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A Return to Camelot?: British Identity, The Masculine Ideal, and the Romanticization of the
Royal Flying Corps Image

Abby Stapleton Whitlock

Undergraduate Honors Thesis

College of William and Mary Lyon G. Tyler Department of History

24 April 2019

A Return To Camelot?: British Identity, The Masculine Ideal, And The Romanticization Of The
Royal Flying Corps Image

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in
History from the College of William and Mary.

By

Abby Stapleton Whitlock

Accepted for Highest Honors
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)



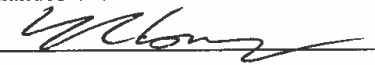
Frederick Corney, Director



Amy Lintoncelli



Chandos Brown



Bruce Campbell

for

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Introduction

In October 1917, British Prime Minister David Lloyd George addressed the House of Commons in a speech dedicated to the British Armed Forces. Their actions and sacrifices, he declared, contributed directly to the defense of the British Isles, the Empire, and secured the success of the Allied Cause.¹ Although he gave attention to each of the branches, it was the newest that appeared to capture both his gratitude and imagination: the Royal Flying Corps (RFC). In near religious, hero-worshipping tones, he dubbed the newest branch the “Cavalry of the clouds”.² Here, Lloyd George represented the airmen with the ideals of “air force elitism,” equating their fight for the “eternal issues of right and wrong” with the tales in the epic adventure stories that had formed the basis of British culture.³

Lloyd George’s elevated view of the Royal Flying Corps is not an isolated one. This view of air force elitism is a common thread uniting most descriptions of the British airmen in the First World War. Central to this air force elitism is the idea of knighthood, which draws on ideals of masculinity, chivalry, and heroism. Sociologists Michael Kimmel and Tristan Bridges distinguished masculinity from biological sex:

¹ F.L. Stevenson, “A Nation’s Thanks: Extracts from a Speech delivered in the House of Commons, October 29th, 1917” in *The Great Crusade: Extracts from Speeches Delivered During the War, by the Right Honorable David Lloyd George, M.P* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1918), 199.

² *Ibid*, 212.

³ *Ibid*, 212

“Masculinity” refers to the behaviors, social roles, and relations of men within a given society as well as the meanings attributed to them. The term masculinity stresses gender, unlike male, which stresses biological sex.⁴

Notwithstanding this definition, masculinity is a fluid concept, heavily dependent on the historical and cultural context at the moment of its definition. By the time of the First World War, the concept of masculinity had shifted considerably from perceptions in recent centuries.

Medieval and Renaissance perceptions of masculinity on the basis of fantastical heroes like Beowulf and King Arthur had shifted in the modern era to notions of male gender identity grounded firmly in capitalist, upper class Britain. Ultimately, the central definition of masculinity is determined by the group holding the most power in a respective culture. In the case of Victorian and Edwardian Britain, this is, undeniably, the upper and middle classes of Britain. Whether it be through lineage in the old landowning aristocracy, imperial endeavors, or through money earned from investments in industrial development, these two classes controlled most of the wealth and power in British society. The British perception of masculinity aligns closely with the traditional Western ideal, placing a thorough education, high economic standing, athleticism, courage, and sound emotional state among its ‘core’ values.⁵ Patrick Deer ties this equating of masculinity with “traditional” upper class values of “insistence on the relation between Empire and gentlemanly valor, the public school ethos of useless games, pluck, and war.”⁶

⁴ Michael Kimmel and Tristan Bridges, “Masculinity,” in *Oxford Bibliographies*, September 2014 [accessed February 14, 2019]. <http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199756384/obo-9780199756384-0033.xml>

⁵ Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes On The Management Of Spoiled Identity* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), 128.

⁶ Patrick Deer, *Culture in Camouflage: War, Empire, and Modern British Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 62.

This image ties in with cultural perceptions of the ‘proper’ roles - socially defined rights, duties, and expectations - associated with one’s relative social standing. In British culture in this era, this status was derived from multiple factors, most importantly gender and socio-economic background. According to anthropologist Erving Goffman, interactions between individuals represent a form of performance in which it is an opportunity for individuals to present a certain image of themselves in order to gain the respect they desire. This is not only a way of maintaining one’s image and concomitant level of respect, but also allows for social mobility, improving one’s status through interactions with others of equal to higher social standing. However, as seen in Kimmel and Bridges’s definition, masculinity is separate from male biological sex, representing the characteristics viewed as ideal for males; this means that due to socialization under these ideals, there is stigmatization of those not fitting the desired set of traits.

This thesis examines the construction of the image of the Royal Flying Corps and the factors that challenged the development and persistence of this image. It explores the Royal Flying Corps through three different lenses: gender, social identity, and memory. The image of the Royal Flying Corps was the product of a number of factors: Britain’s pre-war infatuation with aviation, the impact on public morale of the anonymized nature of industrial warfare in the trenches, and targeted recruitment tactics and medical examination criteria. These three factors directly correlated with the British upper class perception of the ideal “masculine man,” whose characteristics of chivalry, obedience, courage, and emotional strength were directly projected onto RFC servicemen by military and government officials.

This thesis focuses on the RFC image through the lens of the scout pilot, also known as the “fighter pilot”. Although reconnaissance, artillery observation, and bomber pilots faced equally dangerous consequences, their presence is noticeably absent from most portrayals of the British air war, particularly post-war films and novels. As I will expand on in chapter two of this thesis, this has its roots in the connections between the desire for individual heroic achievement and the contrasting anonymous slaughter in the trenches. Being in “the thick of it”, the nature of dogfighting- the one-on-one nature lending itself to the nickname of “knightly duels”- contributed to the RFC becoming central to leading figures and their romanticized realm of aerial combat. In a similar vein, I chose to focus on the Royal Naval Air Service, as not only are there few primary sources accessible on their structure, but also that due to a smaller number of servicemen and machines, they were overshadowed personnel and materiel wise by the larger RFC. Without discounting the contributions of the RNAS, the RFC was the main component in the British air service and provided most of the basis in the logistical planning and formation of the present-day Royal Air Force. For this reason, I focus on breaking down the context and validity of the RFC image while still keeping in mind the service and sacrifices of non-fighter pilots and Royal Naval Air Service servicemen.

Chapter I focuses on the historical background of the Royal Flying Corps, providing a very brief history on the different factors shaping the structure and hierarchy of the branch. The RFC developed from a pre-war status with few aircraft to a branch with thousands of aircraft and a bureaucratic infrastructure on the cusp of amalgamation with the Royal Naval Air Service in 1918. This chapter examines the structure of RFC culture and how pilots were indoctrinated into its values. As discussed in later chapters, a collective mentality developed within the RFC

through training and, perhaps most importantly, squadron culture, where individuals formed positive and negative relationships with other members. By forming these relationships, squadrons fulfilled the primary goal of the government and military officials, namely the creation of a strong collective identity to support the mission of the RFC.

Chapter II tracks the creation of the RFC's image from its pre-war origins to its dissemination through various media forms touching multiple groups. The aforementioned components of RFC identity have separate but connected origins across pre-war and wartime categories. Most integral to this process was British society's pre-war fascination with aviation. The popularity of the science fiction genre, to the extent that it was focused on aviation and aircraft in the Victorian and Edwardian eras, emphasized the British fascination with the prospect of aviation. Closer to the outbreak of war, this became a popular fascination with the pioneering aviation exploits of innovators like Louis Blériot, Glenn Curtiss, and the Wright Brothers. Flight represented superiority, a sense of being above the worldly, mortal ties of life on earth and elevating select individuals to the ranks of the gods. As a result, pioneering aviators were equated with heroes. During the war, this view of air force elitism infused official practices like publicizing methods, such as reports and newspapers published in major newspapers throughout the British Isles and across the globe.⁷ This cult of the air fighter arose as trench warfare halted Britain's traditional perception of war and heroism. With the anonymous slaughter in the trenches, aviation appeared as a savior on the waning horizon of British hopes for military

⁷ John H. Morrow Jr., "Knights of the Sky: Rise of Military Aviation" in *Authority, Identity and the Social History of the Great War*, edited by Frans Coetzee, Marilyn Shevin Coetzee (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1995), 309.

success. As industrial slaughter in the trenches eliminated opportunities for individual heroism, the feats of upcoming ace pilots in lone dogfights filled this gap.

Recognizing this new arena for potential British advancement, officials developed a Messianic view of aviation, as “flying men will win the war” and help preserve British prosperity.⁸ Aerial prowess represented industrial superiority, thus meeting Britain’s nationalist goals of maintaining its top spot in the world order. Unlike the infantry’s industrial technology, aircraft represented an industrial advancement that through its “clean”, “romantic” nature of tactical execution, would guide Britain to a “return to Camelot”, refocusing society away from industrialization’s ‘amorality’ and back to values of chivalry and loyalty.⁹ Ultimately, the technological achievement associated with the RFC provided British society with the means of reaffirming the traditional values it projected onto its pilots.¹⁰

Chapter III examines this overly romanticized and exaggerated representation of the RFC, an image tailored to the needs and desires of the British Government and Royal Flying Corps Headquarters, and the ways in which this was received by those directly experiencing the war in the air. It focuses on the development of the RFC image through recruitment criteria and medical examinations. The analysis concludes with an examination of mental health treatment and the presence of mental disorders in squadrons and how this contrasted with the focus on the masculine ideal of emotional soundness. Originally deemed as a sign of cowardice, mental

⁸ Wherry R. Anderson, *The Romance of Air Fighting* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1917), 3.

⁹ Mark Girouard, *The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981), 293.

¹⁰ Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (Toronto: Lester and Orpen Dennys, 1989), 265

disorders in the ranks of the RFC actually represented individuals suffering from a natural emotional reaction to the realities of industrial war in the air, a lack of established treatment practices, and the pressure of masculine ideals forced individuals to hide their symptoms. This chapter argues that although the general public and military officials represented RFC pilots as the collected, reckless, “ideal” British male, this romanticization hid the reality of this new form of warfare, in which pilots suffered from a lack of medical treatment and the oppressing nature of this “masculine ideal”.

Finally, Chapter IV focuses on the post-war film representations of the RFC. These films represented a blend of both this romanticized RFC image, such as robust squadron life, and the grim realities of war, particularly emotional breakdowns and doomed fatalism. Post-war film presented an interesting perspective on this RFC image, showing RFC life as one of “artificial” camaraderie, formulated in the creation of an “us” vs “them” mentality, as a direct result of attempting to uphold this masculine ideal. Though personality dynamics varied from scene to scene and film to film, those films that dealt with the RFC created a series of “us” vs “them” dichotomies. This dichotomy reflected a collectivism formed under the pressure of war, with “an other” based upon one’s respective emotional reactions to war. These film representations are not only informative on how the public perceived the Royal Flying Corps, but also provide a social commentary on the time period by showing how these perceptions were interpreted to fit their own ideas of the “ideal”.

The image of the Royal Flying Corps developed as a means both to salvage British morale during the uncertain years of the war and to reinforce a useable image of the nation after

the war challenged Britain's association with civilization and stability. An image of a chivalrous, masculine RFC reinforced values that, in the minds of the upper classes and perhaps beyond, defined British pre-war culture. The emphasis on a loyal, chivalrous, emotionally sound collective contrasted sharply with the reality of evolving squadron demographics over the course of the war and the harmful effects of violent aerial warfare.

Chapter I: British Aviation and the Future of War: The Emergence of the Royal Flying Corps

The First World War saw the implementation and rapid development of military aviation merely a decade after its birth. In his 1922 study of the Royal Air Force, historian Walter Raleigh emphasized the contribution of pre-war industrialization, stating that “the national love for continuity of development is well seen in the history of the genesis of the national air force.”¹¹ Coinciding with the rapid industrial developments of the late eighteenth and nineteenth century, the British government also expressed interest in the prospect of aviation. In 1862, Lieutenant Edward Grover and Captain Beaumont of the Royal Engineers conducted the first tests on the military potential of balloons after observing the Federal Army Balloon Corps during the American Civil War. After these initial tests, the War Office introduced coal-gas balloons to the British Army in 1878 and, after successful tests, the Army Balloon School was established in June 1894.¹²

Although the Wright Brothers conducted the first powered flights in 1903, it was not until later in the decade that British officials seriously considered the role of aviation in military affairs. With the rapid industrialization and military expansion of countries like France and Germany in the years before the war, officials expressed the sense that Britain was lagging in this realm. Conservative MP and British Army Colonel the Right Honorable J.E.B. Seely, noted the difference in trained personnel in both the Army and the Navy, numbering in the teens, compared

¹¹ Walter Raleigh, *The War in the Air: Being the Story of The part played in the Great War by the Royal Air Force*, vol. I (London: Imperial War Museum, 1922), 146.

