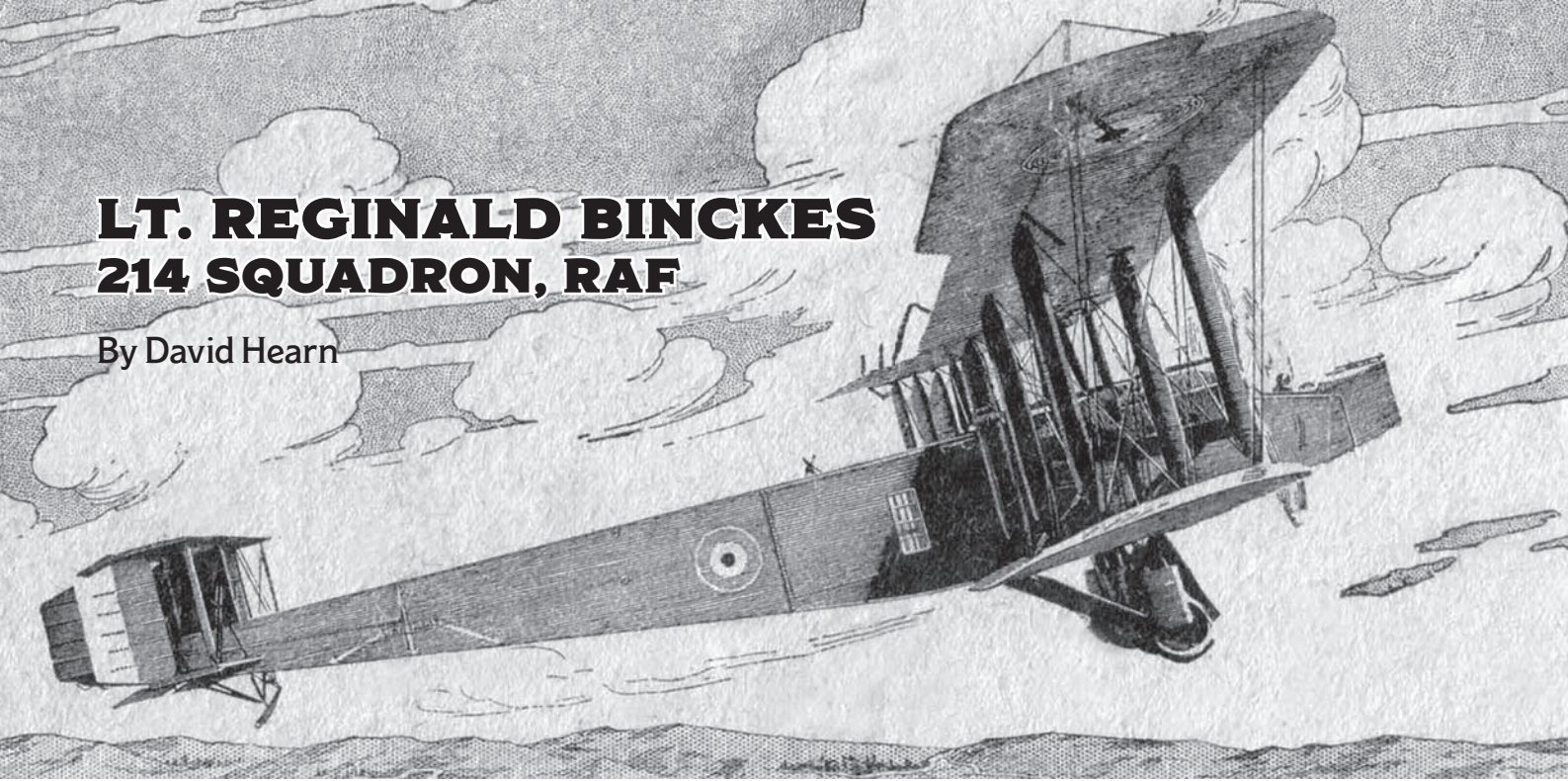


# LT. REGINALD BINCKES 214 SQUADRON, RAF

By David Hearn



*Am very, very sorry that poor old Binckes has gone under. He was a topping fellow. Most obliging and a really good chum. He was an old Owenian and would go out of his way to help anybody. A real loss to the service he was a really good pilot.* (Leslie Semple, 207 Squadron pilot, diary entry for 23 July 1918: IWM Documents Department. Private Papers of Lieutenant L.G. Semple RAF. Documents 4517)

Reginald Binckes, my grandmother's brother and my great uncle, was born on 19 December 1892. He was to die, like so many of the young men of his generation, in France in 1918. He was 25 years old when he died, after his Handley Page bomber crashed taking off from an airfield a few miles south-west of Calais. He was in France on active service for only five weeks before his death.

Reginald joined 214 Squadron RAF, based at Dunkerque in early June 1918, at a very crucial time. The Germans had once again reached the River Marne and were only 50 miles from Paris. 214 Squadron was a night bombing squadron that was fully committed to the battle. They were flying strategic raids on Bruges to destroy the submarine pens and destroyers based at the inland docks. The ports of Bruges, Ostend and Zeebrugge formed a triangle of targets regularly attacked by 214 Squadron and other night and day bomber units. The squadron was also attacking German airfields in Belgium from which Gothas and Zeppelin Staaken 'Giant's' took off to bomb London. Important railway junctions, stations and sidings were other strategic targets for the 214 Squadron night bombing crews.

On 17 July 1918, Reginald's plane crashed on take-off. Reginald was thrown 30 feet out of the wreckage and broke his spine. He lived for a further four days and died on 21 July 1918 at 4:45 in the afternoon. He was buried the next day at Les Baraques Military Cemetery, Sangatte just outside Calais.

In the five weeks that Reginald was a member of the squadron, he did his duty for both King and Country and his family can be proud

of this. He took part in bombing raids on heavily defended targets and survived being shot down by anti-aircraft fire and crashing between the lines in No Man's Land. The airfield at Dunkerque was regularly under attack from German bombers and long-range guns. Even when he was not flying missions, he was still in danger from enemy action.

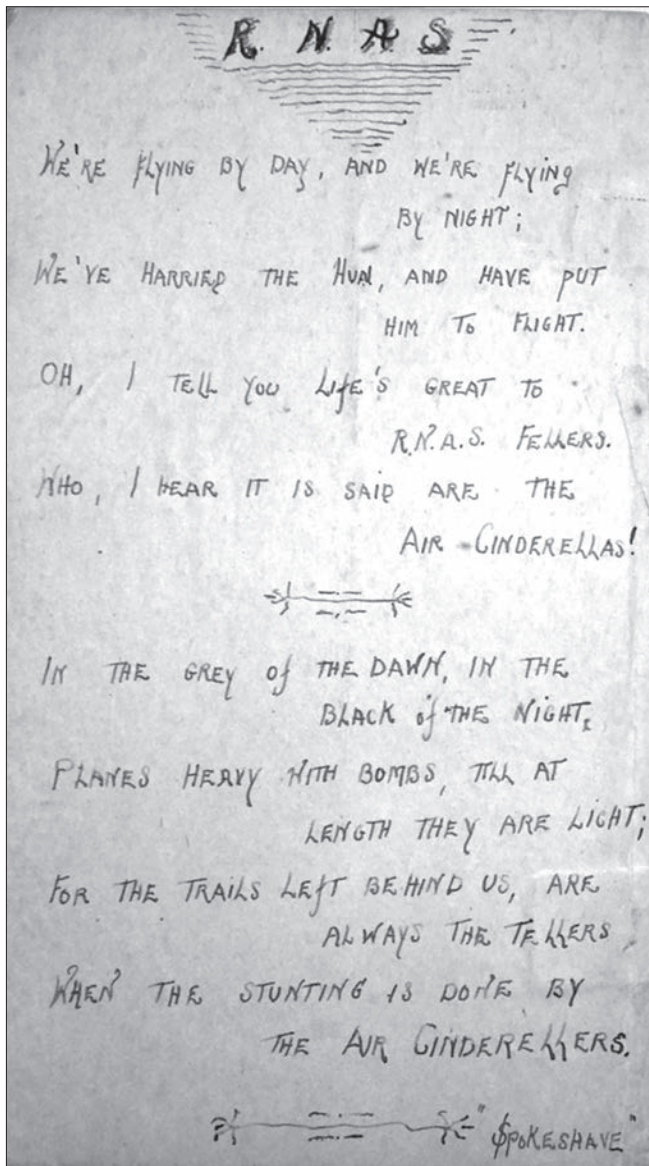
A chance finding of Reginald's Casualty Record card online at the RAF Museum was the discovery which led to me writing this account of Reginald's service history. I have written it as a tribute to a distant relative and gallant airman, who my grandmother loved dearly, and who was killed more than 100 years ago. I feel that it is timely that Reginald's service to his country should be properly recognised and recorded. Reginald Binckes was one of over 14,000 British pilots who lost their lives during training or on active service during the First World War.

It has been an enjoyable treasure hunt to find out about Reginald Binckes and his war time service. I have been pleasantly surprised with the amount of official records that still survive today. I must make special mention of Clive Semple's book *Diary of a Night Bomber Pilot in World War I* that was written from his father's, Leslie Semple's, war time diary. Leslie Semple and Reginald were great friends. I was able to use the book and then Leslie Semple's actual diary at the Imperial War Museum to piece together an account of Reginald's training in France and England.

I felt a genuine sense of awe and privilege when I was able to read Lt Ellison's log books in the Liddle Collection at the University of Leeds. It was such an honour and very humbling to be able to open these fragile documents and read what Lt Ellison had written over a hundred years ago. I remember the great thrill whenever I saw Reginald's name written in a log book or in a document. I knew that I was finding another piece of the jig saw. It was a delight to hear Tiny Wardop's hour long oral history in the Imperial War Museum Sound Archive and the matter of fact way that he described some truly amazing

*Reginald Binckes: 19 December 1892 – 21 July 1918*





The inside cover of the logbook of Corporal W.E. Wardrop No 214 Squadron RAF: IWM Documents 21806 Private Papers of W.E. Wardrop. Wardrop was an observer flying in Handley Page O/100s and O/400s for 14 Squadron RNAS and 214 Squadron Royal Air Force. Reginald flew with Wardrop and Lt Freer in HP D5401 on at least four occasions between 11 and 16 June 1918.

experiences. One of the most exciting moments came when I send off an email to Australia using an email address from 2003. It was sent far more in hope than expectation, but within an hour I had received a reply from Brian Tullis, the son of one of Reginald's crew mates, Ronald Tullis, on his fateful flight on the 17 July 1918. It is incredible to know that D R Tullis's personal photo album from WWI still survives today. I am indebted to Brian for generously sending me an electronic copy of the album and for letting me reproduce some of the images in this article.

The jigsaw is unfortunately still incomplete, as I have not found the 214 Squadron Bombing Reports and Raid Orders for the end of June and early July 1918. I have the bones from the 5th Group Daily Reports from The National Archive in Kew but there are still important pieces to flesh out. Given the incomplete records, I have had to make some educated guesses and deductions in a few places about what Reginald and 214 Squadron were likely to have been doing. Hopefully, over time, I might find out more about Reginald Binckes activities in the night skies over France and Belgium during the early summer of 1918. The search will continue in the archives of the RAF Museum and Fleet Air Arm Museum in Yeovilton.

My one regret has been to find out that the war time activities

of 214 Squadron during World War 1 appear to have been largely neglected. There are few references or publications about the squadron in the First World War. Compared to other squadrons, their exploits have gone relatively unrecorded. Even the squadron history in the National Archive is simply a few apparently random official documents and not a history at all, it is certainly nothing like those in the same file for the other ex RNAS squadrons.

So, in part this is written for the brave night bomber crews of 14 Squadron RNAS and 214 Squadron RAF, who I feel I have got to know during my research into Reginald's service, but whose exploits in World War 1 appear to have been largely overlooked. It is written for men like Corporal Wardrop who was threatened with a court martial for not bringing back the five Lewis guns from his bomber that crash landed in No Mans Land and then destroyed by German artillery. It is written for Captain Sieveking whose commander at Dunkerque was keen to transfer to him to the Handley Page bombers as he had 'completely wrecked three seaplanes' at Dover and whose 'enormous weight at 15 stones prevented him getting into a small single seater'! It is written for Corporal Neve who despite being badly wounded by machine gun fire from an enemy nightfighter, a phosphorous bullet went through his thigh, hung on determinedly to release his bombs over the target before fainting from loss of blood. It is a tribute to the Bloody Paralyser crews of Coudekerque and St Inglevert who flew to bomb Bruges and the dangers they faced from Green Balls, Flaming Onions, Albatros, Fokkers and Long Max.

Most importantly it is written for Reginald. Sadly there is no one left in the family from my father's generation, to pass on the stories that my grandmother would have told them about Reginald. The only physical objects that remain of Reginald are three family photographs and a brooch made out of an RNAS Officer's tunic button and a set of RNAS wings. When I started this research there were no details about Reginald's service on the WWI centenary websites of the British Legion and historical groups. Reginald Binckes was not then, one of the 'Every One Remembered'. Having written this account of his war time training and service, the details can now be posted on the internet as a permanent record. At least one more generation of the Binckes and Hearn family will have a record of their Great Great Uncle's ultimate sacrifice for King and Country.

After my Aunt Dorothy, Reginald's neice and my grandmother's daughter, died in 1995, her jewellery was sold, apart from some items that apparently had no monetary value. These items of mismatched earrings, necklaces and general junk that no one would want to buy have been in my cellar for over twenty years. The intention was to offer them to my cousins to have a rummage through before I took them to a charity shop. It was one of those jobs I had never got around to doing. A couple of months ago I felt drawn to have a look in the old box. I opened the box and started taking the items out and it was just as I remembered. However in the bottom of the box something caught my eye. It was a ruby and diamond ring that I did not remember seeing before. On close inspection I was to make out the hallmark and an inscription. It read 'Sis-May 1918' The ring must have been my grandmother's, given to her by her dear brother Reginald before he was posted to France at the end of May. I cannot explain what made me look in that old box again, why the ring had not been sold originally and why I do not recall it being there before. In the same way, I have felt that someone has been standing at my shoulder as I have written this book pleased that Reginald's story was being told. I know my grandmother would be very pleased that I have written this. Perhaps it is her or Reginald himself?

### The Binckes Family

Reginald Binckes was born just before Christmas in 1892.

His father was Walter Binckes and his mother, Charlotte Elizabeth Binckes, nee Burbidge (Burbidge?). Reginald was the oldest of four children for Walter and Charlotte. In 1895 my grandmother, Ida Florence Binckes, was born and would live a long life, dying in 1989. Three years later, in 1897, Reginald's second sister was born, Dorothy Kate Binckes, who unfortunately died the next year in 1898 only eleven months old. In 1906 when Reginald was thirteen another sister, also named Dorothy, Dorothy Grace Binckes was born.

Walter Binckes had already had seven children before he married Reginald's mother Charlotte Burbidge. His previous wife, Emily Sarah Burbidge, Charlotte's older sister, died in childbirth in 1890. Unfortunately, the baby appears to have died six short weeks after being born. After the death of his first wife Walter and Charlotte clearly found solace in each other and married sometime before Reginald's birth in December 1902. Reginald had four half brothers and sisters, the youngest, Elsie was four years older than him.

Reginald's father Walter was born in 1851 and his mother Charlotte was born in 1866, her sister Emily Sarah was born in either 1859 or 1851 according to different family sources. It is more likely to have been 1859. Emily Binckes died giving birth to her sixth child aged 31 or 39. Her sister, Reginald's mother Charlotte died in 1948 aged 82.

Reginald's half brothers and sisters from Walter's previous marriage were Emily Charlotte Binckes born in 1880, Walter Herbert Binckes born in July 1883, Ernest James Binckes born in 1885, Gertrude Binckes was born in 1886 but died at the age of 6 months, Elsie Binckes born in 1889 and the baby girl born in 1890 who lived only six weeks.

Large families and child deaths were the norm for late Victorian and Edwardian families. Walter Binckes senior had his fair share of tragedy. His fourth child died aged six

*Family photo of Reginald Binckes with his mother and father. This was probably taken during 1917 or 1918 when he was on leave. Given the 13-year age difference the girl in the photo is likely to be his sister Dorothy Grace Binckes.*



*The family pub, The Coach and Horses in Clerkenwell. The Binckes name above the front door.*

months; his wife died at the young age of 31 giving birth to his sixth child. That child only lived six weeks. After marrying his first wife's sister a third daughter, Dorothy Kate, died at eleven months in 1898.

Reginald's father, Walter Binckes senior, was a publican and a licensed victualler. The family were living at the Coach and Horses public house at 303 St John Street Clerkenwell, London EC1. The Coach and Horses was a large establishment, and the family must have owned it for quite some time. There is a photograph of the pub with Walter Binckes name as licensee carved in stone above the front door.

