DIGITAL ISSUE ELEVEN

For all those who still run to the window when something flies over...

COVER STORY - AVIATION ART INTERVIEW WITH MATCHBOX LEGEND ROY HUXLEY
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Welcome to issue 11 of Wingleader Magazine. As we come to the end of our 12 month experimental period with Wingleader Magazine, we now have to decide how to take the project forward into 2020. I have to say that the response from our readers has been incredibly positive and readership figures are already beyond some of the mainstream magazines.

You’ll notice in this issue that we’ve introduced a letters page and also expanded the news section a bit, this is something that we’d like to develop further in 2020 so if you have any news or would like to write to us, please get in touch, we’d be very happy to hear from you.

This month features my interview with Roy Huxley who painted the iconic box-art for Matchbox back in the 1970s-1990s. Roy is a genuine living legend and it was a real pleasure to spend time with him, I hope you enjoy it!

Mark Postlethwaite. November 2019
Sir Peter Jackson’s Wingnut Wings model kit company has been very busy in 2019, announcing a large range of new 1/32 scale models for the next 12 months.

The highlights for UK based modellers are the two Avro Lancaster kits, covering the MkI/III and the Type 464 Dambuster version and the Handley Page O/100 and O/400. These huge kits are certain to cause a stir when they’re released in 2020.

Another iconic kit recently announced is the Fokker Dr.1 Triplane which is probably the most famous fighter of WWI thanks to its association with the ‘Red Baron’ and other leading German Aces.

A considerably less well known type is the Hansa-Brandenburg D.1, (pictured right) which is also in development at Wingnut. This ‘star strutter’ once again shows that the team at Wingnut are not afraid to venture into obscure types, as demonstrated by the recent release of the Gotha UWD of which only one real example was ever made!

www.wingnutwings.com
The Silver Spitfire
Over half way around the World!
Most readers will probably have heard of the Silver Spitfire - Round the World Flight which was launched on 5 August from Goodwood airfield in southern England. Now, three months on, we caught up with the team to see how it’s going.

Having successfully completed the hazardous flight over the Atlantic, the Spitfire and support team flew across Canada and the United States before heading up to Alaska to cross over into Russia. From there they flew down to Japan then onto Taiwan, Hong Kong, Vietnam and then above stunning a jungle landscape as they flew into Thailand.

The very latest news (early November) is that they have just arrived in India and will soon be heading west again towards the Middle East and then up to Cyprus and the comparatively short journey through Europe and back to Goodwood.

You can follow the team’s live updates and all the latest news here;

www.silverspitfire.com

Posing for the press on 5 August are pilots Steve Boultbee Brooks and Matt Jones at the official start of the “Silver Spitfire - The Longest Flight” at Goodwood. (Photo by Remy Steiner/Getty Images for IWC). Below are two of their latest video updates.
Dear Wingleader,

I’ve just read Digital Issue 8 and in particular the interview with and images by Piotr Forkasiewicz. Absolutely fantastic; fascinating and a wonderful insight into the visual elements that go into the creation of so many of your other published works.

Wingleader Magazine was and is a great concept and I’ve looked forward to every email telling me that the next issue is available.

I’m sure that after initial comments die down, there’s the risk that you don’t get perhaps the follow-up feedback.

Take it from me, it’s a wonderful initiative that has already had so many interesting features.

Periodically, I pick up a copy of Flypast or Aeroplane Monthly in a newsagents and flick through them (I subscribed to both for over 25 years). When I look at them I remember why I cancelled my subscriptions – so much old, archived material rehashed or presented in a slightly different format – it’s only the ‘aviation news’ which is really of interest.

However, with your photo archive, your historical research expertise, artistic resources and publishing experience and also your sheer enthusiasm, the Wingleader Magazine has a wonderful future: I really hope that you get the advertising support to ensure that commercially it pays its way.

Best regards
Mark Preston

Dear ‘Wingleader’,

As editor of ‘My Unofficial FAA History Page’ on Facebook I recently received a digital copy of the attached photograph showing a redundant Blackburn Roc being utilised as an anti-aircraft gun position, allegedly at Gosport, in 1940.

Readers then drew my attention to the, perhaps incidental, caption in Andrew Thomas’ Air-Sea Rescue Encounter article you published in Edition 9. This states, “on 18 August 1940 four Rocs were dispersed around the airfield at Gosport with armed turrets to act as anti-aircraft defence posts”. I had no knowledge that the aircraft were used in that manner, and would certainly not be bold enough to question your caption on that basis alone, but it has been suggested from the terraced houses in the background of my picture it was not in fact taken at Gosport but was, perhaps, shot at Eastleigh; another naval air station a short distance away and, without doubt, also worthy of defence.

Secondly, I was approached for information on Roc deck-landing trials. Winkle Brown wrote that “to his knowledge none were ever conducted”; however I have received a suggestion that a film clip exists proving otherwise. I would appreciate any information your readers might have on either of these subjects.

In closing, I should perhaps caution that the reverse of my photo carries a rubber stamp, countersigned by a four-ring naval Captain, saying the “Admiralty Request Publication Be Stopped”. One assumes that the image’s sensitivity has long-since lapsed?

Yours sincerely,
Tim Brown

Below: Tim’s Blackburn Roc air defence installation photo, but where is it?
MATCHBOX BOX ARTIST AND LIVING LEGEND

AN INTERVIEW WITH

ROY HUXLEY
MATCHBOX BOX ARTIST AND LIVING LEGEND
Roy Huxley spent nearly 30 years tempting young schoolboys to spend money they didn’t have by producing inspirational box art for Matchbox plastic model kits. Editor Mark Postlethwaite, one of those impoverished schoolboys who was so inspired by Roy’s art, took a trip down to Royal Tunbridge Wells to interview one of his personal heroes and a living legend of aviation art.

**MP** Firstly Roy, thanks for agreeing to do this interview. Over the course of the year when I’ve been interviewing other artists, I’ve been asking many people who they would like to see next. Your name cropped up again and again so it seems like your work inspired an entire generation!

**RH** It is very nice to know that my paintings have given many people so much pleasure and I am still remembered. I have recently been working to get these paintings back to their original state. It is great to see them in print again and I hope your readers will enjoy them too.

**MP** Let’s start with your earliest memories as I believe you were born to the sound of Merlin and DB601 engines above your head.

**RH** Indeed! I laid in my pram in 1940, the third child in a family of four, witnessing “The Battle of Britain” as it raged overhead. One of my first memories is of my mother showing me the red glow in the sky from the fires in
London; my father was a fire fighter both in London and Coventry. Also, when I started school, there was a crashed aircraft in the corner of the playground which was a magnet for all the boys. I couldn’t know it then but the magic of the Spitfire was to become a force in my life!

**MP** I love the idea of a crashed aircraft in the school playground, I don’t think Ofsted would be too impressed with that nowadays... When did your thoughts turn to art?

