



WORLD WAR ONE AIRCRAFT CARRIER PIONEER

THE STORY & DIARIES OF
JACK McCLEERY RNAS RAF

GUY WARNER

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*The Story and Diaries of Captain
J M McCleery RNAS/RAF*

by

Guy Warner



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Foreword

The Royal Naval Air Service was a dynamic force which, in its short existence, became the first to create the technologies and techniques that enabled aircraft to operate from ships at sea on a regular basis. While the British Army had found it relatively easy to operate aircraft from fields near the troops when the Royal Flying Corps was established in 1913, the Royal Navy had no such capability. Its air service had to start from scratch to work out how to launch aircraft from ships in the open ocean in all but the most severe weather; how to arm and equip them to play an effective part in fleet operations; and, most difficult of all, how to land safely back onto a moving, pitching and rolling ship at the end of a sortie. HMS *Furious*, which was commissioned for service in the Grand Fleet in July 1917, represented one of the most significant advances.

In this fascinating book, Guy Warner brings the experience of Flight Sub Lieutenant Jack McCleery RNAS, the son of a Belfast flax mill owner who served in HMS *Furious*, vividly to life. His sources were Jack's wartime diaries, hundreds of letters home made available by his son and three albums of unique photographs taken by Jack and his friends. After volunteering for the RNAS in 1916 Jack proved to be an exceptional pilot and was hand-picked for *Furious* by its first senior pilot, Squadron Commander Dunning. He stayed with her until after the Armistice in November 1918 and saw or participated in many historic events; among them Dunning's epoch-making first deck landing in August 1917 and the later trials with the landing deck fitted aft. He flew reconnaissance missions in wireless telegraphy-fitted Short 184 and Sopwith 1½ Strutters from the ship into the German Bight, having to 'ditch' into the sea after them to be rescued by sea-boats from destroyers. The very word 'ditching', when an aircraft comes down in the sea, stems from the RNAS of this period when aircraft that went into the water were said to 'fall into the ditch' or simply to 'ditch'. His colleagues flew seven Sopwith 2F1 Camels from the ship in July 1918 to carry out the first successful carrier air strike in history, destroying the Zeppelins L 54 and L 60 at Tondern and he served with some of the great RNAS personalities, including Wing Commander Bell Davies VC and Squadron Commander Rutland, of Jutland fame. Jack witnessed and subsequently wrote about the fiercest air battles ever fought over the sea.

Flying from the first aircraft carriers was a huge technical achievement, not followed by any other nation on a regular basis until some years after the British but it has received scant attention, much greater emphasis having been given to the more easily seen and photographed land-based operations of the RFC and then the RAF in France. Guy's book redresses this shortcoming and gives an important insight into the embarked flying by RNAS aircraft using Jack's own words from the diaries and letters interspersed with well-thought-out comments and historical explanations. Jack was deeply moved by the sight of the German fleet arriving off the Firth of Forth to surrender and the quality of his writing is emphasised by the fact that the impression of the event he sent to his father was subsequently published in the *Belfast Telegraph*. Guy ends this book with several interesting appendices which add

an understanding of the RNAS in its final year.

Having sat down to have a glance at the book when I received it, I found myself totally absorbed, unable to put it down until I had finished. The large collection of previously unpublished photographs complements a work of major significance and Guy Warner is to be congratulated on producing an excellent book which tells the story of a young Ulsterman in war who played no small part within the RNAS in operations which changed the face of naval warfare for ever. I am sure that the book will attract considerable interest and that many others will enjoy it as much as I did.

David Hobbs MBE
Commander Royal Navy (Retired)
Former Curator and Deputy Director
of the Fleet Air Arm Museum
Twyford
September 2000



The North Sea and home waters 1914–118

Introduction

Jack McCleery was one of the world's first carrier pilots. Between 1917 and 1919 he served in and flew from the Royal Navy's 'hush-hush' ship, the aircraft carrier HMS *Furious*, the most technologically innovative and advanced naval aviation platform of its day. Much of the following account is in Jack's own words; he kept a diary throughout his naval service and also wrote more than 150 letters home to his parents in Belfast. For the most part his original spelling, syntax and punctuation have been retained. To this have been added linking passages, notes and remarks explaining the importance of key events, people, places, aircraft and ships, setting the story within its historical context.

