

# JOHN EDWARD CAPPER

## A PIONEER OF BRITISH MILITARY AVIATION

by Michael J. Dunn

*Photographs are reproduced with kind permission of FAST (Farnborough Air Sciences Trust) unless stated otherwise*

GENERAL SIR WILLIAM NICHOLSON, who, in 1908, became Chief of the Imperial General Staff, declared: *aviation is a useless and expensive fad advocated by a few individuals whose ideas are unworthy of attention.* Nicholson was adamantly opposed to 'aviation' in all its forms: captive balloons, man-lifting kites, airships and aircraft. Nicholson was not alone. The powerful opposition to a developing role for aviation in the British Army was able to strongly influence official policy towards military flying, and to restrict the funds available to support the policy. The early proponents of British military aviation struggled against this sort of shortsighted and inflexible attitude from the very start of the 20th century. Only when the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) was formed in 1912 did Britain begin creating a balanced, military aviation organisation capable of supporting the British Army in times of war. Even so, by August 1914, the RFC was considerably smaller than the air arms of both France and, more significantly, Germany.

### John Edward Capper

Between 1903 and 1910, one soldier, Lieutenant Colonel John Edward Capper, Royal Engineers, emerged as a major influence in the development of British military aviation. Through his roles as Commandant of the Balloon School, RE, and Superintendent of the Balloon Factory, RE (both located at Farnborough), Capper was in a unique position. He commanded the only two units in the British Army that were, at that time, dedicated to aviation. Throughout his period of tenure, military aviation evolved significantly; from a focus on captive ballooning, through the construction of Britain's first military airship (*Nulli Secundus*) to the first, official, powered flight of an aircraft in the UK (Samuel Cody's Army Aircraft Number 1).

Capper was well aware of how aviation, in all its forms, was developing around the World (particularly in France, Germany and the United States). He recognised the military potential of aviation and was anxious that Britain should not be left behind. He foresaw the emergence, and eventual dominance, of the aeroplane as the most practical and widely used means of flying. Capper saw it as his duty to promote the use of air power, particularly using aircraft, by Britain. He did this at every opportunity: at public meetings, in numerous official reports, in private



*Cartoon of Major General Sir John Capper in the Royal Logistic Corps officers' mess, Deepcut. :courtesy of Francis Hanford*



discussions, on official committees and at meetings with his superiors.

This article seeks to highlight the role played by John Edward Capper in the development of British military aviation. As Capper had a varied and wide-ranging military career over a long period (it began in 1880 and finally ended in 1943), details of the rest of this career have been included. It included service as an infantry divisional commander on the Western Front, during the Battle of the Somme, and responsibility for the organisation, reliability and tactics of the newly formed Tank Corps.

### Capper – The Man

Capper retired from the army in 1925 as Major General Sir John Edward Capper KCB, KCVO, *Legion d'honneur*. An engineer by training, Capper was a thoughtful, capable, determined and practical officer who demonstrated a keen interest in leading-edge military technologies such as the development and use of aircraft and tanks. He was a strict disciplinarian, especially on parade, and a firm believer in rigid adherence to the military hierarchy, and a product of the Victorian, class-driven society that dominated the British Army up to the start of the Great War. But he was a man who could generate considerable respect, particularly amongst his men, and establish close friendships; for instance with the Wright Brothers. He was a man of considerable physical courage; flying balloons and kites and piloting Farnborough's airships on their first, hazardous flights.

During the Great War, two contrasting nicknames were given to Capper. By the younger staff officers of the Tank Corps, he was known as 'Stone Age'. They considered that Capper was too rooted in the tactics of 19th century cavalry warfare and was incapable of accepting the current thinking on tank development, tactics and deployment. This was not the case. The perception was stemmed partly from Capper's failure to communicate with his juniors due to his stern manner and strict adherence to the following of channels of command. In contrast, *The Wipers Times* wrote that Capper's successor as GOC of 24th Division was taking up the mantle of 'The Professor' ... *who, through nearly two strenuous years, had led us from greenness to understanding.* Capper's obituary in *The Times* said of him *He was indeed a fighting general of the highest order, with unflinching consideration for his troops and with a charm of manner; it was a privilege to serve in his command.*