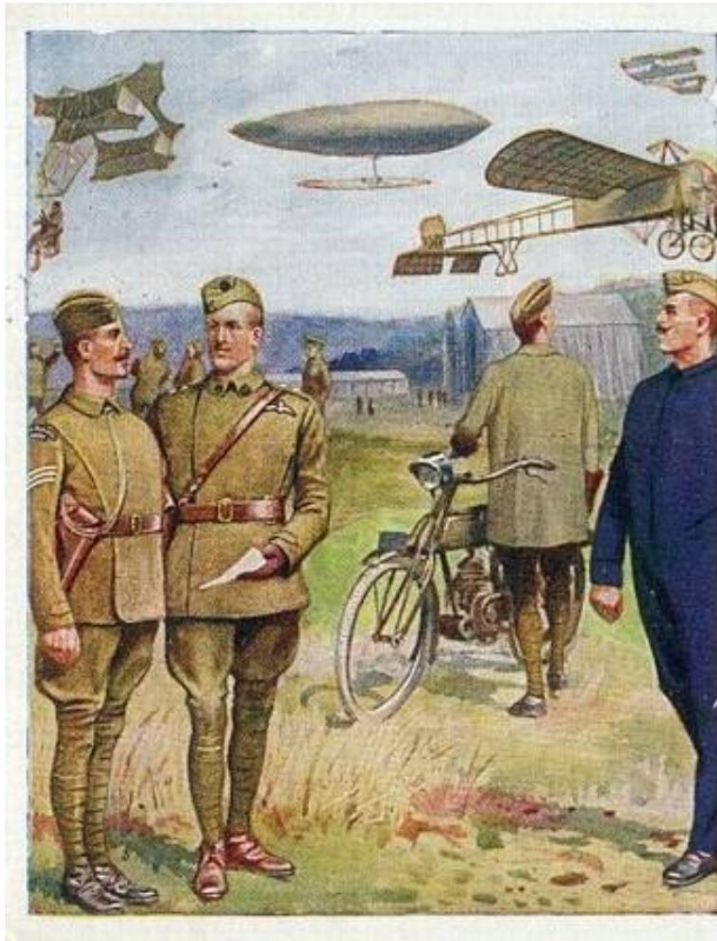


On the Royal Flying Corps in 1914, Part 1

Introduction

Recently in London I was lucky enough to acquire one of the rarer uniform postcards from the *History and Traditions* series published by Gale & Polden in the run up to the First World War. The map, one of the last in [series 1](#)), shows the British Army's then newest corps - the Royal Flying Corps (Military Wing) - established by Royal Decree of 13 April 1912.




ROYAL FLYING CORPS



Since the formation of the Royal Flying Corps, wonderful strides have been made in perfecting the aerial service for war, and its squadrons now take an important and definite place not only in the Forces for operations overseas, but also in the scheme of Home Defence, fully equipped squadrons being stationed at strategic points. The Corps has its foundation in the old Balloon Companies, Royal Engineers, who did good service till April 1st, 1911, when they were absorbed into the new Air Battalion Royal Engineers, of which Major Sir Alexander Bannerman, R.E., was appointed the first commander. On April 13th, 1913, this gave place to the Corps as now designated, the result being a considerable widening of scope and enlargement of service. The two Wings of the Corps, Naval and Military, work in splendid co-operation, both being efficient in handling various types of aeroplanes and airships. The training of all branches of the Corps, aviation and mechanical, is very thorough and practical, and that good service will be rendered by all ranks when the hour of trial comes is beyond doubt. The attractions of aviation have drawn a full complement of officers to qualify as pilots and observers, and the Corps so far as capacity and zeal is concerned is the equal of any now existing.

The beginnings of military flight in England

The English military's interest in space was, among other things, promoted by experiences with observation balloons during the Franco-German War (1870-1871) and in 1883 a balloon factory and an educational unit were established under the auspices of the Royal Engineers. The first military balloon unit accompanied the forces fighting in Bechuanaland (present-day Botswana) in 1884. Balloon units then took part in the campaigns in Sudan in 1885 and 1896-1898 and later in the Boer War (1899-1902).