It was truly a happy chance that I was first given access to the McCleery family archive in the spring of 2009, the hundredth anniversary year of British naval aviation, celebrated by the RN's Fleet Air Arm as 'FlyNavy 100'. This book is therefore dedicated to the gallant naval airmen (and women) of the Royal Naval Air Service, Royal Air Force and Fleet Air Arm. The photographs and drawings which illustrate the text have all been supplied from albums kept by the family since Jack compiled them in 1919. Grateful thanks are due to the family, and in particular Jack's son, John, for his invaluable help and encouragement. I would also like to express my appreciation to Commander David Hobbs for his Foreword; I hope that my text does justice to his very kind words. Thanks also to several friends and fellow members of the Ulster Aviation Society: Ernie Cromie for proof reading; to Graham Mehaffy for his map-making expertise; and to Michael Clarke. Thanks also to the archival staff at the Fleet Air Arm Museum, David Wragg, Angela Campbell and her very helpful staff at Greenisland Library and, as always, my wife, Lynda. It would also be very remiss of me not to thank Peter Coles and all the helpful team at Pen & Sword for their hard work, advice and expertise.

In a remarkably prophetic letter John McCleery wrote to his fourteen-year-old son Jack on boarding school on 11 July 1912.

My dear old Jack,

I was greatly interested in your nice long letter which I got yesterday. It was very well put together and your bicycle tour was very well described. If you take care, and give some thought to it, you ought to turn out a very good letter writer indeed, and believe me that something worth striving for, for there are not many can write a really interesting description or narrative. Perhaps you might be able afterwards to write something more enduring, who knows? Have you ever yet had a wish to do something for your country?... Now good bye for the present, dear boy. God take care of you. Your loving father

JO McCleery.

As we will see, Jack did indeed serve his country in two World Wars and it is my hope that this volume will meet the wishes expressed by John Orr McCleery more than ninety years

CHAPTER ONE

Childhood

Jack was born in Belfast on 15 March 1898, the eldest of five children, with two brothers Tony and Kenneth, and two sisters, Peggy and Kitty. Tony was two years younger than Jack while Kenneth was two years younger again. Peggy was born in 1908 and Kitty in 1911. His father John, Uncle Hamilton and grandfather Hamilton earned their living in the linen trade as flax spinners; whereas his mother Fanny's father, John Milligan, was a prosperous, self-made cotton yarn agent in Liverpool. The McCleery family's experience in flax spinning dates back to the 1850s when Hamilton senior left Portaferry in Co Down on the shores of Strangford Lough (where there had been McCleerys living since the 1600s) to serve his apprenticeship in Belfast; he and his sons worked in or managed ten different spinning mills prior to 1898, when the brothers John and Hamilton purchased William Ross & Co., Flax Spinners, which was located on the Falls Road in Belfast, with Robert Anderson, later Sir Robert and thrice Lord Mayor of Belfast, as a third (non-executive) shareholder.

Jack first set foot in a boat at the age of five months, in the narrows, from the shore of Portaferry. One of his earliest public appearances was on 2 February 1901 when he attended St Enoch's Church for the first time, for a memorial service in memory of Queen Victoria who had died on 22 January. It was claimed to be the largest Presbyterian church in Ireland and dominated one side of Carlisle Circus at the junction of the Crumlin and Antrim Roads, North Belfast not far from the family home on the Old Cavehill Road. 'He conducted himself very well indeed', wrote his proud father. In 1903, his father wrote that at Duncairn Infant School, 'the children played Blind Man's Bluff, and Musical Chairs – but Jack wouldn't join in. However he did enjoy the lantern views of China shown afterwards, immensely.' Holidays were often spent in Portaferry and the village always acted as a magnet for the family when the opportunity presented itself. They were always welcome to stay with Aunt Eliza and James [Orr], in their High Street house for holidays or weekends; days there were filled with boating, fishing, swimming, walking, tennis and picnics.

