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# DRESS REHEARSAL FOR WAR

## THE RFC CONCENTRATION CAMP

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THE RFC SPENT THE FIRST TWO YEARS of its existence in preparing itself for the role it was to play in war, and these preparations culminated in the Concentration Camp of June 1914, the Corps' dress rehearsal for war.

The phrase *concentration camp* had no sinister connotations then: invented during the Boer War, it simply meant the gathering together of people with a common aspect in one place. The RFC's camp was conceived, and organised, by Colonel F.H. Sykes, and was held at Netheravon, on Salisbury Plain, in June 1914, to concentrate all its active service units in one place both for training and as a public demonstration of the unit's proficiency.

The RFC's administrative unit was the Squadron, and each was at least a little different from the others, due both to circumstances and to the personalities of key personnel. Thus 2 Squadron, which had moved to Montrose during January 1913, had, almost of necessity, become experienced in long distance cross-country flying, whereas 3 Squadron, to whom Netheravon was home, had become more accomplished at co-operating with the Artillery units which also exercised on Salisbury Plain.

Sykes's idea was to bring all the squadrons together, for a month long camp, so that they could share experiences and learn from each other. And Salisbury Plain was the obvious venue, but first he had to get all the squadrons there, and it was in doing so that he first showed the extent of his planning for the war which, it was becoming increasingly obvious, was not far off.

3 Squadron, commanded by Major H.R.M. Brooke-Popham, was based at Netheravon and would remain in situ, as would 4 Squadron under Major Raleigh.

5 Squadron would fly in from their base at Farnborough, and 2 Squadron would come down from Montrose. The Aircraft Park, under the Command of Major Carden, would also transfer from Farnborough, as would as much of 6 Squadron as possible, as this unit was still forming up and not yet up to strength.

1 Squadron was still in the process of converting from airship operations to aeroplanes, following the handing over of the RFC's airships to the Royal Navy, and, as yet, had no equipment and so was unable to attend.

Sykes proposed that, in order to practise mobilisation for war, the squadrons would not just simply fly their aeroplanes down to take part but would bring all their Motor Transport, including mobile workshops, and motorcycles, too. In the case of 2 Squadron, this meant moving a total of 34 vehicles, including 12 assorted heavy lorries, 6 tenders, trailers, motorcycles and a car. The slowest vehicle, a heavy lorry, had a top speed of less than ten miles per hour, a performance, or lack thereof, that was unremarkable at the time as the general speed limit, across the country, was only 12mph.

So the journey was planned in stages that the MT vehicles could comfortably achieve in a day, and which the aeroplanes could cover in around an hour, with a mechanic being carried in each aircraft, so that servicing could, if necessary, begin before the arrival of the road party. This would not only test the MT vehicles mobility, but would also demonstrate the aeroplanes' ability to carry on without them, at least for a short time, should such a need arise. The heavy lorries set off each day soon after dawn, with the tenders, which had a better turn of speed, remaining until after the aeroplanes had taken off.

Major C.J. Burke led 2 Squadron on its journey south,