First Landing: 3 Squadron comes to Halton during the 1913 Manoeuvres

By Francis Hanford

The Royal Air Force station at Halton has a long tradition and fine reputation as a training unit. Starting when the estate was lent to Lord Kitchener in 1914 for the preparation of infantry for the new volunteer army, his 'First Hundred Thousand', the emphasis moved to aircraft maintenance in 1916 and, by the end of World War I, there were some 10,000 men, women and boys under training. They were to be followed by Lord Trenchard's apprentices, some 50,000 of them in 155 entries from 1920 to 1993, augmented by vast numbers of other trainees on shorter courses, especially during World War II. Today RAF Halton is the home of recruit and non-technical ground training and celebrates the 90th anniversary of its first encounter with the Royal Flying Corps, which became the RAF. How appropriate it is that this first landing should be during a training exercise — the army manoeuvres of 1913.

The reverses suffered by the British army at the hands of the Boers during the South Africa War had initiated many fundamental reforms, particularly in methods of and attitudes to training. Large-scale manoeuvres became an annual event, developing and testing the co-ordination of the various larger formations and their supporting

The Bleriot of Lieutenant Joubert de la Ferte at Halton

services. Further impetus was given to the need for these exercises by an increasing awareness of the growing power and militancy of Germany. She was developing her international influence and empire, confronting British and French interests in Africa, the Middle East and the Balkans. In 1911 she had even intervened in the internal politics of Morocco in support of the anti-French faction by sending two gunboats into the port of Agadir. She had only backed down when her main dockyards and her access to the Atlantic were threatened by the Royal Navy's Grand Fleet, mobilising for a full scale confrontation in the approaches to the Baltic.

Thus, it was that the manoeuvres in 1913 were of unprecedented size and scope. The planners were particularly anxious to exercise the logistical support services, as the horse drawn wagons of the Army Service Corps were in the process of being replaced with motor lorries and they hoped to gain experience in the operation and control of these. Also, they wished to discover whether a single main road could carry the motorised traffic necessary for the support of two divisions. Thus a fluid scenario was essential and it was decided that the enemy 'Whiteland' forces, consisting of little more than a cavalry screen, would retreat northwards, across Buckinghamshire, in the direction of their capital city, Nuneaton, pursued by the main 'Brownland' army of three divisions. To assemble the necessary forces in the vicinity of Aylesbury, divisional manoeuvres were held between 11 and 19 September. Two divisions marched northwards from Aldershot while the third advanced North-Eastward from the Salisbury plain area.

After its successful debut in the 1912 manoeuvres, when its aircraft had played a crucial role in detecting every move of the opponent's forces for whichever side they were supporting, the Royal Flying Corps was expected to play a full part in the proceedings. The airships of 1 Squadron and the aircraft of 4 and 5 Squadrons were to support the 'Whiteland' army while 3 Squadron was allocated to 'Brownland'. The new corps had very few precedents to follow and preparations were protracted and involved.

Preparation: much to do

As commander of 3 Squadron, Major Robert Brooke-Popham, had much to do. The shortage of aircrew had to be made good to allocate a pilot and observer to each aircraft and appoint a supernumerary adjutant and transport officer. This was accomplished by reclaiming, on loan, personnel

Major Brooke-Popham, Commander of 3 Squadron

who had been given up to facilitate the formation of 5 Squadron and the diversion to ground duties of Lieutenants Allen and Christie. Aircraft were to be prepared and the undersides of the wings marked to facilitate recognition from the ground. This was long before the roundel was introduced and the under-wing area had to be divided into five equal areas, the outer and centre of which were to be painted black. Transport had to be brought up to the approved scale of tenders, lorries, mobile workshops and motorcycles. Tentage was to be assembled, for men and aircraft servicing, and special weather-proof canvas covers for cockpits, engines and propellers were to be made by the tailor because tents for overnight storage of aircraft were not deemed necessary by the authorities.