Jack and his brothers attended Belfast Royal Academy, and Merchiston Castle School in Edinburgh. When the Great War began in August 1914 many Irish citizens from all parts of the country volunteered for service. The mood of the country was well summarised in the *Belfast Telegraph*.

We go to war to save honour, reputation, good name and respect. This War is due to German aggressiveness. We must teach the Kaiser a lesson. We did not want this war and stayed out of it for as long as we decently could. Through no wish or part of our own we find ourselves engaged in the greatest struggle the world has ever known.

John McCleery joined the Irish Home Defence Corps in May 1915, drilling at Belfast's George's Market. In September 1915 he commenced regular patrolling in the docks, after his

day's work at the Mill, often from 8 pm until midnight or sometimes as late as 3 am, as a member of the Belfast Volunteer Defence Corps.

Jack went straight from school into the family business in September 1915. During his apprenticeship, he was required to climb to the top of the mill chimney, well over 100 feet high, watched by many of the workers. This initiation did not cure his vertigo or prevent him from applying for service in the Royal Flying Corps in February 1916. He was unsuccessful in this, receiving a letter from the War Office stating that no further direct commissions in the RFC were being given and that he should apply for service in an Officers' Cadet Battalion prior to selection for training at one of the RFC Schools of Instruction at either Reading or Oxford. He next applied to the Royal Naval Air Service and was supported in this by a letter to the Admiralty from the Lord Mayor of Belfast, Crawford McCullagh, which stated:

It gives me much pleasure to recommend him. He is well-educated and most exemplary in every respect and is the son of Mr JO McCleery, one of our well known citizens, for whom the highest respect is entertained.

CHAPTER TWO

The Admiralty and Crystal Palace

Jack attended the Admiralty in London for interview on 18 October 1916; he was just over eighteen and a half years old. That evening he sent a postcard to his mother, who was on holiday at the Strathearn Hydro at Crieff in Perthshire, perhaps enjoying the waters while his father played golf. This was the first of the missives he wrote to his mother and father between 1916 and 1919. In this he stated:

I had a lovely crossing on Monday night.....Yesterday it poured all day, went to Zoo. Today fine – did some sightseeing. Went to Admiralty and they are to communicate results to me. Am certain I'm through. Tell you all later. Saw a balloon when coming down here. Loved searchlights tonight.....Excuse scribble. Jack

This first communication is untypical in its brevity and in its closing salutation. All the rest of his letters, apart from two, he concluded with, 'I remain, Your loving son, Jack'.

According to contemporary reports the Admiralty interview would have covered such topics as the candidate's ability to ride a horse or sail a boat or ride a motorcycle. Random questions were barked out by senior officers with fierce eyebrows and much gold braid. A public school education was a decided advantage. The interview must have gone well, as no sooner had he reached his uncle and aunt in Birkenhead, breaking off his journey home, than a telegram arrived summoning him back to London that evening,

Uncle Willie and the other two aunts saw me off to London again by the 10 pm train. As there was talk of a troop train, I travelled 1st Class by their advice. Had to change at Chester and Crewe. From Crewe the troop train business started and soldiers filled every carriage. They were lying on the floors – everywhere. There were six in my *first* class carriage! So I got no sleep! We arrived at Euston at 4.30 am. About $\frac{3}{4}$ hour late. Then the tube did not start till 5.30 and there were no taxis! Well, at any rate I got here [Finchley] by tube, train and legs about 6.30! Uncle Arthur let me in and had some grub ready for me, also a hot water bottle in my bed – I was glad of it as I was nearly frozen. As the soldiers had all smoked hard I woke up with a most awful headache and my eyes seemed all sore. My throat was like coarse sandpaper. Well I *passed* my exam and I am now a Probationary Flight Officer! They will probably call me up in a fortnight or three weeks they said. The Admiralty said that if I was stopped to refer the other person to the – Admiralty! They say that I'm really an officer in the Navy now and no one has the right to interfere with me outside the RN! – even though I haven't got my togs [uniform] yet. When I am called up they say I get a 1st Class pass anywhere. We aren't allowed on buses but I can go on other vehicles I believe. I go to Crystal

Palace for a month or two and then to an aerodrome and later possibly to Windermere [civilian and then RNAS flying training on the lake at Hill of Oaks had been ongoing there since early 1915] for instruction in seaplane work. I was the only prospective pilot to go through the medical exam! I was the only one in for it!! They are awfully strict though. remain, Your loving son, Probationary Flight Officer JM McCleery RN!

