

‘Say it with Music’: Combat, Courage and Identity in the Songs of the RFC/RAF, 1914-1918

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of songs and singing in maintaining morale and squadron identity in the Royal Flying Corps/RAF on the Western Front during the First World War. Using song books, published memoirs and officers’ personal papers from the Royal Air Force Museum and Imperial War Museum, the development and dissemination of the songs will be discussed in the context of RFC/RAF squadron culture. This analysis will show that music and songs had several key functions for men serving with the RFC/RAF; they helped to dissipate fear and anxiety, to maintain airmen’s morale and enhance the squadron’s *esprit de corps*.

Music, like sport and alcohol, was an essential part of squadron culture in the RFC/RAF during the First World War. While it was omnipresent in the airmen’s everyday experience of life in and around the aerodromes, very little attention has been paid to it by historians. Indeed, our wider appreciation of the cultural experience of wartime life in the RFC/RAF lags some way behind that of the Army. In the 1960s, Geoffrey Norris’ *The Royal Flying Corps: A History* was the first history to consider the experiences of the individual airman. The ‘memory boom’ of the 1990s widened the field of historical enquiry, with J. G. Fuller’s *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British Dominion Armies 1914-1918* the first academic work to analyse the popular culture of soldiers as both individuals and members of larger group.¹ While the work of historians such as Martin Francis, Edward Bujak, Maryam Philpott, Adrian Smith and Alex Revell have pointed the way forward, a history of the RFC/RAF which seeks to increase the breadth and depth of our knowledge of airmen’s wartime cultures is much-needed.²

¹ Jay Winter, ‘The Generation of Memory: Reflections on the “Memory Boom” in Contemporary Historical Studies,’ in *Canadian Military History*, Vol. 10, No. 3, 2000, Article 5.

² Martin Francis, *The Flyer: British Culture and the Royal Air Force, 1939-1945*, (Oxford: OUP, 1998); Edward Bujak, *Reckless Fellows: The Gentlemen of the Royal Flying Corps*, www.bjmh.org.uk

As Sir Walter Raleigh's *War in the Air* underlined in 1922, '[o]fficial records do not in themselves make history. They are colourless and bare'.³ This lack of colour was still felt in 1963, when veteran RFC flyer Sholto Douglas complained that modern books written about the war were 'lacking in a feeling for the temper of that time' which have 'reduce[d] even that most intense of experiences to the dull level of clinical research'.⁴ Historians are now beginning to examine the cultural significance of the music produced and performed during and after the war, emphasizing that the emotional potency of music surpasses the capabilities of the visual images or written texts; it is an intrapersonal process, an interpersonal or social phenomenon, as well as a product of cultural influences and traditions.⁵ Servicemen's songs which were widely sung 1914-18 are primary sources, *Lieux de Mémoire* (sites of memory), forming key topographical features in the landscape of Britain's memory of 1914-18.⁶ However, the words of R. H. Mottram should also be kept in mind. In 1924, in the preface to his *Spanish Farm Trilogy*, Mottram warned that studies of the conflict should beware of making the war appear as 'fabulous, misunderstood and made romantic by distance'.⁷

The Royal Flying Corps was founded in 1912, a time when significant efforts were being made to enhance the role of music in Britain's armed forces.⁸ The Naval and Military

(London: I.B.Tauris, 2015); Maryam Philpott, *Air and Sea Power in World War I: Combat and Experience in the Royal Flying Corps and Royal Navy*, (London: I.B.Tauris, 2013); Adrian Smith, 'Mick' Mannock, *Fighter Pilot: Myth, Life, and Politics*, (London: Palgrave, 2000) and Alex Revell, *High in the Empty Blue: The History of 56 Squadron RFC/RAF, 1916-1920*, (California, Flying Machines Press, 1995).

³ Sir Walter Raleigh, *The History of the War in the Air, 1914-1918*, (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2014 [1922]), p. 4.

⁴ Sholto Douglas, *Years of Combat*, (London: Collins, 1963), p. 13.

⁵ Nico Frijda's Foreward in Patrick N. Juslin & John A. Sloboda (eds), *Handbooks of Music and Emotion: Theory, Research, Applications*, (Oxford: OUP, 2010).

⁶ Pierre Nora, *Lieux de Mémoire* (Éditions Gallimard, 1986).

⁷ R.H. Mottram's *Spanish Farm Trilogy* (1924), quoted in Douglas, p. 13.

⁸ The RFC was founded by the Aerial Navigation Act on 1 April 1912 as Britain's first military air service, under the dual command of the War Office and the Admiralty. The RFC comprised of two wings, naval and military, and their duty was to support the Army and the Navy as required. The two sides of the RFC worked independently and, by 1914, the Admiralty had asserted full control over all naval flying and established the Royal Naval Air Service. The military wing, meanwhile, retained the use of the title RFC. When war was declared in August 1914 a central contingent of the RFC went with the British Expeditionary Force to France: four squadrons with a total of 109

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Musical Union (NMMU) had been established in 1911 by the composer George Farmer with senior military figures such as Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Willis of the Royal Marines Light Infantry.⁹ The principal object of the NMMU was to improve the standard of vocal music in Britain's armed forces. Song books were published for servicemen to use for both their entertainment and musical education, and musical festivals encouraged competition between unit ensembles drawn from the British Army and the Royal Navy. In addition, Sir Charles Stanford was attempting to revive old folk-songs for the Army, and Henry Walford Davies, who would in 1918 be made the RAF's first director of music, sought to encourage servicemen to sing more traditional tunes in preference to what some perceived as low-brow popular music. As a new force, the RFC was beginning to develop its own musical culture. The earliest squadron song is *The Bold Aviator*, sometimes referred to as *The Dying Airman*, which dates from 1912 when the RFC was formed from the Air Battalion of the Royal Engineers. The Royal Engineers was a regiment that had won several pre-war NMMU-sponsored competitions and well understood the value of music in maintaining *esprit de corps* - the will of a serviceman to identify with his unit as closely as he would his own family.¹⁰ The song is sung to the tune of *The Tarpaulin Jacket*:

Oh, the bold aviator was dying,
And as 'neath the wreckage he lay, he lay,
To the sobbing mechanics around him
These last parting words he did say:
Chorus:
Two valve springs you'll find in my stomach,
Three spark plugs are safe in my lung (my lung),
The prop is in splinters inside me,
To my fingers the joystick has clung.
Oh, had I the wings of a little dove,
Far a-way, far a-way would I fly, fly,
Straight into the arms of my true love,

officers and 66 aeroplanes. Over the course of the war the RFC expanded its role from intelligence-gathering to include aerial combat, short and long-range bombardment, home defence, agent dropping and artillery support. On 1 April 1918, the RFC and the RNAS were reconfigured into the Royal Air Force.

⁹ *The Organisation of the Naval and Military Musical Union: being a paper read at Aldershot by Col. B. R. Ward, R.E., to the members of the Marlborough Lines Literary and Debating Society, November 1911*, (London: Whiteman & Co./Organization Society, 1912).

¹⁰ David French, *Military Identities: The Regimental System, the British Army, and the British People, c.1870-2000*, (Oxford: OUP, 2005), p. 1.

