

A Rough History of No. 214 squadron R.A.F

On the 19th January 1919, just two months after the end of hostilities, Major Brackley wrote an account of the squadron's operations since its formation. He described it as a '*Rough history of 214 Squadron*' that was '*written in the field*'. In the account, he documented a number of actions as '*the noteworthy achievements*' of the squadron in the 16 months of the war that it had been operational.

The Rough History was nine pages long and divided into several sections

- A short, one and a half page, account of the squadron and their aircraft and targets from formation to Armistice.
- A description of 15 different missions, actions and operations during which something exceptional happened to members of the squadron. These ranged from spectacular explosions following the bombing of the La Brugeoise Works in Bruges and ammunition trains in railway sidings near Ghent, through to planes that were seriously damaged in raids, limping back to base with fabric hanging off and seriously wounded crew.
- A description of the three Occasions when Major Brackley flew members of Royalty who were visiting the squadron.
- A list of Officers and Other Ranks that were awarded Decorations during the war. (In the original document this was written in decoration order starting with the Distinguished Service Cross, then Distinguished Flying Cross through to Mentioned in Despatches.)

The copy of this '*Rough history of 214 Squadron*' from the papers of Observer Sergeant 'Tiny' W.E. Wardop, now in the possession of the R.F.C. Collection at the Boscombe Down Aviation Collection, was almost illegible in places. This transcript has been created for ease of reading and the original document has been used with the generosity and permission of the Boscombe Down Aviation Collection.

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The Hadley pages which eventually formed the present squadron, first came to France in March 1917. There were about 15 machines and were commanded by Squadron Commander Babbington, D.S.O., in 7 Squadron R.N.A.S. of Fifth Wing. Wing Commander Spencer Grey was in command of the Wing. The squadron was stationed at Coudekerque Aerodrome near Dunkerque and formed part of the Dunkerque Command of the R.N.A.S. Under Wing Captain C.L. Lambe, C.M.G., D.S.O.

The work carried out by The Dunkerque Command was purely Naval. Most of it was photographic reconnaissance and spotting and anti- submarine patrols; there were also

a few fighting machines which were used for escort duties. Bombing had never been carried out to any extent nor with any regularity, until about June 1917. The flying personnel that went to equip No. 7 Squadron was drawn from what was previously known as Five Wing. This wing used to carry out bomb raids on various aerodromes, railway sidings and Belgian coast ports on twin engine Caudrons, 1½ Strutters and Short Bombers. The casualties in these machines were heavy as most of the bombing was carried out in the day and dawn, and the districts attacked were heavily defended by A.A. Engine failures were not infrequent and the weight of bombs dropped was small compensation for what pilots had to go through to drop them. Machines coming back at dawn were often caught in mists that used to come in from the sea and hang over the land for a couple of hours, they were forced to land owing to a lack of petrol and on many occasions finished up in the sea or crashed on the land. The work under these conditions was not at all popular amongst the pilots sent out from England, most of them preferred fighting machines and reconnaissance.

The coming of the Handley Pages changed the pilots' ideas considerably and with the good machines and reliable engines a night bombing squadron was considered a very good thing to be in. With the big machine and the weight of bombs she could carry the crews of the machines felt they were getting a bit of their own back. Before really commencing bombing however, the machines were used for other purposes. There was a considerable amount of submarine activity on about the time of the Handley Pages were told off for sea patrols. One of the first patrols attacked and sunk an enemy destroyer of Zeebrugge. Shortly after the same pilot was shot down by an enemy single seat seaplane. After this the Handley Pages were escorted by single seater seaplanes, come but as the work proved too risky they were eventually taken off it, and early in June used solely for night bombing.

