

# Father of the Royal Air Force

## Sir David Henderson, Father of the Royal Air Force

By H.A.Jones, M.C.

Sir DAVID HENDERSON, who has been described by Lord Trenchard as the Father of the Royal Air Force, was born at Glasgow on the 11<sup>th</sup> of August, 1862.

Henderson went to Clifton Bank School, St. Andrews, where one of his contemporaries was Sir Douglas Haig. From Clifton Bank, he went to Glasgow University and studied engineering under Lord Kelvin who recognized the promise in him and gave him special facilities. The technical knowledge which Henderson absorbed from Lord Kelvin was to bear fruit in later years.

He passed through Sandhurst and was gazetted, in 1883, to the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. He joined his regiment at Capetown and it was not long before he was on active service. In the spring of 1884, unrest in Zululand came to a head with an attack on the native police at Etchowe. The Argylls were promptly ordered up-country. In a fort in the Zulu hills Henderson's career nearly came to a premature end. He was resting in his tent one afternoon when a bullet passed a few inches above his head. It had been fired from a neighbouring tent by a servant who was cleaning a revolver.

In September, 1884, Henderson took part in the march on M'Kondo, the fastness of the Usutus, and he was present when the rebel leaders tendered their submission. With the end of the unrest in Zululand, the Argylls went to Ceylon, where they remained three years. For much of the time while his regiment was in Ceylon, Henderson was attached to the Royal Engineers to help in the building of bridges and forts. The Engineers reported on the high qualities of his technical knowledge and they pleaded for the retention of his services when the time came for the Argylls to leave the island. He was allowed to stay on for six months, after which he rejoined his regiment at Hong-Kong. He was given a great welcome on his return, which can be understood from the description of him, by his Commanding Officer, as "the life and soul of the battalion".

Early in 1892, the Argylls finished their tour of foreign service and returned home to Edinburgh Castle. Henderson had been away nearly nine years. He was hardened by his service abroad, his character had acquired poise, and he had absorbed much diverse experience. He was in fact, ready to benefit to the full from a course at the Staff College.

He graduated from Camberley in 1896 and was at once given a staff appointment at the War Office. He joined the newly formed Mobilization Section which dealt with the multitudinous details connected with the rapid movement of troops on a declaration of war. The officers in the Section had to survey the whole British Army and to know the strength and war requirements of every unit, and it is significant that most of the officers who passed through the Section, in its early days, achieved high command. They included Sir John Cowans, Sir

Gerald Ellison, Sir John Clawson, Sir James Wolfe-Murray, and Sir Edward Codrington. In 1898 there came a request for reinforcements for the Sudan, where General Kitchener was moving towards the Battle of Omdurman. A second brigade was made up to take part in this battle, and the command of it was given to Brigadier-General Neville Lyttleton, who was Henderson's chief in the mobilization section. General Lyttleton was anxious to give his subordinate further opportunity of active service and took Henderson with him as his aide-de-camp. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of September, 1898, the troops were within sight of Omdurman and next morning the dervishes made their attack. "They came on," said Henderson in a letter, "about 6.30 and our artillery opened at 6.45. Then followed the most awful massacre of these gallant fellows. They came on in excellent order, about 40,000 of them, and were mowed down in heaps by our fire. . . ."

The remnants of the dervishes were left to the cavalry, and the troops marched in to Omdurman. By November, Henderson was back at the War Office and was promoted to brevet-major. In the early summer of the following year, 1899, he was away again on a special intelligence mission to South Africa and he moved freely about the country before October, when the Boer War began.

He was then appointed Intelligence Officer on the staff of Sir George White, the Commander-in-Chief in Natal, and he was one of the besieged garrison in Ladysmith. But he would not lightly accept enforced inactivity and he organized a band of adventurers into a corps of guides. He sent his men out for days at a time to watch and report on the enemy dispositions, and he himself accompanied them on their more hazardous enterprises.