**RH** My artistic career began by winning a poster competition at the age of 12. This small moment of triumph began my first taste of deadlines and a given subject. I wish I could tell you that the poster was of a Spitfire in a dogfight ... well of course it wasn’t ... but the prize was presented at Wembley Town Hall, very impressive for a twelve year old! As the time approached for me to leave school the question was, “what to do next” and
with little interest in things academic but an obvious talent for art, I was persuaded by my Art Master to stay on for another year. At the end of this time he said “Huxley, you will do far better by going straight into a London studio, not college”. I heeded his seemingly wise words and started as an apprentice in a City of London Studio. I remember the City as very grim and grey, still with many bomb sites. It wasn’t long before I realised that the work in the studio I had joined was mostly photo retouching and although of a very high standard, using airbrushes and cutting masks, it wasn’t for me. The crucial moment came when they offered me a five year apprentice contract. I knew this could never be for me … ungrateful perhaps … so I made a quick dash for the door.

For the next few months, whilst looking for another studio, I attended Harrow Art School. I remember, with the help of a friend, hawking my bulky specimens, the many drawings and even oil paintings, around the studios in London in an effort to find a real job for my ambitions. At every studio it was the same story, “yes, very nice young Huxley but come back and see us when you have some experience” but life’s breaks, when they come, are often surprising.

A friend’s father, who was working in an Ad Agency, arranged an interview for me with a Director of Art-in-Marketing, a top Fleet Street studio. Wonderful, what luck! At last I was offered a real job, making tea and delivering parcels. If there was any doubt in my mind of it not being the right job, it was instantly dispelled when I was introduced to an artist named Doug Post, who was working on an incredible piece of artwork, just the kind of artwork I was aspiring to. Little did I know that within a few years I would be working closely with Doug on similar pieces of artwork. I jumped at the offer and all for the princely sum of £3 a week.

MP It’s difficult for younger artists to imagine this ‘Golden Era’ where hundreds of artists were employed in almost every city, painting anything from cars to carrots. Can you describe what it was like?

RH In those days studios often comprised several floors of artists with different artistic skills and at Art-in-Marketing I was so lucky to be surrounded by a number of very talented artists and, encouraged by the very high standard, was able to learn the skills required in general advertising. The studio produced many catalogues and brochures, working for a variety of top companies, particularly the car industry, where in those days they were mostly illustrations, not photography. I well remember being involved in the brochure for the first Morris “Mini” car produced by BMC, it was very ‘hush hush’ at the time. We also worked for Ford, both car and truck divisions and here I found myself working on the same artwork as Doug Post.

Castrol was also a big client and I remember doing alterations on a Michael Turner original,
very worrying at the time! Strangely enough, I also recall producing some car illustrations for Airfix. One thing I did enjoy was looking at the magazines delivered to the studio, which I couldn’t afford for myself, particularly Autocar and Flight with Wootton’s superb covers. Little did I know I would be doing similar work in the future. I also enjoyed the American car illustrations in the Post magazine, all art work.

Working in a studio was a lot of fun and at the time I wondered how they made any money out of us, but there was so much work about then. It was not until I went freelance that I realised the value and quality of the artwork we produced.

MP My previous interviewees have all taken very different paths when making that big break from full time employment to freelance work, how did yours come about?

RH I started freelance work in my spare time before leaving Art-in-Marketing and despite their offer of more money to stay, it was time to go. Needless to say, it was a bit risky going on my own, as by then in 1967/68 I was married with a mortgage, one child and another on the way. Fortunately the work kept coming and even Art-in-Marketing gave me work, which was great!
MP  So tell me about Matchbox, where did that all start?

RH  Soon after I went freelance, Frank Fisher, a director of The Tudor Art Agency got in touch and a new door opened - and what a big door it proved to be! He invited me to come and see him and asked if I could do an urgent Matchbox illustration overnight. It proved to be the beginning of a long association with Tudor Art and Matchbox. It must have gone well, as not long after, I was called back to see Frank and was handed a design and a box of 75 die-cast models. He told me he wanted all new illustrations, that he would be away for 6 weeks and wanted them on his return. To get them all finished in time was quite impossible but that was what the pressures were like. This confidence in my work was quite something for a new freelance artist and a substantial increase in my income.

Through the Tudor Art Agency, I met Derek Stowe, a super artist in his own right and the main designer behind the kit box artwork, who later became a Director of Tudor. We became good friends, a friendship that has lasted for over 50 years. Together we worked firstly on die-cast models and then when Matchbox branched out, on kits. This was a new challenge for me and when asked if I could paint aircraft, my answer was "of course", although I had never painted one before!

Luckily it proved to be a natural subject for me as I had always liked to paint powerful subjects and had a love of big skies. My very first aircraft was the Hawker Fury, which proved to be a success and I was very pleased to be offered the job of painting the first ten kits for the Brighton Toy Fair; regrettably all these paintings disappeared after the show. The kits were a big success for Matchbox and over the
Another one of the first ten illustrations for Matchbox was this 16 Squadron Lysander. (Kit number 7) Sadly all ten of Roy’s initial paintings for Matchbox disappeared after the launch.
years I must have painted hundreds of aircraft and many cars and military vehicles. Later on, Matchbox developed a range of ships which, as a lover of the sea, I was delighted to illustrate.

**MP** I presume the Matchbox work ended up almost as a full time job in itself?

**RH** Yes, as the work for Matchbox developed it became increasingly difficult to maintain my other clients. Many people would think painting for a living was an easy life but it was, in fact, hard to keep everyone happy. I took on everything offered as I never knew when the work might dry up. So I worked long hours, often through the night, to get the job done on time, as the artist is always the last one on the line and the printers are waiting. At that time we desperately needed more artists and it was great to meet up again with my old friend and colleague, Doug Post, a super artist. His speciality was the military vehicles and figures and he was also able to assist with the aircraft.

**MP** After working in studios for so long, did you find it hard to work and motivate yourself at home in isolation?

**RH** I worked mostly from my studio at home but at times I worked in London. I enjoyed these breaks, as it was good to have the company and banter of other artists but

Above: The Folland Gnat was kit number 15 in the early range and originally the box art featured the entire Red Arrows Display Team. This revised solo version was produced after the ‘powers that be’ decided that at least one person in Europe might assume that the box contained all nine aircraft...
After a few years, Matchbox introduced larger aircraft into its range allowing Roy to produce bigger artwork for the bigger ‘Red’ Series boxes. This classic shows a Canberra PR9 in glorious detail with his, by now, trademark loose and expressive background.
it never lasted long, as I would soon get tired of the journey and with two or three precious hours lost each day, I would retreat back to my home in Buckinghamshire. During one of these busy times another Advertising Agency approached me in an effort to get the Matchbox account but I refused their offer as I had a good relationship with Tudor Art and in particular with Derek Stowe.