In 1890, a special balloon section (*Royal Engineers Balloon Section*) was established as part of the Engineer Troops. The development of actual flying machines led to various experiments, but it was only after Louis Blériot's flight across the Channel on 25 July 1909 that things really took off. The first attempts were driven forward by a number of military and civilian zealots, and not least the financial contribution of the latter.

Captain Bertram Dickson, Royal Horse Artillery, who had learned to fly at his own expense (and risk).

France, was permitted to take part in the autumn maneuvers of 1910, to try aerial reconnaissance with another artillery officer, Lieutenant Lancelot Gibbs, Royal Field Artillery. This private initiative became the first actual flight under the auspices of the British Army. Per On 1 April 1911, *the Royal Engineers Air Battalion was established*, consisting of two companies - *No. 1 (Airship) Company* and *No. 2. (Aeroplane) Company*. In 1912 these companies were integrated into the Royal Flying Corps.

The Royal Flying Corps consisted of a military wing (*Military Wing*), a naval wing (*Naval Wing*) and a joint flying school (*Central Flying School*). The two departments developed into independent units, and in July 1914 the Royal Naval Air Service was established. Hereby, the Royal Flying Corps, with a parallel to Danish terminology, became the army's flying troops, while the Royal Naval Air Services became the navy's air force.

Throughout most of the First World War, the two independent air corps supported the army's and navy's operations on land and at sea, and it was not until 1 April 1918 that the two units were again brought together under joint command with the creation of the Royal Air Force, which thus became the world's first independent air force .

At the outbreak of the First World War, the Royal Flying Corps had 179 aircraft and mobilized 2,073 men. Four squadrons, with a total of approx. 50 machines, were sent to the Continent as part of the Expeditionary Force. The Royal Naval Air Service had 39 land-based aircraft and 52 seaplanes; to this were added 7 airships, which were intended to solve reconnaissance tasks for the fleet.

At the creation of the Royal Air Force, the Royal Flying Corps numbered 56 squadrons on the Western Front, 68 squadrons in England, including training units, as well as 18 squadrons distributed in Italy, Africa, Palestine Mesopotamia as well as in the Balkans and in India. In addition, approx. 20 units, equipped with observation balloons. The Royal Naval Air Service had 16 squadrons on the Western Front, numerous squadrons in England and around the Mediterranean, and 90 airships patrolling the coastal areas of England. This considerable air force was supported by a large number of supply and training units, including air schools in Canada and Texas.

By the end of the war, the Royal Air Force operated from more than 700 establishments worldwide and commanded 22,650 machines.

The postcard

The drawing, by Ernest Ibbetson, gives an intriguing impression of the Royal Flying Corps, including the corps' early aircraft and airships. The map appeared sometime during 1913; the current card was sent on 24 December 1914.



My suggestion for identifying the machines is as follows: 1.

- 1. Cody hang glider.
- 2. The airship Beta.
- 3. Farman biplane.
- 4. Blériot monoplane.

Similarly, the map gives a good impression of the corps' early uniforms: 5. Sergeant 6.

- First Lieutenant, Pilot 7. Engine Ordnance 8. Aircraft Mechanic 9. Flying Soldiers

The squadrons of the corps were stationed as follows:

- Farnborough: 1st, 5th, 6th and 7th.
- Larkhill: 2nd and 3rd.
- Netheravon: 4.

Upavon: The flight school

The exterior must come from one of these establishments, but cannot be further established.

About the aircraft types

Cody hang glider



Cody kite flying, with an observer hanging in a basket.

