



Charles Chabot

Aviator, Royal Flying Corps, Royal Air Force and Pioneer.

Charles Chabot

Charles James Chabot was one of the better documented pilots from the Great War and undoubtedly the best documented as far as North Weald is concerned. Most of his story is available to us simply because he managed to gain the ear of some important archives including the Imperial War Museum and television. His biography was in preparation but was never completed and published before his death in 1983. The manuscript is simply in abeyance so until it comes to light this much-reduced version of his story and those now easily accessible on-line television programmes will suffice.

Charles was born in about 1890 and by the time the Great War broke out in August 1914 he was a civilian living in Bangkok, Siam (Thailand) and attending a combined British, French and German rugby dinner.

Not unlike everyone of his age the outbreak of war in Europe was an exciting attraction that many decided they would do their best to join.

It was early days in the war that was to turn out so devastating in terms of deaths and the authorities still believed they had enough flexibility to have choice. Charles faced some difficulties in joining the war and spoke of facing rejection by the naval authorities at Singapore but eventually joined the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve in Britain. He was selected for officer training but faced further difficulties in then volunteering to join the newly expanded Royal Flying Corps due to an attitude he identified as elitism on their part. He was rejected even after a second attempt to join the RFC, being told to go and learn to fly as a civilian and join Special Reserve, Royal Flying Corps. It was only a temporary delay. The days of the military being able to choose their fliers based on where they were born or educated were fast disappearing.

Charles was directed to the Surrey flying ground at Brooklands, one of the first airfields operated but from 1907 it had been a motor racing circuit of repute. At the start of the war Brooklands closed to motor racing and was requisitioned by the War Office. Vickers Aviation Ltd set up a factory in 1915, and Brooklands soon became a major centre for the construction, testing and supply of military aeroplanes. Civilian flying schools closed down or were merged into one Military Training School; flying training continued there until at least the end of 1915.

Charles arrived at Brooklands during February 1915 and commenced flying training on Maurice Farman MF-7 Longhorns over the next two months. The Longhorn was a flimsy French biplane developed before World War I which was used for reconnaissance by both the French and British air services in the early stages of the war before being relegated to service as a trainer.



Those undergoing training at Brooklands were a mix of officers already commissioned into the military services and civilians like Charles learning to fly. The brief flight training – just around 30 flight hours – included practical lessons in stripping and re-building Longhorns, the ultimate in minimalist airframes of the time. There were the occasional mishaps but the slow speed and open architecture of the aircraft used meant they were very forgiving in a crash and fatalities were few.

Charles Chabot

The group Charles was with were included in a photograph he later loaned to Epping Forest District in the 1970s when he was in his eighth decade. They trained together and all learned to fly on the same type. Of the group, the only one he could not recall was the fourth figure he knew only as "Caws." All the captions have been subsequently enhanced.



Henry Edward van Geothem gained his licence number 1162 on 12 April 1916. He subsequently died in a de Havilland DH6 crash. The then Lieutenant Van Geothem died in the 11 July 1917 accident as he and his pupil, Ion Mordaunt Tatham were flying the twin seat DH6, when it crashed at East Boldre [RFC Beaulieu]. Both men were killed.



Lt John Beverley Robinson, a Canadian, gained licence number 1217 on 16 May 1915. Posted to 12 Squadron RFC in September he was taken prisoner November after flying from Le Crotoy on a routine flight in his Maurice Farman (1857) to 3 Aircraft Park. He never arrived as he was forced to land behind enemy lines and was captured.



Gilbert Stuart Martin Insall holder of licence number 1110 achieved on 14 March 1915. His brother Algernon was also an RFC pilot at Brooklands and gained licence 1109 at Brooklands two days earlier. Gilbert was later awarded the VC, when flying a Vickers Gunbus.

Lt Stanley Winther Caws. He received aviators certificate 1097 at Brooklands on 25 Feb 1915 after returning to England with a Canadian regiment. After training as a Pilot, was posted to No 10 Squadron, one of the first units to form as the RFC expanded as part of the British Army. With his Observer, Lt W H Sugden-Wilson, 2nd Lt Caws was out on a reconnaissance sortie on the morning of 21 September 1915 when they were attacked by two Fokker aircraft and shot down – a 'kill' attributed to the German 'Ace' Lt Max Immelmann.



Charles J Chabot

Alan Fitzroy Somerset-Leake gained licence number 1157 on 5 April 1915.

Arthur Claude Wright gained licence number 1136 on 30 March 1915. He served throughout the war and survived.

John Gay gained licence number 1135 on 30 May 1915. He was shot down during the war.

Charles Chabot

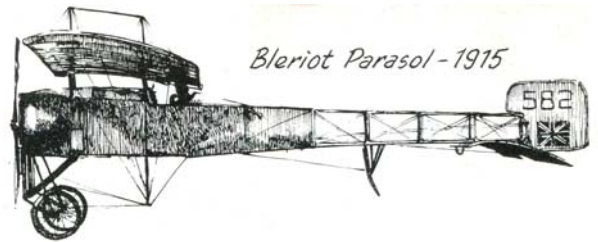
By the time he produced the image for museum use his memory of the details of the people in it had understandably become unclear but, as stated, there was only the one name that escaped him.

His flying lessons in the Longhorn, logged a whole 55 minutes of instruction (during which he stood behind the pilot and observed the proceedings with little or no hands-on contact with the controls) before being sent on his solo flight on 1 April 1915, he gained certificate 1144 and moved on to the Central Flying School, Upavon, in April and May 1915 to learn a great deal more about flying.

