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Tape 285

Air Vice Marshal A J Capel

IT IS AUGUST 1974 AND THIS IS MR LIDDLE OF SUNDERLAND POLYTECHNIC TALKING TO AIR VICE MARSHAL A J CABEL AT HIS HOME BULLAND LODGE, CHIPSTABLE IN SOMERSET WITH REGARD TO HIS FIRST WORLD WAR EXPERIENCE IN THE RFC AND REF.

First of all Air Vice Marshal I would like you to tell me please a little of your background? When and where were you born and what was your Father?

I was born in this house in December 1894 and my Father was a landowner and Justice of The Peace, member of The County Council and prominent in local affairs.

And which school did you go to?

I went to Marlborough College in 1908 until 1913 from where I went to Trinity College, Oxford. An interesting point here is that when I was still at Marlborough I met The Military Secretary at Oxford University and also the bursar of Christ Church. He happened to ask me what I was going to do and I said to him that I had always wanted to go into the army but my Father was adamant that I should go to Trinity College, Oxford. He said to me well you can do both quite easily. I am The Military Secretary at Oxford and I therefore deal with all university candidates for the army and I will send your Father the necessary papers to show him that you can go into the army through Oxford. From that time it was agreed that should be my course and I duly went to Trinity, Oxford and was an university candidate and up till July 1914 I had just completed the army side of the instruction given at Oxford University to candidates for the army which I may say was quite first class.

In August 1914 the war broke out and as I was an university candidate for the army I immediately went to Oxford for a medical examination which I very nearly failed as in those days I stammered very badly. However, I got through and all first year Oxford and Cambridge army candidates were sent to Sandhurst to be the NCOs of the new entry because all the gentleman cadets at Sandhurst were passed out by early August. I therefore became a Sergeant in A company Sandhurst and we were promised that we would only be there for 3 months. This promise was kept and on November 11 1914 I was commissioned into The Somerset Light Infantry. Previous to that date Sandhurst cadets had been asked whether they wished to volunteer for 6 vacancies which were being set aside for newly commissioned officers to go immediately to France to join The Royal Flying Corps to be trained as observers.

It being then well known that most of the pilots would be returning to England in the winter to command squadrons and flights in the expanded Royal Flying Corps to come back in the spring. I did not get one of the 6 vacancies but the day before I was commissioned I was walking out of A company when I met Captain Morton of The Somerset Light Infantry who was an instructor in A company and who had got me into The Somerset Light Infantry and he said one of the 6 officers selected to go as observers had not got parents permission because believe it or not although the war had been going for 3 months it was deemed necessary to get parents permission for a newly commissioned officer to go flying. The Captain said to me I am just going down to the

commandant, would you like me to put your name forward to take this vacant place and I somewhat nervously said yes and he said well wait here I will be back in 10 minutes and let you know. He came back and said yes, you have got it and tomorrow morning you will report at Farnborough to go overseas.

Now up till this date you had done no flying whatsoever?

I had never been in the air.

So?

So the 6 of us went off to Dover and the crossing of that night was so rough that in fact we had to remain at The Lord Warden Hotel in Dover until the following day before we could cross. We then crossed and I reported to headquarters of The Royal Flying Corps in France which was then at St Omer. From there I was posted to 4 squadron then at Poperinge and the next day I was driven up there by Major Brooke-Popham who was then an officer at RFC headquarters and who happened to be going up to the squadron.

Have you recollections of Brooke-Popham in The First World War?

Yes, I came across him several times.

In what way were you able to come, he had a distinguished RFC career did he not in The First World War?

Yes.

Had you personal knowledge of this?

At the end of the war?

No, were you ever in association with him during his service?

No, I was never actually I don't think under his command.

Yes.

So I went up to Poperinge and joined number 4 squadron. The commanding officer was Major Rowley of The Essex Regiment and the first flight I did was with Lieutenant Roach on November 17 1914 when The First Battle of Ypres was coming to a close and we were flying over the immediate front in front of Ypres. Naturally this being my first time off the ground it was all rather strange but I gradually picked up the duties of reconnaissance by continuous flying and I suppose eventually became a qualified observer.

Now could you tell me some of the particular duties and functions of an observer on an operational flight?

At that time the aircraft on both sides were completely unarmed and the duties were purely reconnaissance. By the time that the front had become more or less static the work consisted chiefly of checking movements behind the lines such as troops marching, trains moving, any increase in train activity or troop movement activity and where possible the pinpointing of enemy artillery.