¹² Peter G. Cooksley, *The Royal Flying Corps 1914-1918*, 1-2.

to France, who had over two hundred personnel: "we are what you might call behind."¹³ Even those not in the military speculated about Britain's delayed attitudes towards aviation, with H.G. Wells in a *Daily Mail* article wondering if the country was not "backward, unorganized, unimaginative, [and] unenterprising."¹⁴ This perception, coupled with increasing fears of an impending war on the continent, caused government and military officials to begin developments of British air power. In February 1912, the Royal Engineers created an Air Battalion, which included approximately four flying officers, fourteen ground officers, and 176 other personnel. In addition, a joint Army and Navy Flying School, which included the Naval Air Organization, at Upavon opened, which included two chief instructors for around 63 pupils between the two branches.¹⁵

In November 1911, Prime Minister Herbert H. Asquith requested a sub-committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence to explore measures to expand a more secure air service.¹⁶ Members of the sub-committee included high-ranking officials from both the Army and the Navy. However, two members distinguished themselves in their opinions about the role of aviation in military affairs: Brigadier-General David Henderson, later Commander of the Royal Flying Corps, and Captain Frederick Hugh Sykes, who served in both the Royal Flying Corps and Royal Naval Air Service. Both Henderson and Sykes recognized the potential aviation held for reconnaissance.¹⁷ Aided by Henderson and Sykes' positive prognosis for aviation, the sub-

¹³ Ibid, 202.

¹⁴ Cited in Morrow Jr., "Knights of the Sky", 309.

¹⁵ Cooksley, *The Royal Flying Corps 1914-1918*, 9.

¹⁶ Raleigh, *The War in the Air*, vol. I, 198.

¹⁷ Ibid, 199-200.

committee encouraged the development of a more structured air service. Recommendations for the air service specified two main points structuring the new service, referred to as the “Flying Corps”. First, the new service would include three main facets: a Naval Wing partially under the control of the Royal Navy, a Military Wing under the control of the Army, and the creation of a Central Flying School to train the pilots of both wings. The other main recommendation was the creation of the Air Committee, a consultative committee tasked with answering all aeronautical questions concerning both the Admiralty and War Office.¹⁸

The sub-committee’s recommendations were accepted in Spring 1912. On April 13, 1912, King George V signed a royal warrant establishing the Royal Flying Corps, consisting of the prescribed Naval Wing, absorbing the Naval Air Organization, and a Military Wing, absorbing the Royal Engineer’s Air Battalion.¹⁹ Under Colonel Seely’s recommendations, the Military Wing of the RFC was larger than the Naval Wing, with the former having one hundred and thirty-three officers and the latter having between thirty and forty officers.²⁰ The Royal Flying Corps also included the Central Flying School (CFS), a central Headquarters, seven squadrons, and one airship squadron under one Commanding Officer, Captain Frederick Sykes.²¹ Initially, officers would learn to fly privately before attending the Central Flying School for more advanced instruction, leading some to see the CFS’s goal as “to teach flyers to become soldiers rather than to train them to fly.”²² In the following year, officials established the Experimental

¹⁸ Quoted in *Ibid*, 198.

¹⁹ Cooksley, *The Royal Flying Corps 1914-1918*, 10.

²⁰ Raleigh, *The War in the Air*, vol. I, 214.

²¹ Cooksley, *The Royal Flying Corps 1914-1918*, 10.

²² *Ibid*, 10.

Branch of the RFC Military Wing, tasked with developing essential concepts such as meteorology, aerial photography, aerial bombing techniques, wireless operation, artillery observation, and the development of balloons.²³

Despite the formation of the RFC under the Royal Warrant, officials struggled with how to properly train personnel. One of the major questions was whether every pilot should be an officer or whether some mechanics and non-commissioned officers should also be trained to fly. It was eventually decided that exceptionally skilled pilots should be offered commissions as officers and allow others with potential to enter the non-commissioned ranks. By 1913, the Royal Flying Corps consisted primarily of commissioned officers whose main focus was flying, a smaller number of non-commissioned officers primarily in observation roles, and ground personnel.²⁴ The different trades delegated to non-flying personnel were separated into two different groups. “Main trades”, viewed as those most important to RFC operations, included blacksmiths, sail-makers and fitters, wireless operators, and photographers. “Minor trades”, those viewed of lesser immediate importance, included chauffeurs, machinists, and switchboard attendants.²⁵

Wartime Urgency: Organization, Training, and Duties

Although Raleigh writes of a “national air force,” Britain entered the war with two completely separate air branches. For nearly two years, the organization of the original RFC remained largely intact. The creation of two separate branches came in 1914, with the formation

²³ Ibid, 13.

²⁴ Raleigh, *The War in the Air*, vol. I, 203.

²⁵ Ibid, 209.

of the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS). Under the initial 1912 warrant, the Naval Wing operated semi-autonomously from the Military Wing, which was fully under the control of the Army. The complete split came in July 1914, with the creation of the Royal Naval Air Service.²⁶ Entering the war with only one hundred trained pilots, the RNAS was responsible for all airship operations, patrols of the British coast, and, later in the war, seaplane tenders. At Britain's declaration of war in August 1914, Royal Flying Corps personnel consisted of approximately 147 officers, 1,097 ground crew and non-commissioned officers, and approximately 179 airplanes.²⁷ The nature of industrial warfare greatly impacted how the Royal Flying Corps performed and organized itself over the course of the war. At the beginning of the war, the branch focused primarily on reconnaissance and aerial observation for the infantry. With the onset of trench warfare, infantry officers recognized the need to monitor the enemy's frontlines in order to plan for offensives. Despite initial reservations about the role of aviation, the RFC found their first niche in the war as airborne observation posts for the artillery and by providing behind-the-lines bombing support.²⁸ The creation of the interrupter gear allowed for machine guns to be mounted safely and efficiently onto aircraft. With the rise of the one-seat fighter or scout aircraft, one-on-one combat, one of the defining features of the war, filled the skies above the trenches. Here, the unique nature of two industrial weapons-the machine gun and the airplane-gave the RFC its most important and perhaps autonomous duty: dogfighting.

²⁶ *First World War in the Air*, edited by Ross Mahoney (London: Royal Air Force Museum, 2015), 13.

²⁷ Cooksley, *The Royal Flying Corps 1914-1918*, 18.

²⁸ *First World War in the Air*, 13.

Despite the RFC finding its place in combat, the pressure of war forced officials to make further changes to its structure to streamline efficiency. In 1916, RFC HQ organized the branch into two “Wings”: the “Corps Wing,” which included squadrons committed solely to assist ground forces, and the “Army Wing,” committed to operations called for by an Army commander, such as strategic bombing and long-range reconnaissance. With this structure, squadrons were no longer expected to conduct bombing, reconnaissance, artillery observation, photography, contact patrols, and interceptions over British lines all with one set of personnel.²⁹ Along with the two wings, RFC HQ also reorganized the curriculum of the Central Flying School. High casualties in late 1916 and early 1917 forced many instructors to hastily train pupils, with many recruits coming to squadrons with only one to three hours of solo flying time. Under Captain Robert Smith-Barry, the “Gosport System” was introduced, creating a more structured, efficient training curriculum. As Smith-Barry put it, “the object of training is not to prevent flyers from getting into difficulties, but to show them how to get out of them satisfactorily, and having done so, to make them go and repeat the process alone.”³⁰

Establishing the No. 1 School of Special Flying at Gosport, Smith-Barry recommended that instructors be chosen from a pool of highly skilled scout pilots and be educated at special schools to increase efficient instruction. He also recommended that due to the increased skill of the instructors, pupils should remain with their respective instructor throughout the entire course.³¹ Underneath the Gosport System, officials introduced more schools of instruction,

²⁹ Cooksley, *The Royal Flying Corps 1914-1918*, 19.

³⁰ *Ibis*, 29.

³¹ *Ibid*, 28-29.

including a Machine Gun School, Observer School, Officers Training School, School of Aerial Gunnery, School of Instruction, and Wireless School.³² At these new schools, recruits, depending on their particular rank or course, received a more specialized education, thus improving their skillset when they were later attached to squadrons at the front. However, despite these major changes, the RFC would have to face one last change that would ultimately determine its future: the need for a unified, independent air force.

Wartime Exigencies and the Formation of the Royal Air Force

Despite the various developments of the respective air branches during the early part of the war, officials identified a number of problems hindering performance against German air units. A paper circulated in the British Cabinet in 1916 entitled “Air Service in the War” stated that there was not a “single person outside the two offices [War Office and Admiralty]...who is content with the present situation.” The paper emphasized that the reality of British air performance required a “radical change.” The misallocation of lighter-than-air ships to the RNAS hindered naval reconnaissance and on the Western Front, RFC units were easily “outclassed by German machines,” causing the British to lose air superiority.³³ The report identified the main issue as tense relations between the RFC and the RNAS. A lack of intercommunication and coordination caused both branches to conduct similar operations, thus using up resources already in high demand. Due to their different administrators, both the RFC and the RNAS claimed the right to conduct long-range offensive operations. Such operations

³² Ibid, 31.

³³ “Air Service in the War (II), April 16, 1916,” *Royal Air Force Centre for Air Power Studies Air Power Review*, spring 2013: 95th Anniversary Special Edition, 125.

called for up-to-date aircraft and high-power engines, which, the report identified, came predominantly from France, not Britain.³⁴ There was a major competition between both branches over a limited number of resources. As a result, this inefficiency not only taxed the British war effort under home front industries, but it also impacted units at the front already under extreme pressure.

The report proposed a solution: the amalgamation of the two services. Such a “National Air Service” would include an Air Ministry with “full power and responsibility” as well as a national air factory to centralize production.³⁵ It would also include representatives in both Houses of Parliament, “some considerable measure of financial independence,” and “complete control of Construction and Supply.”³⁶ However, the report did recognize potential problems with such an amalgamation. Logistically, the creation of an amalgamated air force would be difficult during war time. Although there would be an “increase in efficiency” with amalgamation, the housing of staff of the former services could “produce an amount of friction and disorganisation” that would cancel out major progress. Such friction would be similar to the RFC-RNAS rivalry hindering British air development. Overall, the report emphasized the need to amalgamate the two services, suggesting that it was better to “assume the full responsibility” right away than prolong the centralization of power during a period of uncertainty about the future of British aerial superiority.³⁷

³⁴ Ibid, 125.

³⁵ Ibid, 127.

³⁶ Ibid, 128.

³⁷ Ibid, 129.

A similar critique of the air services and potential solutions manifested itself a year later in Lieutenant-General Sir David Henderson's "Memorandum on the Organization of the Air Services". Henderson recognized that no complete air policy could be carried out except by a body with control of both branches," a more centralized form of air policy.³⁸ Expanding on similar ideas presented in the 1916 Cabinet report, Henderson proposed a unified air force with a department "formed on the general lines of the Admiralty and War Office" with "full responsibility for the war in the air." Henderson argued that although air forces were used in accordance with naval and land operations, it was not "necessary that such contingents should be composed of Naval or Military personnel."³⁹ Training should be unified and centralized, with the only specification coming with pilot training and mechanic trainings. Such unification of training would increase squadron efficiency and streamline economic production of military materiel. The result of an independent air service and more efficient wartime economy would outweigh the temporary "reduction of efficiency" during a transitional period.⁴⁰

German strategic bombardment was another major factor contributing to the development of an independent air service in Britain. Though limited by technology and distance, Germany introduced strategic bombardment through Zeppelin raids in 1915. Although these were relatively ineffective, the realization that German forces could reach London caused a panic within the British public. In 1917, attacks on London by long-range Gotha bombers on 13 June

³⁸ David Henderson, "Memorandum on the Organization of the Air Services, July 1917," Royal Air Force Centre for Air Power Studies Air Power Review (Spring 2013: 95th Anniversary Special Edition), 138.

³⁹ Henderson, "Memorandum on the Organization of the Air Services, July 1917", 139.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 140.

and 7 July resulted in nearly 800 casualties. The home defence network, primarily headed by RNAS units, proved to be ineffectual, similar to their performance against the Zeppelin campaigns in the fall of 1916.⁴¹ Select RFC units were pulled back to England to contribute to home defence, but these units were already strained by wartime conditions and were needed at the front in preparation for Passchendaele operations. The success of these Gotha raids showed that “the nature of warfare had changed in a manner which could only spell danger to Britain’s long-enjoyed ‘insular fastness’.”⁴² With increased public outcry, Prime Minister Lloyd George’s coalition government feared a vote of no confidence and a search for solutions became central to War Cabinet meetings.⁴³

In the summer of 1917, Prime Minister Lloyd George appointed Field Marshal Jan Christiaan Smuts as the head of a committee to investigate the problems of air defence. Although he had no experience with aviation, Smuts not only had training as a lawyer and politician, but also served in South West Africa in 1915 and commanded Imperial forces in German East Africa before returning to England. Presented in August 1917, the “Committee on Air Organization and Home Defence Against Air Raids (2nd Report),” also called the Smuts Report, posed three major questions: first, officials debated over whether to create a single air ministry responsible for air service organization and operations; second, there was the major question over whether a single service, rather than the present RNAS and RFC, would be more efficient tactically and

⁴¹ Malcolm Cooper, “Blueprint for Confusion: The Administrative Background to the Formation of the Royal Air Force, 1912-19,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 22 (1987), 440.

⁴² Russell Miller, *Trenchard: Father of the Royal Air Force* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2016), 172.

