

# Some Aspects of the Aircrew Experience During the Great War

by Peter Daybell – Part 2



BE2c 2049 of 13 Squadron brought down 5 December 1915. 2Lt A.R.H. Browne died of wounds, 1AM W.H. Cox prisoner of war.

## Leadership, discipline and morale in the RFC

Leadership, discipline and good morale were the glue that held the RFC together. Indeed there is little doubt that without confidence in their commanders at all levels, and the intangible and elusive magic of *esprit de corps*, the contribution of the RFC to the overall campaign on the Western Front would have been very much diminished. As we shall see, there were appalling casualties, and what many would argue were unrealistic expectations of the men. Yet, like their brothers in arms in the infantry they did what was asked of them, and achieved some remarkable successes. Such achievements do not just happen.

Major General Trenchard, who commanded the RFC in France for most of the war, was a bold and energetic field commander. A tough and aggressive officer, who had the ear of General Haig, Trenchard was a big man, with a loud voice that earned him the sobriquet 'Boom', and he had a strong personality to match. A Royal Scots Fusilier, he was sniped through the lung in South Africa, and as a stalled major of 39, looking to resuscitate a faltering career, he obtained his flying ticket and joined the brand new RFC in the middle of 1912.

Three years later he was commanding his Corps in the field in the world's first real air war, and developing firm ideas on this novel form of battle. His policy was essentially one of taking the war to the enemy and applying unrelenting pressure, be it by fighter sweeps or bombing. His directive of September 1916 stressed that the aeroplane was an 'offensive and not a defensive weapon',<sup>55</sup> and in 1918 he said 'British and American pilots have only one policy, one method of fighting – to go and find the Hun and make him fight.'<sup>56</sup> Thus much of the RFC's war took place deep inside German territory, where many of the material advantages were with the enemy: but the British, he believed, by taking the initiative held the moral high ground.

Trenchard was no 'chateau general' and made frequent visits to his squadrons, often by air, accompanied by his popular ADC, the author, poet and linguist Maurice Baring. He eschewed fuss, and sought to mix with the men and see things for himself. He did not expect infantry style 'bull', and once castigated a CO who had his mechanics doing early

morning PT with the pointed remark 'This is a technical corps... You're not in the army now you know.'<sup>57</sup> Trenchard stamped his personality and authority on the RFC and the men warmed to him, despite the fact that he was the hardest of task masters, and could be rude and abrasive. A favourite statement was 'Just because I'm condemned to drive around in a Rolls-Royce and sit out the fighting in a chair, you musn't think I don't understand.'<sup>58</sup> The important point was that he knew his men, meant what he said, and operations apart allowed them a good deal of leeway. Cecil Lewis recalls Trenchard sitting on his shooting stick and briefing his squadron during the Somme battle 'in his pleasant masterful way.' He noted that 'Boom infused men's enthusiasm without effort by a certain greatness of heart that made him not so much our superior in rank as in personality.'<sup>59</sup> Trenchard was not only a visionary, but a practical, tough and respected commander.

## 'Trenchard's undisciplined mob'

But good leadership must cascade down from the top, and just as important as the overall direction was the part played by brigade, wing, and particularly squadron, and flight commanders.

McLanachan, writing as 'McScotch' recalls the youthful Brigadier General Shephard who frequently crossed the line, and during attacks 'his Nieuport was to be seen hovering about, watching what was happening or taking part whenever an engagement required his assistance.'<sup>60</sup> He was young and vigorous, leading from the front, and increasingly the airborne commanders were cast in this mould. Although the British chose not to fête and celebrate their aces in the manner of the French and Germans, success was rewarded with promotions, decorations, and prestige; and successful pilots like Ball, Mannock, McCudden and Bishop were an inspiration not just to those about them, but across the whole corps. Maurice Baring wrote:

'We got news that Ball is missing. This has cast a gloom throughout the whole Flying Corps. He was not only perhaps the most inspired pilot we have ever had, but the most modest and engaging character. His squadron, and indeed all the squadrons will feel this terribly.'<sup>61</sup>

There was no place for the spit and polish of the old army with the RFC in France, and 'McScotch' recalls the