

Summary of Harold Hindle James's Service in the Royal Flying Corps in World War I

Transcribed and Annotated by John Barnard
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The original document consists of five single-sided sheets of manuscript in H.H. James's own handwriting, though it is written in the third person, and is not stinting in its praise of James's own qualities, especially in the final paragraph. It was found in an extremely large collection of papers related to James and his family, which was retrieved from the attic of his late brother's house in Devon in 2010.

The document is written as a Preface to what appears to have been the intended publication of a set of his letters and diary entries from the period concerned. The papers retrieved from Devon do not include any organised collection of such letters, though a few relevant letters have been found in it, and more may yet come to light. One further document which has been found is James's original diary from his service in the Hedjaz, Aden and Palestine in the period February to June 1917.

Preface

Flying, especially war-flying, has brought with it a great wealth of new experience, not only in opening to man's exploration the almost limitless regions of air, but also in the range of novel thought and feeling attending the incidents and accidents, both ordinary and exceptional of the airman's daily life. The ground of the publication of these extracts from letters and diaries written between July 1915 and December 1918 is, that they present, with simple fidelity and from the inner side, the actual experiences, sensations and reflections of a young officer of the R.F.C. in various theatres of the war and under very varied conditions. The writer was exceptionally fortunate. In August 1914 as an undergraduate of Ch. Ch. Oxford, at the end of his second year, he applied for a commission and in a short time was in training at Churn Camp. Subsequently on being gazetted 2nd Lieutenant in the 6th Somerset Light Infantry he was training at Aldershot and in camp at Witley though the winter of 1914-15.

In the spring of 1915 he was recommended for the R.F.C. by his Colonel (who as General Rawling¹ fell gloriously at [Passchendaele]), and was trained as an observer at Farnborough, Hounslow and Netheravon. In July 1915 he went out to France with No. 10 Squadron and saw active service on the Western front, being quartered at Béthune from July to the end of October. After taking part in the twenty days' artillery preparation for the Loos offensive² which began on the 5th of that month, he was attached to the 14th Squadron and sent out to Egypt.

1 Cecil Godfrey Rawling, CMG CIE DSO FRGS (1870-1917) was noted for his explorations of Tibet, both unofficially in 1902 and 1903, and as part of Sir Francis Younghusband's expedition in 1904, where he identified the source of the Brahmaputra River and confirmed Mount Everest as the highest mountain in the Himalaya. He was killed by German shellfire outside Brigade headquarters during the 2nd battle of Passchendaele. [Wikipedia]

There he was for four months stationed at Ismailia, engaged in scouting across the desert and making raids into the mountains of Sinai. His Flight-Commander at this time was Lord Lucas³ whose death on the Western front in [November 1916] was so heavy a national loss.

In May 1916 he was sent home to qualify as Pilot. He went through the usual course of training at Hounslow and qualified as army Pilot in August. In September he returned to Egypt. This time he went to El Kantara⁴ and took part in the first advance across the desert to El Arish.⁵

In December 1916 he was selected to take part in one of the most interesting and least known of the side-shows of the war east of Suez, the help given by a Flight Detachment of the Air Force to the King of the Hedjaz⁶ in his struggle with the Turkish forces in Arabia. He visited Wejh, coasted down the Red Sea to Rabegh and there went on a series of remarkable bombing raids into the mountains of Central Arabia, which resulted in the withdrawal of the Turkish garrisons from their posts near Medina. After a short visit to Aden he was recalled to the Palestine front at the time of the advance to Gaza and was employed on reconnaissance work and photography in preparation for the first attacks on that stronghold in the spring of 1917.

In June 1917 he was invalided home⁷ and after recovery was posted to command a flight in an Instructional Squadron at Rochford in Essex, gaining experience of day and night instruction work, and, incidentally of night flying during Gotha raids.⁸

After experience of similar work at Hornchurch he was successful in September 1918 in realizing his wish to be sent to the Italian front, where he acted as Flight-Commander in the famous 66th Squadron, quartered at San Pietro in Gu. From September to the eve of the great Italian offensive he was engaged on patrol work over the Piave and in bombing raids into Austrian territory.⁹ On the 21st of October after destroying an Austrian balloon he was wounded and compelled by injury to his engine to make a forced landing on an island in the river. After eight hours alone in this "No Man's Land" he was rescued about midnight by the Italians.¹⁰

2 The Battle of Loos (25 Sep – 8 Oct 1915) was an unsuccessful attempt by the British to break through German lines. The RFC provided significant support in identifying targets and directing artillery bombardments. [Wikipedia]

3 Auberon Thomas Herbert, 9th Baron Lucas and 5th Lord Dingwall, (1876-1916) was appointed to Asquith's Cabinet at the outbreak of war, but did not serve in the coalition government formed in 1915. He died of wounds after being shot down over France in November 1916. [Wikipedia]

4 Now known as El Qantara, this town lies on the Suez Canal and was the site of the Headquarters of No. 3 Section in the Sinai campaign of 1916. [Wikipedia]

5 A Turkish stronghold on the Mediterranean coast of northern Sinai. [Wikipedia]

6 Hussein ibn Ali (c1854-1931) led the "Arab Revolt" against the Ottoman Empire and declared himself King of the Arab Countries in 1916. He was the father of King Abdullah of Jordan and of King Faisal of Iraq. [Encyclopedia Britannica]

7 The entries in James's diary suggest that this was the result of some unspecified throat problem.

8 The Gotha Raids were strategic bombing raids carried out by Germany over southern England using Gotha aircraft. [Wikipedia]

9 This period followed the defeat in June 1918 of the Austrian offensive in the Battle of the Piave River. The Allies delayed pressing home their advantage until they were ready to do so, and the Battle of Vittorio Veneto, which resulted in the chaotic retreat of Austrian and German forces, began on 24 October, and led to the signing of an armistice on 3 November. [Wikipedia]

10 On page 245 of James's *Firm Earth My Comrade* memoirs (covering the period 1929-1951), he relates that it was first supposed that he had been killed in this incident. His commanding officer had later told him that his bringing down of the balloon should have been the final episode to confirm the award of a DSO, but that when it was thought he was dead, the award was made to his second in command instead, who had also been under consideration for a decoration. This story probably needs further investigation. James was awarded the Italian *Croce di Guerra* (CG) for his service in this campaign.

The varied experiences which thus fell to his lot are described partly in letters and partly in diaries which he kept at times. Their interest is in the directness with which they describe the actual experiences of a flying officer through three-and-a-half years of war on various front, and it is thought that the interest is varied enough to appeal to a wider circle than that to which the letters were originally addressed. The main interest in the extracts made is not that of sensational conflicts in the air, though the work done never lacked its dangers and the writer escaped death half a score of times by a hair's breadth, but in their intimate [] of feelings and episodes incident to the every-day work of war-flying. They are the expression of a sensitive and lively intelligence active in the midst of sternest necessity for practical alertness and swift decision, a quality of mind, rarer in the airman than the presence of mind and courage, by which alone he carries out his duties, and survives the perils they entail.