To war in France

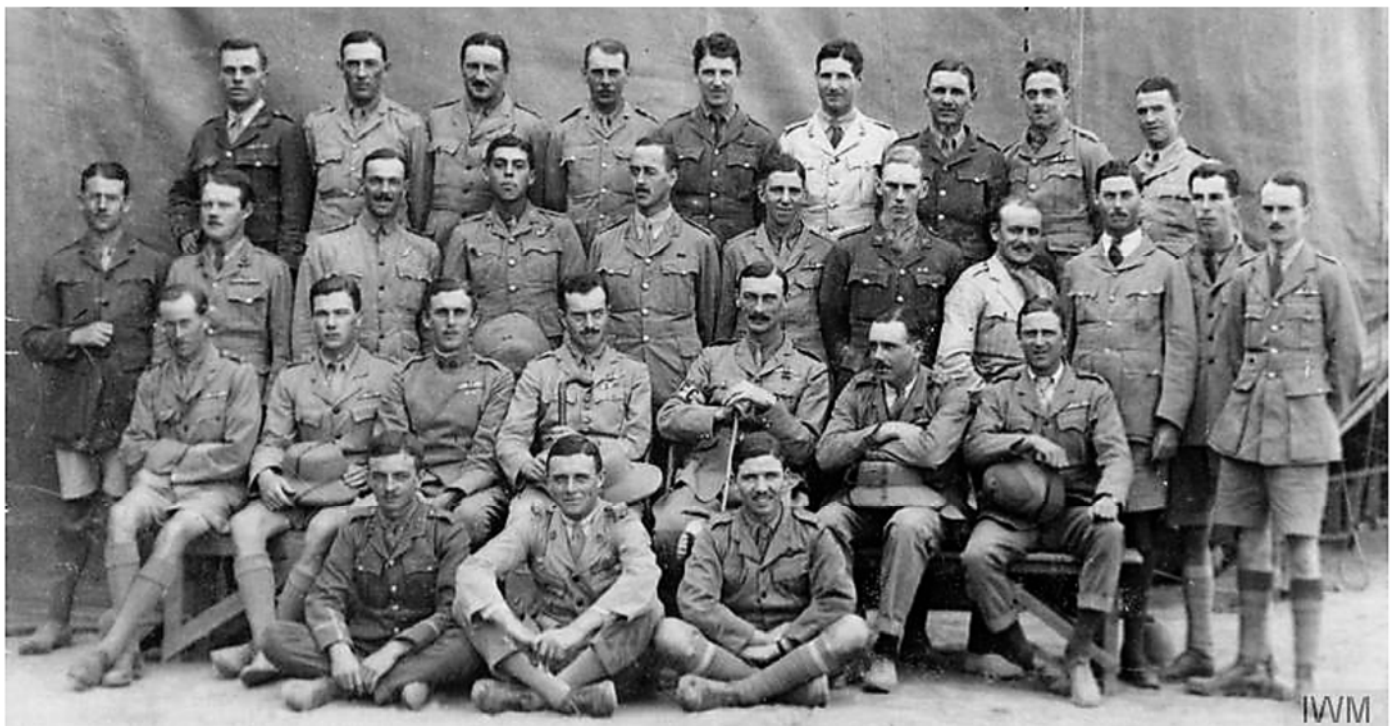
After completing his further training at the CFS he served with the Royal Flying Corps on the Western Front, initially around Dover with 15 Squadron in 1915 before moving on to serve with 4 Squadron during 1915-1916. His flying was seen as good for he was selected for further training in monoplanes at a time when the German Fokker E.III monoplane was knocking many Allied aircraft from the skies.

He converted to monoplane flying as prospective fighter pilot using specially adapted 'Penguin' and 'Virgin' variants of the Bleriot Monoplane. Unfortunately he managed to crash land one of the Bleriot's and that incident attracted the displeasure of the senior officers and he was subsequently removed from the course. And quickly found himself off to a new war front in what we would now know as Iraq. Mesopotamia.



For a few months in late 1916 he served with 30 Squadron Royal Flying Corps at Shaikh Saad south of Bagdad in Mesopotamia flying the BE2C.

Mesopotamia may have been a backwater in the war but its aerial warfare problems were just as important as those on other fronts. The British were on the back foot and were suffering from the superiority of the enemy machines - *The Fokker Scourge* was evident on all fronts. The failure of various attempts to match the capability of the superior Fokker aircraft fitted with machine gun interrupter gear let alone destroy them led Charles towards one of several aeronautical innovations he implemented over the years.



30 Squadron Royal Flying Corps in Mesopotamia. Chabot is standing in the third row in the lighter coloured jacket.

Another source captions those in the image as

Back row: unknown; D'Arcy; H. St. C. Smallwood; Captain Hudson; Merton; Forsyth; unknown; unknown; unknown;
Third row: unknown; Powers; B Mason; Browning; unknown; Hopkinson; Chabot; Hannay; Moxey; unknown;
Second row: O'Gowan; Major R McCrindle; Herring; Col J E Tennant; N McEwan; H de Havilland; Elliot Smith;
Front row: McFarlane; K B Lloyd; Windsor.



This surviving image shows only four guns in place but there is room for a fifth Lewis gun on the cross-underside struts 1916-1917;

Many years later the great and the good of military aviation accepted that getting as many bullets onto a target in the shortest possible time was the best possible scenario and that required multiple guns. At the time of the Great War getting one gun into an aircraft was an effort and more than two guns in the same mount the ultimate option.

