



NOTABLE AMONG THE DOZENS of flight cadets who passed through 16 Training Squadron (TS) at Yatesbury was 18 year-old William Cotton, who arrived at the Wiltshire station on 30 March 1918, straight from 5 School of Aeronautics at Denham. He would later gain fame as Billy Cotton, the band leader and long-time host of popular BBC radio and TV shows, and his *Wakey wakey* catchphrase had made him a household name by the time he died in 1969.

The year after his death, Cotton's autobiography, *I Did It My Way*, was published¹ and aside from his early life and later career as a band leader, the book includes one chapter which recalls the man's RFC and RAF service. On the face of it, this section describes a hectic life of flight training, and of opportunities taken by this young flyer to display his prowess as a pilot. But it all came to an end as a result of a flying accident at Yatesbury, and though the bare facts of that are correctly documented in *I Did It My Way*, there is a great deal of the detail which simply does not bear up to close inspection. Overall, this part of Cotton's life comes across as a series of tall tales, but surviving documents help piece together a more accurate account.

Cotton's RAeC Certificate photo, November 1930. Despite seeing service at Gallipoli, training with the RFC and becoming a band leader, he was still only 30 years of age.



William Edward Cotton was born at some point in May 1899 in New Tothill St, Westminster, but a specific date is difficult to ascertain: his RFC application² gives 27 May as his date of birth, while his RFC/RAF Service Record³ has 12 May. Furthermore his 1930 RAeC Certificate adds to the confusion by stating 6 May, though the latter does seem to be the most reliable source.

Cotton had volunteered for the 2/2nd Battalion of the City of London Regiment on 29 September 1914⁴ and, despite being aged just 15 at the time of joining, he declared himself to be 19 years and one month old. His subterfuge was successful and Cotton was embodied as a private, embarking with the regiment for Malta two days before Christmas, 1914. Appointed as a drummer in March 1915, Cotton was transferred to Expeditionary Force Mediterranean from 27th August 1915 and served in Egypt and at Gallipoli before, more than a year after joining up, his age finally caught up with him.

On 31 January 1916, he was ordered for transfer back to *The game's up: signed at GHQ 3rd Echelon in Alexandria on 31 January 1916, this brief memo was the authority for return of No.782160 Private W.E. Cotton back to the UK upon being found under age. He was then just 16.* : TNA WO 339/126837

