

SOJOURN IN A SIDESHOW

AM2 Harry John Ernest Burtenshaw

27 Kite Balloon Section, Royal Flying Corps

by Peter Chapman

FOR EVERY MAN WHO SERVED in the forefront of the war in the air between 1914 and 1918, there were thousands more of lesser renown, whose lives and deeds remain unknown to all but their immediate families, even today.

Perhaps the most ignored arm of the Royal Flying Corps, and indeed the air arms of all the protagonists in World War One, is the often unsung role played by the observation, or Kite Balloon Sections, as they came to be called. Yet a simple look through official publications, such as *The London Gazette*, soon dispel the myth that these were men whose task was easily accomplished, or less dangerous, at times, than those of the men who flew in aircraft. Many a balloon officer was rewarded with a Military Cross for his bravery under fire, whilst others were not as lucky, earning only a cross of a different kind.

What then, too, of the men who serviced these balloons, not in the air but on the ground? In many ways their task was all the more dangerous than that of the enlisted man on an aeroplane squadron, many miles behind the lines. Kite balloons were located closer to the front, to enable them to carry out their primary tasks of observation and artillery registration on enemy targets, and they thus invited attack by not only aircraft, but enemy counter-battery artillery fire too. Many balloon section enlisted men learned to their cost that their role was a dangerous one, with a number being killed or wounded on active duty.

Despite these risks, their story remains largely untold, as few have written about their service. Many of these men were drafted into balloon sections of the RFC because they were considered too old or too physically frail for more direct combat roles. Yet most were volunteers, many with families at home that relied on them and missed them while they were away.

The following account is of one such man, who volunteered for service in the Royal Flying Corps at an age unfashionable to do so, left his wife and children in England and ended up serving with honour for a year and a half in one of the worst and most neglected side-show conflicts of that Great War, where he contracted malaria and had to eventually be invalided home.

HARRY JOHN ERNEST BURTENSHAW was born on 21 November 1878, at 13 Hayes Place, Marylebone; the eldest child of Henry (1850–1956) and Eliza Burtenshaw (née Chapman) (1849–1885). His family were still resident in Marylebone at the time of the 1881 Census, the same year a second child, Minnie Anne, was born. Sadly, ill-fortune was to follow Henry and Eliza's family as Minnie died of smallpox just three years later, in May 1884, and a third child, son Leonard James, was even less fortunate, surviving a bare nine months

before succumbing to the same illness in July that same year. Their misfortune was complete when Harry's mother, Eliza, also died on 18 December 1885 at the age of just 36, and only a week after giving birth to her fourth child, daughter Alice Maude Eliza.

Despite these setbacks, Harry seems to have been well cared for during his childhood and eventually learned his father's trade, that of plasterer.

In April 1900, aged 21 and now resident in Ilford, Harry returned briefly to Worthing to marry 22 year old Ellen Louisa Virgoe on the 16th of that month, the two newlyweds setting up their subsequent home at Manor Park, where their first child, a daughter, was born the following year. More children followed with some regularity over the next 12 years, so that by the beginning of 1914 Harry and wife Ellen were blessed with no fewer than three daughters – Edna (known as Dolly), May and Irene (known as Rene) – and two sons – Ernest and Frederick, the last named having been born in July 1913. With a large family to support, life was difficult at times for Harry and Ellen, as recalled by their eldest daughter, Dolly:

.... Dad was often out of work but it wasn't for the want of trying. He would get a 4d return ticket on tram or train and traipse the streets of London. He was

experienced and enjoyed doing ornamental ceilings in the big houses in London. He could repair any damaged work so that nobody would be able to see it. He would get a cheap dinner in a coffee house (they were not called cafés) or he would take sandwiches and in a screw of paper would be a spoonful of tea, sugar, also some tinned milk to make tea in a billy-can. These were usually provided by the employer. His tools of trade, as I remember, were a hod, a hawk and some trowels, some flat and some pointed. These were carried in a large toolbox and how Mum used to dread seeing him come home with that on his shoulder for she would know that that particular job had finished.¹

ENLISTMENT

On the outbreak of war in August 1914, Harry and his family were living at 31 Parkhurst Road, Manor Park. He first came to the Forces' attention when he volunteered for active service and was attested on 6 December 1915, although he did not immediately enlist. That was to come eight months later, on 22 August 1916 when, at the relatively senior age of 37, he was assigned to the Royal Flying Corps as an Air Mechanic 2nd Class, or AM2, his service number 45040. We are fortunate today to have a glimpse of what his life must have been like in the RFC, for Harry kept a small diary during his service which gives a very private glimpse into the ordinary and extraordinary events that men such as he were part of.

On enlistment, Harry was posted to the RFC Depot at



A family man ready for war: Harry Burtenshaw with his wife and children.