

Short Biplane S45 was fitted with a wheeled undercarriage for participation in the 1912 army manoeuvres. (Short HIST 11)

check on this ruling, but this proved to be impractical.

THE NAVY'S PART

The Royal Flying Corps which then incorporated a naval element (the separate Royal Naval Air Service did not evolve until the following year), received the detailed exercise plans early in September. Advance parties set out by road and selected an air park location at Thetford for Red Army and re-opened a site near Hardwick, where the Royal Engineers had stationed their aircraft the previous year, for Blue Army.

A naval aircraft was first in the field. This was Short Tractor Biplane S41, bearing the recently allotted serial No 10. First flown in April that year, it had subsequently been fitted with floats and was serving once again as a landplane. Flown by Commander C.R. Samson, it left Sheerness on 5 September to fly to Hardwick. Forced down at Whittlesford, not far from the later site of Duxford aerodrome, Samson was accosted by a local lady with the question, 'Sir, would you mind telling me what that thing is for?' Samson, a man of few words, noting her parasol pointing at the propeller, replied, 'Madam, that is for cutting the air'.

Next day as preparations proceeded there was mishap and disaster. Short Tractor Biplane S45 No 5, also previously fitted with floats, was damaged in a forced landing en route. Worse was to follow. Captain P. Hamilton and Lieutenant A. Wyness-Stuart had Deperdussin Monoplane No 258, from No 3 Squadron at Larkhill, break up in the air killing them both.

There was still a week before divisional exercises started and

RFC personnel in 1912 with one of their standard Leyland 3-ton trucks. Their uniform that year was transitional. Here only one of this RFC working party has the new exclusive RFC jacket. Pending supply of the new RFC badge, RE cap badges are worn or those of other arms from which personnel had been seconded. (MOD H1907)



THE ROYAL FLYING CORPS' FIRST FIELD EXERCISE

By Bruce Robertson

IN 1911 a few aircraft of the Air Battalion, Royal Engineers, had attended the annual army manoeuvres. In May the following year the Battalion was raised to the status of the Royal Flying Corps and as such was alerted to actively participate in the annual manoeuvres for 1912. These exercises were to become known as the Grand Manoeuvres of September 1912, for never before in Britain had so many troops been engaged in wholesale mock war.

The participating RFC element was drawn from No 1 Squadron, then specialising in lighter-than-air craft, having earlier been No 1 (Airship) Company, RE, and No 3 Squadron previously No 2 (Aeroplane) Company, RE. No 2 Squadron, RFC, had been formed mainly from Central Flying School personnel and was currently concerned with providing the nucleus of a new No 4 Squadron; in these circumstances it was relegated to be in reserve. Such was the paucity of aircraft that such airships and aeroplanes that were available were allotted to the opposing sides irrespective of their original squadrons.

The general military scenario for the exercises was that England, invaded by Red Army after landing between Wells and Hunstanton, were moving against London. To hold the invaders,

Blue Army was mobilised to thwart the drive well to the north of the capital. The Orders of Battle of the opposing sides were impressive, involving more troops than the initial British Expeditionary Force to France in 1914, largely because Territorial troops would participate from the outset as part of their annual training.

