

# BRAN MASHES AND ALL THAT

by Alan Fraser

It sometimes escapes those with an interest in World War One aviation that the Royal Flying Corps was an element of the British Army like, say, the Ordnance Corps or the Corps of Signals. It is a little surprising to find that in the very first days of the RFC its necessarily novel and innovative activities were so little moderated by Army conventionality.

True, there was at first only limited acceptance of the aeroplane, simply as an aid to reconnaissance, and it had been my impression that official acceptance of the possible expansion of the aeroplane's role into fighting in the air, for example, arose solely from the pressure of war and, at that after the 1914 - 18 war had been under way for some time. The "Field Service Pocket Book (1914)" seems to show otherwise.

Compulsory issue for every officer in the British Army, the pocket book provided information on Army organisation and administration, equipment and services and also, seemingly on every contingency likely to be faced by a serving officer. The 1914 version, reprinted in 1971 for David and Charles (Publishers) Limited of Devon, England, is particularly interesting as it outlines the state of the British Army at the outbreak of war.

Close students of military matters may, no doubt, already be familiar with such topics as "Slings Camels Onto a Ship", "How to Make a Bran Mash", and "How to Estimate the Age of a Sheep" - all covered in the pocket book. They were, however, mostly new to me (I did know how to make a bran mash) and together with "War Establishments of Personnel", "Weapons and Transport", "Field Kit Items", "International Law", and so on, are fairly comprehensively covered and, I would judge, of some interest to all students of World War One.

But the book's chief interest for the purpose of this note lies in its references to the Royal Flying Corps and aircraft, written before World War One started. Officially, as mentioned above, the sole military objective to be served was reconnaissance. Among several brief references to this role is the following:-

"Reconnaissance of a Position In The Attack

43 .....

44 In the future, airships and aeroplanes may facilitate these reconnaissances; but it must not be forgotten that the enemy will himself possess aircraft which must first be defeated ....."

The reference to the defeat of enemy aircraft, obviously referring to fighting in the air, is of some significance in a 1914 official publication.

The notion of air fighting between aeroplanes was not, of course, new. It had been the

subject of official consideration at least several years earlier, in the days of the Air Battalion of the Royal Engineers in 1911 and later, from 1912, of the Royal Flying Corps. However, although experiments were conducted in 1913 by the Military Wing of the RFC to determine the most suitable kind of machine gun for use in aeroplanes. Fighting in the air using machine guns, or any other weapon, was not official policy and appears to have been seen merely as a speculative possibility. Thus, considered in the context of the strategic/tactical aviation philosophy of the time, the inclusion in an official handbook of the words quoted above seems remarkably far sighted.

An interesting feature of the pocket book is a table showing the establishment (or entitlement) in various military units of personnel (officers and other ranks), horses, guns, and vehicles. This includes entitlements of two types of Flying Corps units, one described as a Headquarters and Kite Squadron and the other as an Aeroplane Squadron. The latter's establishment comprised 19 officers and 138 other ranks equipped with motor cars and 6 motor cycles. It is not listed as entitled to any horses, carts, wagons or bicycles.

For the time this was an extraordinarily large quantity of motor transport; the 32 "motor cars" would have included lorries, and to put that entitlement into some sort of perspective the table shows that an infantry battalion of 30 officers and 977 other ranks received no motor transport but had 56 horses (riding, draft and pack), 16 carts and wagons and 9 bicycles. The nearest unit in establishment of motor vehicles to an RFC squadron was the Transport and Supply Divisional Train of 428 all ranks which had 4 motor cars but 142 carts and wagons and 378 horses. Even a whole division of 18000 men comprising 3 infantry and 3 artillery brigades a cavalry squadron, engineers, supply, field ambulance, etc. was only allotted 9 motor cars, but 876 carts and wagons and 5592 horses. No wonder it was important to know how to mix a bran mash! Presumably the Aeroplane Squadron entitlement of motor vehicles recognised mobility requirements of the RFC in the field and perhaps the mechanical skills possessed by RFC personnel.

Flying Corps units were not listed as entitled to guns or machine guns, except presumably small arms. Incidentally, the table confirms the melancholy fact that immediately prior to the outbreak of a war in which the machine gun proved very early to be a dominant weapon, an infantry battalion's entitlement to machine guns was - 2. Eventually, on 22 October 1915, formation of a special Machine Gun Corps was authorised by Army Order No. 416.

I have wondered whether in discussing machine gun entitlements there could be some confusion in nomenclature. Recently, I read a book written by a WW1 machine gunner in which he somewhat disparagingly referred to the Lewis gun as an "air-cooled automatic rifle", implying that the only real machine gun in use at that stage (1915) by the British and Germans was the water cooled Maxim type (Vickers or Spandau) with its capacity to lay down accurate fire on unseen targets over 1000 yards away. It is possible, therefore, that Lewis guns were categorised as "small arms" which do not figure in the pocket book's establishment tables.

Finally, although not specifically referred to, so far as I could see, in the 9 chapters of main text, there is an Appendix VIII setting out aero nautical terms and their meanings. I had heard these terms before, except "vol pique", but thought it might be of interest to reproduce it with these notes (next page).

EXTRACT FROM  
FIELD SERVICE POCKET BOOK (1914)  
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APPENDIX VIII

AERONAUTICAL TERMS AND THEIR MEANINGS.

DEFINITIONS.

- |    |                                      |     |     |   |
|----|--------------------------------------|-----|-----|---|
| 1. | Aeroplane                            | ... | ... | A flying machine heavier than air.  |
|    | Aviator                              | ... | ... | The pilot or driver of an aeroplane.  |
|    | Biplane                              | ... | ... | An aeroplane with two sets of mainplanes one above the other.                                   |
|    | Engine bearers                       | ... | ... | Supports for the engine.  |
|    | Fuselage                             | ... | ... | The outrigger or framework connecting the mainplanes with the tail piece, or with the elevator. |
|    | Monoplane                            | ... | ... | An aeroplane with one set of main planes.   |
|    | Nacelle                              | ... | ... | The car of a balloon or dirigible. An enclosed shelter for the pilot of a biplane.              |
|    | Staggered planes                     | ... | ... | A biplane or triplane in which the upper planes are set in advance of the lower.                |
|    | Tail-plane or<br>Empennage           | ... | ... | Supporting surfaces composing the tail.   |
|    | Tractor machine                      | ... | ... | An aeroplane having its propeller in front.   |
|    | Triplane                             | ... | ... | An aeroplane with three sets of main planes one above the other.                                |
|    | Under-carriage or<br>Landing chassis | ... | ... | Wheels, skids, wires and struts under the body.   |

COMMON EXPRESSIONS.

2. A machine "rising" is said to be "climbing".  
A machine descending without the engine running is said to be "gliding" or "volplane".  
A machine descending too steeply is said to be "diving" or "vol pique".  
A machine descending too flat, and so losing flying speed, is said to be "doing a pancake".  
A machine "banking" describes the angle taken up by the planes when turning.

BALLOON TERMS.

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|----|------------|-----|-----|---|
| 3. | Rigid      | ... | ... | A term applied to a dirigible balloon whose envelope is provided with a stiff framework to keep it in shape.      |
|    | Semi rigid | ... | ... | A term applied to a dirigible balloon which maintains its shape partly by the assistance of a suitable framework. |