⁴³ John Sweetman, “The Smuts Report of 1917: Merely Political Window-Dressing?” *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 4, issue 2 (1981), 153.

logistically; and, finally, how to preserve select elements of RNAS and RFC structure and tradition in the new air service.⁴⁴

Like Henderson's vision, Smut's idea for a unified air service included an independent air department, in this case an Air Ministry, that could "control and administer all matters in connection with aerial warfare."⁴⁵ Although many in the War Cabinet questioned aspects of the Smuts Report, including the feasibility of creating a new branch during wartime, the War Cabinet accepted the report. An Air Organisation Committee was created "to investigate and report on arrangements necessary for...amalgamation."⁴⁶ The primary objective of the committee included drafting legislation and regulations for the unification process. On 29 November 1917, the Air Force Bill passed into law.⁴⁷ With the legislation in place and the creation of an Air Ministry with Secretary of State for Air Lord William Weir and Chief of Air Staff Sir Frederick Sykes, the Royal Air Force (RAF) officially came into existence on 1 April 1918.

By November 1918, the RAF was the world's largest air service and first independent air service with around 300,000 officers and 22,000 aircraft. The RAF would face an uncertain future in the interwar period, but with the commitment of individuals like Hugh Trenchard and Winston Churchill, the RAF would go on to serve in the colonies and during the Second World War. The

⁴⁴ "Report by General Smuts on Air Organization and the Direction of Aerial Operations, August 1917," *AIR FORCE* Magazine, Published January 2009.

⁴⁵ "Report by General Smuts on Air Organization."

⁴⁶ Sweetman, "The Smuts Report of 1917: Merely Political Window-Dressing?", 171.

⁴⁷ Miller, *Trenchard: Father of the Royal Air Force*, 187.

trials and tribulations of the war, though difficult at the time, would serve as guidelines for the creation of later independent air services, setting a standard for countries like the United States.

Chapter II: The Cultural Image of the Royal Flying Corps

As with the other branches of Britain's armed forces, the Royal Flying Corps had a distinctive identity that stemmed from multiple factors. Most of these branches had similar sources contributing to their respective image, specifically training and assigned duties. Ultimately, these tactics helped streamline the efficiency of the branch by not only educating servicemen about their duties, but also by creating a distinctive sense of identity for all members to embrace. The group identity of the Royal Flying Corps was undeniably different from other military branches. Most significantly, the Royal Flying Corps distinguished itself from the other branches by the very machinery it used to wage war. By combining aircraft with machine guns, aviation represented the pinnacle of technological innovation, a representation of Britain's dedication to industrial power. Using technology barely a decade old, the Royal Flying Corps was Britain's newest military branch with the most youthful personnel. Despite being connected to the Army, the Royal Flying Corps' youthfulness provided room for a new image to be formed against the chaos and uncertainty of industrial war. While all the military branches tapped into different forms of the "ideal" British man to create their identities, none held these ideals so central to their core values as the Royal Flying Corps. The dawn of the fighter pilot and the age of the "dog-fight" attracted the attention of British society in the course of the war. Against the anonymous mass slaughter in the trenches, aviation provided a source for hope, a re-awakening of the pre-war notion of "air elitism". This air elitism evolved from focusing on the accomplishments of pioneer civilian aviators to creating individual heroes out of aces.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Michael Paris, "The Rise Of The Airmen: The Origins Of Air Force Elitism, C.1890-1918," *Journal of Contemporary History* 28, no. 1 (1993): 124.

This sense of air elitism evolved with the birth of the RFC, creating a “cult of the air fighter.”⁴⁹ Here, pilots represented the masculine ideals of individualism and chivalry. The Royal Flying Corps image was both shaped and transmitted by three main factors: pre-war literary fascination with aviation, the nature of industrial war, and government-sponsored media.

Early Roots of the RFC Image: Public Imagination and Pre-War Attraction to Aviation

Britain’s fascination with and idealization of aviation pre-dated the First World War by nearly half a century. Prior to 1914, British culture focused on aviation through the lens of science fiction literature and flights made by pioneering aviators. Due to the revolutionary nature of aeronautics and the success of the technology in a relatively short period, aviation became associated with the coming of a new age of national prowess.⁵⁰ Each of these factors influenced the development of the idea of “air elitism,” the romanticized view of aviation and aviators as superior to all other individuals. Ultimately, there were three main elements of air elitism that developed in this period. First, there was the association of aviation with human progress and industrial development. Second, due to this connection with progress, aviators were seen as superior human beings. The final factor of air elitism was the potential aviation held for military power and control.

The association of aviation with human progress, individual enterprise, and bravery grew out of the early flying exploits. Even before the 1903 Wright Brothers flight at Kitty Hawk, representing the dawn of powered flight, multiple aeronautical developments captured the public’s attention. These included the observation balloon, which had been used in the French

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Paris, “The Rise Of The Airmen,” 124-125.

Revolutionary Wars and the American Civil War, and the creation of the dirigible in 1884.⁵¹ Although powered flight became central to aerial combat in the First World War, these early lighter-than-air flights provoked early responses to the future prospects of aviation. Science fiction, one of the most popular genres of the Victorian Era, highlighted these scientific achievements as positive manifestations of control over progress. One of the most famous science fiction writers of the period, Jules Verne, included different modes of flight in his novels, including *Five Weeks in a Balloon, or, Journeys and Discoveries in Africa by Three Englishmen* (1863) and, more futuristically for his time, *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865). Many of Verne's novels included other innovative industrial concepts, such as early submarines in the form of the *Nautilus* in *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870). For Verne, though, aviation was one of the most important products of industrialization and, with further developments, could “most affect the life of man.”⁵² Machines such as airplanes represented not only man's mastery of machinery and technical development, but also the mastery of the air.

Aviators were represented as a new breed of “hero” or as “superior” to other humans. Pilots were often compared to Daedalus and Icarus.⁵³ However, this comparison to Icarus is, of course, ironic, as *hubris* ultimately leads to his death flying too close to the sun. Like Daedalus, aviators harnessed new technology regardless of the lack of preceding success and relied on their skills and courage to beat the odds against them. Through their pioneering flights, pilots ultimately surpassed Icarus and Daedalus in achieving the age-old dream of man: the mastery of

⁵¹ Morrow Jr. , “Knights of the Sky”, 305.

⁵² Paris, “The Rise Of The Airmen,” 125.

⁵³ Morrow Jr. , “Knights of the Sky”, 305.

flight.⁵⁴ The era of popular fiction furthered this concept of elitism by making aviators key to their plots, an early version of the “cult of the airman” that would rapidly expand through wartime government-sponsored media. In these novels, “noble and inventive souls” built or flew airplanes and their courage, intelligence, and mastery of the air allowing them to always defeat rivals. In this modern heroic trope, the aviator replaced the medieval heroic trope of knight and steed in the fight against the dragon to save a fair lady or, on a greater scale, civilization.⁵⁵ Later, the introduction of air races, such as the 1910 London-Manchester Race at Hendon Aerodrome, added another public display technical mastery that captured broad popular attention. The association of aviation with sporting danger made it appear, in the eyes of the public, more heroic, with fatalities in air races or other pioneering flights presented in the press as a necessary sacrifice for man’s future mastery of the air.⁵⁶ Ultimately this concept was later expanded on with the introduction of propaganda focused on pilots.

This “Messianic” view of pilots and aviation greatly contributed to the association of flight with national power.⁵⁷ By the turn of the twentieth century, heightened nationalism between industrialized countries, particularly Great Britain and Germany, created tension about the future of peace and national pride. Although most of the early prospects of aviation had been focused on civilians, this period of uncertainty caused many to wonder about its military potential.⁵⁸ Two main approaches to the future of aviation developed: one sought to develop

⁵⁴ Ibid, 374.

⁵⁵ Paris, “The Rise Of The Airmen,” 126.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 130.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 125.

⁵⁸ Morrow Jr. , “Knights of the Sky,” 309.

aviation to “inaugurate a reign of peace”, whereas the other viewed aviation as a means to secure and enforce Britain’s imperial and military presence. By 1910, the use of aviation to reinforce British power appeared to be the dominant opinion. After rapidly expanding its empire in the late nineteenth century, the British government sought a method to police their colonial holdings, specifically the Sudan, Somaliland, and northern India. The Committee of Imperial Defense viewed the airplane as a tool to repress native uprisings and restore “the declining respect for the white man.”⁵⁹ By the early 1910s, many associated flight with national development and power. This greatly contributed to the creation of the Royal Flying Corps in 1912.

Marketing “The Cult of the Air Fighter” : The Dissemination of the RFC Image in Government Supported Media

In his “A Nation’s Thanks” speech mentioned in the introduction, Prime Minister David Lloyd George contextualized the contributions of each of the branches of the Armed Forces, even including the service of the colonial troops. His speech focused primarily on the “traditional” branches of the Army and the Royal Navy, as he connected their recent victories to their long, illustrious history defending British citizens and their values. However, one of the longest sections focused on Britain’s still-young air services. He emphasized the glory of aerial combat as its defining feature:

I am sure the House would like special mention to be made of our Air Service. The heavens are their battlefield; they are the Cavalry of the clouds. High above the squalor and the mud, so high in the firmament that they are not visible from earth, they fight out the eternal issues of right and wrong. Their daily, yea, their nightly struggles, are like the Miltonic conflict between the winged hosts of light and of darkness... Every flight is a romance; every report is an epic. They are the knighthood of this war, without fear and without reproach. They recall the old legends of chivalry, not merely by the daring of

⁵⁹ Paris, “The Rise Of The Airmen,” 128.

their exploits, but by the nobility of their spirit, and, amongst the multitudes of heroes, let us think of the chivalry of the air.⁶⁰

Here, Lloyd George's description takes on an almost religious connotation, equating aerial combat with Milton's struggle against Evil. Literally and morally above the trenches, pilots were presented here as a glimpse of chivalry in the midst of an industrial war that threatened both civilization and humanity. In his sections on the Army and the Navy, the Prime Minister highlighted the courage and sacrifices of these respective branches, but did not invoke a romanticized vocabulary of "chivalry," "knighthood," and "epic." This language, more common to classical and medieval tales, distinguished aviation from the other branches as invoking of an idealized British tradition. Lloyd George's romantic speech on aerial combat illustrates how the attitudes of air elitism and air force elitism that influenced the structure of the Royal Flying Corps infiltrated government views.

As the war progressed and the Royal Flying Corps evolved to meet the needs of combat, more people recognized the potential aviation held. For the government, the vicious nature of industrial warfare and the sharp rise in British casualties threatened morale both at the front and at home. With the original promise of a short war and the anonymous slaughter in the trenches eroding British support for the war effort and faith in the government, a solution was needed. Here, the idea of air force elitism, influenced by air elitism of the pre-war years and its subsequent incorporation into recruitment tactics, takes a step further. This romantic perception of the fighter pilot and aerial combat found a central spot in government-sponsored press, furthering the idealized image as a propaganda tool for morale.

⁶⁰ F.L. Stevenson, "A Nation's Thanks", 212.

Why the Fighter Pilot?

In 1917, Lord Hugh Cecil, a Conservative politician and a Lieutenant in the Royal Flying Corps, outlined the factors that drew the public's attention to fighter pilots. For Cecil, the constantly developing nature of aviation, combined with its pre-war connection to sport, created an opportunity for heroism. He writes that

The Flying Corps is the greatest of the novelties of the war. And it appeals to people in several ways. Its military importance is great and increasing; it unites in a singular degree the interest of a sport with the deeper and stronger interest of war; the gallantry of its flying officers touches sympathy and thrills imagination.⁶¹

All of Cecil's reasons help explain the government's attraction to and adoption of air force elitism in response to industrial warfare. The advent of industrial warfare in the First World War was a shock to both military officials and society. Conventional conceptions of waging war, such as the use of the cavalry and limited mobilizations of men, struggled to translate into this new era of warfare.⁶² Technological advancements such as the machine gun and the tank, combined with tools such as barbed wire, made conventional tactics obsolete. By mid-1915, the rapid offensives characterizing the first few months of the war were halted, evolving into stalemate in the trenches. In August 1914, the accepted idea was that the war would be over within a few months with relatively few losses, partially due to the perceived superiority of the British armed forces and to a failure to grasp the nature of this modern kind of warfare. The degeneration of the war into stalemate trench warfare, resulting in high casualty rates in relatively short periods of time, undercut British support for the war. Through 1915 and 1916,

⁶¹ Cited in Peter G. Cooksley, *The Royal Flying Corps 1914-1918*, ix.

⁶² Anderson, *The Romance of Air Fighting*, 3.

the high casualties of trench warfare took a toll on morale of both troops and civilians back home. During the Battle of the Somme from July to November 1916, the British suffered nearly half a million casualties, 57,000 of them on the first day of the offensive alone.⁶³ In a country like Britain, where national pride was so closely tied to military prowess and success, these high losses made many question their faith in their country, and undermined the popular patriotic outpourings that had accompanied the start of the war.

Such mass slaughter on the ground eliminated the space for individual acts of heroism. This industrial slaughter was anonymous, killing large numbers of men in short periods of time. Unlike conventional warfare, most men never saw their killers; technological advancements erased the individual identity of the person behind the weapon. The few moments of hand-to-hand combat were chaotic and dehumanizing. In industrial warfare, it was harder to find stories about individual heroes, resulting in fewer physical embodiments of British success and courage, as well as images to help understand the course of the war. Here, in the apparent void of chivalry and civilization, air elitism found an opportunity to expand and fill the need for public heroes.

