

# FIGHTER ACES!

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THE CONSTABLE MAXWELL BROTHERS

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FIGHTER PILOTS IN  
TWO WORLD WARS



ALEX REVELL

# Fighter Aces!

Born of the sun they travelled a short while towards the sun,  
And left the vivid air signed with their honour.

*Stephen Spender*

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The Constable Maxwell Brothers  
Fighter Pilots in Two World Wars

ALEX REVELL

Foreword by  
Air Chief Marshal  
Sir Hugh Saunders  
GCB, KBE, MC, DFC, MM



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Mosquito NF11s of 264 Squadron (*courtesy Flight*)

## Maxwell in 1953

\* \* \*

*Capt. Gerald Joseph Constable Maxwell, Yeo. and R.F.C.*

*Distinguished Flying Cross. 3/6/1918*

*Capt. Gerald Joseph Constable Maxwell, M.C.*

This officer has at all times shown exceptional skill and gallantry, and on numerous occasions has fought against greatly superior numbers. During the last six weeks he has brought down five enemy aeroplanes. Recently, he approached unobserved to within ten yards of three Fokker triplanes, one of which he shot down. He was chased for about nine miles by the remaining two until he met a formation of six Camels; these he led to attack some enemy aircraft, although he had only twenty-five minutes' petrol left.

Gerald was also awarded an Air Force Cross on 3/2/19



# Foreword

by  
Air Chief Marshal  
Sir Hugh Saunders  
GCB KBE MC DFC MM

Writing this introduction to the biography of Gerald and Michael Constable Maxwell has revived many happy memories. I had the good fortune to serve with both in war, in conditions which reveal people in their true colours. Both the brothers were well endowed with considerable qualities of initiative, courage and determination, all of which are essential for success in war in the air.

Gerald served with distinction during World War I as a fighter pilot with 56 Squadron, one of the crack fighter squadrons in France and, on his return to Home Establishment, as Chief Flying Instructor at No. 1 Fighter and Gunnery School at Turnberry in Scotland. It was here that I first met Gerald and learnt something from him of the art of leadership and man management. In World War II Gerald served under my command for two years as the Station Commander at Ford, a night fighter station near Arundel in Sussex. His wide experience and high qualities of leadership were a major factor in making Ford one of the most efficient and happy stations in No. 11 Group. When Gerald retired the RAF lost an officer it could ill afford.

Michael was one of the many young officers who fought with great distinction in the Battle of Britain. He led a charmed life and had several miraculous escapes in crashes. Promotion came rapidly and led to the command of a night fighter squadron with a fine war record. The Battle of Britain was the beginning of the end of the defensive phase of the air war and Fighter Command and its squadrons gradually assumed an offensive role. The day and night fighter sweeps and intruder operations over enemy territory were developed to destroy enemy aircraft in the air and on their airfields. Road and rail communications and many other military targets, including the V launching sites, came under continuous attack. Cover for the Normandy landings and support for the army in the break out and final operations leading to the defeat of Germany kept the RAF at full stretch.

Each new phase of the air war demanded new methods and tactics;

much was left to the initiative of the squadron commanders and group and sector commanders. In this field both Gerald and Michael made valuable contributions.

With the end of the war some younger officers with good war records found difficulty in settling down – in many cases with loss of acting rank. Michael applied for study leave with the possibility of becoming a priest. In the end he came back to the RAF but finally decided to retire. I was very sorry to hear of his decision for I was quite sure he had the qualities necessary for high command and would have contributed much to post war developments in the RAF.

## Acknowledgements

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My grateful thanks also to Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Saunders, who responded so generously to my request that he write a foreword to this book.

Finally, my thanks to Amy Howlett of Kimber, for her help and encouragement.