The 1901 Census reveals a number of family members and other staff living at the Coach and Horses at that time. Reginald would have been 9 years old by then. In 1901 his older half-brother, Walter H. Binckes, was 17 and working as a butcher. Between 1906-1911 Reginald went to Dame Alice Owen's Boys' School in Islington. The school was owned by the by the Worshipful Company of Brewers, one of the City of London livery companies. No doubt the Binckes family profession as publicans and licensed victuallers probably helped secure Reginald a place at the school. Reginald was to be one of 170 Dame Alice Owen old boys who would die in World War 1.

Reginald was to meet up with other Dame Alice Owen alumni when he joined the Royal Naval Air Service. Leslie Semple and C.T. Jones. Semple was six years younger than Reginald but joined the RNAS a few weeks later. They were to become great friends. They were to be posted to the same training establishments throughout their pilot training in 1917 and 1918.

The 1911 Census has 27-year-old Walter's profession as a Licensed Victualler. His brother Ernest James Binckes was 26 and also in the family business and listed in the 1911 Census as also being a licensed victualler. By 1918 Ernest is described in his father's probate papers as being a 'gentleman'.

Reginald Binckes left Dame Alice Owens school in 1911 and joined the Civil Service on 16 July 1912. It is not known what



A family photograph taken May/June 1918.

Reginald did for the year between leaving school and joining the Civil Service at the age of 19, but it is likely that he would have helped out in the family business. Reginald would work for the department of Customs and Excise for the next five years. In 1913 Reginald's eldest brother Walter, emigrated to Australia and started a new life there. He settled in Freemantle Western Australia, married Florence Alice Cutler and had three children. Walter Binckes died in 1958.

Reginald left his job with the Customs and Excise on the 23 July 1917. It may be that he was now conscripted or that he felt the need to volunteer if he was in a job needed for the war effort. Six days later, on the 29 July 1917, Reginald enlisted with the Royal Naval Air Service.

#### Training to be a Pilot in the RNAS

On joining up Reginald was passed fit for General Service by the Navy and given the rank of Temporary Probationary Flying Officer and was posted to Crystal Palace in South London for his basic training. It is not clear what made him leave his job at the Customs and Excise and join the RNAS. 1917 was the Gotha Summer over London when German bombers raided the capital in broad day light almost at will. The first raid on London was on 13 June 1917 when 14 Gotha bombers flew unopposed over London bombing at will and causing 162 deaths and 432 injuries. Among the dead were 18 children, killed by a bomb falling on their school in Poplar. This was the deadliest air raid of the war. No Gothas were lost to fighter or anti-aircraft fire.

A further Gotha raid of 22 aircraft was made on 7 July, resulting in 57 deaths and 193 injuries on the ground. London appeared defenceless. One hundred sorties were flown against the formation, resulting in one Gotha shot down, three damaged and two fighters shot down.

On 28 July 1917 14 (Naval) Squadron, the unit that Reginald would eventually be posted to in France 10 months later, was formed at Coudekerque near Dunkirk as No 7A Squadron RNAS. On 29 July 1917 Reginald was posted to Crystal Palace in South London. This is where the RNAS basic training was carried out. Reginald was there for approximately 5 weeks. Crystal Palace was called HMS *President* and it was Reginald's introduction to his life as a naval officer. Leslie Semple's diary entry for 14 August 1917 described the daily routine at Crystal Palace.

06:00	Reveille. Shower, cup of tea and biscuit.
06:40	Physical Training
07:40	Breakfast
08:40	Squad drills and lectures
12:00	Lunch

13:20-18:00	Squad drills or lectures
18:00	Free
19:25-21:00	Dinner or Supper
21:00	Free
23:00	Bed
23:15	Lights Out

On 4 September 1917, Reginald was posted to Vendome in France for pilot training. Vendome was in the centre of France 100 miles from Paris. The RNAS had a flying school there because the wet winter weather in the UK meant that few pilots were completing their training on time. Reginald was to be at Vendome for seven weeks or so from 4 September 1917 to 30 October 1917.

The basic trainer aircraft at Vendome was the French designed Caudron G3, a pusher biplane. The RNAS purchased 140 of these aircraft during the war. By 20 October 1917, Reginald had gone solo. His service record noted him as having 10 hours on Caudrons. It is likely that this is solo flying time at Vendome.

We know a great deal about Reginald at this time because he came across two other Dame Alice Owen pupils during training at Vendome. The two were C.E.T Jones and Leslie Semple. Both Jones and Semple were about six years younger than Reginald and would still have been at the school when Reginald left in 1911. It is not known if they knew each other at school or from moving in the same social circles in North London. Whatever the circumstances, they all joined the RNAS and met up at Vendome. Reginald and Leslie were posted to Cranwell and Stonehenge within weeks of each other. Reginald was probably 2-3 weeks ahead of Leslie in the training. Reginald joined the RNAS on 29 July 1917 and Leslie Semple joined up on 11 August 1917.

Leslie Semple died in 1971 and, after his death, his wartime diary and a several photo albums were found by his son Clive, who used these to write a book about his father's exploits called 'Diary of a Night Bomber Pilot in World War I'. Reginald Binckes became a very close friend of Leslie Semple and Reginald is mentioned a number of times in the diary.

Chapter 11 of 'Diary of a Night Bomber Pilot in World War I' is titled *Poor Old Binckes Has Gone Under* and contains a moving tribute to Reginald that Leslie Semple wrote in his diary in July 1918. I only wish that my grandmother had been aware of this before she died. Many of the dates and events in Reginald's RNAS and RAF service career between October 1917 and May 1918 are taken from Leslie Semple's war time diary. The diary is in the Imperial War Museum document archive.

Leslie Semple arrived at Vendome on 16 September 1917 and went solo nine days later. Reginald may have taken longer depending on his ability, trainee pilot numbers, the weather and the availability and serviceability of the aircraft. The fatality rate for trainee pilots in World War I was high and this also played a part in the numbers of aircraft available. It would be safe to assume that Reginald probably went solo within two or three weeks at Vendome, around the 20 September or so. There does not appear to be any documentary evidence available that indicates the date of his first solo flight.

We do know that by the 20 October 1917 Reginald was going on solo cross-country flights and getting lost in the process or coming down with engine trouble. Leslie Semple mentions Reginald in his diary for the first time on this date. Semple was undertaking a cross-country flight that afternoon on a triangular route from Vendome to Chateau Renault to Blois and then back to Vendome: *Told to look out for Binckes whilst on the way as he was lost in the morning. Reached Blois at 2:40 and return to Vendome by 3:10. Do not see Binckes and do not land but keep up until 5:15pm.*

After mastering the Caudron G3 at Vendome, Reginald probably progressed onto the American designed Curtiss



Caudron G.IIIs outside A Flt shed at Vendome.

:CCI Archive

JN3. This appears to have been the procedure at Vendome. Reginald's service record shows him with 5 hours on the Curtiss. It was a tractor aircraft, more advanced and powerful than the Caudron pusher design.

After mastering the basics of flying and going solo at Vendome, Reginald was posted back to England on 30 October 1917. He was posted to RNAS Cranwell in Lincolnshire. Reginald would be at Cranwell until the beginning of March 1918.

On 9 December 1917 the squadron that Reginald would fly with in France the following year was formed. 14 Squadron RNAS was based at Coudekerque aerodrome outside Dunkirk. It was a heavy night bombing squadron attached to 5th Wing RNAS and equipped with Handley Page O/100 bombers. It was involved in carrying out bombing attacks against strategic targets in Belgium and Northern France.

While he was at Cranwell, Reginald gained experience flying different machines. It is likely that he accumulated flying hours on at least three other types. Reginald logged 3 hours on Avro 504s. He also logged 15 hours on Royal Aircraft Factory BE2cs and BE2es.

Reginald then logged 5 hours on De Havilland DH4s. This was probably at Cranwell, but it may have been afterwards when he was at Stonehenge.

Once he progressed onto the DH4s, Reginald would have realised that his training would come to an end and he would be going on active service in the next few months. During his time at Cranwell Reginald met up again with his friend Leslie Semple. The RNAS shot a propaganda film at Cranwell which was shown in cinemas across Britain called 'Our Naval Air Power'. Reginald may have appeared in this. Leslie Semple did.

On 19 January 1918. Reginald and Leslie Semple appear to have other things apart from flying on their mind. *Go into Sleaford with Binckes and meet Ethel and Joyce. Have dinner with them at the Carr Arms.* (Leslie Semple's war time diary)

On the 24 January 1918 Reginald was promoted to Flight Sub Lieutenant (Temporary) according to the April 1918 Quarterly Naval List of Active Officers.

On 1 February there was another trip into the bright lights of Sleaford for Binckes and Semple: *Go to Sleaford with Binckes, have tea at the Carre Arms.* The same again on 6 February: *Go to Sleaford with Binckes, find a nice girl.*

A few weeks later he was no longer a Temporary Flight Sub Lieutenant. On 15 February 1918 Reginald was officially promoted to Flight Sub Lieutenant. I am not sure if this promotion means that he has officially gained his 'wings' or not.

Now that Reginald could fly several types of aircraft to the navy's satisfaction, the next step in his training appears to

be practicing with real weapons. Reginald was posted to the air station at Freiston. Freiston is in Lincolnshire near the Wash, just outside Boston. Freiston Gunnery School RNAS was where the trainee pilots got to use live ammunition, firing machine guns and dropping bombs.

On 25 February 1918 Reginald met up again with Leslie Semple whose diary records: *Arrive Freiston 12:45. Fly in evening as passenger to Flt. Sub Lt. Binckes and fire Verey's lights over Batchelor's Moor.*

Two days later, Reginald and Leslie flew together again on a couple of flights that morning: *Go up again with Binckes as passenger. He also takes me up again to drop bombs. Flying all morning. Nothing doing in the afternoon and still have 150 rounds to fire in the air. Shall do this tomorrow and leave for Manston on Friday.*

Also at Freiston around this time was Leslie Alexander Dell, who was there by 15 February. Their paths may have crossed and, if they did, they were to meet up again in June when Reginald was posted to the same squadron as Leslie Dell.

Reginald's service record card shows his live firing proficiency at Freiston Gunnery School RNAS: *Firing in Air V.G. (very good?). Bombing. 1st Class.*

After completing this course at Freiston Reginald was posted south to Salisbury Plain. On 1 March 1918, he joined 1 School of Aerial Navigation and Bomb Dropping based at Stonehenge. He would be there for three months, but a lot of his time would be spent hanging around due to poor weather and poor organisation. He would spend a lot of time on leave.

At Stonehenge Reginald learned to fly large Handley Page twin-engine bombers, the 'Bloody Paralysers' that he would fly on active service. The Handley Page O/100s and O/400s were very advanced designs with large internal bomb loads.

Curtiss JN4s at Vendome.

:CCI Archive





Avro 504 N5810, typical of such machines used at the RNAS Central Training Establishment, Cranwell.

:FAAM JMB/SL 00867

By the end of the war the Handley Page V/1500 would be entering service, nicknamed the 'Berlin Bomber' because by 1918, only 15 years after the Wright brothers first flew, aircraft designers had built a plane to carry a bomb load from England to Germany and back.

On 4 March 1918 Reginald was taking the opportunity to have a long weekend in London. By this time, Leslie Semple has also been posted to Stonehenge. Reginald took the Monday evening train from Waterloo down to Wiltshire and Salisbury Plain meeting Leslie Semple at Waterloo station. Leslie Semple's diary reads: *Take mother out to lunch and then meet Binckes on 5:50 train from Waterloo to Amesbury. Arrive 9pm. Ring for a tender to camp, shown to our hut-awful place. Wash in dirty canvas basins and sleep on camp beds. Two mile walk to the aerodrome. Have some supper and go to bed.*

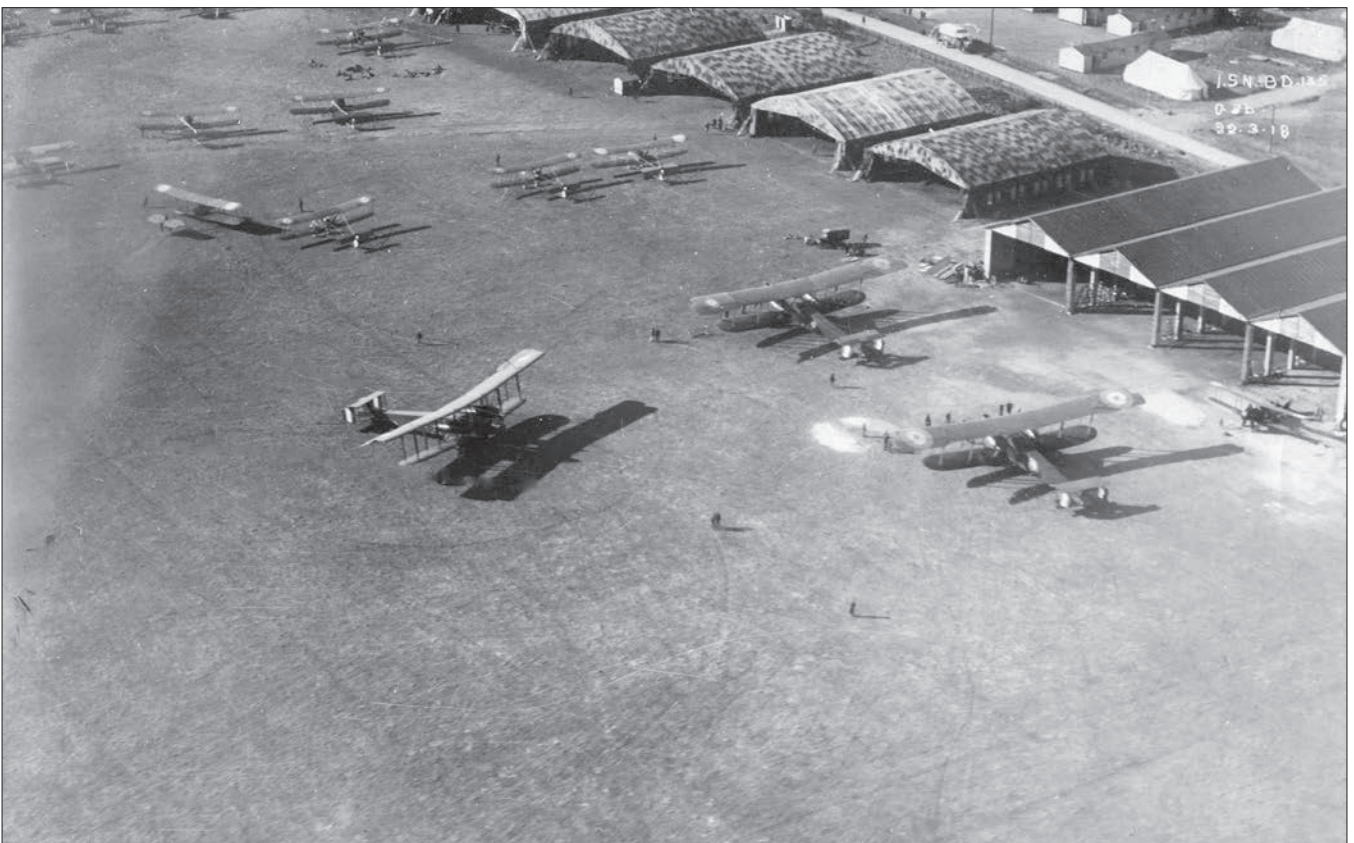
The following day, they reported to the Commanding

Officer at Stonehenge. The aerodrome was training pilots for the Handley Page and other bomber squadrons operating in France. Leslie Semple's diary suggests that, upon arrival, they were sent away on leave again until the 12 March 1918. Such is the way in the armed forces. *March 5th Report to CO Instruction. Fill in necessary forms and then told to go on leave until the 12th because they don't know what to do with us. The RNAS and the RFC are all mixed up here. Messing is 2/6 per day and anything worth eating is extra. Binckes and I go into Salisbury and meet Doris (Leslie Semple's sister). Have tea and go to pictures.* (Diary of a Night Bomber Pilot in World War I, p.124)

On the 8 March 1918 while on leave the London Gazette announced his promotion from Temporary Probationary Flying Officer to Temporary Flt Sub Lieutenant. Reginald had this seniority apparently backdated with effect from

Stonehenge aerodrome: the NW site originally used by the RNAS, with HPs, FE2bs and a MF Se.11 nearest the camera.

:CCI Archive





A Handley Page O/100 at Stonehenge. Four were operated there by 2 TDS and, later, 1 SNBD: 1456, 1458, 1465 and 3118.

:CCI Archive

22 January 1918. It appears that the dates in the Navy List mentioned above, and the London Gazette do not agree. His good friend Leslie Semple was also promoted and appears under Reginald's name in the London Gazette.