At first the night bombing was considered a very easy job as it was only carried out on moon lit nights and in good weather. The enemy A.A. fire was not very accurate although they used to put up a lot of stuff. There was great competition amongst pilots and observers to carry out the greatest number of raids, and drop the most bombs. Casualties were light and results obtained very good. Later however, the condition changed. Bombing was carried out on dark as well as moonlit nights. Pilot soon became used to the work and on a few occasions had fly back after a raid in heavy rain. With the increase in bombing so the enemy defences grew. Ostende, Zeebrugge and Bruges were always hot places even in the earlier days with the inferior machines. but towards the end of the War machines never came back from any of the three places without being hit. Officers were often heard to say but they would rather carry out long distance raids into Belgium and Germany than do the short flight over Bruges. In the summer of 1918 the enemy started an additional means of defence of these places in the shape of machines, and flights (*flights?*) became almost nightly affairs. Of the squadron objectives the railways and the sidings inland from the coast what perhaps considered the easiest work,

aerodromes came next, but Bruges -Zeebrugge were never liked, machines used to get it the whole way in and out, and as soon as they got clear of the coast Ofsted and Westende used to open up, even if the machines were miles out to sea. A great testimonial to the accuracy of the bombing of the squadron it showed at Bruges; although the docks, which are right on the edge of town, were bombed incessantly practically no damage was done to the town at all. The inhabitants say that most of the damage done to the town was done by our day bombers and the A.A. defences.

Of the aerodromes worked from those in the Dunkerque area were considered the worst. Machines got away quite well but often had to fly around for upwards of an hour, waiting to be allowed to land on account of enemy bomb raids on Dunkerque. Machines sometimes landed on the beach until the raid was over but then flew back later, when E.A. bombed the aerodrome out the machines had to take to the beach both for leaving and landing. The enemy found this out and came and bombed the beach. Machines could never use the same place more than the couple of times. When the enemy gave up bombing Dunkerque and used his Bombers elsewhere a seaplane used to come down from Zeebrugge or Ostend and sit on the water just off the beach to wait for the Handley Pages and FE's to come back when he used to take off and attack them. This machine shot down two FE's in one night and shot a Handley Page about badly.

The aerodrome at Saint Inglevert was about the best work from, it was never bombed and it was easy to find. Most of the work carried out from this aerodrome was during the allied offensive in Flanders. Machines were used for bombing railway sidings behind the lines.

Only a few of the pilots who were in the squadron in its formation so anything of the work carried out in the summer of 1918, and practically none of the old pilots and observers were in the squadron at the time of the Armistice was signed.

(Signed)

Major, Commanding No. 214 Squadron, Royal Air Force

'Of the note worthy achievements the following is a rough record.'

(Please note that this list has been rearranged into chronological, the original list whilst broadly in chronological order had some discrepancies)

September 28th 1917 Namur Railway Bridge.

Badly damaged and rails torn up. Confirmed by Agents.

Pilot – Flight Commander H. G. Brackley, D.S.O., D.S.C.

Observer – Lieut. P. Bewsher, D.S.O.

A.M. (Air Mechanic) A/G (Air Gunner) W. Wardrop.

Machine – H.P. Br. 3130

Comments. To sum up this historic mission in just nine words is an indication of Major Brackley's modesty in down-playing his achievement on this operation at Namur. The crew flew 120 miles behind enemy lines, making a 300 mile round trip at night, that took 4 hours 30 minutes, to bomb a railway bridge that was being used by the enemy to transport reinforcements to the Battle of Passchendale. They damaged the bridge, successfully destroyed half the railway lines leading to the bridge. They took off at 19:59. The Pilot and Observer had never flown before. Major Brackley was in Dover, 8 hours earlier at midday, returning from leave. The Observer only heard about the flight at 16:00, four hours before taking off. Major Brackley wrote in his log book, 'Most enjoyable trip'.

October 28th 1917. Cologne

'The whole squadron attempted to raid Cologne, but ran into rain storms before reaching German Frontier, compelling all machines to return. Alternative targets were attacked on return journey.'

December 11th 1917. Target Bruges Docks.