Charles improvised a multiple Lewis gun attachment on BE2C undercarriage designed to attack Fokker aircraft on ground. The weight and drag of the multiple guns were significant and would severely compromise the manoeuvrability and self-protection of the airframe in an air-to-air fight but as a ground attack option it was a reasonable war risk. There are unanswered questions about the exact layout of the Chabot multiple gun solution but it was flown and tested successfully. The unknowns relate to the number of Lewis guns employed; Charles has quoted five but the surviving image of such a set up on the undercarriage of a BE2, presumably his, suggest it was less.

The machine flew and the firing of the guns was demonstrated successfully but again saw Charles attracting the wrong kind of attention of senior officers. It seems the racket produced from the air of the multiple guns frightened the British Army cavalry horses and led to a complaint, a reprimand and the abandonment of concept.

He returned to Britain and went through a period acting as an instructor with Royal Flying Corps at Beaulieu or East Boldre, Hampshire between May and August 1917.

To the north of the B3054 road was the WWII airfield of RAF Beaulieu. To its south was a WWI aerodrome at East Boldre that first started in May of 1910 as the New Forest Flying School, the second flying school in the UK. The site later became an RFC and then an RAF base during WWI. The original flying school was established by two pioneers, William McArdle and John Armstrong-Drexel and there are several photographs in circulation of the early planes resting on local chimney stacks.

It was during this period that his fellow pupil Van Geotherm died in the DH6 accident at East Boldre. The Court of Enquiry found that the aircraft caught fire in the air but Charles was damning of the DH6 as a type citing the poor build quality of the mass-produced type as causing more than its share of accidents.



The de Havilland DH6 and Van Geotherm

Home Defence

In the summer of 1917 he moved on to fly with the 39 (Home Defence) Squadron, Royal Flying Corps at North Weald, still flying the slow but dependable BE2 and BE12 in the defence of the civil population against air attack.

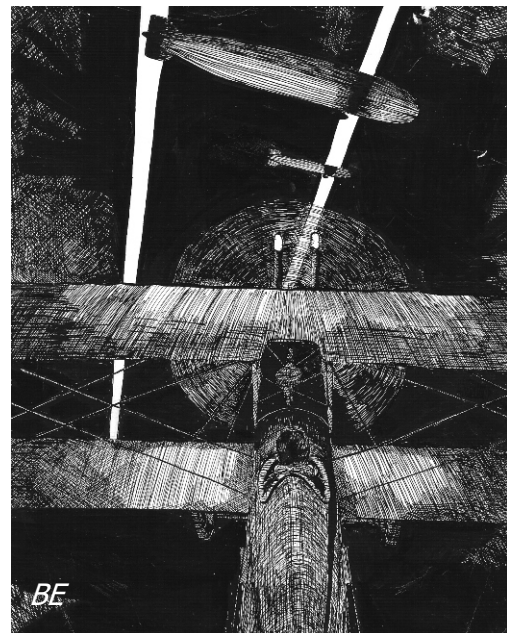
A year after the German airship raiders had received a bloody nose from several of their number being destroyed over Hertfordshire and Essex new improved airships were operating in conjunction with large fixed wing aircraft – the Gotha and the Giant.

On October 19, 1917, after a series of daylight raids by the bomber aeroplanes the improved airships attacked by night. In one of the raids the Waltham Abbey gunpowder works attracted the attention of two airships. Little damage was achieved as most of the bombs fell on the marshes alongside the River Lea. The Waltham Marshes are currently the home of the Olympic White Water Centre.

At 10.23pm two airships, the L52 [commanded by Oberleutnant zur See Friebe] captain and L44 [Captain Leutnant Stabbert], were offloading incendiary bombs when Lt Charles Chabot, 39 (HD) Squadron, intercepted them in a BE2e night fighter, B4484, flown off from North Weald at 2030hrs. After flying on the North Weald – Hainault patrol line at 12,000 feet for 1¾ hours Chabot noticed searchlight and gun flashes activity to the west near Hertford. As he approached the raiders flying due east towards his patrol line at some 3-4,000 feet higher it was clear that they were attacking the important Royal Gun-Powder Factory [RGPF] explosives factory in Waltham Abbey. He climbed to meet them.

The BE had been modified to Chabot's requirements by fitting a fixed Lewis gun over the covered front cockpit position. The unique design, held in place with wire bracing, was intended to enable it to fire over the propeller disc without the need to employ a heavy interrupter gear. Although the gun was not difficult for the pilot to reach in flight Chabot had dispensed with the 'luxury' of a reload magazine to keep aircraft weight down - so he had just 47 rounds.

To reduce distractions while flying Chabot turned off the instrument lighting – thereby losing sight of his air speed indicator. Unfortunately, in lining up to fire on the approaching airships, the aircraft stalled at a critical moment and fell away, thousands of feet, into the night. Despite quickly recovering the aircraft Chabot had lost too much height to attack the same airships again. Although the single, poorly armed, aircraft had posed little threat to them, the appearance of the BE obliged the two German craft to break off their attack and climb away after dropping only twelve of the bombs. Five fell on the factory; another five were spread between Waltham Marsh and Cheshunt Marsh and a further two, well to the south, beside Avey Lane.