MP One of the many outstanding things about your Matchbox work was the technical accuracy of your aircraft. How did you achieve this when you were a comparative newcomer to the world of aviation?

RH Originally I did most of my own research with the great help of my wife Sue who would spend hours in the local library searching for decent photos of the subject aircraft. But as the work for Matchbox increased, to take the pressure off me, Derek Stowe and his team would try and put together as much information as possible, so I could get on with the next illustration quickly. Meanwhile, I would search my reference books and photographs and often in the summer I would go to air shows armed with my camera and press pass. If it was an obscure or little known aircraft, it was necessary to call in the experts, who would be able to provide me with the necessary squadrons and markings. Occasionally I would make a model to get the feel for the aircraft or travel to RAF Stations or Hendon Aircraft Museum. There I would meet up with Derek and Maurice Landi, the Matchbox Aircraft Project Engineer, a lovely chap, who nicknamed me “Living Legend”, a title which he used to address me on all correspondence, much to the amusement of our postman.

If I was producing this work now, it would be a great deal easier - the computer has made reference searching so much quicker to access. Also the use of a digital camera, as I always wanted my photos yesterday but had to be content with my films being developed overnight. I could get instant photos with a Polaroid camera but the quality was poor in comparison. Sadly, computers have also changed the art world and most of the studios have now disappeared.

MP Can you talk us through how you would approach a typical Matchbox box art illustration?
RH The first step for a new illustration would be to choose a view that would best show off the subject and also fit comfortably in the box design. I would produce a pencil sketch of the view I thought appropriate and if everyone was happy, I would get on and begin the illustration and the choice of background would be left to me. Normally I would work half-up or twice-up on reproduction size.

If it was a new range, Matchbox might be shown a rough but normally they would not be involved with the illustration and, happily, always seemed pleased with the result.

Over the years, there were three distinct periods to the illustrations. The first boxes had full backgrounds with plenty of action which the young kids loved, but then came a time when Matchbox responded to pressure from certain countries and all violence and Swastikas were removed. Then later, the second aircraft was taken out as apparently some purchasers were expecting there to be more than one aircraft kit in the box! Finally, they decided on a new style of box, to show the aircraft on a half-white background. This led to a number of my original paintings being spoilt and the backgrounds painted out. Fortunately, I have been able to restore some of these.

Right: The gradual sanitization of artwork, illustrated with kit number 21, the Messerschmitt 262. The main image shows the original all action version. Bottom left, shows the same artwork with the burning B-17, bombs and explosions all removed, saving an entire generation of young boys from PTSD.

Bottom right shows the final period where all violence was removed along with other aircraft, valiantly saving those boys yet again from the disappointment of not finding five B-17 models in the same box...
backgrounds. Of course, these days with the use of computers, it would have been possible to achieve this without damaging the artwork, but back then, the artwork was physically overpainted with a lot of white paint.

MP That must have been extremely frustrating, to find that many of your paintings had been overpainted by someone else. Did you manage to keep all of your artwork?

RH Unfortunately no. Like my old friend and neighbour Roy Cross at Airfix, a lot of my work disappeared over the years. I did not realise until some years later that many had not been lost but stolen and it wasn’t until Matchbox went into receivership and was being sold that I discovered the extent of my losses.

MP For the artists reading this, can you describe how you paint?

RH I have often been asked that and it is very difficult for me to analyse. For commercial work I normally use Designers Gouache, it is a water based paint which is quick drying and a good medium for applying detail and I would use a heavy weight wash board or stretched heavy quality watercolour paper with a rough surface.

To commence an illustration, I first produce a full size drawing of the subject and on occasions when I was not quite happy, would
do a small colour rough for my own guidance. Then with the colours decided and some large dishes of colour mixed, the next move was to get the background down. Sometimes this was decided for me as it had its own story to tell but this was not always the case and at times it was the accidents that occur that can change a painting. The disadvantage of gouache over oils, is going back over backgrounds, particularly skies, with body colour is not always successful, as the colour can become ‘muddy’ and lose recession and depth. Alternatively, one of the advantages is that you can keep your used palettes of subtle colours already mixed from previous illustrations and use them again. I don’t like a clean palette! Also, as Gouache dries so quickly I can have a painting ready to go immediately I have finished, with a courier waiting.

The next step is the worst moment - the beginning - when I am confronted with a blank white sheet of board. At times when I was producing so many illustrations, I would wander round my garden, putting off the dreaded moment, hoping for inspiration for a different background but as time ticks away and the deadline is looming, I am forced to go back and get on with it but there is no doubt I work better under pressure. A background must always be put down quickly whilst the board is wet, the phone disconnected and the children locked in their room. This may be a slight exaggeration on my part but it is

Right: Over the years, Roy produced well over 100 illustrations for Matchbox covering all genres of aviation from the supersonic F-104 Starfighter to the rather more pedestrian Westland Wessex.
essential that NO ONE interrupts those first critical moments of an illustration’s life. Once it has reached a certain stage and I am happy, I can begin painting in the aircraft or whatever, before finishing off the background and the very exciting task of bringing it all together to give that final sparkle or dash of speed.

**MP** Well I think most artists will empathise with all that, especially the bit about locking up the kids at regular intervals! Do you have any particular favourites from the Matchbox years?

**RH** This is a difficult one as I have painted so many cars, aircraft, armoured vehicles and ships. The ones that come to mind are the Chinook depicting the Evacuation of Beirut, the Lancaster with its old peeling paintwork, the Harrier which first won me the Guild of Aviation “Painting of the Year” award and the Corvette - HMS Bluebell, as she battled on defending the wartime Atlantic convoys.

**MP** I must admit that your Lancaster was also one of my all time favourites and I often referred to it for inspiration when painting Lancasters of my own! The other one that really stood out for me was your Ju188 which I always remember as being painted on a green background. I also seem to remember an HS-125 painted on a dark green sky as well. I love the colour green but if I ever tried to paint a green sky it would be a disaster. Where did the inspiration for these come from?

**RH** It was all down to constantly trying to vary the appearance of the new kits. After a hundred kits it’s hard to come up with something genuinely different!

**MP** After the demise of Lesney/Matchbox, what did you then?

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Above: One of Roy’s most well known paintings depicting a IX Squadron Lancaster over the Tirpitz. A favourite of both the editor and Roy himself, the painting is a masterclass in how to paint canopies, weathering, recession and curved surfaces. Released in 1979, the model proved to be one of Matchbox’s most popular kits.
I was asked by the new owners to produce work for them but the time had come for a change. Fortunately, I had kept alive my contacts in general advertising and work continued to arrive and for a period I worked for many companies. During this time I was commissioned by The Bradford Exchange to paint several series of aircraft for them to reproduce on plates, some 40 paintings in total. One was particularly successful, depicting a Spitfire over St. Paul’s Cathedral, achieving their ‘best seller’ status. As a result, I, together with Michael Turner who had also achieved this with one of his paintings, was invited to Royal Doulton where we were presented with a cheque and a plate specially manufactured to mark the occasion.