Fighter pilots represented the antithesis of the ground war, embodying the “*joie de vivre*” lacking in the trenches.⁶⁴ The fledgling nature of flight and the even newer prospect of aerial combat made fighter pilots come across as daring and glamorous. This was partially due to the pre-war exposure to air races and partially due to the lack of firsthand knowledge about aviation. This left room for romanticization about aerial combat and fighter pilots. Relying on personal

⁶³ Linda R. Robertson, *The Dream of Civilized Warfare: World War I Flying Aces and the American Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 91.

⁶⁴ Anderson, *The Romance of Air Fighting*, 22.

skills and courage, many equated aerial combat with the gladiatorial battles of antiquity, with aces replacing gladiators as the new hero.⁶⁵ In addition, the nature of flight also elevated aerial combat, with its emphasis on tactics and skill, and retained the notions of sport so central to pre-war air elitism and upper-class society. Aviation represented “the conquest of space and speed, the sense of mastery over others,” its technical superiority literally and figuratively raising its pilots above the infantry. Aviation represented industrial innovation and modern progress while still maintaining British ideals of chivalry and civilization.⁶⁶ Overall, aerial combat was portrayed as more civilized and romantic than the infantry, with dogfights retaining the personal element that trench warfare destroyed.⁶⁷ These one-on-one duels in the air provided opportunity for individual heroism, later seen in the system tracking an “ace’s” kills or tallies after accomplishing five victories.

As seen with Lloyd George’s speech, the most common presentation of the RFC was as the “knights of the air”. In the *Romance of Air Fighting*, Wherry Anderson explains how the nature of aerial warfare connected pilots to their medieval counterparts, writing that

Here we touch upon the one thing that distinguishes battles in the air from all the other fighting in this war. It is the revival of the honourable courtesies of the duel - nay, more, the revival of the ancient chivalry of the Knight Templars. As he soars aloft, the airman has at the back of his mind the idea that he is out to meet a champion belonging to the same knightly order as himself, one possessing qualities resembling his own - trained skill, daring, the power of swift decision.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Robertson, *The Dream of Civilized Warfare*, 100.

⁶⁶ Morrow Jr. , “Knights of the Sky”, 317.

⁶⁷ James Hamilton-Paterson, *Marked for Death: The First War in the Air* (New York and London: Pegasus Books, 2016), 2.

⁶⁸ Anderson, *The Romance of Air Fighting*, 11-12.

This association of fighter pilots with knights is a significant one, as it represented a continuity of cultural tradition and perception of the military. Mounted warriors, such as the chevalier, were considered to be the military elite. As defenders of British civilization, they embodied the chivalric values of the ruling upper class. With the demise of the cavalry in the early years of the war, the legacy of knights and other mounted warriors transferred to the RFC.⁶⁹ These new “knights of the air” still maintained the appropriate parts of rider and steed: the officer corps served as the “knights” or “riders” and their airplanes representing the modern “mechanical steed”. In a more subordinate level, ground crew like mechanics and riggers represented “faithful squires,” their work dedicated to serving the knights.⁷⁰

By associating the RFC with medieval traditions of chivalry and knighthood, the upper class wished to preserve aspects of tradition. Mark Girouard explains that by the end of the nineteenth century, most of the upper class sought a “return to Camelot”, defined as turning away from modernization and back towards a “more leisurely, gentrified existence”.⁷¹ Partially, this “return to Camelot” was in response to the anonymous slaughter in the trenches. However, it was also connected to industrialization’s impact on the traditional social order. Industrialization led to the gentrification of the middle classes through the rise of modern professions, such as professors, doctors, and lawyers. Industrialization also changed the dynamics of the working class, with women entering the workforce and leaving the middle class service in order to

⁶⁹ Ibid, 224.

⁷⁰ Paris, "The Rise Of The Airmen,"137.

⁷¹ Ibid, 136.

support their families.⁷² With the middle class closing the gap on the share of power, the upper class wished to return to a period or society in which they still held their monopoly on control. Here, the ace, viewed as the new embodiment of the chivalry they desired, was a small step towards a return to such a society. Ironically, pilots were representative of the very modernization many Victorians wished to distance themselves from, with airplanes as products of mass industrialization. Referring to the airplanes as “steeds”, however, diminished such irony, allowing the desire for chivalry to override the presence of modernization in the prospective new heroes.

Ultimately, by mid-1917, fighter pilots were identified as a means of filling the void of heroism in the war. Their main draw was that their exploits were individual acts, something the collective nature of the ground war lacked. Through their attributed chivalrous nature, aerial combat represented the reverse of the failed ground war and embodied aspects of conventional warfare many initially envisioned the current war to invoke. With such characteristics in mind, further manipulating the concept of air force elitism exaggerated British military advantage in the war and serve as a platform for rebuilding public unity through positive emotions. However, it would not be until early 1918 that fighter pilots became named, individual representations used in the British propaganda effort.

Media Perceptions and Portrayals of the Fighter Ace

In his 1922 book *Public Opinion*, American Journalist Walter Lippmann explained the relationship between societal cohesion and the use of stereotypes or idealized portrayals to

⁷² Martin J. Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 14.

manipulate social perceptions of a complex reality. During the First World War, he served on the American Committee on Public Information and analyzed the mechanics behind wartime propaganda. He argued that as a part of human nature, journalists reduce complex ideas to symbols rather than employ realistic investigation or critical thinking.⁷³ In the case of the First World War, this symbol is hero, an individual representative of the course of the war or how the government wishes to portray the war. Unlike in peacetime, where there are multiple symbols that “represent only a part of the population”, the symbols of wartime are less diverse in nature.⁷⁴ As the heroic image is directed primarily towards the general public, it is important to create a personality that elicits a common mental image.⁷⁵ This common mental image leaves little to no room for personal opinion or judgment. With tight controls over information, the use of mass media by the government allows for, ideally, total control over the public’s perception of the war. Through government-sponsored media, specifically newspapers like the *Daily Mail*, civilians would only understand the war through the lens framed by writers and filmmakers.⁷⁶

In the case of the government and the Royal Flying Corps, the “glamorous” and “civilized” image of fighter pilots translated easily into newspaper propaganda. Sir Frederick Sykes, future Chief of the Air Staff of the Royal Air Force, emphasized the role of government-sponsored media in the war, stating that “it gave us [Military Headquarters] great assistance in helping to educate the public.”⁷⁷ Through such “education”, propaganda overwhelmed the limited

⁷³ Robertson, *The Dream of Civilized Warfare*, 99.

⁷⁴ Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1922), 3.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Robertson, *The Dream of Civilized Warfare*, 107.

⁷⁷ Paris, "The Rise Of The Airmen: The Origins Of Air Force Elitism, C.1890-1918", 134.

amount of realistic information to which society had access. Linda Robertson states that effective propaganda presents and controls information to create “seduction into a particular kind of denial”.⁷⁸ With this monopoly on information, the government effectively created an image appealing to the public: civilized acts of individual heroism within the uncertainty and anonymity of industrial war.

British officials were initially hesitant to publicly display the achievements of their pilots. Lord Rothemere, Air Minister in 1918, believed that by focusing on the exploits of individual pilots, squadrons would place less emphasis on teamwork and the efforts of the entire roster or on the actions of reconnaissance and bomber crews, thus negatively impacting the morale of the RFC as a whole.⁷⁹ One of the earliest pushes to identify British aces by name and face came during the Battle of the Somme, when Liberal MP Sir Arthur Markham questioned the lack of publicity on the successes of the RFC. Hinting at the morale-boosting potential it held after the disastrous opening day of the Somme, he asked Parliament why there was no press coverage on “the name of the young aviator who shot down Immelmann [June 1916]” or “why the names of airmen who had distinguished themselves were not allowed to appear in the press.”⁸⁰ By 1916, with Captain Albert Ball’s rising tally, 31 by October 1916, on the Western Front hidden from public knowledge, Members of Parliament continued to press for more publicity for aces.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 204.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 134.

⁸⁰ Ironically, *Oberleutnant* Max Immelmann PLM was actually brought down by a photography reconnaissance and artillery observation crew: Pilot Second Lieutenant G.R. McCubbin and Gunner/Observer Corporal J. H. Waller of RFC 25 Squadron. Dubbed *Der Adler von Lille*, Immelmann was one of Germany’s first celebrity aces and, along with *Hauptmann* Oswald Boelcke, was one of the first recipients of Germany’s *Pour le Mérite*, equivalent with Britain’s Victoria Cross.

Although Ball ended up receiving both the Military Cross and Distinguished Service Order for his actions, politicians themselves threatened to leak more detailed information to the press.

The turning point came in late 1917, early 1918, with the publication of an editorial emphasizing how public French and German aces were. After the government recognized the highly publicized manner in which Germany and France idealized their own aces, the seed for a change in protocol to identify and publicize Britain's pilots was in place.⁸¹ Finally, in January 1918, with the *Daily Mail's* publication of an article entitled "Our Unknown Heroes - Germany's Better Way," the government introduced the public to the top British aces. Criticizing such a delay in publicity, the article argued:

What I want to know is, why an Englishman whose hobby is bringing down sky Huns in braces and flies between luncheon and tea, and who can already claim a bag of 30 enemy aircraft should have to wait to be killed before a grateful nation waiting to acclaim him can even learn his name.⁸²

Another *Daily Mail* article appeared the following week entitled "Our Air "Stars" (Figure 1), including biographies and photos of different aces.⁸³

After the initial short publications on British aces, later articles heavily incorporated the imagery of knighthood and sport. Wartime dispatches compared aerial combat to jousting tournaments or public school athletics matches. Here, in these spaces dedicated to individuals, officials and journalists had room to characterize the image of each pilot. By writing the public biography of each pilot, the media contributed to the narrative of British success and ideals by

⁸¹ Robertson, *The Dream of Civilized Warfare*, 107.

⁸² Quoted in *WW1: Aces Falling*. United Kingdom: BBC, 2009. Film.

⁸³ "Air "Stars"-Special Portraits," *The Daily Mail*, January 7, 1918.

selecting characteristics that “distinguished” them as individuals, thus making them more appealing to the general public. For aces, their heroism and attractiveness to the public was gauged by the number of kills each had gained.⁸⁴

In the case of pilots like Lieutenant Arthur Rhys Davids and Major James McCudden, it was a combination of both background and wartime exploits that helped determine their image. For Rhys Davids (Figure II), publicity came after he shot down *Leutnant* Werner Voss, Manfred von Richthofen’s protege, on 23 September 1917.⁸⁵ However, as seen in the figure above, his victory over Voss is not the focus of this article, rather his alma mater and accolades. The headline refers to him as “Eton’s Boy Airman” rather than by his name or rank. As with many members of the RFC, Rhys Davids attended a public school, elite institutions that were major recruiting grounds for the branch. This aspect of Rhys Davids’ background was ideal, as public schools were essential to creating the image of the British elite, as through their academic, often classical curriculum, emphasis on traditional values, and centrality on sport, helped in “moulding the character of an English gentleman.”⁸⁶ The subheading mentions his Distinguished Service Order, a coveted medal awarded by the government and royal family for his defense of British society and values.

⁸⁴ Morrow Jr. , “Knights of the Sky”, 317.

⁸⁵ The “Last Stand” of Werner Voss is considered to be one of the most famous dogfights of the war, involving some of the best of Britain’s pilots, including Major James McCudden, Captain Geoffrey Bowman, and Lieutenant Richard Maybery. Rhys Davids’ famous response to the news of shooting down Voss was “If I only could have brought him down alive.” See Alex Revell’s *Brief Glory* (Pen and Sword Books Ltd., 2010) or *High in the Empty Blue: The History of 56 Squadron, RFC/RAF 1916-1920* (Flying Machines Press, 1995) for a detailed account of the flight and its legacy.

⁸⁶ Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit*, 17.

McCudden's case (Figure III) is extremely similar, except his articles focus on what makes him unique, rather than explicitly ideal: his nationality and rank. McCudden was born in England, but the press emphasized his Irish heritage. Like colonial troops, McCudden's nationality makes him unique amongst the mostly homogeneous reports of English aces in the newspapers. Also emphasized is his rank, as McCudden worked his way from air mechanic to Major in five years. Given the preference to the officer corps, McCudden's case shows the sacrifice of the underdog, another easily identifiable feature. Overall, like Rhys Davids, both of these features connect to his accolades in combat, with his string of medals rounding out the article. Here, Rhys Davids' and McCudden's personal backgrounds are mined for useable qualities for the articles. These "attractive" qualities embody ideals that could serve as unification points for morale and support for the war effort.

The creation of the Royal Flying Corps image took place over the course of nearly two decades. As a new military branch, lacking the defined traditions of the Army and Navy, the image of the RFC was greatly shaped by attitudes towards pre-war aviation and the squalor of trench warfare. Initially representative of human development through modernization, "air elitism" evolved into "air force elitism" as the pressure of industrial war emphasized a need for individual heroism in order to boost morale. The image of the ace was originally used to provide the heroes wartime British society needed, but also encapsulated the broader desire of upper class society to return to the pre-industrialization society of chivalry and structure. Despite being disseminated through multiple different mediums over time, this romanticized image of the

“knight of the air” failed to illustrate the reality of the physical, mental, and emotional toll of aerial warfare.

THE DAILY MAIL
AIR RAID FUND
1000 of death or loss of limb, and £5 a week for
collateral. It offered by "The Daily Mail"
Free to registered readers.
Receipts and Order Form appear in Page 4.

Daily
MONDAY, JANUARY 7, 1918.