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And there I would lay me and die.¹¹

The narrator then proceeds to describe his funeral and the alcoholic beverages his comrades should drink to remember him. RFC pilot Sholto Douglas first encountered the song when he enlisted in the RFC in 1915, with 2 Squadron at Merville. He underlined that it was sung throughout the war by all ranks at every occasion when 'vigorously we would bawl' the chorus.¹² The words were customized by different squadrons as desired. James Gascoyne, who served with 3, 9 and 92 Squadrons on the Western Front, recalled that 3 Squadron would often sing their own version of this song in their mess:

Wrap me up in my old flying jacket
And say a poor airman lies low
Then six solemn airmen shall carry me
With steps that are mournful and slow
Take the crank shaft from out of my body
Take the piston from out of my brain
Then the workshops with all its mechanics
Will make it to fly once again.¹³

Having the 'wind up'

Douglas refers to *The Dying Airman* as 'the perfect example of the humour that was developing' in the RFC in the early period of the war.¹⁴ Indeed, in all of the armed forces, humour was utilized as 'a coping mechanism to deal with loss and trauma, hopelessness and dread'.¹⁵ As Sigmund Freud's essay on 'The Joke and Its Relation to Unconsciousness' (1905) and Wit (1916) outlined, humour allows topics which may be taboo to openly articulated and expressed. This means that it was of significant use for flyers in both world wars who operated 'a veto on [the] verbal acknowledgement of fear'.¹⁶ While the literature on mental health in relation to aviation in the First World War is limited, the work of Michael D. Collins, Mark Wells, Martin Francis and Lynsey Shaw Cobden provides some insights, although the majority relates to flyers'

¹¹ C.H.Ward-Jackson (ed.), *Airmen's Songbook: Being an Anthology of Squadron, Concert Party, Training and Camp Songs and Song-Parodies [...]*, (London: Sylvan, 1945), pp.2-3

¹² Douglas, *Years of Combat*, p. 66.

¹³ Imperial War Museum (IWM) 16: Gascoyne, James V (Oral history): Reel 4.

¹⁴ Douglas, *Years of Combat*, p. 66.

¹⁵ Clémentine Tholas-Disset & Karen A.Ritzenhoff, *Humour, Entertainment and Popular Culture in World War I*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 3.

¹⁶ Francis, *The Flyer*, p. 106.

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experiences in the Second World War, they are nevertheless useful.¹⁷ As Francis has underlined, the RAF's hierarchy 'approached fear as a collective problem, a challenge to military morale, discipline and fighting effectiveness which could spread like a virus through a whole fighting unit'.¹⁸ This was a virus which could not be allowed to infect its frontline fighters, and methods were sought by airmen to ameliorate feelings of fear and terror through diversions such as sport and music, superstitions, alcohol and drugs.¹⁹ The source of fear among the air crews of the RFC/RAF is easy to locate: they were young and healthy young men who were faced injury or death - in a myriad of forms - on a daily basis. Flying itself was dangerous, and recruiting officers would attempt to find men who could 'ignore or suppress' their anxieties 'for considerable periods'.²⁰ However, flyers were human beings who in addition to the physical risks were also afraid of not being able to conceal one's terror. Douglas recalled that '[b]eing frightened was an experience that I came to know with increasing frequency as the fighting in the air became more intensive, and I used to get just as windy as the other pilots and observers when we set off and climbed our way to our offensive patrols'.²¹ Harold Balfour, who flew with Douglas, wrote of being 'unable to master and control my nerves'.²² Miles Tripp, a member of RAF air crew in the second conflict, spoke of fear as the 'extra passenger' on board the aircraft.²³ Cecil Beaton described the inner conflict between the instincts of self-preservation and 'the social code of a fighting unit' where no one could admit to being terrified.²⁴

¹⁷ Michael D. Collins, 'A fear of flying: diagnosing traumatic neurosis among British aviators of the Great War', in *First World War Studies*, Vol. 6, Iss. 2, 2015, pp.187-202; Mark Wells, *Courage and Air Warfare: The Allied Air Crew Experience in the Second World War*, (London: Routledge, 1995); see also Francis, *The Flyer* and Lynsey Shaw Cobden, 'Neuropsychiatry and the Management of Aerial Warfare: The Royal Air Force Neuropsychiatric Division in the Second World War', (PhD thesis, Oxford, 2015).

¹⁸ Francis, *The Flyer*, p. 110.

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 106. For drug use among airmen see James Pugh, 'The Royal Air Force, Bomber Command and the use of Benzedrine Sulphate: An examination of policy and practice during the Second World War', in *Journal of Contemporary History*, Online First, (January 2016).

²⁰ David Jordan, 'War in the Air: The Fighter Pilot' in Peter Liddle, John Bourne, Ian Whitehead (eds.), *The Great World War 1914-45, Volume 1: Lightning Strikes Twice*, (London: Harper Collins, 2000), p. 95.

²¹ Douglas, *Years of Combat*, p. 124.

²² Ibid. p. 162.

²³ Francis, *The Flyer*, p. 110.

²⁴ Ibid. p. 109.

In the First World War, as in the Second, we can see that the fear of being killed ‘was less acute than the fear of being thought a coward by one’s comrades, and with all the consequent ostracism that might follow’.²⁵ When in 1918, an airman serving in Egypt was overheard saying that after a raid on the aerodrome he had the ‘wind up’, many of his colleagues were aghast:

What an example for the young pupils, to hear an Active Service Pilot admitting that he “HAD THE WIND UP”. I thought [...] that it is shocking bad taste to admit the bare possibility of “having the wind up” – besides, from a psychological point of view, entirely the wrong atmosphere to create. My Mysore friend exclaimed “What a rank outsider that chap is! We don’t talk like that – damn it, it just isn’t done!”²⁶

The concept of having the ‘wind up’ could however be shared in a humorous way via the medium of song. These kinds of tunes were born out of mess parties of pilots and other aircrew mostly written while on operation. The song *Omer Drome*, sung to the tune of *My Old Kentucky Home*, not only satirizes the fact that aerial combat is conducive to having the ‘wind up’, it also makes a feature of No.1 Aircraft Depot, St. Omer, the base through which all machines and newly enlisted airmen had to pass on their way to their designated squadrons:

I’ve got a windy feeling round my heart
And it’s time that we went home,
I’ve got a great big longing to depart
Somewhere back to Omer Drome.
Huns are diving at my tail,
Wind up – Gee! – I’ve got a gale.
Guns are jamming.
Pilots damning.
Archies bursting all around us.
And observers say,
“Ain’t it time that we came down.”
So you won’t splitass’ll back
Along the track

²⁵ Ibid. pp.109-110.

²⁶ IWM Documents 24991: Private Papers of Captain G. Miller Johnstone, *Any Fool Can Fly*, p. 92.

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To my dear old OMER TOWN.²⁷

The official history underlined that airmen had to assume their combat role; ‘those who meet the members of a squadron in their hours of ease, among gramophones and pictorial works suggestive of luxury, forget that an actor in a tragedy, though he play his part nobly on the stage, is not commonly tragic in the green-room’.²⁸ Flyers would adopt an appearance of nonchalance by playing billiards, reading, listening to the gramophone or playing the piano, all accepted methods of dissipating fear without admitting they were terrified of their forthcoming missions. For airmen 1914-18, alcohol, rugby, mess games and raucous singing were the main ways in which they could deal with fear and surplus adrenalin. Singing was an everyday activity in the mess. Music in various forms was an important part of everyday life for all the servicemen of the RFC, and there is also strong link between the consumption of alcohol and squadron songs. RFC airmen had a reputation for heavy drinking which sometimes resulted in the smashing up of a mess or a local café.²⁹ In the 1970s, Alan Clark may have overstated the stereotypical RFC/RFC ‘binge’ which, he said, ‘would begin at dusk and continue often until those taking part were insensible’, but there is plenty of evidence to support the assertion that many airmen became heavy drinkers.³⁰ Reverend Pat Leonard, who in 1917 was attached as a chaplain to the RFC on the Western Front, wrote to his parents that ‘[m]y parish consists of four squadrons, two here and two about 3 miles away [...] So far everybody has been perfectly charming and cheery [...] tho’ many of the younger ones drink more than is good for them’.³¹ It must be pointed out, however, that some flyers, particularly some of the top-performing fighter ‘aces’ such as Albert Ball and James McCudden, were known to abstain from drinking. It follows that instances of alcoholism were more likely a result of combat stress rather than alcohol being a substitute for courage.³² Nevertheless, this facet of service life was parodied in their songs, and Arthur Gould Lee, who served with the fighting 46 Squadron on the Western Front, wrote home about one of his favourites, sung to the tune of *John Peel*:

²⁷ F. T. Nettleingham, *Tommy’s Tunes: A Comprehensive Collection of Soldiers’ Songs, Marching Melodies, Rude Rhymes, and Popular Parodies, Composed, Collected and Arranged on Active Service with the B.E.F. Tommy’s Tunes*, (London: Erskine Macdonald, 1917), p. 49.