Alex Revell

*To*  
*Bernard and Alice Constable Maxwell*  
*Carrie, Gerald, Billy and Michael*

## CHAPTER I

### Early Years

The year 1890, the beginning of the last decade of the nineteenth century, a decade that was to see far reaching changes for the peoples of Europe, was relatively modest in its events. In Germany, Bismarck the Iron Chancellor finally fell from power – resigning in March – and the brash young Wilhelm II began his personal rule: a rule which was to bring tragedy to Europe. In August, Tsar Alexander III met Wilhelm at Narva, but failed to convince the German Emperor of the desirability of an entente between their two countries and another irrevocable step was taken towards the catastrophe of 1914.

In Great Britain, exactly halfway between the two Boer wars, events were of a more domestic nature. Free elementary education was introduced; the first electrical power station was inaugurated; the first ‘tube’ railway was opened, running under the Thames; the City was shaken by the failure of the Baring Bros. In the world of the arts the Pre-Raphaelites were still popular and few if any people noted the death by his own hand of an unsuccessful artist in Auvers-sur-Oise, France. William Morris founded the Kelmscott Press and, for more plebeian tastes, the *Daily Graphic*, the nation’s first fully illustrated newspaper, commenced publication. A young musician, Edward Elgar, came to London to seek recognition as a composer.

In more material fields, the prices of commodities continued to fall while wages rose. Although the divisions between the social classes were clearly marked, and there was still widespread poverty, conditions were gradually improving for the majority. The staple commodities of meat, cheese, vegetables, tea, frozen meat and canned goods, were becoming plentiful and their distribution to the masses more efficient. Chain stores were beginning to make a national appearance – Thomas Lipton, a Glasgow grocer, had seventy shops in London alone – and the new department stores catered for a wider and less affluent clientele than the few exclusive stores in the capital.

But to the people of Scotland, and in particular those of Inverness-shire, a more parochial event took precedence in the spring of 1890. On the last day of April the Hon Alice Fraser, daughter of Simon,

fifteenth Lord Lovat, married the Hon Bernard Constable Maxwell, fourth son of the tenth Lord Herries, in the family church at Eskadale, four miles from Beaufort Castle, the Lovat family home.

In the days preceding the wedding, tenants and farmers on the Lovat estates had been entertained to tea at Beaufort, and on the day itself, after a family and neighbours' lunch and house party, the rest of the day was taken up with sports, organized by the brothers of the bride. It was intended that there should be a firework display in the village and a toast drunk to the happy couple, but in the event only one solitary rocket exploded in the evening sky. The firework money, with a true Scottish sense of priorities, had been spent on whisky.

The wedding of Bernard Constable Maxwell and Alice Fraser saw the joining of two remarkable families. Their children – two of whom are the subjects of this book – have fourteen lines of direct descent from Edward III through their four grandparents: Fraser and Weld on their maternal side; Maxwell and Stourton on their paternal; and have family connections reaching back to the very beginning of recorded European, Scottish and English history.

Maxwells and Frasers sat in the Scottish parliaments and Grand Councils, and fought in the Scottish and English wars for over eight hundred years. Soldiers, statesmen, and confidants of kings, both of Scotland and England, their names run like a thread through centuries of Scottish and English history. From the twelfth century, to the European wars of the twentieth, Maxwells and Frasers have fought and died in the service of their King and country: from the Highlands of Scotland to the fields of Flanders; from the Borders to the hedgerows of Normandy; from the heights above Quebec to the Far East.<sup>1</sup>

The Constable Maxwells spent their honeymoon at Glencoe Lodge, 'surrounded by that wonderful view of mountains, with Loch Ness and Fort Augustus at our feet'. They then lived for a while at Everingham, the Maxwells' ancestral home, until taking a four year lease on Walworth Castle, near Darlington in Yorkshire. Bernard had been born at Everingham, but had spent much of his early life in lands his father owned in Dumfriesshire, from where the Maxwells had originated. Because of this connection, Bernard Constable Maxwell decided to live in Dumfriesshire, but his brother-in-law, Simon Lord

<sup>1</sup> For further reading on the history of the Constable Maxwell family, *Avenue of Ancestors* by Alice Constable Maxwell. Messrs Blacklock Farries, Dumfries, 1965, is highly recommended.