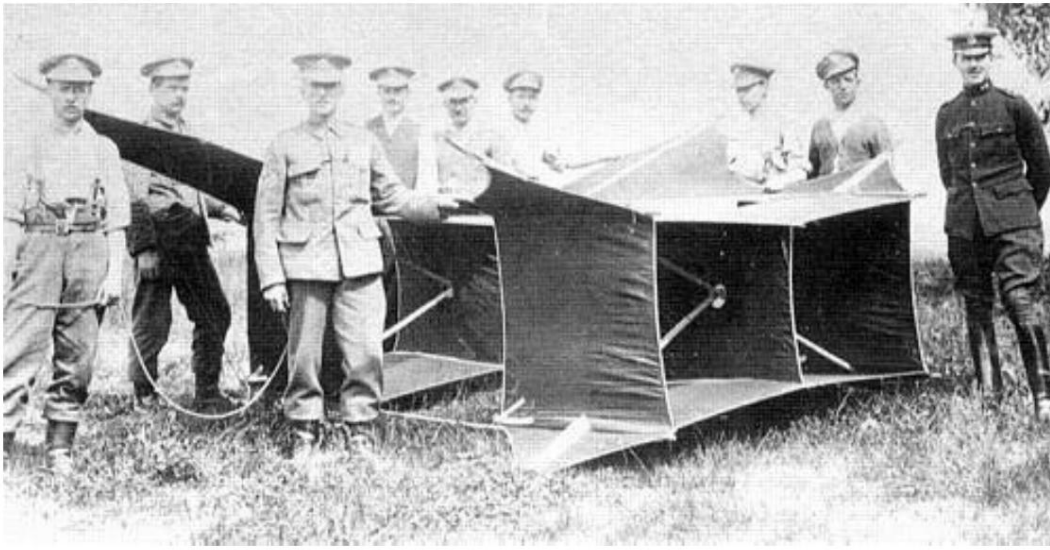
From Source 6, which dates the picture to 1907.

One of the pioneers of aviation was Samuel Franklin Cody (1868-1913), who, despite the similarity in name and his American origin, has no connection to the famous William Frederick Cody (1846-1917), better known as Buffalo *Bill*.

Samuel Franklin Cody became an English citizen and from 1902 to 1909 was chief instructor at *the Royal Engineers Balloon Section*.

Source 4, which contains a larger reproduction of the image, mentions that the gentleman with the cowboy hat (a.) is probably Samuel Franklin Cody.

I am referring to the Australian website Hargraves - The Pioneers. Celebrating the Bi-Centennial of Aviation 1804-2004 [2](#)), which contains a nice, illustrated presentation of Samuel Franklin Cody and his various flying constructions - kites, airships and airplanes.



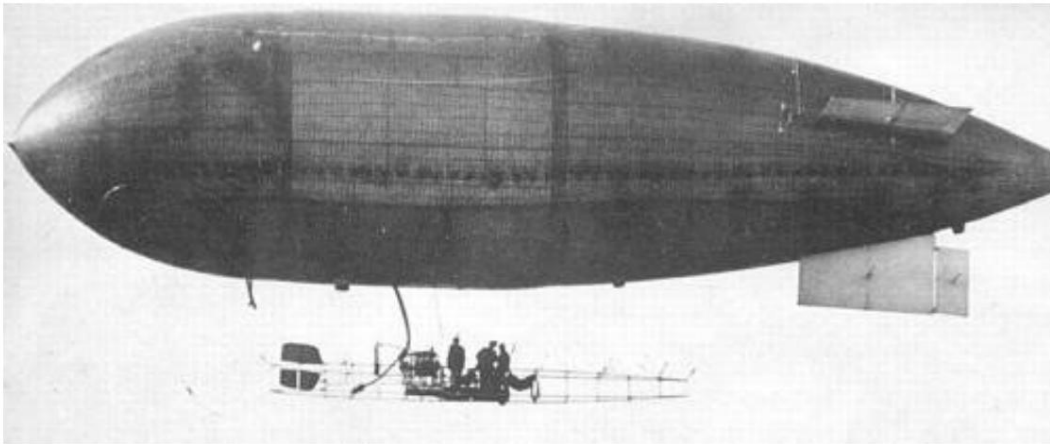
Training in hang gliders at the Royal Engineers Balloon Section.

From Source 6, which dates the picture to 1907.

The soldiers are wearing the khaki Field Uniform Model 1902. Note that the soldiers wear half-length leather gaiters, which derive from the earlier uniform system.

The officer is wearing service uniform (*undress*), which may be the Royal Engineer's red uniform coat and dark blue trousers. Alternatively, it is an officer who is assigned to the balloon park and who therefore wears his own regiment's uniform. A white cover is worn on the uniform cap.