On 8 March, Reginald met up with Leslie Semple in London: *Meet Binckes at 4pm and go to the Cave Tea Rooms – just off the Strand by Charing X hospital. Then book seats for Palladium – third house- 9pm- front row stalls - good seats.*

On 11 March, Reginald was finishing his leave and returning to Stonehenge and met up with Leslie Semple in London before travelling back together: *Today I report back to Stonehenge.....then leave mother as I have to meet Binckes outside the Gaiety Theatre....Well I met Binckes and we strolled down the Strand meeting Harold Gliksten on the way... Went to the Cave Tea Rooms with Binckes and then caught the 5:50 train to Salisbury. Dinner on the train was quite good 3/6 per head. Had to wait two hours for Squadron tender and when we reached camp and found our hut empty. Everyone away on a Squadron holiday.*

By 15 March they had both settled into the routine of another training aerodrome: *Routine here much the same as everywhere else, lectures or flying. Dress for dinner at Larkhill. Today Stronach and some other fellows came down here for the Handley Page course so now I shall have some nice chums-Binckes as well. Go for a walk around the neighbouring country. Take some photos of Stonehenge.*

On 17 March Leslie Semple's diary mentions him going solo on a Maurice Farman Shorthorn. Reginald also did the same and his service record credits him with 1 hour's flying time on this type of aircraft.

It appears that at Stonehenge pilots practiced on three types of aircraft. The MF Shorthorn, then the FE2b/d, another pusher type used as a night bomber at the time, and then the Handley Page O/100s. It is likely that pilots did a few hours on the Shorthorn pusher before converting to the more powerful FE2b planes that they were expected to fly during the day and at night.

Life at Stonehenge did not appear to have been too onerous. There seems to have been lots of hanging around waiting for their turn to fly. On 18 March, Leslie Semple wrote that *Doris and George Vidler came up to see me today. George came home last week having been nine months at the front. I did not fly today. Binckes took some photographs of me.*

On 20 March 20 Reginald and Leslie Semple had very little to occupy themselves and were able to relax in some unseasonably sunny and warm weather. *This afternoon I did nothing but sit basking in the sun and chatting with Binckes,*

*Jones and others. (Diary of a Night Bomber Pilot in World War I, p.131)*

On the same page as this diary entry, there are two photos of Reginald Binckes relaxing with Leslie Semple, Jones and some other trainee pilots who are from the Royal Flying Corps and also learning to fly the heavy bombers. In contrast to the relaxed atmosphere at Stonehenge aerodrome, a storm was about to hit the British armies on the Western Front the very next day.

21 March saw the start of Operation Michael, Germany's attempt to break the stalemate on the Western Front before fresh American troops would arrive in France in their hundreds of thousands later that spring and summer. The Russian surrender and signing of the Treaty of Brest Litovsk had freed 1 million German troops from the Eastern Front. Germany's pre-war nightmare of having to fight on two fronts at the same time was over.

To get ready for the Big Push of 1918, American trainee pilots and other aircrew were attached to the RFC and RNAS for training and a number of these were based at Stonehenge. They would learn to fly the HP O/100s and HP O/400s and then be transferred to front line British Squadrons to gain experience. One of these men, Ensign Stocker of the USNAC (United States Naval Air Corps), was at Stonehenge at the same time as Reginald and Leslie Semple and would be part of Reginald's bomber crew with 214 Sqn in July 1918.

However, despite the setbacks in France, it appears that the news of the German offensive was kept by a combination of distance and censorship from the people of Britain. It appears that life at Stonehenge continued much as usual for Reginald Binckes and the rest of the trainee heavy bomber pilots. Reginald went for of a joy ride in the rear cockpit of a Handley Page: *Owing to the bumpiness of the weather there was little flying this morning, but in the afternoon Binckes and I went for a flight in the back of an HP. We were in the air for one and a half hours and it was most enjoyable. (Diary of a Night Bomber Pilot in World War I p.132)*

On the 25 March, Reginald and a group of friends sought some rest and relaxation in the flesh pots of Amesbury: *Binckes, Jones, Stronach and myself walked into Amesbury today. Had tea at the Queensberry Hotel – which I shall not visit again –and then walked to Bulford Camp to see The Better 'Ole at the Garrison Theatre.*

The slow pace of training continued and now poor weather at the end of the month slowed things further. *31 March 1918: The last few days have all been the same. Nothing to do but sit around reading and chatting. The weather has changed. It*

is now pouring with rain. (Diary of a Night Bomber Pilot in World War I, p.136)

There appears to have been some attempt by the powers that be to introduce more rigour into this stage of the training programme. It appears that Reginald had moved onto practicing day and night bombing in FE2bs or FE2ds and Handley Pages. 31 March 1918: *Today a new course has been started in squads which are moving up every 8 days*

1st 8 days E Flight for FE day bombing

2nd 8 days G Flight for HP day bombing

3rd 8 days F Flight for FE night bombing

4th 8 days H Flight for HP night bombing

After this go into the 'pool' for disposal. (Diary of a Night Bomber Pilot in World War I, p.136)

The 'pool' was the pool of trained heavy bomber pilots and crew who were waiting to be sent to France. The length of time a pilot spent in the pool before being sent to an active service Squadron would depend on the flow of trained crew and the war in France and Belgium and the casualty rates in front line squadrons



FE2b A5589 of 1 SNBD at Stonehenge. The unit marking of a bomb shape was carried under the lower mainplane. :CCI Archive

However, the new system had its flaws which Leslie Semple pointed out in his diary at the time: 31 March 1918, *The disadvantage of this is that should the first 8 days be 'dud' (interrupted by bad weather or lack of serviceable machines), no FE work will be done and the squad will move on later and have to fly FEs at night never having flown them during the day.*

Interestingly though, there is no mention in his service record of Reginald completing any time on the massive FE2 pushers. Either he did, but it was not recorded, or the structure of the course changed to introduce the FE requirements after Reginald had passed through that stage of training. The FEs, like the BE2c, had been outclassed and made obsolete by the Albatros DIII during 'Bloody April' in 1917. However, it continued to provide valuable service right up to the end of the war as a night bomber.

1 April 1918. Easter Monday. The new 8-day rotation described above appears to have come into effect. Those who were further advanced in the training, including Reginald, were sent on leave to allow the others to catch up whilst they were away. Leslie Semple recorded: *As the new course comes into operation today, there are a few fellows who are left out for a time and they are sent on leave i.e. Binckes, Jones and the others. I start the new course. This afternoon I make a few landings in an FE2b.* It looks like Reginald had two weeks leave because he is next mentioned on 15 April 1918.

It appears that Reginald was teamed up with his own observer at Stonehenge. This was an officer called Wiltshire who was to be posted to a different squadron to Reginald when they went on active service. Wiltshire would be posted to 207 Squadron as Armament Officer.

On 1 April 1918 the Royal Flying Corps and the Royal Naval Air Service were amalgamated into the Royal Air Force. For the men in the front-line squadrons, army or navy, little changed. All the naval squadrons were renumbered with 200 added to their numbers, so 14 Sqn RNAS became 214 Squadron RAF. Reginald was promoted to Lieutenant on 1 April 1918, as RNAS and RFC ranks were standardised.

Reginald's service record has an entry for 13 April 1918 *I Sch N and B* (1 School of Navigation and Bombing). That evening Reginald returned to Stonehenge after his leave.

Between 8 and 15 April 1918, the 8-day rotation system, started barely a week before, had already been disrupted. Two weeks into the programme Leslie Semple was complaining about a lack of flying due to bad weather. 15 April 1918: *Bad weather. Damned nuisance as I haven't flown for a week.... Binckes and Jones have returned from leave. Binckes and I go to a Variety show at Larkhill but it was rotten - bad artists.* Two days later, Semple was complaining that he had not flown for a fortnight.

At this time, it seems that the RAF decided to move some of the trainee Handley Page crews back to Cranwell. It appears that Reginald stayed at Stonehenge, but Leslie Semple went to Cranwell. 19 April, Semple wrote in his diary about being at Cranwell: *But very much wish that Binckes was up here with me.*

20 April 1918, the first HP O/400, C3487, arrived at 214 Sqn in France. An official photographer went to Coudekerke to record the event. For some reason the only surviving photos are of the older O/100s that were being replaced. C3487 was from an order for 12 such bombers, C3487-C3498, built by the Royal Aircraft Factory at Farnborough. The plane was lost less than a month later, on the night of 18/19 May during a raid to Zeebrugge. Capt V.E. Sieveking and Lt H.A. Havilland-Roe were both killed, and Air Gunner F. Spencer was wounded and became a Prisoner of War.

On the night of 22/23 April, Handley Page bombers from 214 Squadron played a part in the famous Zeebrugge raid when the Royal Navy attempted to block the end of the Zeebrugge to Bruges canal to prevent German submarines and destroyers based at the inland docks of Bruges getting access to the English Channel and the North Sea.

The German Navy's Flanders Flotilla based in Bruges inland harbour was a thorn in the Allied side: *The effectiveness of the Flanders Flotilla was terrible: it is estimated that submarines based at Bruges were responsible for the destruction of 2,554 Allied vessels, amounting to 4,400,000 tons. This was one third of the number of Allied ships sunk during the war.* (Paul Kendal, *The Zeebrugge Raid 1918. 'The Finest Feat of Arms'*).

The plan was to blow up the lock gates and sink ships filled with concrete in the deep-water channels. Submarines packed with explosives would blow up the bridge onto the Zeebrugge Mole and a diversionary attack by HMS *Vindictive* and two Mersey ferries, *Iris* and *Daffodil*, filled with over 200 Royal Marines would take out the German gun batteries on the Mole. The attacking forces suffered 227 dead and 326 wounded. The action at Zeebrugge lasted just over an hour and eight Victoria Crosses were awarded. It was a limited success. The canal was partially blocked for about three weeks and then only passable at high tide. However, it is likely that the sinking of block ships bottled up some larger vessels in Bruges and for a time the Germans only used the canals at night. It may not have stopped the Flanders Flotilla, but it did have an impact on their operations with sinkings by U-boats in the English Channel and North Sea greatly reduced.

Bombers from 214 Squadron had a diversionary role that night, flying above the port town, so that their engine noise would distract the defenders' attention and the searchlights. Both Paul Brewsher and W.E. Wardrop from 214 Squadron described their roles in this action.



After their diversionary tactics on the Zeebrugge Raid, 214 Squadron reverted back to their normal bombing missions against the docks in Bruges, with Ostend and Zeebrugge harbours and lock gates being less frequently visited targets. The German defences were strong in terms of anti-aircraft fire and growing numbers of fighters were being encountered. The squadron lost planes to these defences. On the night of 15/16 May, HP O/100 3132 was shot down near Bruges, with all three crew killed; Captain Rushton, Major Harrison and Lieutenant King. The aircraft had had a very long service career starting with 7 Squadron RNAS at Coudekerque on 5 July 1917. The crew were buried at the Larch Wood Cemetery.

By the end of the third week in May 1918 all three HP O/400s sent from Stonehenge to Cranwell had crashed and were no longer available for flying, so Leslie Semple returned to Stonehenge. Semple travelled back to Stonehenge on 23 May. Upon arrival, he received two pieces of bad news. The first was that he would have to start the whole 32- day, 4x8 day, conversion course of day flying and bombing in FE2s to night flying and bombing on Handley Pages again as he had missed so much due to the bad weather in the last 6 weeks. The second piece of news was that Reginald had finished the course: *May 23, 1918: .... Unfortunately, we are here to do the whole course of 32 days again. Finish on the June 26th. Absolute red tape. Binckes and others have finished and gone on leave.*

Reginald's leave finished on 25 May and he returned to Stonehenge to await further orders. He was now in the 'pool' and waiting to be posted on active service: *Too bumpy for flying. Jones and Binckes return from leave. They have to stand by to await further instructions. We all three went to a Variety show at Larkhill and had supper afterwards. Very pleasant evening.*

No sooner had he arrived back at Stonehenge than Reginald was told the next day, Sunday 26 May 1918, that he was to report to the Hotel Cecil in the Strand, the RAF's administrative offices, to find out where he would be posted. *26 May 1918: Trinity Sunday. I went to Service this morning- rather a good sermon. Binckes and Jones are reporting to the Cecil tomorrow for overseas draft. Lucky dogs, Say "Au Revoir" to them.*

On Monday 27 May 1918 Reginald reported to the Hotel Cecil and found out that he was being posted to 214 Squadron at Coudekerque, just outside Dunkirk. The date of this posting on his Service Record was 29 May 1918. Reginald arrived at 214 Squadron sometime between 8 and 11 June. Records show that he was flying on the night of the 12/13 June 1918. It looks like he was given some leave at the start of June before travelling to France.

Reginald had been in training for the best part of a year and according to his Service Record available online from the National Archive in Kew, he completed at least 39 hours of flying training before going on active service:

- 10 hours on Caudron G3s at Vendome.
- 5 hours on Curtiss machines at Vendome.
- 3 hours on an Avro 504s, probably at Cranwell.
- 15 hours on BE2cs and BE2es, probably at Cranwell
- 5 hours on DH4s, probably at Cranwell but possibly Stonehenge as the DH4 was issued to RFC and RNAS bombing squadrons at the time.
- 1 hour on MF (Maurice Farman). This would be the Maurice Farman Shorthorn at Stonehenge.

These may be solo hours only. A very interesting omission from this list of aircraft is that there is no mention of the Handley Page bombers and probably the FE2b/ds that Reginald had been flying at Stonehenge for the last three months and that he would be posted to France to fly. His flying at Stonehenge would probably have included both day and night flying and bombing practice on both these types. He would definitely have flown the Handley Page O/100s and O/400s down on Salisbury Plain. However, nothing of his

flying experience on Handley Pages is recorded on his service record.

### 214 Squadron RAF and its HP night bombers

Reginald was to fly Handley Page O/100 and O/400 heavy bombers on active service. The squadron was in the process of re equipping with the newer O/400s, with their more powerful Rolls Royce Eagle engines, when Reginald arrived in France.

Flying the large bombers with their idiosyncratic handling tendencies was a challenge for many pilots as Cecil Lewis described in his 1964 book 'Farewell to Wings' published by Temple Press. Cecil Lewis was a fighter pilot during World War I with 56 Squadron Royal Flying Corps. He flew a large number of different planes in WWI and the book describes his experiences flying 24 different aircraft.



*Hotel Cecil to where Binckes reported for posting on 27 May 1918.*

This is how Cecil Lewis described the experience of flying the big Handley Page bombe: *Climbing up into the machine was like setting off for an ascent of the Matterhorn, but, once up, there was a fine view and you could walk about the thing! Whoever heard of an aeroplane as big as that! And with two engines you could actually steer by opening up one more than the other! True it was like a lorry in the air. When you decided to turn left, you pushed over the controls, went and had a cup of tea and came back to find the turn just starting; but it had a nice comfortable, big car feeling, leisurely and relaxed. If you had to drop bombs about the place, well, this was the gentlemanly way of doing it.*

214 Squadron at Coudekerque was commanded by Major H.G. Brackley. Reginald joined the unit at a very crucial time. The war was not going well for Britain and her allies. The Germans had been attacking constantly for the last two months since their Michael Offensive started. The allies had been pushed back and by the time Reginald arrived in France the Germans had once again reached the River Marne.

On the night of 29/30 May 1918, six 214 Sqn Handley Page bombers went on a raid to Bruges docks. The aircraft despatched; 3125, 3128, 3135. C3488, C3492 and D5402. The Handley Page night bomber squadrons were normally organised into two flights of five aircraft each. Each bomber squadron would have ten aircraft available for missions.

There was a further raid by 214 Squadron on Bruges docks and the La Brugeoise Works in Bruges during the night of the 30/31 May. The Brugeoise works was a steel works, munitions factory and train assembly complex in the south of Bruges with lots of railway lines close by. This time eight bombers attacked the targets; 3125, 3128, 3135, C3488, C3489, C3492, C9644 and D5402.



Coudekerque aerodrome, home to 214 Squadron in June 1918.

:CCI Archive

Allied intelligence reports suggest that these two raids on Bruges on consecutive nights had been most effective: 11 tons of bombs were dropped by 214 Squadron over the two nights

There was a direct hit on a munition's depot

200 soldiers and some civilians were killed

Eight sections of the munition's depot were destroyed

The resultant fires and explosions lasted for three hours

Two large torpedo boats in Bruges docks were reported as *practically blown to pieces*.

This apparent success for 214 Squadron on these two missions was in stark contrast to the normal ineffective bombing that was revealed at the end of the war. 214 Squadron had been attacking Bruges for many months and would continue to do so until the end of the war. The ports of Ostende, Zeebrugge and Bruges were important targets because they posed a constant threat to the supply lines from England to France. The Germans had a number of destroyers, motor torpedo boats and U boats based in these ports at the southern end of the North Sea and close to the narrowest parts of the English Channel.