The medical examination included such items as climbing a rope in the nude, hopping around the room on one foot and a colour blindness test, which involved sorting beads. Back home having crossed from Liverpool to Belfast in the SS *Graphic* of the Belfast Steamship Company as his parents were still away, he stayed with his Uncle Hamilton,

I was out at Dunmurry at about 4 o'clock. I said I would lie down. I just lay on the bed and pulled the eiderdown over me. *And* fell asleep. I woke up in darkness. I looked or rather groped all round for matches to light the gas. I could not feel any. Then I remembered they used candles so I tried to find a candlestick but could not. So I went to the door to see my watch and it was 10.30 pm! I got on my slippers and went to the drawing room. They were surprised! Uncle H had gone into my room at teatime and said 'Jack' and as I did not answer he concluded I was in for the night. So I had some supper, read your letter and went to bed again, after having been told they used electric light!

Jack's mother must have enquired about the clothes he would need when he went away:

They will send me a list of the kit I will require when they send for me. I don't know whether a muffler would be any use, thank you, but even if it wasn't I would be glad of it on the bike. [Jack was a motorbike enthusiast.] I'm sure the mittens would be useful. But if you really do make them, please make them a tight fit, as my last pair was too loose. Thank you for offering to make them.... You must not address your letters to Prob. — — RN, really. I'm still 'Mr' when at home without a uniform, what I said in my letter was more or less a joke. Of course, it doesn't matter and you can if you like.

There wasn't much time to prepare Jack for his naval service but no doubt the experience of sending him away to boarding school in Edinburgh helped with deciding what to pack. By the first week of November he was back in London.

We went straight to Gamages [department store] to ask about my badges and had to go to another for my cap. I'm just in from Church as I had not time to wait for the sermon.... I will write as soon as possible when I get

there....Thanks for the sweets.

The Crystal Palace at Sydenham in South London had been taken over by the Royal Navy in early September 1914 to be the RN Divisional Depot, where large numbers passed through its training battalions. More importantly, it was the initial training establishment for all Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve (RNVR) personnel and also for officers destined for the Royal Naval Division (RND). Later, other categories of naval personnel, including the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS), also got their initial training there – from 1 April 1916 all newly entered RNAS officers went first to Crystal Palace for basic disciplinary and technical training. I

official name as a RN shore station was HMS *Victory VI*. Jack was one of over 125,000 men serving in the RNAS, RND and RNVR who were trained for war service there.

On 12 November 1916, Jack wrote:

Here I am at the Crystal Palace. There seems to be no end to it so far! I sleep in a house called Ashurst in a room with three other chaps. I paid 5/- for servants' wages in the house. I am writing this at the club which is situated in the CP itself and is very nice and comfy. I think the distance record for not having to salute must be 4½ feet here! We were told we would be here for five weeks and would then be sent to our air station, presumably to learn to fly. I have to get my buttons changed to RNAS ones. [The emblem of the RNAS was an eagle with outstretched wings which replaced the RN's fouled anchor on buttons and cap badges.] They seem to be a fairly decent lot of chaps here. Well I'll close now as it's nearly dinner time – quite good grub on the whole!

Over the next week or two a regular flow of letters described aspects of Jack's experiences at the Royal Navy Depot, Crystal Palace. He wrote on 14 November:

Just a few lines to keep the home fires burning. Life is very strenuous here if one really wants to get on, there is little time for letters. I am not allowed to give any particulars of the place or as to numbers of men. We get our first drill at 7.15 am and it's work from that time to 7.30 pm (dinner). After dinner we are free and I come up here to swot. It's more secluded than the club. We do only three weeks' drill here and then two weeks' of lectures. Then if we pass our exams we go to some aerodrome. I forgot to say that we get our pay by the month and can deposit it with the Paymaster if we wish. But the State takes no liability if it's lost, so I'm going to put mine in my cash box in my locked trunk. We had to apply for our £15 k allowance. I haven't got it yet but will send it on to you when I do. We can live here on our income all right I think. Things are very cheap at the stores here – boots etc.

