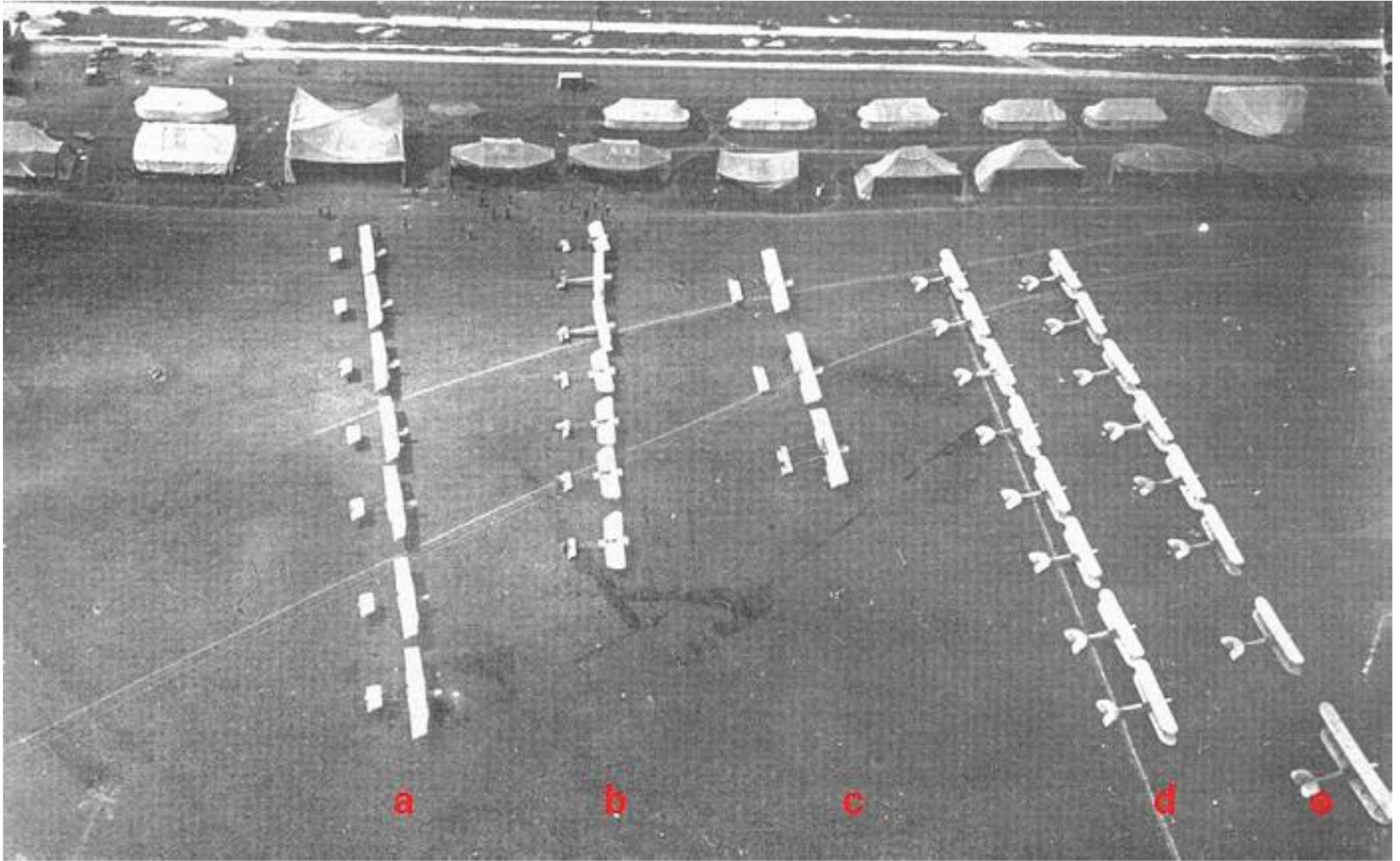


# On the Royal Flying Corps in 1914, Part 2

## The Expeditionary Force's flying department

In June 1914, the Royal Flying Corps held a major field exercise of one month's duration, during which the squadrons were assembled at Netheravon. The exercise was to prove to be good training ahead of the imminent mobilization in August 1914.

