

OUT OF THE ORDINARY

by David Learmount

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Albert Ball, Billy Bishop and James McCudden were three of Britain's 'ace' military aviators in the First World War. Although the Royal Flying Corps actively disapproved of the glorification of individual aviators, it awarded medals as the military always does where they are deserved, and these three were all awarded the Victoria Cross. So, the Press, which loves to provide the public with heroes, knew where to look for them.

Then there was 2nd Lieutenant Leonard Learmount, RFC. Also a pilot, he did rather a lot in his three years flying over the hellish battle lines of the Western Front, but as with most other RFC men, no-one outside his squadron ever heard of him. No-one heard of his observer/gunner Archie Whitehouse, either.

In January 1917 the two men joined 22 Squadron RFC, based for a few wintry months at Chipilly, an aerodrome between the artillery-battered town of Albert and the River Somme in north-eastern France, a few kilometres behind the battle lines. Learmount, by then an Acting Major and 22 Squadron's commander, flew with Whitehouse many times. They survived at least one dogfight with the notorious Red Baron without knowing it until later, and encountered Ball, Bishop and McCudden when their respective – highly itinerant – squadrons were briefly co-located at various aerodromes between 1916 and 1918.

The eagle-eyed reader will have noticed that Leonard Learmount's surname is the same as the author's. There is a reason for that: Leonard is the grandfather of David Learmount, an aviation journalist.

A highly competent but self-effacing man, Learmount kept no records of his RFC service, photographic or otherwise. In later life he seemed to think little of what he had done. His family retained a few artefacts related to his RFC service, but fortunately his 22 Squadron contemporary Whitehouse kept a diary and – many years later – published a memoir.

In contrast to Learmount's reticence, his observer's written accounts – published as *Hell in the Heavens* – reek of castor oil and cordite and evoke the mercilessness of war in the air: *We flew, slept, flew, slept and flew some more. We staggered back and forth to our machines, too tired to eat. No-one spoke, no-one laughed, no-one argued. Faces were lined with weariness, pitted with cordite, and daubed with whale-oil.* Whitehouse's recollections quoted here have been checked and supplemented with data from the National Records Office, Imperial War Museum and the RAF Museum, and with help from the Cross & Cockade team.

The sky above the Western Front, as a theatre of war, was

the scene of an aircrew attrition rate five times that facing the troops in the trenches. When Whitehouse finally left 22 Squadron in January 1918, Learmount and he were the only two aviators left alive among those who had been on the unit's strength when they joined it almost exactly a year before.

Even to get to the Front, RFC pilots faced a shocking cull through flying training accidents. Aviation was, after all, in its experimental phase. Out of the total 4053 airmen lost to the RFC from 1914 to 1918, approximately half died in training crashes. A young American volunteer pilot trainee at the RFC's Montrose training base just before the war wrote to his parents: *There was a crash every day and a funeral every week.*

Merely getting airborne was a high risk, and this gave aviation a fatal glamour in an age when most ordinary people had never even seen an aeroplane.

Declaration of War

It was in August 1914 that Britain declared war against Germany. At that time Learmount was 25 and employed by London-headquartered shipping and trading company Paterson Simons, based in the Straits Settlements (Malaya and Singapore). Heeding the call to

arms, that November he took a ship back home to join up.

The meagre family records show no details of this journey, but his RFC Record of Service shows Learmount reported to Brooklands aerodrome, Surrey, on 19 March 1915, and his flying log book shows he got airborne the next day for his first flying lesson, in a Maurice Farman 'Longhorn' trainer. So much for ground school!

Learmount flew his first solo exactly two weeks later, having logged 3hr 10min in the air. His entire pilot training lasted 12 weeks up to the day he was posted, as a 2nd Lieutenant, to 7 Squadron at St-Omer, France. He had accumulated exactly 24hr airborne time by then. And the entry in the 'remarks' column of his flying logbook on his 9 June final training sortie reveals how much the RFC was prepared to forgive to get pilots to the front line. It says: *Pancaked over sheds, smashed undercarriage and one wing landing.* That was clearly good enough, because the next statement in his logbook is: *Arrived in France 12 June 1915.*

With the BEF

A week later, after a local area familiarisation sortie in a French-built two-seater Voisin 'pusher' biplane out of St-Omer, Learmount wrote in his logbook: *Above clouds, steered by compass.* He had clearly done neither of those things before.

In Learmount's early operational flying with 7 Squadron during the summer and autumn of 1915, he flew the painfully slow Voisin out of St-Omer and other aerodromes further east in the Ypres Salient region of Flanders. At first, he was purely carrying out reconnaissance and artillery spotting for



A studio portrait of Leonard Learmount in uniform. :via author