In his next letter he advised that officers were not allowed to go to YMCA services but that he was going to take men to the Presbyterian Church on Sunday morning and that Mr and Mrs Norton of the YMCA had befriended him. He had also discovered that his room-mate had served in France from 1914 but had been invalided out of the Army with shell shock and broken nerves, from which it must be hoped that he had fully recovered as he was now learning to fly. On a more martial note Jack added:

I'm getting on quite well here, have been drilling a squad, learning musketry and revolver and later the Lewis Gun. At present it is nearly all military drill except for a class in seamanship – tying knots. Also physical drill – Swedish.

The drill was conducted on the cycle track by Royal Marine Light Infantry Drill Sergeant. Some more domestic details were revealed in Jack's letter of November 19:

We get up about an hour later than I did at home. Breakfast at the same time (about) as you. This consists of good porridge, toast and bacon or fish (or both) and then tea or coffee. That's all right!! Lunch is about an hour and a quarter earlier than official time at my last station in Belfast [home]. It is soup, meat or pie or fish, potatoes, vegetables and usually stewed fruit.

or tart after. Cheese and if one wishes, coffee can be got in the club (you can get stronger things too). Tea at 4.45 – bread butter, tea or coffee, jam, marmalade or honey. Dinner three quarters of an hour later than yours and reminds one of Crieff. Entrée (all sorts of weird things), soup, meat of some sort, good rolls, potatoes and vegetables and tea or coffee and the King's health in water! So the food's all right. Of course, we wear full uniform for dinner.

The mention of drinking His Majesty's health in water would have been important to Jack's father, as he was a dedicated member of the Irish Temperance League from 1890 to 1920, becoming president in 1911. Jack also noted in his letter that he had sent a booklet to his best friend, George Herriot, who was also hoping to join the RNAS. This is a little hardback about the size of a small pocket diary and was titled *Hints for Flight Sub-Lieutenants Royal Naval Air Service by 'Flight Lieutenant'* (some extracts from which have been included in [Appendix 5](#)). Jack concluded his letter with a few thoughts concerning the family pet, Jock:

I think a coat of tar would do the barrel good [Jock's kennel]. Also a couple of boards hammered on the front like this [here he added a drawing of the barrel, with dog and boards in position] to keep Jock warmer.

His last letter of the month was written while on weekend leave in the house of a Mr Bowden and his sister, YMCA colleagues of Mr Norton.

They are very nice people indeed. Yesterday afternoon, Mr Norton, his wife and I went into town and into St Paul's. It is fine inside. We stayed for about 15 minutes during the service and then came away. We then went to the central YMCA in Tottenham Court Road and which really is a splendid place, I believe Mr N said they pay £5000 a year ground rent. There's a rifle range, a really beautiful swimming bath, about the finest I've seen and a very fine gym. About 600 men sleep there every night. Fine lounges and two very nice-looking restaurants. Then we had tea at an ABC, after which it was very dark so we went to a picture house. The morning I went to a congregational church with Mr N – these people are C of E. It was a good service only they sang twice as quick as at home. I'm just down after having a bath. You have to take things when you can here. I don't think I was ever as 'done' as this weekend. I nearly fell asleep last night at supper and also today during the sermon – not that I wasn't listening. On Friday night I went to a Mrs Pilkington's (another YMCA lady) for supper. We played music for a while. I played a beautiful mandoline and then had a shot at a banjo and was just getting 'Swanee River' when I had to go. There is also a boy and a girl in the family – two girls to be exact, one between Peggy and Kitty's age and the other – well I didn't like to ask her, but she's about my age. I'm probably going again next Friday.