However, 1st and 7th Squadron did not take part in the exercise - 1st Squadron was in the process of handing over its airships to the Royal Naval Air Service, which had just taken over responsibility for all airships, while 7th Squadron was being drawn up.

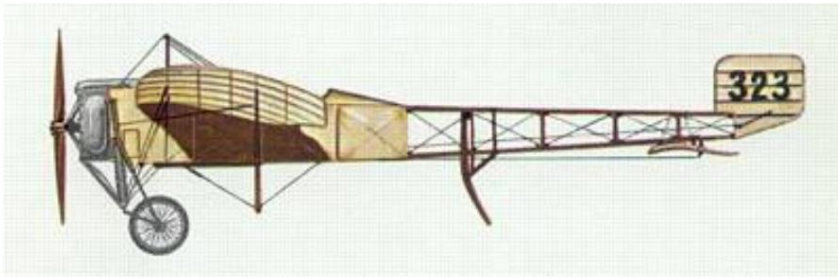


Field exercise at the Royal Flying Corps, Netheravon, June 1914 [1](#).

The machines are *Henri Farman* (a.), *Blériot* (b.), *Maurice Farman* (c.), *BE 2* and *Avro 504* (d. and e.); the machine at e is an *RE5* that had specially extended wings, intended for high-altitude flight.

## About organization

The Expeditionary Force's air wing, commanded by Brigadier-General Sir David Henderson, came to consist of the following units:



*Blériot XI-2 Artillery, from 3. Squadron, 1914.*  
From Source 7.

### **Squadron Aircraft**

#### **Types 2BE 2**

3. Blériot and Farman
4. BE 2
5. Farman, Avro and BE 8

The 1st, 6th and 7th Squadrons remained in England, initially as training units. Responsibility for the air defense of England was placed in the hands of the Royal Naval Air Service.

A squadron (*Squadron*) was organized as follows:

- 1 Sergeant Major
- 3 Flight sergeants
- 11 Sergeants
- 22 Corporals
- 56 Air mechanics 1st class
- 42 Air mechanics 2nd class
- 7 Privates \*)
- 142 men in total**

*\*) including 4 men from  
the Royal Army Service Corps.*

- Staff element (*Squadron Headquarters*) 3
- divisions (*Flights*), designated A, B and C, with 4 aircraft each.

The *squadron commander* was a major and *the flight commanders* were captains.  
The squadron numbered up to 18 pilots, most of whom were lieutenants.

The total strength figure was approx. 160 men, with a distribution of non-commissioned officers and privates as indicated in the table to the right, based on information about 4th Squadron.

The Expeditionary Corps' flying troops were also accompanied by a supply and park unit (*Aircraft Park*), which housed 12 officers, 162 non-commissioned officers and privates, as well as 17 reserve machines (BE 2, BE 2c, BE 8 and Sopwith Tabloid).

The total strength of the flying division is given as: 105 officers, 755 non-commissioned officers and privates, 63 aircraft and 95 vehicles.



*Field lunch at the 5th Squadron, 1914.*  
From Source 10.

Even during the retreat from Mons, there was time to get a bite to eat, under orderly conditions.

The officer on the right in the picture is the commander of 5 Squadron, Major JFA Higgins, Royal Artillery.

The commanders of the other squadrons were as follows:

2nd - Major CJ Burke, Royal Irish Regiment

3rd - Major JM Salmond, King's Own

4. - Major GH Raleigh, Essex Regiment

Park - Major AD Carden, Royal Engineers

## **About communication**

Already early on experiments were carried out with the dissemination of observations from airships and airplanes by means of wireless telegraphy, a technique which was developed to a considerable extent during the war.

The most common form of communication between aircraft and units on the ground included dropping messages, message fishing, signal flags, and light and sound signals. Furthermore, it was common for a pilot to land on a suitable field and relay his observations of the enemy so that the units on the ground could quickly take advantage of them.