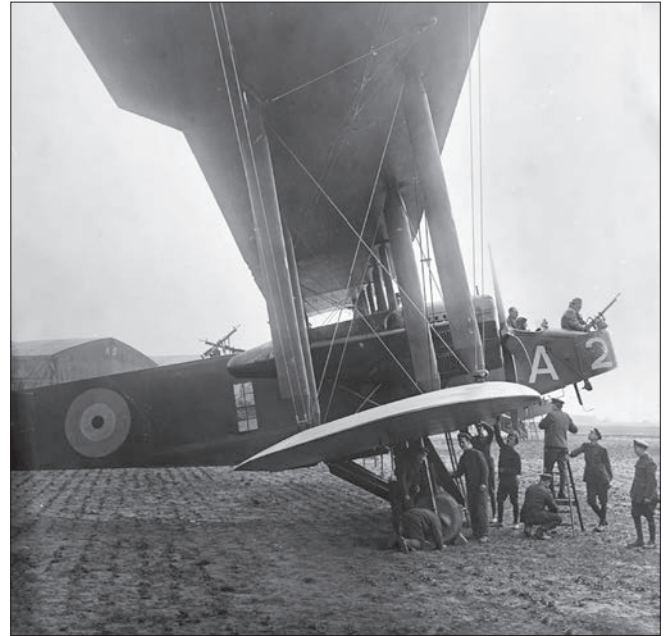
The coastal ports of Zeebrugge and Ostende were vulnerable to fire from Royal Navy ships and monitors. There were canals running inland from Ostende and Zeebrugge to the inland port of Bruges. By moving their ships and submarines along the canal to Bruges the Germans prevented them from being attacked by the Royal Navy whose heavy guns did not reach this far inland.

Bruges offered a safe berth and the Germans developed the town to be an 'Imperial Dockyard' with a planned capacity to accommodate 30 destroyers and 35 submarines. The Royal Navy wanted to prevent the use of Bruges as a safe haven for these ships and submarines and tried a variety of means to deny them access; bombarding the lock gates at Zeebrugge from the sea, trying to block the canal with old ships filled with concrete and trying to capture the town with seaborne landings.

The German investment in the infrastructure of the port of Bruges was massive. They built a total of 11 massive concrete submarine pens of different sizes called the 'Eight Blessings' by the local population. Construction of it started in 1917 and it was big enough to house 8 of the large UBIII class submarines. The concrete pens were designed to protect the submarines at Bruges from the attentions of 214 Squadron and other bombing squadrons.

During May 1918, 214 Squadron had been trying to develop silent gliding attacks at low level, dropping three large 550lb bombs in quick succession, hoping to damage the gates by concussion from the exploding bombs. Captain Darley was the brains behind this new method of attack.

-On 1 June 1918, 214 Squadron was visited by an official photographer and a number of images were taken of the



A 214 Squadron HP O/100 at Coudekerque, with Nestler hangars in the background.

:CCI Archive

Below: The submarine pens at Bruges.



aircraft undergoing maintenance and fuelling up. These photographs are in the archive at the Imperial War Museum in London. They give a good impression of the size of the Handley Page bombers and the ground crew teams needed to maintain them. The improvised arrangements of assorted ladders and planks looks quite amateurish, but the skill and the professionalism of the ground crew is shown by the additional access panels that they had already made as field modifications they had made since 20 May, when the first HP O/400s were delivered.

On the night of 1/2 June, there was heavy mist which prevented the squadron from flying: *No night bombing due to mist*, however Coudekerque Aerodrome was attacked by a German aircraft which dropped bombs and machine gunned the officers' quarters. There were no casualties and little damage was caused.

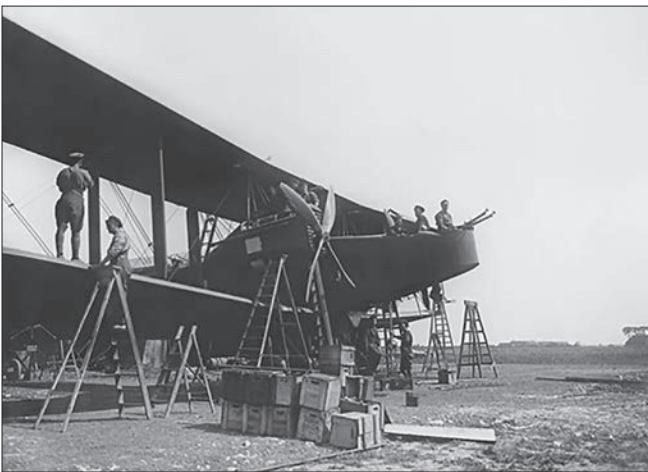
On 4/5 June, 214 Squadron attacked three different targets. Six planes were tasked with a raid on Bruges and Zeebrugge. However, visibility was poor and only three of the six planes reached their objectives. A further three planes targeted Thourout railway junction, two managed to bomb and one returned with their bombs not dropped.

Just as the raid was starting their aerodrome was attacked by German bombers. Two single-engine planes drop eleven 11-kg bombs on the airfield. 6 men were killed including two Air Mechanics from 214 Squadron. Air Mechanic First Class, Percy Harold Fuller and Air Mechanic Second Class William Keepax were the squadron personnel killed, both were buried in Dunkirk Town Cemetery. These German attacks were to continue and intensify over the next few days.



Above and below: Some of the images taken by the official photographer at Coudekerque on 1 June 1918.

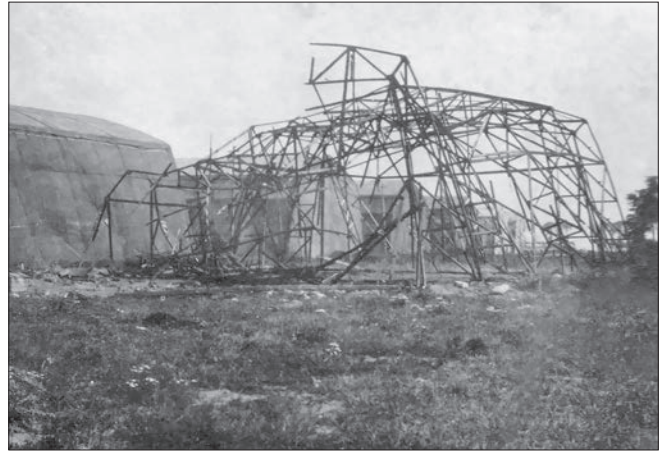
:IWM Q23610, Q11549 & Q12033



Nine Handley Pages from 214 Squadron flew on raids on the night of the 5 June, dropping six and a half tons of bombs including five 550-lb bombs on the Zeebrugge lock gates. Bruges docks, Bruges canals and La Brugeoise works and two enemy aerodromes were also attacked.

On the same night of 5/6 June, three waves of enemy bombers, around twenty in total, attacked the RNAS bases around Dunkirk; Bergues, Coudekerque, Petite Synthe and Capelle were all attacked with devastating effect. 200 bombs were dropped. At Coudekerque, 214 Squadron had Air Mechanic First Class, Edgar Baigent killed and two hangers burnt down. Other squadrons lost aircraft and men.

The German raids night appeared to have done little to



A wrecked Nestler hangar after the German raid on Coudekerque.

:D.R. Tullis

reduce 214 Squadron's offensive capability. On the 6/7 June, the squadron undertook two different raids. After the first, they returned to refuel and rearm and then set off on the second. In the first raid, nine O/400s bombed Bruges docks and Gotha base at St Denis Westrem.

By coincidence, the Germans continued their own bombing attacks against Coudekerque for the third night running, arriving over the airfield shortly after the nine Handley Pages of 214 Squadron had left for their first raid. The German bombers attacked Coudekerque and Teteghem. It was a very heavy raid which lasted three and a half hours from 22:00 to 01:30. 30 enemy aircraft were estimated to have taken part according to the Daily Summary of RAF Naval Operations dated the next day: 7 June 1918. '30 GOTHAS and "GIANTS" dropped a very large number of bombs on DUNKIRK and neighbouring aerodromes. COUDEKERKE suffered most and had to be abandoned the next day.

214 Squadron suffered more losses that night. Air Mechanic First Class, Percy John Gray was killed as was Air Mechanic Second Class Clarence William Jones, aged 20. Paul Bewsher wrote in 'Green Balls - The Adventures of a Night Bomber' (p.205) ....two months after my crash (on 10 April 1918, so in early June) eight hundred bombs were dropped in two nights on Coudekerque aerodrome, and it was so badly damaged that it was abandoned.

Corporal W.E. 'Tiny' Wardrop's recordings in the Imperial War Museum Sound Archive recall these raids on Coudekerque as being very damaging, smashing up the runways and the planes being forced to land on the wide beaches at Mardyke or Mardyck Sands until the airfield could be repaired. It appeared to have become standard operating procedure for the HP /400s to land on the beach upon returning from a raid and later the same night, or the following morning, flying the short 15-minute hop back to Coudekerque.

Shortly after the German bombing raid finished on the 6/7 June, the nine planes of 214 Squadron arrived back at their base from their first mission of the night and were rearmed. Nine HP O/400s then took off to bomb Bruges docks for a second time that night. C9644, piloted by Capt T.Q Studd was attacked by a German two-seater. Leslie Dell's logbook mentions this: *Whilst getting our height over Furnes, an enemy two-seater biplane attacked us. Capt Studd managed to prevent him getting under our tail, while I had a shot at him.*

At least one 214 Squadron machine also attacked St Denis Westrem Gotha base that night. This was a plane with Cpl Wardrop as observer. They arrived to find the enemy airfield landing lights lit up and then saw a German plane with its own landing lights illuminated and attacked it. The lights on the ground went out but the German aircraft then shot identification flares and the ground landing lights were put



Theodore Quintus Studd.

:RAeCT 2602

back on again. The HP crew then proceeded to take advantage of this and bomb the German aerodrome.

After attacking the Gotha base, Wardrop's plane crash landed on the beach at between Dunkirk and Gravelines. It dropped 200 feet coming into land and the plane fell out of the sky and crashed for no apparent reason. Wardrop was thrown out of the wreckage and was buried with his head and shoulders in the sand. He experienced a black eye. He then pulled the pilot out of the sand. Wardrop pulled off the pilot's thigh length flying boot and he thought he had pulled off the pilot's leg! The gunlayer, surnamed Thomas was seriously injured. Thomas was sent back to England but died from his injuries. Wardrop flew again the next day: *The black eye sustained in the crash was the only injury I suffered during my entire war service (he flew 66 missions), so the gods must have favoured me with their blessings.* (Cpl W.E. Wardrop)

There was no night flying for 214 Squadron Handley Pages on 7 June 1918: *Owing to weather conditions no bombing could be carried out last night by No.214 Squadron.*

#### Reginald's baptism of fire over Bruges

Reginald probably arrived at No 214 Squadron sometime between 8 and 11 June 1918. He was flying as Air Gunner on a mission during the night of the 12/13 1918. His arrival was recorded in the weekly returns for pilots of the two night-bombing squadrons of 5th Group. The other such unit in the group was 38 Squadron, which flew FE2b bombers. Despite the German offensive it appears that there appeared to be no shortage of pilots in the two squadrons. Handley Page night bombing squadrons normally had two flights of five aircraft each. Reginald's arrival meant that the squadron now had

seventeen pilots. However, the issue for the Squadron was a shortage of aircraft. On 30 May Vice, Admiral Keyes had reported that 214 Squadron had no more than six Handley Pages available. It looked like Reginald was going to be at the back of a rather long queue of bomber pilots waiting for a plane of their own.

Only one Handley Page bomber flew on a mission on the 8/9 June. This solitary machine attacked the rail junction at Thourout dropping 15 x 112-lb bombs on the target. On the night of the 8/9 June, three German aircraft returned to attack Coudekerque. This time there was only slight damage done and no casualties.

The Squadron did not fly on the following night. The records appear to contradict themselves as to the reason why. The 5th Group Daily Report of Operations in TNA AIR/1/456/15/312/54 states: *Owing to weather no bombing possible last night.* However, later, the weekly resume suggested that a German raid had prevented the bombers from taking off from Coudekerque that night. 214 Squadron was then the only Handley Page Squadron in the area, as 207 squadron had been posted back to the UK.

On the night of 10/11 June, 214 Squadron attacked Zeebrugge, Bruges and Thourout railway junctions: *Five and a half tons of bombs were dropped on a raid on Bruges docks and Zeebrugge. A fire was caused on Eastern Darse [at Bruges] and hits observed on Brugeoise Works.* The squadron aircraft dropped three 550-lb bombs on the Zeebrugge sea lock, 34 smaller bombs on the Bruges canal and 20 on Thourout junction. Wardrop and his crew were apparently on a roving commission mission.

The next night, 11/12 June, eight bombers from 214 Squadron flew on raids. Zeebrugge, Bruges and Thorout were attacked again as well as the German aerodromes at St Denis Westrem, Ghisteltes and Maria Aalter. Reginald Binckes did not take part in the missions. A copy of the Raid Order for that night was found in Wardrop's logbook. There is no mention of Reginald Binckes as crew.

A photograph probably shows HP O/100 3125 after the raid on the 11 June. Corporal Wilkins wrote a war time diary, a copy of which is in the Liddle Collection at Leeds University. Wilkin's entry for Tuesday 11 June reads *3125 arrived back with the spars and wires only on the starboard lower plane much worse than any that have returned before. It looked practically unbelievable.*

On 12/13 June, Reginald Binckes flew as Air Gunner in HP D5401 with Lt Freer as pilot and Corporal Wardrop as observer. This may even have been his first mission, depending on when he arrived at the squadron between 8 and 11 June. It was squadron policy to put new pilots such as Reginald with more experienced crews as part of their induction. Reginald was flying with a very experienced NCO, Corporal Wardrop was normally the bomb aimer and observer for the Commanding Officer, Major Brackley. Wardrop had been flying on Handley Pages since August 1917. Reginald was flying in the rear cockpit of the aircraft, manning three Lewis guns, one of which fired underneath the plane.

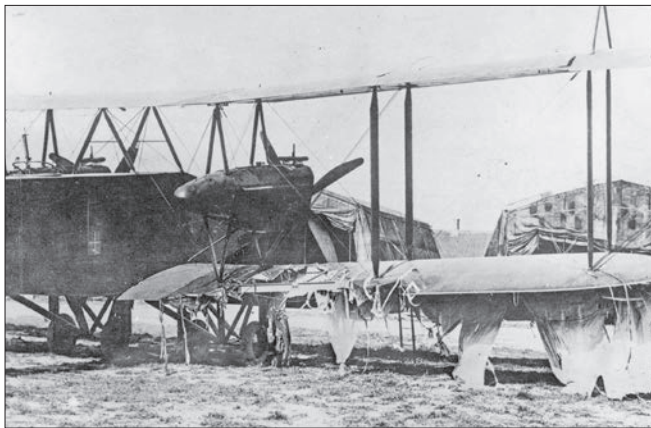
They had a short 15-minute flight from the aerodrome to Mardycke Sands, taking off at 21:35 and landing at 21.50, reaching a height of 500 feet. The plan was to fly from here on a mission over the lines. Corporal Wardrop's logbook describes the short flight at 21:35 *Flew to sands in readiness for raid. Weather unfavourable, three machines only carried out raid.* The three crews that flew on the raid attacked Ostend or Zeebrugge in bad visibility. The other machines, including D5401, remained at Mardycke until early the following morning when they flew back to base. This return journey was 'very bumpy' and flown at 04:30 at a low height of 200 feet, possibly because of the weather: *From sands to Drome. Very bumpy.*

On the night of the 13/14 June, Reginald flew in D5401 again,

with Lt Freer as pilot and Corporal Wardrop as observer. In Wardrop's logbook the mission is described as a *Roving Commission* with Ghisteltes aerodrome mentioned as a target. Other planes attacked the regular targets of Bruges and Thourout railway junction. D5401 was the last plane to take off for the raid. It carried a bomb load of 16 x 112-lb bombs. The crew took off at 21:30 and returned at 23:45. The flight took 2 hours 15 minutes at a maximum height of 7000 feet.