'After making a successful attack on Bruges Docks in very unfavourable weather, Pilot was returning through rain storms and on nearing the Aerodrome could not see the ground. Machine struck ground at speed of 80 miles per hour, knocked over three small trees and turned completely over, pinning the pilot and observer under the wreckage. Help could not arrive for half an hour owing to the uncertainty of the wrecked machine's position. Several men swam across Canal but but on arrival could do nothing, The Pilot and Observer could only be extricated when a large number of Officers and men arrived to lift the machine. Pilot's head was held to the ground by the weight of one of the engines. By careful handling the two were successfully got out after being saturated in Petrol for nearly an hour. Apart from a shaking up and slight injuries, they were none the worst for the experience after two days rest'.

Pilot – Flight Commander C. H. Darley, D.S.O.

Observer – Wing Commander T.A. Cull, D.S.O.

Gunlayer – Captain Gilmour R.F.C

Machine – H.P. Br 3121

April 11th 1918. Coastal Batteries. Ostende – Zeebrugge.

'The squadron, working with 207 squadron carried out a series of attacks on coastal batteries around Ostend and Zeebrugge, in conjunction with the Naval attempted landing. The weather was extremely bad and the enemy batteries were very active. The

Naval attack however, did not materialise, owing to bad weather. 2 machines did not return'

May 9th 1918. Ostende Harbour and Coastal Batteries.

'Working in conjunction with Naval Forces making a landing at Ostende. The squadron attacked all coastal batteries in the vicinity and dropped many flares for illumination of Coast'

May 19th 1918. Bruges Docks.

'Whilst attacking Bruges Docks, the machine had greater part of it's starboard lower plane shot way. Pilot returned safely. Main spars and cross bracing wires only, were left intact.

Pilot – Lieutenant E.F. McIlraith

Observer – Corporal W.E. Neve

Gunlayer – Ac.1. W.P. Murphy

Machine – H.P. Br. 3487

May 27th 1918. Zeebrugge Lock Gates

The first gliding bomb attack was by Batchelor and Darley on the 2nd/3rd May and here Darley is having another attempt to put lock gates out of action, with the same crew.

'May 27th 1918. Zeebrugge Lock Gates. Attacked from 200 feet with 3 – 520lb bombs. Southern Gate partially destroyed. Enemy was forced to replace,'

Pilot – Captain C. H. Darley, D.S.C.

Observer- Lieutenant H.E. Clark.

Gunlayer – Lieutenant A.R. Clark.

Machine – H.P. Br 3128

May 30th 1918. La Brugeoise Works. Bruges

'Badly damaged by direct hits. Ammunition trains blown up. 3 – 550lb bombs dropped'

Pilot – Lieut. G.H. Russell

Observer – 2/Lt. J. Mc.K. Young, D.S.M.

Gunlayer - Corpl. T.F. Whittaker.

Machine – H.P. Br. 3128

June 11th 1918. Brugges Docks.

After scoring direct hits in Brugges Docks, the machine went through a very happy barrage of A. A. forcing pilot to descend to 1,000 feet. The Port lower plan(e) was so shot about that the whole of the fabric was stripped off. Pilot kept his head and by skilful handling brought machine safely back to the aerodrome and made a good landing.'

Pilot – Lieut. H.A.Mc Cormack

Observer – Corpl. W.H.Neve

Gunlayer – Pte. H. Williamson

Note incident happened during raid on night June 10th/11th. Pilot's name was Mc Cormick.

June 15th 1918. Bruges Docks.

Whilst attacking Bruges Docks the intense barrage of A.A. fire resulted in the machine being hit in many places. Starboard engine was hit and put completely out of action. Pilot managed to cross the lines at 100 feet and made safe landing in full view of the enemy. Very shortly after, the machine received a direct hit which blew it to pieces.'