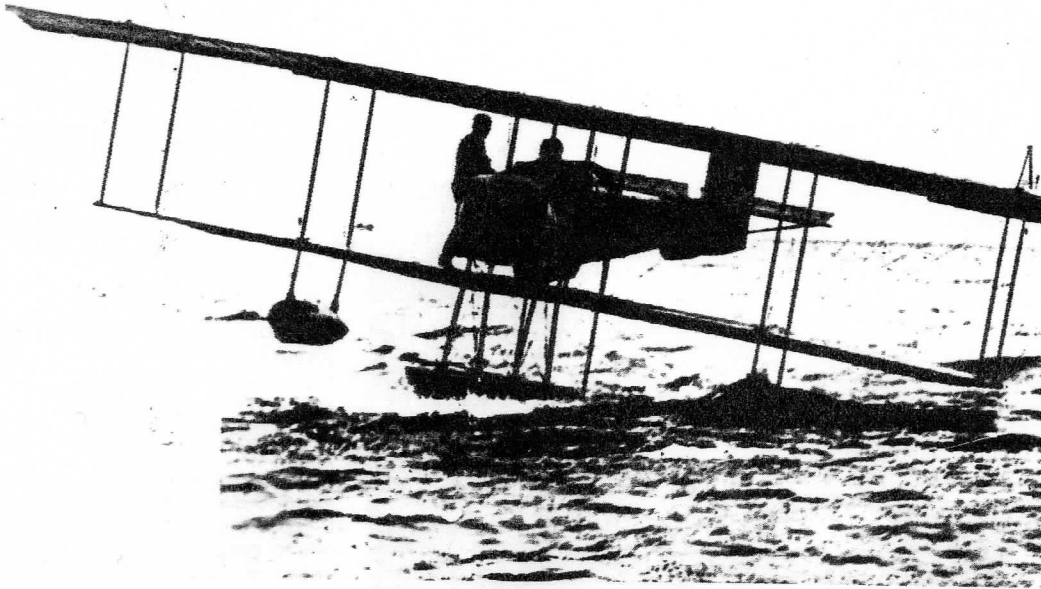
THE BELLIGERENTS

Red Army was composed of the 1st and 2nd Infantry Divisions from Aldershot with the Cavalry Division and all supporting arms with headquarters at Thetford. Their air element was two flights of aeroplanes and an airship. This army also had call on three Territorial cyclist battalions making in all some 22,500 men and 9,000 horses, with around a hundred artillery pieces and 68 machine-guns.

Blue Army was composed of the 3rd and 4th Infantry Divisions from Salisbury Plain, complete with all supporting arms and similarly fielding two flights of aeroplanes and an airship.

Their Territorial allotments included a mounted brigade and cyclist units as well as additional supply columns and field ambulances. Overall, Blue Army fielded more troops but less horses than Red with parity in field artillery.

Unusual for field exercises were two Royal Garrison Artillery units, the 23rd and 39th (Siege) Companies allotted one to each army, but the need for anti-aircraft guns was not envisaged. In this respect the chief umpire, General Sir John French (who was to command the BEF 1914-15), decreed that aircraft would be vulnerable to small arms fire flying below 2,000 feet and any that did so would be ruled shot down. Each aircraft was supposed to have a recording barograph for umpires to



The airship Beta completed in 1910, colloquially known as 'Silver Queen', seen here at Farnborough, was allotted to the Red Army in the manoeuvres. (John Drew postcard 40323)

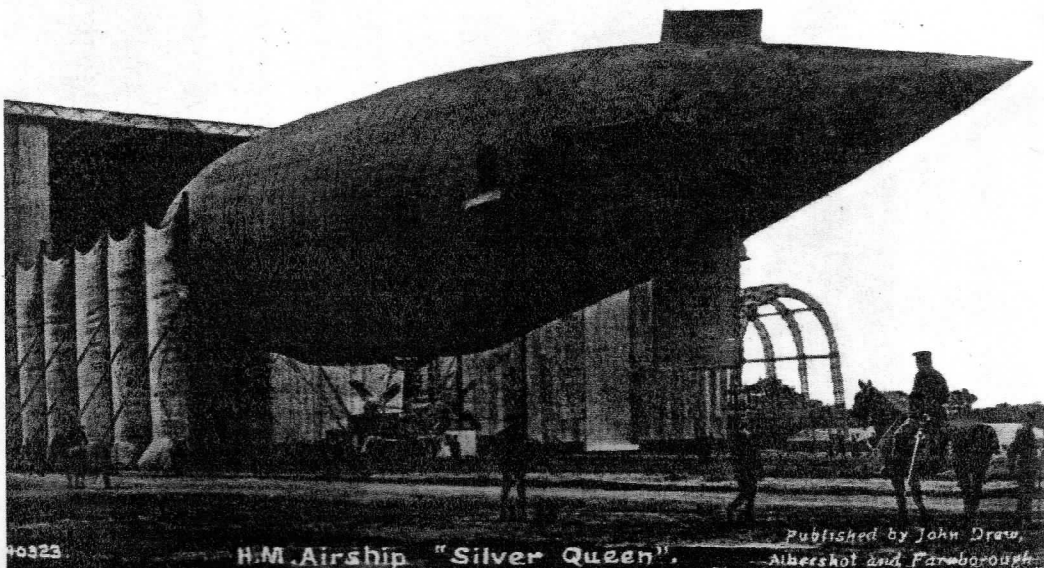
ten days before the main armies moved. At Farnborough and Larkhill frantic efforts were being made to ready the aircraft required, seven aeroplanes and an airship to each of the two armies. Meanwhile, another naval aircraft, Deperdussin Monoplane M1 (No.7), had taken up station. This was followed by Short Triple-Tractor S47 (No 4) which had two engines driving three propellers flown by Lieutenant C.J. L'Estrange Malone.

