

FARNBOROUGH

THE WORLD OF THE AIR MECHANIC DURING THE GREAT WAR by Johanna Rustler

AIR MECHANICS WHO SERVED with the Royal Naval Air Service, the Royal Flying Corps and the 1918 amalgamated Royal Air Force disappear behind the stories of heroic exploits of pilots. Air Mechanics were the men that kept the pilots in the air, enabling their aircraft to take off, remain airborne, land and fulfil their vital role in modern warfare. The focal point of military aviation is usually focused on the pilots who often gave their lives while serving their nation; the Air Mechanics' skills, that ensured mechanical safety, are forgotten. This study will consider the world in which the mechanics lived and describe their wartime experience. The Royal Aircraft Factory, located at Farnborough, Hampshire, was home to a story of innovative military aviation. This essay will tell part of their story using original unpublished material from diaries, journals, private papers, and archived material from collections at the Imperial War Museum, The Royal Air Force Museum, the National Archives, the British Library and the Farnborough archive.

While the focal point of military aviation usually falls on the glamorised pilots who often gave their lives serving the nation, the mechanic, who ensured the aviator's mechanical safety and overhauled the machines they flew in, seem to have been easily forgotten. The Southern Aircraft Repair Depot (SARD) in Farnborough was the most important facility in Britain for training Air Mechanics in the necessary skills for front line repair. Successful candidates experienced a quick transition from the classroom and training workshops to being stationed in their units at the front, learning that there was still more to learn about aircraft mechanics 'in the hard school of active-service'.¹

Telling the story of how these brilliant minds were trained and describing their living and working environment, where ideas could develop is important. Being introduced to the living conditions of the SARD, socialising and sleeping amongst fellow aviators and ground crew members is well documented elsewhere. These accounts give additional insight into the difficult start of an Air Mechanic's life at the SARD and the experience of living side by side with variously ranked military men. In order to enter the training scheme at the SARD, applicants had to fill out numerous forms, record any skills useful to the RFC, pass the inevitable army medical test and, after supplying two references, had to undertake a

trade test.² This test consisted of three parts; a practical and an oral test, and the last stage was an interview.³ After three weeks, the applicants were divided into three categories: skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled.

As the war went on, Q53919 the RFC was desperate for as many Air Mechanics as possible, needing more human resources in order to sustain the war effort. With more relaxed examination, hardly any men were stigmatised as incapable of fulfilling the job specification. The oral examination's purpose was to identify and assess any kind of basic engineering knowledge. The practical test varied according to the examiner supervising it, many merely had to sufficiently utilise a metal file and drill into a piece of steel.⁴ The experienced engineer and later, RFC First Class Air Mechanic and Fitter General S. Burdett recalls his trade test as being both difficult, and absurd:

*The test was farcical, but extremely hard work. Taking a block of steel, about four inches long, and two inches square, the SM [Sergeant Major] in charge took a file, filed a deep inch in one corner, and said, "There you are, file that up square again." So about an hour later, after expending a lot of energy, and losing a lot of sweat, I handed it over, and became [...] what was then called 2nd A.M.*⁵

Mechanics at work on an 80-hp Renault engine, under the watchful eyes of two Flight Sergeants. : IWM Q53919