²⁸ Raleigh, *The War in the Air*, p. 16.

²⁹ Philpott, *Air and Sea Power*, pp. 75-76.

³⁰ Alan Clark, *Aces High: The War in the Air Over the Western Front 1914-18*, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1973), pp. 30-31.

³¹ IWM Documents 16268: Letters of Reverend M. P. G. Leonard, 28 November 1917, France, Letter 132.

³² Philpott, *Air and Sea Power*, p. 76.

When you soar into the air on a Sopwith Scout,
And you're scrapping with a Hun and your gun cuts out,
Well, you stuff down your nose 'til your plugs fall out,
'Cos you haven't got a hope in the morning.

Chorus:

For a batman woke me from my bed,
I'd had a thick night and a very sore head,
And I said to myself, to myself I said,
"Oh, we haven't got a hope in the morning."³³

Following an after-dinner 'binge', Lee recalled that:

one fellow produced a concertina – and sang things like “When this ruddy war is over” [...] and “The green grass grew all round” and some less delicate ones such as [*Skiboo*] [...] which becomes more and more blue. As for skiboo, I've no idea what it means, but it's very good for yelling at the top of your voice when you're ginned.³⁴

One RFC pilot on the Western Front wrote that he and his comrades would:

sit here and choke down whisky until it chokes us because it's all we can do [...] sop it up so that we'll see six vacant chairs instead of one or two, and then start laughing because you can see the funny side of it all, because if you don't laugh you'll go potty or something [...] They're out of it and we damn soon will be, so why worry.³⁵

Francis has pointed out that many flyers 1939-45 'sought a personal rationalization of their macabre predicament'. At the extremes, one could either accept that it will happen to them or it definitely will not. Faced with the prospect of death some flyers 'familiarized themselves with it, and accepted its inevitability to such an extent that they effectively regarded themselves as already dead'. This led to reckless behaviour, for example 'stunting' after drinking sessions and raucous games in the mess.³⁶

³³ Arthur Gould Lee, *No Parachute: A Classic Account of War in the Air in WWI in letters written in 1917 by Lieutenant A. G. Lee* (London: Grub Street, 2013 [1968]), pp. 25-26.

³⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 6-7.

³⁵ *Death in the Air: The War Diary and Photographs of a Flying Corps Pilot*, (London: William Heinemann, 1933), p. 147.

³⁶ Francis, *The Flyer*, pp. 119-120.

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Chaplain Leonard witnessed a good deal of rough play with his squadrons, and as a keen rugby player and boxer he often joined in:

A great after-dinner game here is “Stand to your horses”, in other words pickaback [piggyback] wrestling. A lad called Watson and I challenged the mess. [...] It was a mighty fight but the Church was triumphant amid scenes of great enthusiasm. Card players had their tables overturned and the bar supporters forgot their drinks in the excitement of the moment.³⁷

As a non-flyer, Leonard observed that the deaths of the men of the RFC seemed ‘much more tragic than a casualty in the trenches. Here a couple of fellows go out in the morning full of life [and] good spirits from comparative civilization, white tablecloths and toast and marmalade and never come back. Up the line everybody lives in an atmosphere of sudden death. [...] But here we seem so far away from war that death begins to have all the vague horrors which it brings with it in peacetime.’³⁸ However, among the flyers there was also a veto on the verbal expression of loss. Death was euphemistically referred to in order to play down the terror which threatened to shred their nerves completely.³⁹ On the Western Front the very real possibility of death, and also the act of killing those who were trying to kill you, was dissipated using nursery-rhyme tunes. Established melodies such as *Who Killed Cock Robin?* were used by the RFC for this purpose:

Who killed Cock Robin?

“I” said the Hun,

“With my Lewis gun,”

I killed Cock Robin.”

Chorus:

All the planes in the air

Went a-dipping and a-throbbing,

When they heard of the death of poor Cock Robin,

When they heard of the death of poor Cock Robin.⁴⁰

As the means of inflicting death, weaponry is also mentioned in other songs, for example *The Birdman*, sung to the tune of *I Want to be an Angel*:

³⁷ IWM, Leonard, 14 December 1917, Letter 135.

³⁸ Ibid., Letter 136, 21 December 1917

³⁹ Francis, *The Flyer*, p..120.

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 61.

I fear no Hun; no, far or near,
While my gun's mounted on the rear,
And I've got a Vickers by my side,
To be my escort and my guide.⁴¹

As Philpott has observed, waiting was the primary experience of servicemen 1914-18.⁴² The pilots of the RFC/RAF had to cope with extended periods of inaction; fighter squadrons had to wait to meet the enemy, and other flyers which specialized in reconnaissance would both be targeted by anti-aircraft fire. This pattern of fighting demanded a certain type of courage. Chaplain Leonard complained that:

'[t]he trouble with the Flying Corps is that there is so much waiting. [...] If the weather is "dud" they have nothing to do but sit in the mess playing auction and drinking whisky or cocktails, waiting for the weather to clear'.⁴³

Cecil Lewis described the atmosphere when pilots on standby waited for the hooter:

there was nothing to do but play poker, put on the gramophone, and drink [...] The Mess was strangely quiet on such nights. The voices of the pilots calling their hands, Kreisler's *Caprice Viennois*, the chink of bets dropping into the saucer on the table.⁴⁴

Squadron Identity

RFC/RAF aerodromes were a stimulating environment for young men. Captain George Miller-Johnstone recalled that they:

were all more or less like a group of schoolboys – eager to fly, the majority having got it into their heads that it was a wonderful accomplishment [...] here we were in the middle of a great war willy nilly hero-worshipping anyone who could fly.⁴⁵

The atmosphere of the aerodrome recalls the atmosphere of the public schools from which many RFC officers were drawn. These were institutions which had 'drilled

⁴¹ Ibid. p. 65.

⁴² Philpott, *Air and Sea Power*, p. 35.

⁴³ IWM, Leonard, Letter 133, 5 December 1917.

⁴⁴ Cecil Lewis, *Sagittarius Rising*, (London: Peter Davis, 1936), p. 227.

⁴⁵ IWM, Miller Johnstone, p. 35.