Lovat, persuaded him to settle in the Highlands, on the Lovat estates at Beauly, where he bought some land and had built Farlie House. The family lived in several houses on the Lovat estates while Farlie was being completed, and it was while staying with friends at Dores, on the Aldourie estate, that Alice Constable Maxwell gave birth to her third son, Gerald Joseph, on 8 September 1895.

Gerald was the fourth child, being preceded by two brothers: Ian (1891), Ronald (1892), and a sister, Mary (1893). Gerald was a quiet boy, a little shy, but at an early age he had already begun to show the essential gentle kindness of his nature which was such a facet of his character, remarked upon by all who knew him or came in contact with him throughout his life. Like his father and brothers he enjoyed the hunt, shooting and fishing – although he was never overkeen on horses – but in common with his brothers he was keenly interested in mechanical gadgets. His sister Joan remembers that, unlike their father, ‘who wouldn’t have known which way the wheels went round on a motorcar’, all three boys were mechanically minded.

‘Our uncle, Simon Lovat, had an old Panhard and all the boys could drive it perfectly. Uncle Simon used to say, “You can have it for the weekend” and they would drive it about the estate. His chauffeur, who was really more of a groom, used to say, “Well, you boys are born mechanics, but I’m only a made one”.’

The brothers also had ‘The Little House’: a small wooden shed in the grounds of Farlie. ‘They had two small engines there’, Joan remembers. ‘They put a telephone into The Little House – which was maybe less than a quarter of a mile from Farlie, but the telephone bell did ring in the house and we could answer it. They had all their tools there and used to work there for hours on end – no trouble at all to anybody.’

In later years, while at Cambridge, both Ian and Ronnie owned powerful motorcycles and competed in races and hill climbs against Oxford. Ian also raced at Brooklands, driving one of the two cars owned by his friend William McBain: either the huge 80hp De Dietrich, which McBain had bought after it had won the St Petersburg to Moscow race of 1910; or a racing Delage – ‘much smaller, but very fast’.

The years before the First World War were ideally happy for the Constable Maxwell children. In his autobiography, Ian describes their childhood as ‘the happiest period of childhood and youth anyone could expect’. All the children – there were eventually twelve – got on extraordinarily well together, being fundamentally devoted to each

other, an aspect of her childhood Joan remembers well. 'The boys were really very good to us; always so kind and thoughtful'. The centre and spirit of this happy family life were their parents. Their father was a much travelled man who would enthral the boys with tales of the American West in the early and middle eighties, while their mother was a remarkable woman who believed in giving young children their freedom. Her own mother had believed that 'after a child has reached the age of reason, usually about seven, the less they are interfered with the better, short of preventing serious sin', and Alice Constable Maxwell followed the same precept.

The children were never happier than when they were all together, especially in large family gatherings with their near relatives. Christmas was always spent at Beaufort Castle, the home of their maternal grandmother, and throughout the year they were constant guests at the homes of their many relatives and close friends, always staying at Everingham Park on their way back to school after the holidays.

Until the brothers were old enough to attend school they were taught by a succession of tutors and governesses. Joan remembers that Gerald was rather frightened of the dark, and early coaching by the village schoolmaster had to be discontinued because of the walk to and from the village in the dark winter months.

As they reached prep school age the boys were sent to Downside School in Somerset. Downside School had been founded in 1606 at Douai – a town Gerald was later to know well from the air – to provide the sons of English Catholics with the opportunities of education which was at that time denied to them in Reformation England. During the French Revolution the school was evacuated to England; first to Acton Burnell, near Shrewsbury, and later, in 1814, to its present location at Stratton on the Foss.

Gerald entered Downside in the September term of 1905. Although he seems to have made no great impact scholastically he was both happy and popular at Downside, quickly entering into the life of the school, no doubt helped over those first traumatic weeks as a new boy by his two brothers. Gerald was a good all round sportsman and won a place in the Junior Football XIs of 1907–8–9. In 1910 he won his colours in the First XI, quickly followed by those for the Rugby XV and Hockey XI. He was an original member of Barlow house, when it was formed in 1913, and was made House Prefect, representing the house in sports and athletics.