Pilot – Lieut. W.S.B. Freer

Observer – Serget. Obs. W.E. Wardrop

Gunlayer – Lieut. R. Binckes

Machine – H.P. Br. 5401

July 13th 1918. Oostcamp Aerodrome.

On reaching the objective, machine was attacked by an enemy 2 seater, the first burst badly wounding the observer and putting one engine out of action. The Observer managed to release the bombs before fainting and the pilot recrossed the lines at a very low altitude and effected a safe landing on the beach. The machine was hauled up to the Dunes to keep it from view of the enemy. In two days repairs were effected and machine successfully flown away in full view of the enemy'

Pilot – Lieut. G.L. Fraser

Observer – Corpl. W.H.Neve

Gunlayer – 2/Lt. E.C. Fletcher

Machine – H.P. Br. C. 3489

July 24th 1918.

'Whilst "taking -off" for a raid, machine would not leave the ground before reaching the end of Aerodrome. The machine struck long crops turning the machine completely over

and pinning the occupants under the wreckage. Petrol ran onto the hot engines and caught fire. In a few seconds the whole machine was burning fiercely. Luckily the rear gunlayer, who had broken his arm, crawled out and gave assistance to the Pilot and the Observer who were both injured. Help arrived immediately and the crew were got away. When only 40 yards from the burning mass, the 16 -112lb bombs exploded but fortunately injuring none.'

Pilot – Lieut. H.A. McCormick

Observer – Corps. Obs. E.A.Barber

Gunlayer – Ensign J.C. Foster, U.S.N.A.S.

Machine H.P. Br. D. 9642

This incident was dated August 24th 1918 in Major Darley's account.

August 21st 1918. Zeebrugge, Solway Works.

After making a successful attack on Solway Works, machine was badly hit by A.A. fire. Pilot made a gallant effort to get back but was forced to land in the sea, on the enemy's side of the Lines. The Observer was drowned. The Pilot and Gun layer extricated themselves from machine and crawled to the tail, the only part of the machine above water. Soon after dawn a patrol of enemy machines flew over at low altitude, and after circling round, flew back in the direction of Ostende, no doubt to give information. Shortly after, a friendly machine on reconnaissance duly passed, the Pilot of which had had his attention attracted to the Signals made by the two helpless men. The machine (a D.H.4) returned immediately to report. In the meantime, the Handley Page had drifted still further eastwards and after a long wait of ten hours, help arrived in the shape of a flying boat, piloted by Lt. Gates, U.S.N.A.S. The Pilot and Gunlayer of the wrecked machine were taken off and landed safely at Dunkerque.'

Pilot - Lieut. J. Hetherington

Observer – 2/Lt. E.C. Fletcher

Gunlayer – El. 2. Cl.(R) C.W. Kennedy. U.S.N.A.S.

Machine – H.P Br. 3492

October 14th 1918. Melle Sidings, Ghent.

During the early part of the Flanders Battle, Melle Sidings were choked with traffic. The squadron carried out many raids on this objective. On 14th October, Lieut. G.S. Lewtas scored direct hits with 3 -550lb bombs on trains loaded with ammunition, causing indescribable damage all over the Sidings. The fires were help to the other Pilots bombing the same objective.'

Pilot – Lieut. G.S. Lewtas

Observer – Capt. H.E. Clark, D.F.C.

Gunlayer – Lieut. J.G.K.R. Smith, U.S.N.A.S.

Machine – H.P. Br. D. 9644

November 10th 1918. Louvain Railway.

The night before the Armistice, a raid was carried out on Louvain Railway Junction, nearly 6 tons of bombs being dropped, causing fires and explosions.

It will be born in mind that the principal objectives attacked, were exceptionally strongly defended by the enemy, every kind of “hate” being used against the attackers. On many occasions every machine in the squadron has returned from a raid damaged by A.A. fire, and in some cases Pilots have only just been able to make it over the Lines.