On top of this necessary administration, he received a confidential briefing on the plans and was authorised to reconnoitre the area of operations to identify suitable landing grounds. These were required to be at least 200 yards square without stones or ridges and furrows and with hedges no more than five feet high. If higher obstacles were found the length was to be extended by a distance equivalent to 12 times the extra height. For this last task 'Brookham' (as he was known to his troops) was exceptionally well qualified. Having served in the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry for many years he knew most of the landowners in the area well and could command hospitality wherever he went. Travelling in the taxi, hired by the army for the purpose, he would drop in and accept the meal that was invariably offered. His adjutant, who accompanied him, found this proceeding extremely difficult. His leader rarely told him of his plans and almost invariably fell asleep after coffee, leaving Allen to carry on a polite conversation with his hosts. As the evening progressed he would be asked whether they would be staying for the night and would have to confess that he was not privy to their plans. If, when the great man awoke, he decided to return to base, his unfortunate subordinate would be required to locate their tired, and not always sober, driver and endure a long night drive back to their base at Netheravon, on Salisbury Plain.

The availability of aircraft was also a problem. At this early stage in the history of flying the serious production of airframes in any quantity was confined to a few French pioneer constructors. The Royal Aircraft Factory at Farnborough was experimenting with its early designs and other British makers were also only at the development stage, or were building French models under license in small numbers. Thus the Royal Flying Corps was forced to use what it could get, fielding a great variety of types and experiencing considerable problems in maintaining serviceability. Eventually, 3 Squadron managed to field 11 of the 12 machines expected. They were a typical mix for the time: 4 Henry Farman F 20s, 4 Bleriots and 3 different Bleriot Experimental types from the Royal Aircraft Factory: a BE 2a, a BE 3 and a BE 4.

The Henry Farman was a two-seat pusher biplane built in France by one of a pair of English brothers, Henry and Maurice. Their aircraft followed the principles of the Wright brothers' designs but with a nacelle to protect the crew, aileron control in place of wing-warping and the removal of the forward elevator on most models. Slow, stable and easy to fly, their products were to be used in considerable numbers for initial training before and throughout WW I.

The Bleriots were tractor monoplanes very similar to the machine in which Louis Bleriot had crossed the channel in 1909. However, the 23 hp Anzani engine in his original machine had been replaced with a 50 hp Gnome rotary in the two, single seaters and 70 and 80 hp Gnomes in the two-seaters. Also the tail plane and elevator had been redesigned and the tail wheel replaced with a skid. This last change was to aid stopping in an era prior to the introduction of undercarriage brakes. Although this make was extremely popular for air races and widely used by European air forces for reconnaissance and bombing it was to be relegated rapidly to the training role and then to obscurity once serious hostilities started.

Rather more advanced in design were the three Royal Aircraft Factory BEs. Indeed the Aeroplane had acclaimed the BE 4 the previous year with a drawing labelled: '*How to build an aeroplane — It will be noted that the upper plane is staggered forward and that the body is streamlined to the utmost possible degree*'. These two-seater tractor biplanes with aileron control were inherently stable in flight and were early examples of a configuration which was to change little till the mid-1930s. The aircraft developed from these early examples were to carry out the bulk of the British reconnaissance and artillery spotting tasks for the duration of the coming hostilities.

The Squadron deployed on 12 September. 'A' and 'B' Flights flew to Haineshill to support 1 and 2 Divisions, encamped at Billingbear Park, and 'C' Flight joined 3 Division at Hungerford. Details of this first phase of the manoeuvres are sketchy in the extreme as the squadron flying records do not cover the period and only the sorties done in support of the later, army level, operations are detailed in the squadron commanders final report. In this he ends his general comments with a slightly petulant section in which he stresses the need for the air effort to be taken seriously. This reflects on the very real risks taken daily by the aviators of the time, and suggests that, during the earlier period, neither these nor the information they collected were always appreciated.

