

FREDERICK FRANK REILLY MINCHIN

CBE, DSO, MC* Lt Colonel RFC, 1890 - 1927

*A Summary of the book Maverick Airman
by Michael Partridge*

BORN IN MADRAS IN 1890, Minchin was the second son of Major General Frederick Falkiner Minchin, one of the Minchins of Annagh in Borrisokane, County Tipperary, an ancient Anglo-Irish family.

Freddie, or 'Jack' as he was known within his family, Minchin came to Eastbourne College in January 1905 and soon showed a talent for games, appearing in both the cricket and rugby sides. He won the *Victor Ludorum* cup in the summer of 1908, when he also passed, at the second attempt and with help from a crammer, the qualifying examination for Sandhurst.

Jack was tall, 6ft 3ins, a good looking young man who had great charm and good manners. He became a daredevil schoolboy and the leader of a wild section in his school. These facets of his character, while perhaps of positive merit in times of war, got him into a variety of troubles both before and after the war when, at different times, he allowed himself to be cheated by rich and unscrupulous friends, took the blame in a messy divorce, and was, for a time, reduced to penury and declared bankrupt. As the second son, he was, according to the custom of the time, not a beneficiary of his father's estate when he died in 1920.

Minchin was commissioned into the Connaught Rangers on 5 October 1910. In 1912, while on a month's leave from his regiment in Ireland, he came to Eastbourne to learn to fly at the recently formed Eastbourne Aviation Company. There on 18 February 1913 he obtained his Royal Aero Club certificate flying a Bristol Boxkite. Required by his regiment to give evidence at a Court of Enquiry, he could not be found. He had not told his Colonel of his intention to travel to England while on leave and had left no contact address. Recalled to Ireland, he was to have been court martialled but, after his family interceded, he was allowed to resign his commission. He was packed off to Canada, and there he spent two years and attempted to generate interest in flying by setting up an aviation company in Winnipeg.

September 1914 found him a lieutenant in Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, a volunteer regiment with whom in early 1915 he served for three months in the trenches near Ypres, where more than a half of his regiment's officers became casualties. He would write regularly to his grandfather in Ireland,¹ once commenting that 'we had to bury a man in the trench the other day ... digging a hole about three feet deep we came across the remains of three other dead men ... when they weather gets warm, you can imagine ...'

In March 1915 he was transferred to 1 Squadron, Royal

Flying Corps, as an observer, based at St-Omer under the command of Major Geoffrey Salmond. Equipped with four BE8s, a Caudron G3, a Bristol Scout D and eight Avro 504s, on 12 March four aircraft attempted to destroy with

bombs a rail bridge near Douai and a rail junction at Don. Later in March the squadron moved to Bailleul as a part of 2 Wing, where it remained for three years. Their principal task was to keep the enemy away from the tunnelling that was going on preparatory to the assault on Hill 60, by flying patrols from 04.30 until 19.15 daily. This was successful and the attack on Hill 60 took the enemy completely by surprise. Up to 20 June some 141 bombing sorties were flown, although bombs were dropped more or less haphazardly by observers without the aid of bomb aiming equipment. In the summer of 1915 the Germans introduced the Fokker E1 *Eindecker* which caused heavy allied losses to the extent that the period became known as the 'Fokker Scourge'.

Then on 5 August Minchin was posted to Central Flying School. By 5 October he had qualified as a pilot to RFC standards, following which he was posted to 14 Squadron, preparatory to its embarkation for service in Egypt.

Minchin's time with 14 Squadron, engaged on bombing and reconnaissance missions in Egypt and Palestine, proved to be some of the most distinguished of his whole service career. He was soon leading patrols over the Sinai Peninsula, first in BE2cs and later in Martinsyde G100 Elephants. His squadron's attacks on the Turkish army camps at El Arish and Mahemdia were significant in driving the Turks eastwards towards Beersheba and causing their garrison at Magdhaba to surrender. Squadron records from this period, including Minchin's own sometimes handwritten mission reports can be found in the National Archives. On 31 May 1916, he was awarded the Military Cross:

For conspicuous gallantry and skill on many occasions, notably when leading a successful bomb and machine gun raid on a force of the enemy which he had located overnight. Next day he took part in two other raids. During these operations he flew for 13 hours over enemy country.

On 13 October the *London Gazette* reported a bar to his MC, with the citation:

He flew 150 miles at night to bomb an enemy aerodrome, descending to 500 feet and doing serious damage. On another occasion he landed 45 miles from our line to pick up the pilot of a damaged machine in hostile country.

He also received two 'mentions' during his time with 14 Squadron. Later, in November 1916, on a reconnaissance mission, flying a Martinsyde, Minchin was in combat with