During this time I would try and take the odd day off and would slip down to my sailing boat but it could be tricky when the mobile phone rang with a client asking when their job would be ready and there were noisy sea gulls in the background!

So you slowly sailed off into the sunset of retirement then? Do you still paint?

Yes, we’ve enjoyed sailing most of our married life and still travel extensively, especially in the winter to escape the cold and the damp! I don’t paint a lot now but I keep myself busy in the studio retouching a lot of these old artworks.

I have to say that looking through these old artworks here today has been an absolute inspiration for me and has brought back many fond memories of those multi coloured Matchbox kits. It will, I’m sure, please...
many readers to know that we plan to publish a book of your work next year which will allow us to include so much more of your work than we could fit in here. I look forward to working with you on that one!

RH Thank you Mark for your time in putting together this article. I am so pleased that we have met up again after that day 25 years ago, when I took the photo of you in a Harrier on a windy RAF airfield.

MP Ha, yes I should explain to the readers that Roy and I first met on the flight line at RAF Wittering when I was just climbing into a Harrier to go flying and Roy was busy photographing the aircraft for reference material. I recognised you straight away and asked if you could take a photo of me in the cockpit before we took off. I have to say I’ve published that photo several times so I’m sure I owe you a few quid in repro fees!

RH No problem, we can discuss that after we’ve completed the book. Let’s get started!

Above: Roy’s painting for the 1987 packaging of the Harrier GR3 model. With the cropped box and graphics overlaid, only the main aircraft was visible, (below).

The Vintage Years of Matchbox art by Roy Huxley will be published early in 2020 by Red Kite.

More details will be published in next month’s issue.
NEW for 2020!
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For more information/pricing, contact wesley@wingleader.co.uk

Up to 6 people
1 x double room, 2 x twin rooms

Private Hot tub
If you’ve enjoyed reading this issue then please take a look at our previous NINE issues - all free!
Simply click on the covers.
BRACE ! FOR CHRIST’S SAKE BRACE!!
New Year’s morning 1945. A shake of my shoulder and the service policeman said “sign here please Sir, breakfast at 4:45 and briefing at 5:30”. The signature a necessary precaution to ensure complete wakefulness particularly after the celebrations of a few hours before.

The four commissioned members of my crew lived together as half occupants of a Nissen Hut. John Buckley, older than average aircrew, a tough character from the Outback of Australia, our skipper; Bill Shutler, a surveyor from Stoke on Trent our navigator; Ian Moore, another Australian, our wireless operator; and myself Dennis Nolan (bomb-aimer) a photo-engraver from London. To complete the crew Ken Dawes the flight engineer; Geoff Round in the mid-upper turret and Bob Copperwaite, a quiet country lad who, from childhood, had handled shotguns and was an absolute wizard on the clay pigeon range. We all hoped he was as good with his 4 Brownings in the rear turret.

On 1 January 1945, IX Squadron was briefed to send ten Lancasters to bomb the Dortmund Ems Canal. At 07.30 the first bomber thundered down the runway at Bardney and disappeared into the misty darkness, followed by a huge explosion. The late Dennis Nolan was aboard the second Lancaster to line up that fateful morning and wrote an account of what happened next...
Operational breakfast, traditionally egg and bacon, was a fairly quiet affair. Who feels cheerful at that time in the morning anyway and the immediate future was not conducive to a happy laughing atmosphere.

Before the walk of a quarter mile or so from the Mess to the huddle of admin buildings, we collected our flying rations, flasks of coffee, chocolate, chewing gum, glucose sweets and sandwiches if required.

At the main briefing in intelligence section we picked up our other NCO crew members and speculated on the target. We already knew the bomb and petrol load so knew it was likely to be a medium length haul to a tactical target.

The commanding officer arrived and we all stood to attention. He put us at ease and then started briefing by pulling back the curtain to reveal the map with tapes stretched across to signify our tracks via turning points to the
target and return. An immediate buzz filled the room, “The Canal”. The Dortmund Ems canal had been attacked regularly as befitted a transport target of prime importance, used to transport vital war materials including prefabricated U boat sections between the industrial Ruhr and the north German ports. All these facts were stressed during briefing which told us the method of target marking and attack, along with intelligence reports on defences.

The meteorology officer then stood up to ironic cheers. Nobody doubted the intelligence estimate of the number of Flak batteries but when the met officer forecasts 7/10 cloud at 12,000 feet and there’s only 3/10 at 5000 everyone sees it and remembers! As a result, the meteorology section were treated with affectionate disbelief by most crews.

After the main briefing came specialist briefings for each aircrew category. For me these were details of fuses and delays, order of release from bomb-bay and stick intervals to be set up on ‘Mickey Mouse’. Then it was onto the locker room to struggle into flying kit and draw our parachutes and harnesses. Some leg pulling on standards of flying no doubt and dates made for a drink later and then a drifting out to crew buses and dispersals. Our bus was driven, as usual, by Olga our mascot WAAF. She had done this job for us at various training stations and, by coincidence, had been posted from station to station and finally, to our squadron. Five minutes or so around
the perimeter track with a stop to drop off another crew and then came our dispersal with 'A -Able' waiting for us. Our ground crew, whose life revolved around the aircraft whatever time of day or night and whatever the weather conditions, were waiting to hand her over to us. We all had some equipment to check and report OK to the skipper before he signed acceptance of the aircraft. Time then for a quick cigarette before finally boarding and heaving the ladder on board and shutting the door.

Most of the intercom talk at that point would be between skipper and flight engineer as pre start checks were made, culminating with thumbs up to the ground crew with trolley accumulator. A cough and spit as the first Merlin caught and was away in a cloud of blue smoke followed rapidly by the other three. Each engine was run up to peak revs and checked on all its instruments. Each crew member reported on equipment powered by engines and auxiliaries. Some welcome heat now started to circulate around the fuselage which always helped us to relax a little. Taxi time came and with no Very light from control tower to signal a delay or cancellation, we were off.

Our dispersal was one of the closest to the end of main runway so this always helped us to be one of the first aircraft away. This time, another Lanc was in front of us so we waited while he went through pre take off checks and turned onto the runway. A green on the Aldis lamp and we heard the roar of his engines at full power and watched his tail light pick up speed down the runway. Before he lifted off we had begun our own pre take off checks which were suddenly interrupted by a muffled explosion and flare of flame. By its direction and estimated distance someone commented “some poor devils from Woodhall have gone in”. Woodhall Spa being the next airfield.

Our checks completed, we waited for the green from the aerodrome control pilot but, seemingly, he was in no hurry. It must have been 10 minutes later that a green finally came.