A further tragedy came on the 10th when Bristol-Coanda Monoplane 263 of No 3 Squadron crashed killing its two crew, Lts C.C. Bettington and E. Hotchkiss. As a result of the two fatal accidents an embargo was put on flying any more monoplanes. This precluded the planned participation of the Bristol-Prier No 261 which, in any case, had damaged a wing that day in a forced landing.

BATTLE OF THE GRANTA

Cavalry Division exercises, as a prelude to the main battle, started on 10 September. Divided into White and Brown formations, the former advanced from Long Melford in Suffolk towards Cambridge, following roughly the line of the now disused and almost obliterated railway line from Clare to Shelford, trying to probe and outflank the Brown defences deployed along the River Granta. That so-called river, little more than a stream, presented no great obstacle and a poor landmark for the aviators, but it simplified matters for map referencing by giving a positive line. Here the airmen learnt one valuable lesson for actual warfare; that it was difficult for pilot and observer to communicate verbally above the engine noise. As a result a system of signals was later evolved.

Such aircraft as were available



were pooled and based at a spot between the opposing sides. This was a field at Worsted Lodge, three miles north-west of the village of Linton. Eventually four aircraft, two to serve each side, were assembled at Worsted Lodge. These included Maurice Farman S7 Longhorn No 403 that had been called in from the Central Flying School, Upavon, staging via Oxford, bringing Major Hugh Trenchard onto the scene. The other aircraft were two naval Short biplanes and BE3 No 203 which was fitted with W/T.

For two days there were skirmishes along the Granta line, with such little forward movement as there was resulting in an advance base for the aircraft at Babraham. During this period Captain Gordon, flying the Short Tractor S45 (No 5) which had only recently been repaired, was forced to land in a field near Cambridge waterworks at Cherry Hinton. In poor light he had run into hurdles that ripped canvas from a wing. MT were called out from Hardwick to take it to that base. As the manoeuvres proceeded the RFC was finding

a constant need to draw more mechanised transport from the army transport pool. In all eight steam wagons, ten heavy lorries, 12 light tenders and eight cars were needed to transport tentage, personnel, equipment and spares, as well as maintain liaison between the Thetford and Hardwick bases and the field positions.

So far the RFC had not featured well, the weather had been

indifferent for reconnaissance and cavalry commanders hesitated in calling upon the new arm for scouting which was their traditional role.

While aircraft had become commonplace around Farnborough and Salisbury Plain, the East Anglians were, in most cases, seeing aircraft for the first time. The sight of an aeroplane was news and the village correspondents hastened to appraise



