

The Royal Naval Air Service in World War One



The Royal Naval Air Service embroidered cap badge

In the early part of the 20th century the British Royal Navy used balloons and airships for reconnaissance. After the failure of the Royal Navy's airship *Mayfly* in 1911, the naval minister, Winston Churchill, began arguing for the development of military aircraft.

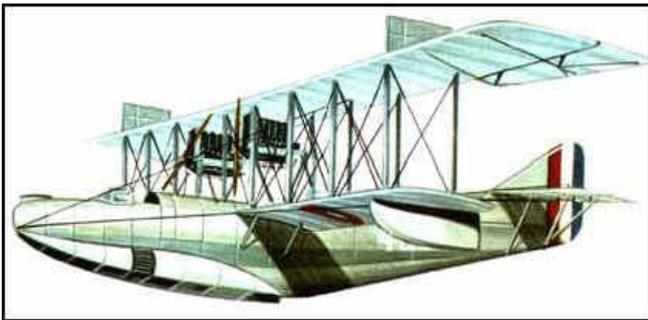


Royal Naval Air Service Airship Section. Lugs 54x49 mm.

In 1912 the government formed the Royal Flying Corps. The British Navy was given the airships owned by the British Army. It was also given twelve aircraft to be used in conjunction with its ships.

The first flight from a moving ship took place in May 1912. The following year, the first seaplane carrier, *Hermes*, was commissioned. The Navy also began to build a chain of coastal air stations.

In January 1914 the government established the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS). Within a few months the RNAS had 217 pilots and 95 aircraft (55 of them seaplanes).



One of the most successful seaplanes purchased by the RNAS was the Curtiss H-16, a craft produced by Glen Hammond Curtiss in the USA.

By the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914, the RNAS had more aircraft under its control than the Royal Flying Corps. The main role of the RNAS was fleet reconnaissance, patrolling coasts for enemy ships and submarines, attacking enemy coastal territory and defending Britain from enemy air-raids. The leading war ace in the RNAS was Raymond Collishaw with 60 victories.

The RNAS was severely attacked for its failure to prevent the Zeppelin bombing raids. In February 1916 there was a change of policy and the Royal Flying Corps were given responsibility of dealing with Zeppelins once they were over Britain. The RNAS now concentrated on bombing Zeppelins on the ground in Germany.

Popular aircraft with these pilots included the Bristol Scout, the Sopwith Pup and the Sopwith Camel.

Royal Naval Air Service or **RNAS** was the air arm of the Royal Navy until near the end of the First World War, when it merged with the British Army's Royal Flying Corps to form a new service (the first of its kind in the world), the Royal Air Force. The RNAS came under the direction of the Admiralty's Air Department.



Squadron Commander Edwin Dunning landed a Sopwith Pup on HMS Furious as the First Pilot To Ever Land On Aircraft Carrier on 2nd August 1917

Background

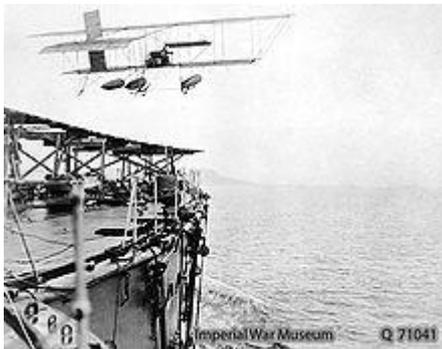
In 1908 the British government had recognised that the use of aircraft for military and naval purposes should be investigated. To this end the Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, approved the formation of an "Advisory Committee for Aeronautics" and an "Aerial Sub-Committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence". Both committees were composed of politicians, army officers and Royal Navy officers. On 21 July 1908 Captain Reginald Bacon, who was a member of the Aerial Navigation sub-committee, submitted to the First Sea Lord Sir John Fisher that a rigid airship based on the German Zeppelin be designed and constructed by the firm of Vickers. After much discussion on the Committee of Imperial Defence the suggestion was approved on 7 May 1909. The airship, named *Mayfly*, never flew and broke in half on 24 September 1911. The then First Sea Lord, Sir Arthur Wilson, recommended that rigid airship construction be abandoned.