A IX Squadron Lancaster seen taxiing for take off at Bardney. Of interest is the ‘goose neck’ flare on the right of the photo. These tins full of Paraffin were used to light runways and taxiways on many Bomber Command airfields. Very effective but tricky to ‘switch off’ in a hurry when enemy intruders appeared!
during which time we had watched the flames grow and bombs explode and scatter flaming wreckage from the crash.

We lumbered around to port with a great hissing of brakes and quick revving of starboard engines and lined up with the converging diminishing line of lights and goose neck flares. A sudden throb of full power and ‘Able’ was shaking and vibrating against the brakes. A final hiss from the brakes and the rumble of the tailwheel echoed up the fuselage as we picked up speed, the rumbling stopping suddenly as the tail lifted. Meanwhile, the navigator started his chant ofairspeeds at 5 knot intervals.

My take off position and task was on the navigator’s bench seat but outside his blackout curtain and within the cockpit; facing an instrument panel on the starboard side and watching for indicator lamps which would light on fuel pump failure. I had to take corrective action and warn the pilot if this happened. “90 knots” from the navigator and “God the bloody lamps have come on!” A strangled warning shout and flick of my wrists as I change over cocks. The skipper was well aware that both port engines had died at the moment of take off. A sickening lurch and urgent orders of which I heard “Cut!” and felt and heard all engines die. Just how close we had been to dropping a wing and cartwheeling down the runway we’ll never know.

By this time we had lurched off the runway and were running and bouncing across the grass. A jumble of lights rushed towards us and, because no one had said a word since “Cut” and I had felt that some crew members hadn’t realised what was happening, (confirmed later), I shouted “Brace for Christ’s sake brace!” as the jumble of lights and a Lanc still in dispersal with cockpit and nav lights on, whipped past with wing tips missing by about 6 feet, (measured subsequently by wheel tracks on the grass). A one word order from the skipper “Graviners” (Fire Exinguishers) and the hiss from the brakes as he tried to slow
the monster down followed almost at once by a monstrous tearing rending crash. Instead of oblivion, as expected by me at least, we were in a floating, airborne waffling Lanc suddenly tearing and banging its way to a standstill.

The Perspex observation blister above my head had been torn away and a reflex action had me on my feet and head first through the hole and rolling down the wing root of a petrol soaked, smoking and still banging wreck. I attempted to run as far away in the darkness as possible before it blew up but was catapulted back every other step by what I eventually realised were very small trees. With this realization also came the fact that the expected explosion hadn’t occurred and I had better help my crew to get out. By this time three others were out and we could hear the skipper and engineer thumping about inside the fuselage. The rear gunner was trapped in his turret and the wireless operator and the other gunner started to chop him out with crash axes while the navigator and I went to help the other two. It turned out the engineer had broken a leg and we had quite a job to get him out. He was in worst shape with a couple of ribs broken too but miraculously the rest of us had only cuts and bruises.

We realised we were in one of the Forestry Commission plantations that surrounded the airfield but didn’t know where. In any case the crash crew would be with us in no time at all. We made Ken as comfortable as possible a safe distance from the wreck and in the first faint light of dawn congratulated ourselves on still being alive.

Distant voices and flashing torches announced the arrival of the crash crew who

Above: A few hours after their take-off crash, the six uninjured survivors returned to inspect their forlorn Lancaster in the forest. Dennis is in the centre of the photo, the Australian pilot John Buckley is second right.
were sorry they had been so long but had been at the other crash we had seen before take off. This was actually the aircraft which took off in front of us and not one from Woodhall Spa. We carried Ken on a stretcher to the edge of the wood only some 50 yards or so away and were whisked away to the sick quarters where our engineer and the only survivor of the other crash were rushed to hospital. The rest of us were sent back to our Messes to await the return of the squadron and availability of another aircraft to get us into the air again quickly.

Later in the day we went to inspect ‘Able’ and realised just how lucky we were. We had missed digging in a wing and cartwheeling up the runway by a hair’s breadth, a collision with another fully loaded Lanc by 6 feet or so and, finally instead of running full tilt into the dense trunks of the forest, had hit a mound of earth piled up during the airfield construction and had been coaxed into flying above those trunks before settling down through the tops of the trees.

The confusion in the control tower after the first two aircraft to roll down the runway had crashed was understandably, considerable. Had a saboteur been in action? Had the wings and control surfaces been sprayed with glycol to prevent ice formation? Was it just pilot error? The rest of the squadron was held at the runway end for at least 15 minutes before being sent safely away.

The other aircraft to crash on take-off that morning was NG252 WS-R which also lost power in both port engines. It appeared to have staggered into the air before crashing just south of the airfield. The American pilot F/O C S Newton and his crew were all killed apart from P/O R C Flynn, the bomb aimer, who was badly injured. The operation itself saw one of the squadron’s Lancasters return early and two others shot down over the target. Only five returned to Bardney, landing between 13.24 - 14.03 hrs.

Interestingly, one of the IX squadron Lancasters shot down that day was PD377 flown by P/O Denton and his crew. The Wireless Operator F/S George Thompson was subsequently awarded the Victoria Cross for his bravery in trying to save the two gunners in his burning aircraft. A truly eventful New Year’s Day for the men of IX Squadron.
To replace its increasingly obsolescent Vampire fighters, in early 1962 the Royal Rhodesian Air Force (RRAF) placed an order with Hawker Siddeley for a dozen refurbished Hunter F 6s modified to FGA 9 standard. After conversion training with the RAF the first two aircraft, ferried by Rhodesian pilots, arrived at Salisbury (now Harare) on 20 December. They were to re-equip 1 Squadron RRAF based at Thornhill in central Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) with the final pair being handed over on 15 May 1963. The unit soon worked up and although small, the RRAF was one of the most efficient in Africa. However, following the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) in November 1965, there was an immediate halt to spares, though some sanctions busting and a great deal of ingenuity by the Rhodesians meant that the Hunter force maintained its full efficiency.

The Hawker Hunter is regarded by many as one of the most attractive fighter aircraft ever produced with over 20 different air forces flying her in locations and conflicts all around the globe. Andrew Thomas has a look through his photo files of the Hunter whilst in service with the Rhodesian Air Force.
In March 1970, Rhodesia was declared a republic and the RRAF became the Rhodesian Air Force (RhodAF) with a consequent change in the national markings. The first Hunter was lost in a crash soon afterwards when R1823 suffered an engine failure near Bulawayo. However, from the mid 1960s there was a gradual increase in African nationalist terror activity in the country and the first action had been as far back as 1966 with Hunters strafing the first insurgent group and occasional attacks had been mounted through the rest of the decade. However, from early 1973 the number of incursions into Rhodesia increased and by 1976 the country had spiralled into what became known as the Bush War.