Wardrop's logbook describes the flight: *Last away. Visibility was not good at commencement. Flew into a thick bank of low cloud near Gravelines. After climbing to 6000 we crossed the lines. Flew over Thourout trying to find the exact location of the dumps. Then saw Ghisteltes Aero and landing lights come on and Verys lights fired. Took a run N to S over western side of drome. The hangers were on the northern and western side. First three bombs exploded short on the side near road. Managed to get an almost accurate line on hangers so released the remainder in a quick straddle. Turned NW then west. Searchlights appeared after bombs were released and anti- aircraft fire inaccurate. (It was just dusk when we attacked). Warm night. Not active on lines.*

It appears that D5401 landed back on the beach at 23:45 on the 13 June. Early on the morning of 14 June, they flew the 15 minutes back to the aerodrome at 1000 feet. For some reason they carried a passenger, as Sgt Dell also made the flight with them. Perhaps his aircraft had engine problems or had been damaged on the mission. Wardrop's logbook describes this flight; *Sands to Drome. Very bumpy trip.* 13 June was 38 Squadron's first raid with 5th Group. Ten of the squadron's aircraft targeted Ostend docks

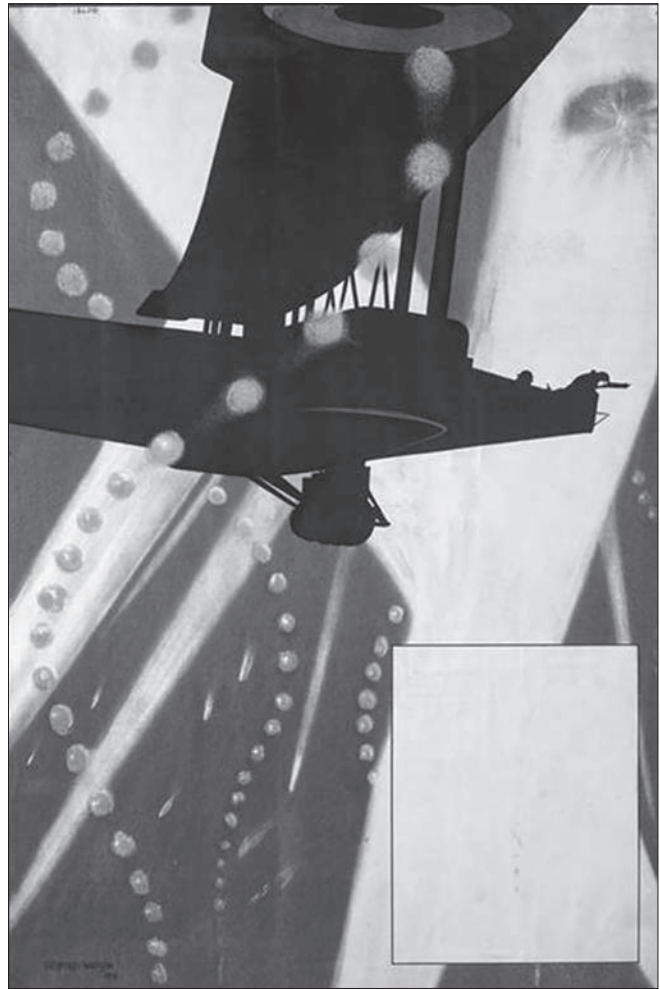


Almost certainly HP O/100 3125 after the raid on 11 June 1918.

:CCI Archive

Wardrop's logbook does not mention any flying on the night of the 14/15 June, perhaps the weather was poor, or he was being rested. Reginald was back flying on HP 5401 with Freer and Wardrop on the night of the 15/16 of June. This time the anti-aircraft fire over Bruges was to be much more accurate, as the crew of HP D5401 were going to find out!

Bruges was a frequent and heavily defended target for the Handley Page bombers of the RAF squadrons based at Coudekerque due to the German naval forces berthed there. Captain Paul Bewsher was an experienced pilot who served with 7 Naval Squadron, 207 Squadron and 214 Squadron at different times. He was involved in a number of important historic missions including the long-range flight to bomb the important railway bridge at Namur on 29 September 1917. In 1919 Paul Bewsher wrote an autobiographical account of his experiences bombing Bruges, Zeebrugge and other targets from Handley Page bombers called 'Green Balls - The Adventures of a Night Bomber'. The green balls, or flaming onions as they were also known, were flare type projectile shells fired by a 37mm revolving multi-barrel anti-aircraft gun nicknamed 'lichtspucker' (light spitter) by its crews. This



*Green Balls, a WWI poster by artist Geoffrey Watson, 1918, produced by the Dangerfield Printing Co Ltd London. The poster is an image of a large Handley Page bomber, seen in three-quarter length profile and silhouette, flying left to right through searchlights and flak. It was produced with a blank text box to enable local text additions after distribution. Height 720mm, width 480mm. : IWM PST 10251*

gun had five barrels and could launch a 37mm artillery shell to about five thousand feet (1,500m). To maximize the chance of a hit on the target all five rounds were fired in rapid succession at the aircraft flying overhead. The five green flares fired in quick succession gave the bomber crews an impression of a string of flaming green onions looping up towards them. The Germans used these to defend observation balloons and other key facilities.

Bewsher's book has some very vivid accounts of the defences around Bruges and his experiences of being under fire from the 'green balls' and 'flaming onions'. Bewsher was a poet who found the green balled anti- aircraft fire both threatening and beautiful: *there a rich chain of emeralds floats upwards to some suspected menace ..... long chains of vivid green balls which cast an unearthly gleam upon the water ..... the jealous ropes of glowing jade, which pass upwards in swaying curves and mingle their green brilliancy with the searchlights glare .... the useless beauty of the green balls.*

The Germans used the green ball anti-aircraft artillery to defend a number of key targets and the pilots often commented on its presence in their bombing reports. Bombing reports from 214 Squadron for May on Ostend, Zeebrugge and Bruges all mention the green balls. In addition to being a hazard, it appears that on a number of occasions the green ball flares aided visibility and navigation for the night bombing crews as the Report on Bomb Dropping from May 17/18 shows.

The basic facts of Reginald Bincke's mission to Bruges on the night of 15/16 June for him and the rest of the crew of D5401 are found in Sturtivant and Page p389: *Badly damaged by AA*



Testing the engines of a Handley Page O/100.

:D.R. Tullis

during raid on Bruges Docks; FL on beach Oostdunkerque Bains, destroyed by enemy shipping, set on fire. The first part of the mission was the short flight to the beach starting at 21.15 climbing to 1000 feet and landing 20 minutes later. The plane was carrying 16 x 112-lb bombs: *Seventh away, climbed 1000 feet, then landed on sands at Mardyke.* The crews waited one and a half hours on the sands, presumably for it to get dark, as it was just under a week to the longest day on 21 June.

At 22:55, D5401 took off for Bruges. It was to be Wardrop's 38th mission. They were to climb to 8000 feet and the flight lasted 2hr 15min. Corporal Wardrop's flying logbook provides full details of the flight: *Second away. Climbed between Furnes and just east of Gravelines eventually crossed the lines at 7,500. Two searchlights came up at Ghisteltes but managed to fly around them. Saw Ostende-Bruges canal and took a line W to E over centre portion of docks releasing eight bombs. These were observed to fall on the western side of the dock between northern and southern ????? [illegible]. An AA shell then exploded by our starboard engine just above us. We then flew NW to SE over docks releasing the remainder. Bursts from these were seen by Lt. Binckes on the eastern side just in a line with those that had exploded on the western side. Turned east then south. Discovered the engine had been hit and would soon stop. The water pipe from radiator on top had been severed. Managed to keep going alright after starboard engine had stopped. We were just SW of Bruges then. Crossed the Hun lines at 500 feet by Dixmude. Turned north and made for coast. A west wind which was blowing began to make us drift perilously near the lines again. Managed to reach the coast so fired a few Verys lights to enable us to see the sands more clearly. Eventually landed about two miles our side of the lines. As soon as daybreak the Huns began to shell the machine. They soon made a wreck of it. It also caught fire. As soon as the fire died down, we went to examine the engines etc. also to see if we could save anything. We had not been there for five minutes when they started firing at us. So we left.'*

Corporal Wardrop's logbook summarised the damage that the anti-aircraft fire had done to HP D5401. The crew were lucky to survive the trip. *Warm trip. Visibility was fair. Our starboard engine was hit three times, aileron control shot away, elevators and planes punctured. This was done by AA over Bruges.* It is interesting to note that Wardrop left a space for Reginald's name in his logbook to be filled in later.

Corporal Wardrop's own recollections of that flight on the 15/16 June 1918 are vividly recorded in the Imperial War



The five-barrelled 37mm Krupps anti-aircraft gun.

Museum Sound Archive, Wardrop W.E.D. an Oral History, Catalogue Number 29. It was recorded in March 1973: *On the night of the 16th June we were back over Bruges again when we were caught in an intense AA barrage. The propeller and radiator were hit on the starboard engine, and we had to throttle back on the other one. Then we headed for home on what I can only describe as a powered glide. With the prevailing wind against us we came down lower and lower. Meanwhile the searchlights held us in their beams whilst Archie gave us a real roasting. Luckily all of us escaped injury when our aircraft eventually crashed in no-mans-land near Nieuport. Struggling from the wrecked machine we quickly took cover in a large shell hole, but we were soon approached by soldiers we took to be German, in one of those accidents of war opening fire with a Webley, I shot one of them. They turned out to be Belgians, sent out from their front line to bring us in. Our luck held again as we were taken prisoner rather than being shot. In the dugout we tried to explain that we were British flyers but could not make them understand. Although we were well treated and provided with beer and sandwiches, they kept us there for several hours. Eventually one of the captors said 'It's alright now you will shortly be picked up by your unit'. Whereupon I exclaimed 'You said you could not speak English'. A few hours ago I couldn't but now you are cleared I can'. He replied. In a later conversation the Belgian soldier told me he that before the war he had worked at a restaurant in the Strand.*

The oral account continues: *During the time we had spent in*

the dugout our Handley Page had been ranged by the German guns and literally blown to smithereens. A sequel to this story is that when we arrived back at the Squadron, I was sent for by the Armaments Officer. He was angry and enquired about the five Lewis guns we had on board, reminding me it was a court martial offence to lose one's gun. I replied 'How was I expected to bring back five Lewis guns from no-man's land? Stick them up my jumper?' Commander Brackley decided that after the two crashes [Wardop had crashed on the night of the 5/6 June when his HP suddenly fell out of control from an altitude of 200 feet at the end of a mission] I should be given fourteen days leave"

Further details of the fateful flight are on p.14 of 'Avenging in the Shadows' by Ron James. It appears to be notes of a conversation between Ron James and Tiny Wardop. D5401 was hit by AA at 10,000 feet above Bruges. The starboard propeller and radiator were hit, and the pilot shut the starboard engine down and had to throttle back the port engine. The pilot then glided from Bruges back to the lines. Because they were going so slowly in the glide, they were held in the search lights and subject to very intense fire. D5401 was riddled but none of the crew were hit. The plane glided to the lines and crashed on the beach in No Man's Land at Nieuport.

All three crew survived the crash and took cover in shell holes in No Man's Land. They were rescued by Belgian troops and were taken to a dugout. No Belgians could speak English and they thought the bomber crew were Germans. After two hours one of the Belgian soldiers started speaking in English. "Do you come from London?" Wardrop said "Yes". "Do you know the Strand?" After that the atmosphere changed and they were told a car would pick them up at daybreak. As soon as it got light the Germans shelled the crashed plane and it was totally destroyed.

The car came from the Squadron at daybreak. All three bomber crew; Reginald, Wardrop and Freer warned the driver not to go past a certain point on the road as the Germans would shell it. The driver was determined that he was going to drive down the road to turn around. The three bomber crewmen refused to get in the car because of the danger.

The driver ignored them, drove up road to turn around and was promptly shelled. The driver jumped out of car and dived for cover in a ditch. They shouted to him to get back in the car which he did and returned to the crew. The driver was so scared he drove back to Squadron at 60-70 mph. Wardrop had never had such a dangerous car ride in his whole life. Wardrop reported that because of this the driver had lost his nerve and sent back to London.

When they got back to the Squadron, they were apparently told off by 214 Armaments Officer for not removing five Lewis guns from the crashed plane. Wardrop claims that they were threatened with a Courts Martial for not saving the guns. They had removed all the maps and their service revolvers. As a result of experiencing two serious crash landings in a very short time Wardrop was given 14 days leave by the Commanding Officer.

Wardrop, Freer and Reginald's escapades that night were also recorded in Corporal Wilkins diary (Cpl Thomas Wilkins's diary entry for 23 July 1918. Leeds University. Liddle Collection/Air/351/Wilkins, Thomas Oliver). Wilkins identifies the different aircraft by the last two digits of their serial numbers. HP 5401 is written by Wilkins as '01': *Sun June 16th .....to go ashore, but we ????? again at night. '01' returning from raid got punctured in water pipe of port engine but managed to get over lines at 200 feet, landing 2½ kilometres from enemy lines (The Belgians had flooded no-mans-land and the sides were separated by this flooded area) just in front of the Belgian trenches. Was dragged by Belges further off and dismantled a bit. At daybreak it was shelled and fired. ????? Ob. Wardrop said twas? Nothing like feeling of being ??????. Oh turns ??? That was '20'? first night out etc. ???/ happenings again next night, but '28' conked ??? on Calais Road for some reason, and '02' suffered fate of (34?) ?????? ????.four bombs were dropped*

on Petit Syth on.....'The next night was 16th and 17th of June. HP D5402 the '02' in Wilkins diary was wrecked on landing but fortunately the crew were all uninjured.

In addition to D5401, the rest of 214 Squadron attacked targets in Bruges and Thourout on the night of the 15/16 June. Visibility was poor but La Brigeoise works in Bruges was attacked by one plane dropping three 550-lb bombs. Other targets were attacked along the Zeebrugge-Bruges Canal and at Bruges Docks. Other aircraft attacked Thourout railway junction and aerodrome. Handley Page O/100 3128, piloted by Lt Nichols could not take off and their sortie was aborted.

### The Bombing of Bruges

*Sleep on, pale Bruges, beneath the waning moon.  
For I must desecrate your silence soon,  
And with my bombs' fierce roar, and fiercer fire.  
Grim terror in your tired heart inspire:  
For I must wake your children in their beds  
And send the sparrows fluttering on the leads!*

*Night after weary night no peace you know,  
But o'er your roof you hear our engines go:  
Poor stricken town, so long the home of those  
Your very stones cry out against — your foes.  
Who tramp your cobbled squares with heavy feet  
And mock your country in its sad defeat.*

*Night after night, your troubled sleep is torn,  
And, cold and weary, you await the morn.  
Which brings you peace, and to your tired eyes  
Reveals the smoke which pours towards the skies.  
And is a silent record of our flight  
Hid in the darkness of the cursed Night!*

*Sleep on — sleep on — your time is yet to come:  
Your sentries have not heard our engines' hum  
As at their posts they wander up and down  
Upon the outskirts of the sleeping town.  
Beside the ready guns the soldiers sleep:  
The countryside is wrapt in silence deep.*

(Captain Paul Bewsher 207 and 214 Squadrons RAF)

### The Squadron moves to St Inglevert

The crew of D5401, Freer, Wardop and Binckes probably returned to Coudekerque after their previous night's escapades in the early afternoon of 16 June. Tiny Wardop did not fly that night, there is no flight recorded in his logbook. It is likely that Reginald too was rested after their ordeal over Bruges and their crash landing the night before. The rest of the squadron however were busy on the night of 16/17 June, attacking Zeebrugge, Bruges and Thourout rail centres as well as attacks on German aerodromes at St Denis Westrem, Ghistelles and Maria Aalter. At least one plane raided Ostend, D5402 was wrecked on landing after the mission: Lt A.M. Cosgrave, Lt A.R. Clark, AG H. Williamson were all uninjured.

It was more of the same the next night. 214 Squadron attacked Zeebrugge, Bruges and Thourout rail centre, with other attacks on German airbases at St Denis Westrem, Ghistelles and Maria Aalter. Lt Nichols was not having much luck in HP O/100 3128, unable to take off two days ago, this time he crashed on take-off on the Calais Road. There were no injuries.

The weather then took a turn for the worst and there was to be no night bombing operations for the next four nights. The 5 Group Daily Report of Operations reported for the night of the 18 June: *Owing to weather conditions no night bombing raids were possible.* The German airforce were not deterred by the poor weather, they were to bomb Coudekerque and



214 Squadron's first HP O/400, C3487, was lost during a night raid on Zeebrugge on 18/19 May 1918 with Capt V.E. Sieveking and Lt H.A. Havilland-Roe KIA, while Gunlayer F. Spencer was made POW, wounded. :CCI Archive

surrounding airfields for five consecutive nights causing extensive damage and a number of fatalities.