The airship Beta



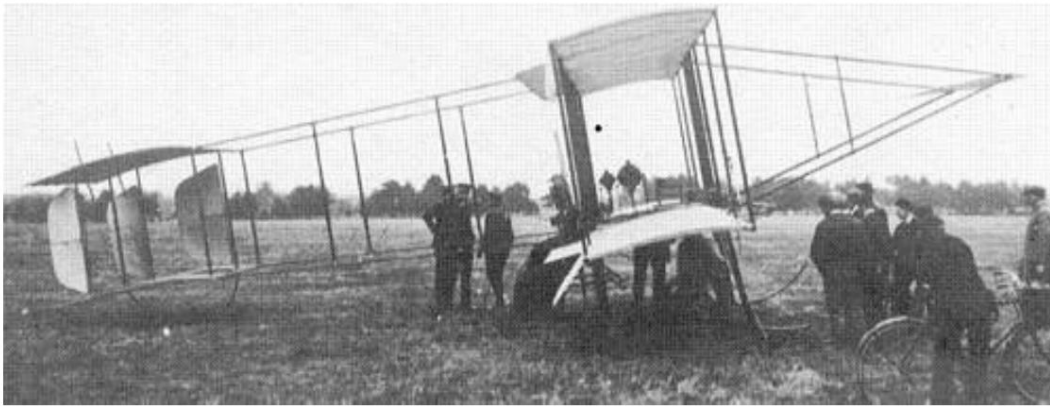
The airship Beta.

From Source 4.

The airship on the postcard may be *the airship Beta* - colloquially better known as *the Silver Queen* - which was "launched" in 1910, and then converted to *Beta II* in 1912.

The airship was equipped with a wireless telegraph connection to the ground, which during the autumn maneuvers of 1912 gave the participants a foretaste of the conditions of modern warfare. During the exercise, one party controlled the airship *Beta*, the other controlled *the Gamma*.

The commander of the enemy party, General JM Grierson, is credited with subsequently remarking that *these airships (with their "radios") had completely ruined the exercise!*



Farman biplane, circa 1911.
From Source 6.

Farman biplane

The brothers Henry (1874-1958) and Maurice Farman (1877-1964) were among the pioneers of aviation. They were masters of a number of aircraft that were used in the air forces of many countries, including Denmark.

Louis Blériot monoplane



Louis Blériot monoplane, circa 1912.
From Source 6.

The machine was a further development of the type used by Louis Blériot during his epoch-making flight across the Channel in 1909.

In its military version, the machine received the designation *Blériot XI Militaire*, and was found in a number of different versions, including the two-seater version *XI-2 Artillerie*.

Source 7 describes the aircraft as one of the best civilian and military aircraft in the period up to the First World War.

The aircraft type is also known from Denmark, where a private foundation donated a Blériot monoplane to the Army's Flying School in February 1915 (purchased from a Swedish private person for DKK 6,000). However, the machine only had a short life as it broke down completely in June 1915. The engine was then reused.

About the uniforms

The cut of the Royal Flying Corps' uniforms stood out clearly from the rest of the army's uniforms, both in terms of the uniform coat and headgear.

The uniform coat, with its slanted, hidden closure, had an almost lance-like feel. The officer's jacket was quickly dubbed the "*maternity jacket*", as witty minds thought it resembled expectant mothers' clothing. Buttons for officers were in bronze, while those of the crew were in brass. On both the officer and crew version of the uniform coat, a strap was sewn on at the bottom of the sleeves, with which the sleeve could be buttoned. This made it easier to wear the collared gloves used during flight.



From *The British Army of 1914* by
R. Money Barnes, Seeley Service
& Co. Ltd., London 1968.

Originally, officers and crew wore a cap, but in 1913 a **field hat** (slanted hat) of the so-called Austrian model was introduced. On the cap, officers wore a bronze corps badge, while that of the crew was in brass.

Immediately below the shoulder patches, non-commissioned officers and privates wore a black **shoulder band** with the text Royal Flying Corps in white. The uniform collar was not originally intended to be decorated with the corps badge, but among officers it quickly became fashionable to wear miniature versions of the cap badge as collar badges.

Officers wore **waist belts** of the *Sam Browne model*, usually with only one shoulder strap worn as a sling. It was common to wear this diagonal strap over the right shoulder, although in the drawing it is shown over the left shoulder.