The quieter side of his nature is reflected in his having been a member of the school choir between 1907 and 1910, and he played the



chapel organ at Downside many times. But he could also display a quiet determination. Angry at what he considered an excessive amount of discipline in the school OTC, he and his great friend Dick Stokes – later Minister of Works in the post-war Labour Government – organized a strike, everyone lying on their beds and refusing to move until the more unreasonable of the rules were rescinded. It was not that Gerald was a natural rebel against authority, but rather that he could not bear to see people treated with a lack of consideration, a trait which was to be so evident in later years.

Gerald finally left Downside in June 1913. In a little over thirteen months Europe was to be at war.

## CHAPTER II

### War

As with so many families, the outbreak of war in 1914 scattered the close knit Constable Maxwell family. Bernard and Alice Constable Maxwell were in London when war was declared, but left almost immediately for Edinburgh to see their eldest son Ian before he left for France with his regiment, the Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders. The regiment mustered at Edinburgh Castle and left for France on 6 August 1914. Few were to return; Ian was severely wounded at the battle of the Aisne and invalided back to England.

Ronnie had left Cambridge in 1912 and had gone out to the Sudan to work for the Sudan Plantation Syndicate, which had been founded by his uncle Simon, Lord Lovat. When war broke out Ronnie made every effort to return to England, 'to get into the fight', but he was persistently refused permission. He eventually managed to secure a commission in the Camel Corps, served with the Corps at El Obeid, and was mentioned in dispatches. While at El Obeid he caught black water fever and was given a year's sick leave in England to enable him to recover fully. Once back in England, his original goal, he immediately joined the Royal Naval Air Service, 'because they teach you to fly quicker'. Successfully passing his medical, although still suffering from bouts of fever, he soon gained his wings and was made an instructor.

Gerald joined the 1st Regiment of the Lovat Scouts on 4 August 1914, the day war was declared. During the early days of the Boer War his uncle Simon had taken a party of fifty Highland ghillies and stalkers out to South Africa. These had been attached to various bodies of troops in a scouting capacity, in an attempt to counter the guerrilla tactics being used by the highly mobile Boers. This met with such success that Lord Lovat was sent back to England to recruit a force of two hundred and fifty men to be known as 'Lovat's Scouts'. The response was immediate. Highlanders flocked from all over the world to join the Scouts, many paying their own passages from as far as Australia and Canada and bringing their own mounts with them. These men were all self-sufficient; reliant and extremely tough; used

since early childhood to living in the Highlands, stalking and shooting the deer; skilled horsemen and excellent shots.

The Lovat Scouts served with distinction in South Africa, at one time narrowly missing capturing the Boer leader, Christian de Wit. After the conclusion of the war, Lord Lovat was given authorisation to raise two regiments of yeomanry, each five hundred strong, to be known as the 1st and 2nd Lovat Scouts. The training ground was Beaufort Castle, and on the first evening a thousand men rode into camp. At the outbreak of war in 1914 Lord Lovat was given command of the Highland Brigade and during the next few months the Lovat Scouts moved to various depots and camps throughout the country, until April 1915 found them at Hunstanton in Norfolk. The Scouts were dismounted in August, while still at Hunstanton, and on 7 September entrained for Devonport, sailing for Gallipoli the following day in the *SS Andania*. The *Andania* docked at Alexandria on the 18th and after a short stay ashore the Scouts embarked for Lemnos, the base of operations for the Gallipoli campaign.

The Lovat Scouts landed at Suvla Bay after dark on 28 September and moved up into trenches overlooking the Turkish positions on Sari Bair Heights on 8 October. The natural hazards of dysentery, enteric fever and frostbite added their toll to the casualties of war and the twenty-year-old Gerald soon found himself a temporary captain in command of a squadron, all his senior officers – including his uncles Simon and Alastair – having been killed, wounded or taken sick in the pestilent conditions.