In November 1910 the Royal Aero Club, thanks to one of its members, Francis McClean, offered the Royal Navy two aircraft with which to train its first pilots. The Club also offered its members as instructors and the use of its airfield at Eastchurch on the Isle of Sheppey. The Admiralty accepted and on 6 December the Commander-in-Chief, The Nore promulgated the scheme to the officers under his jurisdiction and requested that applicants be unmarried and able to pay the membership fees of the Royal Aero Club. The airfield became the Naval Flying School, Eastchurch. Two hundred applications were received, and four were accepted: Lieutenant C R Samson, Lieutenant A M Longmore, Lieutenant A Gregory and Captain E L Gerrard, RMLI.

The Royal Flying Corps had wings on the left breast but the RNAS only had a small pair of wings on the left arm cuff to distinguish them as aircrew. Many of the RNAS personnel had wings made up in the local workshop which they wore as per RFC. These wings were made up at Great Yarmouth RNAS for Chief Petty Officer Norman Blackburn who served as both observer and later pilot and flying instructor during the First World War and afterwards founder and director of Blackburn Aircraft. His war medals were sold at Birmingham in 1998 but not his wings which is shown on this page. Blackburn was born 25 May 1896 and died 27 January 1966. He was promoted to the acting rank of major while in command of No. 132 Squadron RAF based at RAF Ternhill. He left RAF 5 February 1919. RNAS and RFC was merged 1. April 1918.



The R.N.A.S. pilot wing belonged to CPO Norman Blackburn which was made in the local workshop. Below the reverse side of the wing. 92x14 mm.



Commander C Samson of the RNAS takes off from HMS Hibernia in his modified Shorts S.38 "hydro-aeroplane" to be the first pilot to take off from a ship underway at sea.



Royal Navy Chief Petty Officer bouillon cap badge. This Specific badge was worn by CPO Norman Blackburn, Royal Naval Air Service. 39x61 mm.

History

After prolonged discussion on the Committee of Imperial Defence the Royal Flying Corps was constituted by Royal Warrant on 13 April 1912. It absorbed the nascent naval air detachment and also the Air Battalion of the Royal Engineers. It consisted of two wings with the Military Wing making up the Army element and Naval Wing, under Commander C R Samson. A Central Flying School staffed by officers and men of both the navy and the army was created at Upavon for the pilot training of both wings, and opened on 19 June 1912 under the command of Captain Godfrey Paine, a naval officer. The naval wing, by the terms of its inception was permitted to carry out experimentation at

its flying school at Eastchurch. The Royal Flying Corps, although formed of two separate branches, allowed for direct entry to either branch through a joint Special Reserve of Officers, although soon the Navy inducted new entries into the Royal Naval Reserve. In the summer of 1912, in recognition of the air branch's expansion, Captain Murray Sueter was appointed Director of the newly-formed Air Department at the Admiralty. Sueter's remit as outlined in September 1912 stated that he was responsible to the Admiralty for "all matters connected with the Naval Air Service."

In the same month as the Air Department was set up, four naval seaplanes participated in Army Manoeuvres. In 1913 a seaplane base on the Isle of Grain and an airship base at Kingsnorth were approved for construction. The same year provision was made in the naval estimates for eight airfields to be constructed, and for the first time aircraft participated in manoeuvres with the Royal Navy, using the converted cruiser *Hermes* as a seaplane carrier. On 16 April ten officers of the Navy Service graduated from the Central Flying School. As of 7 June forty-four officers and one hundred and five men had been trained at the Central Flying School and at Eastchurch, and thirty-five officers and men had been trained in airship work. Three non-rigid airships built for the army, the *Willows*, *Astra-Torres* and the *Parseval* were taken over by the navy. On 1 July 1914, the Admiralty made the Royal Naval Air Service, forming the Naval Wing of the Royal Flying Corps, part of the Military Branch of the Royal Navy.