The rolling echelon of 4 Squadron included the Royal Flying Corps' only telegraph (wireless telegraphy) carriage, a Daimler, and telegraph section. Unfortunately, the wagon was quickly completely damaged, during which the "radio" was destroyed. On 27 September 1914, the telegraph section was transformed into *the Headquarters Wireless Section*; from 8 December the section was part of the 9th Squadron

Actual artillery flights were still in their infancy. It was possible - and used from 13 September 1914 - to observe and report on artillery firing. Only after the war did it become possible to direct firing from aircraft [2](#)).

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Although reports from the air had quite ruined General Grierson's (see [Part 1](#)) autumn maneuver [in 1912](#)

messages from the Royal Flying Corps quickly came to play an important role in locating enemy - and own - units, making the flying troops truly a weapon that was here to stay.



*Field lunch at the 5th Squadron, 1914.*  
From Source 10.

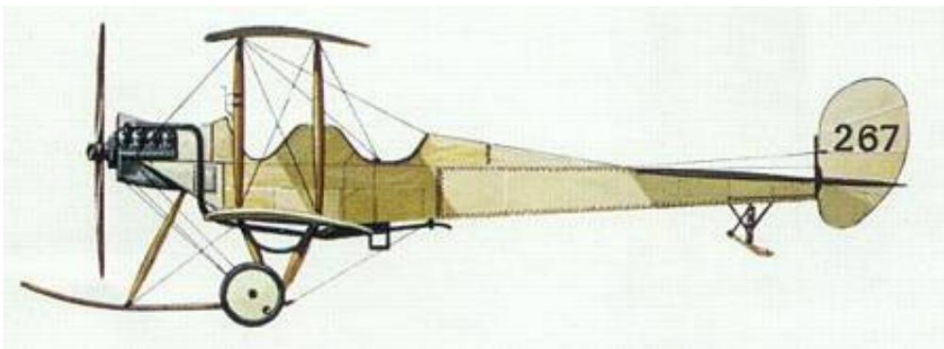
Added to this were the many other essential roles that the aircraft carried out on their own and in cooperation with the units on the ground.

In contrast to the previous picture of the squadron staff, the crew behaves in somewhat more humble ways.

### **About aircraft types**

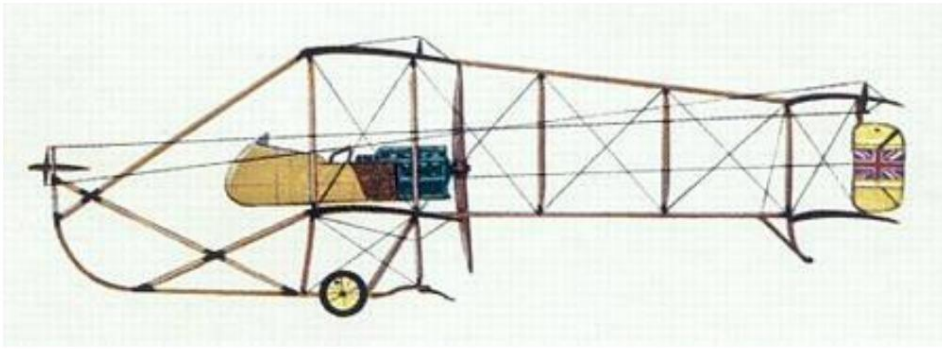
The following drawings [3](#) are intended to give an impression of the types of aircraft that the Expeditionary Force's flying department had at its disposal at the beginning of the war. These are unarmed machines that were only intended for reconnaissance tasks.

In the first months of the war, aircraft from both sides often met each other on reconnaissance flights over the front, but all that was exchanged were greetings. It was only when the machine gun became standard equipment that the aircraft gained real combat value. However, in connection with the deployment to France, a number of BE 2 aircraft were tasked with ramming any German airships they might encounter on their way across the Channel! (Source 7.)



*BE 2a, of the Royal Flying Corps, 1913.*  
From Source 8.

