

## ***The Royal Flying Corps and the Royal Air Force***

The **Royal Flying Corps (RFC)** was the air arm of the British Army before and during the First World War, until it merged with the **Royal Navy Air Service** on 1 April 1918 to form the **Royal Air Force**. The Royal Flying Corps was established by royal warrant on 13 April 1912. The Air Battalion of the Royal Engineers became the Military Wing of the RFC on 13 May. The initial strength of the RFC was 133 officers and by the end of 1912 it had 12 manned balloons and 36 aeroplanes. The RFC came under the command of Brigadier-General Sir David Henderson, the Director of Military Training and had separate branches for the Army and the Navy, each with its own commander. The Royal Navy had different priorities to those of the Army and wished to retain greater control over its aircraft. The Naval branch separated and was renamed the Royal Navy Air Service in 1914, although a combined central flying school was retained.

During the early part of the war, the RFC supported the British Army by co-operating with the artillery and carrying out photographic reconnaissance over the German lines. This was done by the airman sitting behind the pilot and leaning over the side of the aircraft with a large box camera. This work gradually led RFC pilots into aerial battles with German pilots (including the notorious German Ace known as the 'Red Baron', Manfred von Richthofen) and later into the war included the strafing of enemy infantry and emplacements, the bombing of German military airfields and transportation facilities.



At the start of the First World War the RFC consisted of five squadrons – one observation balloon squadron (RFC No 1 Squadron) and four aeroplane squadrons. These were first used for aerial spotting on 13 September 1914, but only became efficient when they perfected the use of wireless communication at Aubers Ridge on 9 May 1915. Aerial photography was attempted during 1914, but again only became effective the following year. By 1918 photographic images could be taken from 15,000 feet and interpreted by over 3,000 personnel.

Aircraft were not always reliable in their performance and tended to stall. Parachutes were not available to pilots of the RFC's heavier-than-air craft (although they were used by balloonists) – nor were they used by the RAF during the First World War. Flying was therefore an inherently hazardous occupation. **2<sup>nd</sup> Lt Norman Sassoon Croager** (73 Squadron) was killed in an air accident over Lilbourne airfield in Warwickshire on 8 November 1917, whilst on a training flight. He had applied to join the RFC whilst serving with the Norfolk Regiment in Egypt and had only passed his flying tests in the previous April. His aircraft, an AVRO 504 bi-

plane, went into an unexplained spinning nose dive at 300 feet. Both he and his trainee were killed. He had not yet piloted his 'plane in a conflict situation.

The formation of a new service, on a level with the Army and Royal Navy, was proposed in a report by South African General Jan Smuts, and presented to the War Council on 17 August 1917. The formation of the new service would make the under-utilised men and aircraft of the Royal Naval Air Service available for action on the Western Front, as well as ending the inter-service rivalries. On 1 April 1918 the Royal Air Force (RAF) was formed when the RFC and RNAS were amalgamated, under the control of the Air Ministry. On 9 August 1918, **2<sup>nd</sup> Lt Wilfred Lofts** of the 42<sup>nd</sup> Squadron RAF was killed in action over the Western Front, near St Omer, France. He was flying an RE8 two-

seater bi-plane, which was used for reconnaissance, and also bombing.

By 1919 the RAF had 4,000 combat aircraft and 114,000 personnel in some 150 squadrons. About 15,000 airmen of all nationalities were killed in the First World War. Another interesting statistic is that by the end of the war about 270,000 workers were employed in the British aircraft industry. The industry, built up from virtually nothing, produced 30,000 aircraft in 1918. Many of the aeroplanes, which were constructed mainly from wood, were built in Amersham's neighbouring town of High Wycombe, where the skills of the furniture makers were harnessed.