He then went on to outline what was in store at Crystal Palace and further progress with weapons training,

Next week, or rather this one is our hardest. We have squad drill all day and they start to examine us on Thursday. I hope I get through. I believe it's a great help to yell at your men for the least little thing, or if there isn't anything wrong to pretend there is! They understand

being for the most part brother officers. So I intend to try. We did revolver shooting last week – a huge, long Mark VI Webley. I did all right and pretty well in the miniature rifle shooting. I passed my test in the Lewis gun all OK and was being instructed in the Webley Scott automatic pistol yesterday. You can strip them in under six seconds! I did it in 12 which was the best of our squad. We are having lectures on ‘Aero Engines’ and ‘Theory of Flight’ on the evenings. It’s very interesting but there are a lot of notes! I’m really very well, though tired and I’m sure I’m growing! You could tell the manager [at the Mill] and any of the foremen you come across that I was asking about them please, Father.

At the beginning of December, Jack was able to meet with his friends George and Hunter Herriot for a weekend and reported not only that he had had a good time with them but also had passed his exam with flying colours. George was the same age as Jack, while Hunter was four years older. The following weekend he spent with his new friends, the Pilkingtons. He had now reached a decision about the future direction of his training,

I’m off Windermere now. If I learn there, I’ll never be able to learn [to fly] land machines, so I’m going to some land aerodrome and when I can manage a land bus [aeroplane] I’ll volunteer for the others. Then I’ll know both. You can’t learn both if you start with seaplanes as once they’ve got you they’ll not let you go. They are always only too pleased to get seaplane pilots. [The first (relatively) successful ascent from water by a British seaplane was on 18 November 1911 by Commander Oliver Schwann RN flying an Avro Type D biplane at Barrow-in-Furness.] Oh, while I remember, my collars are 15s and I would like *soft* cuffs. Also another pair of shirts. It’s cold and miserable here today. This is as unpleasant a morning as we’ve had yet and my fingers are nearly – not quite though, numb. I’m wearing a waistcoat under my sweater now. Would you please let me know how much the jackets are, and if you’ll get Paine to make me another, I’ll send you the money for it. A gold eagle on the left arm, six inches up the cuff, and eagle buttons. Also strong pockets and if he’d make it a little freer under the arms and round the chest. The sleeves and length are right.

Some trainees from the depot were being sent to France and at one stage Jack thought he might be one of them, where at Vendôme, west of Orleans, a training unit for the RNAS had just been opened in November 1916. It owed its existence to the bad weather of the winter of 1915–16, which had seriously interfered with flying training in the United Kingdom and consequently a new site for a training aerodrome was sought in an area where good flying weather might reasonably be expected. In the event he was not chosen and was able to reflect in his letter, his pleasure at being in an aeroplane for the first time. Several instructional airframes were supplied to Crystal Palace for non-flying duties. These were outmoded Short S.38 Pusher Biplanes.

I was in an aeroplane today, a proper one, but it was only adjusting some of the control wires. I also started up an aero engine by ‘swinging the prop’. It takes a lot of doing and makes a fine row. So I’ve enjoyed my morning’s work. When the engine is started it takes about 6 or 8 chaps holding on to the tail of the machine to keep it from running forward. I can send messages by Semaphore all OK now and can read slowly. I’m not very far on with Morse yet.

A little six-page booklet, printed on heavy card, has been preserved. It is titled *Signal Code* 1908 (*Reprint 1915*) and bears the inscription 'Flight Officer JM McCleery Dec. 12. 1916'. It contains full colour illustrations of the 'Flags and Pendants used in Naval Signalling', 'Semaphore Signs and Significations' and 'Signs used within the Morse Code'. No doubt it was three pence well spent.

CHAPTER THREE

Eastchurch

Jack's time at Crystal Palace had been completed successfully and his next letter, which was dated 15 December, comes from RNAS Station, Eastchurch, Kent.

