# SOME INCIDENTS FROM
# GEOFFREY DE HAVILLAND'S MILITARY CAREER
## by Paul R. Hare

EVERYBODY KNOWS that Geoffrey de Havilland was an aircraft designer of considerable talent, and an adventurous aeroplane constructor Fewer, perhaps, remember him as a skilful test pilot, fewer still will recall that he also served, for some years, as an officer in the Royal Flying Corps.

As is well known, de Havilland sold his first successful aeroplane to the War Office when he took up employment as designer/test pilot at the Royal Aircraft Factory where he designed and developed a number of important machines, most notably the BE2 which he flew, *hors concours*, at the Military Aeroplane Competition held at Larkhill on Salisbury Plain during August 1912. Whist at Larkhill, he achieved the record altitude of 10560 feet, in BE2, his passenger being one of the competition judges, the commander of the RFC's Military Wing, Major F.H. Sykes with whom he established a close rapport the two becoming good friends.[1]

The Army Order[2] setting out the Royal warrant which established the Royal Flying Corps explained how officers who were already pilots might apply to transfer to the new corps, and might be placed in a reserve until a vacancy occurred, and also set out how civilian pilots could also apply to join:

*A gentleman not holding a commission who desires to join the Royal Flying Corps as an officer will forward his application to the Commandant, Central Flying School, quoting the number of his Royal Aero Club Certificate, stating which wing of the corps he wishes to join. If selected for the Military wing he will be granted a commission as second lieutenant, on probation, in the Special Reserve of Officers.*

*Training of these officers will normally be the same as that presented for officers of the regular army, and they will receive, under the same conditions, the sum of £75, if they have obtained the Royal Aero Club certificate at their own expense.*

At the suggestion of Major Sykes,[3] presumably made during their time together during the Military Aeroplane Competition, de Havilland applied to join the Special Reserve, being appointed as Second Lieutenant (On Probation) with effect from 2 September 1912.[4] His name first appeared in the Army List in October and from then on the aviation press

*Aircrew of the defending force in the 1912 manoeuvres. Geoffrey de Havilland was seated at the left end of the front row. The others were; standing: Capt. G.W.P. Dawes; Lt V. Wadham; Lt P.H. Playfair; Lt R.H. Chateris; Lt A. Achton; Lt C.J. Estrange- Malone RN; Lt Spenser Grey RN, Lt A.G. Fox. Seated; GDH; Capt. R Gordon; Major H.R.M. Brooke-Popham; Major F.H. Sykes; Cdr C.R. Samson RN; Lt V.A. Barrington-Kennett.*



always referred to him as Lieutenant de Havilland.

Whilst officers appointed to the Reserve were obliged to put in a minimum of nine hours flying per quarter, and to provide evidence that they had done so, effectively limiting membership to those who owned their own aeroplanes, members of the Special Reserve were under no similar obligation: possession of a Royal Aero Club certificate was all that was required, .

De Havilland, in his autobiography *Sky Fever* mentions joining the Reserve but gives no reason for his having done so leaving us to guess at his motivation. It may have been pure patriotism of the kind common in the Edwardian age, or a desire to belong, and spend more time amongst people whose company he obviously enjoyed, or simply to get to fly aeroplanes on service duties, adding to his knowledge as a designer, or perhaps a combination of all three. However, whatever his reasons for joining, the £75 for possessing a Royal Aero Club certificate cannot have been unwelcome to a married man with a growing family since it represented more than he could earn in three months.

Within days of his official appointment as a second lieutenant in the Special Reserve, de Havilland was in uniform and piloting Major R.H.M. Brooke-Popham, who had previously occupied the front cockpit of the same machine, BE2, on 27 August when de Havilland returned from Larkhill to Farnborough,[5] to the autumn manoeuvres

None had been held in 1911 and those for 1912 were planned to be on a truly grand scale, principally to give staff officer experience in handling large bodies of troops. Each side was to comprise two divisions of infantry, one of cavalry, and some field artillery. In addition, each was intended to have the support of a squadron of eight aeroplanes, whilst four more aeroplanes were to be made available for use by the umpires.[6] However, this proved more than the recently formed RFC could achieve, even with the participation of the Naval Wing, which probably explains de Havilland's, and the BE2's, involvement.

The scenario was that the Red Army, commanded by General Sir Douglas Haig, had landed on the Norfolk coast and would attack towards London, defended by the Blue Army under General Sir James Grierson, with boundaries laid down beyond which each force could not cross prior to the start. 2 Squadron RFC was to form part of the Red force, whilst 3 Squadron, to which de Havilland was attached, was to join Blue, assisted by a contingent from the RFC's Naval wing. Four days were allowed for action, but the various units involved began the considerable task of assembling in their assigned positions almost two weeks before.

Thus, on 4 September de Havilland took-off from Farnborough, landing first at Hitchin before Brooke-Popham selected a farm at Hardwick, some five miles or so to the west of Cambridge and just inside the Blue Army's permitted area, as his unit's base for the duration of the Manoeuvres.

Brooke-Popham, piloted by de Havilland, began to make reconnaissance flights in order to familiarise himself with the surrounding countryside whilst the remainder of the RFC contingent slowly moved into the area. However their move was not without numerous setbacks. Bad weather delayed the departure of many of the participating aeroplanes and then, on 14 September, following two fatal crashes involving monoplanes en-route to the manoeuvres, the War Office