Lt D.R. Tullis described the impact of the raids in his photo album. *The bombing raids on our aerodrome at Coudekerque 18-23 June 1918. Due to the fact that we had for the past three months been carrying out successful night raids on Bruges Docks and enemy aerodromes thereby causing much damage, the "Huns" decided to pay us a "massed" visit. These raids were very severe and took place from 10pm til 3am on three nights running. On the first night many of our men were killed but on succeeding nights the district was cleared after our own machines had departed. In all 15 machines consisting of Gothas and two seaters took part.*

*A total of 740 bombs were dropped 81 of which fell directly in our aerodrome area. The damage was not as much as would be expected as most of the hangars and huts were empty. Our mess and officers' huts were wrecked. The ground was so cut up that we had to abandon the aerodrome. We moved near Calais.*

There was not much mention of the German raids in communiques. On 19 June: *No bombing raids were carried out last night due to unfavourable weather conditions. No operations possible during the night owing to weather conditions on the 20th and No night flying last night owing to weather conditions on the 21st (AIR/1/456/15/312/54).* Lt Tullis clearly shows that the Germans are flying during this unfavourable weather.

At this time Reginald's friend, Leslie Semple, was still stuck in his never-ending Purgatory of the 32-day course at Stonehenge. On 19 June Semple was returning from four days leave in London and met up with an American airman who has been with him at Stonehenge, Ensign Stocker of the USNAS (United States Naval Air Service). The Americans were keen to develop their own strategic bombing arm called the Northern Bombing Group. To gain experience American aviators were training alongside the British Handley Page crews and would be posted to Handley Page Squadrons in France. Ensign Stocker would be posted to Reginald's 214 Squadron in July and will be part of Reginald's own crew on 17 July.

It is not clear if there were any operational missions on the 22 and 23 June. Missions had definitely restarted on 24/25 June. Eight HPs attack Bruges docks, La Brugeoise Works, two

canals and Maria Aalter airfield. Reginald may have flown on this mission. That night 5th Group bombers from 214 and 38 Squadrons dropped six and a quarter ton of bombs in good visibility over Zeebrugge, Bruges docks and the canals in the area. Fires were started and all aircraft returned safely. The Squadron attacked Bruges again the following night.

On the 26 June 1918 all operations were halted for 214 Squadron as they prepare to move 30 miles west, from Dunkerque to St Inglevert, on the other side of Calais. This move has been necessitated by the sustained German air raids on Coudekerque and surrounding aerodromes earlier in the month. The decision to move 214 Squadron from Coudekerque was fully vindicated on the 27 June when the aerodrome again became a target for 'Long Max' the biggest artillery gun in the world.

During the war the Germans had built a number of massive artillery pieces such as 'Big Bertha'. These used the naval cannons found on the latest German Dreadnought battleships. 'Long Max' was the biggest of the bunch. It was a large 15-inch gun based at Leugenboom, inland from Ostend. Officially named "Battery Pommern", it weighed 75 tons and had a barrel length of 56 feet. The gun was capable of firing a 6 foot long, 15 cwt shell a distance of up to 46 miles. The size and power of this gun was amazing.

On the 26 June 1918 the Germans fired 55 of the massive shells a distance of 27 miles into Dunkirk. On the next day, they targeted the aerodrome at Coudekerque, causing 14 large craters, and destroying a nearby farmhouse. Paul Bewsher describes these attacks from the Leugenboom gun in his book 'Green Balls - The Adventures of a Night Bomber' and the impact of the shelling on the town and the airfield. It is not clear if they refer to these attacks in June 1918 or earlier attacks. Bewsher remembered being woken by the explosions and the Dunkerque warning siren nicknamed 'Mournful Mary', he describes the regular shelling of the town every seven minutes and columns of refugees leaving Dunkerque to escape the apparently random destruction and devastation.

Bewsher describes the impact of one of Long Max's artillery shells on the aerodrome: *I have just left the camp behind me, and I am beginning to walk across the great field when in the middle of it, some two hundred and fifty feet away, appears a*

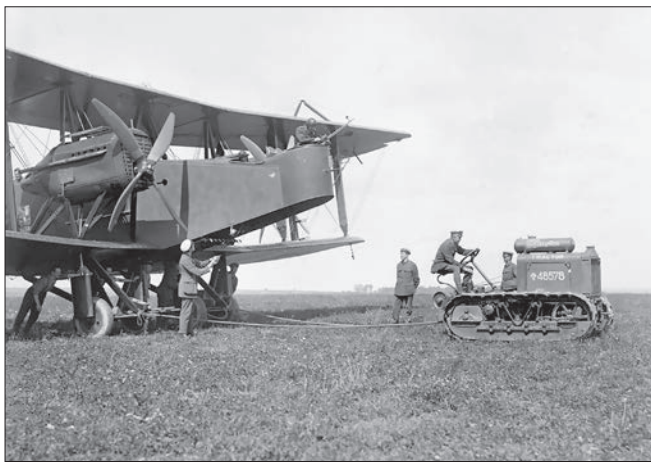


*solid black fountain of smoke and earth, quite seventy feet high. I stand transfixed with amazement and excitement as the roar of the sound sweeps by me, and a few seconds later I hear the remote boom of the gun, twenty-eight miles away near Ostend.....When I get there I find a huge crater thirty five feet across and twelve or fifteen feet deep...*

The shelling continued at regular intervals. The men on the aerodrome sheltered on the sides of the canal cutting that runs along the edge of the aerodrome. The French authorities have a spotter who pressed a button when he sees the flash of the gun firing. This then set off the warning siren 'Mournful Mary'. The shell was in flight for a whole minute, rising to 33,000 feet before crashing down again. The Commanding Officer organised a similar system on the aerodrome with an officer with a stopwatch and whistle.

Later that morning Bewsher had a very near miss when a shell exploded only yards from him: *towering some eighty or ninety feet high, only a few yards from us, is a tall fountain of black earth and uprising smoke, like the great genie which whirled up wards from the bottle in the fairy story...We turn and run back to get souvenirs from the crater. The size of it staggers us. It is almost big enough to put a motor omnibus in...and the place where we were sitting is only a few feet from the edge of the hole.*

On the 27 June 1918, Reginald's father, Walter Binckes, died at the age of 67. He was born in 1851. The Binckes family were living at the Coach and Horses at 303 St John Street



*A Handley Page O/400 being towed by a Clayton caterpillar tractor.*

*:CCI Archive*

Clerkenwell. He left a will and an estate of £13,681. His wife Charlotte and son Ernest James Binckes are executors. Ernest is now described in the probate papers as a 'gentleman'. On the 27 June, 214 Squadron were not flying as they are preparing to move from Coudekerque. The weather that night was bad and none of 5th Group night bombers flew that night: *No night work possible due to weather conditions* (AIR/1/456/15/312/54). It appears that there were no operational flights the following day either.

On the 29 June 1918, 214 Sqn RAF moved to St Inglevert. This aerodrome was 8 miles SW of Calais.

The Squadron are back in business that night on 29/30 June. Six HPs attacked an ammunition dump at Stahillebrugge. This dump was located on the banks of the canal between Ostend and Bruges. Reginald probably flew on this mission as an Air Gunner.

The Daily Report of Operations was incorrect. All machines did not return safely. It is clear that night fighters were very active. Six machines went on the raid and three were attacked by enemy scouts. Half the bombers were intercepted, which was an unprecedented success rate for night fighters given the primitive technology at the time. One 214 Squadron bomber, C9648, was shot down, probably by a 2-seater 'nightfighter'

from Schlasta 16. Unteroffiziers Muschen and Kraatz claimed a heavy bomber *shot down in allied lines SE of Wulpen between 23:35 and 23:50.*

Initially the fate of the crew; Vance, Potter and Kimberley was not known and in the weekly pilot returns from the night bombing squadrons of 5th Group for the week ending 30 June they are listed as 'missing'. The plane force landed in the Netherlands, on a beach near Valkenisse. The crew, Lt J.D. Vance, Lt A.G. Potter and Sgt R. Kimberley were interned by the neutral Dutch authorities. The plane was used by Netherland Air Force, the LVA, as *HP 703*. It was returned to RAF in March 1920.

On the night of the 30 June 1918, 5th Group night bombers were very active, attacking Bruges, Maria Alter, Varsennaire, Vlisseghe and Ghisteltes aerodromes and Ostend Docks in poor visibility. It is likely that 214 Squadron attacked Bruges and Maria Aalter aerodrome. 32 x 112-lb bombs and 3 x 550-lb bombs were dropped on the aerodrome. Bursts were observed amongst sheds and hangars and on other parts of the airfield. One Handley Page scored a direct hit on a storage shed on the quay at Bruges dropping three 50-lb bombs on the warehouse roof and starting a fire. Reginald might have flown on this mission and the next.

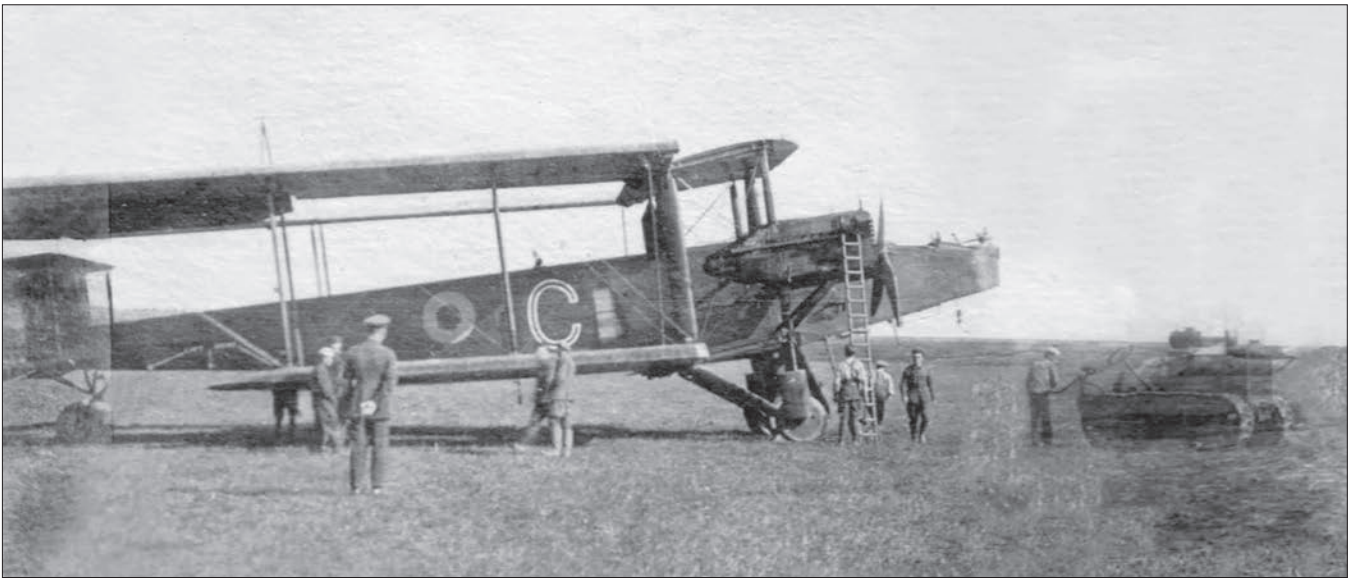
On the night of 1/2 July, 214 and 38 Squadrons attacked eight different locations, raiding docks, aerodromes, steelworks and railway junctions. The targets were the docks at Zeebrugge and Ostende, La Brugeoise Works at Bruges and five aerodromes at Ghisteltes, Maria Aalter, Thourout, Wyhgene and Vlisseghe. Six and a half tons of bombs were dropped. It is not clear if the Squadron flew on bombing operations on the following night.

It appears that a further period of poor weather limited flying for the next four days or so. There were no missions on the night of 3 July 1918: *No flying possible last night due to the weather conditions.* The following day was very similar: *Weather conditions during the night unfavourable for night flying.*

Operations resumed on 5 July, when Ostend, Zeebrugge and enemy shipping were attacked by night bombers. It is not clear if some or all of the locations were targets to 214 Squadron. On 6 July the bombers took off but were forced to return due to poor weather: *Machines which started for bomb raid last night, returned without attacking objective due to the weather* (AIR/1/456/15/312/54).

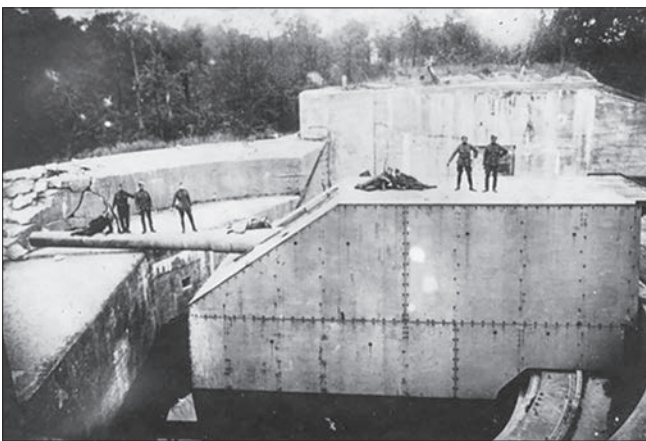
On 7/8 July 1918, the squadron attacked regular targets with raids on Maria Aalter and Ghisteltes aerodromes and Bruges docks. Reginald may have flown that night, as the pilot of HP 9643, Lt Ellison records flying with a new observer in his logbook for their raid on Bruges docks. The crew took off at 21:37 and were in the air for 175 minutes flying at 8,000-10,000 feet. The aircraft had a mixed bomb load; 4 x 250-lb, 6 x 112-lb, 6 x 16-lb and 4 Michelin flares. Ellison's target was the eastern side of the dock. He recorded: *new observer...not got held* (in search lights?) ... good straddle (Leeds University, Liddle Collection/Air/106/H.R.W. Ellison). However, Sgt Dell, the NCO observer, recorded flying back from Mardyck Sands at 04:37 on a 33-minute flight back to St Inglevert with an Ensign Fahy, one of the American aircrew as rear gunner, so it was probably not Reginald flying with this crew. It appears that despite relocating to south-west of Calais the squadron is continuing to land on the wide sandy beaches near Dunkirk and returning home at first light.

Another period of bad weather set in and Reginald and 214 Squadron did not fly any night bombing missions for five consecutive nights as recorded in 5th Group Daily Report of Operations. Considering it was July, the weather was very unseasonal. Possibly 12 or 13 nights in the month were washed out because of poor weather. On the night of the 8th *No operations carried out by bombing machines during the night.* The 9th was exactly the same: *No operations were carried*



A further view of a Clayton tractor towing a HP O/400.

:D.R. Tullis



The 15 inch 'Long Max', Battery Pommern near Ostend.

out by bombing machines during the night.' The bad weather continued on 10 July: *Unfavourable weather continues. No bombing operations last night.* There is no 5th Group Daily Report of Operations for 11 July and neither Sgt Dell nor Lt. Ellison had entries in their log books for this date, so it is likely the bad weather continued. There was no night bombing for the fifth consecutive night on 12 July 1918: *Unfavourable weather prevented war flying until afternoon* (National Archive AIR/1/456/15/312/54).

On the night of 13/14 July, Reginald was flying as rear gunner on a mission to Bruges with the experienced crew of Lt Ellison as pilot and Sgt Dell as his observer. By a lucky coincidence, the logbooks of both Ellison and Dell are in the papers of the Liddle Collection at the University of Leeds. Reginald Binckes is named in both logbooks.

Handley Page O/400 C9643 took off at 9:52pm for a raid on the eastern side of the docks at Bruges. The mission lasted 2 hours 40 mins. They climbed to 10,000 feet and had Calais, Dunkirk, Furnes and the enemy aerodrome at Ghisteltes are way points. It appears from Sgt Dell's logbook that the actual bombing attack on Bruges started at 23:23. The plane approached the target from the north and, with good visibility, they dropped to a height of 8,500 feet to drop their bombs in a steady straddle over the eastern side of the dock. At 23.30 Sgt Dell recorded a large fire burning in the vicinity of Bruges.

Lt. Ellison's summary of the raid in his logbook is brief. *Nothing of importance and usual hate. Bombs fell right across docks and 4 short in town.*

Sgt Dell's logbook was much more detailed. He noted in particular the fact that HA (Hostile Aircraft) were active. Several of the No. 214 Squadron planes were attacked by hostile

aircraft. In C3489, Corporal Neve was seriously wounded. To avoid the heavy anti-aircraft fire, the HP flew north or north-west to pass along the coast out of range of the guns. As they passed over Ostend on their return leg, they dropped two of the four 25-lb Coopers bombs on enemy shipping before landing safely on Mardyck Sands at the end of the mission. Reginald had completed another mission to Bruges.