He was appointed brevet Lieutenant-Colonel and, as head of the Intelligence on Kitchener's head-quarters staff, became the right-hand man of the Commander-in-Chief. He entirely reorganized the Army intelligence system, on a centralizing basis, and the intelligence organization of 1914 was the natural development of the scheme which he initiated in South Africa.

After articles of peace were signed, in May 1902, Henderson stayed behind to help Lord Milner, who became Governor of Transvaal. In May, 1903, he was back at the War Office and at once set about incorporating the lessons of his intelligence experiences in South Africa in a text-book. This book, *Field Intelligence*, published officially in 1904, greatly increased his military reputation. By the time it appeared, he had been given an appointment on the staff of the First Corps and he continued to fill various staff appointments until 1907, when he became staff officer to Sir John French, the Inspector-General of the Forces. He had just consolidated his military reputation by producing his book on *The Art of Reconnaissance*, which came into wide use in the Army for Infantry training.

In 1909 he accompanied Sir John French on a tour of inspection to India and the outskirts of the Empire. In the spring of 1910, he was home again, but went away almost at once on another tour through Canada.

Early in 1911, when he was back in England, the wound he had received at Ladysmith began to bother him. An operation was performed and he went to Harrogate to recuperate, and his stay there probably changed the course of his life. One day, an aeroplane, competing in the round-Britain air race, was forced down in a field near the hotel in which Henderson was staying. He walked across and had a long talk with the pilot, and there is little doubt that from this conversation grew his resolve that he would learn to fly. Reconnaissance was his pet subject and he must then have realized, if he had not done so already, that the aeroplane had profoundly changed the science of military intelligence. And there was the added lure that flying in those days was an adventure of the kind which he loved. So when he was fit again, he enrolled as a student at the Bristol Flying School at Brooklands. So that he should get no special treatment he gave his name as Henry Davidson, and because work had accumulated at the War Office he robbed his sleeping hours and was ready at the aerodrome before dawn each morning. He was taught by Mr. Howard Pixton, described by his instructor as a born flyer.

When it became known in the Army that David Henderson had qualified as a pilot, the news came like a tonic draught to those Army officers who were taking an interest in aviation. In this same year, 1911, the Air Battalion of the Royal Engineers was formed. The object was to create a body of expert airmen for duty with the Army, but the Government soon realized that something bigger was needed, and they decided to explore the possibilities of a special aviation service. A sub-committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence was entrusted with the investigation, under the Chairmanship of Colonel the Right Hon. J.E.B. Seely. The scheme by which the Royal Flying Corps was formed was actually drawn up by three members of the sub-committee, Brigadier-General Henderson, Major D.S. Innes, and Captain F.H. Sykes. Henderson, as was his nature, put his whole heart into the work. He travelled the length of England to inspect every civilian aerodrome and flying school, and he explored Salisbury Plain until he had chosen what seemed to him the best site for the proposed military school – afterwards known as the Central Flying School.

The sub-committee report, ready in February, 1912, was approved, and the Royal Flying Corps came into being on the 13<sup>th</sup> of May, 1912.

Henderson went back to the War Office and, on the 1<sup>st</sup> of July, was given a brilliant appointment. He was made Director of Military Training and thus became responsible for the Army's training at a critical period. The new branch of aeronautics came under his supervision and he specially watched and fostered the development of the service which he had done so much to create. He was a member of the Air Committee, a consultative body charged with the duty of co-ordinating the air policies of the Navy and of the Army. The importance of service aviation grew so rapidly that, in August, 1913, the Government decided to create a new branch at the War Office to handle the whole business of military flying. This branch was called the Military Aeronautics Directorate, and, to mark the status of the new department, Henderson was transferred from Military Training and became Director-General of Military

Aeronautics. The new branch had in it the germs of the eventual Air Ministry, for it acquired, for aircraft, all the powers normally divided between various War Office departments.