You were not at this stage spotting for your own artillery?

No, that came later and before the days of wireless we had a system of firing Very lights to indicate whether a shot was over short left or right and by gradually trying to bring the gun down to the target sometimes a great many Very lights were expended. You might say for example that 2 red Very lights meant over. Two green meant short. Then one red would mean not so far over. One white would mean to the left and so on. It was pretty crude but in those days there was no wireless in aircraft. So far as armaments are concerned I think a German aircraft first fired on one of ours and we started off being armed with ordinary service revolvers which was to all intents and purposes useless.

Did you ever have occasion to use yours?

You fired if an enemy aircraft came fairly close but it was an obvious waste of ammunition. The next weapon that we had in 4 squadron anyway was the French carbine with either 3 or 5 bullets in a clip and then we had an ordinary service 303 rifle.

Did you have any better success with either of these?

As far as I am concerned

Tape 271

A.J.
Air Vice Marshal ~~H.A.~~ Capel

THIS IS A CONTINUATION TAPE MADE BY AIR VICE MARSHAL H A CAPEL IN AUGUST 1974 WITH MR LIDDLE WITH REGARD TO HIS ROYAL FLYING CORPS AND ROYAL AIR FORCE EXPERIENCES IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR. ON THE PREVIOUS TAPE HE HAS BEEN TELLING ME THAT THE FIRST ARMAMENT THAT THEY HAD IN THE NUMBER FOUR SQUADRON WAS IN FACT A SERVICE REVOLVER. THEN A FRENCH RIFLE AND THE BRITISH 303 BUT IN FACT HE PERSONALLY HAD NO SUCCESS WITH ANY OF THESE TOTALLY INADEQUATE WEAPONS AND HE WAS REMINDING ME OF COURSE, THAT AT THIS STAGE THERE WAS NO WAY OF FIRING IN A SYNCHRONISED MANNER THROUGH THE PROPELLER.

Now what was the rifle replaced by?

I think the first machine gun we had was the Lewis with the drum of I think 97 rounds but my recollections of using this as an observer are not very clear but I think we had some form of fitting which enabled the observer to fire backwards over the pilots head or to left or right.

Yes, that reminds me that I certainly should have asked you what sort of planes you were flying at this stage?

Well, when I first joined we had BE2A, BE2B and very shortly after I joined a flight of French planes which were pushers.

So that you sit in front of the pilot, is that right?

Yes. They had an enormous radiator sticking up behind the pilots head and I remember that if one bullet penetrated the radiator the water went out remarkably quickly and the engine seized up in a very short space of time necessitating a forced landing but I was not in the French flight although I did go up once and so I didn't have experience of this seizing up.

What were the most interesting of your experiences during this particular stage of your First World War flying career?

Well, the first few months were pretty routine. Regular reconnaissances and I do remember that we were still at Poperinghe when the first gas attack took place just north of Ypres I think in April 1915 and the Germans could shell our aerodrome and did so and I remember taking off very hurriedly with my pilot and we went off and we landed in a field behind Poperinghe and eventually got I think back to St Omer and it was about this time that Number 4 Squadron became the strategic reconnaissance Squadron working from St Omer which meant that we did longer reconnaissances further behind the lines.

Yes. I should also have asked you Air Vice Marshal if you had been on a reconnaissance flight during the unofficial Christmas truce? Would your log book indicate this?

Yes, I must look there.

Well, we can check this later but you haven't a personal recollection of this? It would have been delightful if you had just happened to have seen an absence of firing on the line and the troops gathered in?

No recollection.

Alright then. What about Neuve Chapelle the big British offensive in March because I think that you were away from the front before the September attack at Loos?

Yes. I don't think 4 Squadron was then on that front but I cannot quite remember when we ceased to be GHQ Squadron and moved to Bailleul and it was from Bailleul that I left the Squadron to go to learn to fly.

Where did you learn to fly?

First of all in France where I took my ticket where observers were sent to a small flying school and we had Maurice Farnham Longhorns and we got as far as solo flying, figures of eight and a few landings. On the successful completion of that we got what was called our ticket which was the blue document from The Aeronautic Federation or something which recorded your number. I think mine was 1716 and from there still in August 1915 I went first to Castle Bromwich where we flew Shorthorns and then to Dover where we flew Avros and where I got my wings.

Now when you came back to France which was I think in June 1916, were you in a sector sufficiently near to take part in the reconnaissance and other preparations for the Somme on July 1?

No. We were practically the only Squadron left north when the Somme battle was fought.