The Rhod AF Hunters were fully engaged throughout this savage conflict, keeping aircraft at readiness as well as making pre-planned attacks on identified terrorist groups. They also participated in external raids into neighbouring states that were housing terrorist training camps, notably in Mozambique and Zambia and as a result the Hunters had all national identity markings removed. The first of these raids came in February 1976 and though initially the Rhod AF had little to fear, later anti aircraft defences and man portable SA 7 missiles became a significant threat. On 10 June, Hunter R1280 was hit by anti aircraft fire during a strike on the Mozambique border and the pilot was eventually forced to eject.

Below: Hunter FGA 9 RRAF 126 at the Hawker Siddeley factory at Dunsfold in 1962 just prior to delivery. HSA
The Rhodesian Hunters were regularly in action through 1977 and 1978, often supporting raids by the SAS and Selous Scouts on ZANLA and ZIPRA forces as well as the Mozambican FRELIMO.

The war reached a climax in 1979 when there were several large scale raids into Mozambique, notably against the huge base at Chimoio in atrocious conditions of smoke and haze, on the 3rd October. Hunter R1821 was shot down and crashed into the column it was attacking causing considerable destruction. However, the pilot was killed and with other losses made it the most costly operation of the entire war for the Rhod AF.

By now, peace talks were taking place in London and a ceasefire came into effect on 22 November. This led to elections and the creation of the state of Zimbabwe in April 1980. The old Rhod AF now became the Air Force of Zimbabwe and retained the Hunters of 1 Sqn as its main strike aircraft. The following February, Hunters provided top cover to troops in Bulawayo trying to stop inter tribal fighting. The following month, five ex Kenya Air Force Hunter FGA 80s and a solitary two-seat T 81 were delivered to supplement the surviving nine ex RRAF FGA 9s. These were followed in April 1984 by five ex RAF Hunter FGA 9s and another four in September 1987. These were the last of 26 Hunters that gave such sterling service to the RRAF, RhodAF and AFZ. In January 2002, the last six Hunters in use were retired, so ending almost 40 years of successful Hunter operations in Central Africa.
**ROYAL RHODESIAN AIR FORCE**

Initial 12 Hunter FGA 9 delivered 1962-3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RAF Serial</th>
<th>RRAF Serial (prefix RRAF)</th>
<th>Rhod AF Serial (prefix R)</th>
<th>Delivery Date</th>
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<tr>
<td>XE559</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>8116</td>
<td>15 Dec 62</td>
<td>w/o sabotage 25 Jul 82. Used as spares source for 1284</td>
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<tr>
<td>XJ718</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>1817</td>
<td>15 Dec 62</td>
<td>w/o sabotage 25 Jul 82</td>
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<tr>
<td>XE613</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>1188</td>
<td>12 Mar 63</td>
<td>w/o sabotage 25 Jul 82 but preserved Gweru</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XF506</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>1198</td>
<td>12 Mar 63</td>
<td>w/o sabotage 25 Jul 82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XE548</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>1280</td>
<td>2 Mar 63</td>
<td>Damaged by small arms fire and crashed on finals near Thornhill 10 Jun 76. Flt Lt T M Thomas ejected.</td>
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<tr>
<td>XG294</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>8122</td>
<td>5 Apr 63</td>
<td>w/o sabotage 25 Jul 82</td>
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<tr>
<td>XJ638</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>1823</td>
<td>5 Apr 63</td>
<td>Fuel pipe burst and crashed on final approach to Bulawayo airport 28 Oct 70. Air Lt A R Bruce ejected.</td>
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<tr>
<td>XJ716</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>1284</td>
<td>19 Apr 63</td>
<td>Later rebuilt as a composite with parts from 8116.</td>
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<td>19 Apr 63</td>
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<td>126</td>
<td>1286</td>
<td>15 May 63</td>
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<td>XF374</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>1827</td>
<td>15 May 63</td>
<td>w/o sabotage 25 Jul 82??</td>
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Below: Showing off its paces, Hunter FGA 9 RRAF117 was one of the first two delivered to Rhodesia in December 1962. RRAF

Bottom: The nearest of this impressive Hunter lineup at 1 Sqn's Thornhill base in January 1964 wears the new RRAF roundel of a single assegai, reflecting the dissolution of the Federation and the reversion to control of Southern Rhodesia. RRAF
In 1968, Hunter FGA 9, R8116, was repainted in experimental earth-green colours that was eventually adopted and is flown by Sqn Ldr R C Morris whose name is under the cockpit. RRAF.

Right: A pair of Hunter FGA 9s in the new roundels sit at dispersal at Thornhill in 1964. C BEDFORD
Lake Kariba provides a backdrop to Hunter FGA 9 R1258 during a sortie over the Zambezi Valley in 1968. RRAF

The classic elegant lines and the later RRAF roundel are well shown in the lovely view of Hunter FGA 9 R1280 taken in 1968. RRAF
Left: The post 1970 Rhodesian Air Force roundel was moved onto the nose of the 1 Squadron Hunters at one stage and combines the green and white of the new Rhodesian flag with the lion holding a tusk from the coat of arms. T HUDSON

Below and bottom: The Rhodesian Hunters made regular training flights to South Africa, including in March 1970 when R1817 flew down to Cape Town. T HUDSON
Background photo: The 1 Sqn CO Sqn Ldr Rob Gaunt taxies Hunter FGA 9 R1258 to parking at Victoria Falls in 1970. AVM I HARVEY

Inset right: The first Rhodesian Hunter lost was R1823 that suffered an engine failure and crashed near Bulawayo on 28 October 1970 though the pilot ejected safely. WG CDR P COOKE
Below: At Thornhill in July 1972, Hunter FGA 9 R1817 was painted with a ‘Bunny’ marking for a publicity photo. BULAWAYO CHRONICLE VIA WG CDR P COOKE
AIR FORCE OF ZIMBABWE

4 ex-Kenya AF FGA 80 delivered 1981

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<tr>
<th>RAF Serial</th>
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<th>AFZ Serial</th>
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<td>803</td>
<td>8100</td>
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<td>XF972</td>
<td>804</td>
<td>1801</td>
<td>19 Mar 81</td>
<td>(FGA 80A) – believed w/o.</td>
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<td>1038</td>
<td>19 Mar 81</td>
<td>w/o sabotage 25 Jul 82</td>
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1 ex Kenya AF T 81 delivered 1981

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<tr>
<td>XL604</td>
<td>802</td>
<td>1084</td>
<td>19 Mar 81</td>
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5 ex-RAF FGA 9 delivered 1984

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<tr>
<td>XF511</td>
<td>1805</td>
<td>10 Apr 84</td>
<td>Ex 1 TWU – cr nr Thornhill 19 Jun 89 pilot killed</td>
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<tr>
<td>XF519</td>
<td>8106</td>
<td>10 Apr 84</td>
<td>Ex 1 TWU – cr nr Beatrice 19 Feb 95 pilot killed</td>
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<td>XG155</td>
<td>1807</td>
<td>10 Apr 84</td>
<td>Ex 2 TWU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XG207</td>
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<td>XF416</td>
<td>1098</td>
<td>10 Apr 84</td>
<td>Ex 2 TWU</td>
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4 ex-RAF FGA 9 delivered 1987