When war came, Sir David Henderson (now a Brigadier-General and a K.C.B.), went to France in command of the Royal Flying Corps in the Field. It is not difficult to imagine the quality of his thoughts. He had been responsible for the intelligence side of the army's activities in the later stages of the South African campaign. For many years since he had studied the art of reconnaissance. He was now going into a European war in command of a new and untried force on which might depend, so far as any man could foresee, the fortunes of the campaign. The work of the Royal Flying Corps in those early days is sufficiently set out in the first volume of the official history, *The War in the Air*. In the anxious and strenuous days which followed the German attack at Mons, the Royal Flying Corps officers kept watch on the attempted enveloping movements of General von Kluck. As they landed with their reports, Henderson telephoned the information to General Headquarters. When he judged the news to be vital, he would make a personal visit to headquarters to impress its importance on the General Staff. The value of this early work is now a matter of history and the testimonies of Marshal Joffre and of Sir John French are on record. Looking back, with full knowledge of the later war developments of the Air Service, it can be definitely stated that the Royal Flying Corps reconnaissance reports brought back during the retreat from Mons reached a very high standard. They give the impression that they were written by officers who had a lively appreciation of the tactical situation and, as a whole, are eloquent of the careful and well-directed training which the pre-war squadrons received.

Towards the end of 1914, the War Office made a tentative proposal which, had it been accepted by Sir John French, would have reduced the status of the Royal Flying Corps and must, almost certainly, have retarded its growth. This proposal, arising out of demands by Sir John for extra squadrons, was that Wings, grouping three or four squadrons, should be allocated direct to army commands in the same way as army or divisional troops. Under such an arrangement a Royal Flying Corps Headquarters would be unnecessary and could be disbanded. All that would be needed would be a senior officer on the Staff of the Commander-in-Chief responsible only for the maintenance of the Air Service. Sir David Henderson foresaw what the effects of such a re-organization would be, and he used all of his great influence with Sir John French to resist it. He won the Commander-in-Chief's support but, although the proposal was not put into effect, the War Office expressed their doubt whether, when the Wings had got to work, there would be room for a General Officer Commanding the Royal Flying Corps.

Henderson had been promoted a Major-General on October 26<sup>th</sup>, 1914. The War Office view seemed to be that the Command of the Flying Corps was not big enough for an officer of his seniority and achievement. On November 22<sup>nd</sup>, therefore, Sir John French appointed him to the command of the 1st Division. But the War Office had, apparently, reckoned without Lord Kitchener. When the Secretary of State for War came to hear of Henderson's departure,

he refused to accept it as fact. "I want Henderson in command of the Flying Corps" he told Colonel Branker, "and if he thinks it isn't big enough, you can tell him I'm going to have a lot of generals in it before I'm finished." Lord Kitchener continued to act as though Sir David Henderson still occupied his old position, and in the end Kitchener had his way. Henderson was relieved of his infantry command on December 21<sup>st</sup>, 1914, and returned to the Air Service with the title of General Officer Commanding the Royal Flying Corps, and all idea of curtailing the duties or status of the R.F.C. headquarters was abandoned.

The next eight months of his command in France was a time of wide-spread growth in the activities of the squadrons. He encouraged his officers to experiment in everything likely to be of help to the army, and he used his influence with senior army officers to convince them of the many directions in which the Royal Flying Corps could be of use. By August 1915, many future needs of the air service had been defined. Air photography and wireless co-operation with the artillery had got beyond the experimental stage; air fighting had begun, and the need for squadrons equipped with fast fighters, fore-shadowed; the supply of bombs and special bombing aircraft must be pressed forward; and, finally, wide problems of recruitment and training had been opened up by the expansion of the Service. Sir David Henderson judged the time had come when he must give up the command in France and go to the War Office to take full control of the development of the service. He was reinforced in his decision by the knowledge that in Brigadier-General Trenchard the Flying Corps in France would have a chief endowed with rare and outstanding qualities of leadership. On August 19<sup>th</sup>, therefore, he resumed his War Office appointment as Director-General of Military Aeronautics.