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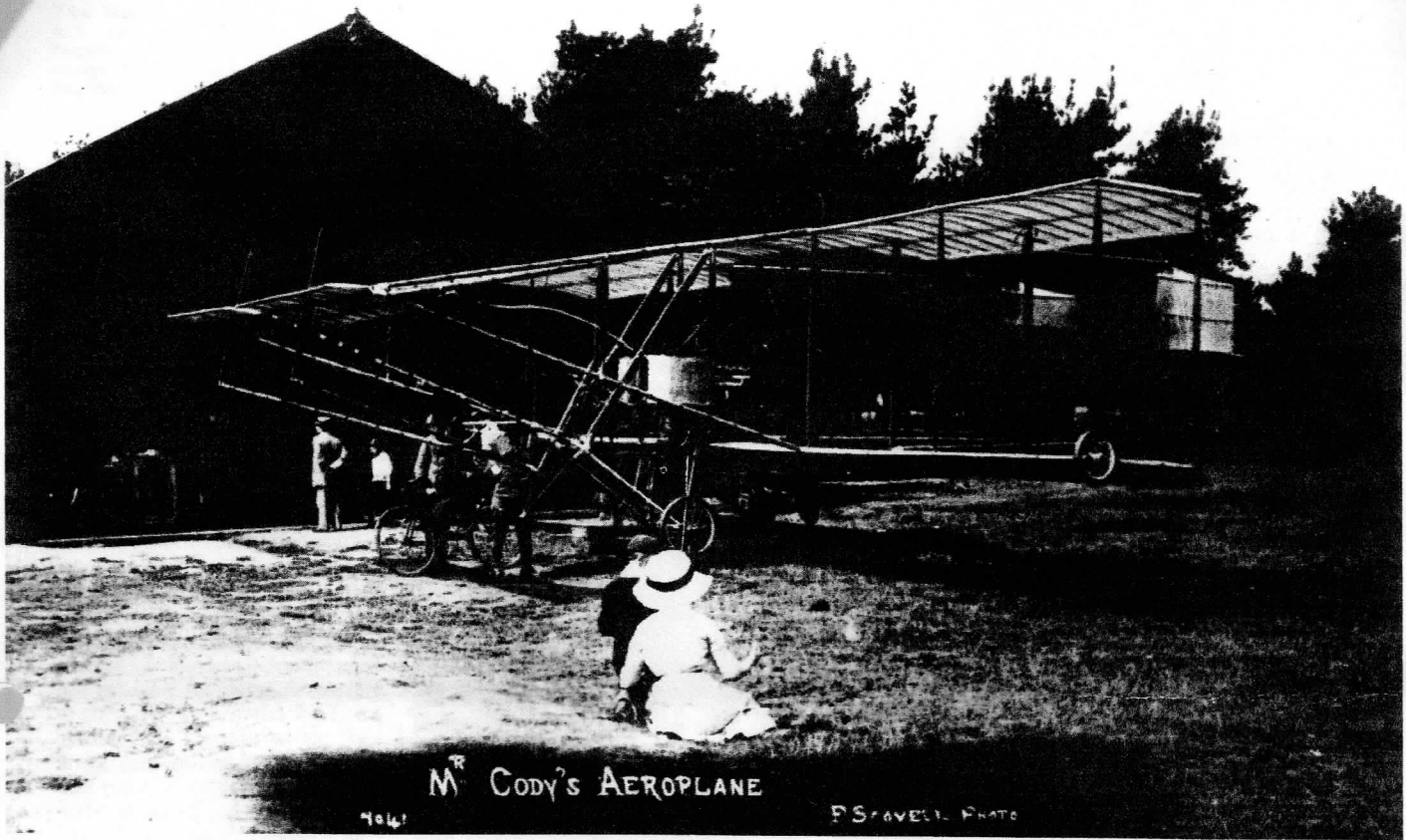
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The 1912 Cody Biplane. When Cody was asked by a reporter at the Hardwick manoeuvres air base about his unorthodox aircraft with its pusher airscrew when all other aircraft were tractors, he quickly retorted that it was the other aircraft that were unorthodox. (F. Scovell 7041)

their country town editors of such sightings. The Willingham representative reported in the Cambridge Weekly News, 'About seven o'clock an aeroplane passed over the village causing much excitement, this being the first seen from here'.

On the ground much was happening as troops took up their opening positions for the grand manoeuvres due to start soon after dawn on Monday, 16 September. The previous Friday and Saturday were peak days as special trains arrived at Cambridge and Thetford, disgorging troops, limbers, artillery pieces

and GS wagons. Roads resounded to the tread of heavy boots and the pounding of quite literally thousands of hooves.

EVE OF BATTLE

Sunday was a settling in day for the troops at their field camp sites, but there was aerial activity as the RFC strived to place its allotted quota of seven aeroplanes and an airship to each army. The airship Beta had been allotted to Red Army which was unfortunate, for this small craft was not fitted with W/T. Originally Delta had set out from

Farnborough, but had suffered an engine breakdown over North London. This aircraft had efficient W/T and was able to signal her mishap, leading to Beta being substituted for the Thetford base.