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<td>XF431</td>
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<td>XF419</td>
<td>8112</td>
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<td>Ex 1 TWU</td>
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<td>XJ683</td>
<td>1813</td>
<td>5 Oct 87</td>
<td>Ex 1 TWU wfu &amp; stored Manyame</td>
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Above: By 1973, the Rhodesians Hunters had been repainted overall dark earth and green as seen on R1258 over Cape Town flown by Air Lt Steve Murray as part of his conversion training. S MURRAY

As the Bush War intensified, so markings were gradually removed, including serial numbers, though this example armed with 68mm SNEB rocket pods underwing seen in 1974 retains the fin flash. AUTHOR’S COLLECTION
The Hunter FGA 9 remained in use in independent Zimbabwe, 1188, is seen after being repainted, including the AFZ tail marking at Thornhill in April 1981. J BOYD

Below: A Rhodesian Hunter FGA 9 low over the bush during the final year of the Bush War, during which the aircraft had made many highly effective attacks. RHOD AF
The Black Ship
In the Autumn of 2019, with British fifth-generation multi-role combat aircraft training onboard a Royal Navy aircraft carrier off the American eastern seaboard, we might be forgiven for thinking of the Lockheed Martin F35B Lightning II as a new venture into stealth technology. However, if we could eavesdrop on the conversation between two young naval officers in 1916 we might think differently.

The scene is RNAS Capel le Ferne, an airship station located a few miles west of Dover. Flt Sub Lt Billy Chambers RNAS tells Midshipman Victor Goddard, “I’ve a job to do somewhere… will you come and help me?” Victor looked puzzled, so Billy added, “Secret service in enemy territory is all I can say… but it will be great fun don’t you think?”

Although little more than boys, the two young men had been among a group of junior officers who had already been asked once to perform classified duties. About eighteen months earlier, Kaiser Wilhelm II declared the seas around the British Isles a war zone and adopted a policy of ‘unrestricted submarine warfare’. The British First Sea Lord, Admiral ‘Jackie’ Fisher, had secret plans to counter the threat and, on 28 February, he approved the construction of a small dirigible airship capable of searching coastal waters for enemy submarines.

The first of these was ready for evaluation within 5 weeks, and entered service three weeks later. Fisher was probably pleased, but the urgency was betrayed by his comment on record, “Now I must have forty.” As well as the aircraft, Fisher needed crews. He sent a letter to all Commanding Officers in the Fleet ordering them to select suitable officers under training and ask them to volunteer for special duties. Bizarrely, the only qualification was that they should have experience in small boat handling. If they accepted, twenty or so would be trained to fly the new airships.
Sub Lt William Phillips Clutterbuck Chambers and Midshipman Robert Victor Goddard, aged 20 and 19 respectively, were among them. The vessels they were given were strange contraptions, comprising a redundant biplane fuselage with two seats and a motor, but no wings, slung beneath a relatively small gasbag. Known as ‘Sea Scouts’, the first two airships flew from Kingsnorth in Kent in March 1915, and anti-submarine patrols commenced from other stations located around the British coastline that summer.

Whilst the RNAS fight against submarines continued, RFC squadrons on the Western Front had, on occasions, landed aeroplanes behind enemy lines to drop off agents; who, on completion of their mission, made their way into the neutral Netherlands, from where they could make their way home across The Channel.

By the Spring of 1916, increased German security made it harder to cross the border and the War Office looked into the possibility of using ‘stealth’ aircraft specially adapted for covert night operations, to drop and recover spies behind enemy lines, and to carry out night-time reconnaissance. But landing an aeroplane at night on an unprepared strip was fraught, so the proposed solution was to use a small airship. If flown into wind it might be low and slow enough for a waiting agent to catch-hold and climb aboard. Apparently, whoever conceived that plan never gave any thought as to how the airship pilot would locate the pick-up site in the dark, or be there on the right time and date without the assistance of an elaborate resistance organisation. These ‘minor details’ would have to be worked out as the plan developed.

The Armstrong Whitworth FK3 was an unsuccessful replacement for the BE2. The fuselage however proved to be a useful thing to sling underneath the SS class airship.
The airship chosen for the project was number SS40. It was built around a redundant FK3 fuselage, a general-purpose biplane designed by Armstrong Whitworth as a replacement for RFC BE2Cs but rejected by the War Office as it offered little improvement. SS40 was paired with a specially-silenced 100hp Green aero-engine at the Wormwood Scrubs factory. It was then moved to RNAS Kingsnorth, overlooking The Medway, where it was slung on ten support wires beneath a larger than standard 70,000cu.ft envelope. The whole arrangement was painted black, dismantled and packed into crates and shipped to RNAS Polegate, the experimental airship station at Willingdon, near Eastbourne, where it was unloaded, discretely, into a remote hangar where, away from prying eyes, further modifications were carried out.

Billy Chambers had been flying SS-airships from Capel for a while, and on 29 March flew the first of several night-flying sorties in SS13. When asked to select a colleague to assist on the project, Bill approached his friend Victor Goddard. After a few night sorties together, Billy and Victor arrived at Polegate on 4 May 1916.

Only a few personnel saw their airship as it was being assembled. Those entitled called her “The Black Ship”. Further modifications included a hand-operated air blower to pump air into the ballonettes to keep the gas bag inflated whilst the airship drifted with engines cut, and special hoods fitted to shield its landing lights. The airship’s endurance was extended to an estimated 12hrs by two
additional 45 gal tanks, suspended in canvas slings hanging from the rigging above the car.

On 26 May, the Black Ship was demonstrated to a group of staff officers from the War Office, led by Maj Gordon. At this time, although the Admiralty had control of the airship and its personnel, their Lordships wished “to know as little as possible about the affair.”

Drizzle was falling as the staff officers watched on a breezy moonless night as Billy Chambers took off, with Victor Goddard acting as navigator. The airship appeared to circle Eastbourne and the surrounding villages, returning some 40 minutes later. One observer commented, “The ship became invisible as soon as she took off, seemed to go around in a circle and fade away. Never saw her again until she landed. Very good show!”

The official report was more factual, but still gave a favourable account of the trial, “The airship could be plainly followed with the naked eye up to 4,000ft, and could still be heard. At about this height the ship became invisible and at 5,000ft could not be found by glasses, or with the naked eye, and all efforts to locate it by searchlight failed... The experiment may be regarded therefore as a complete success.”
Even that report concealed a problem as, Victor later explained, “...Billy seemed to make (navigation) difficult by keeping the rudder bar hard over and we went round and round and round, gradually getting miles away down wind. Eventually I shouted to him, What about going back, Billy? To which he replied they couldn’t because the rudder was stuck.”