From the very terse journal maintained by the commander of 'A' Flight, Captain Allen, we learn the outline of his and 'B' Flight's movements. He wrote:

12 Sep: *Sent off the flight on ahead to Haines Hill.*

13 Sep: *Up at daybreak, decided too foggy to fly, strong wind all day, started at 1615, found it quite pleasant and landed at Haines Hill at 1715. In camp: Picton-Warlow, Birch, Abercromby: House (umpire), Porter, Stopford and self.*

14 Sep: *Pretty busy all day, conference with staff, looked for landing ground. Visit from Sykes (Colonel F H Sykes, the commandant of the Military Wing of the RFC).*

15 Sep: *Porter (BE 3) and Stopford (Henry Farman) out reconnaissance, dropping message bags, same in pm.*

16 Sep: *Dense fog in am and operations ceased at 1300.*

17 Sep: *Had to attend a conference. Went to see staff in pm.*

18 Sep: *Thick fog till 1100. Shifted to Rose Hill. Staff left us severely alone all day. No flying.*

19 Sep: *Not a word from the Staff and very foggy. Flew 203(BE 3) in the pm.*

From this we can infer that though his duties as deputy squadron commander involved him with the staff and in other duties, the reconnaissance tasking was not particularly onerous, which bears out his superiors comments on not being taken seriously. Concerning the 4 Bleriots of 'C' Flight, under the command of Captain Fox, we know much less. The 3rd Division had advanced via Hungerford, Wantage and Oxford but no mention is made of the locations of the landing grounds. The only specific facts we have from him are that aircraft serviceability was poor and that they: '*could only keep two aircraft flying at any one time*' and that: '*Wadham and Joubert each changed engines twice*'.

"Brookham" discusses a sortie with Captain Allen in front of the BE 3

The first phase ended on 19 September and the time had come for the separate Divisions to coalesce into whole armies. The troops were to be given three days rest, encamped on private estates across mid-Buckinghamshire, while the staffs reorganised. The arrival of the two armies, made up of some 50,000 troops, with 14,000 horses, artillery and hundreds of supply wagons, made an enormous impression on the local populace. It is hardly surprising that their lines of march and camp sites were the objects of enormous curiosity and all who could got out to enjoy the spectacle.

Welcoming the troops

On the Halton estate Mr Alfred de Rothschild welcomed the troops with open arms. These included a brigade of Guards, battalions of the Black Watch and Munster Fusiliers and a battery of field artillery. Not content to merely allow them onto his land, he had hired marquees and caterers to ensure their every comfort. The military authorities had rejected his offer to provide all meals for the troops but this failed to deter him from supplementing their rations on a most generous scale.

On three successive evenings 3,000 soldiers were given a high tea of hot pies, cold meats, bread and butter, washed down with tea, beer and mineral waters. Indeed, the beer was served by the quart and Lieutenant Allen noted that, hot from the long march, the troops did it ample justice. It is no wonder that their host was received with hearty cheering when he visited the mess tent!

The officers were entertained on an even more lavish scale. Their mess marquee was decorated with floral arrangements, the best chefs were employed and champagne flowed freely. When Lieutenant Allen had arrived ahead of the squadron to set up the tents in advance for the aircraft and personnel, he was invited to stay in Halton House. He had felt compelled to refuse the offer but his host had insisted that he take all his meals there and had even provided him with a horse to make transit to and from the landing ground easier.

For the use of the Royal Flying Corps Mr Rothschild had provided a field from which the sheep had been cleared — the other side of the Tring Road from the main encampment. This is the site on which the Maitland Parade Square and its attendant barrack blocks were to be built during the 1920s. It conformed to the official RFC size requirements but, being close under the ridge of the Chilterns and sloping downwards to the West, access from the air was not easy. Pilots coming in to land were faced with the options of landing uphill, with the prevailing wind, or of approaching from the South along the side of the hills and turning into wind to land down hill with only a tail-skid as a brake. Fortunately, their aircraft was capable of landing in very short spaces but the fact that the permanent airfield of what was to become RAF Halton was established a mile away to the West is hardly surprising.

Captain Allen, Commander of 'A' Flight

On this sloping pasture the ground crew, under the direction of the adjutant and the transport officer, erected the tents, identified the centre of the landing ground with a large white cross of American Cloth and marked its perimeter with yellow flags. They then settled down to await the arrival of the aircraft while enjoying three meals a day provided by their host. Their feeding arrangements were independent of the main body and ignored the fact that they were receiving a cash allowance of one shilling a day in lieu of rations. This had been authorised by the army command because they often had to leave camp for extended periods to rescue aircraft in distress.

