

# Lieutenant Colonel C.J. Burke DSO

## Flying Corps Heavyweight

by Paul R. Hare



*Photographs come from the author's collection except where stated otherwise. Unfortunately, shots to illustrate the RFC in the field during the early part of the war are in short supply. The solution has been to incorporate a selection of cartoons, showing some of Burke's contemporaries who are mentioned in the text. These have been unearthed by our President, Peter Dye, and were drawn by Arthur S. Walker, who later served with the subjects on the staff of the HQ RFC with the BEF.*

**H**AD CAPTAIN C.J. BURKE ATTEMPTED to transfer to the Air Battalion on its formation in April 1911 his application would almost certainly have been rejected out of hand for, amongst other more specialised requirements, preference was to be given to bachelors under 30 years of age who weighed less than 11 stone 7lbs.<sup>1</sup> Although Burke was still only 29 he was already married<sup>2</sup> and his weight was clearly well in excess of the suggested limit, his obvious bulk later earning him the unkind nickname 'Pregnant Percy'. Fortunately, since he was already one of the few army pilots attached to the Balloon School, from which the Air Battalion grew, his acceptance into the new unit was automatic.

He was born, in 1882, in Armagh in Ireland, and in 1900, like many thousands of other patriotic young men, volunteered to fight in the South African War, being awarded the Queen's Medal with two clasps. By 1902 he had decided to make the army his career and accepted a commission into the Royal Irish Regiment, being promoted to the rank of Lieutenant in 1904. From 1905 to 1909 he served with the West Africa Frontier Force and in September 1909, he attained the rank of captain.<sup>3</sup>

During 1910 he became increasingly aware of the military advantages of the aeroplane and, whilst in France, learned to fly at the Farman School, being granted aviator's certificate No.260 on 4 October 1910, and being elected a member of the Royal Aero Club on 18 December.<sup>4</sup>

On 5 November, he was seconded to the Royal Engineers Balloon School at Farnborough, joining the small group of Army officers able to fly aeroplanes, although the army had few machines for them to fly.

*Burke at Hendon in 1910, standing in front of a Farman F.III.*



In October, it had been announced in Parliament that Britain had ordered two aeroplanes from France, a Paulhan and a Farman Type *Militaire*, the latter being a standard Farman III with the addition of upper wing extensions and a third, central, rudder. The machine cost £1008 without instruments, and differed from standard in having its metal fittings nickel plated<sup>5</sup>. Burke, being the only army officer with experience on the type, travelled to Chalon to take delivery, together with Mr George Holt Thomas, Farman's UK agent, and, after a number of trial flights, mostly by company pilots, formally accepted the machine on 26 November.<sup>6</sup>

It was then shipped to England and re-assembled by the Balloon Factory, and on 7 January 1911 was test flown by Burke. He took off, flew towards Laffan's plain at a height of between 50 and 80 feet, turned around after a mile or so and landed back beside the Factory. Ten minutes later he took off again but after just 50 yards met with what was described<sup>7</sup> as *an unfortunate accident* when he stalled, the right wing tip striking the ground and the whole machine cartwheeling, wrecking the machine and injuring Burke's foot. This injury appears to have occasionally troubled him throughout his life and he later put in a claim for disability allowance.<sup>8</sup>

From his hospital bed Burke wrote to Major Bannerman, commander of the Balloon School, explaining that<sup>9</sup>

*My Doctor expects me to off the sick list in three weeks' time so might I request that an application be made to the factory for a new machine for me.*

He went on to express a desire to enter for the Mortimer Singer Prize for the longest flight by a serving officer but in this he was to be frustrated.

The Farman, although badly damaged, was rebuilt by the Balloon Factory, at a cost of £160, and was completed by 6 March when it was test flown by Geoffrey de Havilland who, unsatisfied with its balance, specified some adjustments. De Havilland flew it again on 8 March and, finding it satisfactory, allowed Burke to take it up for a short flight. Now designated as F1, it was handed over to the Balloon School on 16 March 1911, together with a document that is frequently regarded as the first ever certificate of Airworthiness. Burke remained its

*A rather murky shot of Burke landing a Farman.*