The Lovat Scouts were evacuated from Suvla Bay in the middle of December 1915 and sent to Egypt, where they were attached to the Western Frontier Force in defence of the Suez Canal.

The situation in Egypt was relatively static after the unsuccessful campaign by the Turkish forces the previous year and Gerald quickly became 'fed up, with little to do'. He visited places of interest with Ronnie, who was still in Egypt at this time, and his interest in cars and motorcycles found expression when he put forward a plan to his squadron commander that the mounted patrols, sent out into the desert to report on any possible Turkish attack developing, could be more efficiently and easily carried out by motorcycle detachments. Gerald had found by personal reconnaissance that the desert sand was firm enough to support a motorcycle and his idea was adopted and later used throughout the Canal Zone.

His brothers had become interested in aviation while at Cambridge before the war and Ronnie had had his first flight – which ended in a

crash – at Brooklands in 1912, but perhaps Gerald's first interest in the use of aeroplanes in war, and the germ of the idea that he should transfer to the Royal Flying Corps, was sown during the operations at Suvla Bay. During the evacuation period British aeroplanes were in constant patrol over the beaches, preventing enemy machines from flying over and discovering the withdrawal.

Restless at the lack of activity in Egypt, Gerald bombarded Ian, now at the War Office, with a constant stream of letters, asking Ian to pull all possible strings to get him seconded to the RFC. Ian eventually succeeded and Gerald returned to England in the middle of 1916. After a short leave he reported to the No 2 Military School of Aeronautics at Oxford on 20 September 1916 as a flying officer in the Royal Flying Corps.

The cadets at Oxford were housed in the various colleges of the University, instruction being given in wooden buildings on the perimeter of Port Meadow. The complete course lasted a month and Gerald successfully passed out on 20 October 1916. After a period of leave he received orders to report to Turnhouse, on the outskirts of Edinburgh, for his initial flying training and he arrived there on 14 November.

Gerald made his first flight in an aeroplane on 11 December 1916: twelve minutes' dual instruction from a Captain Hervey in Maurice Farman Longhorn No 6701, taking off at 8.00 am and landing at 8.12. An hour and a quarter later he was in the air again, having a further ten minutes of dual with Captain Hervey. When they landed from this second flight, Hervey climbed down and nonchalantly told Gerald to take the Longhorn up solo, to do a circuit and land.

After twenty-two minutes of dual instruction, with a total of three landings, Gerald flew solo: surely a record time for a pilot under instruction, even in the days of haphazard flying training in 1916. He flew again the next day, having an additional four minutes of dual with Captain Hervey before a longer solo flight of nine minutes. On 13 December Gerald made no less than five separate flights in the Longhorn, adding a total of eighty-one minutes to his solo time, and over the next two days he added a further fifty-six minutes, bringing his solo time for the four days to 152 minutes. On 15 December he was posted to No 18 Reserve Squadron at Montrose for further flying instruction on more advanced types of aeroplane.

Montrose aerodrome, on the east coast of Scotland, had been a service aerodrome since No 2 Squadron had arrived there from Farn-

borough in February 1913. In 1916 No 18 Reserve Squadron was equipped with BE2cs, Avro 504ks, some Curtiss JN3s, and a few Martinsyde Scouts, and was commanded by Major C. E. C. Rabagliati. Euan Rabagliati was a small, slim man, with a lively and likable character, and although he possessed a sharp mind and an even sharper tongue, he was affectionately known throughout the RFC as 'Ragbags'. As a second lieutenant, seconded from his regiment, The Yorkshire Light Infantry, he had flown to France with No 5 Squadron at the outbreak of war. The day after his arrival at Montrose, Gerald was taken up in a BE2c by a Lieutenant Sandys for a familiarisation flight of fifteen minutes; followed the next day by another, also of fifteen minutes, with Captain Sloan as instructor, Gerald this time taking the controls and making one landing. On 19 December Gerald made a longer flight of forty minutes with Lieutenant Hamilton, and two days before Christmas Captain Sloan gave him another twenty five minutes of dual. On Christmas Eve, with a fresh east wind blowing, Gerald set out with Sandys in a BE2c, but an engine failure forced them to land after only five minutes. There was a break from flying on Christmas Day, but Gerald was in the air early on Boxing Day, doing five landings under the instruction of Captain Sloan, with another two landings the next day. But although his training was progressing well, it was not until the New Year that he was to fly his first solo in a BE2c. Fate intervened in the shape of a poisoned foot and he was sent home to Farlie on leave on the first day of 1917.