The crew of HP O/400 C3489 and Corporal Neve were not so lucky. The following account is taken from Ron James's History of 214 Squadron- 'Avenging in the Shadows': *Sortie against Costcamp aerodrome. C3489 piloted by Lt G.L. Fraser, with observer W.H. Neve and 2Lt E.C. Fletcher. On reaching their objective they were attacked by an enemy two-seater. The first burst badly wounded Corporal Neve and put one engine out of action. Cpl. Neve managed to release the bombs before fainting and Lt. Fraser managed to cross the lines at very low altitude. A safe landing was made on the beach and the machine was hauled up into the dunes to keep it out of sight from the enemy. It was soon repaired and two days later flown back to base.* Corporal Wilkins diary mentions Neve being hit in the thigh by a phosphorous bullet.

The plane that Reginald was rear gunner in on 13/14 July, HP C9643, would have an interesting career before it was struck off charge in Egypt three years later. 10 days after this flight, on the night of 24/25 July, C9643 would drop the biggest bomb of the war so far when it dropped a 1650-lb SN bomb at Middlekerke. The plane was being flown by Ellison on the 1 October 1918 when it damaged its tail in a mid-air collision.

Of interest here is a contradiction concerning the length of this mission to Bruges on 13 July. The pilot, Lt Ellison records in his logbook that the flight lasted over 3 hours and has an entry of 198 minutes, 3 hours 18 minutes. Sgt Dell's logbook records it at 2 hours 40 minutes or 160 minutes. A 38-minute difference is a big discrepancy. This is explained on the next page of Sgt Dell's logbook which shows a 38-minute flight from Mardyck Sands back to St Inglevert at 04:07 on the morning of the 14 July. Reginald is shown as being on this flight too.

It is not clear why, almost a month after acting as rear gunner with Freer and Wardrop when D5401 crash landed, Reginald was still flying as the Air Gunner role with Ellison and Dell. It might be that the squadron had a number of spare pilots who took turns going on missions until their own planes became available.

What is clear from the records is that four days later Reginald was pilot at the controls of HP O/400 C9646. Yet more bad weather set in over northern France on 14 July. There was no flying after 11:00 because of unfavourable conditions. There was no raid on the 14 July: *Intermittent rain and low clouds*

throughout the day have handicapped flying. No bomb raids. Sgt Dell was not to fly again until the night of the 18 July. It appears that poor weather may have continued on 15 July. Ellison flew a couple of test flights in the afternoon. On the 16th and 17th there was little war flying owing to unfavourable weather.

### The Fatal Flight

The recent spell of poor weather continued and there were to be no missions on the nights of 16 July and 17 July. However, normal maintenance and training flights continued, and Reginald went on a flight in one of the bombers on a training flight. Reginald was allocated HP O/400 C9646. This had the identification letter 'L' on the fuselage. There were two other crew with him, Lt D.R. Tullis an experienced pilot who had been flying Handley Page bombers for almost six months, and Ensign Maury Stocker, a pilot in the US Navy. C9646 started its take-off run but failed to leave the ground properly and crashed nose first, completely destroying the front cockpits of the plane.

Ronald Tullis's made notes in his war time photo album describing what happened. *The end of the famous C9646. A marvellous escape from death. 17th July 1918, While taking off uphill from St Inglevert the wheel hubs became entangled in flax. The machine failed to rise properly and struck the ground under full power at 65 miles per hour. My companion, Lt R. Binckes and I were thrown 30 feet.*

Ronald Tullis took a series of photographs of the crashed aircraft that show the violence of the crash and how the aircraft almost turned over on its back. One of these was annotated by Ronald Tullis to show how far the two men were thrown from the wreckage.

Leslie Semple's diary mentioned the crash. He recorded that the aircraft was taking off, uphill, fully loaded, when the wheels caught in a tall wheat crop causing the plane to nose over. All three crew members were injured (though Ronald Tullis's account does not suggest this), with Reginald's injuries being very serious. According to Leslie Semple's diary, Stocker got concussion. Reginald was transferred to hospital in Calais after the crash.

Ronald Tullis's son, Brian, has said that his father had told him that he was piloting the plane when it crashed. I had thought that, as this appeared to have been a training flight, then Reginald was at the controls, but this now appears not to be the case: *My father told me about the crash - I always assumed he was the pilot and I am sure he told me that a landing wire became entangled with the axle of undercarriage. Maybe I misunderstood him or have forgotten what he said - it was back in 1952. Further research showed it was a flax crop jamming the wheels. Also looking at the details of the HP undercarriage this is confirmed as the most likely reason.*

The accepted way of listing the crew in official reports was Pilot, Observer, Air Gunner in that way. Sturtivant and Page list D.R. Tullis first, confirming him as pilot.

The day after the crash, Reginald was being treated in Field Hospital 308/3 in Calais. The initial diagnosis was that he was dangerously ill with concussion and this was later changed. The card reads *Corrected diagnosis frac. spine.*

After the lull of the previous few nights 214 and 38 Squadrons were back in business on the night of 18/19 July. The two squadrons dropped about six and a half tons between them. Both squadrons attacked Ostend docks and Ghisteltes aerodrome and 38 Squadron attacked a number of other targets as well also losing one of their FE2bs that did not return from the mission. 214 Squadron dropped 6 x 550-lb bombs and 16 x 112-lb bombs on Ostend. Most of their efforts were focussed on Ghisteltes aerodrome, with aircraft dropping 38 x 112-lb bombs and 4 x 250-lb bombs.

Lt Ellison and Sgt Dell in HP O/400 9643 raided Ghisteltes.

They took off at 22:37 for a flight of 193 minutes. They flew at 4,000ft with two gunlayers and a mixed bomb load of 4 x 250-lb, 6 x 112-lb, 8 x 25-lb and 4 Michelin flares: *Only two searchlights but AA quite accurate got a good line across aerodrome by following road but no direct results observed.*

On the 19 July, Reginald remained dangerously ill in hospital with concussion and a fractured spine. The weather took a turn for the worst during the day and yet again this wet and soggy July there were no night operations: *No night bombing due to unfavourable weather.*

The next day, Reginald's close friend Leslie Semple was finally posted to 207 Squadron stationed near Crecy in the Pas de Calais. 207 Squadron was a former RNAS squadron also flying the HP O/400. His diary entries for that day indicate that he knew nothing of Reginald's serious crash: *Saturday 20th July 1918, .....Posted this morning to 207 Squadron. Handley Page. Very glad it is a naval squadron.....Binckes is in 214 Squadron near Calais. His observer at Stonehenge - Wiltshire by name - is Armaments Officer here and we are going to see Binckes when we have an opportunity.*

On the night of 20/21 July it appears that the bad weather continued. Neither Dell nor Ellison recorded a flight in their logbooks. Reginald Binckes finally succumbed to his injuries and died at 16.45 on the 21st, from the fractured spine he suffered in the crash four days previously. It appears that a letter was sent to his next of kin the same day.

Reginald's Casualty Record card in the RAF Museum archive suggests that he was buried at 13.30 on 21 July. This must be an error and his burial at the Les Baraques Military Cemetery at Sangatte, just west of Calais must have been the following day, 22 July 1918. Alternatively, if he died at 4:45am and not 4:45pm on 21 July, the afternoon burial at 13.30 would have been possible as the hospital would by now have a conveyor belt process for the burying of casualties.

Reginald Binckes had made the ultimate sacrifice for his King and Country. The war continued on 21 July for 214 Squadron. They took off on a mission but the *Weather unfavourable, Handley Page raid abandoned* (AIR/1/456/15/312/54).

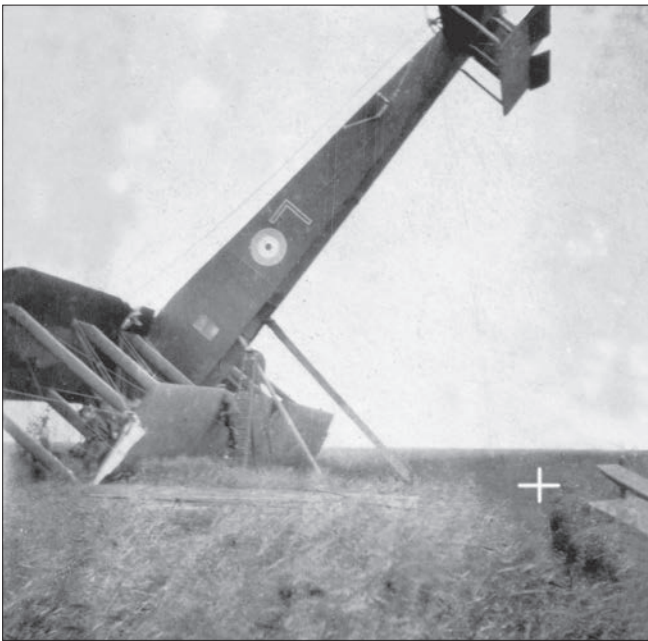
The poor weather continues for two more nights. The day after Reginald was buried, his friend Leslie Semple travelled down from 207 Squadron to see him. He arrived at St Inglevert to hear the sad news that Reginald had been killed: *July 23rd. No flying. Bad weather. This morning I went with Lt Littlejohn to 214 Squadron to see Binckes. We went in a Crossley Touring Car via Boulonge where we had lunch. On arrival at 214 after a very quick ride (45 -55mph) I was astounded to learn that Binckes was killed four days ago when a Handley Page pitched over on its nose. Ensign Stocker, another chum of mine was also in the bus and has received concussion. What a massive shock this must have been for Leslie Semple to drive over to Calais to be met with the sad news of Reginald's death.*

On the same day that Leslie Semple arrived at 214 Squadron to find his friend had been killed, Lt Ellison updated his logbook amending the entry for the raid on 13 July with information about Reginald's death.

News of Reginald Binckes death was sent to his family. This was a double blow for the family after Reginald's father's death only four weeks before. His next of kin, now listed in his service records is his mother Charlotte Elizabeth Binckes. It appears that, following Reginald's father's death, the family had moved from Clerkenwell to 7 Fairfield Road, Crouch End N8.

Leslie Semple then added a heartfelt eulogy in his diary for Reginald which shows the depth of their friendship: *Am very, very, sorry to know that that poor old Binckes has gone under. He was a topping fellow. Most obliging and a really good chum. He was an old Owenian and would go out of his way to help anybody. A real loss to the service he was a really good pilot.*

A photograph of a damaged Handley Page bomber, which is probably C9646 after the accident on 17 July 1918, was found



HP O/400 C9646, turned onto its nose on St Inglevert aerodrome. The cross marks the spot where the crew fell. :D.R. Tullis

amongst some of Ensign Stocker's personal papers and posted on a US website, US Militaria in January 2013.

The photograph showed a Handley Page that had gone over on its nose. The damage appears to be consistent with what we know might have happened to Reginald and the rest of the crew.

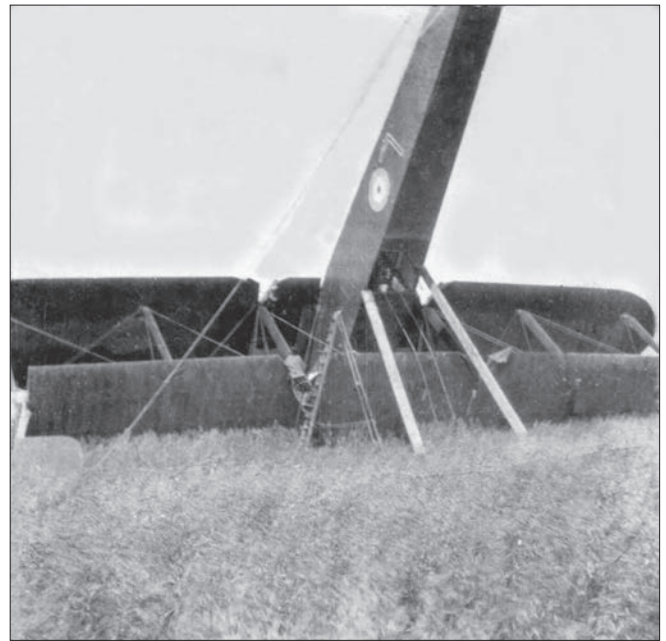
The back of the photograph is annotated with the location – St Inglevert. It also appears to have three names mentioned *Crash St Inglevert. Self- doc? - CB?* Tullis's initials were D.R. It appears that his nickname was Doc (as Dr is the abbreviation of Doctor). Is the last name simply B for Binckes, written in a rather flowing way? Look at how he has written the final t of St Inglevert or the f of self.

Another member of 214 Squadron who recorded Reginald's accident was Corporal Wilkins. His diary entry for 23 July was one that caught up on the previous fortnight's news ..... *About the 18th (of July) a machine 9648 ? turned turtle injuring 2 of ? occupants and Lt Binks has died of injuries.* He then writes what appears to be *'This was school or test flying'*.

In other entries, Cpl Wilkins mentions that the weather had been awful and that conditions on the new aerodrome were very poor compared to life back at Coudekerque. The men were living in bell tents without their hammocks and other basic equipment. The diary extract above mentions the men living in tents with no tables or writing conveniences. Wilkins mentions the camp at St Inglevert being at the bottom of a hill and was waterlogged. The aerodrome was at the top of the hill.

There is still an aerodrome at St Inglevert today. The location is a good one for an airfield. It is on a plateau on a chalk upland to the south-west of Calais. The area is called 'St Inglevert – terrain des 2 caps'. The two caps or chalk headlands are Cap Blanc Nez and Cap Griz Nez. The aerodrome continued in use after 1918 and it saw some civilian use. During the war St Inglevert was taken over by the Luftwaffe and Me109 fighters were based there. It was in a vulnerable location and was regularly attacked by the RAF. Later in the war four large concrete gun emplacements were built as part of the Atlantic Wall to cover a possible allied landing at Wissant in the narrowest part of the English Channel. A small flying club the Aeroclub Du Bulonnaise operates from the airfield today.

The state of the ground may have been a contributory factor in the accident. We know the weather had been unseasonably wet with flying cancelled for 2-3 days at a time. The ground would have been heavy when Reginald took off for his daytime flight. Perhaps the heavy waterlogged ground slowed the



Two further views of the crash.

:D.R. Tullis



aircraft and possibly prevented it from taking off? Tullis was clear that the crop of flax wrapped itself around the wheels. This would have dragged and slowed the undercarriage underneath the plane while the engines located 10 feet higher would have continued under full power. This caused the plane to nose over and turn turtle as Cpl Wilkins described almost turning over on its back as Tullis described.

Unfortunately, this type of accident appears to happen to Handley Page bombers on a regular basis. Ronald Tullis photo album has several images of other planes on their nose and during my research I have found many others too. It looks like a design fault. The Germans fitted nose wheels to some of their Gotha bombers perhaps because they were experiencing similar problems.

The plane that Reginald crashed in, HP O/400 C9646 was built at the Handley Page factory at Cricklewood in North-West London. It was delivered to 2 (Hendon) AAP in April 1918. On 1 May 1918 the aircraft was to be transferred to Lympne in Kent; however, the plane made a forced landing at Ragfield



The wrecked nose area of C9646, with the remains of the pilot's seat.

:D.R. Tullis

Farm near Sittingbourne. The damage was repaired and two weeks later, on 15 May, it arrived at Reception Park of 1 ASD at Marquise. It was delivered to 214 Sqn the same day.

Ensign Stocker of the US Navy Stocker was attached to 214 Squadron for less than two weeks, between eight and thirteen days, before he was posted out again. Reginald's death and Stocker's arrival and departure from 214 Squadron are recorded in the Weekly Returns of 5th Group officers and pilots. Ensign Stocker arrived between the 8th and the 15th of July and had been posted out by the 23rd, according to the weekly returns. Given this very short time at St Inglevert, it is highly likely that the photograph of the crashed bomber labelled *Crash- St Inglevert* is C9646.

C9646 was apparently transferred to 4 ASD for repair on 17 July. This was the same date as the crash and may be wrong. The fact that only a few days previously Reginald was flying as Air Gunner with Ellison and Dell suggests that Reginald may not have been flying regularly and so a practice flight sometime on the 17 July makes sense. We know that the Squadron had an excess of operational pilots in early June when Reginald arrived and since then Reginald may have been waiting for his own crew plane and crew to become available.

C9646 was not a complete write off. It was repaired and returned to the squadron on 9 October 1918. 214 Squadron went to Egypt after the war and C9646 went via Buc in France on 4 July 1919. It probably followed the No.1 Aerial Route RAF arriving in Cairo on 31 July 1919. The plane was later scrapped on 7 December 1919 (Sturtivant and Page, p.372).

Reginald is buried at Les Baraques Military Cemetery on the western side of Calais. The cemetery was designed by Sir Herbert Baker. The cemetery now contains 1,303 Commonwealth burials of the First World War, together with more than 250 war graves of other nationalities including two German. The cemetery also contains seven Second World War burials. Reginald's crew on the 17 July recovered from their injuries and returned to active service. Both Ronald Tullis and Robert Stocker of the US Navy Air Service were to survive the



St Inglevert aerodrome today.

:Author

war.