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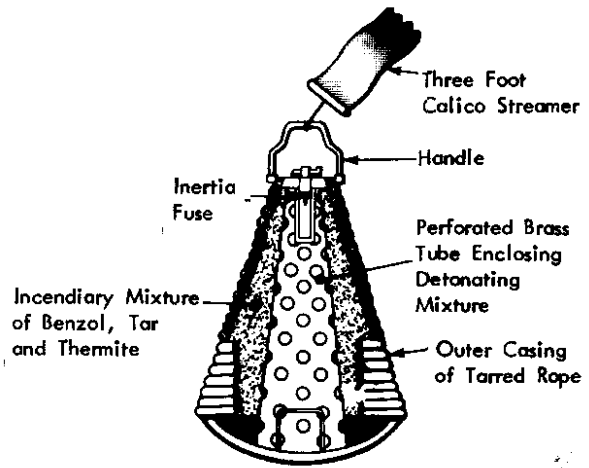
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AIR RAID 19th October, 1917.

Time and Place.	Bombs Dropped.		Casualties.								Damage.
			Killed.				Injured.				
	Exp.	Inc.	M.	W.	C.	Tot.	M.	W.	C.	Tot.	
Brought forward.	2	-	7	6	4	17	19	13	9	41	
About 10-23 pm. Royal Gunpowder Factory, Waltham. (N)	-	5	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Nil.
Unknown. In field, Avey Lane, Waltham Abbey. (N)	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Nil.
do Cheshunt Marsh adjacent to Royal Gunpowder Factory. (N)	-	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Nil.
do Waltham Marshes adjacent to Royal Gunpowder Factory. (N)	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Nil.

The official record of the bombs dropped to the north and west of Waltham Abbey [PRO]

35
 Special Constable 19-10-17 19
 The following list of men
 at 8.30 P.M. 19th inst and were
 dismissed at 1.30 A.M. 20th inst
 during a hostile air raid.
 Mr. Geo. Edwards in charge
 Sir J. B. Bond.
 Messrs. Bedley, Baynes, Perry
 Marshall, W. Marshall
 Hicks, Peck, Johnson
 Elliot, King, Jones.
 George, Pemberton, Pyle
 W. John, Wankin.
 Total 1 Mr. Geo.
 2 Constables
 5 Constables 16 Constables



Air Raid on Waltham Abbey

Chabot may have thwarted the main bombing run but there were burning bombs like that above to be doused, recovered by the police and stored safely. The report left was by Special Constable Carter and lists some of the men working with him out of the police station that night. [WAPHIC]

Airship bomb design had not progressed greatly in the war, the devices were a mixture of tarred rope incendiaries and small explosive tubes each released from the airship by hand – literally thrown out of the cabin door as quickly as the crew was able to set the fuses on them. Invariably few exploded on impact with marshy land and the local police were already well versed in collecting them up and carrying them to a safe place using long poles – the "coolie method".

Although this final airship raid on Waltham Abbey had again resulted in total failure for the enemy, elsewhere in the country, but mainly in London, 36 men, women and children had been killed and 55 injured in attacks by eleven airships that night.

Chabot considered his attack on the airships a failure, but he may have been wrong. In a previous attack by an airship on the RGPF in the spring of 1916 more than 100 bombs were dropped by one airship. Fortunately, they were all off target on the wrong side of the town.

In the 1917 attack the two airships had found the target and were already straddling it with the few bombs that were dropped. They were capable of dropping in excess of 200 bombs on the site. If just one had hit the hundred or so process and storage buildings below the effect would have been catastrophic. All had light board roofs designed to mitigate the effect of an internal accident, they would have afforded no protection whatsoever against the falling bombs and to the 1,000 pounds of explosive compounds in each structure would certainly have exploded or burned fiercely with multiple fires and chain reactions a high probability. If Chabot had not made the attack attempt the airships would certainly have felt themselves safe to have continued their attack.

The RGPF had something of a charmed life and never suffered seriously from air attack. Even so the site was closed in the Second World War and its processes moved out of the easy range of the enemy – to Scotland.

In a report submitted after the October 19 flight Charles Chabot detailed his inconclusive flight against the enemy in a manner that clearly displayed his anger. Regardless of his own position he complained at the lack of support by higher authority in expecting the pilots to tackle the enemy with poor equipment. Chabot's report provoked a reply from Wing Headquarters at de Keyser's Royal Hotel, on The Embankment at Blackfriars. Chabot was ordered to elaborate upon his criticism to Major General E B 'Splash' Ashmore, Commander of the London Defences at Whitehall, which he did, forcefully and to good effect.

Although he had made several influential enemies in his submission, his personal report convinced the General. Ashmore authorised 39 Squadron to undertake trials with the Bristol F2b Fighter, a two-seat ma-



RAF BE2e Night Fighter at North Weald

Until the arrival of the Bristol air defence relied upon various versions of the slow and old BE aircraft simply because they were very stable and better to fly at night. #

chine already proven to be fast and robust on the Western Front.

Following the meeting he took a walk around the Mansion House area as enemy Gotha bombers raided the city. It was the night of October 31/November 1. Fellow members of the squadron flew four of the fifty defence sorties sent against 22 bombers flying the inadequate BE2 and BE12 aircraft [including Chabot's aircraft B4484] without success.

Taken to Northolt in the General's car he converted to and delivered the first Bristol Fighter for 39 (HD) Squadron. Conversion to type in those days consisted of no more than being shown the salient features of the type and then let loose in the sky on a delivery flight to North Weald.

Having accepted the aircraft and successfully flown it, it was anti-climax to find that the subsequent arrival at North Weald had the field shrouded in a thick mist. He crashed and wrecked that first, unidentified, Bristol aircraft and ended up being admitted to the Epping Workhouse hospital with concussion.