Gerald returned to Montrose on 10 January, and after another two hours ten minutes of dual instruction he flew his first solo in a BE2c on 22 January, having made seventeen landings and flying four hours, forty minutes of dual instruction on the type. Gerald commented in his diary: 'Did my first solo on BE2c. Thirty Mins up. Good landing'. During the next two days he took up a BE whenever he could, weather permitting, and flew another one hour twenty five minutes in flights of thirty-five to fifty minutes duration, climbing to 3,000 feet.

On 25 January, Lieutenant Hamilton gave Gerald his first dual instruction in an Avro 504, introducing him to the vagaries of the rotary engine. After an hour and a half instruction on the Avro, including three landings, Gerald flew it solo on 29 January. His instruction on the Avro was interspersed with more ambitious solo flights in the BE, including several cross country flights and one successfully negotiated forced landing. On 30 January he passed his wireless test in the BE and on the last day of the month he crammed in nearly three hours of solo flying – a respectable amount of hours for a

pilot under training at that period – finishing the first month of 1917 with a grand total of thirteen hours fifty seven minutes of solo flying time.

In the first two days of February, Gerald flew a further six hours ten minutes solo in both the BE2c and Avro 504, making triangular cross country flights between Montrose, Arbroath and Brechin – a distance of sixteen miles – and successfully making a forced landing, and two landings at night. On 2 February he entered in his diary: 'Finished my twenty hours flying before graduation', and the next day wrote to his father.

Darling Papa,

I have now passed all my tests and have qualified as a pilot. I am going today to Horncliffe until Monday, when I go to Cramlington, near Newcastle on Tyne. We have been having lovely weather here for some time and I have been flying 3 or 4 hours a day.

I have sent off today, to Farlie, 3 parcels (my guncase, suitcase, and 200 cartridges, which I have not used). Please ask them to unpack the suitcase and wash all dirty clothes, etc. Tell Oona there is a lot of music in the suitcase.

No more news just now. In my confidential report the C.O. said I was 'an exceptionally good pilot' (swank).

Love from Gerald.

On Sunday, 4 February, Gerald was given his graduation certificate and ordered to report to No 58 Reserve Squadron at Cramlington. On 6 February he took the final tests for his wings by flying a contact patrol in an Armstrong Whitworth FK3, and on Wednesday 7 February, he proudly entered into his diary: 'Flew BE12 for the first time (12 cylinder RAF 120 hp) Have now flown: Maurice Farman (Longhorn), Avro, AW, BE2c and BE2d, BE12, and BE12a.'

The following day the diary has a jubilant entry: 'In orders for pilots wings from today.'

On 21 February, Gerald received orders to report to the Central Flying School at Upavon, 'at once'. Despite the injunction, he arrived at Upavon after a weekend in London, where he saw *The Double Event*, *A Little Bit of Fluff* and *Three Cheers* ('Harry Lauder, very good', was the diary comment) theatre going while in London being an almost compulsory duty for serving officers of that period. He reported to Upavon on the Monday morning and was put into C Squadron. He took up a BE for fifteen minutes the next day and over the succeeding

four days flew a Martinsyde G100 Scout for seven hours ten minutes. The Martinsyde, powered with a 120 HP Beardmore engine, was the most powerful aeroplane Gerald had yet flown, and the type was still on active service with No 27 Squadron in France. Gerald's superiors had evidently by now realised that this quiet, unassuming, almost shy Scotsman was a natural pilot and would make an ideal fighter pilot, and his logbook entries for the Martinsyde flights carry the comment: 'Fighting practice'.