During the whole career of the squadron only 5 machines have been lost over the enemy’s side of the Lines. Of these two were known to have been shot down attacking Brugges Docks and Zeebrugge, the personnel being killed. The other three, with the exception of three of the crews, are safe, but prisoners of War.

It may be interesting to state that owing to the lack of supply, the same machines of the 0/100 type were kept going for a year. When the squadron was reequipped with the 0/400 type, the old machines were flown down to the independent force, where they were used for bombing Germany.

‘Four Royal Personages’. Among other interesting items four Royal personages with their respective Staffs have been flown in Machines of the Squadron piloted by me. These are;

November 29th 1917. The King of Siam and his Staff.

February 23rd 1918. Prince Axel of Denmark and Staff.

October 18th 1918. Their majesties the King and Queen of the Belgians and Staff, were flown to Ostend and the surrounding country immediately after the evacuation of the district by the enemy.

On the following page is a list of Officers and O.R.s who have been awarded Decorations etc for meritorious Services. In addition, the Squadron has received many telegrams of congratulation after successful operations; one Special Letter from the Admiralty and inclusion in special letter published in Air Ministry Weekly Order No. 1634 dated 19th December 1918.

(Signed) H.G. Brackley Major, Officer Commanding

214 Squadron R.A.F. In the Field. 19/01/19

The following Officers and Other Ranks have been awarded Decorations and 'Mentions' for meritorious service

Corporal Observer E. A. Barber. Distinguished Service Medal. Meritorious Service Medal

Captain T. A. Batchelor. Distinguished Flying Cross.

Major H. G. Brackley. Distinguished Service Order. Distinguished Service Cross. Croix de Guerre avec Palme. Mentioned in Despatches

Sergeant O.H. Burley. Mentioned in Despatches.

P.O. W. S. Burville. Distinguished Service Medal. Meritorious Service Medal

Chief Mechanic. H. Cadman. Meritorious Service Medal

Sergeant F.B. Clark. Mentioned in Despatches.

Captain H. E. Clark. Distinguished Flying Cross.

P.O. AG./L. A. Clark. Distinguished Service Medal.

AC. AG./L. G. Conley Distinguished Service Medal.

Flight Commander C.H. Darley. Distinguished Service Cross. Bar to Distinguished Service Cross. Distinguished Flying Cross.

Sergeant E. H. Davey. Meritorious Service Medal.

Sergeant Observer L. A. Dell. Distinguished Flying Medal.

Lieutenant H.R.W. Ellison. Distinguished Flying Cross.

Lieutenant W.S.B. Freer. Mentioned in Despatches.

Lieutenant V. R. Gibbs. Distinguished Service Cross.

Sergeant J. A. Helsden. Mentioned in Despatches.

Captain. G. S. Lewtas. Mentioned in Despatches. Croix de Guerre Avec Palme.

Captain E. F. Mc Ilraith. Distinguished Flying Cross.

Second Lieutenant J. Mc Kinley Young. Distinguished Flying Cross. Distinguished Service Medal.

Lieutenant B. A. Millsom. Distinguished Service Cross.

Sergeant Observer A. A. Parker Distinguished Flying Medal.

Sergeant J. Parry. Mentioned in Despatches.

Sergeant R. H. Powell. Mentioned in Despatches.

P.O. C. E. Roust. Distinguished Service Medal.

Captain G.H. Russell. Distinguished Flying Cross.

Chief Mechanic J. R. Strachan. Mentioned in Despatches.

Captain C. T. Tyrer. Mentioned in Despatches.

Lieutenant W. A. Scott. Distinguished Service Cross

Lieutenant V. E Sieveking. Distinguished Service Cross. Bar to Distinguished Flying Cross.

Captain T. Q. Studd. Distinguished Flying Cross.

Sergeant Observer W. E. Wardrop. Distinguished Flying Medal.

Sergeant Observer T.F. Whittaker. Mentioned in Despatches.

Second Lieutenant T. Willis. British Empire Medal. Mentioned in Despatches.