The difficulties which he had to face during the next two years cannot be set out in the space of a brief article. The problems must often have appeared insuperable and must have crushed a lesser man than Sir David Henderson. He worked long hours. He had the sensitiveness of a fine nature, and his single-hearted devotion to his task, during these anxious years, undoubtedly undermined his strength. "His counsels on the first Air Board under Lord Curzon in 1916" said Sir Sefron Branker, who worked with him at this time, "and the Second Air Board under Lord Cowdrey in 1917 were of infinite value, and were a potent factor in the steady development towards the creation of the Royal Air Force under an independent Air Ministry. By the frankness of his statements and his almost furious opposition to the machinations of self-seekers and self-advertisers, he earned for himself a not inconsiderable group of enemies and detractors, by whose instigation various criticisms were levelled against him in Parliament, in the Press, and in private. They carried no weight, however, with those who really knew him, and in the Pemberton-Billing enquiry, held by the Government in 1916, he vindicated his policy on every debatable point, and established a reputation for clear-mindedness and ability in legal debate such as has seldom been attained before by a simple soldier."<sup>i</sup>

An example of the unfairness of the attacks made on him may be quoted. By his direction, and in accordance with British Military traditions, the crews of Zeppelins destroyed over

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<sup>i</sup> The Aeronautical Journal, September, 1921.

England were buried with formal military honours. For this act of simple decency he was assailed in many quarters, and he was the recipient of anonymous letters of abuse.

In the summer of 1917, public opinion was strongly in favour of a separate air service. The two Air Boards, more particularly the second, had done much to solve the problems of aircraft supply, but the instructed public were not satisfied. Dissatisfaction came to a head as a result of the daylight aeroplane attacks on London in June and July, 1917. Sir David Henderson had never ceased to be aware of the evils of divided control. The original conception of a Flying Corps common to the Navy and the Army, and divided into naval and military wings, was his. In July, 1917, after the second daylight attack on the capital, the Prime Minister (Mr. Lloyd George) and General J.C. Smuts began an exhaustive examination of the whole air organization. The judgement and influence of Sir David Henderson at this critical time are clear. In a masterly paper, dated July 17<sup>th</sup>, 1917, he reviewed the problem in great details and marshalled the arguments for the formation of a complete united air service, "dealing with all operations in the air, and with all the necessary services which that expression implies."

In the middle of August, 1917, General Smuts made his report, in which he advocated the amalgamation of the two air services. The proposal was accepted, in principle, by the Government, and an Air Organisation Committee was set up, under the Chairmanship of General Smuts, to work out the plans. Sir David Henderson was relieved of his appointment at the War Office so that he might give the whole of his time and thought to the creation of the Royal Air Force. Many of those who recognised the need of a separate service, believed that such a revolutionary step could not be carried through in a time of war. It was said that Sir David Henderson had under-rated the difficulties. The event was to prove that he recognized them, measured himself against them, and knew in his heart that he could meet and overcome them. So with a great faith he went ahead. He spent himself in committee for long hours and continued his hard work into the night in the quiet of his home. It may be that his labours at this time, quiet and non-spectacular as they were, represent his outstanding claim to the gratitude<sup>ii</sup> of his countrymen.

The plans were ready before the end of October, 1917, and the Bill creating the Royal Air Force was passed by Parliament in the following month. The first Air Council was formed on the 3<sup>rd</sup> January, 1918, with Sir David Henderson as Vice-President and Sir Hugh Trenchard as Chief of the Air Staff. The Secretary of State for Air and the President of the Air Council was Lord Rothermere. So well had the Air Organization committee worked, and so wisely were the processes of amalgamation directed, that the Royal Air Force came into being on the 1<sup>st</sup> April, 1918, quietly and without any of those dislocating effects on operations which had been so freely predicted.