A surviving North Weald Bristol F2B Fighter



Fortunately, the rest of the squadron was still converted to the Bristol Fighter. For Chabot though his unhappy interface with the hierarchy continued to blight him. His period in the hospital no doubt eased the paperwork at headquarters. Shortly after his successful campaign to upgrade the quality of equipment in the North Weald squadron Chabot was posted away to fly with 50 Squadron at Bekesbourne in Kent...

Charles Chabot returned to North Weald in a 50 Squadron SE5 early in 1918 Chabot [left] is standing with Captain G M 'Clank' Clarke

He flew Camels on night air defence until the inevitable happened and the engine stopped. He glided down from a great height and in his own words "made lots of little landings" when the altimeter read zero.

Charles Chabot

One of these 'little landings' connected with the ground, and to his considerable surprise the Camel rolled placidly to a stop. Chabot climbed out, and not knowing where he was, started walking west to be on the safe side. Unfortunately, having survived the greater danger in getting his aircraft on the ground in pitch dark conditions, he then fell into a shell-hole in the dark and hurt himself....

In the Great War years, he had flown several different types including the Longhorn, Bleriot, Curtiss Jenny, a variety of BE's, SE5A's, Sopwith Camel's and the Bristol Fighter and even a Blackburn Kangaroo as well as the greatly unloved DH6. Flying Officer Chabot's time was done and along with many thousands of others he left the service for the peacetime challenges beyond.

He had a war office gratuity of £600 and set up a business in Limehouse set up to clean ships decks. It was not a line of business that gripped him though as it was miles from aviation.

There was very little aviation related work and even less for the thousands of now redundant pilots. Some such as Alcock & Brown found work and fame in being the first to fly across the north Atlantic in a Vickers Vimy and Chabot had been in negotiations with the Fairey company in the hope that he would get to be a pilot on their record breaker. After the success of the Vimy that chance went although the Fairey IIID was the first to make a crossing of the south Atlantic in 1922.

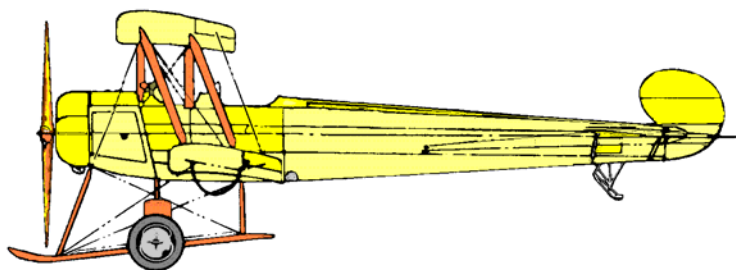


After that bid failed he travelled to the Far East, again turning up in Siam [Thailand] but there was no work of substance to be had when unemployment rates were at 1.75 million at home and little better across the world. He met up with the pioneering pilots Ross & Keith Smith in their Vimy G-EAOU that flew to Australia [London to Darwin] in November 1919. The flight distance was estimated as 17,911 kilometres (11,123 mi) and total flying time was 135 hours 55 minutes (131.8 km/h or 81.9 mph). This was if anything to heighten Chabot's wish to gain a record somehow. Various ideas came and went.

He tried to interest the P&O Shipping Company in mail by air but although he managed to get a meeting with two high officials with the company it did not last long and they walked out on him.

The first [1922] and subsequent editions of the annual Kings Cup Air race was an attraction, an opportunity to meet with the right people industry but there is no record of him having taken an active part in the racing.

A return to military flying was offered when the RAF Volunteer Reserve was set up in 1923 but it was an illusion with no service flying. What it did facilitate though was to expand the opportunities for the newly re-joined Reservists to meet with the manufacturers and likely sponsors of aviation work. It put Chabot in a position to talk to de Havilland's at Stag Lane – that alone assisted greatly with activities there were seven years beyond.



He found that Lady Beecham was looking for a pilot with an aircraft to assist her son with some meteorological work. He had no aircraft but still applied and was accepted. After a period, he managed to find an Avro 504K in poor condition and, using the skills he learned in training, restored it to flight worthy condition. He was able to fly solo and collect the various weather measurements while ground measurements were collected by the son.

Nonetheless the inter-war years saw him focus his aviation activities on attempts at advancing and proving the capabilities of the still fledgling aircraft. With others, he attempted to break flight records. The most prominent of these flights was an attempt to bust Bert Hinkler's 1928 record flight time of 15 days to Australia. It was 1930 and Amy Johnson flew the route in the May in the Moth biplane Jason but in a longer time than Hinkler.

Charles Chabot

A flurry of attempts started in early October. Flying Officer Charles Chabot teamed up with Major Charles E M Pickthorne MC in a Puss Moth, high wing monoplane starting from Croydon.

Early on the pair decided that for their attempt they would keep the publicity low until they knew they were getting somewhere but the story got out and it quickly became a media circus and was hyped up to be a race involving three teams. Being bathed in publicity the apparent race really put on the pressure. The original plan was to fly across Russia but that was scotched by political considerations so the new route was Croydon to Belgrade, Aleppo, Basra, Karachi, Calcutta, Bangkok, Batavia, Atamboea, Darwin. The plan was to fly at night – using Chabot's night flying experience and taking full advantage of the full moon – with one pilot sleeping as the other flew. It was expected to take one week and they expected to have to contend with a 20mph headwind to start with but then get favourable winds once past India.