Aircraft of this type entered the 2nd and 4th squadrons in August 1914.



*Maurice Farman, of the Royal Naval Air Service, Spring 1915.*  
From Source 7.

The aircraft is reminiscent of the Farman aircraft which were part of the 3rd and 5th Squadron in August 1914.



*Avro 504, modified prototype, 1913.*  
From Source 8.

The aircraft is reminiscent of the Avro 504 aircraft which were part of the 5th Squadron in August 1914. At that time, the aircraft would also have had a paint job in the style of the other early aircraft.



*BE 8, from 8. Squadron, June 1915.*  
From Source 7.

The aircraft is of the same type that was part of the 5th Squadron in August 1914.

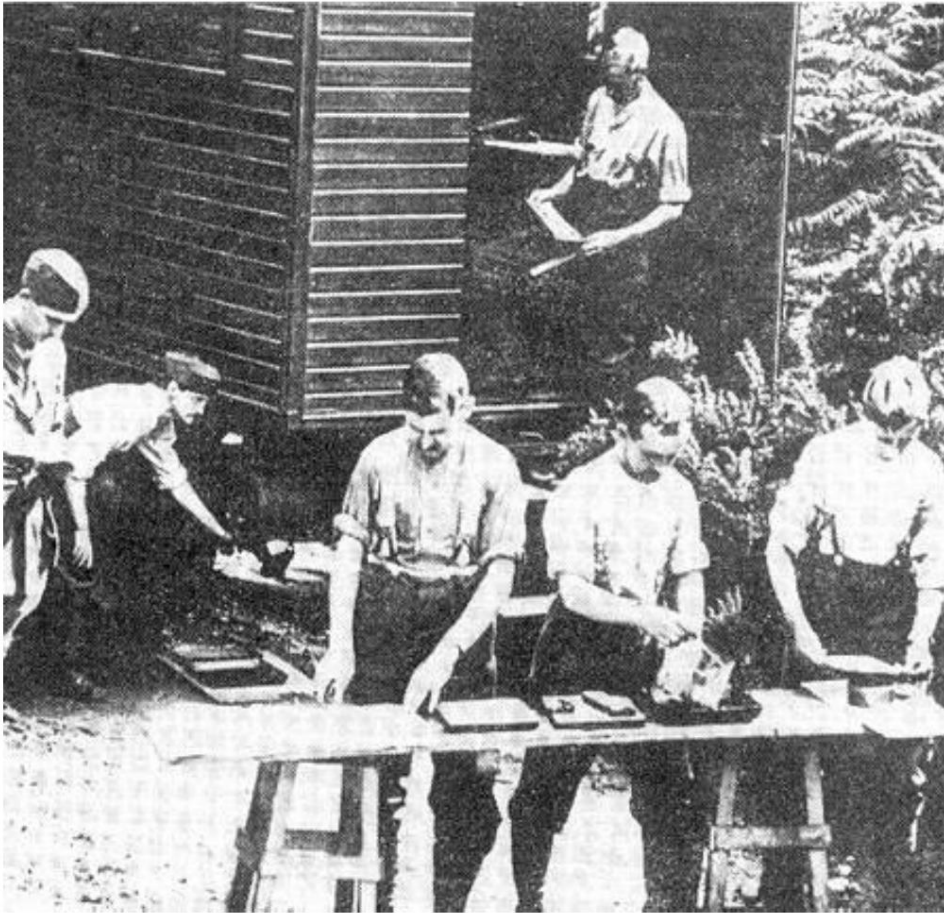


*Sopwith Tabloid, prototype, 1913.*

From Source 8.

The supply and park squadron brought 4 pcs. of this type.

Unlike the other machines, these were transported to France in a disassembled condition.



*A photo section at work - field development of aerial photographs.*  
From Source 11.

Among the tasks that the Royal Flying Corps gradually became able to solve was the possibility of making aerial photographs. 3. Squadron had been experimenting with aerial photography since the beginning of 1914.