Soon after dawn that Sunday the airship Gamma, allotted to the defending Blue Army, set out for the temporary airship station at Kneesworth where a handling party awaited in vain for her arrival. Early morning it was drifting over Cambridge. Sailing over the town's Midsummer Common, on which there was a sea of tents, Gamma's crew threw down ropes and megaphoned down handling instructions to the troops. It was manhandled to a clear patch by the River Cam where the intention

was to examine the engine, but to the surprise that it had given to the town population was not foreseen. The 45 hp Clerget, spluttering overhead, had aroused the populace. With coats thrown over night attire in many cases, townsfolk flocked to the Common where the pale yellow gasbag glistened in the morning sun. The airship, with its crew of Captain Hetherington, Lieutenant Fletcher, a sergeant and a corporal, were hemmed in to a degree that made work impossible.

Hetherington ordered a little ballast to be removed allowing the airship to rise slightly; troops were then ordered to walk the airship into Jesus College grounds where fencing kept out the crowds which grew larger every minute. Two lorries arrived later in the morning with mechanics and tackle to attend to the Clerget which was dismantled.

Cody had left Aldershot on the Saturday, but fog had deterred him from reaching Hardwick in time for a Cambridge train to London where he was to review the Islington Boy Scouts. Instead he put down at High Wycombe and took a train and car from there to make his appointment. Returning, he resumed his flight during the Sunday evening. As one local journalist wrote, 'A whirring, humming noise high in the air sent the farmers shaggy colts snorting and galloping as

Breguet G3 No 207 from No 2 Squadron, seen being towed in with engine trouble, was allotted to the invading Red Army. (MOD H1553 ex-F. Scovell postcard 31)



The Deperdussin Monoplane M1, re-numbered No 7, was flown to the manoeuvres but came under the monoplane flying ban. (Harleyford Collection)

Mr Cody's aeroplane passed over'. Cody reached Hardwick in twilight and reported to the Camp Commandant, Lieutenant B.H. Barrington Kennett, Grenadier Guards, seconded to the RFC; Commander Samson was in charge of the naval section there.

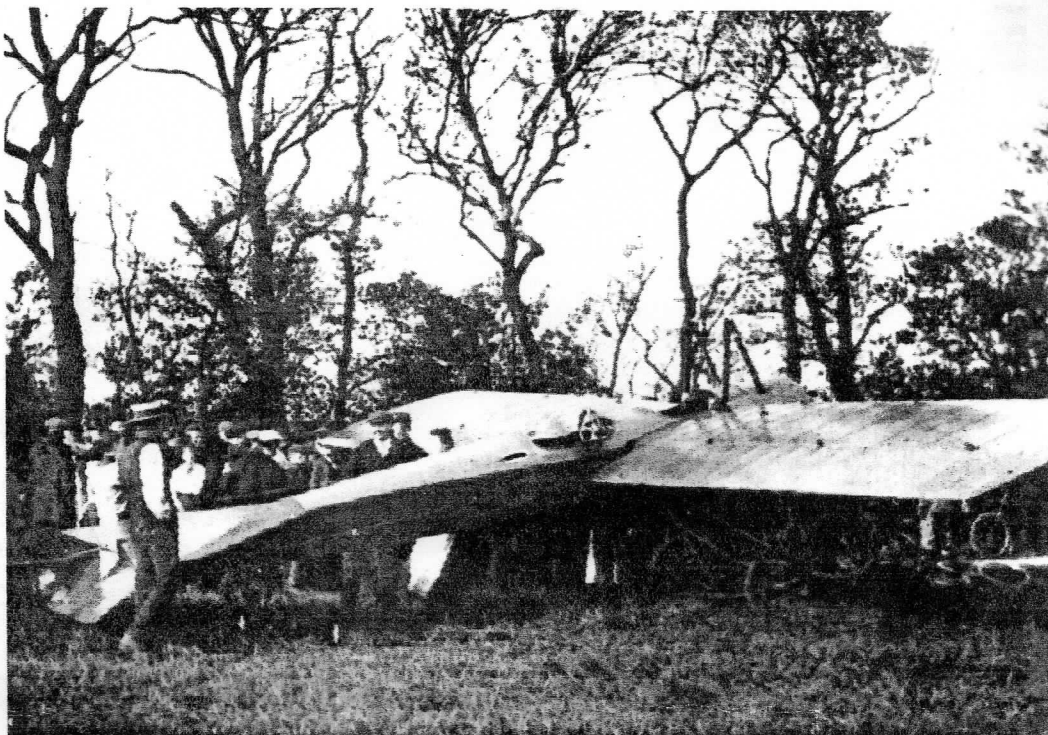
All that Sunday further troops arrived by special trains to Cambridge station. These were mainly the designated reserves taking up position around Cambridge itself.