First World War



The RNAS also had fighter squadrons on the Western Front. Sopwith Triplanes from No. 1 (Naval) Squadron, in Bailleul, France. The aircraft nearest the camera (N5454) was primarily flown by ace Richard Minifie

Before techniques were developed for taking off and landing on ships, the RNAS had to use seaplanes in order to operate at sea. Beginning with experiments on the old cruiser HMS *Hermes*, special seaplane tenders were developed to support these aircraft. It was from these ships that a raid on Zeppelin bases at Cuxhaven and Wilhelmshaven was launched on Christmas Day of 1914. This was the first attack by ship-borne aircraft. A chain of coastal air stations was also constructed. This followed with the Tondern Raid, again against Zeppelins, which was the first instance of carrier launched aircraft.

By the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914, the RNAS had ninety-three aircraft, six airships, two balloons and seven hundred and twenty-seven personnel. The Navy maintained twelve airship stations around the coast of Britain from Longside, Aberdeenshire in the northeast to Anglesey in the west. On 1 August 1915 the Royal Naval Air Service officially came under the control of the Royal Navy. In addition to seaplanes, carrier borne aircraft, and other aircraft with a legitimate "naval" application the RNAS also maintained several crack fighter squadrons on the Western Front, as well as allocating scarce resources to an independent strategic bombing force at a time when such operations were highly speculative. Inter-service rivalry even affected aircraft procurement. Urgently required Sopwith 1½ Strutter two-seaters had to be transferred from the planned RNAS strategic bombing force to RFC squadrons on the Western Front because the Navy had "cornered" Sopwith

production. In fact this situation continued - although most of Sopwith's products were not specifically naval aircraft. Thus RNAS fighter squadrons obtained Sopwith Pup fighters months before the RFC - and then replaced these first with Sopwith Triplanes and then Camels while the hard-pressed RFC squadrons soldiered on with their obsolescent Pups.

On April 1, 1918 the RNAS was merged with the RFC to form the RAF. At the time of the merger, the Navy's air service had 55,066 officers and men, 2,949 aircraft, 103 airships and 126 coastal stations. The RNAS squadrons were absorbed into the new structure, individual squadrons receiving new squadron numbers by effectively adding 200 to the number so No. 1 Squadron RNAS (a famous fighter squadron) became No. 201 Squadron RAF. The Royal Navy regained its own air service in 1937, when the Fleet Air Arm of the Royal Air Force (covering carrier borne aircraft, but not the seaplanes and maritime reconnaissance aircraft of Coastal Command) was returned to Admiralty control and renamed the Naval Air Branch. In 1952, the service returned to its pre-1937 name of the Fleet Air Arm.

Roles and missions

The main "naval" roles of the RNAS (ignoring for the minute the service's direct "competition" with the RFC) were fleet reconnaissance, patrolling coasts for enemy ships and submarines, and attacking enemy coastal territory. The RNAS systematically searched 4,000 square miles (10,000 km²) of the Channel and the North Sea for U-boats. In 1917 alone, they sighted 175 U-boats and attacked 107. Because of the technology of the time the attacks were not very successful in terms of submarines sunk, but the sightings greatly assisted the Navy's surface fleets in combatting the enemy submarines. It was the RNAS which provided much of the mobile cover using armoured cars, during the withdrawal from Antwerp to the Yser, in 1914. Later in the war, squadrons of the RNAS were sent to France to directly support the RFC. The RNAS was also at one stage entrusted with the air defence of London. This led to its raids on airship stations in Germany, in places as far from the sea as the manufacturing site at Friedrichshafen.