Both the first lieutenant and the sergeant carry a pistol, which was the most common weapon in the corps.

Usually, rifles were only carried by personnel in connection with guard duty, during which they also wore webbing belt clothing, most often in a reduced version.

Originally there were only two types of non-commissioned officers in the Royal Flying Corps - *sergeant majors* and *sergeants*.

The former wore a woven crown on the forearm, while the latter (as shown in the drawing) wore the sergeant's traditional **insignia**. During the war, a system of ranks was developed, corresponding to that of the rest of the army.

The officers wore their insignia on their shoulder pads.

The motor orderly is wearing the corps' short coat. Like the crew uniform, the cape does not have shoulder flaps, which was first introduced on both cape and jacket in June 1914. The motorcycle may be of the *Vickers-Clyno make*, but may also look like almost any other type from the period.



Aircraft mechanics next to a lorry that may be Leyland.

From Source 2.

By 1914 flying squadrons were the only fully motorized units in the British Army.

Each squadron was rationed with a rolling echelon of 30 motor vehicles (cars and trucks) and 6 motorcycles. (Source 9.) The mobilization involved, for the most part, written-off vehicles.

The aircraft mechanic is wearing the blue overalls that were used until 1915, when brown/khaki colored fabric was used. The field cap is of the same model as the sergeant's, with a cap badge in brass. No distinctions were worn on the turning noise.

The flying soldiers who take part in setting up the hang glider are wearing uniforms similar to the sergeant's and this part of the drawing differs only in that one figure wears a cap. He may be intended as a non-commissioned officer, or simply an airman, wearing the headgear introduced before 1913.

The pilot wing, also reproduced above the text, was introduced in 1913 and worn by officers, non-commissioned officers and privates who had completed flying training with satisfactory results. In September 1915, an **observer wing was introduced**, which consisted of a crowned O and a half wing; the observer's wing was also in white embroidery on a black background.

During the war, **the shoulder badge** - Royal Flying Corps in white letters, on a black background - was replaced by a smaller version, with the corps name in abbreviated form - RFC The two versions were apparently worn side by side.

Officers assigned to the Royal Flying Corps retained their original uniform and department insignia (see my article [The English Field Uniform Model 1902](#)), making the pilot's wing the only "corps-specific" insignia.

In 1915, the normal army officer's uniform, including the cap, was also introduced into the Royal Flying Corps; this uniform was worn alongside the "waiting clothes".

Closing

The story continues in [Part 2](#), which also contains my bibliography.

Postscript

As an apropos of the uniforms worn by the Royal Flying Corps, here is a postcard 3) of Royal Naval Air Service uniforms.



The King inspecting RNAS officers.

The text on the back of the card reads: *Among the King's meetings with his troops on the Western Front was this quiet inspection of a number of officers of the Royal Naval Air Service.*

Further information about the reason for the parade, including whether the officers come from the same squadron, is not available. Likewise, a dating is not currently available

Whether it was directly the purpose of the parade to show the King as many different uniforms as possible, I shall leave it unsaid... There are hardly two of the officers who wear the same uniform, but all variants may very well be regulated.

For use in those units of the Royal Naval Air Service serving outside England, khaki uniforms (in the style of the Army) were introduced in the spring of 1915. The Navy's pilot wing was somewhat flimsier than the Army's. On navy uniforms the pilot's wing was worn on the sleeves, immediately above the insignia, while on the khaki uniform it was worn over the left breast pocket.

Per Finsted

Notes

1) Technically speaking, the card bears no. 110 (appears on the back) and probably replaced the previous card with this number - *Mounted Infantry* - when this type of weapon was withdrawn from the army in 1912. See e.g. my article *English Mounted Infantry*.

2) The fact that the flight, whose 100th anniversary was marked in 2003 based on the Wright Brothers' flight in 1903, can celebrate its 200th anniversary here is due to the fact that the first successful flight with a glider was made in 1804. Read more on that page, it is an exciting story...

3) From a postcard in the series *Official War Photographs* (Series 13, No. 100) published by the Daily Mail newspaper during the First World War. Some of these colored photographs were reprinted in 1997 and sold at, among others, the National Army Museum, London.