Eastchurch, on the Isle of Sheppey, was the first Royal Naval Air Station. Originally, it was the home of the Royal Aero Club flying field, which was, by 1910, rapidly developing as a centre for civilian flying. The Short brothers, Horace, Eustace and Oswald, who were well known for manufacturing balloons, set up a factory at Eastchurch when they branched out into aircraft manufacture. The first Royal Navy officer to learn to fly was Lieutenant G. Colmore, who did so at his own expense, gaining his Royal Aero Club Aviator's Certificate (No. 15) at Eastchurch on 21 June 1910, flying a Short biplane. Francis McClean, a pioneer aviator (who himself qualified for his Royal Aero Club 'ticket' No. 21 in September 1910) and philanthropist, owned much of the land at Eastchurch, and leased it to the Royal Aero Club for a 'peppercorn' rent. In February 1911, he offered the Admiralty the use of two of his Shorts aircraft, so that naval officers could learn to fly. Cecil Grace, another pioneer aviator (Certificate No. 4) with a hangar at Eastchurch, offered to provide free flying instruction for the four men selected by the Navy. Unfortunately, Grace was killed before training could commence, but his offer was picked up by another pioneer, George Cockburn, who held Certificate No. 5. The only fees paid by the Admiralty were £20 per officer paid to Short Brothers for six months' technical instruction plus running costs and any repair bills. The four officers were Lieutenants CR Samson, AM Longmore, R Gregory (all RN) and EL Gerrard (Royal Marine Light Infantry). They were awarded Certificates 71 and 72 (on 25 April), 73 and 76 (on 2 May).

In December 1911, McClean acquired a further ten acres of land next to the club field, and in an act of further generosity and patriotism, gave this to the Navy for the establishment of their own flying field. Eastchurch thus became the first Royal Naval Air Station, and soon became known as the Eastchurch Naval Flying School.

In 1912, military and naval aviation was combined into a single service, the Royal Flying Corps, with a Military Wing, and a Naval Wing. It was intended that the RFC would employ unified training at a Central Flying School, a single source of aircraft supply from the Royal Aircraft Factory at Farnborough, and a unified Reserve. This was an uneasy relationship at best. The Admiralty naturally enough jealous of its position as the 'Senior Service', had no intention of being subservient to the Army, and kept Eastchurch as a flying school, rather than defer to the Central Flying School. It did not take long before the name Naval Wing was dropped, and the unofficial name Royal Naval Air Service came into general use. June 1913 brought the final breach between the two wings of the RFC when the Admiralty issued a series of regulations governing the organisation of the Royal Naval Air Service, which thereby became a distinct branch of the Royal Navy in much the same fashion as the Royal Marine

Remarkably the Admiralty was able to make this move without either being questioned or contradicted by either Parliament or the press. It was very much a unilateral declaration of independence.

The first operational unit to be prepared for overseas service with the naval element of the British Expeditionary Force was set up at Eastchurch on 8 August 1914 and was known as the Eastchurch (Mobile) Squadron. This title soon lapsed and on 1 September 1914, when stationed at St Pol, it became No. 3 Squadron, being commanded by Longmore and the Samson. As well as the Naval Flying School, Eastchurch was the home of various RNAS squadrons, wings and units from 1914 onwards, including, No. 2 Squadron, the Gunner Schools Flight, the Observers' School Flight, D Test Flight, the Spotting Flight and the Eastchurch War Flight.

The Commanding Officer at Eastchurch in December 1916 was Wing Commander Arthur Longmore, who had returned to the station where he had learned to fly following active service in France, Belgium and at the Battle of Jutland. He noted:

It had grown considerably since I had last seen it, and the aerodrome had been extended to the north-east with new hangars. Total strength 90 officers and 900 men. Eastchurch was never a very lively spot and it was even less so in war time, particularly in the middle of winter. A pack of beagles hunted the strong marsh hare, and provided good sport. There were cross country runs for the officers and men, and bleak walks on which my dog [also called Jock used to accompany me.