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schoolboys in nineteenth-century concepts of courage and manliness'.⁴⁶ This had been enhanced by the Army reforms of R.B.Haldane which in 1907 had introduced the Officers' Training Corps into the majority of English public schools.⁴⁷ Cecil Lewis for example, begins his memoir *Sagittarius Rising* on the steps of Oundle. John Farmer, the founder of the Naval and Military Musical Union, had been the music-master at Harrow in the 1870s, and with his colleague Edward Bowen composed the school song *Forty Years On* in which it was said 'the emotional side of Harrow training [is] expressed in that grand school song'.⁴⁸

To young recruits like Cecil Lewis and Albert Ball, fresh from school or university, the squadron became like a school, house or college. Squadron identity was central to the wartime experience of servicemen in the RFC/RAF: airmen were as loyal to their squadron as soldiers were to their regiments and sailors to their ships. Sholto Douglas recalled that 'we lived in a tight little world of our own. It was a world that was exciting, always interesting, and at times very dangerous; and our lives revolved around the squadron and our flying'.⁴⁹ Squadron songs were a central feature of this squadron culture. Once a song had been composed it did not belong to any specific unit but tended to enter common ownership, moving from one mess to another via visits and postings. *So Early in the Morning* and *I Left the Mess Room Early* are early examples from 1914-18. During the war, 54 Squadron was well known for its songs, and a collection of 10 of these numbers was published in *Cinquante Quatre*. A. G. Lee wrote to his wife that 46 Squadron obtained a copy of 54 Squadron's published songbook, and that 'several ditties were new to us'. Lee and his colleagues in 46 Squadron proceeded to appropriate *The Song of Fifty-Four* to the tune of *We've Come Up From Somerset*, with the new version *The Song of Forty-Six*:

Oh, we've come up from Forty-six,
We're the Sopwith Pups, you know,
And wherever you beastly Huns may be,
The Sopwith Pups will go.
And if you want a proper scrap,
Don't chase B.E.s any more,
For we'll come up and do the job,
Because we're Forty-six!⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Francis, *The Flyer*, pp. 126-127.

⁴⁷ John Lewis-Stempel, *Six Weeks: The Short and Gallant Life of the British Officer in the First World War*, (London: Orion, 2010), p. 13.

⁴⁸ *Organisation of the Naval and Military Musical Union*, p. 4.

⁴⁹ Douglas, *Years of Combat*, p. 87.

⁵⁰ Lee, *No Parachute*, p. 79.

The RFC/RAF of 1914-18 was a varied organization fighting in an ever-changing conflict. Distinct types of squadrons operated on the Western Front, and the roles of these groups would change as the demands of war progressed. It was observed in 1939-45 that experiences of fear 'had more to do with the presence or absence of personal agency than with an objectively defined degree of danger'.⁵¹ Fighter pilots were seen to have more agency than observers or in the second conflict, bombers. However, the 'flying aces' of the Western Front, for example those in the elite fighter squadrons, such as 56, may have been 'duelling' with their German counterparts, but they were still fighting over a modern battlefield, dominated by long distance killing by means of heavy ordnance or the machine gun, 'a domain in which the enemy was invisible and the weaponry of war highly impersonal'.⁵² In the midst of combat flyers were known to sing. Maurice Baring recorded that 5 Squadron named anti-aircraft fire 'Archies' from the song *Archibald! Certainly Not!* a music hall number written in 1909 by John L. St John, and pilot James McCudden recalled that pilots would sing the refrain as they flew.⁵³

Archibald - certainly not
Get back to work, sir, like a shot
When single you could waste time spooning
But lose work now for honeymooning
Archibald - certainly not!

Douglas recalled that one of his strongest first impressions of life in the mess in the RFC 'was the way in which there was always this cheerful readiness to gather around and give voice to songs about flying. It was another of the aspects of the laying down of the tradition, and our songs became an interesting and often amusing expression of our way of life'.⁵⁴ He underlined that the key person in every squadron was the Recording Officer, the equivalent of an adjutant in the Army, and that in 43 Squadron one of the best features of their popular RO, Tom Purdey, was that he was an accomplished pianist.⁵⁵ Duncan Grinnell-Milne, who joined 56 squadron in the spring of 1918, described his reception at the aerodrome, led by the commanding officer, Gilchrist, who:

⁵¹ Francis, *The Flyer*, p. 113.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Douglas, pp. 64-65; Alex Revell, *The Happy Warrior: James Thomas Byford McCudden VC*, (Aeronaut Books, 2015) p. 30.

⁵⁴ Douglas, *Years of Combat*, p. 66.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 163-164.

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called for the squadron band and [...] the members filed in and took their places around the upright piano. “Strike Up!” ordered Gilly. “And start with the Squadron tune”. To some it might make pleasant reading were I able to record that, with the squadron-commander and his gallant officers standing stiffly to attention, the orchestra played a selection from “Pomp and Circumstance”, beginning with a noble and full-throated chorus of “Land of Hope and Glory”. [...] The melody chosen by the Squadron to which I now had the honour to belong could only, I’m afraid, be regarded as frivolous. It was called “The Darktown Strutters Ball” and the first line of the refrain informed some unknown lady that: “I’ll be there to get you in a taxi, Honey”. But nobody worried about the words and the rhythm was invigorating. [...] It may have been the cocktails, but I began to bless the good fortune which had brought me to this happy squadron.⁵⁶

Along with pianos, gramophones were key pieces of kit in the messes of the RFC/RAF. Musical tastes varied from one squadron to another. While some liked the hit songs from the London shows whose tunes evoked glimpses of home and leave, others established a tradition of ‘classical only’. It was, however, expected that any squadron member who went on leave should return with at least one gramophone record for the mess.⁵⁷

On Active Service

As on the ground and at sea, air operations over the Western Front were defined by peaks and troughs in the fighting. James Pugh and others have shown that there were times during which the RFC was the dominant force followed by periods in which it was operating at a tactical or operational disadvantage.⁵⁸ Examples would include the ‘Fokker Scourge’ from August 1915 to early 1916, and ‘Bloody April’ in 1917.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Ibid. p. 359.

⁵⁷ Alan Clark, *Aces High*, p. 31.

⁵⁸ James Pugh, *The Royal Flying Corps, the Western Front and the Control of the Air*, (London: Routledge, 2017).

⁵⁹ The ‘Fokker Scourge’ was a period from late 1915 when the Imperial German Flying Corps (*Die Fliegertruppen*), equipped with the *Fokker Eindecker* fighter, gained an advantage over the RFC and the French *Aéronautique Militaire*. The *Eindecker* was the first aircraft to be fitted with a machine gun synchronised to fire through the arc of the propeller without striking the blades. The tactical advantage of aiming the gun by aiming the aircraft and the surprise of its introduction were factors in its success.⁵⁹ The term ‘Fokker Scourge’ was used by the British press in mid-1916, after www.bjmh.org.uk

Douglas recalled that 1916 was the year 'that the world in which we had been brought up to believe in finally seemed to fly to pieces'.⁶⁰ It was during the spring of 1916 that Second Lieutenant Frederick Thomas Nettleingham, of the Royal Flying Corps, published *Tommy's Tunes: A Comprehensive Collection of Soldiers' Songs, Marching Melodies, Rude Rhymes, and Popular Parodies, Composed, Collected and Arranged on Active Service with the B.E.F.* Nettleingham published a sequel, *More Tommy's Tunes*, in 1918.⁶¹ The preface to the first volume is dedicated 'to those who sang and fought and died':

TO
Ye that have sung,
Ye that have laughed,
Ye that were happy,
Amateurs at Warcraft,
 Amateurs all.
[...]
Your songs were ribald,
Your rhymes were rude,
Your ditties doubtful,
Your quips quite crude,
Be ye fought.
 Heroes all.⁶²

Tommy's Tunes tells us a great deal about servicemen's attitudes to many aspects of their wartime experiences. It shows that it was already understood that the voice of the British serviceman was distilled in the songs that were sung on the fighting fronts. Nettleingham asserts his reason for publishing the collection is the belief that 'a nation's songs and other musical effort [...] reveal the actual character and culture of a nation

the *Eindeckers* had been outclassed by the new Allied types the French Nieuport 11 and British Airco DH.2 fighters. These new machines were more than capable of challenging the Fokkers, although the Fokker were not replaced until September 1916.