LET BATTLE COMMENCE

At 6 am (the British Army had not then adopted the continental time scale) on Monday, 16 September hostilities opened, the troops having been conditioned not to move beyond their Sunday night outpost positions before that hour. The invading Red Army was spread across Norfolk and parts of Suffolk, while the defending Blue Army was spread out across South Cambridgeshire, Herts and Essex. Prompt at 6 o'clock two aircraft were started up at Hardwick in the initial attempt to detect the main thrust of the Reds. The calm autumn morning was ideal for flying, but a slight haze did not help reconnaissance. It was difficult for the airmen to gain any true picture that morning as cavalry patrols and Territorial cyclist units were probing the defences along several roads. In the afternoon it became evident that while the 1st Division were marching south west from Elvedon and the 2nd Division were moving southward, a third column of cavalry and cyclists were moving fast, and by evening were through Newmarket. A Blue aeroplane, forced down with engine trouble near the Newmarket-Barton Mills road, was captured.

That night King George V left Ballater in a special train that arrived at Cambridge at 8.09 Tuesday morning, a minute before scheduled. The King was taken by car to Blue Army HQ at Trinity College and left soon after for Abingdon where the royal party changed to chargers. The RFC were able to inform the party of the main troop concentrations along the Gog Magog Hills to Haverhill. From RFC reports, Major (later Sir Robert) Brooke-Popham, commanding No 3 Squadron RFC, had been able to give the Blue Army commander a sketch of the main Red thrusts, leading to the thwarting of their advance.

Next day with stiff resistance from Blue Army positions, the front had become more static. The King, expressing a wish to



visit the RFC in the field, was motored to Hardwick in a Maudslay car around 10 am where he was met by Major F.H. Sykes. Noticing Cody, the King moved towards him and congratulated him on winning the Military Aircraft Competition.

The King asked Cody if the wind was suitable for a demonstration, but soon after this Commander Samson landed back from a reconnaissance and the King went over to him to ask about the work of the naval section.

Soon after the King left Hardwick, Geoffrey de Havilland flew in on a BE2. The royal party, on RFC advice, had motored to Horseheath where the main Red thrust was being contested. For the third and last day the royal party, still following the terrain being most hotly contested, passed through Sawston to Whittlesford where a wireless

station kept in touch with the repaired airship Gamma. Later at Linton the King met a veteran of the Indian Mutiny.

CONCLUSIONS

That night, at the close of hostilities, after the King had left to return to Balmoral, a conference was held at Trinity College. The General Staff gave an appreciation to formation commanders, senior umpires and key personnel including senior RFC officers. General Sir Douglas Haig explained the operations of his Red Army and General Sir James Grierson summed up his Blue Army defence. Finally the chief umpire, Sir John French, gave his conclusions, mentioning in particular the work of the RFC in keeping formation commanders apprised of the movements of the opposing sides; but he was well aware in this respect that

they had been fortunate with the weather.

While this was going on Gamma flew around the area and after nightfall fired off a few Very lights evidently in a spirit of exuberance. Their base commander, Major C.J. Burke, was meanwhile preparing his report on the lessons learned during the exercise. He pointed out that no large body of troops could move in clear daylight without detection and that such primitive camouflage as had been attempted proved more of a give-away than concealment. Overall, the RFC had made their mark and on occasion had even been asked to fly to verify cavalry scouting reports. Not all were so impressed. Later General Grierson was reported as saying that aerial observation completely spoilt such exercises!

Precisely two years later the RFC was in the field in France.

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