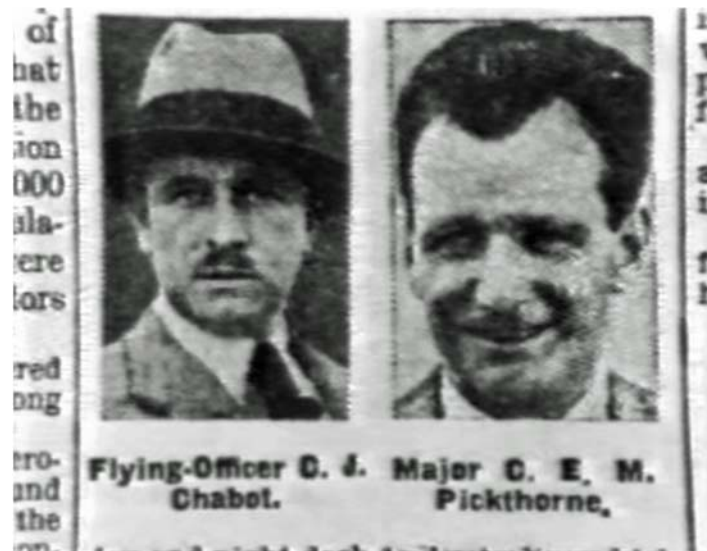
They set off in the teeth of a storm, Chabot later said that it was the "Filthiest weather I had ever flown in." It was an infamous storm and during it the high profile R101 Airship that was heading the same way – towards India – crashed in France with the resultant fire killing most on board. It was Headline News across the world. Although the airship crash initially overshadowed the various flights to Australia they soon served as a suitably media diversion from the negativity of the loss of R101 in the English press.

Chabot and Pickthorne first learned about the R101 disaster after landing safely in Belgrade. The weather remained bad and the wetness of the ground meant they could not take-off with a full fuel load. The reduced fuel load meant that the next stage length fell short and they made an unplanned stopover in Constantinople [Ankara, Turkey].

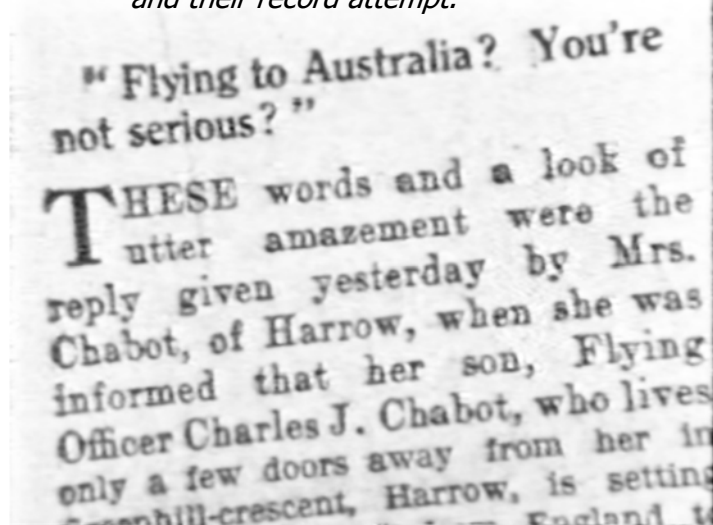
Arriving in Constantinople they were delayed a day by bad weather but then suffered a forced landing at the port of Lingah, Persia, now Bandar-e Lengeh, across the Strait of Hormuz on the Gulf [Iran]. To add to their problems, they were tied up in local red tape over their passports whilst also trying to repair a burst tyre. They eventually arrived in Karachi on October 13 and concluded that they were not going to achieve the record, others by now were clearly days ahead of them.

On this occasion, the shortening of the flight time passed from Bert Hinkler's 15 days 12 hours to Kingsford-Smith who trimmed it to 9 days 21 hours in an Avro Avian.

Records continued to tumble as a succession of pilots vied with each other for a place in history. Three years later Sir Charles Kingsford Smith as he then was had taken the record back in a Percival Gull and driven the times down to a little over a week. Charles Chabot was on the edges of this activity, appearing regularly in the press, but did not quite make a household name for himself.



One of the many news reports on the pair and their record attempt.



The news gets out ...

Charles Chabot with their DH Puss Moth



FLIGHT ABANDONED
CHABOT AND PICKTHORNE
GOING HOME
LONDON, October 13.
In consequence of the delays which they have experienced. Flight-Officer

Charles Chabot

In 1933 quite late in life — he was around 43 years old — he married Diana. It seems that she had ideas that they would be able to cruise the high seas but her new husband had other ideas. He built a caravan [right] with ideas that they would draw closer to his Huguenot roots and be able to slowly wander around Europe and beyond – maybe to Persia - taking in the sights. It was to be a very slow progression as the caravan was large boxy and drawn by a single horse. Original plans were modified as the political situation in Europe deteriorated. Soon Spain, Germany, Italy and Austria became untenable. Most travel remained firmly anchored in France.



A new profession loomed. After training he was now making 16mm films, with a focus on the study of wine making. Films were made successfully but again the looming war constrained his activities. When the conflict broke out into a shooting war early in 1940 he was 50 years old and had been filming in the west of France. As they slowly made their way to Bordeaux it became clear there was a mass migration towards the channel ports. Good fortune briefly came their way when a fleeing man gifted them his car.

Their fortune was short lived however and they arrived at the coast to find that it was time for choices. What appeared to be the last ship to England was in port and about to leave. They were obliged to leave everything behind, the caravan, the car, the camera equipment and baggage and leave France in the clothes they stood up in. The vessel normally able to accommodate around no more than 1,200 people left port with more than 3,000 aboard.