⁶⁰ Douglas, p. 129.

⁶¹ TNA AIR 76/369/4: Service record of F.T.Nettleingham: Nettleingham's wartime service begins on 25 July 1916. His service record shows that he was admitted to hospital on 29 August 1917 and that he resigned his commission on 7 September 1917. No other details feature on his service documents, but we can see from the published volume that Nettleingham prepared the manuscript of *Tommy's Tunes* in Paris in the latter part of 1916.

⁶² Nettleingham, *Tommy's Tunes*, p. 5.

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in a way that is unapproached by any other art or by rule of thumb'.⁶³ Nettleingham also states that 'this collection of songs should be reviewed by none other than men with Army experience'.⁶⁴ Twenty-six of the songs in *Tommy's Tunes* are from the Royal Flying Corps. By the time Nettleingham had prepared the manuscript for *Tommy's Tunes* in late 1916, many of the songs had appeared in the journals *Aeronautics* and *Flying*. The collection shows that there is a great deal of fluidity between Army and RFC songs, as most RFC men had transferred from Army and the tunes went with them. The shared cultural heritage of these organizations is pronounced. Nettleingham highlights that 'the great aim of this work is to present and perpetuate the original and unwritten tunes and rhymes' of the British servicemen at war. He states that although the men liked 'the latest music-hall ditties [...] the enthusiasm soon wears off'. *Tipperary* 'was never greatly sung', highlighting the fact that it was propagated by the *Daily Mail* correspondent, George Curnock, who reporting from Boulogne heard soldiers of the BEF singing the song 'instead of another equally popular, which the same troops started up a few miles farther on'. As a result, 'a hitherto unknown and unwanted song of such mediocre worth' became 'sung over five continents [...] was never Tommy's song'.⁶⁵ While *Tipperary* is included in *Tommy's Tunes* it is the alternative version, explained as 'a little episode illustrating the fact that Tommy has made a conquest with the ladies of France in a way after their own heart':

That's the wrong way to tickle Marie,
That's the wrong way to kiss,
Don't you know that over here, lad,
They like it better like this.
Hooray pour la France!
Farewell, Angleterre!
We didn't know the way to tickle Marie,
But now we've learnt how.⁶⁶

As with many of the wartime songs sung by the Army, the RFC appropriated the tune and developed their own lyrics. Maurice Baring noted that in February 1915, 2 Squadron were singing the *Tipperary* parody, *It's a Long Way to 8000*, in reference to the difficulties in climbing to decent heights.⁶⁷ In the 1960s, a veteran of another squadron, James Gascoyne, recorded *It's a Long Way to 7,000*, for the Imperial War Museum:

⁶³ Ibid. p. 13.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid. pp. 14-15.

⁶⁶ Ibid. p. 23.

⁶⁷ Douglas, p. 65.

It's a long way to 7,000,
It's a long way to roam,
It's a long way to 7,000,
On a 50-horsepower Gnome.
With Fokkers buzzing round you,
And the Uhlans down below,
It's a long, long way to 7,000,
But it's the safest place I know.⁶⁸

Nettleingham underlines that *Annie Laurie* was the servicemen's wartime favourite. He wrote that the song:

has queen of place. I have heard *Annie Laurie* in peace and war; at home and abroad; in camp and on the march; in a big dining hall with 300 men and no dinner, and for all time I think it will remain the greatest, most pathetic, soul-stirring refrain ever composed'.⁶⁹

Perhaps the most popular song of the conflict which was liked by both civilians and servicemen was Ivor Novello's *Keep the Home Fires Burning*. This number became a hit in December 1915, shortly before he joined the Royal Naval Air Service training depot at Crystal Palace as a probationary flight sub-lieutenant.⁷⁰ While the Army had their own song sung to the tune of *Keep the Home Fires Burning*, the RFC sang the following to the well-known melody during the 'Fokker Scourge' of 1915/16. Here they made fun of the B.E.2c aeroplane, the mainstay of the RFC of that time, as the slow, stable and vulnerable aircraft that was. That the men of the RFC were singing about this aircraft at a time of significant strain shows the value to morale of songs and singing even at times of great strain:

Keep the 2Cs burning.
Watch the windsticks squirming,
The R.A.F. has chugged his inside out,
All on his blooming own.
Can't yer 'ear it grinding?
'Oo the 'ell's a-pining?
Don't yer 'ear the fabric rip? –

⁶⁸ IWM 16: Gascoyne, James V (Oral history): Reel 4.

⁶⁹ Nettleingham, *Tommy's Tunes*, pp. 15.

⁷⁰ TNA: ADM 273-9-143, Service record of David Ivor Davies.

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List ter its sad, sad moan!⁷¹

Shortly after 'Bloody April' in 1917, 56 Squadron lost six pilots, including Albert Ball. The loss of the men from the RFC's elite fighting squadron was deeply felt among the men who, like Cecil Lewis, had returned safely from the mission. Lewis recalled that 'a feeling of depression hung over the squadron. We mooned about the sheds, still hoping for news. The day after that hope was given up'.⁷² Shortly afterwards a sing-song was held in a large barn in one of the farm buildings near by the squadron's base. The band played 'brassy music' and the men 'sang the old songs' such as *If You Want the Sergeant-Major*, *There's a Long, Long Trail, Way Down Upon the Swanee River*, and *Pack Up Your Troubles*. A corporal disguised himself as a Lancashire comedian, a batman gave *Pale Hands I loved*, then Lewis sang the *Stevenson Requiem*. Lewis recalled that the men 'applauded huskily: they understood. Then the band struck up *Tipperary* and soon had them shouting again'.⁷³

RFC 'Recruiting Songs'

The RFC/RAF had little need to appeal for men to join their ranks. Their songs show that they cultivated their reputation for being members of the wealthy and/or upper class, creating songs which poked fun and revelled in their public image. It is clear from the lyrics of the songs that they were being sung by members of the RFC who are presenting the seemingly glamorous life they lead, that it was 'a gentleman's life' which rendered them highly attractive to the opposite sex.⁷⁴ Here we can observe the foundation of the glamour of the flyer, where the RAF were seen to be the most appealing.⁷⁵ We can see elements of music hall entertainment in the four recruiting songs in *Tommy Tunes*. The fourth and final verse of *Recruiting Song No. 1* boasts that:

You should see us hold our heads up
When the others pass us by.
The girls they all run after us
And, breathless, say "Oh my!
Dear Tommy brave, I'll be your slave,
If you will take me up."
But hastily I answer,

⁷¹ Nettleingham, *Tommy's Tunes*, p. 71.

⁷² Lewis, *Sagittarius Rising*, p. 178.

⁷³ *Ibid.* pp. 179-180.

⁷⁴ Christina Goulter, 'War in the Air: Bomber Crew' in Peter Liddle, John Bourne, Ian Whitehead (eds), *The Great World War 1914-45, Volume 1: Lightning Strikes Twice*, (London: Harper Collins, 2000), p. 101.

⁷⁵ Francis, *The Flyer*, p. 25

“I’ve an invitation out to sup.”⁷⁶

Recruiting Song No.2 - to the tune of The Lowther Arcade and The Tin Gee-Gee:

I was walking in town up Regent Street
When I saw the R.F.C.
I thought to myself – Now, they look neat –
I think that would suit me.
So I strolled inside, and carefully lied
About my carpentry,
But when I came out, I swaggered about –
For I was in the R.F.C.