The two men discussed their options. Billy suggested Victor climb down the fuselage and cut open the fabric to see where the jam was... Victor was about to climb out of his cockpit, when he was struck by a more comfortable, and definitely safer, alternative. They should throttle back the engine and let the airship rotate... giving a burst of throttle as she approached the point where she was pointing towards Polegate... then cutting back again and repeat until the air station came back into sight.

“We circled our way back but missed the landing party on our up-wind curving approach... ‘Trail rope away’, shouted Billy. What a shermozzle below... men bowled over left and right, as the hangers-on swirled through the mob... and we came down like a kite. Lucas, in charge of the ground party, enquired through his megaphone, ‘Which way was your wind blowing, Mr Chambers?’

It was decided to send the Black Ship to France anyway. Victor, who had been recently promoted to Sub Lieutenant, travelled on ahead and having got to Calais found himself alone on the quayside. Using bad French he managed to get the telephone operator to connect him to the RFC unit. A car duly arrived and took him to “an unnamed place where I found a brand-new hangar... a cathedral of wood and wire arches, shrouded in canvas, camouflaged to make it look like a small factory”. Victor looked around, went inside the shed but found no one, then on re-emerging a staff car approached. A Colonel in RFC uniform emerged, introduced himself as Brooke-Popham, and enquired if Victor had everything he wanted?

Brooke–Popham had started his career in 1898 in the Oxford Light Infantry. After an attachment to the Air Battalion the Royal Engineers, in 1911 he learnt to fly at Brooklands, before returning to take command of No.2 (Aeroplane) Co. in May 1912, now called 3 Squadron RFC. At the time Victor encountered him, Brooke-Popham was the RFC’s Deputy Adjutant and Quartermaster-General.

Victor commented about the lack of a landing party, some petrol, stores and a hydrogen plant. B-P replied, “Well Goddard, you’d better get onto No.2 Air Stores park, and indent for what stores you want... then you’ll have to fix billets for your men and indent for their rations... Let me know if you want any help. Good Luck!” and with that, got back into his car and disappeared.

Billy Chambers launched from Polegate at 04.00 on 6 July. Shortly after take-off he lost the airship’s wireless aerial, but decided to press-on in silence. “Near Hastings I struck out to sea towards Boulogne. On reaching the French coast a course was set to the southeast, but the weather was closing in and I decided to
WORLD WAR I

abandon the trip and turn back towards Capel. All went well until a mile or so off Folkestone when an oil pipe broke and I had no option but to stop the engine before it seized. The airship slowly rose above the mist to 3,000ft whilst we attempted to affect a temporary repair. By the time this was done, we had drifted back across the Channel and were near Cape Gris Nez... (so) we flew to the naval airship station at Marquise, near Boulogne where a safe landing was made..."

The next morning, after repairs had been made, the Black Ship made its way to its destination. As she was being secured, the oil pipe broke again. Victor welcomed his friend, who replied, “Well here we are... where are we?” Within a few days a Naval Party had been assembled, comprising six ratings, to look after the mechanics of the airship, and about thirty fusiliers who formed the handling party. Both Chambers and Goddard were to act as pilots, whilst three RFC officers, Second Lieuts Robbins, Baldwin and Herbert would act as their observers, and Capt A.N Greig handled the operations side of things.

They were attached to No.23 Sqn RFC, whose personnel willingly shared their knowledge of the local area and supported them whenever necessary.

The men were accommodated in tents, stables and at a local brasserie... whilst the officers set up home in a small house on the edge of the field. A while later permission was obtained to use a small chateau. The White Ensign was hoisted from a mast and a board announced it as ‘Naval Airship Headquarters’. Chambers and Goddard carried out test flights over enemy lines for about a month.

Billy recalled, “We made a short night flight on 8 July, followed by one over the local RFC headquarters... (but) I was unable to get the ship to climb above 3,500ft due to a drop in gas purity, we did not consider this was high enough to be safe from ack ack... (and) it was obvious that a larger envelope was required...” They flew the airship back to Kingsnorth on 8 August, where a large gusset was fitted the length of the envelope increasing the gasbag capacity to 83,000 cu.ft, enabling her to fly at higher altitudes (8,000ft).

After a successful trial flight the following day she returned back to France on 10 July when, once again, there was more trouble with the oil pipe! There was, however, a more fundamental problem now the gasbag had been expanded. The Black Ship could no longer fit in the hangar. The team spent the night, split into two shifts, one digging a channel in the floor, the other tending the airship in the open, in the hope that reducing the pressure would change the shape of the bag. It worked, and by dawn the handling party managed to get the airship inside.

In July, the Black Ship commenced covert operations behind enemy lines for the duration of the Battle of the Somme, and several practice landings were made without a ground party. On 13 August, Lt C Robbins parachuted successfully into allied lines from a height of 1,500 feet, and several drops of baskets of homing pigeons were made. Then,

Right: Colonel Robert Brooke-Popham the RFC’s Deputy Adjutant and Quartermaster-General who helped to literally get the project off the ground.
on 21 August, they attempted the first night time reconnaissance over the front line. Billy recalled, “A course was set for Cambrai but bad visibility made observation difficult and strong westerly winds forced us to return to base. We stayed over the trenches for about three-quarters of an hour, but the wind was very strong (and to make headway) we descended to 5,000ft... Another attempt was made on 28 August which was more successful.” An engine failure on one of these flights would have meant almost certain capture for the crew, assuming they were not killed in a blind forced landing.

It was a mystery that the Germans never shot at them, although this cannot have been because the Black Ship was invisible. Tommies called her ‘Bertha the Black Blimp’, and took pot shots at her thinking she was a Zeppelin and she was punctured a few times. Many years later, when Goddard was being interviewed by the BBC, he recalled, “Many’s the time that the ‘Black Ship’ sailed over the lines at night through that long summer and autumn of rumbling, bloody battle. But never once with an agent to drop. Spies are brave men, but they didn’t fancy our airship as a mode of transport. Chambers and Robbins made many night reconnaissance flights from which all too little could be learned about the enemy movements.”

He recalled that, as they descended approaching the landing site, the crew would sing bawdy barrack-room songs as they approached at treetop height, with the engine throttled back. The singing was to alert the ground crew and also to discourage any troops in the vicinity from taking pot shots at them.

By 1917, the RFC aeroplane pilots had gained mastery of the night skies and took over the reconnaissance task. Flt Sub Lt Chambers was mentioned in Dispatches by General Haig in his report on the battle. SS40 was returned to Kingsnorth early in 1917, where she was fitted with a standard silver envelope, and sent out to the Mediterranean and remained there until finally taken out of service in October 1918.

Victor Goddard transferred to the Royal Air Force in April 1918 and rose to the rank of Air Marshal; little is has been found to date on the later life of Billy Chambers.

Left: An SS Class airship with FK3 fuselage, inside a large airship hangar, possibly at RNAS Polehill.
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