But on the Air Council itself there were difficulties. Differences of opinion arose between the Chief of the Air Staff and Lord Rothermere. General Trenchard resigned and Sir David

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<sup>ii</sup> "Gratitude" – La Rochefoucauld's definition of "gratitude" – "It is a lively sense of favours to come"

Henderson shortly did the same. It was not long before Lord Rothermere himself resigned but by that time Henderson had gone, and the air service knew him no more. There is tragedy in his departure, at that time, and in those circumstances, from the service to which he had devoted the best and ripest years of his life. He left his friends and went out into the wilderness, where he was to receive a crushing blow. In June, 1918, his only son, Captain Ian Henderson, who had won honours as a fighting pilot in France, was killed in a flying accident at Turnberry.

The War Office welcomed his services once more. During the peace negotiation, he served as a Military Counsellor in Paris.

In June, 1919, he was given a task after his own heart. An American, Mr H.P. Davidson, had conceived the idea of grouping all the various Red Cross Societies for a world campaign against disease. The League of Red Cross Societies was founded at Geneva and Sir David Henderson was appointed Director-General. Thuswise did he consecrate his last days to his fellow-men. At Geneva, in August, 1921, he died.

The reputation of Sir David Henderson will increase with the passage of time. His qualities were of the knightly kind that may well set up a legend. He was a natural soldier, a good friend, and an unflinching but chivalrous enemy. He was greatly ambitious, not for himself, but for his service. He was a master of a wit so subtle and profound as to be kin to wisdom, and the clarity of his vision was such that trials and difficulties by the way left him unperturbed. Something of his personality is impressed on the structure and on the traditions of the Royal Air Force, and it is well and just that he should be remembered.

Transcribed by RAF CAPS from original held in the Henderson Papers, RAF Museum, Hendon.

An electronic version of this document is available at:

<http://www.airpowerstudies.co.uk/apps/documents/>



Kensington 3362

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7<sup>th</sup> October 1954

Dear Lady Henderson,

It is a long time since I wrote to you, but I was rather perturbed the other day when I saw the obituary notices for Sir Frederick Sykes, and I talked to several people about them.

The obituary notice in The Times read as though he was the 'Father of the R.F.C.' and took it to France in 1914, whereas he was, as you know, a junior Staff Officer to Sir David Henderson.

Sir David was the man whose influence at the War Office, and his great strength of character, made him the power in Air matters that he was.

I saw Sir Edward Ellington and he agreed with me about Sir David's part in the formation of the Royal Air Force, and he wrote the attached letter to The Times, with which I am in complete agreement. I thought you might like to see it, and he is willing that you should, as The Times so far has not published it.

Unfortunately, I cannot see to read or write now, so you must excuse a dictated letter.

With all good wishes to you.

Yours sincerely,

TRENCHARD





Lieutenant General Sir David Henderson

## Lieutenant-General Sir David Henderson: Forgotten Father of British Air Power?

By Doctor David Jordan

Sir David Henderson's name is not widely-known, yet, there is good reason to suggest that he deserves much greater prominence, since he might reasonably lay claim to being the 'father of the RAF' (as Viscount Trenchard argued, disclaiming that description for himself) and possibly even the man who did most of the work that led to the birth of British military aviation. Dr John Bourne, the former Director of the Centre for War Studies at the University of Birmingham, described him as 'one of the most under-estimated British soldiers of the Great War.'<sup>1</sup>