The Expeditionary Corps' flying department included an *Experimental Photographic Section* under the leadership of Lieutenant JTC More.

The first tactical use took place on 15 September 1914 during the Battle of the Aisne.

Although the possibilities in 1914 were not yet fully developed, aerial photographs contributed to the troop leaders' intelligence picture, which was thereby greatly improved compared to earlier times. Source 3 states that during 1917 alone, a total of 2,695,750 aerial photographs were taken.

## About nationality markings

At the beginning of the war, English and German aircraft were not provided with nationality markings (English aircraft only carried their number on the side rudder), but from the end of September 1914 the German aircraft were marked with "iron crosses".

To avoid fire from their own units, for whom flying was an unknown concept, *the Union Jack* was quickly painted on the underside of the wings. However, this marking did not have the desired effect, as colors are less prominent than figures when viewed from a distance, whereby the central cross in the English flag could easily be confused with the German cross.

During the autumn, it was therefore agreed with the French that British aircraft should be marked with cockades according to the system that had already been used in the French air forces from the start.

The new marking was introduced in the Royal Flying Corps per 11 December 1914. The Union Jack was used on side rudders until mid-1915, when they were replaced by a blue, red and white marking common to both the French and British air forces.

## Closing

The flying division of the Expeditionary Force advanced to France in the days 11 to 13 August 1914, with Amiens as the target; 4th Squadron, delayed by mishap, arrived on 15 August. The entire force was then concentrated in Maubeuge, from where the first mission was flown at 09:30 on 19 August 1914.

Two planes took to the wings to carry out reconnaissance missions and the first valuable experience was soon gained. The pilots had been sent up without observers and had problems finding their way around the foreign terrain, and they quickly got separated from each other. One machine returned to base at noon, the other not until 5:30 p.m. Both planes had been forced to land to ask for directions, one even twice, so from now on no plane took to the wings without the observers following along.

During the following days, the first observations of the enemy were made and were able to provide the Expeditionary Force staff with information on enemy movements. On 22 August 1914, the 5th lost Squadron its first aircraft, which may have been shot down. During this, both crew members - Lieutenants V. Waterfall and CGG Bayly - were killed. The machine was found by some Belgians, who secured the still incomplete report on the plane's sightings, and by detours the report reached the Ministry of War in London somewhat later.

The experiences of the first weeks also included the need to not only carry out tasks, but also to maintain contact with/between corps and divisions. Actual contact patrols thus became a regular task for the squadrons.

Correspondingly, they successfully experimented with leaving squadrons in operational command of the corps; in mid-September, 3rd Squadron was thus in operational command of *II Corps* (Smith-Dorrien), while 5th Squadron worked together with *I Corps* (Haig). 4. Squadron provided an aircraft with "radio" to each squadron.

All sources speak unanimously of the great and meritorious efforts of the Royal Flying Corps during the early battles of the war in Belgium and France. During the Expeditionary Force's withdrawal in August and September, the flight department followed back and changed base a total of 9 times, which must be described as something of an achievement, not least considering the vehicles of the time etc. In addition, there is great praise for the ground personnel for their efforts in keeping the often temperamental and not necessarily reliable aircraft in working order.

It must therefore be said that the Royal Flying Corps fully lived up to its motto: *Per Ardua Ad Astra*, which can be translated as *Through Efforts Against the Stars*.