He sought to re-join the RAF at the earliest opportunity on his return to England. He wanted to fly but the RAF had other ideas. The service plan for any 50-year old applicants was that they would be placed in an administration post. Arguments ensued.

He managed to move the immovable, initially to get himself offered a job running Link Trainers, a very much ground based flying training device of the time [though he professed not to know what they were], then eventually he managed to find out the name of someone who ran the pilot interviews and get in front of a board. A deal was struck. He could return to flying if he could pass the stringent medical which no doubt everyone assumed would never happen.

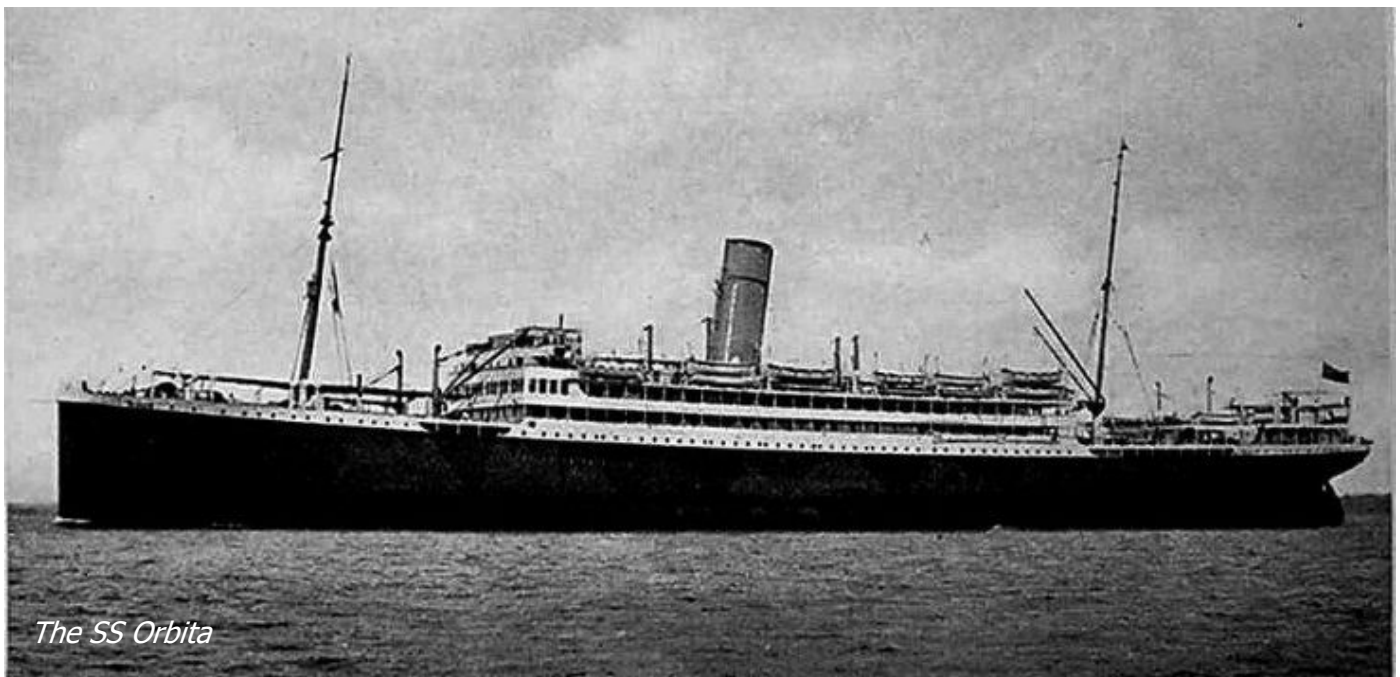


There was a serious problem with getting passed A1, the grade for piloting. Since 1929 he had been surviving on one kidney.



He passed all the initial tests, respiration, hearing, eyesight, albeit by an apparently narrow margin. The final check was the strip check with a different doctor. At the end of a long day the clearly weary doctor asked him all the pertinent additional questions including whether he had had an operation at any time. “Well” he replied, “I recall having my tonsils out” The interview continued but finally the full body exposure was called for. Although he attempted to shield the tell-tale scar in his rump from sight the doctor eventually noticed it. He commented “I suppose that’s the scar they used to extract your tonsils, is it?” With that he turned and signed the papers. It was war and Charles Chabot was back with a flying post.

Armed with the all-important piece of paper he was off to RAF Ansty near Coventry where he flew one of the Tiger Moth training biplanes on assessment. Unfortunately, he found that aerobatics was causing sickness and consequently he was transferred to undertaking aircraft delivery duties before being shipped out to South Africa.



In late December 1940, he was on the troopship *SS Orbita* in a convoy that sailed from Liverpool on 18th December set for Port Elizabeth S.A. heading towards their first port of call Freetown when the assembled vessels were attacked by the German cruiser *Admiral Hipper*.

German cruiser *Admiral Hipper* detected Allied Convoy WS.5 700 miles west of Cape Finisterre, Spain late in the afternoon. The convoy consisted of 19 troopships and freighters; not noticing that it was escorted by two carriers, three cruisers, and four corvettes, the German commander Admiral Wilhelm Meisel prepared the crew for an attack in the morning, Christmas Day.