According to the account in the local newspapers, the first aircraft they saw did not touch down. It appeared on the Wednesday and made a detailed reconnaissance of the landing ground before disappearing over Combe Hill. It was followed on the afternoon of Thursday 18 September 1913 by the four aircraft of 'B' Flight, under the command of Captain Herbert, alighting in the designated area. Unfortunately the identity of the first to land has eluded the reporters of the event. The rest of the squadron flew in during the following two days, the first to land being recorded as the Bleriot of Lieutenant Joubert, at 1.30 pm on the Friday.

Half an hour later the excitement of the occasion was heightened dramatically, if unintentionally, by Lieutenant Wadham. Misjudging his final approach, his Bleriot overshot the landing area, narrowly missed some spectators and ended up in the hedge beside the Wendover-Tring road. Fortunately he and his mechanic, AM 1 Bowyer, were uninjured and the only damage to the aircraft was a broken propeller.

Luckily, the honour of the squadron was recovered at 6.30 pm when Lieutenant Laurence, with Major Brooke-Popham as his observer, executed a perfect landing after 'a brilliant spiral volplane (gliding with the engine cut)' from 8,000 feet, coming to a halt neatly parked 30 yards from the aircraft tents. The last to arrive was Captain Allen who had had to attend yet another Staff conference before flying in on Saturday afternoon.

Captain Herbert, Commander of 'B' Flight

Captain Fox, Commander of 'C' Flight

We must remember, at this point, that these events took place a mere five years after the first flight in Britain and that the vast majority of the population would never have seen an aeroplane. The chance to feast their eyes on this new technology at first hand provoked great excitement. Rope barriers — guarded by two policeman and the estates' 12 game-keepers — had to be erected to control the crowds of onlookers, who were present in greatest force on Sunday when they were very disappointed that the poor weather prevented flying. Sympathetic to their curiosity, Major Brooke-Popham arranged to have aircraft parked where they could be seen and allowed generous access to the local press who reported on every aspect of the manoeuvres in great detail. Meanwhile, his officers were entertained to a special performance of Mr Rothschild's private miniature circus, with their host acting as ringmaster.

On Monday 22 September hostilities were resumed, but the day dawned foggy and reconnaissance sorties could only be launched after 11 am. In spite of this, the early morning was enlivened considerably by the emergence from the mist of the airship Delta which was observing for the 'Whiteland' forces. A Henry Farman, which happened to be airborne at the time, headed straight for the enemy and a Bleriot and a BE took off quickly to intercept. In the space of six minutes these latter were able to fly around and climb above the interloper, allowing 3 Squadron to claim that they could have destroyed it, had they been armed for the purpose.

This event was seen as having great military significance and provoked considerable discussion after the manoeuvres. The fact that an airship had reconnoitred successfully, in conditions which had grounded heavier-than-air machines, suggested a potential which was not to be borne out by later events. Nor was the opinion of the general staff, published in *The Times* on 4 October, that Delta would have driven the aeroplanes off, because 'she was a steadier platform' to prove to be sound. However, the final word on this matter must go to Captain Allen, who takes 3 Squadron's side but adds: *'Whether of course a Zepplin could have been so easy to tackle is another matter'.*

