

SE5a F904 - A Short History



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For many years it had been believed that the Shuttleworth Collection's SE5a F904 did not see war service. However, the Deputy Chief Engineer, Andy Present, whilst recently browsing *The SE5 File* published by Air-Britain discovered that it was alleged that F904, having been built by Wolseley Motors, had in fact been issued to 84 Squadron RAF in France and had been in action on 10 November 1918. It had been piloted by Major C.E.M. Pickthorn MC, commanding 84 Squadron, who successfully destroyed a Fokker D.VII in the vicinity of Chimay. There was a further reference to this action in *Above the Trenches*, published by Grub Street, in the entry relating to Major Pickthorn. In mid-March the Chief Engineer, Jean-Michel Munn, asked the Library & Archive Team if it could investigate this new information as, if proven, it would greatly enhance the status of the Collection and the aircraft itself. The team undertook to do this, it had been previously agreed that the object should be to compile a dossier which would 'stand up in court'.

The entry in *Above the Trenches* indicated that the source for the action involving F904 was an RAF Combat Report. We contacted Gordon Leith, curator of the Department of Research and Information Services at the RAF Museum, who told us that he understood that Combat Reports were held in the National Archives (TNA) at Kew. Armed with this information, we opened an account on the TNA website and searched their catalogue for all the information held on 84 Squadron RAF for November 1918. We found that there were Combat Reports, the Squadron Record Book, War Diary and History, in addition to a wealth of other information. However, as these documents had not been scanned, it would be necessary to visit Kew in order to view them and obtain copies of those that were relevant.

It was planned that three of the team, Jim Greaves, Peter

C.E.M. Pickthorn MC, at right, photographed post-war with an unknown friend beside a Viper-engine SE5a that had the early form of undercarriage.
: Pickthorn family



Sewell and I would go to Kew in order to view and obtain the information we required. Due to holidays and other commitments we were unable to go until early May but were frustrated by a London Transport strike in the first week and a further strike planned for the second week, so we weren't able to go until 20 May! In the event Jim was unwell, so Peter and I went. I should explain that on arrival at TNA one has first to obtain a Reader's Ticket in order to have access to the Reading Rooms; also, one is limited to viewing no more than three documents at a time. As we had a dozen documents to view we were going to be busy! Fortunately, a number of them were in the same file which speeded up the process.

So, what did we achieve? We have a certified copy of the Combat Report submitted by Major Pickthorn which confirms that he was flying F904 when he shot down a Fokker D.VII, and two pages from the 84 Squadron Record Book for 10 November 1918 which show that F904 flew two sorties that day. We found that Major Pickthorn arrived at 84 Squadron on 8 November 1918 to assume command from vice Major Sholto Douglas who was RHE (Reverting to Home Establishment) on promotion to Lieutenant Colonel. We assume that, as there is no reference to F904 in any of the Squadron documentation before 10 November, Major Pickthorn may have flown the aircraft from Marquise on joining his new command. So far so good, but that did not prove without doubt that the SE5a owned by the Shuttleworth Collection actually was F904.

We knew that Major Jack Savage had purchased the aircraft, converted it for skywriting and that its civil registration was G-EBIA. The CAA Civil Register shows that F904 (Wolseley Serial No 654/2404, ex-RFC) was registered to Savage as G-EBIA on 26 September 1923 and de-withdrawn on 9 February 1932. In 1955 the aircraft was located by Air Commodore Allen Wheeler, Aviation Trustee of the Shuttleworth Collection in the old Armstrong Whitworth

An 84 Sqn SE5a, lacking its Lewis gun and photographed on a former German aerodrome.
: Shuttleworth Collection