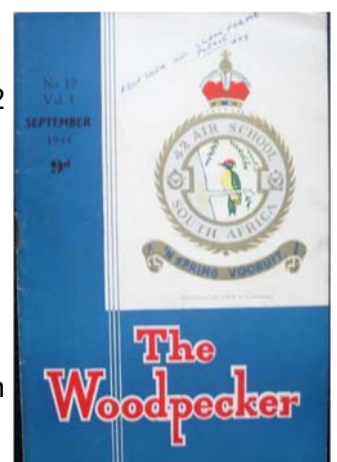
Taking advantage of mist and rain but still failing to realise it was heavily escorted at 0808 hours, *Admiral Hipper* fired on troopship *Empire Trooper* (16 soldiers killed) and freighter *Arabistan*, but she was soon chased off by a corvette and three cruisers. In retreat, *Admiral Hipper* fired at her pursuers, striking cruiser *HMS Berwick* at the rear gun turret, killing 4. The ancient but deadly aircraft carriers *HMS Argus* and *HMS Furious* launched aircraft to hunt for *Admiral Hipper* as she retreated toward Brest, France for repairs, but the German cruiser would not be found. Later the same day, 150 miles to the east, *Admiral Hipper* detected and sank British ship *Jumna*; 111 survivors in the water were left to drown. The convoy continued without further damage.

Having made it safely to South Africa he served as instructor at 42 Air School, RAF Port Elizabeth, South Africa, in 1941. Duties included flying examples of an obsolete Northrop light bomber [the A17A Nomad] towing drogues for air gunnery training. It was a fault with drogues that led to a new call upon his movie making skills, the employment of slow motion film to determine why faulty drogues broke away in flight. That then led to Charles appointment and duties as Group Accident Prevention Officer.

He may have shunned administration for flying duties but a part of his duties in South Africa included involvement with the publication of "The Woodpecker" a booklet that acted as the house flight safety and general interest magazine for 42 Air School.

He wrote a series of articles about his experiences in the Great War that ran in 1941 editions of the magazine but the length of his editorial involvement is not known.

He continued his Accident Investigation work, mostly in South Africa, where he had a Spitfire as his personal transport, and (among other things) discovered the cause of glue-failures which were destroying de Havilland Mosquitos operating in hot climates. The complication was that any example of the mainly wooden construction Mosquito which had suffered a structural failure at height did not generally leave a lot of remains to be investigated.



The aircraft suffered from a series of unexpected crashes during late 1944, which were initially blamed on problems with the glue used to bind the wood together, caused by the heat and humidity of India. The situ-

Charles Chabot

ation became so bad that in November 1944 all Mosquito operations over Burma were cancelled while the aircraft were checked for airworthiness.

An investigating team led by Major Hereward de Havilland travelled to India and produced a report in early December 1944 stating that "the accidents were not caused by the deterioration of the glue but by shrinkage of the airframe during the wet monsoon season". However a later inquiry attributed to Cabot & Myers stated that the accidents were due to faulty manufacture and this was confirmed by a further investigation team by the Ministry of Aircraft Production, which found faults in six Mosquito marks built at the Hatfield and Leavesden plants. The defects were similar, and none of the aircraft had been exposed to monsoon conditions or termite attack. Thus the investigators concluded that there were construction defects at the two plants.

The investigation into the flying accidents caused by Mosquito wing problems had been stumbling on the unreliability of witnesses' memory of accident details. Finally the investigation into break up of Mosquito at Ranchi, the capital and most populous city of the Indian state of Jharkhand, provided a breakthrough that enabled the identification of a faulty wing joint. Although history has not clearly attributed it to him, it was Charles Chabot's work that was finally able to link the faulty part to bad workmanship, to supply proof to de Havilland, leading in turn to the UK investigation that resulted in the correction of the lethal fault.

He ended the war as Wing Commander responsible for accident investigation in India with Burma Command, 1942-1945.

At that point, Charles Chabot may well have faded into obscurity but for the interest of a television company that produced a three-part series on his lifetime in aviation broadcast on UK TV at the end of the 1970's. Called "*Chabot Solo*" the colour documentary recounted his adventures and included his supersonic flight in the cockpit of the Concorde and his own ongoing flying in preserved aircraft including a Stampe biplane. It was a gentle, whimsical programme in the then new colour broadcasts that caught the imagination of the audience. The documentary consisted of anecdotes told by Chabot himself, early flying film, film of First World War aircraft mixed with images of vintage aircraft in a modern setting, still photographs and music hall songs. It was a thing of its time but can still be viewed in full via YouTube.



Shortly after the television programme was broadcast Chabot teamed up with Lyndon Mallet who spent six months with him in 1978 as ghost writer, helping him with his autobiography. Chabot was anxious to expand upon the television series in book form. A draft was produced but never published by the time of his death aged in his 9th decade.

Chabot died suddenly of natural causes in 1983, at the age of 93. He was cheery and sprightly to the end. He left his body to science so his 'funeral' was a memorial service, it included a solo memorial fly-past and aerobatic routine by Brian Lecomber in a modern Pitts Special biplane. He was eventually buried in Parkstone Cemetery, Poole.



Charles Chabot 1890-1983

The story of a remarkable aviator compiled by Bryn Elliott 2017 from various sources including the man himself as spoken to the Imperial War museum and the television production company.

The story entered my life in 1989 when I wrote a short item for Flypast magazine about a RAF BE2e aircraft B4484 "Riwa Fiji" that had landed in the chilled fields of the village of Upshire in 1917. Little did I realise that there was a far bigger story surrounding that unexpected landing.

I have been writing ever since.