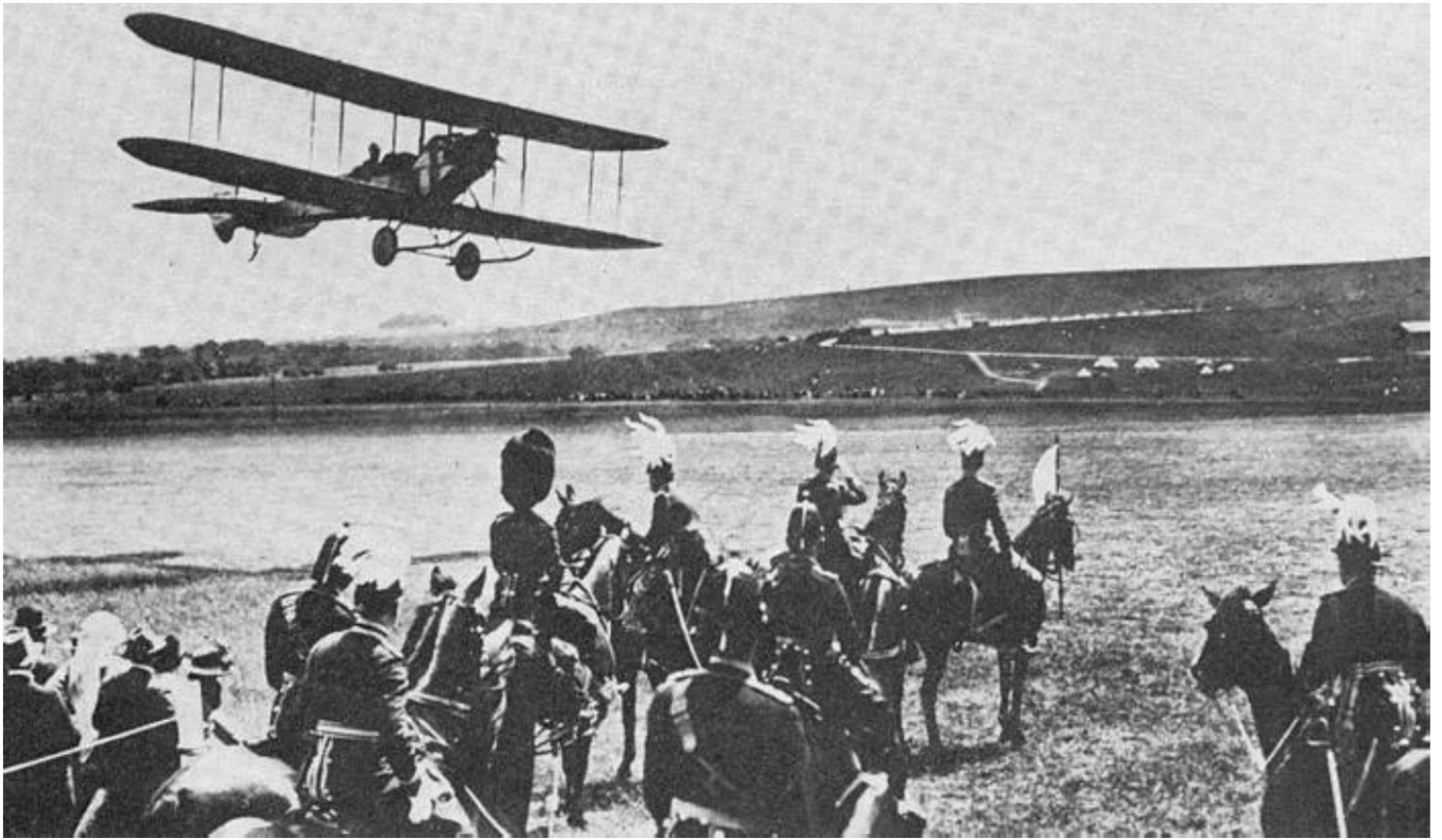
*Blériot XI, photographed during the Royal Flying Corps field exercise at Netheravon in the summer of 1914.*  
From Source 13.

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Per Finsted





A BE 2 from 4th Squadron pays respects to General Smith-Dorrien, 22 June 1914, at a parade on the occasion of the King's birthday.

From Source 14.

#### Notes

- 1) The image comes from the article *Royal Flying Corps - A Sixtieth Anniversary*, which was published in the magazine *Air Clues*, May 1972. The identification is based on a reproduction of the same image, published in Source 3.
- 2) From 1916, however, it became common to use observation balloons, among other things in connection with observation and fire control. See e.g. the review of the book *Guns, Kites and Horses - Three Diaries from the Western Front* by Sydney Giffard.
- 3) The relative size of the planes is not consistent.