3 Squadron aircrew involved in the 1913 manoeuvres

Name	Post	Cert	Date	Remarks
Maj R Brooke-Popham	Sqn Cdr	108	18.7.11	Observer — Tail No 266
Lieut A Christie	Tpt Off	245	16.6.12	Ground party
Lieut D L Allen	Adj-P	318	15.10.12	Ground party
Capt C R W Allen	'A' Flt Cdr-P	159	14.11.11	BE 4 Tail No 204
Capt W Picton-Warlow	'A' Flt-O	451	1.4.13	BE
Lieut R O Abercromby	'A' Flt-O	134	12.9.11	BE
Lieut G T Porter	'A' Flt-P	169	9.1.12	BE 3 Tail No 203
Lieut W Lawrence	'A' Flt-P	113	1.8.11	BE 2a Tail No 226 on loan (5 Sqn)
Capt P L W Herbert	'B' Flt Cdr-P	244	16.7.12	HF
Lieut R Cholmonderley	'B' Flt-P	271	13.8.12	HF
Lieut T O'B Hubbard	'B' Flt-P	222	4.1.12	HF
Lieut G B Stopford	'B' Flt-P	300	17.9.12	HF Tail No 351
Lieut A Shekelton	'B' Flt-O	399	21.1.13	HF
Lieut G Adams	'B' Flt-O	495	29.5.13	HF on loan (5 Sqn)
Lieut W C K Birch	'B' Flt-O	375	17.12.12	HF on loan (5 Sqn)
Capt A G Fox	'C' Flt Cdr-P	176	30.1.12	Bleriot Tail No 219
Lieut V H N Wadham	'C' Flt-P	243	16.7.12	Bleriot Tail No 221
Lieut E L Conran	'C' Flt-P	342	22.10.12	Bleriot Tail No 292
Lieut P B Joubert de la Ferte	'C' Flt-P 2	80	3.9.12	Bleriot Tail No 293
Lieut E R L Corballis	'C' Flt-O	378	17.12.12	Bleriot
Lieut E N Fuller	'C' Flt-O	325	15.10.12	Bleriot

P: Pilot; **O:** Observer: all aircrew were qualified pilots and held Aviators Certificates; **Cert:** Aviator's Certificate granted by Royal Aero Club of the United Kingdom; **Date:** Date Certificate granted; **BE:** Bleriot Experimental: two-seat tractor biplane made by the Royal Aircraft Factory at Farnborough; **HF:** Henry Farman F20: two-seat pusher biplane of French manufacture

This excitement over, two BEs, a Henry Farman and a Bleriot took off to check the enemy's movements and then to drop messages detailing the results of their observations to the 'Brownland' cavalry headquarters near Aylesbury. Shortly after 11 am another airship, the Eta, was sighted and an aircraft was launched to attack her, but contact was lost in the hazy conditions that still prevailed. These reconnaissance sorties proved successful, each aircraft covering 100-120 miles and returning safely.

However, one of the Henry Farmans was forced to land at Staverton, by engine trouble, and was adjudged to have been captured and the BE 4 of Captain Allen suffered from lack of power. The former had to have the oil joints on its pulsator remade and, for the latter, an engine change was deemed necessary. This had to be done in the open air as the tents were being taken down, in preparation for the squadron's next move. This was most unfortunate as there was heavy rain for much of the night.

Now the centre of operations moved Northwards, into the Buckingham area, and Tuesday saw the departure of the bulk of the squadron for Padbury. High winds kept them grounded for the whole morning, the Bucks Advertiser reporting that '*(Sergeant) Major Ramsay told our representative that it was asking for trouble to ascend in such weather*'. This was born out when the one Bleriot which attempted to take off returned to earth rapidly having been, as the paper gleefully reported,

'buffeted about like a cork on the waves'. When the weather moderated in the afternoon they did get away, leaving 'B' Fight behind. On their way they were able to do further valuable reconnaissance tasks.

Remaining behind also was Captain Allen, whose aircraft's engine still refused to perform properly. His mechanics had to spend that day, and much of the next, cleaning and reinstalling the original engine. This probably involved purging its fuel system and cleaning off the carbon which the total loss lubrication system deposited in copious quantities on the valves and spark plugs. Although the high winds persisted his predicament could be allowed to delay 'B' Flight no longer and they left for the operational area during the morning.

Allen finally departed at 3.30 pm and, after 20 minutes flying in very bumpy conditions, rejoined the squadron at Towcester. As the Halton Estate employees tidied up and discussed the recent events none could foresee the return of the troops in a year's time, when they would be in far greater numbers and with an infinitely grimmer task in prospect.

Departure: moving northward

As the war moved northward, 3 Squadron was in the van, acting as the eyes of the army. They recorded some 26 reconnaissance sorties over the next four days, systematically observing the battle area and the enemy's lines of communication to meet the intelligence needs of the general staff. This proved neither easy nor realistic, for while the aircraft of 'Whiteland' could locate and watch substantial numbers of 'Brownland' troops, they had only a screen of cavalry and a few cyclists to identify. Here the lack of experience of their observers became all too apparent.