And the number of your Squadron?

My Squadron was number one. We were on Morane Parasols and Morane Bi-planes and we had pretty well the whole of the front north of the Somme for reconnaissance to check that nothing was going on there which might have affected the operations on the Somme and that was for us a very quiet time compared with what was going on on the Somme and naturally we were bursting to get to the Somme but the Squadron was never moved up to the time when I left which was in March 1917.

Now this might be a good stage to ask you something about the special mystique of Royal Flying Corps service which in perhaps an indefinable way distinguished it from service in the Army. Would you be able to make any comments on the relationships between officers and men, between pilots and ground staff, any comment on living conditions, the strain of operational flying balanced by the facilities for relaxation with either tennis or football or a ride in somebodys motor car for a booze and a binge in some neighbouring town? This balanced high intensity of living which in some ways seems to me have been very much different from the experience of a soldier on The Western Front?

Well, starting from the beginning. At Poperinghe we were in billets. I remember that our flight was in an estaminet. At St Omer we were also in billets in the town and at Bailleul in the summer of 1915 we were in tents beside the aerodrome. All of which was reasonable comfort compared with the trenches or the artillery positions or anything like that. On my second tour with number one Squadron also at Bailleul but not the same aerodrome as I had been before we were originally billeted in Bailleul but very soon after I arrived we formed a compound with small huts. I cannot remember what they

were called but they were not Nissen huts and we had a mess also in the compound and we were reasonably comfortable but in the winter extremely cold but I remember a nice fireplace had been built in the mess where we could have a good fire.

A gramophone?

I expect so. Almost certainly I think by that time we had a gramophone.

And did anybody have a dog or a car?

Yes, there were one or 2 dogs. We also had a very good rugby team and we used to play a very good many of the Regiments round Bailleul when out of the line and we had a lot of fun with that.

When you were flying from St Omer I think you said that you were on flights which took considerably longer. To what extent was this an increase in strain which manifested itself in headaches or in complete tiredness and exhaustion when you got back?

I don't remember particularly anything of that kind. The strain chiefly was on the longer flights because the wind was almost invariably blowing from the west and the question always was getting back. You always had to allow enough petrol to get back against the wind and yet not give up your reconnaissance before it was really necessary but that of course, was a judgement for the pilot and not for the observer.

Now you would have seen some of these early wooden planes go down in what I believe was called a flamer which must have been the most dreadful sight. Did the fact that at any time you could be a victim of such a loss disturb you?

I would say that one can only fly with any comfort at all so long as you have that feeling that it won't happen to me and therefore I would say that one was not unduly upset by seeing other people involved in casualties.

Because it can't happen to me?

If you are going to feel every time you fly that you are going to meet a disaster then I would say you better not try it.

Yes, I can understand that and would you like also to tell me something about the very important relationship between a pilot and his observer?

It was extremely close. I was incredibly lucky because from the time that the original pilots of 4 Squadron began to go home. About January 1915 I started flying with a new pilot of the name of Mitchell. Not only was he an extremely good pilot but I was able to fly with him I should guess 80% of my flying from January to August 1915 and that was an enormous asset because we got to know each other extremely well and I must admit that some of the old observers did get a bit frightened flying with some of the new pilots who had come out and I was with one or 2 exceptions I flew with Mitchell almost the whole time.

How did you communicate together in a plane?

Hand signals. There were no talking tubes.

What sort of plane were you in at this time?

V2AB, 2B, sitting just in front.

So that you are in front of him and you see something which you don't think he can have seen either an enemy aircraft or a troop train and if it is the latter you would point down with your hand towards the object that you want him to note, is that what you do?

Yes. With a hand signal you could say go to the left, go to the right or circle left or circle right or whatever you wanted.

What about combat, were you ever in combat?

Well, compared with what it became in those days practically not.

Never forced down?

No.

And you never had the opportunity of shooting down or forcing down an enemy aircraft?

Not that I am aware of.

Well, would you tell me of your moves from this period flying with Mitchell in 1915, where did you go next?

From there as I said I got my ticket in France. Then, to first Castle Bromwich flying Maurice Farnham, Shorthorn and then to Dover flying Avro and it was from Dover that I got my wings. Then, I expected then to go back to France but was in fact sent to The Central Flying School at Upperavon as an instructor. This may seem curious after only just getting my wings but having done 9 months flying as an observer I suppose they thought I was fairly air experienced and therefore could be trusted to become an instructor. Anyhow, I did and I remained there until May 1916 when I first joined 42 Squadron at Filton, Bristol which was forming to go overseas but before they went overseas I was posted as a Flight Commander to number one Squadron in France at Bailleul and I joined them in June 1916.