AIR "STARS"—SPECIAL PORTRAITS.



PLANE AIRMEN—NAMES AT LAST!—In consequence of "The Daily Mail's" special efforts, two
names can now be named. Left, Capt. Philip Fallard, D.S.O., M.C., whose "bag" is 42 enemy
planes shot down and 3 captive balloons. An accident in a game of football in France has recently

THE MEAT QUEUE.—In London the
But crowds of patient women waited for
the West End well-dressed shoppers at

Figure I: Daily Mail's Air "Stars"- Special Portraits"⁸⁷

⁸⁷ "Air "Stars"-Special Portraits," *The Daily Mail*, January 7, 1918.



Figure II: Lieutenant Arthur Rhys Davids ⁸⁸



Figure III: Major James McCudden⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Newspaper Clipping, 1918, box 12, Rhys Davids Family Papers, Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, University of Cambridge.

⁸⁹ Newspaper Cutting, 1918, James McCudden Papers, Royal Air Force Museum.

Chapter III: Shaping the Ideal: The Early Years of Aviation Psychology

The final element of the RFC image is its relationship to medical requirements. By creating strict medical entry criteria for candidates, military officials had control over the demographics of their recruits, allowing it to reflect the standards they wanted to associate with the Royal Flying Corps. These standards focused on physical and mental health, adhering to the image of the athletic, courageous, mentally sound man central to the upper class ideal of masculinity. These medical criteria served as an extension of the same air force elitism that defined pre-war perceptions of aviators and the development of the RFC image through government media.

However, this extension of social elitism to the RFC went a step further in emphasizing the ideal by creating an “other.” Although the other aspects of air force elitism had a sense of an “other”, the specificity of these medical requirements and examinations created a very concrete image of what officials viewed as threatening to their desired image. The brutal reality of aerial combat and, on the whole, industrial war made the idealized image of the RFC a dichotomy. In this dichotomy, the desired image contrasted sharply with the high numbers of mental disorders that developed with pilots. The presence of these mental disorders and of attitudes towards them was greatly impacted by three major factors: social norms, the roots of air elitism, and the infancy of aviation medicine and psychology as a discipline. These mental disorders contrasted with the idea about mental and emotional soundness so central to the medical examinations. Although officials attempted to tailor the image of the RFC to fit their idealized notions of masculinity, the strain of aerial combat and social attitudes about emotions caused many pilots to crumble under the pressure.

Embracing Air Force Elitism: RFC Medical Criteria and the Creation of the “Ideal”

The ideas of pre-war air elitism influencing the media portrayal of fighter pilots equally impacted the medical requirements required for entry into the Royal Flying Corps. Possessing the mythic qualities of Icarus and Daedalus, pilots were represented on almost a demigod level, as "men possessing some supernatural quality - the power to fly".⁹⁰ Even before a set of medical criteria was established, RFC recruiters already had a notion of ideal or preferable traits for prospective pilots. Ultimately, flying was a “noble profession” that held a level of exclusivity in which recruits had to prove their innate worth to earn their wings.⁹¹ This worth resided in certain physical, mental, and mental health qualifications. These qualifications were also key to medical tests for the Army and the Navy, but here, the idea of air force elitism and pilots as supermen distinguished RFC qualifications.

Like the Army and the Navy, RFC candidates were expected to meet certain health criteria in the first stage of the recruiting process. The primary set of characteristics revolved around physical health, primarily athleticism. Ideal candidates included those "used to playing games and leading an outdoor life. The yachtsman and horseman, with their finer sense of judgment and “lighter hands,” should make the most skilful [*sic*] pilots.”⁹² This desire for athleticism and previous training and sport stemmed from the nineteenth and twentieth century “cult of games” central to British public school life. Sports like rugby, football, cricket, and rowing were arenas for young boys to exhibit their leadership potential and masculine strength.

⁹⁰ Graeme H. Anderson, “An address on the selection of candidates for the air service,” *The Lancet* 191, issue 4933 (March 1918): 395.

⁹¹ Anderson, *The Romance of Air Fighting*, 4.

⁹² Anderson, “An address on the selection of candidates for the air service,” 395.

Ideally, successful athletes represented peak masculinity.⁹³ In the eyes of recruitment officials, war was just an extension of sport, another arena in which pilots could use their athletic skills to be successful. In an address to pilots during training, an officer emphasized athleticism, stating that

You will always beat the Hun by virtue of your ability to play games; you size up the weak spot and go for it regardless of the consequences. This quick appraisal of the situation, and the dash that carries you through, comes from your games and leaves the Boche still wondering what hit him as he sails for Kingdom Come or the interment camp.⁹⁴

Officials early in the war recruited candidates primarily from Britain's public schools and universities like Oxford and Cambridge.⁹⁵ As Sir John Slessor, future Air Marshal during World War II, argued, drawing from the upper class and public schools was most beneficial to the war effort, as public schools "produce a very high proportion of the best leaders of men in Britain."⁹⁶ Even after the heavy casualties suffered during Bloody April in 1917 caused recruitment patterns to shift to include those outside the upper classes, the heavy emphasis on athleticism reflected the upper class ideal of masculinity it sought for commissioned officers.⁹⁷

⁹³ Tony Mansell, "Flying Start: Educational and Social Factors in the Recruitment of Pilots of the Royal Air Force in the Interwar Years", *History of Education* 13, Issue 1 (March 1997): 73.

⁹⁴ Quoted in Mansell, "Flying Start: Educational and Social Factors in the Recruitment of Pilots of the Royal Air Force in the Interwar Years", 74.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 71.

⁹⁶ Quoted in Mansell, "Flying Start: Educational and Social Factors in the Recruitment of Pilots of the Royal Air Force in the Interwar Years", 74.

⁹⁷ Morrow Jr., "Knights of the Sky", 316.

Like physical requirements, mental requirements also centered on specific “ideal” qualities for upper class men. Specifically, officials desired mental and emotional soundness, as, ideally, these characteristics would make efficient fighter pilots in combat. One of the most important questions pilots were directed to ask themselves was “Am I all right as regards heart and nervous system?”⁹⁸ In their 1917 article “Report on the Essential Characteristics of Successful and Unsuccessful Aviators”, T.S. Rippon and E.G. Manuel specified that “a dogged determination to overcome difficulties” united all ideal candidates.⁹⁹ This “determination” was a pilot’s personal courage and mental soundness under pressure, also known as “nerve”. Such “nerve” was representative of not only an individual man, but was, by extension of serving in the military, representative of the image of his respective country. Courage and sound nerve represented a candidate’s personal commitment and “desire to uphold my country’s reputation” beyond the initial dedication expressed by serving in the military.¹⁰⁰

In a March 1918 address, Graeme Anderson, a Surgical Consultant to Royal Flying Corps, outlined the criteria used for the selection of ideal flying candidates. By 1917, the Royal Flying Corps proposed a set of requirements each candidate had to meet before being accepted for training through a three-part medical examination consisting of a “surgical examination,” a “medical examination”, and a “special examination,” with the latter only vaguely defined.¹⁰¹ This extensive medical examination identified and selected candidates based upon a multi-tiered

⁹⁸ Ibid, 23.

⁹⁹ T.S. Rippon and E.G. Manuel, “Report on the Essential Characteristics of Successful and Unsuccessful Aviators.” *The Lancet* (28 September 1917): 426.

¹⁰⁰ Anderson, *The Romance of Air Fighting*, 24.

¹⁰¹ Anderson, “An address on the selection of candidates for the air service,” 396.

process, with each tier incorporating different medical criteria. This examination ideally evaluated each candidate thoroughly, allowing all aspects of their health and character to be measured against the coveted ideal.

The first stage, the surgical examination, assessed a candidate's "present" state according to physical factors such as age, weight, height, and persistent injuries. This examination sought candidates between the ages of 18 and 30, as it was believed these individuals possessed the "well-balanced judgment" that would allow them to avoid "the nerve-strain of air work."¹⁰² Weight and physique were valued more than height, with "tone of muscles" aided by sport proving to be the most apt feature.¹⁰³ Finally, the surgical examination documented a candidate's injury history. Immediate disqualifications included weakened muscle definition, persistent headaches or migraines, concentration problems, lack of motor control, vertigo, epilepsy, and other neurological disorders. Officials enforced such strict requirements in order to avoid ailments being "exaggerated later by a pilot who has developed a distaste for flying."¹⁰⁴ The second stage, the medical examination, focused on the candidate's background, particularly health, family medical history, and occupation. Reflecting the emphasis on athleticism, ideal candidates came from a lifestyle of an "out-door nature" and "sport," which helped preserve their physical and mental health. The medical examination built on the surgical examination's negative view of neurological and mental disorders. This stage identified a history of "neurasthenia, nervous breakdown, and mental breakdown" as an immediate disqualification.

¹⁰² Ibid, 396.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

One Chief Medical Officer emphasized the necessary combination of physical and mental health, stating that

[O]ne would much sooner accept a well-educated nervous type as a lot than one whose mental training has been very limited. For the nervous, pale-faced, introspective East End clerk with little or no experience of outdoor exercise and sport, whose habit of life almost compels him to think far too much of himself, one would probably advise rejection; while for the university athlete, equally nervous but trained to ignore himself and to control his feelings, trained to act and think of and for others, of good physique and broad in mental outlook, one would on the whole advise acceptance.¹⁰⁵

Officials at this stage further explained their reasoning behind disqualification of those with such mental disorders, which were similar to shell shock, as more prone to developing “some form of aero-neurosis,” a concept that will be discussed in the next section.¹⁰⁶ Rather than the impact of aerial combat on individuals with mental disorders as the main concern of officials, they instead focused on “unstable” nervous systems as incompatible with effective combat performance. The outlining of these criteria and implementation in medical examinations sought out a specific temperament or character for their officer corps. As historian Walter Raleigh states

What they sought to create was a service temper, and they were so successful that the typical pilot of the war was as modest and dutiful as a lieutenant of infantry. The building up of the Flying Corps on these lines... [created] a severe code of duty, a high standard of quiet courage, and an immense corporate pride.¹⁰⁷

While the selection criteria were publicly intended to select candidates suitable for the rigors of flight, these physical requirements and examinations only confirmed the image of the ideal masculine male. Overall, these medical requirements and examinations relied heavily on

¹⁰⁵ Hamilton-Paterson, *Marked for Death*, 217-218.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 397.

¹⁰⁷ Raleigh, *The War in the Air*, Vol. I, 230-231.

the officials' first impressions of the candidates. Their perceptions of the character and how it met the criteria for acceptance were often a matter of the examiner's personal prejudice that reflected social attitudes towards health and wellness and how these tied in to the image of ideal masculinity. Nonetheless, while these recruitment criteria tried to embody and preserve the "superman" qualities of the pilot presented in air elitism, this romanticized image had to face the realities of aerial warfare.

The Dichotomy of the "Ideal" in the Face of Industrial War: Social Attitudes and the Development of Aviation Medicine and Psychology

Medical officials, then, sought to identify Victorian upper class ideals of masculine physical and mental health in their ideal candidates. The ideal pilot represented the courageous male as a revival of chivalry central to British culture. However, despite trying to create an officer corps both fitting their ideals and, ideally, designed to perform successfully in combat, the nature of aerial combat in an industrial war setting conflicted with this idealized perspective. Pilots struggled to gain treatment for their symptoms of shell shock, later known as Combat Stress Reaction (CSR) and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), due to a combination of negative social attitudes towards mental health and a system lacking established aviation medicine and psychology practices. As stated in their strict medical requirements for recruitment, "damaged goods are certainly not wanted in the Air Services," as they were a current and future burden for British society.¹⁰⁸ Such mental disorders were viewed as failures of both physical and moral character. This idealized masculine identity only further harmed pilots suffering under the

¹⁰⁸ Anderson, *The Romance of Air Fighting*, 23.

pressure of aerial warfare. This ideal perspective of masculinity, an extension of air elitism, only reinforced a cultural stigma associated with mental disorders and outward displays of emotion.

The strain of aerial combat is most clearly heard in the the pilots' own voices. Through their letters and memoirs, their darkest thoughts reflected a sense of loneliness and hardship they felt amidst the pressures of war and an environment prioritizing mental strength. Pilot Ira Jones stated that it was “easy to spot when a pilot is getting nervy” as they “become very talkative and restless.”¹⁰⁹ In his own personal struggles, he questioned his own self-worth during a dogfight:

Suddenly reaction set in. I started getting hot and cold all over and momentarily lost control of myself. I decided I was no use as an airman, that I could never cross the lines again, and that I would inform Grid [Major Keith Caldwell] of the fact as soon as I landed...I felt convinced that I was a rank coward.¹¹⁰

All pilots recognized that ‘cowardice,’ although the “most common human emotion” was despised in the RFC.¹¹¹ Strain in their line of work was inevitable, but they were expected to meet the pressure with strength and courage, as their recruiters had selected them to do. Here, they had little to no agency over their own emotions. As expected of all servicemen, they were to push their personal interests and feelings aside for the wartime cause. As pilot Cecil Lewis described it:

It is not pretty, the war-time psychology, and its attitude is violently repudiated, by those who are past the age when life is rising in them. By those most under its spell it passes unperceived, hidden by glamorous words - patriotism, heroism, sacrifice, and glory! Life

¹⁰⁹ Quoted in Ian Mackersey, *No Empty Chairs: The Short and Heroic Lives of the Young Aviators Who Fought and Died in the First World War* (London: Phoenix, 2012), 285.