To assemble the manpower needed to fill their establishment had proved hard enough; to find crews with the expertise needed, at a time when the RFC was expanding, was almost impossible. Still, they made the best of things and learned much in the process. They were to reap the rewards of this experience and their efforts to learn from it 12 months later, as they followed and reported on the movements of the Kaiser's armies in France.

The fact that they were able to meet the flying task was due, in no small measure, to the success of

A Henry Farman and Bleriot at Halton with BE4 in the tent. Note the Black recognition markings under the H-7's wings

their support arrangements. There were some 140 ground staff on the squadron strength. Each aircraft had its own designated rigger and engine mechanic, each flight had a carpenter, a sail-maker, a photographer and a signaller, while drivers, cooks, officers' servants and the crews of the two workshop lorries accounted for most of the rest. These last-mentioned were kept very busy with repairs to aero-engines, metal brackets and cowlings while devoting equal time and energy to keeping the squadron's vehicles and motor cycles serviceable.

That an adjutant and a transport officer should be needed to direct and control this complex team while the aircrew got on with the serious and hazardous business of flying, comes as no surprise. In an anecdote in which he criticises 'Brookham' for pocketing unread a message delivered to him by a despatch rider as he set off on a sortie, Lieutenant Allen underlines the need for the formal separation of operations and administration. On this particular occasion the preparations for a move were delayed but, had the squadron commander been captured, the enemy would have gained valuable intelligence. Finally, it was shown that the skill, determination and morale of the ground crews could be supported efficiently by the Ordnance and Army Service Corps. These organisations provided the 790 gallons of petrol and 100 gallons of castor oil engine lubricant they used, as well as spares and many other necessaries as and when needed.

As well as exercising air and ground crews, the manoeuvres gave the RFC the opportunity to evaluate the aircraft they were using, under the conditions that might be expected in wartime. After his squadron had covered some 4,545 miles on reconnaissance and 3,310 miles on other flights, operating from eight temporary landing grounds, Major Brook-Popham was in a position to report with authority.

The BE 3 and 4 he liked, commenting favourably on their performance in wind and their slow landing speed. To improve their utility he suggested that the observer be given writing facilities, that ingress and egress for the crew be made easier and that access to the engine for servicing be improved.

The Henry Farmans had proved disappointing. If left out in the rain, or in heavy dew, the wings had filled with water which had to be released by puncturing the fabric. The resultant waterlogging of wood and linen had increased the overall weight and caused wing distortion which ruined performance, limiting the aircrafts' ceiling to 3,000 feet and even causing one of them to be restricted to single-seat operation at times. Their redeeming features were that they had proved to be good observation platforms and were able to turn quickly and to land in very small spaces.

The Bleriots he considered to have many advantages. Provided that they were fitted with the most powerful of the engines available, they were 'good wind machines', fast, able to climb well and to land and take off in small spaces. Also they had stood up to the weather well and their undercarriages had coped with a lot of rough use. Their disadvantages were that they were unstable, making them very tiring to fly and causing discomfort and even 'seasickness' to their observers, whose position offered inadequate protection and very limited forward vision. With the view ahead obstructed by the wings and fuselage they could give very little assistance to their pilots with navigation.

In conclusion

The manoeuvres were judged a success. It said so in *The Times* and also in the final report, signed off by no less a personage than the King. The former had stated that 'Our Flying Corps can now be reported competent to supply this information and it has consequently justified its existence and its cost'. Even more important than these opinions was to be that of Sir John French, who had gained considerable confidence in the RFC's ability.
A year later, as commander of the British Expeditionary Force in France, he was to use the results of the RFC's reconnaissance flights, the first of which was done by Lieutenant Joubert, to make the moves that would contain the German advance and save Paris.

The Times also aired the question of whether competing air forces might have to fight for information, a point which, as we have seen, was already exercising the minds of 3 Squadron. Their aggressive response to Delta's intrusion was another first by a unit with many firsts to its name and this one they can, perhaps, share with Halton, whose hospitality they enjoyed so much.

In 90 years both organisations have come a long way and become pre-eminent in their own fields of expertise while supporting a common purpose.

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