

SYLVESTER LOUIS COWLAN RNAS

Service in the Aegean

BY PETER COWLAN

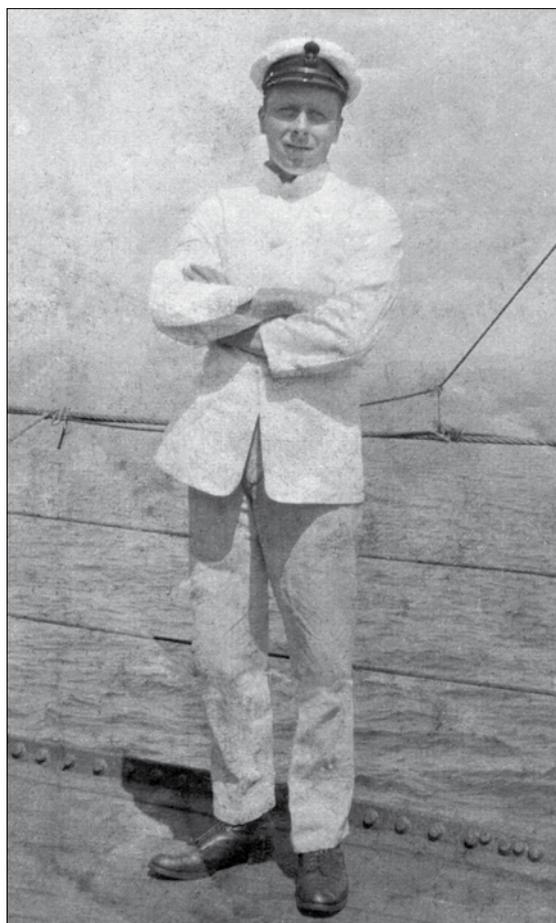
Sylvester Louis Cowlan was born in Soho, London on 19 March 1890, the son of Silvester George Cowlan and his French wife Alice, nee Dupont. In the late 1860s, Alice's father, Louis DuPont, had travelled from his homeland, together with his wife and young daughter, to set up home in the Soho area of London. This location was a magnet for immigrants of many nationalities, especially those in the food trade, in search of a better standard of living than that which was available to them in their native countries. Louis Dupont's business was in the fish trade, his speciality being fried fish, which, at that time, was becoming an increasingly popular part of the working man's diet. After Louis death, Silvester George - he always used this alternative spelling of his first name - took over the fish business in Peter Street, and it was here, at No 4, that Sylvester Louis was born and grew up.

At the age of 21 he was detailed in the 1911 Census working as a Pipe Moulder (a job consisting of the crafting of the silver fittings on a smoking pipe) for Robert Victor Dumenil, a French born silversmith, who traded from premises in Poland Street, a short distance from Sylvester's birthplace. By the outbreak of hostilities, however, he had ceased working with metals of the precious variety and was now employed in the engineering trade, as a fitter and turner, and, possibly, part way through an apprenticeship. Unfortunately, no details have come to light about precisely where his employer was located.

One possibility could well have been the firm of Barimar Ltd, who, as it happened, also had premises in Poland Street. This concern acted as the London agency for the French engine manufacturer Bariquand and Marre. The manufacture of precision tools was their main business but, since the advent of powered transport, they had also been busy making engines, for both automobiles and aircraft. Indeed, in 1907, Wilbur Wright, elder of the two American aviation pioneers, had arranged for B & M to manufacture aeroplane engines of his own design; not, as it turned out, without dispute. Barimar Ltd had pioneered a method of 'scientific welding', specialised in repairs to items made of cast aluminium, such as engine crank-cases, and were to benefit from Ministry contracts throughout WWI.

I do wonder whether Sylvester, himself half French and having been in the employ of a Frenchman, had obtained a good reference from Monsieur Dumanil, before starting work for Barimar. Alternatively, perhaps it was simply a case of better pay that had seen him change jobs.

Early in 1915, with the war barely six months old, it had



Sylvester Louis Cowlan, in his 'whites' aboard HMS Ark Royal

become obvious to the Admiralty that with the increase in aeroplane production there would be an urgent need for a great deal more men to service and maintain these machines and so the call went out for extra manpower. For Sylvester, however, there may also have been another more obvious reason for serving King and Country. The night of 31 May 1915 witnessed the first airship raid carried out on the capital, with bombs, many of them incendiaries, falling on parts of North-East London and resulting in the deaths of seven civilians. Perhaps during that night, Sylvester contemplated the possibility of his own neighbourhood being targeted and maybe it was this, more than any other sense of patriotism, which motivated him to sign up, hopefully to strike back at the Hun.

The location of Sylvester's actual enlistment in the RNAS is also unknown, but one of the possible locations would have been the Regent Street Polytechnic, where days had been set aside especially for tradesmen to register¹. The day following the airship raid, 1 June 1915, saw the start of his service life. His next stop was probably the

Royal Naval Depot at Crystal Palace, to start his basic training, the first entry on his service record stating: 'President II', Air Mech II (e)². After a period of familiarisation with the various types of engine that he would be working on, he no doubt spent many hours square bashing, either at Crystal Palace or one of the other Naval Depots.

Following this introduction to the ways of the Senior Service, F5279, S.L. Cowlan, was assigned, on 12 July, to the books of HMS Ark Royal. This 'Wonder Ship' - as she was sometimes referred to in the periodicals of the time - was, by this time, anchored in Kephalo Bay, Imbros, just twelve miles from the Gallipoli peninsula. Sylvester's actual travel arrangements from the UK are another mystery but Ark Royal's log for 30 July shows the arrival of 18 Air Service ratings.³ The following day details AS (Air Service) ratings - most likely part of the existing crew - tasked at 06.30 with clearing up the workshop. Shortly after, and hopefully after leaving everything spotless, 18 of these AS ratings departed the ship, in exchange presumably for the new intake. Two days later, 1 August, an intake of an additional 28 AS ratings also arrived on board; the probability being that Sylvester was one of these 46 new boys.

The AS personnel on board Ark Royal appear to have been split into three separate sections: 'E' 'aero engines', 'C' 'planes', (presumably airframe riggers) and 'G' 'as requisite' (presumably a mix of both the above to be used as and when necessary). The day to day routine followed the same basic