

# SUBJECTIVE IMPRESSIONS IN THE ARCHIVES

## Britain's National Archives as a Source for Personal Accounts, and Personal Opinions, of Air Warfare 1914-1918

by A.D. Harvey

**M**OST WRITERS OF BOOKS on First World War aviation – a recent example is Ian Mackersey's *No Empty Chairs* – pay fulsome tribute to the Imperial War Museum, to the Royal Air Force Museum at Hendon and above all to the Liddle Collection at the Brotherton Library at the University of Leeds, with its 'amazing trove' of letters and diaries by aviators of the 1914-18 period.<sup>1</sup> By contrast very little use ever seems to be made of the much larger quantity of original material in Britain's National Archives at Kew. Much of this consists, of course, of official returns and reports which still await the exhaustive analysis that will be needed before we can count on a really balanced picture of how work like artillery spotting and coastal patrolling fitted in with the much more celebrated exploits of the fighter pilots: there is however a surprising amount of material comprising first-hand accounts of personal experiences. The fact that this material was originally written for official purposes, with the expectation of its being read by impartial or perhaps even ill-disposed senior officers, does not make it necessarily less subjective and self-revealing than private letters sent home to relatives, for young men only rarely have a practised knack of being personal and intimate in their private writings, and had both professional and personal reasons for suppressing details of their more stressful military experiences when writing to their families. Some of the papers in The National Archives at Kew have indeed a painful honesty and directness rarely met with either in family letters or post-war memoirs, together with all the readiness to address technical issues that one would expect from the context in which the material was written.

Most of the files relating to both the Royal Flying Corps and the Royal Naval Air Service, along with all those of the Royal Air Force after its establishment on 1 April 1918, were collected together in class AIR 1 during the preparation of the RAF's official history of the 1914-1918 conflict, *The War in the Air*<sup>2</sup>. There is however a considerable amount of interesting documentation remaining in other classes. Class ADM 273 consists of thirty-one volumes of the Royal Naval Air Service's *Register of Officers Services*, which, for example, testifies to the high esteem in which Canadian ace Raymond Collishaw was held by his superiors within weeks of his arrival at 3 Wing:



Charles Dawson Booker

twice destroyed three German aircraft during a single mission, was noted down as *Steady & quiet although very young* [31.3.16] and later as *Most keen & reliable officer in every way, & quite suitable for a command. Has the gift of tact & attention to detail, & is a most gallant Scout Pilot* [25.9.17]<sup>4</sup>.

*Recommended for promotion* [30.8.16]; *Exceptionally capable Flt Cdr with exceptional ability to command & organize* [30.6.17]; *Great command & capable organizer. Marvellous fighting pilot whose energy never tires* [1.1.18].<sup>3</sup> These reports on naval aviators, not available for their counterparts in the Royal Flying Corps, often have the flavour of a boarding school housemaster's reports on promising fifth formers: C.D. Booker, who

R.A. Little, the most successful Australian fighter pilot of the war, began badly: *As an officer he is quite hopeless & likely to remain so* [12.4.16]; *This officer has been reported on unfavourably, & he is to be informed that if a further adverse report is received, his commission will be terminated* [5.5.16]; *Has conducted himself satisfactorily ... As soon as he learns to be less irresponsible, & when flying, to use his head to better advantage, I shall feel confident that he will do exceptionally well on Active Service* [9.6.16]. Once in action with 8N Squadron, however, Little's talents became better appreciated: *A most loyal capable & keen young officer with few, if any equals as a fighting pilot* [1.8.17].<sup>5</sup>



Robert Alexander Little

ADM 1/8449/39A is a file on the operation of the Luxeul bomber wing in 1916. It contains an interesting minute by Rear Admiral C.L. Vaughan-Lee, the Admiralty's Director of Air Services, which indicates that the distinction between the tactical and strategic employment of air power was already understood, by the Royal Navy at least, as early as February 1916: *As regards attacks on German Military bases the Admiralty are better able to develop the type of flying machine required than the W.O. [War Office, i.e. Army], the engine power being the principal factor, & the operations of the Navy are not restricted like those of an army in the field to a particular front or zone.*<sup>6</sup>

Vaughan-Lee was not alone, incidentally, in considering that that RNAS was superior to the RFC as regards technical matters, and it is a pity that so little work has been done in the naval service's role in the 1914-18 war.<sup>7</sup>

AIR 10/451 is a report on the much-vaunted Fokker Triplane by Lieutenant Colonel J.G. Weir, of the Department of Aircraft Production at the Ministry of Munitions, which states: *The designer appears to have employed considerable ingenuity (or exhibited considerable mental slackness) in devising schemes whereby slight increase of manufacturing speed has been purchased at the price of grave structural weakness or increased weight ... the design shows evidence that it has been carried out hastily and in a slovenly manner ... the cantilever construction is not only weak, but essentially non-rigid ... All control surfaces are balanced, but the method of balancing is inferior to that employed on the Albatross. Ailerons are fitted to the top plane only, a type of construction which has been shewn to be ineffective.*

Six months later, Weir, by now promoted to Brigadier General, wrote a considerably less supercilious report on the Fokker D.VII, accompanied by neat drawings.<sup>8</sup> AVIA 6 includes a number of rather skimpy and indigestible reports on the spinning characteristics of different aircraft, and on engine performance. The Cabinet papers (especially CAB, 23, 24 and 42) and the records of the Ministry of Munitions (MUN) contains material equally impersonal. WO 339 and WO 374, comprising the personal files of army officers – which include Royal Flying Corps officers – are the most important classes for students of First World War aviation, after AIR