

The 'HAND & THUNDERBOLT' Badge

by Jeff Jefford

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OFTEN REFERRED TO IN LATER YEARS as the 'handful of sparks' or simply the 'sparks' badge, the insignia still worn today by selected airmen is one of only two RAF 'trade' badges that have been authorised for use continuously since the formation of the Service on 1 April 1918, the other being the pilots 'wings'. Despite, or perhaps because of, its antiquity, however, the origins of this venerable emblem are somewhat obscure.

During WWI most RFC personnel on active service in France were stationed on airfields, typically located ten or fifteen miles behind the lines. There, beyond the occasional air raid, they lived in conditions of relative security and comfort that were a world away from the circumstances being endured by their less fortunate colleagues in, or in the vicinity of, the trenches. Aircrew were at risk, of course, but only for the relatively short periods while they were actually flying. There was, however, one group of RFC men who were frequently in harm's way – the wireless operators.

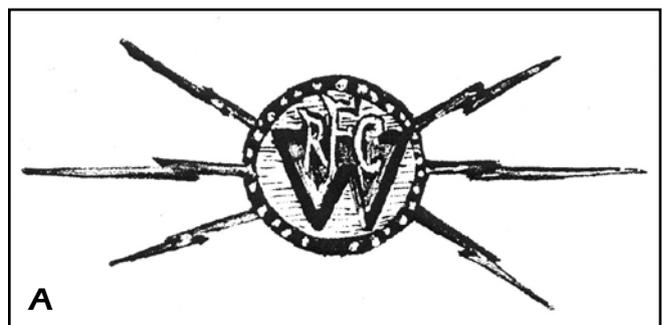
Radio technology was in its infancy in 1914-18 and consisted, for the most part, in air-to-ground-only transmissions using Morse in connection with artillery co-operation. Aircrew were trained to work at no more than eight words per minute and they were not required to send complex messages. Most of the instructions that they needed to pass to the ground were very succinct, consisting of single letters or two- or three-letter groups drawn from a universally understood code. Messages for the crew were sent via ground signals, the early use of pyrotechnics soon being superseded by 'panels' – strips of white cloth laid out on the ground to create patterns which had predetermined meanings.

The men who laid out the ground signals and worked the radio receivers were RFC wireless operators who were attached to the battery with which their squadron was working. That

meant that they were deployed forward in a high risk zone where they could become involved in an artillery duel in which they found themselves playing the role of the target.

In recognition of this, in January 1917, Lt Col Lionel Charlton, then of the Air Organisation staff at the War Office, minuted the Quartermaster General to point out that these men had to perform 'work which requires great skill and great personal responsibility, often under conditions which are very trying and dangerous.' He argued that this warranted a badge that would distinguish these men from the 'ordinary air mechanic who is seldom called upon to face [such] hardships and dangers' and submitted a possible design for consideration.¹

The initial response was guarded, as there were a number of other applications for special badges in the mill and an ingrained conservatism meant that there was a reluctance to sanction too many, apart from the practical issue of the cost of materials and manufacture.



Nevertheless, Charlton was authorised to pursue his case and the sketch of Badge A, which, it was proposed, 'should be worn on the right arm' was dispatched to HQ RFC whose views were sought. The question was mulled over for several