The RNAS engaged in interservice rivalry on land as well as in the air, possessing for a time the UK's only mechanised land forces in the form of the **RNAS Armoured Car Section** made up of squadrons of Rolls-Royce Armoured Cars. Commanded by Commander Charles Samson, the section was originally equipped with unarmoured touring cars and intended to provide line of communications security and to pick up aircrew who had been forced to land in hostile territory. Samson saw the possibilities when he armed one vehicle with a Maxim gun and ambushed a German car near Cassel on 4 September. He then had a shipbuilders in Dunkirk add boilerplate to his Rolls Royce and Mercedes vehicles. The new armoured car squadrons were soon used to great effect forming part of Naval mechanised raiding columns against the Germans. By November 1914 the Section had become the **Royal Naval Armoured Car Division (RNACD)** eventually expanding to 20 squadrons. As trench warfare developed, the armoured cars could no longer operate on the Western Front and were redeployed to other theatres including the Middle East, Romania and Russia. In the summer of 1915 the RNACD was disbanded and the army took over control of armoured cars, with the units soon coming under the command of the Motor Branch of the Machine Gun Corps.



Royal Naval Air Service Armoured Car Section Yelverton, Dartmoor early 1915. They are wearing both types of collar insignia. Badges of the Armoured Car Section KK 1160 or Cox 1692 and the smaller one without the number 2. (Figure 17)



Royal Naval Air Service Armoured Car Section collar badges. Left a badge as shown in King and Kiplings book as number 1160 with lugs and size 41x48 mm. Right a version with a different crown as shown in Reginald Cox Book as number 1692 with lugs in size 40x46 mm. These badges were only used as collars and not as many believe were worn in the cap



Royal Naval Air Service a matching set of shoulder board badges. Three screws with back plate 54x13 mm.



Royal Naval Air Service armoured car section in England. Right a known genuine variant (Figure 17), probable officer's collar dog of No 2 Armoured Car Squadron RNAS or No 2 Armoured Car Company RAF formed 1922 in Egypt when RAF inherit some ex-RNAS armoured cars left in the Middle East. The badge is 34x23 mm



Squadron Commander, with under 8 years seniority wearing the scarce bouillon cap badge and an eagle on left cuff



Left a shoulder boards for a Wing Commander and right for a Flight Sub-lieutenant



Above and right two different sweetheart badges from RNAS in respectively size 49x15 mm and 25x43 mm.

Royal Naval Air Service Rank Insignia, 1914-1918

Commissioned Officers

The uniforms of the RNAS had just begun to take shape when the war began in 1914. Officers who had entered the RNAS directly wore eagles in place of the anchors on the buttons and cap badges, and flying officers wore an eagle on the left cuff. Officers who had transferred to the RNAS from the regular navy continued to wear their former cap badge and buttons.

In June 1917, flying officers were ordered to wear eagles on both cuffs or shoulder straps, and observer badges were authorized. Stars were also introduced to indicate higher appointments in flying units. In November 1917, non-flying officers attached to the RNAS were ordered to wear a winged "A" insignia above their stripes. This highest rank held by an observer officer before amalgamation with the Royal Air Force was Squadron Observer (under 8 years seniority).



Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS) observer's badge. A 55 mm breast badge, brass base with gilt finish, lugs and pin to reverse; along with a 34 mm brass and gilt finished cuff badge, with two prongs to reverse.



Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS) Volunteer Reserve Officer Wing.

This "Flying A" wing was worn on either the sleeve or on the shoulder boards of the great coat. This is a very rare original WW1 insignia and it two threaded rear posts for fixing to a uniform with two nuts.



. NAVY .