¹¹⁰ Quoted in *Ibid*, 281.

¹¹¹ Cecil Lewis, *Sagittarius Rising* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 50.

is a past-master at throwing such dust in the eyes of mankind that men and women should obey its curt commands and find the best possible reasons for doing so.¹¹²

Often individual disorders were evaluated for their effects on squadron morale rather than in terms of their effects on the individual pilot. Many squadrons implemented policies to try and preserve squadron morale during periods of high personnel losses. Between 1914 and 1918, nearly 6,000 RFC pilots were killed in combat and around 8,000 pilots were killed during training. Such high casualty rates led to the RFC being nicknamed the “suicide club”.¹¹³ One of the most famous policies was Major-General Sir Hugh Trenchard’s “No Empty Chair” policy. Lewis described the sense of doomed fatalism accompanying the loss of comrades from the perspective of mess life:

As the months went by it seemed only a matter of time until your turn came. You sat down to dinner faced by the empty chairs of the men you had laughed and joked with at lunch. They were gone. The next day new men would laugh and joke from those chairs. Some might be lucky and stick it for a bit, some chairs would be empty again very soon. And so it would go on. And always, miraculously, you were still there. Until tomorrow... In such a atmosphere you grew fatalistic...It wasn't possible to be sure - even of yourself. At this stage it required most courage to go on - a sort of plodding fatalism, a determination, a cold blooded effort of will. And always alone!¹¹⁴

Trenchard recognized the psychological impact this had on pilots, as such empty seats were constant reminders of not only high casualties in the war, but personal losses within the squadron. As a result, Trenchard designed a system to immediately replace losses with new replacements, ideally decreasing the amount of time pilots had to mull over their friends’

¹¹² Ibid, 142.

¹¹³ Robertson, *The Dream of Civilized Warfare*, 106.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 45.

physical absence. Taking both a pragmatic and compassionate approach, Trenchard's policy appealed to both RFC HQ and individual squadron commanding officers.

Despite its efficiency, Trenchard's policy was not the main approach to decreasing morale and psychological strain in squadrons. Although most recognized that fighter pilots faced extreme stress due to solo flying and the unpredictable, violent nature of dogfighting, many thought that the living conditions of flying officers were a bulwark against psychological breakdowns.¹¹⁵ Compared to their infantrymen counterparts, pilots enjoyed a more predictable, routine lifestyle with comfortable living quarters, regular food, and a relatively short work shift. Similar to infantrymen, their life was one of "long spells of idleness punctuated by moments of intense fear". However, due to targeting those with a sound mental state in the recruitment process, most officials viewed such intense moments to be manageable.¹¹⁶

This attitude towards psychological breakdowns can be partially explained by the relationship between aviation and medicine. Although aviation had been around for around a decade, there was no formal sub-discipline of "aviation medicine" in Britain, and thus there existed no medical institution dedicated solely to treating air personnel. With the start of the war in 1914, the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC) was tasked with treating both infantry and RFC personnel, and all personnel received the same treatment regardless of the difference in their fighting conditions.¹¹⁷ After October 1915, when improvements in artillery and aerial

¹¹⁵ Allan D. English, "A Predisposition to Cowardice? Aviation Psychology and the Genesis of 'Lack of Moral Fibre'", (*War and Society* 13, issue 1, 1995), 17.

¹¹⁶ Anderson, "An address on the selection of candidates for the air service", 395.

¹¹⁷ Lynsey Shaw Cobden, "The Nervous Flyer: Nerves, Flying, and the First World War" (*British Journal for Military History* 4, no. 2, 2018), 4-5.

technology, such as the interrupter gear providing for the rise of dogfighting, officials recognized an increase in reported mental disorders. Here, the lack of medical practice dedicated to aviation produced a variety of diagnoses of essentially the same conditions. “Neurasthenia” or “acute war neurosis” covered symptoms like fatigue, tremors, jumpiness, loss of appetite, insomnia, nightmares, depression, and anxiety.¹¹⁸ “Neurasthenia” was understood as strained “nerves”, which represented both the emotions experienced at periods of heightened tension and the somatic nerves responsible for bodily function.¹¹⁹ Although it shared many of the symptoms associated with ‘shell-shock,’ neurasthenia was distinguished from the former by medical officials. “Neurasthenia,” with its roots in Victorian medicine, befitted the gentlemanly infantry officer, whereas “shell-shock” was for those directly confined to the uncivilized trenches.

¹²⁰Another term used to avoid “shell-shock” was “Not Yet Diagnosed Nervous” or “NYDN.”¹²¹ Over the course of the war, around 3,149 RFC personnel, approximately thirteen percent of all RFC casualties, received treatment for medical disorders.¹²²

Most breakdowns suffered by pilots were precipitated by stress and fear, commonly accepted as the result of the strain of aerial combat. This strain of aerial combat included flying at high altitudes with extremely low temperatures, the strains of high G forces during combat, and, as seen most clearly in the pilots’ reflections, fatalistic acceptance of the inevitability of

¹¹⁸Mackersey, *No Empty Chairs*, 261.

¹¹⁹ Cobden, “The Nervous Flyer: Nerves, Flying, and the First World War”, 2.

¹²⁰ Michael Collins, “A fear of flying: diagnosing traumatic neurosis among British aviators of the Great War” (*First World War Studies* 6, no. 2, 2015),192.

¹²¹ *First World War in the Air*, 78.

¹²² Cobden, “The Nervous Flyer: Nerves, Flying, and the First World War,” 2.

death.¹²³ In the absence of sophisticated medical diagnoses, the accepted belief was that no matter the extent to which a mental illness progressed, rest away from the front lines could treat such “Flying Sickness Disorders” or FSDs. In his semi-autobiographical novel *Winged Victory*, V. M. Yeates illustrated the typical treatment prescribed for mental disorders. In a conversation between Tom Cundall, the main character, and a doctor after a period of heavy personal losses, violent aerial combat, and crashes, Cundall stated that he was suffering from depression and insomnia. The doctor asked him if he had simply “lost enthusiasm for war flying.” Diagnosing him with FSD, with the “D” standing for “debility,” the doctor marks his condition as one resulting from “too much war flying.” He prescribed Cundall a month’s leave and posted him to Home Establishment, where he was to relax and, most specifically, “forget about the war and flying.”¹²⁴

This emphasis on “repression” of one’s wartime experience was not accepted by all medical officials, however. Dr. W.H.R. Rivers, a neurologist and anthropologist, was posted as Chief Psychologist to the Royal Flying Corps’ Hampstead Hospital in 1917. Rivers, like Trenchard, embodied a more compassionate approach to mental disorders. Unlike Trenchard, who was focused more on the preservation of morale, Rivers viewed each patient as individuals with valid emotions and reactions to war. He believed that due to the traumatic nature of war, it was only normal human nature to react in such an emotional way.¹²⁵ In his time at Hampstead, he observed that most of his patients with “anxiety neurosis” were former public schoolboys, who,

¹²³ Mackersey, *No Empty Chairs*, 265.

¹²⁴ V.M. Yeates, *Winged Victory* (Mount Pleasant, SC: Arcadia Press, 2017), 239.

¹²⁵ Mackersey, *No Empty Chairs*, 263.

through their “breeding,” were conditioned to exercise self-control and repress fear in traumatic experiences.¹²⁶ Due to the pattern of recruiting such public school boys, he deduced that flying officers were “driven by his position to repress emotions far more persistently than the “lowly infantryman.”¹²⁷ Rivers defined repression as the process by which an individual “thrust[s] out of his memory some part of his mental content,” which included the emotions in response to and accompanying the memory, in response to a traumatic event.¹²⁸ He argued that such repression of emotions caused a two-fold negative impact on an individual. By feeling such painful emotions in a society where a “stiff upper lip” was desired, an individual naturally felt feelings of regret and shame for falling short of this ideal. Feeling the need to save face, the individual repressed such emotions and, in turn, internalized their struggle, creating a further toll on their mind and body.¹²⁹ For him, such strict repression of emotions played an “active part in the maintenance of the neurosis.”¹³⁰ To combat this, Rivers called for an environment in which individuals could exercise the natural, human reaction to traumatic experiences, one in which open discussions about mental health and disorders could occur.

Despite the presence of revolutionary opinions like Rivers’, most of British society viewed mental disorders with heavy stigmas. Connecting to the image of courage and strength,

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷Quoted in Gabriel Koureas, *Memory, Masculinity and National Identity in British Visual Culture, 1914-1930: A Study of ‘Unconquerable Manhood’* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007), 114.

¹²⁸ W. H. Rivers, “The Repression of War Experience” (*Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine* vol. 11, 1918), 1.

¹²⁹ Ibid, 17.

¹³⁰ Ibid, 2.

there was a categorization of casualties into two primary groups: “honorable” and “dishonorable.” “Honorable” casualties were associated with physical wounds that obviously placed an individual out of combat, such as a loss of a limb from shrapnel. As these rendered people unable to serve but were due to war service, such casualties deserved both respect and solid care. “Dishonorable” wounds, on the other hand, were less obvious. These included wounds that allowed for return to combat or, in the case of industrial warfare, “wounds to the human spirit” or mind. These casualties were associated with cowardice and were a betrayal of the courage emanating from their sound “background and breeding.”¹³¹

According to historian Jay Winter, outward reactions to trauma, such as shell shock, had both a gendered and a “socially ascribed class character.”¹³² Referred to as the “New Man” image, these strict definitions of “proper” masculinity confined the extent to which servicemen could not only naturally react to the stress of combat - especially the new pressures of aerial combat - but also thoroughly and openly mourn the loss of their comrades.¹³³ There were certain expectations for how males in the different social classes were to cope with trauma. As class boundaries were beginning to be eroded at the start of the war, the upper classes sought to create “masculine norms” that differentiated the different classes. Presented as the “New Man”, the upper class “ideal” included “self-sacrifice, chivalry and obedience.” This contrasted with the attitudes towards the “working-class man,” who was associated with “greed, disobedience, and

¹³¹ Mackersey, *No Empty Chairs*, 262.

¹³² Cited in Koureas, *Memory, Masculinity and National Identity*, 114.

¹³³ *Ibid*, 6.

‘un-gentlemanly’ behavior” and, ultimately, lacking emotional strength.¹³⁴ By developing distinct perceptions of masculinities on the basis of class structure, the upper classes created identities to unify around in a time when their values and image in society were being contested.

The incorporation of specific medical and physical criteria directly impacted those actually constituting the institution of the Royal Flying Corps. Like the other aspects contributing to the RFC image, the focus on medical criteria for officers was greatly impacted by three major factors: the original idea of air elitism, upper class social norms relating to masculinity, and the infancy of aviation medicine and psychology. Despite the Messianic and superman view of aviation portrayed through media representations, the medical requirements designed to preserve this image failed in the face of the reality of aerial combat. This reality was much darker than the romanticized image the vast majority of British society was familiar with. Pilots struggled emotionally and mentally under the strain of industrial war and the weight of society’s romanticized view of aviation connected to the masculine ideal. The early categorizations of themselves in this romantic view crumbled almost as quickly as their infantry counterparts fighting the ground war. Overall, the idealized image of the athletic, courageous young fighter pilot suffered under the pressure of societal expectations and the brutality of aerial combat.

¹³⁴ Ibid, 49.

Chapter IV: The Flying Ace on the Silver Screen: Film Portrayals as an Illustration of the Masculine Ideal and the Reality of War

Art is not only an expression of personal thoughts and an identity, but it is always in conversation with other pieces of art. With the expansion of the film industry, film provided a new opportunity for artistic expression, easily becoming one of the most rapidly developed extensions of cultural representation and interpretation. What differentiates film from other art forms like writing is the medium in which specific ideas or feelings are communicated. Film relies on a combination of sensory experiences, most importantly visual elements. From the early days of cinema, filmmakers relied on visual elements for their artistic expression and to guide the audience's interpretations of this expression. Although dialogue and written words alone can easily represent one's views, film utilizes other elements for further emphasis, such as aesthetics, set design, music, and even the choice of the actors.

With most military and war films, an image of group's collective identity emerges from this combination of elements utilized by filmmakers. With a recognizable identity or set of ideals forming its core, this collective represents how different groups view societal norms or, in the case of many war films, view how societal norms should manifest. Such a collective is a point of unification or dissolution for society and creates divisions along the lines of perceptions of societal norms. Films focused on the Royal Flying Corps are no different, as group culture is central to most cinema representations. Primarily, this group culture translates into portrayals of interactions in the squadron mess hall. For pilots, squadron identity was central to their wartime experience, as their connection to their squadron mates was similar to their connection to a

university or sports team.¹³⁵ As their service in the Royal Flying Corps was a major defining experience in the lives of these young men, the overwhelming uncertainty and traumatic environment of the war affirmed the development of a sense of a experiential collective identity.¹³⁶ For these men, this collective identity, however many different forms it took, served as a coping mechanism for this turbulent period of change.