Henderson was born in Glasgow in 1862, the son of a prominent Clydeside ship-builder. A talented child, Henderson went to Edinburgh University aged only 15, but did not graduate, instead choosing to go to Sandhurst rather than complete his degree in engineering. He commissioned into the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders in 1882, but carved out a notable career in the field of intelligence. He served as Staff Captain (Intelligence) in the Sudan between 1897 and 1898, and then served as Lord Kitchener's Director of Military Intelligence during the Boer War. Henderson reflected upon his profession and wrote two books which, although largely forgotten today, confirmed his reputation as the most notable expert on tactical intelligence within the Army.<sup>2</sup> The first of these books, *Field Intelligence: Its Principles and Practice* (1904) was followed by *The Art of Reconnaissance* in 1907. In the first edition of the latter book Henderson observed that developments in aviation might be of value for the gathering of information; by the time of the third edition (1914), Henderson had expanded the book to include a speculative chapter on aerial reconnaissance, noting in the preface:

A book on reconnaissance, in which the possibility of aerial scouting are not considered, must be classed as obsolete; and yet, in this new field, experience is so limited and progress is so rapid, that any dogmatic pronouncement on military aeronautics would, at this stage, have no permanence and little value<sup>3</sup>

By the time that he wrote this, Henderson's interest in aeronautics had seen him learn to fly in 1911 - at the age of 49, he was then the world's oldest pilot. He had also served on the sub-committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence which had laid the ground for the formation of the Royal Flying Corps (in its original state as what we would now term a joint organisation, with military and naval wings designed to meet the aeronautical needs of the Army and Royal Navy respectively), and in 1913, was appointed as the Director General of Military Aeronautics. Although it was not intended that Henderson should command the RFC Military Wing in war, he led the formation to France in 1914. This left handling aeronautical matters to Major William Sefton Brancker, who found himself all-too frequently ignored when arguing the RFC's case. He urged Henderson to return to London, but it soon appeared that Henderson would be lost

to the service entirely, when he was given command of 1st Division. This brought promotion to Major-General, but the appointment was overturned by Field Marshal Lord Kitchener, who considered Henderson too valuable to the RFC. Henderson continued a peripatetic existence between France and London, attempting to assuage Brancker's concerns by frequent visits to the War Office. Henderson's health was not improved by this, and he was frequently unwell during 1915. He finally succumbed to the need to base himself permanently in London, and in August 1915 command of the RFC in France passed to Brigadier-General (later Marshal of the Royal Air Force) Hugh Trenchard. Henderson then fought the RFC's corner in London, becoming increasingly frustrated with the inability of the army and navy to cooperate over seemingly any aspect of air power, and the failure of half-hearted attempts by the government to impose some semblance of order over the two warring parties.

Henderson was thus in prime position to influence General Smuts when he was commissioned to conduct his investigation into the organisation of British air power. Henderson's advice played a considerable part in Smuts' decision to recommend the creation of an independent air service, but he was not to play a major part in the body he had done so much to help create. Although appointed as Vice-President of the Air Council in January 1918, he resigned following the appointment of Sir Frederick Sykes as the Chief of the Air Staff in the aftermath of Trenchard's resignation from that post when it became clear that he could not work with the new Secretary of State for Air, Viscount Rothermere. Returning to the Army, Henderson became an area commandant, before leaving military service to take charge of organising the League of Red Cross Societies, based in Geneva. He died suddenly in August 1921. Henderson's obituaries pointed towards the regard in which he was held, but his contributions to the development of British air power have tended to be overshadowed by the work of Trenchard and Sir Frederick Sykes, leaving him as something of a forgotten man, a rather undeserved fate for someone who was so closely involved with the early years of British military aviation.<sup>4</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/activity/warstudies/research/projects/lionsdonkeys/d.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> Alfred Gollin, *The Impact of Air Power on the British People and their Government 1909-1914* (London: Macmillan, 1989), pp.197-198.

<sup>3</sup> David Henderson, *The Art of Reconnaissance* (London: John Murray, 1914, 3rd Edition), p.iii.

<sup>4</sup> There has been some recent interest in Henderson's career – see Francois Prins, 'Forgotten Founder' in *The Aeroplane*, April and May 2012, pp.60-63 & 36-38 respectively.



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