They sent me down to Salisbury Plain
To a place they call Larkhill.
The sergeants they bullied with might and main
And made us do some drill.
All the fellows they were “risky”, they smoked naught by De Reske
When going to the Y.M. hut.
And they didn’t do us badly – tho’ we weren’t from Pope and Bradley⁷⁷
For we were the Flying Corps – Tut! Tut!⁷⁸

The Ragtime Army, sung to the tune of The Church’s One Foundation, was appropriated by the Royal Engineers, the Army Service Corps Motor Transport section, the Artists’ O.T.C., the A.N.Z.A.C.s, and the R.N.A.S. The RFC version was sung as:

We are the Ragtime Army,
We are the R.F.C.
We do not fight, we cannot fly,
So what earthly use are we?
And when we get to Berlin
The Kaiser he will say,
“Hoch! Hoch! Mein Gott!
What a blooming fine lot

⁷⁶ Nettleingham, *Tommy’s Tunes*, pp. 72-73.

⁷⁷ Pope and Bradley were the first tailoring firm to create uniforms for the RFC. Nettleingham, p. 73.

⁷⁸ Nettleingham, *Tommy’s Tunes*, p. 73.

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Are the boys of the R.F.C.’’⁷⁹

From 1915, *The Ragtime Flying Corps* was another variant sung by new recruits to the RFC:

We are the Ragtime Flying Corps,
We are the ragtime boys,
We are respected by every nation,
And we’re loved by all the girls (I don’t think).
People, they think we’re millionaires,
Think we’re dealers in stocks and shares;
When we go out all the people roar,
We are the Ragtime Flying Corps.⁸⁰

The specialist nature of the air crew’s work can be seen in many of the songs in *Tommy’s Tunes*. This is particularly marked in relation to the mechanics, as seen in *The Mechanic’s Moan*, sung to the tune of *The Rosary*:

The hours I spent with thee, dear bus,
Are as a string of plugs to me;
I count the clearances in all your valves,
But you will miss – and still you miss.
Some pilots are – and some are not.
Some pilots can – and some cannot.
The engine’s mis-firing! Now we’re o’er the line;
I’m coming back: the fault’s not mine.
And when the war is over.
I’m going back to Angleterre,
And then you’ll hear La Belle France calling me,
I don’t think: *Je ne pense pas*.⁸¹

A similar song which was sung by members of the ground crew was *The Mechanics Rosary*, performed to the tune of *My Mother’s Rosary*:

There’s an awful noise at times
Comes from out our planes
Jim – he calls it ‘orrid names,

⁷⁹ Ibid. p. 42.

⁸⁰ Ward-Jackson, *Airmen’s Songbook*, pp. 7-8

⁸¹ Nettleingham, *Tommy’s Tunes*, p. 63.

Says it gives 'im pains
Without any rhyme,
Without any prose.
One can never get the blamed thing to go;
But ten great big cylinders,
And ten great big valves:
You'll take them out,
You'll put them in,
And when your daily work is done,
You'll count them each and every one –
That is *your* Rosary.⁸²

The referencing of these specific mechanical details becomes the airmen's own language. To sing and understand this song enhanced their corps identity by sharing their own admixture of technical jargon and humour in the form of parody. A further example of the RFC/RAF's delight in composing songs with detailed technical descriptions is *Ode to the R.A.F.*:

Eight little cylinders, sitting facing heaven,
One blew its head off – then there were seven.
Seven little cylinders used to playing tricks,
One warped its inlet valve – then there were six.
Six little cylinders working all alive,
One got a sooted plug – then there were five.
Five little cylinders working all the more,
One overworked itself – then there were four.
Four little cylinders flying o'er the sea,
One shed a piston ring – then there were three.
Three little cylinders wondering what to do,
One over-oiled itself – then there were two.
Two little cylinders very nearly done,
One broke a valve stem – then there was one.
One little cylinder trying to pull round seven,
At length have it efforts up and ascended into heaven.⁸³

⁸² Ibid. p. 68.

⁸³ Ibid. p. 70.

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Military Authority & Religion

Just like the Army, the men of the RFC found relief in singing ‘When this war is over/You can have your R.F.C.’.⁸⁴ The mocking of military authority is another theme found in many songs. As is traditional in military life, it is the NCOs, particularly the sergeants, who are the subject of some ribbing from the ranks. The men of the RFC were by no means immune to grumbling about the sergeants. The RFC adapted *Never Mind*; In place of the words ‘If the sergeant steals your rum, never mind’ the special RFC sang about an RFC sergeant ‘who went to fetch rations in a side car, the light tender usually employed for this purpose being otherwise engaged. Not being able to get it all in, he tied the bread round the side and back. When he arrived at the unit, not unnaturally the bread was “napoo”’. Nettleingham said this was usually performed at lunchtimes:

If the Sergeant’s lost your bread – never mind.
If he sticks it round a side car – never mind.
And even if it’s messed – he did it for the best.
For he’s the sergeant – dontcherknow – so never mind.⁸⁵

Similar sentiments can also be seen in *The Mountains of Morne (Another Moan)*:

Dear, mother I’m writing this letter you see;
I’m a second A.M. in the R.F.C.,
And when I enlisted, a pilot to be;
But oh! ‘tis never a bit of the flying I see.
The sergeant-majors, they bawl and they shout,
They don’t ever know what they’re talking about.
Now if things don’t alter I’ll blooming soon be
Where the Mountains of Morne sweep down by the sea.⁸⁶

Chaplain Leonard found that, in contrast to the infantry, the proximity of death did not appear to make the men of the RFC turn to religion, finding ‘they are not strong on Communion’s’.⁸⁷ Even in a concert party setting, the men of the RFC did not appear to be keen on religious music. At a Sunday concert in an aerodrome at Bernaville, a ‘tremendous crowd’ was gathered and ‘although the great audience showed little enthusiasm over the singing of the solos from the *Messiah* [...] [during] the second

⁸⁴ Ibid. p. 21.

⁸⁵ Ibid. p. 28.

⁸⁶ Ibid. p. 63.

⁸⁷ IWM, Leonard, 28 November 1917, France, Letter 132.

half of the programme, which was secular, the rafters fairly shook'.⁸⁸ In addition to using hymn tunes for their own musical compositions, Nettleingham's anthology also shows that the RFC liked to utilize existing modes of worship in humorous ways. This can be seen in *The Pilot's Psalm*, a parody on the 23rd Psalm of David:

The BE 2e is my bus; therefore shall I want.
He maketh me to come down in green pastures.
He leadeth me where I will not go.
He maketh me to be sick; he leadeth me astray on all cross-country flights.
Yea: though I fly o'er No-man's land where mine enemies wouldst compass me about. I fear much evil: for *thou* are with me; thy joystick and thy prop discomfort me.
Thou prepares a crash before me in the presence of mine enemies; thy R.A.F. anointest my hair with oil, thy tank leaketh badly.
Surely to goodness thou shalt not follow me all the days of my life: else I shall dwell in the House at Colney Hatch for ever.⁸⁹

It is the aeroplanes themselves that are often the subject of airmen's worship. The RFC adapted several popular music hall tunes to their own odes to their machinery, for example *Oh, You Beautiful Bus!* sung to the tune of *Oh! You Beautiful Doll!*:

Oh, you beautiful bus!
You great big beautiful bus!
Let me take the wireless off you,
Put the blooming bomb racks on you,
Oh, you beautiful bus!
You great big beautiful bus!
If I should ever leave you, oh, my heart would ache;
I would hug you but I'd fear you'd break,
Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh, you beautiful bus!⁹⁰

Another variant was *You're Some Aeroplane* where the *double entendres* familiar to many servicemen's songs are clear:

⁸⁸ Lena Ashwell, *Modern Troubadours: A Record of Concerts at the Front*, (London: Gyldenhal, 1922) p. 86.

