

THE AIR BATTALION

ROYAL ENGINEERS



Air Battalion officers with students on the Army's first flying course: Back Row (l-r): Lt G.T. Porter, Lt J.M. Fletcher, Lt C.M. Waterlow, Lt B.R.W. Beor, Capt G.W.P. Dawes, Capt G.H. Raleigh, Lt C.A.H. Longcroft, Lt T.G. Heatherington, Lt C.T. Carfrae. Front Row: Capt E.B. Loraine, Capt P.W.L. Broke-Smith, Lt Col H.R. Cook, Maj A. Bannerman, Capt C.R.W. Allen, Capt A.D. Carden, Capt E.M. Maitland. :National Army Museum

ON 1 APRIL 1911, THE AIR BATTALION, Royal Engineers was formed. It was the British Army's first unit specifically tasked with operating and deploying aeroplanes, as well as the operation and deployment of balloons, kites and airships. The Air Battalion existed for just over a year as, in May 1912, it was absorbed into the newly formed Royal Flying Corps. Although the story of the Air Battalion is largely unknown, the centenary of this pioneering unit is worthy of mention, especially at the current time.

Formation of the Air Battalion

British military aviation suffered something of a set back in 1909. The Committee of Imperial Defence's Sub-Committee on Aerial Navigation demonstrated a hostile attitude towards the future use aeroplanes. The Army's Balloon Factory was to cease development of new aeroplanes and instead focus on building airships. The Balloon Factory and the Balloon School (tasked with the operational deployment of kites, balloons and airships) were separated and the Army's two aeroplane pioneers, Samuel Cody and Lt John Dunne, were sacked. But slowly, attitudes began to change. The use of aeroplanes during the Army's 1910 manoeuvres made some senior officers begin to appreciate their potential value to the military. But these aeroplanes were privately owned machines flown by Capt Bertram Dixon, Lt Lancelot Gibbs and Mr Robert Loraine. Concern grew over the major aviation developments taking place in France and Germany - Britain had slipped behind its continental neighbours. The time for a major re-organisation of flying in the British Army was overdue.

The regulations creating the Air Battalion were set out in Army Order 61, published in March 1911. The battalion was to be a unit of the Royal Engineers (RE), staffed by officers of that corps and allocated as Army Troops for general support of the field army.

AO 61 described the functions of the new unit thus:

With a view to meeting Army requirements consequent on recent developments in aerial sciences, it has been decided to organise an Air Battalion to which will be entrusted the duty of creating a body of expert airmen, organised in such a way as to facilitate the formation of units ready to take the field with troops, and capable of expansion by any reserve formations which may be formed in the future. In addition, the training and instruction of men in handling kites, balloons and aeroplanes, and other forms of air-craft will also devolve upon this battalion.

Officers from any branch of the Army could apply to join and were required to meet all the following conditions. They must:

- be specially commended by their commanding officer*
- be medically fit for air work and have good eyesight*
- possess an aviator's certificate*
- have previous experience of aeronautics*
- not be above the rank of captain*
- be a good map reader and field sketcher*
- be unmarried*
- have at least 2 years service*
- be under 30 years of age*
- be a good sailor*
- have a knowledge of foreign languages*
- have a taste for mechanics*
- be light weight (under 11 stone 7 pounds).*