Gerald left Upavon on 2 March to report to No 42 Reserve Squadron at Hounslow. He was not sorry to leave Upavon. His diary carries a succinct entry: 'CFS Upavon is the worst place I have ever been to'. Although Gerald was happy with his posting to Hounslow – 'very nice Squadron, Major Sandy is CO' – he was less keen on the aeroplanes the squadron flew. The squadron was equipped with the RE8 and Gerald commented: 'machines not very nice'. He was glad to finish his time on them after a fifty-five minute solo flight, and on Saturday, 10 March 1917 he received orders to report to No 56 Squadron, stationed at London Colney in Hertfordshire.

After a weekend in London, where he stayed with family friends at the South Kensington Hotel, he reported to London Colney aerodrome on the Monday morning. His diary entry reads:

Reported 56 Squadron, London Colney. Major Blomfield CO. Captain Albert Ball is my flight commander. Fly Sopwith two seaters, Bristol Scouts and BE12. SE5 coming soon.

It was the beginning of a life long association.

## CHAPTER III

### France

Fifty-six Squadron had been formed at Gosport on 23 June 1916, three air mechanics having previously been posted from Farnborough on 8 June 1916 to No 28 Reserve Squadron, Gosport, as a nucleus flight for the new squadron. On 14 July 56 Squadron, now grown to around twenty men under the command of Major E. L. Gossage, arrived at London Colney in Hertfordshire and began to build up strength. On 6 February 1917, Major Richard Graham Blomfield arrived to take command and the squadron entered the last stages of its training before leaving for France.

Major Blomfield, 'a prince of organizers', was determined to lead the finest fighting squadron in France and left no avenue unexplored to further his ambitions for the squadron. At this period of the war, new squadrons leaving for France had only a small proportion of pilots – if any – who had seen service with squadrons at the front, with the exceptions of the flight commanders, who were usually pilots who had seen active service. Blomfield knew that a great deal depended on the quality of these flight commanders and he picked his own carefully.

Blomfield's first acquisition was Captain Albert Ball. Ball had served in France from February 1916 until posted to Home Establishment in October. With thirty aerial victories, and a DSO with two bars and an MC, Ball was the Royal Flying Corps' first 'ace' and his capture gave 56 Squadron the standing of a potentially successful fighter squadron from the outset.

Ball's fellow flight commanders were also pilots of great experience. Captain Ian Henry David Henderson, son of the RFC's first GOC, Brigadier-General Sir David Henderson, had served with No 19 Squadron throughout the Somme battles of 1916 and had done particularly well.

The third flight commander was also a pilot of some ability and a much loved character in the RFC. Cyril Marconi Crowe – known to everyone as Billy – had learnt to fly before the war and had served in France since 1914 with Nos 4 and 8 Squadrons, flying Bristol Scouts



with the latter squadron. For all his easy going ways and mercurial character, Billy Crowe was a careful tactician and 56 Squadron was later to owe a great deal to his example and expertise.

One of Major Blomfield's first ideas was to send Ball to the training schools to spot potential fighter pilot material. One of those picked by Ball was Gerald, most probably while Gerald was at Gosport, and Gerald's posting to 56 Squadron was a direct result of Ball's interest. The Maxwell family still remember, with some amusement, that Ball was much taken with Gerald's Lochaber bonnet which he still wore from his Lovat Scout days. 'I'll have that Scotsman,' Ball is reputed to have remarked after seeing Gerald fly, and he took Gerald into his flight.