David Ronald Tullis was born on 24 September 1899 in Partick, Glasgow, Scotland. He was only 18 years old at the time of the crash. Despite his apparent youth, Ronald Tullis was already an experienced pilot who had been at the squadron some time, having been posted to France on the 14 January 1918. At the time of the crash, he had been on active service for six months.

Tullis had joined the RNAS on 13 May 1917. At the time, he was a student at Glasgow Technical College. His service record described him as an Analytical Chemist involved in metallurgical analysis and chemical research work. On joining up he was initially posted to Crystal Palace. According to his service record available online from the National Archive in Kew he then went to Redcar in North-East England on 30 June 1917. He spent just over two months at Redcar before being posted to Cranwell on 8 September 1917.

However, it appears that Ronald Tullis was at the RNAS station at Manston in Kent on the 22 August 1917. A photograph in his album shows the burning wreckage of a German Gotha bomber labelled *Crashed Gotha Manston 1917*. The Gotha was shot down at Manston that day.

Donald Tullis completed his flying examination at Cranwell on the 17 October, being graded a *good pilot*. He was then promoted to Flt Sub Lt on the same day. He may have gone solo at Redcar, but 17 October looks like the date he formally completed his training.

The results of his Graduation Examination dated 17 October are found in the National Archive at Kew. ADM/273/13/58: *Results of Graduation Examination; Flying Ability 2nd Class, Aerial engines 66.25%, Navigation 62.8% Gunnery 60%, WT and Photography 60%.* His service record refers to a confidential report from Manston dated 1 January 1918 in which he is described as *V.G. Pilot. G. Officer*. Two weeks later Ronald Tullis was posted to 207 Squadron at Dunkirk. During his training Ronald Tullis had flown the following aircraft: Maurice Farman, Avro (probably 504), BE2c, BE2e, Sop 13 (Sopwith 1913? Seaplane design), Sopwith Pup, Handley Page (O/100) and Bristol Scout. Ronald Tullis's, aerial gunnery was graded as VG1.

At some time, possibly after Manston, and before being posted, he went to Freiston in Lincolnshire. A photograph in his album is labelled *At Freiston*. This shows a group of seven RNAS pilots photographed on a snow-covered airfield. The pilots are wearing their fur lined gauntlets so it must have been cold and taken in late 1917 or early 1918

Tullis was to be at Dunkirk until the end of June. At some time between January and June he was transferred to 214 Squadron. Both 207 Squadron and 214 Squadron were based at Dunkerque. The two squadrons were closely linked. They flew missions together and appear to have swapped crew and

personnel on both a formal and informal basis. A similar thing happened with Paul Bewsher. Ronald Tullis was promoted to Lieutenant on 1 April 1918, when the RNAS and RFC combined to form the Royal Air Force.

Like all of 214 Squadron crews, Ronald Tullis was a regular visitor to the target zone formed by the Bruges-Ostende-Zeebrugge Triangle. On a mission to bomb German coastal batteries near Ostende on the night of the 9/10 May 1918, Tullis was acting as Air Gunner in the rear cockpit of HP O/100 3150. He was lucky to escape uninjured when he crash landed in heavy fog: *This machine crashed badly on landing near St Omer after the raid. Pilot and observer injured.* He flew as a pilot during the summer months and his name appears frequently on bombing reports and Raid Orders

In late September 1918 Ronald Tullis was transferred from 214 Squadron. It appears that he was either wounded or had become ill, possibly a victim of the Spanish Influenza epidemic that claimed so many lives in 1918. On 23 September he proceeded to MD Hampstead, probably a hospital in North London. He was on medical leave for two months. Ronald Tullis was assessed by a medical board at the start of November, on 5 November his service record AIR/76/514/101 noted *RAF MB (Medical Board) Fit HS (Home Service) 8 weeks flying duties.*

On 27 November, Ronald Tullis's sick leave finished. By this time the war was over, and he was not posted back to 214 Squadron. He was to remain in the RAF for two more months. He was posted to 1 Communication Squadron. This was formed at Hendon to provide rapid transport between London and Paris in connection with the Versailles Peace Conference. Additional squadrons were subsequently formed at Buc aerodrome, near Versailles, and briefly at Hounslow.

On 26 January 1919 he was demobbed to return to Scotland and his studies. His service record describes this in harsh official language as *transferred to the unemployed list*. His discharge from the RAF was posted in the London Gazette on 1 April 1919. Ronald Tullis became a metallurgist, and he died on 16th May 1964. His son Brian followed in his footsteps and trained as a pilot in the RAF. He emigrated to Western Australia where he lives today outside Perth.

The other crew man with Reginald Binckes and Ronald Tullis when their plane crashed on 17 July was Ensign Robert Maury Stocker Jr of the United States Navy Air Service (USNAS), born on 20 September 1897. He was born into a naval family and his father was a Captain in the US Navy who would retire as a Rear Admiral in 1937. Robert Stocker qualified as a naval pilot at Hampton Roads in Virginia in November 1917.

The composition of the three-man crew of C9646 when it crashed on 17 July is a bit of a mystery. All three men; Binckes, Tullis and Stocker were trained pilots. Ensign Stocker had been on the Stonehenge course with Reginald's good friend Leslie Semple. We know from an entry in Leslie Semple's diary that Stocker was training at Stonehenge on 19 June 1918 and appears to have been there for some time as he had been granted four days leave in London. There are two photos of Stocker on pp.173 and 174 of 'Diary of a Night Bomber Pilot in World War I'. According to Semple, Stocker received concussion in the crash.

Stocker had only just arrived at the squadron and like other United States Naval Air Service personnel was posted to this British squadron as the Americans made preparations to set up their own strategic Northern Bombing Group. Ronald Tullis was the most experienced of the three-man crew and had been piloting his own aircraft since May, if not before. Reginald has been at the squadron for five weeks, but four days before the crash he was flying as rear Air Gunner for Ellison and Dell. Why would a trained pilot like Reginald be flying as the third crew man as the gun layer, a job that any Air Mechanic do? I think that Reginald's flight was a morning training flight



*Les Baraques Military Cemetery and Reginald Binckes' CWGC headstone.*

*:Author*

rather than an operational mission, there was *little war flying due to unfavourable weather*, and that Ronald Tullis was the more experienced man sitting with the learner pilot. Stocker may simply have gone along for the ride.

Robert Maury Stocker was US Naval Aviator No.141 and his aero certificate is dated 18 December 1917 and signed by the then Secretary of State for the US Navy, a certain Franklin D. Roosevelt. Very shortly after the crash Stocker appears to have transferred from 214 Squadron to a US Navy bombing unit that was part of the Northern Bombing Group.

This consisted of United States Navy and United States Marine Corps squadrons tasked with the strategic bombing of German U-boat bases along the Belgian coast during World War I. On paper the Northern Bombing Group was to have a day bombing wing and a night bombing wing, operating from six aerodromes, with a separate repair and supply base, located in the area around Calais and Dunkirk. Each of the six Navy night wing squadrons was to have ten Caproni Ca.5 bombers operating in two flights of five; and each of the six USMC day wing squadrons was to have eighteen Aircro DH4 bombers

operating in three flights of six.

Difficulty in obtaining aircraft caused a reduction in the planned strength of the Northern Bombing Group to four day flying squadrons and four night flying squadrons on 31 May 1918. Night squadrons 1 and 2 were assigned to Saint-Inglevert aerodrome where 214 Squadron were already based. Caproni was contracted to the delivery of thirty bombers in June and July, and eighty more in August. However only eighteen had been delivered by the end of August, and their Fiat engines were unsatisfactory. Ronald Tullis clearly did not rate them. One photo in his album has a Caproni in flight with the label *An Italian deathtrap – Caproni bomber*.

The only Northern Bombing Group night raid was made on 15 August 1918 by a single Ca.5 bomber to Ostend; but seven United States Navy pilots and about 40 enlisted men participated in several raids flying two 214 Squadron RAF Handley Page bombers from St Inglevert. Could Ensign Stocker have remained at St Inglevert and joined the Northern Bombing Group? By the time the war ended only six Caproni Ca.5s had been delivered to the US Navy night wing aerodromes and only two of these were operational.

Robert Stocker served with distinction until the Armistice and was awarded the Naval Cross. His medal reads: *The President of the United States of America takes pleasure in presenting the Navy Cross to Ensign Robert M. Stocker, United States Navy (Reserve Force), for distinguished and heroic service as an Aviator of land planes attached to the Northern Bombing Group in active operations co-operating with the Allied Armies on the Belgian front during September, October and November, 1918, bombing enemy bases, aerodromes, submarine bases, ammunition dumps, railroad junctions, etc.*

Tragically, having survived the dangers of active service in France, Robert Maury Stocker was to die in a flying accident only a year later on 24 November 1919. His plane, a Briggs F Boat, A5255, crashed into the Delaware River. Stocker and the other crew man died. Unfortunately, Stocker's body was not found for a further four months, on 19 March 1919.

Extracts from Robert Stocker's Funeral Notice and Obituary in *The Daily Press* of 20 March 1920 read:

#### Funeral of Robert Stocker Jr

Remains of young aviator were found yesterday in the Delaware River

.....Lieutenant Stocker, who distinguished himself by saving two men after his arms were broken in France, was a naval aviator at the time of his tragic death. He was making an exhibition flight when the big seaplane fell into the water, killing Lieutenant Stocker and his companion. Although a search has been constantly made for the body the remains were only found yesterday. .... Lieutenant Stocker graduated from the Hampton high school and had joined the aviation corps when the call came for troops. He went to France and was in the flying corps about a year, when his machine fell and his arms were broken. Two of his companions were badly hurt, and the machine caught fire.

*Lieutenant Stocker heroically saved his companions by pulling them from the burning machine. He was 22 years old.*

#### The War Continues for Reginald's Squadron

Three nights after Reginald died, on that of 24/25 July, another crew from 214 Squadron suffered a similar accident to Reginald's, overturning on take-off at St Inglevert. The circumstances appear almost identical to Reginald's crash one week before. Handley Page O/400 C9682, crewed by Lt H.A. Mc Cormack, Cpl E.A. Barber and Lt J.C. Foster USN was taking off downwind for a raid. It turned over in crops and caught fire causing the bomb load to explode. Fortunately, all three crew were uninjured in the crash, fire and subsequent explosions.

C9682 was going to be part of an important historical raid that night when Reginald's former squadron mates dropped the RAF's first 1,650-lb bomb on the enemy at Middlekerke. This was the heaviest bomb to be dropped in the war. It was 11 feet long. It was dropped by the crew that Reginald had flown with on 13 July, Lt Ellison and Sgt Dell.

Lt Ellison recorded in his logbook: 1st time the largest bomb had been dropped on active service. Had 3 attempts to get in and was also shot at by scout. It made a huge explosion and hole about 50 feet across and put out all S.L. (searchlights) and A.A.

The following account of the effect of the raid has been extracted from the records of the 5th Group, Dover Patrol: [The bomb] *functioned successfully and all the lights in the town immediately went out and AA fire (which had been intense) stopped and was not renewed although a subsequent photograph showed that the bomb had dropped in a field about half a mile east of the town. The crater caused by the bomb had a diameter of over 50 feet and the spread of earth displaced covered an area over 100 yards in diameter.*

The bomb had been dropped successfully and had exploded, but unfortunately the crew missed the target by over half a mile! This lack of accuracy with the massive bomb continued to plague 214 Squadron. The bomb worked, but 214 Squadron was not delivering them anywhere near the target. Cpl W.E. Wardrop, who flew with Reginald on the eventful 16 June mission over Bruges, was the Commanding Officer's bomb aimer and had a similar lack of success. Wardrop's first attempt with the 1650-lb bomb missed by 5 miles! The problem was that the bomb sights on the Handley Pages were designed to be used with a completely different size and shape of bomb, which had a very different trajectory when dropped from height. Once they had designed a different sight for aiming the massive bombs, accuracy improved.

The rest of July 1918 appeared to be a washout for the Squadron. Bad weather continued for several days.

On the 25 July 5th Group recorded that *No night bombing possible due to weather conditions.* The same thing happened on the night of the 26th: *No night operations possible owing to weather conditions.* Lt Ellison had



Ronald Tullis.  
:D.R. Tullis



R.M. Stocker, 4th from left, standing, in this shot taken at Hampton Roads, Virginia in November 1917.

no flights in his logbook for the next four nights. He flew a daytime test flight on 31 July and then a raid on Bruges on 1 August 1918 but was forced to return due to bad weather. HP 4578, with Lt. Ellison and Sgt Dell attempted a raid on Bruges Docks. They took off at midnight but *had to return due to bad weather* after 137 minutes in the air.

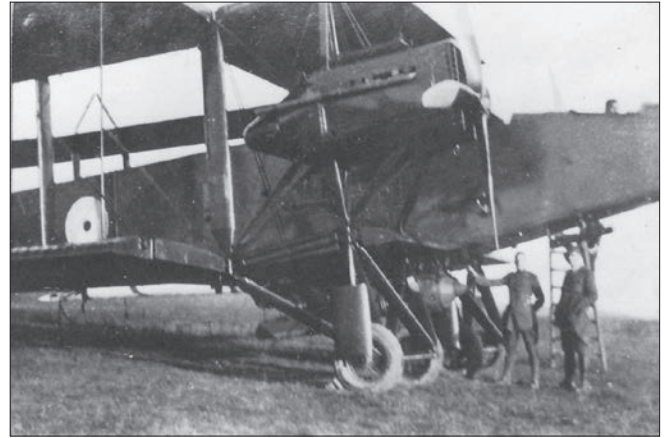
On 8 August 1918, the British Army launched a major offensive against the over-extended and exhausted German troops, the Battle of Amiens. Allied forces pushed, on average, 11 km (6.8 miles) into enemy territory by the end of the first day. Canadian troops advanced as far as 13 km (8.1 miles). General Erich Ludendorff described the first day of Amiens as the "Schwarzer Tag des deutschen Heeres" (The Black Day of the German Army). It was the start of the one-hundred-day offensive that would win the war for the allies. The Germans were finally in retreat.

No. 214 Squadron continued to be based at Saint Inglevert until 23 October 1918, when they moved to Quilen as the Germans retreated. A week later, on 30 October and less than a fortnight before the end of the war, the squadron moved from Quilen to Camphlin aerodrome. Just before the Armistice, 214 Squadron was tasked with a very important mission. The squadron prepared to get ready for a bombing flight to Berlin on 11 November: On the never to be forgotten morning of Armistice Day, 11 November 1918, they were awaiting the very word to "Go" - to bomb Berlin! *My husband told me and always maintained that his comrades and he himself, bitterly regretted that the cessation of hostilities countermanded the order to bomb Berlin that very day and that they begged to be allowed to go through with the plan* (Brackles. *Memoirs of a Pioneer of Civil Aviation*. 1952. Publishers Mackay and Co. Chatham p.29).

After the war it was found that the bombing of Bruges by 214 Squadron and other bombing squadrons both RNAS and RAF had a minimal impact in the long term. Raleigh and Jones *War in the Air Volume 7* summarised the contents of AIR 1/678/21/13/2137 and AIR 1/2115/207/506/1 'Report of the Air Bombing Committee appointed by the Air Ministry' to enquire into the effects of bombing in Belgium. March 1919. *A post-war survey of the results of dropping 6,359 bombs on the docks at Bruges and a further 353 bombs on La Brugeoise munitions works (an industrial site in the centre of the town) a total of 275.1 tons of bombs between February 1917 and November 1918 showed that there had been no resulting cut back in activity or output.....the Germans did feel obliged to provide the submarine pens that they had built in Bruges with two metre thick roofs, though none of these were ever actually hit by a bomb'*

In July 1919 214 Squadron flew their Handley Pages to Egypt only to be disbanded on 1 February 1920. The Squadron was reformed at Boscombe Down in 1935 again as a bomber squadron. The Squadron was given a badge and a motto around about this time.

Their emblem was a Nightjar and the Latin motto 'Ultor



The 1650-lb SN bomb slung under a HP O/400.

:CCI Archive

in Umbris' is translated as Avenging in the Shadows. The reformed squadron flew Handley Page Harrows going on to have a distinguished history before being finally disbanded on 28 January 1977.

Reginald Binckes's death and service to his country were recorded by his old school. Reginald was one of 160 young men, who had gone to Dame Alice Owens Boy's School, who made the ultimate sacrifice. Reginald's name and theirs' are carved on the school memorial stone that is in the grounds of the school now relocated to Potters Bar.

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- Little Collection University of Leeds. Four 214 Squadron logbooks including those of Sgt Dell and Lt Ellison.
- National Archive Kew. 5th Group Daily Summary of Operations and Weekly Personnel Summaries. 214 Squadron Bombing Reports provide a great deal of detail. Much still to be discovered in the Archive.