ROYAL NAVAL AIR SERVICE

<p>56 57</p>		<p>58</p>	
<p><i>R.N.R. and R.N.V.R. Officers attached to R.N.A.S. wear a gilt "A" with wings, on shoulder- straps and sleeves. Observers wear the same badges as Pilots except that the body of the eagle is represented by an "O."</i></p>			
WING-CAPTAIN			
<p>59</p>	<p>60</p>	<p>61</p>	<p>62</p>
<p>WING-COMMANDER Cap & Badge as 56 & 57</p>	<p>SQUADRON-COMMANDER Cap & Badge as 11 & 57 *</p>	<p>FLIGHT-COMM^{NDR} Cap & Badge as 11 & 57</p>	<p>FLIGHT-SUB-LIEUT. Cap & Badge as 11 & 57</p>
<p><i>For other R.N.A.S. Badges see "Badges and Their Meaning."</i></p>			
<p>63</p>	<p>63a</p>	<p>64</p>	<p>64a</p>
AIRSHIP PILOT	AEROPLANE & WATERPLANE PILOT	ENGINEER	ARTISAN

The last four badges are worn both in gilt and red.
Naval Officers who are also Air Service Officers wear the Naval Anchor badge.
** Extra 1/2 stripe for 8 years' seniority. ** Also Flight-Lieutenant, but without star.*

Relaxing RNAS flight officers. Number one from left is a Flight Sub-lieutenant, second and third Flight Lieutenants and the fourth Flight Sub-lieutenant which also wear an eagle on the left cuff.



RNAS young Flight Sub-lieutenant



Lieutenant Archie Low (Lieutenant, RNVR, attached to RNAS)

1914-June 1917



Wing
Captain

Wing
Commander

Squadron
Commander

Flight
Lieutenant

Flight
Sub-lieutenant

After June 1917

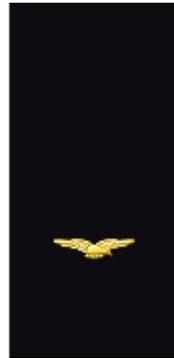


Wing Captain
with rank of
Captain RN

Wing Captain
with rank below
Captain RN

Wing Commander





Squadron
Commander
of 8 years
seniority

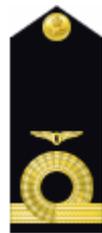
Squadron
Commander
,
under 8
years
seniority

Flight
Commander

Flight
Lieutenant

Flight Sub-
lieutenant

Probationar
y
Flight
Officer





Squadron
Observer,
under 8 years
seniority



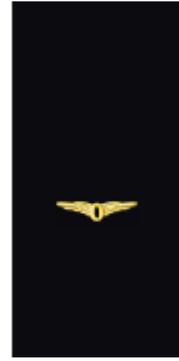
Flight
Observer



Observer
Lieutenant



Observer Sub-
lieutenant



Probationary
Observer
Officer

Attached officers, after November 1917



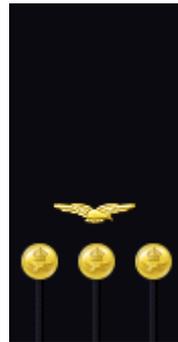
Lieutenant, RNVR,
attached to RNAS



Sub-lieutenant, RN,
attached to RNAS



Warrant Officers 1914-1918



Warrant
Officer 1st
Grade

Warrant
Officer 2nd
Grade, 10
years seniority

Warrant
Officer 2nd
Grade, under
10 years
seniority
(flying)

Warrant
Officer 2nd
Grade, under
10 years
seniority

Petty Officers and Ratings

RNAS ratings wore insignia similar to the rest of the Royal Navy. All wore the "fore and aft rig" ("Class I" or "Class III" uniforms) of jacket and tie with gilt buttons for Chief Petty Officers and black buttons for others. Chief Petty Officers generally did not wear specialty badges, just the gilt eagles on the jacket collar. Right arm distinguishing badges incorporated the eagle.



(collar)



(left sleeve)



(left sleeve)



(cuff)



(cuff)



(cuff)

Chief Petty Officer

Petty Officer

Leading Rate



Air
Mechanic



Aerial
Gunlayer



Airship
Coxswain



Aeroplane
Pilot



Airframe
Mechanic



Wireless
Operator



Crews from the RNAS Armored Car Section are digging one of their wagons free of mud. The officer on the left carries the navy badge with anchor