The overall view of group culture seen through the lens of squadron life in these films represents a more superficial camaraderie formed on the basis of a perceived difference in identities. Though their character dynamics in scenes varies by individual film, the overall film genre focused on the Royal Flying Corps creates a series of “us” vs “them” relationships. These different “us” vs “them” mentalities reflect a collectivism formed under the influence of war and united against “an other”. This common “other” can be more external than the overall collective, such as German pilots, or more internal, such as a division between different squadron members. Overall, these relationships are rooted in different perceptions of the “ideal” British man that are portrayed through the lens of a Royal Flying Corps squadron. As there is not just one “us” vs “them” relationship present in each plot, these film representations are not only informative on how the public perceived the Royal Flying Corps, but also provide a social commentary by showing how these perceptions were interpreted to fit their own views of the “ideal”. Ultimately, the films focusing on the Royal Flying Corps primarily fall into two decades, although certainly with outliers falling in other years: the 1930s, as seen with films such as *Flight Commander* (1930) and *The Dawn Patrol* (1938), and the 1970s, like *Aces High* (1976). With a combination

¹³⁵ Emma Hanna, “‘Say it with Music’: Combat, Courage and Identity in the Songs of the RFC/RAF, 1914-1918,” *British Journal for Military History* 4, Issue 2 (February 2018): 10.

¹³⁶ Koureas, *Memory, Masculinity and National Identity*, 1.

of expansive budgets, well-established actors, and detailed scripts, many of these films are today considered “classics” of the First World War genre.

As collective identity forms on the basis of cultural norms, it contains “contested meanings...to produce a sense of belonging to a nation of ‘imagined communities’”.¹³⁷ These mentalities take different forms. The most popular form, perhaps, is that defined by nationality, such as British pilots against German pilots. Here, the relationship is based upon a shared sense of national belonging and a committed effort to the cause of defending the nation. Another relationship involves a significant difference in duty, rank, or combat experience. Regarding ranks and duties, this involves a perceived difference between flying officers or observers and other personnel, including non-commissioned officers and ground crew. In the case of combat experience, a collective identity can form on two different bases: one is a sense of connection to a particular military branch or unit, such as the Royal Flying Corps or the infantry; on the other hand, the collective identity can form on a difference in combat experience between “old hands” and new recruits or veterans and civilians. In these cases, individuals group together on the basis of a shared experience during wartime, often with the belief that the other group will not understand the true extent of their experience and the impact it has had on their individual personalities.

The last two types of relationships, although present and significant separately, form one of the most forward versions of collective identity dynamics in the post-war films. The first defining factor is social class, including education and family background. This often intersects with the visible expression of grief or trauma, whether it be more repressed and internalized or

¹³⁷ Koureas, *Memory, Masculinity and National Identity*, 2.

open and external in nature. Many of these films present a spectrum in expressions of grief, ranging from more internalized to externalized. This spectrum reflects how close a character is to being the “ideal” and is confirmed by a character’s reception by their squadron mates.

Collective Identity in Flight Commander (1930) and The Dawn Patrol (1938)

Although present in the Silent Era, films focused on the First World War increased in number with the introduction of sound films in the late 1920s. Several First World War classics were produced in the 1930s, including Lewis Milestone’s Academy Award-winning *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930) and Howard Hughes’s *Hells Angels* (1930). Although most of these classics were produced by American film studios, many of them had European directors, including British director James Whale’s adaptation of *Journey’s End* (1930), Georg Wilhelm Pabst’s *Westfront 1918* (1930), and Jean Renoir’s *La Grande Illusion* (1937). Two of the most famous films focusing specifically on the Royal Flying Corps appeared during this period: American director Howard Hawk’s *Flight Commander* (1930) and its remake, British director Edmund Goulding’s *The Dawn Patrol* (1938). *Flight Commander* was originally titled *The Dawn Patrol* but its name was changed after the release of the 1938 remake.¹³⁸ Although not the only films of the time period to focus on the Royal Flying Corps or aviation during the war, these two films pioneered having group culture as central to their their visual narratives.

Both films were based on John Monk Saunders’ 1930 short story of the same name. Both films share, therefore, a nearly identical plot, with only slight changes in scene length, set design, and dialogue. The film takes place in France in 1915, where 59th Squadron is struggling with high casualty rates with each patrol against von Richter’s German squadron across the front

¹³⁸ *Flight Commander*, directed by Howard Hawks. 1930. First National Pictures. Film.

lines. As more veteran pilots are replaced by new recruits, tensions rise within the squadrons and between the squadron's commanding officer, Major Brand, and Headquarters. Brand, struggling with losing his experienced pilots and having to send new recruits into the air against the superior Germans, relies on his aces of "A" Flight: Courtney, played by Richard Barthelmess in the 1930 version and Errol Flynn in the 1938 version, and Scott, played by Douglas Fairbanks Jr. in the 1930 version and David Niven in the 1938 version. Courtney becomes squadron commander after Brand is recalled to headquarters although both face the same hatred from both veterans and headquarters. After Scott's brother, a new recruit, is killed on a patrol sent by Courtney, their friendship is strained. To try and make amends, Courtney takes Scott's place in a suicide mission and is killed. To continue the cyclic nature, the film ends with Scott taking Courtney's place as squadron commander and gives orders to the newest replacements filling the spots of the last of the veterans.

The films center on the theme of doomed fatalism, as the characters are not only faced with the mortality of their comrades, but also with their own seemingly inevitable deaths. Many of the films' key scenes focus on how the squadron copes with the stress of combat: heavy drinking and riotous activity in the squadron mess. Although the combat scenes between Germans and the British are an obvious point of conflict between two different sets of ideas, scenes in the squadron mess hall are equally important. The screen time dedicated to these scenes in the squadron mess is almost overwhelming, permitting few other glimpses into the personal lives of the pilots. The audience rarely sees pilots as individuals, but rather as components of the squadron's group culture, which, through the idealized and romanticized portrayal of squadron life in the film, is an extension of the collective mentality emphasized in the Royal Flying Corps.

Combat and the group culture in the mess seems to be the thing bonding the squadron. In his memoir *No Parachute*, Arthur Gould Lee described the dynamics of how such bonding developed:

We seldom talk to each other about our private affairs. You seldom get to know much about a fellow's background. His accent, education, bank account, don't matter, nor who his people are. You never ask. You don't even want to know... In France, we're a sort of brotherhood. It's a rum life.¹³⁹

In most films, a squadron or unit is portrayed as a cohesive collective, united in the face of adversity against a common enemy, most often the German air service. If a pilot is portrayed as an individual, it is implied that this pilot has been ostracized for certain reasons. The one pilot seen primarily as an individual is Hollister, who although he is only a secondary character, is one of the main points fighting against a portrayed "norm". In *Flight Commander* and *The Dawn Patrol*, this norm represents a maintained level of "emotional stability" and repressed outward suffering. Hollister's place in the film centers around the open mourning of one of his best friends, who the audience discovers in the film's opening with "A Flight" returning from a patrol. Courtney, telling him he has to pack his friend's things to be sent home, is faced with Hollister openly crying after remarking that his friend had been happily taking part in mess hall activities the night before. Silently, Courtney leaves the room and returns to the mess hall below. As one of the film's key scenes, it emphasizes the squadron's increasing distancing from Hollister in order to save face emotionally.

¹³⁹ Arthur Gould Lee, *No Parachute: A Classic Account of War in the Air in WWI* (London: Grub Street Publishers, 2013), e-book.

For many pilots, group activities such as sports, drinking, and singing were ways to manage both adrenaline and internal fear. This need and desire to escape from thinking about the war forced many pilots to seek a “personal rationalization of their macabre predicament”¹⁴⁰ in an attempt to “drown the eloquence of one empty chair”.¹⁴¹ As seen in the film, singing and drinking represented an outlet for collective amnesia. Although the 1938 film included a score by Max Steiner, both films lack prominent background music.¹⁴² Instead, the pilots’, and, by extension, the audience’s emotions are influenced by the music in the group scenes. Songs provided two opportunities for unification: first, many of the songs sung in the mess were popular contemporary songs from music halls, so the lyrics were widely recognizable; secondly, the lyrics contained themes that many of the pilots connected with, such as romance, alcohol, and a fear of death and losing more comrades. However, unlike Hollister’s naked mourning, singing these songs were more acceptable, as it was a more veiled expression of their emotions hidden in lyrics of popular songs.

One such song is “Stand by your glasses steady” or “Hurrah for the Next Man That Dies”, a popular drinking song during the war. The lyrics describe the presence of the dead within the mess hall, urging the men to acknowledge them with a toast of “Hurrah for the next man who dies”.¹⁴³ The song appears prominently in two major scenes: one being the night after Hollister’s friend is killed and the second being when the German prisoner-of-war joins the

¹⁴⁰ Hanna, “Say it with Music,” 98.

¹⁴¹ Hamilton-Paterson, *Marked for Death*, 159.

¹⁴² *The Dawn Patrol*, Directed by Edmund Goulding, 1938. Warner Bros. Film.

¹⁴³ *Flight Commander*. Directed by Howard Hawks. 1930. First National Pictures. Film.

squadron for a drink. The scene comes after Scott is shot down and thought dead and the German, who was also shot down, is brought in for questioning. Courtney, although obviously distraught over Scott's presumed death, invites the German to drink with them. He even asks the squadron adjutant to ask the German "if he'll drink a toast to the dead".¹⁴⁴ It is this exchange that forces Hollister to confront his comrades for their "carefree" attitude towards the enemy and for forgetting the friends they have lost, asking bluntly "how can you sit there and drink with the man that just murdered your best friend?"¹⁴⁵ These songs create a point of conflict between the squadron and Hollister. In many of the mess hall scenes, there is clear separation between the collective and Hollister. Although the main collective separates into smaller groups, Hollister is always seen drinking alone and refusing to participate in activities like singing. Here, in a space meant to be one of extroversion, relative happiness, and oblivion from the realities of war, Hollister is a constant reminder of the trauma of war and the loss of their fellow comrades.

Although the majority of the squadron most certainly feared death in combat, their interactions with characters such as Hollister suggest that their greatest fear was being perceived as a coward by their comrades. If they openly expressed their thoughts like Hollister, they too would face the same ostracism he did and be alone in the squadron. Outside of the group, they would be unable to escape their thoughts and emotions about the war. As a result, fearful of facing isolation like his, individuals remain a collective, fearful of making an attempt to aid in his mourning. Hollister's presence helps solidify and illustrate the ideals uniting the majority of the squadron under the pressure of the war. With his ostracization, Hollister is relegated to an

¹⁴⁴ *The Dawn Patrol*, Directed by Edmund Goulding, 1938. Warner Bros. Film.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

“outsider” or an “other” separate from the squadron’s collective identity, similar to the squadron’s relationship with Germans or civilians as groups with little understanding or regard for the squadron’s “proper” ways. Ultimately, only through his death later in the film does Hollister escape from the ostracization and loneliness.

A 1937 review, published before the film’s official release, notes that Edmund Goulding’s 1938 remake’s flow comes from “alternating the happier, drinking scenes in barracks with the ill-fated takeoffs at dawn and battle gyrations in the sky”.¹⁴⁶ This use of “happier” to describe these mess hall scenes suggests that they are more appealing because of this overwhelmingly extroverted, youthful expression in the overall dark scenario of war. Ultimately, the 1930s context manifests here. Although impacted by extreme losses in the war, British society was still one dedicated to patriotism and “stiff-upper-lip courage”.¹⁴⁷ Especially with the release of the 1938 film, British society was preparing for another war and needed to have support for another patriotic cause. Such a dedication required a strong portrayal of the ideal man that would defend Britain from negative elements threatening society. For Goulding and Hawks, war represents yet another harsh and testing element that the ideal “masculine” male is to successfully meet with the “New Man” ideals of toughness and emotional stability. Here, this toughness and stability presents itself in riotous extroversion in the mess, especially in group participation in song. *Flight Commander* and *The Dawn Patrol*, rooted in their 1930s context, set the stage for the theme of “doomed fatalism” that would define the Royal Flying Corps film genre as it expanded later in the century.

¹⁴⁶ “The Dawn Patrol,” *Variety*, December 31, 1937. <https://variety.com/1937/film/reviews/the-dawn-patrol-2-1200411558/>.

¹⁴⁷ Ian Mackersey, *No Empty Chairs*, 4.

