

14 SQUADRON

A FIRST WAR HISTORY: PART 1

BY MIKE O'CONNOR & MIKE NAPIER



BY LATE 1914 IT WAS APPARENT that the War would not be 'over by Christmas' as the British people had somewhat overconfidently predicted when it all started in August. Lord Kitchener was appointed Secretary of State for War and plans were made for a massive increase in the size of the British Army. The bigger army would require a bigger Royal Flying Corps, and it was clear that the RFC would need to be enlarged from its seven squadrons. The question was: how big should it be? At HQ RFC the staff officers did their calculations and, with some trepidation, put forward a tentative suggestion of 50 squadrons. Their proposal was returned with a note in red ink scrawled in the margin *Double this - K.*

The problem facing the RFC staff was how to manage this expansion when they had neither pilots nor aeroplanes with which to do it. Their answer was to form the new squadrons as cadres of semi-trained pilots around a nucleus of experienced pilots and to build up to full operational strength slowly as aeroplanes became available. In this way nearly ten new squadrons were formed in the four months from December 1914. As part of that expansion, Capt A. Ross Hume² formed 14 Squadron RFC on 3 February 1915 at the airfield at Shoreham near Brighton. This unit consisted of three qualified pilots (Capt R.O. Abercrombie, Lt R.E. Lewis and 2Lt H.C. Barber) and two trainees (2Lts F.H. Jenkins² and D.S. Jillings³ MC) from 3 Reserve Aeroplane Squadron using aircraft from the RFC school at Shoreham. At the end of March, Major G.E. Todd,⁴ Ross Hume's successor as OC 3 RAS, arrived to assume command of the Squadron.

On 11 May, 14 Squadron moved to Hounslow Heath just to the west of London where it began to receive its own aircraft. There was an assortment of eight aeroplanes on the Squadron strength by the end of the month, including a number of Martinsyde and BE2c scouts as well as Avro and Blériot training aircraft. In June the Unit received a number of 'pusher' training aircraft such as Caudrons and Maurice Farman Longhorns, reflecting the Squadron's growing training task. As one might expect with primitive aeroplanes and inexperienced pilots, Flt Sgt W.G. Stafford⁵ and his ground crews were kept busy maintaining both aircraft and engines in flyable state and it was not unusual for only half of the aeroplanes on the Squadron strength to be actually serviceable. The Unit was operating much like a training school with typically about seven officers under training with the Squadron at any one time. Some of those trainee pilots were posted away to different squadrons once they had gained sufficient skills. One such was Lt W.S. Douglas⁶ who joined 14 Squadron in July for training as a pilot after he had gained operational experience as an observer on the Western Front with 2 Squadron. Douglas thoroughly enjoyed his short time with 14 Squadron, which was chiefly memorable to him for Hounslow's proximity to the social life of London and for the number of aeroplanes which he crashed! However by the end of the month he was deemed competent enough to be sent back to France.

In early August the Squadron moved from Hounslow to Gosport where it joined 17 Squadron as part of the newly-formed 5 Wing, under the command of Lt Col W.G.H. Salmond⁷. Both squadrons continued their operational

work-up in the expectation of being sent to France in the autumn. Equipment was by now being standardised with the BE2c aeroplane. These 'tractor' biplanes were the mainstay of the front line squadrons in France, so pilots were able to gain experience on the very aeroplanes that they would be using operationally. By now the Squadron's training included practical exercises such as artillery co-operation with the Royal Artillery units at nearby Cosham. Pilots were also detached to airfields further afield in order to gain experience of night flying.

On 13 October Lt J.C. Slessor⁸ was sent up from Gravesend at 2130 hours in BE2c 2065 to patrol against Zeppelins on their way to bomb London. Despite the darkness of the night, Slessor spotted a Zeppelin as he patrolled at 3,000 feet. Unfortunately, what might have been 14 Squadron's first operational success was thwarted when Slessor lost contact with the raider amongst the clouds as he climbed to intercept it.

New pilots continued to be posted in, and typical of these was Lt C.W. Hill, an Australian, who joined the unit in November. Hill had sailed from Australia earlier in the year with the intention of joining the RFC but when he reached Britain he found that he would not be considered until he had gained his Aviator's Certificate at his own expense. This he did, along with many other would-be military pilots, at Brooklands before

Aged 23 Cedric Hill (1891-1975) sailed from his native Australia and paid for his own pilot's certificate before joining 14 Squadron at Gosport. After the War he served with 14 Squadron again in the early 1920s and commanded 1 Squadron and RAF Tangmere in the 1930s, eventually retiring as a Group Captain.