Jack's first impressions were as follows:

We were told by our 'loot' [lieutenant] in charge yesterday morning that we were to be at the CP over Xmas. Then about an hour later our names were up on draft and here I am. If the weather is good we have to fly on Sundays as this is a war station. It's about the biggest aerodrome in the country, miles from anywhere decent. This place is a sea of mud literally. No drinking water as the huts are new and it's not all laid out yet. So I drink lime juice and soda and most of the others, things more manly! You will probably get a note from Gieve tailors, saying I have opened an account. The reason is that we were advised to when we left CP as this place is so far away. Accounts are then furnished monthly to me. I bought a regulation tin box – a long 42" affair for a trunk and helmet (black and fur-lined) 37/6, goggles (Triplex unbreakable glass, fur-lined) 16/6, gloves (tanned leather gauntlets, rabbit fur inside) 18/6 and 9/6 for cash, as I was short. I would like a good *thick* cardigan *and* a blue knitted muffler, both worn for flying. Any mittens will be very useful. On account of the mud I would also like a pair of plain black rubber (leather heeled) knee boots. There are what are usually called gum boots *but* not thigh boots. At the Palace one could always pay for anything one wanted, but here you have to *sign* a 'chit' or docket, which comes back as an account each month. *Money* seems to be no use here except about once a month. If you're sending a parcel, would you mind putting in some Oxo or Bovril *cubes* as we are going to cook in our room in the mornings before early parade? I'm afraid this letter is nothing but please send me — etc, so far. Oh and I'd like two pieces of Pears soap and two 1/- tubes of toothpaste! We were told today to get flying kit that we hadn't got yet – boots and coat, so if father would send me £11.11.0 I would buy them here. The boots are black knee boots lined with fur and

the coat is black chrome leather with fleece lining. I will have to get them sometime and the last for nearly ever, I might as well get them now. That does away with the other boot altogether. I hope, if the weather's good, to be up tomorrow flying with dual controls.

His next letter was to his best friend, George Herriot, one of very few of these, signed 'Your old Chum', which has survived. His frustration is evident:

I was sold today. We all went to the hangars this morning and I was to go up with the instructor for a 'joy flip'. There were about 15 machines all drawn up and I got in behind the loot. After I had expended about 1000 lbs of kinetic energy, or something equally as hard, managed to get my belt fastened around me. The engine was warmed up – they tick over very nicely with pilot jets, then accelerated and with a roar we bounded forwards – ah the 'supreme moment – then there was a yell and one of the mechanics pointed to something the engine (behind). Some stud was gone, so we had to get out and I didn't go. What I saw remains to be ...not seen, but wafted over to Belfast like a thick blue mist. I was the only one in our lot *not* to go up.

However, there were still sights and sounds to savour:

Those Bristol Scouts or Bullets and the Sopwith Pups are worth seeing and dreaming about. They rise [drawing inserted showing ascent] like this at a most weird angle, it just about takes your breath away to watch them. And when they start to loop, tail slide and side slide with the greatest ease and a *lovely drone*. Well it leaves you with just about *no* breath! Of course they are from the War Flight not the School Flight. There were about 10 buses up once this morning. Two crashes. One chap, when starting off solo in a Curtiss – big and enclosed sort of machines, first of all broke a wheel (the ground was frozen hard) which caused him to bust a bit of his prop and then hit the ground with his left wing. Then he oozed up about 50–100 feet and came down again and ran along the ground until he came to a ditch whereupon the bus stood on its nose and smashed his landing chassis and his prop. It was quite amusing. He was all right of course, except for getting 'strafed' for it. So in spite of not getting up it was quite cheery. It's great to hear about 10 or 15 buses, all lined up, warming up their engines.

Jack also spotted some very unusual types:

They've several fine triplanes and a quad experimental. Also PBs with dihedral planing [wings]. Weird looking buses but quite fine machines.

These aircraft were the Blackburn Triplane, N502, and the Sopwith Triplane, N509, which were being test flown by Squadron Commander Harry Busted of the Design Flight; the Supermarine PB31E Night Hawk, 1388, a very strange-looking, twin-engine machine with a raised, fully enclosed, glazed cockpit and the Pemberton-Billing PB 25s 9002 – 9003.

No doubt hardly able to contain his excitement enough to put pen to paper, Jack wrote to his parents and to George on the following day.

I've some great news to tell you and you can easily guess what it is. Yes I've been up

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