Were there any well known personalities or people who made a name for themselves in this Squadron?

Well, the Commanding Officer was one of the original Royal Flying Corps and also Somerset Light Infantry. Of the others we had Quentin Brand who later did I think the first Cape to Cairo flight after the war and Morecambe-Brown who was doing exceedingly well but was killed a few months later.

You had none because of the nature of your aircraft, you had none of the men who were to make a name for themselves with regard to,

No. At that time we had none of the well known fighter pilot because we were not engaged in fighting. We were reconnaissance.

And the highlights of your experience during this stint?

Well, most of it was what can only be described as very quiet because we were the only Squadron up north while the Somme was on and it was a matter of continuous reconnaissance. A little artillery observation but really keeping watch over a very large section of the front.

What sort of planes?

Moran² bi-plane and Moran² Parasol.

Yes, I remember you mentioned that. Now to what extent had sophistication introduced itself into artillery spotting?

Well now, at that time I am fairly certain that we must have had wireless but I don't remember very much about it but we had certainly passed beyond the very light stage.

And the shutters on the ground?

We certainly carried at one time all these lamps but I can't quite remember what period that was. That was the flashing Morse signals.

And your reconnaissance was not greatly interfered with? You weren't losing many planes?

No, we had a very quiet time.

So it was back to England after this stint, is that right?

In about January 1917 we converted to Newport Scouts and were fetching them from Paris and were taken off for training for about a month and just about that time I went home. Again after completing 9 months which was the normal stint at that time and so there again if you look at it this way, I was incredibly lucky in serving almost my 9 months in a very quiet sector.

And of course, you were to be in England during the bloody month of April 1917 when so many men were lost?

Exactly. Not only did the war in the air hot up a great deal after March 1917 but after my previous 9 months as observer I went back to learn to fly if I remember rightly just about the time of the Fokker scourge when a great many of our aircraft were being shot down. So you can say that my survival in the First War was due largely to incredible luck.

But nevertheless you have an experience which for you effectively and quite dramatically terminates your active service and this is right at the very end of the war. You returned to France with the newly formed Squadron, this is in October 1918 and then on the morning of November 11 you were about to lead this Squadron out on a reconnaissance mission and what happened?

We were at a place called Senlis in France and we had been there about 10 days doing practice patrols up to but not over the line and on November 11 we were down to do our first escort trip with some bombers which the Squadron and I don't recollect. We had SE5A aircraft. I had actually turned round into the wind to take off. The rest of the Squadron were following round the perimeter to take off when an aircraft arrived flying very low over the aerodrome firing off red lights. So I thought I better wait and see what

this was all about and he landed and came up to me and said you are not to go off, the war is finishing at 11 o'clock today. It being then about 9am.

Well, how could you have a party to celebrate this at 9 o'clock in the morning? Do you remember how you celebrated?

Well, the funny part is or perhaps not the funny part is, having been delayed for so long in England expecting to come out from about August onwards. We were believe it or not in a state of fury that we hadn't done one operation.

Among the things that I would like to have heard from you, you take a particular pride in the fact that having formed this Squadron and what was the equipment that you were given and what was the number of the Squadron?

Ninety four. SE6A.

Yes, and initially you were given a bell tent and?

A bell tent and an equipment officer and from that we formed the Squadron. Carried out training. Mobilised for overseas. Went overseas and eventually the Squadron on the principle of last out first in I suppose, we were disbanded and I was sent back to England with a touring car. The office Sergeant and the records and I went off to command another Squadron.

So, that you could say that even if it hadn't had any combat experience it had been entirely your Squadron?

Yes.

You mentioned with a wry aside that with the economic pressures from which we are all suffering today you would like to have recorded that your pay as a Second Lieutenant in the Army was 5 and 3 pence a day and immediately on your qualifying as an observer you got another 5 shillings a day?

Five shillings a day flying pay. That is the important part the flying pay. This practically doubled my pay in a day.

So, not the senior service but certainly the best off financially as compared with the Army, the Navy and The Royal Flying Corps in relative pay?

I don't know what the Navy was and of course, there was no Royal Air Force. I don't know what the Navy pay was.

Well, Air Vice Marshal I have appreciated the privilege you have given me of coming to your home to talk to me about your First World War service which we have now documented. I appreciate this very much and value that which you have told me. Thank you very much indeed.