

The London Balloon Company

Brigadier P.W. Clark – An Early Recruit

by Michael J. Dunn

We published Michael's original article on the London Balloon Company in Vol 38/3 and Peter Wright's article, A Slow Boat to China, which appeared in Vol 39/3 provided some extra detail on members of that pioneering unit. It's amazing what there is still 'out there' and so it was interesting to receive the following from Michael.

FOLLOWING THE PUBLICATION of my article on the London Balloon Company, I had the pleasure of receiving a letter about the unit from Mr John Clark from Kent. His father, Percy William Clark, joined the London Balloon Company in 1908. This was the start of a long and impressive career in the Royal Engineers, during which Percy Clark spent much of his service working alongside the RAF.

Mr Clark's letter makes interesting reading and is re-printed below:

London Balloon Company RE (TF)

I have downloaded your paper on the London Balloon Company RE from the website for the Centre for Air Power Studies. This paper interests me because my father was an original recruit as a Sapper. At the time of joining, he was an articled pupil with a Consulting Engineer and had to resign when his pupilage ended and he went to work in the North of England. I enclose a copy of his Discharge Certificate which shows that he was enlisted on 30th June 1908.

My father was granted a Temporary Commission in the Royal Engineers on 1st Sept 1914 and after training in England was posted to a Signals Company serving in France. From June 1915, he commanded 61st Divisional Signal Company in France until the end of the War. He was awarded the DSO, the MC and was mentioned in dispatches. He was demobilised in 1919 but applied to be remobilised and was sent to India in 1920 where he was employed, in the first instance, in installing a power station at RAF Drigh Road, now Karachi International Airport.

He served in the British Military Mission to the Iraq Army from 1927 to 1932. In the last year of that assignment, he was awarded a bar to his DSO for an incident in the Campaign in Northern Kurdistan. In 1937 he returned to Iraq as Chief Engineer to the RAF in Iraq and the Gulf. At the time he was responsible for the construction of RAF Dhibban, later renamed RAF Habbaniyah, the construction of Shuaiba and numerous stations down the Gulf as far as Oman. In those days, all the RAF facilities were also used by Imperial Airways and it was their introduction of flying boats that also meant construction of suitable facilities at Habbaniyah, Basrah, Bahrein, Dubai and Muscat.

He returned to the UK shortly before the Second World War and was posted to France as Chief Engineer to the Advanced Air Striking Force where he was responsible for the construction of numerous grass air strips in Northern France. After the fall of France, he was evacuated through St Nazaire. He was awarded the CBE for his work in France. After a short spell in Northern Ireland, he became Chief Engineer Southern Command and, amongst many other works required for Operation Overlord (the invasion of Normandy), was responsible for the construction or repair of numerous RAF airfields. He died suddenly of a heart



Colonel Percy W. Clark, Royal Engineers.

attack in 1943. His many activities in connection with the RAF came about, I suspect more by chance than choice.

The War Office never connected 2Cpl P.W. Clark of the Balloon Company with Brigadier P.W. Clark CBE DSO MC. His service record makes no mention of his earlier military service.*

My father had a distinguished career in the Army subsequent to his service in the Balloon Company which I think you were unaware of when you wrote your paper. Hence this letter. I trust you will forgive me for writing to you out of the blue.

Yours sincerely,
J.F.F. Clark

Percy Clark's impressive Army career is another example of the success of Harold Holtorp's recruitment policy for the London Balloon Company: that of 'enlisting recruits well educated men with an interest in aviation.'

A complete list of all former members of the London Balloon Company is no longer available. My original article outlined the biographies of 8 of them. For some members of the unit, such as CSM H.E. Holtorp, very little biographical information was available. However, since the original article was published, the names of 3 further members have come to