⁸⁹ Nettleingham, *Tommy's Tunes*, p. 62.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 68.

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You're some aeroplane,
You're at your tricks again.
When you start that flying,
In a style of your own.
I can't help but holler out, "Good-bye, happy home."
Oh! Oh! Hold on tight,
It's going to loop with all its might.
Oh! When you dip, as you always do,
I have nothing at all to do.
Oh! I can feel you strain,
You horrible aeroplane!⁹¹

Folk songs were also popular. *Tommy's Tunes* also includes *The Ragtime Aircraft Builders*, which was sung to the tune of *Here We Go Gathering Nuts and Hay*:

This they call a factory, a factory, a factory,
It's breadth and width is three by three,
It's called the R.A.F.

And here we build our aeroplanes, a biplane, and a monoplane,
With silly work we're nigh insane,
At the factory for aircraft.

Now two big sheets from mother's bed, not sister's bed, not Lucy's bed,
Tow big sheets from mother's bed,
They'll come in very handy.

[*Various other components are added over 5 more verses*]

And now we've made an aeroplane, Is't a biplane, Or a monoplane?
We'll pack it up and send it by train,
So as not to spoil it.
(*Over the lines*)
I think they're off their beastly rocker,
perhaps they think it's a game of soccer.
They send me out against a Fokker
They must have lost their valve-head.⁹²

⁹¹ Ibid. p. 69.

⁹² Ibid. pp. 66-68.

Throughout the war, the continued popularity of the folk-style pre-war RFC song *The Dying Aviator* underlines that airmen could confront directly the high possibility of their deaths in action. The direction that this song was also performed as an ensemble piece is also highly indicative of the singing of songs being something that was done by a group of men from the same unit:

SOLO: A handsome young airman lay dying
CHORUS: *lay dying*
And as on the aer'drome he lay
He lay,
To the mechanics who round him came sighing,
Came sighing,
These last dying words he did say,
He did say:
"Take the cylinder out of my kidneys,"
"of his kidneys"
"The connecting rod out of my brain"
"of his brain"
"The cam box from under my backbone"
"his backbone"
"And assemble the engine again"
*"again"*⁹³

The ensemble nature of the song is significant. During the Second World War, RAF psychiatrists and medical officers found that telling nervous air crew that they were not the only ones to be experiencing difficulties appeared to help alleviate their symptoms.⁹⁴ In 1914-18 the airmen's songs are helping to do a similar thing by enhancing the sense of shared fear in the face of danger, further cementing the unit's *esprit de corps* and familial belonging.⁹⁵ The very specific results of anti-aircraft fire and physical injuries are also described in the RFC version of *I Don't Want to Join the Army - I Don't Want to Join the Air Force*:

I don't want to join the air force,
I don't want to go to war.
I'd rather stay at home
Around the streets to roam,

⁹³ Ibid. p. 76.

⁹⁴ Francis, *The Flyer*, p. 116.

⁹⁵ French, *Military Identities*, p. 1.

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Living on the earnings of a lady typist.
I --- don't want an Archie where I sit down,
I --- don't want my cranium shot away.
I'd rather stay in England,
In merry, merry England,
In the Air Board Office all the day.⁹⁶

Again, we see that the men of the RFC/RAF were confronting the prospect of their deaths, using humour and song as an acceptable mode of release. A popular hymn tune was adopted for 56 Squadron's song which was sung to the tune of *Solomon Levi* by F. Weaver:

Oh that I was back in the P.B.I.
With no more Triplanes on me tail, nor tracer passing by.
And no more flames and clickerty-clack and no more blooming sky,
And only a couple of feet to fall whenever I want to die.⁹⁷

Crashes and accidents were regular occurrences for the RFC, and this is reflected in the song *What Do You Want...?*, an RFC parody to the tune of the popular song *What Do You Want to Fool Around like That For?*

What do you want to go and crash like that for?
It's the second time today.
You make me sad – you make me mad,
First it was a Rumperty, then a brand new Spad.⁹⁸
What do you want to fool around like that for?
First you banked, then you slipped away.
But never mind, you'll go up again tonight
With umpteen bombs, all loaded with dynamite.
Then if you make another crash like last time,
Well, you won't draw next week's pay.⁹⁹

Throughout the war, the RFC/RAF continued to utilize existing tunes which had been made popular in the Army. The song *Goodbye*, by R. P. Weston and Bert Lee from

⁹⁶ Ward-Jackson, *Airmen's Songbook*, p. 15

⁹⁷ Revell, *High in the Empty Blue*, p. 359.

⁹⁸ Rumperty = Maurice Farman Shorthorn aircraft.

⁹⁹ Ward-Jackson, *Airmen's Songbook*, p. 9

1918, was said to have been inspired by a group of factory girls calling out to soldiers on their way to Victoria Station.¹⁰⁰ This was appropriated by 3 Squadron:

WE'RE Three-ee, Yes Three-ee,
And we're right at the top of the Tree-ee.
Where the green leaves always grow,
We're just tickled to death to go.
We fly-ee, so high-ee,
We're the only master of the sky-ee.
Bon soir, old thing,
Cheerio, One Wing!
Napoo, not Two, We're Three.¹⁰¹

Popular songs would always make their way over to the fighting fronts, and a visitor to 56 Squadron in 1917 recalled that their favourite tunes were *Hullo, My Dearie* and *Someone Has Got to Darn His Socks*.¹⁰² The RFC also appreciated alliterative tongue-twister songs from the music halls. The following tune was sung by 54 Squadron to the tune of *Sister Susie's Sewing Shirts for Soldiers*:

Dirty Danny's digging deeper dig-outs,
Much deeper dug-outs dirty Danny dug to make a fug,
One day he dug a topper,
But the General came a cropper
In that damn, deeper, dirty, deeper. Dug-out Danny dug.

Heavy-handed Hans flies Halberstadters,
In handy Halberstadters for a flight our Hans does start;
His Oberst says, "O dash it,
For I fear that he will crash it,
See how heavy-handed Hans ham-handles handy Halberstadts!"¹⁰³

The formation of official bands in the RFC, if it was considered at all, would have been a low priority during the early years. As in the Army, the first RFC/RAF ensembles

¹⁰⁰ Richard Anthony Baker, *British Music Hall: An Illustrated History*, (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2014), p. 146.

¹⁰¹ Ward-Jackson, *Airmen's Songbook*, p. 11

¹⁰² Douglas, p. 231.

