

# THE WORLD'S FIRST MILITARY DRONE AIRCRAFT: A HIDDEN HISTORY

by Steve Mills, author of *The Dawn of the Drone*, published by Casemate

It might be expected that priceless parts of the world's first military drone that flew over 100 years ago and are now in the care of Britain's premier military museum would be proudly and prominently displayed – but in fact they are hidden away in the Imperial War Museum's stores. These surviving parts of the 1917 Aerial Target, so eagerly sought by the Museum in 1956 for their exhibition, were subsequently crated up.

## The flight of the first drone

Another surprise is the identity of the pilot of this world's first ever military drone aircraft. He was Sir Henry O'Neal de Hane Segrave. Of course, this flight took place in his younger days when he was an officer in the Royal Flying Corps (RFC), long before his land and water speed records and his knighthood. In fact, it was on Wednesday 21 March 1917, at the Central Flying School base of Upavon on Salisbury Plain. There he stood in the chill spring air among a bevy of some forty senior allied officers observing the RFC's radio controlled de Havilland Aerial Target and shouting the commands to Captain Archibald Montgomery Low who was operating the transmitter in the control wagon.

The first of these unmanned aircraft had not launched correctly but this second machine soared into the air with Segrave shouting *Up!* and then yelling *By God, it's working. Up! Up!* However, overdoing it, the monoplane looped, the engine spluttered and the top brass scattered as this novel prototype weapon tore into the ground nearby. But the trial had succeeded, as it proved that an aircraft could be remote controlled with the technology available in WWI.

The few previous accounts that exist have labelled this Royal Flying Corps' WWI pilotless aircraft project a failure, but now we know it did in fact succeed. It was to herald the dawn of the military drone aircraft.

## The conception of the drone – the 'Aerial Target'

It all began in the warm spring of 1914 when the world-famous Selfridge's store and other venues in London witnessed demonstrations by Dr A.M. Low of his latest invention, a revolutionary television system.

In that same momentous year, the Royal Aircraft Factory (RAF) at Farnborough started to produce designs for unmanned monoplanes powered by small internal combustion engines designed by Granville Bradshaw and made by ABC Motors. As Europe went to war that autumn, the RAF produced engineering drawings of these machines and had covertly named them 'Aerial Targets'.

Dr Low had now turned his attention from his television project to work for the military authorities and in October the newspapers reported two attempts by enemy agents to assassinate him at his laboratory on Paul Street, in Shoreditch in the East End of London.

Archie joined the army in 1915 and, based upon his TV invention, he was recruited into the Royal Flying Corps to develop a control system for the variety of their unmanned aircraft designs that stemmed from this RAF Aerial Target work.

In these desperate times it was hoped that these unmanned aircraft could be packed with explosives and be capable of attacking the German airships that had been bombing Britain from early 1915 with apparent impunity.

## Clever bullets nearly made it obsolete

One of the other developments Archie Low became involved with was seriously dangerous. This was the development of an explosive bullet. Like the Aerial Target, these bullets were an intended solution to 'the Zeppelin menace'. The British home defence aircraft were operating at the limits of their performance to reach and catch those high-flying German airships. By the autumn of 1916 these bullets were used to shoot down one of these marauding airships, the Schütte-Lanz SL 11, finally signalling an end to the supremacy of the German airship.

## What now for the Aerial Target?

The success of these clever bullets and the increased performance of the newer aircraft had undermined the

*Left and below: Royal Aircraft Factory drawing A4794 of a 10-foot wingspan unmanned monoplane fitted with a 6-hp ABC engine, dated October 1914.*  
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