

TESTING 226

by Paul R. Hare



BE2a 226 at Farnborough, apparently in factory-fresh condition. .

ON 18 MARCH 1914 the Assistant Director of Military Aeronautics, based at the War Office instructed Lt Col F.H. Sykes, then the Officer Commanding the Royal Flying Corps, (Military Wing) to hand over to the Chief Inspector of Aeroplanes at the Aeroplane Inspection Department whichever BE2a had most nearly reached 100 hours flying time for testing and evaluation.¹

Col Sykes, having consulted the appropriate records, replied on 23 March, that he thought 226 would be the most suitable as it had flown about 80 hours and was still in serviceable condition. It was, at that time, with 2 Squadron, at Montrose, and an instruction was promptly given that the machine should be taken out of service pending further instructions.

226 was the second of a batch of twelve examples of the BE2 design ordered from the British & Colonial Aeroplane Company of Filton near Bristol, and was delivered to the Royal Aircraft at Farnborough, ready for inspection, on 13 August 1913. For some reason it remained in the Factory's charge for two weeks before being handed over to the RFC on Thursday 28 August.² Assigned to 2 Squadron, it was, the same day, employed by Lt Walter Lawrence in an attempt to beat Geoffrey de Havilland's altitude record of 10,560 feet, set in the prototype BE2 during the Military Aeroplane Competition the previous August. De Havilland's passenger has been Major (as he then was) F.H. Sykes whilst Lawrence was accompanied by Captain Cordon, RAMC. Reported as a splendid attempt,³ Lawrence was aloft for one hour and forty minutes and reached a height of exactly 10,500 feet, when failing light forced his descent, and so he missed the record by just 60 feet. If nothing else, Lawrence's attempt served to confirm that the absolute ceiling of a BE2a powered by the 70hp Renault and carrying a passenger really was 10,500 feet. It also served to keep Lawrence active whilst the majority of his unit, 2 Squadron, were abroad, taking part in manoeuvres in Ireland. Still at Farnborough, Lawrence flew 226 to Brooklands on both 11 and 12 September, each with a passenger, although the purpose of the flights is not recorded.⁴

That year, the Army's autumn manoeuvres were held near

Hemel Hempstead in Buckinghamshire, between 18 and 26 September, with 4 and 5 Squadrons supporting the defending 'White Army' whilst 3 Squadron was attached to the attacking 'Brown Army'. 3 Squadron, who were temporarily based near Halton for the manoeuvres, had difficulty in fielding the required twelve aeroplanes. 226, piloted by Lawrence, joined them, on loan, to help make up the deficiency.⁵ 226 was attached to A Flight under Captain Allen and during the manoeuvres flew a total of 25 hours, spending four nights out in the open, unprotected from the weather. It was noted that, unlike some other machines, it was not necessary to pierce the fabric on the underside of the trailing edges of the BE2's wings to allow moisture accumulated overnight to escape.⁶

At the beginning of October, 226 was flown by Lt Lawrence, to Montrose, in stages, to finally join 2 Squadron, which had now returned from Ireland and resumed its normal duties.⁷

During January 1914, 2 Squadron moved from Upper Dysart, just to the south of Montrose, to a new aerodrome adjacent to the golf links, which the War Office had leased from the town council.

This new aerodrome was not only larger, with easier approaches, but also closer to Panmure Barracks where both officers and men were quartered.⁸ This move, coupled with the winter weather, meant that almost no flying took place that month, but in February the Squadron resumed its wide ranging reconnaissance flights, and on Saturday 7th, 226 suffered engine failure whilst flying near Edinburgh and was forced to spend another four nights in the open; in weather so stormy that, at one time, four men were needed just to keep it on the ground, before repairs could be completed and it was able to return to Montrose.⁹

On 19 March, following his initial instruction to Sykes, the Assistant Director of Military Aeronautics advised the Chief Inspector of Aeroplanes at the AID that he should expect the arrival of the BE2, and gave instructions that it was to be inspected 'in the normal way' but the results of that inspection were not to be promulgated, requesting instead that any remarks the inspector might wish to make should be forwarded direct to the ADMA at the War Office.¹⁰