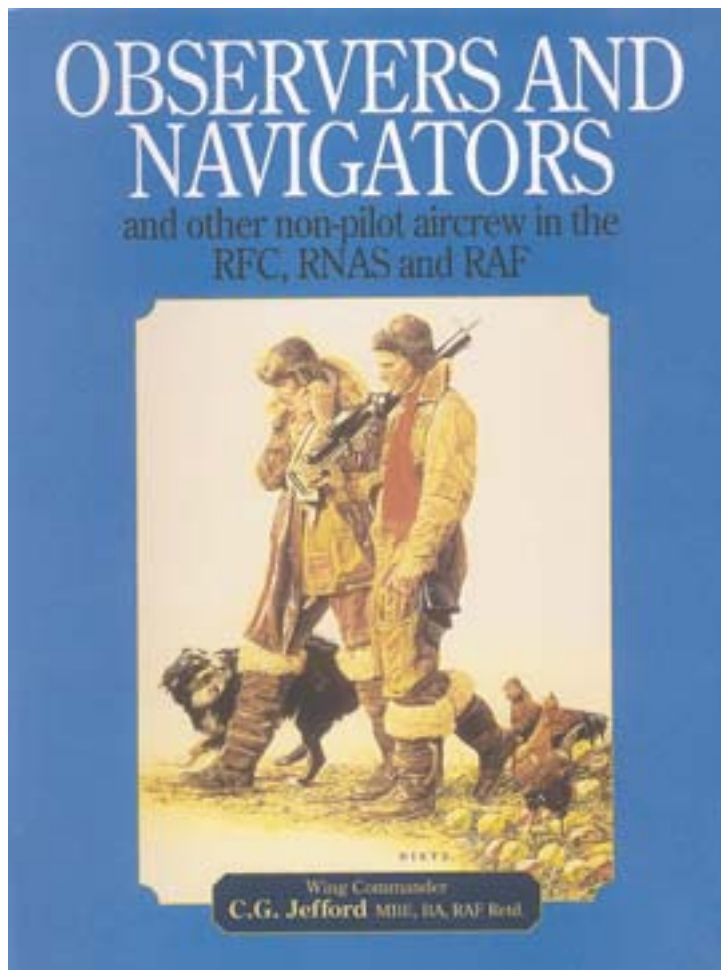


OBSERVERS AND NAVIGATORS AND OTHER NON-PILOT AIRCREW IN THE RFC, RNAS AND RAF

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Reviewer Gp Capt P W Gray



Air Council Pamphlets from 1948 onwards confirmed the equality of all members of the General Duties Branch in career terms. Yet as Air Marshal Sir John Curtiss points out in his very forthright Foreword, only three navigators were ever promoted to that esteemed rank; none were ever appointed to serve on the Air Council, and only one on the Air Force Board. Sir John leaves the reader in no doubt as to his views on the impending introduction of the 'Weapons Systems Operator' as rear crew will become known. These subjects are instantly controversial and the subject of regular crewroom and Happy Hour discussion. This book shows that whatever the 'banter', the controversies are as old as the inevitable need to share workload – in other words as old as military aviation.

But as 'Jeff' Jefford points out, very little space has actually been devoted to the men (and more latterly women) who shared the rigours of combat with their pilot brethren. This book goes a long way to redressing the balance in terms of the history of non-pilot aviators. Jefford covers the growth of awareness in the Royal Flying Corps of the need for an extra pair of eyes and for sharing the ever-increasing workload. It is evident that the earliest military aviators quickly came to understand the difference between operating an aircraft and just physically flying the machine. As the Great War progressed, so the requirements for the skills of the second crewmember increased to include ability to fire the Lewis gun, operate the camera, send and receive Morse and, most importantly, effectively control artillery liaison.

Jefford meticulously records the controversies over the official status of Observers and the need for their distinguishing badge; but he also covers the ‘banter’ aspects that have always been part of the aircrew world. The advent of aerial gunners is covered with equal attention to detail as is the progress made by the RNAS over the same period.

The inter-war years are covered in the same depth through to the early war years – especially in the RAF’s ‘pilot only policy’ of the time. Once war started in earnest, the failure of bomber crews to find and attack their targets led directly to marked improvements in air navigation techniques and a change from the O-brevet to the now-familiar N. The controversy over whether the new brevet should be single or double-winged is discussed with the CAS of the time, Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles Portal, suggesting that the public did not understand the significance of the single wing. Again, this rhymes with the recent debate on the WSO concept.

After a comprehensive review of the Cold War years, Jefford reopens the debate initially kindled by Air Marshal Curtiss suggesting that the WSO badge presented an ideal opportunity to show that the non-pilot fraternity are fully-fledged, valued members of the Service. This book should be essential reading for all involved in such debates. Moreover, it presents a detailed insight into the emergence and development of a vital element of military aviation. The figures speak for themselves: over 10,000 non-pilot aircrew flew on operations during the First World War; and by definition, of the 55,000 bomber aircrew that died during World War II less than 10,000 were pilots.

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