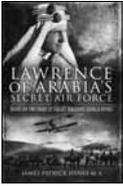


THE 'X' FACTOR

Special Duty Flight – 14 Squadron RFC

A detailed History of 14 Squadron by Mike O'Connor and Mike Napier appeared in CCI 42/1-3.
This account covers the unit left behind at Akaba to work with Lawrence.

by Peter Wright



'SECRET AIR FORCE'¹ is the rather misleading subtitle of the recent Lawrence of Arabia book based on the wartime diary of Flt Sgt George Samuel Hynes who, as an Air Mechanic 1, served with 14 Squadron RFC 'C' Flight, Arabian Detachment at Wejh and then with X Flight.

It is unfortunate that the author, the diarist's nephew James Patrick Haynes, appears to have chosen to over-dramatise historical fact in this way – as The Special Duty Flight was never 'SECRET'! On several occasions this epithet has been used, and the statement made that 'even the RAF did not know it existed, or about its flights'.

CLARIFICATION

X Flight, as it was designated, appears to have been erroneously taken to mean 'X' as an unknown secret unit. In fact the Flight was no more unknown to the RFC/RAF Middle East Brigade at Suez and Cairo than was X Aircraft Depot in Alexandria, X Engine Repair Depot at Abbassia in Cairo, or X Aircraft Park at Kantara. It is also listed in General Allenby's major dispatch to the Secretary of State for War, on the campaign in Palestine.² While researching the X Flight documents at the National Archives, out of the hundreds of sheets, only one so far viewed was rubber-stamped 'SECRET'. Regular typed Weekly Reports by the various Commanding Officers of the Flight were sent to Headquarters Middle East Brigade at Suez and then on to Cairo.

Overall however, the value of this book and diary, recording the personal actions, thoughts and views of AM1 Hynes is very useful and interesting, as little has been written by other-ranks personnel regarding the wartime exploits of this small and short-lived unit.

In researching the background for the diary it is apparent that the author has made use of sections from my article 'Lawrence's Air Force', taken off the internet; while there are a number of factual errors, such as '160 Rumplers at El Arish' (p10), which is nonsense, and a few other inconsistencies.

THE ARABIAN DETACHMENT

In October 1917, the Arabian Detachment, otherwise 'C' Flight of 14 Squadron RFC, was disbanded at Wejh and moved back to Suez. [see *CCI Journal* Vol 34/ 2 (2003), page 116, my article 'Lawrence's Air Force']. The unit had worked in the Hejaz with Capt T.E. Lawrence for most of the previous year. Lawrence had then gone north to join up with Emir Feisal's Northern Arab Army and on 6 July 1917, they carried out their daring and surprise capture of the port of Akaba. This then became their HQ.

AKABA (AQABA TODAY)

From the now defunct Arabian Detachment, a small unit consisting initially of three aircraft, two Crossley Tenders with trailers and eight ground crew, under the command of Capt F.W. Stent,³ was formed at Wejh in September 1917, and on the 9th was detached to Akaba, where they created a base and landing ground. This unit was designated X Flight.

The pilots were Capt F.W. Stent, Lt V.D. Siddons and Lt E. Bannister, but others would soon follow. Their aeroplanes were two BE2e machines, A1801 and A3065, the latter being Presentation aircraft *Bikanir No 2*; two BE12s, A6311 and A6323 and one DH2 Scout, A4779 which arrived in a packing case. The DH was erected on 7 October and test-flown by Stent on the 18th. Two spare 100hp Monosoupape engines were also allocated.

The small 'airfield' and base at Akaba, with its Royal Aircraft Factory 1912 pattern 'T' tent hangars and other ranks' bell-tents.

:IWM