¹⁰³ Ward-Jackson, *Airmen's Songbook*, p. 22-23

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were unofficial and largely made up of part-time volunteers.¹⁰⁴ The most well-known RFC orchestra on the Western Front belonged to 56 Squadron, the RFC's elite fighting unit. It was established by Major Richard Graham Blomfield, Commanding Officer of 56 Squadron from 6 February to 29 October 1917. Cecil Lewis underlined that:

a first-class fighting mechanism needs first-class personnel [...] To keep fighting pilots on their toes there must be an AI morale. For this there was nothing like music [...] whenever things were not quite as bright as they might be, out came the squadron band.¹⁰⁵

Sholto Douglas described how 56 Squadron's orchestra was famous throughout the RFC on the Western Front solely because of Blomfield's efforts:

In addition to pulling all sorts of wires and to resorting to every kind of trick in bargaining and trading, Blomfield had even raided London in recruiting and gathering together in his squadron group of airmen who were musicians as well as basically tradesmen in the Flying Corps; and no social occasion in the life of the squadron was celebrated without the orchestra being in attendance. In its way, this could be looked upon as the peak in the efforts made by the RFC to say it with music.¹⁰⁶

After a day of successful combat, the squadron would often give a concert as 'there was no shortage of talent'.¹⁰⁷ Dinners would be held regularly at each squadron, particularly when bad weather prevented flying, or there was an occasion to celebrate. Bert Pattenden's squadron, for example, held a seven-course dinner to mark the marriage of one of their sergeant majors, which was 'followed by a sing song'.¹⁰⁸ Chaplain Leonard recalled that '[a]fter dinner the tables were cleared away and we danced to the music of our little orchestra – [which] soon degenerated into a Rough House'.¹⁰⁹ It was generally accepted that music was much preferred to destructive behaviour and could act as a counter-attraction as 'an undoubted aid to sanity and

¹⁰⁴ Gilbert A. Singleton, *Music in Blue: Uniforms of Musicians in the Royal Air Force and its Predecessors – A Photographic History*, (Maidenhead: Eagle & Lyre Publications, 2007), p. 9.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. p. 165.

¹⁰⁶ Douglas, p. 231.

¹⁰⁷ William Orpen, *An Onlooker in France 1917-1918*, quoted in Revell, *High in the Empty Blue*, p. 180.

¹⁰⁸ Royal Air Force Museum (RAFM), X001-2334/007/005: Letters from Bert Pattenden, September – October 1918, 13 September 1918.

¹⁰⁹ IWM, Leonard, Letter 137, 26 December 1917.

sound health'.¹¹⁰ The RFC were always receptive to music, and the performances of professional troupes were very popular. The instrumentalist Gordon Williams recalled one YMCA-sponsored concert at the end of the July 1917 on the Somme:

Another call to a late concert to 500 R.F.C. men under orders for the line, and there were practically no lights - only a few candles. [...] We gave the men 1000 cigarettes and the applause during and at the end of the Concert was simply deafening. They fall in and are ready'.¹¹¹

The therapeutic benefit of singing *en masse* was recognised during the war. The composer Henry Walford Davies taught soldiers to sing in participatory concerts with a broad repertoire of folk tunes, homely ditties, rounds and sea shanties. He maintained that ensemble singing helped to reinforce the team spirit of fighting men:

A brass band is all very well in its way, but it does not come near the male voice choir in the production of the best music [...] Get the men to do something together and you have started an *esprit de corps* among them which will have a tremendous influence for good, and will do more than any of us imagine to make life in camp, in barrack, or billet, or in the outpost more tolerable.¹¹²

The men of the RFC/RAF, however, did not need to be organised into a formal choir. Their cockpits and aerodromes were full of music and humour of their own devising, enabling them to further define their own corps identity. Their songs and parodies are primary sources which show that amid so much fear and death there was a great deal of life. The melodies are therefore infused with the airmen's wartime memories. Nettleingham's dedication 'to those who sang and fought and live' at the start of the second volume, *More Tommy's Tunes*, utilises George Farmer's Harrow School song, *Forty Years On*:

Forty years on, when afar and asunder,
Parted are those who are singing to-day,
When you look back and forgetfully wonder,
What you were like, in camp or the fray.

¹¹⁰ IWM, LBY 09/71, Lena Ashwell Special Collection: *Leeds Mercury*, 12 April 1915, no page reference.

¹¹¹ IWM Documents 15459: Gordon Williams, Diary, July 1917, p. 20.

¹¹² Cadbury Special Collections, YMCA/K/6/1: Major H. Walford Davies 'Music and Arms', *The Red Triangle*, vol.1, September 1917 - August 1918, p. 97.

COMBAT, COURAGE AND IDENTITY IN SONG

Then it may be there that will often come o'er you,
Glimpses of notes like the catch of a song,
Visions of Flanders shall float then before you,
Maybe this book will help bear them along.¹¹³

Post-War Memories

In 1927, *Air Force Songs and Verses* was published to raise money for the RAF Memorial Fund and featured 54 RFC/RAF squadron songs with another 27 from the period of the Great War and Armistice. The desire to collect and preserve the songs is very evident, particularly after the Second World War. Published in 1945, the *Airman's Song Book: Being an Anthology of Squadron, Concert Party, Training and Camp Songs and Song-Parodies [...]* incorporates the tunes of the RAF and its auxiliary's predecessors, both in training and on active service. This tells us a great deal about attitudes to wartime music from the standpoint of 1945, and the introduction sets out that the collection's aim was to preserve the songs and therefore 'the traditions reflected in them'. The author is also honest in saying that he hoped it would remind ex-airmen of 'the lighter side of their service' and moreover that it would 'let it be known to the public that their air force, though youthful, had its own technique of dispelling though song its trials and tribulations'. If 'the sailors had their shanties and the "brown types" their marching refrains' the airmen 'had written their own history' in their songs. These are songs and ditties purely composed by, for and about airmen.¹¹⁴ Sholto Douglas wrote that '[w]henever I allow my mind to summon up thoughts of the Somme there are always recalled for me memories of the songs that we sang in the first war, and they are memories that never fail to bring a lump to my throat'. Of *Roses of Picardy* he wrote that it 'is more than a pleasantly sentimental song to those of my generation: it evokes a poignant memory of the sight of columns of dishevelled troops, at times very muddy and torn, as they marched back up from the trenches'. To Douglas, *Tipperary* and *Pack Up Your Troubles* 'will always be the marching songs of that particularly intense period of [his] early life', and *If You Were the Only Girl in the World* 'ran like wild-fire through the fancy of the men in France, and it stirred our youthful sentiments in a way that was then very moving and which is even now possessed of a nostalgia that cannot be shared with anyone because it is so essentially a purely personal one'. He maintained that it was 'the memory of those songs and the other songs that we sang in the Flying Corps that seems to bring most strongly to my mind thoughts about my association with the men with whom I flew'.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ F.T. Nettleingham, *More Tommy's Tunes: An Additional Collection of Soldier's Songs [...]*, (Erksine Macdonald, 1918), frontispiece.

¹¹⁴ Ward-Jackson, *Airman's Song Book*, p.vi

¹¹⁵ Douglas, p. 154.

The songs sung by the RFC/RAF tell us a great deal about the pressures and pleasures of service in the front lines, both on the ground and in the air. An examination of the songs and music utilised and enjoyed by airmen adds much needed context to what we already know about the war in the air 1914-18. The music of the RFC/RAF shows us how the airmen used music to communicate notions of courage and cowardice, to communicate their fears and of their attempts to dissipate and overcome their wartime anxieties in both individual and group contexts. The music and of the RFC/RAF shows that while nineteenth century concepts of military manliness were still in 1914-18 defined in terms of stoic endurance, songs were used to manage feelings of fear and to enhance a squadron's *esprit de corps*. Music was a principal method for managing that fear. It was ever present in the lives of men on the fighting fronts, unmatched in its power to cajole, console, cheer and inspire during the conflict and its aftermath. The collections of songs, from *Tommy's Tunes* and *The Airman's Songbook* show us that the men of the RFC/RAF wanted to preserve the sound worlds of their wartime experiences as key indicators of their squadron identities. Furthermore, memoirs written by RFC/RAF veterans show that songs acted as powerful portals of wartime memories. The songs of the RFC/RAF are therefore vital sources which allow us to glimpse how those who endured the First World War lived, fought and remembered their wartime years.