Collective Identity in Aces High (1976)

After the Second World War, films focusing on First World War aviation were less present than in the inter-war era. From the 1950s through the 1980s, films about the Royal Air Force during the “glorious” campaigns of the Battle of Britain and in immediate post-war endeavors such as the Berlin Airlift were commonplace. These ranged from ranging from B-Films to larger scale productions, like *Angels One Five* (1952), and even blockbusters, such as Guy Hamilton’s *Battle of Britain* (1969). The only film with any portion focusing on the RFC before the mid-1970s was *Von Richthofen and Brown* (1971), with Canadian pilot Roy Brown, considered at that time to have shot down the Red Baron, as one of the main characters. Despite his name in the title, Brown’s time on-screen is overshadowed by Von Richthofen. The one outlier is the 1976 film *Aces High*, directed by Jack Gold. Until the short-lived BBC series *Wings* and the 1989 episode “Private Plane” of *Blackadder Goes Forth*, Gold’s film stands alone in focusing solely on the Royal Flying Corps. For Gold, he emphasized that the focus on interactions between the pilots set *Aces High* apart from both other military films of the period and the preceding films on the First World War subject. Recorded as being attracted to the youthfulness, chivalry, bravery, and unknown associated with the war in the air, Gold casted Malcolm McDowell and Christopher Plummer in the role of two main characters to create a realistic sense of camaraderie. In a 1975 review preceding the film’s official release, Gold stated that

What interests me is human relationships. *Aces High* has aerial battle scenes but they're not just thrown in. It has songs but they're not just cue music. They do tell something about the characters.¹⁴⁸

One of the key aspects of *Aces High's* plot is that it is the adaptation of two different pieces: Cecil Arthur Lewis' memoir *Sagittarius Rising* and R.C. Sherriff's 1928 play *Journey's End*. First published in 1963, *Sagittarius Rising* is considered one of the classic British First World War aviation memoirs, entwining his reflections within skillfully-crafted descriptions George Bernard Shaw described as evident of a "master of words, and a bit of a poet".¹⁴⁹ Lewis, fitting in with the idealized upper class image, joined the Royal Flying Corps from Oundle School, a public school in Northamptonshire, at age sixteen after lying about his age.¹⁵⁰ In his two-and-a-half years of combat flying, three operational tours in total, Lewis served several squadrons, one of which being the illustrious 56 Squadron. With members including Captain Albert Ball, future Major James McCudden, and Second Lieutenant Arthur Rhys Davids, the squadron earned fame for its combats against *Rittmeister* Manfred von Richthofen, or the Red Baron, who features in Lewis' reflections. 56 Squadron served as the inspiration for the squadron in *Aces High*, with its "worthy men; good, useful men...perhaps lucky men", as Lewis described them, projected onto Director Gold's characters.¹⁵¹

The connections to *Journey's End* are more concrete and easily recognizable. Like the play, *Aces High* takes place over the course of one week in 1917. The plot is nearly identical to the play's, although the setting moves from the infantry in the trenches to a Royal Flying Corps

¹⁴⁸ Bart Mills, "Riders in the Sky", *The Guardian* (1 November 1975), pg. 8M.

¹⁴⁹ Lewis, *Sagittarius Rising*, cover endorsement.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 5.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid*, 1.

squadron. Second Lieutenant Croft, originally Raleigh in the play, arrives at Major Gresham's (originally Captain Stanhope) aerodrome after flight school. Functioning as a rite of passage, the plot of the film focuses on Croft's transition from a schoolboy to a hardened veteran as aerial combat and squadron etiquette pressures his idealism. However, Croft's rite of passage ends with his death in an air-to-air collision after getting his first air victory. Gresham, burdened with Croft and other young pilots' deaths on his mind, is forced to welcome new recruits to the squadron.¹⁵²

However, *Aces High* places a greater emphasis on the role of the upper class ideals and public school experience in its plot. Although both elements are extremely present in *Journey's End*, its format as a play makes it difficult to fully express their role in the plot as clearly as in film. With *Aces High*, these ideals are central to the interactions between the pilots and how positively and negatively individual characters are portrayed. Unlike the play, the film opens in October 1916 with Major Gresham speaking to pupils at Eton College, including Croft. Public schools such as Eton and Harrow were major recruiting grounds for future Royal Flying Corps pilots, as the education included the "proper" ideals and opportunities, such as Officer Training Corps (OTC) and athletics, to help develop the proper officer candidates. At such institutions, young boys were "drilled schoolboys in nineteenth-century concepts of courage and manliness".¹⁵³ Ultimately, due to the incorporation of proper masculine attributes of "courage, endurance, and self-sacrifice" into public school educations, the middle and upper classes viewed these individuals as destined to lead the country, whether it be in institutions such as the civil service or in Britain's armed forces. The lower classes, however, did not have access to this

¹⁵² *Aces High*, directed by Jack Gold. 1976. EMI Films. Film.

¹⁵³ Hanna, "Say it with Music", 100-101.

education due to class differences, and, as a result, did not have the proper attributes of “stoicism and self-sacrifice”.¹⁵⁴

These public school and upper class ideals influence the relationships of all the major characters in the film. In the beginning, we are introduced to Gresham and Croft’s dynamic. Gresham is connected to Croft both as his former house captain at Eton, and also as his older sister’s boyfriend. Each of the characters have a different reaction to Croft’s arrival at the squadron and his statement that he specifically wanted to join Gresham’s unit. In Croft’s eyes, he joined the unit to be close to the Gresham he went to school with. However Gresham, under the pressure of high casualty rates and struggling with shell shock symptoms, urges Captain Sinclair, also called “Uncle” (Osborne in the play), to “send him [Croft] somewhere else”. However, Sinclair responds that its “damned unkind. He thinks an awful lot about you”. It is here that the visual accompaniment to Gresham’s response signifies his struggle with the upper class ideal, as he states “Oh yes! I’m his bloody hero” while pouring himself another drink.¹⁵⁵

Gresham discredits the public school’s emphasis on idolization, viewing it as “will nilly hero-worshipping anyone who could fly” rather than constructive support of the war.¹⁵⁶ Gresham is the antithesis of the man Croft knew, who was, in his eyes, the ideal British upper class man. Now, under the pressure of war, these upper class ideals are struggling to contain Gresham’s personality. Gresham and Croft represent the evolution of these upper class ideals under the pressure of war. Croft, fresh out of the public school system and flying school, represents the

¹⁵⁴ Koureas, *Memory, Masculinity and National Identity*, 113.

¹⁵⁵ *Aces High*, directed by Jack Gold.

¹⁵⁶ Hanna, ““Say it with Music””, 100.

desired idealistic and patriotic individual nurtured from a young age. Gresham, on the other hand, represents the reality of how these attributes fare in a scenario such as the war and aerial combat.

What fully illustrates Gresham's departure from the upper class ideal is his reaction to the war itself. Gresham's interactions with Captain Sinclair in his office reveal the strain on Gresham's nerves being exerted by the squadron's high casualty rates and increasing pressure from German squadrons. In order to cope with this combat stress and continue flying to help his squadron, Gresham resorts to alcohol. However, unlike in *The Dawn Patrol* and *Flight Commander*, this coping mechanism is openly critiqued. The difference between the role of alcohol as a coping mechanism in these two films suggest that drinking as a part of zealous partying is acceptable, as it is seen as a part of the youthful extroversion to release adrenaline. Gresham's individual reliance on alcohol, separate from the collective, sets him apart from this heroic ideal.

Stemming from his coping mechanism, Gresham's biggest worry is that his girlfriend, Croft's older sister, will not want to see him on leave because of how "shot up" he is. This gulf between servicemen and civilians is a common theme in both war films and memoirs, as the experiences at the front had little counterpart on the home-front, making it impossible for civilians to truly understand what their loved ones went through.¹⁵⁷ Although home leave was originally the main desire of all personnel, this realization made home leave almost equal to a disappointment or a hardship. For men like Gresham, they resort to self-blame in that "something

¹⁵⁷ Hamilton-Paterson, *Marked for Death*, 172.

in them had been destroyed” by the war and, thus, made it difficult to re-connect with their loved ones.¹⁵⁸

Gresham’s coping mechanism also causes conflict with other squadron members struggling under these masculine ideals. Lieutenant Crawford, originally Lieutenant Hibbert in the play, believes he is suffering from neuralgia, otherwise known as nerve pain in the face or the head. In reality, he exhibits symptoms of the combat stress that Gresham struggles with. Whereas Gresham uses alcohol to attenuate his suffering in order to continue functioning, Crawford uses his ailment to avoid squadron duties. In the play, Hibbert comes to Stanhope to ask him if he can avoid the next offensive due to his neuralgia. Stanhope originally responds with it is “better [to] die of pain than be shot for deserting” but later says “I feel the same-exactly the same... Why didn’t you tell me instead of talking about neuralgia. We all feel like you do sometimes, if you only knew”.¹⁵⁹ However, in the film, Gresham does not come across as understanding or accommodating. When Crawford begs him to be sent home, Gresham responds with “If you go out of here, I will have you court martialed and shot for desertion”.¹⁶⁰ For Gresham, openly expressing suffering is equated with cowardice. Whereas he equated his situation with Hibbert’s in the play, Gresham does not think of himself as connected to Crawford. For Gresham, he thinks himself a coward but tries his best to hid his suffering, whereas Crawford does little to veil his struggle. Ultimately, Crawford’s time in the squadron comes to an end after he finally breaks, running around the squadron aerodrome pretending to be an airplane. With this, Gresham is

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, 173-174.

¹⁵⁹ Robert Cedric Sherriff, *Journey’s End* (London: Penguin Books, 2018), 57.

¹⁶⁰ *Aces High*, directed by Jack Golding.

finally forced to fulfill Crawford's wish and send him home. Despite both suffering from the same dissolution of nerve under the same circumstances, their difference in coping mechanisms and external expression of suffering causes a point of contention between them. Although Gresham recognizes that he is no longer fulfilling the role of the ideal upper class male, he still expects his comrades to uphold a functioning image.

For Gold, these human relationships serve as both a coping mechanism and method of saving face in the face of evolving warfare. As seen with Gresham and "Uncle", individual friendships between pilots allowed for a degree of mutual understanding and emotional support. However, like with Goulding and Hawks' films, these relationships also served as a means of saving face, with unification on the basis of representing the "ideal" characteristics in the face of the other. Ranging from Gresham's harsh reprimanding of Croft to his dismissal of Crawford due to a nervous breakdown, the darkest theme in the film is the repression of emotion underneath the surface of the entire squadron; very few of Gold's characters in the film face the war with a sound body and mind. Although Gold's film does represent more of an equal balance between the two uses of human relationships in the squadron, the prominent theme is still one of ostracization in the face of encroachment on masculine ideals.

As Gabriel Koureas states, commemorations, whether it be in the form of memorial ceremonies or artistic production such as film, replace the darker reality of war with aspects of "order, solemnity, and meaning" to eradicate "chaos, disorder, and loss".¹⁶¹ In the films discussed, there is a prevalent theme uniting each, regardless of the details of their plots. The

¹⁶¹ Koureas, *Memory, Masculinity and National Identity*, 3.

films' focus on expected "norms" and a collective identity aligns with the desired image of the RFC collectivism that shed a positive light on British culture. In times of uncertainty, this image, or, realistically, the upper class ideals projected onto RFC servicemen, served as a means to preserve Britain's traditional values greatly challenged by the uncertainty of the First World War. The collective relationships in the films served as an extension of this image even in the post-war era, repressing the threatening "others". For characters such as Hollister, Crawford, and even Gresham, they represent this "other", with their emotional states a rebellion against prescribed norms. Although the films focused primarily on presenting these men outside the "norm" as outsiders, their mere presence in the film suggests a movement towards changing attitudes about the reality of war and its connection to the RFC image.

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Conclusion

The creation of the Royal Flying Corps image proved to be one of the factors further defining the branch's unique place in the history of the First World War. With aircraft at its helm, the Royal Flying Corps represented Britain's successful modernization and her industrial power. However, as the war progressed and that very industrial modernization threatened British morale, the RFC evolved to reflect British values. In its short six-year lifespan, the Royal Flying Corps proved to be one of the most important institutions in the British propaganda regime. As it lacked the set traditions of the Army and the Navy, the Royal Flying Corps presented itself as a blank canvas for the ideals of society. Through the selection of its pilots, officials carefully crafted an image that appealed to a wide audience. This romanticized crafting of the RFC image to correlate with British upper-class ideals of masculinity infiltrated all aspects of the branch, from training to media portrayals to medical treatment.

The dissemination of the RFC image was a multi-stage process that included and impacted numerous groups. With its roots extending into the pre-war years, air force elitism included the input of ruling society, specifically the upper classes. During wartime, the dissemination of this image was directly controlled by government and military officials. Subsequently, the image produced was a forthright representation of an ideal form of masculinity, a physical manifestation of the values and characteristics Britain's ruling class desired. With industrial war eradicating long-established ideas of civilization and individual heroism, fighter pilots were presented as surrogates to preserve these traditional views. Through recruitment tactics and medical requirements, military officials extended this romanticized view

of its own pilots. Noticeably, the personal voices of the pilots appear to be lost in the creation of the image.

The effects of industrial warfare, coupled with the lack of aviation medicine and the pressures of social attitudes about masculinity and emotional reactions to war, worked against the idealized image. Widespread emotional breakdowns and mental disorders showed that even with a romanticized notion of aerial warfare, those actually fighting were only humans struggling in the face of devastating industrial war. Rather than have control over this image, many pilots' perceptions of themselves and their place within the RFC were largely determined by the image disseminated by the state. Unfortunately, many did not face reality until they faced the lack of resources and the daily presence of the empty chairs Cecil Lewis described. As a result, pilots appeared to be at the mercy of both the enemy and the very state they served, extending well into post-war years.

Regardless of this dark reality, the Royal Flying Corps continued to be associated with its initial glamorous image. The romanticized image presented during the war evolved into yet another stage of air force elitism: the dashing young fighter pilot in his silk scarf and leather jacket. Representative of courage and the luster of youth, this figure was not much different from the one present in the First World War. Through its media dissemination, the present-day image of the RFC fighter is a direct continuation of the process started during the war. Although popular cultural representations may have become more factually realistic in their depictions of aerial combat tactics, most remain fixated on an idealistic and still attractive portrayal of the fighter pilot. As it becomes closely tied to the memory of the First World War, the century-old perspective of air elitism continues to cast a shadow over the reality of the war in the air.

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