Gerald made his first flight in 56 Squadron the day after his arrival, flying both the Bristol Scout and the Sopwith 1½ Strutter. On 13 March Ball collected the first of the squadron's SE5s from Farnborough, flying it back to London Colney. The pilots had heard glowing reports concerning the new fighter from the Royal Aircraft Factory at Farnborough, and a great deal was expected of it but their first view of the SE5 was far from encouraging. Ball circled London Colney 'very slowly' before landing. The radiator was boiling and the aeroplane seemed 'hopelessly slow'. The squadron engineering officer, H. N. Charles, and his mechanics, soon found that the SE5 had a number of 'rather obvious technical faults' and it was evident that a great deal of work would be needed to bring the aeroplanes and their armament to an operational state. Blomfield counselled patience over the various modifications and alterations needed, arguing that nothing should be allowed to impede the squadron leaving for France; that the aeroplanes could be modified once the squadron was safely at the front.

Gerald flew an SE5 for the first time on 16 March, making a short ten minute flight in the vicinity of the aerodrome at two thousand feet. Despite its poor performance the SE5 was a more powerful aeroplane than any Gerald had yet flown, including the Martinsyde, and the landing speed was high. The higher landing speed rather frightened Gerald: not for his own personal safety, but because he knew that Blomfield would drop from the squadron anyone who 'broke' an SE5. After his first flight he carefully avoided any further flights in the SE5 and to his relief, on 24 March, he was told to report to the No 2 Auxiliary School of Gunnery at Turnberry for a short course. During the day he had received a telegram from his brother Ronnie to say he had landed in England on a year's sick leave to recover from Black

Water fever, and Gerald travelled up to London in the evening and they saw the obligatory show together – this time *The Bing Boys are Here* at the Alhambra. Gerald left London Colney at noon the next day and took the night train for Scotland; but he was only at Turnberry for three days before receiving orders to return to London Colney at once as the squadron was leaving for France ‘within the week’.

There are no diary entries for four days after 31 March, which simply states: ‘getting ready to go to France’. Gerald was evidently ready by 5 April as he went up to London and spent a pleasant evening with Ronnie and Oona at the London Hippodrome, where *Zig Zag* was the latest hit. The next day Ronnie, Ian and Oona went out to London Colney and Gerald took up a Bristol Scout in the afternoon to show them his prowess with ‘a few stunts’.

Fifty-six Squadron was now ready to leave for France. At 11.55 am on 7 April 1917, the thirteen SE5s were ‘revving up and ready to go’, and at Major Blomfield’s signal, Cecil Lewis led the squadron out on to the field. One by one the SE5s turned into the wind and took off, Gerald flying SE5 A4863. The little khaki aeroplanes circled the field once, while they formed up, then disappeared, flying to the east on the first leg of their journey to France. It was twelve noon.

The squadron had an uneventful flight across the Channel – the lifebelts issued to the pilots were not needed – landing safely at St Omer for lunch. After the aeroplanes had been checked and refuelled the squadron flew on to its first base in France: Vert Galant aerodrome, thirteen miles north of Amiens.

Vert Galant Farm lies on the long straight road from Doullens to Amiens, straddling the crossroads to Naours to Beauquesne. In 1917, the aerodrome, situated on the southern side of the crossroads, with the farm itself on the north, was a pleasant spot and had not yet degenerated into the urban-like sprawl it was to become in 1918, choked with the detritus of four years of war. 56 Squadron shared the east field with 19 Squadron, equipped with Spads; the west field housed the Sopwith Pups of 66 Squadron. The three squadrons comprised the fighter strength of 9th Wing, whose headquarters was at Fienvillers aerodrome, six miles to the northwest.

Fifty-six Squadron quickly settled into its new quarters. The weather was extremely unpleasant: bitterly cold, with frequent flurries of snow and sleet. Major Blomfield, Marson the recording officer, and two or three of the more fortunate officers were billeted in the farmhouse itself, but the remainder of the officers and men were

housed in tents at the northern end of the aerodrome. There were few grumbles about the weather or conditions, however. The squadron was where it had eagerly longed to be: in France and 'impatient to have a crack at the Hun'.

On Sunday morning all the pilots flew short flights in the vicinity of the aerodrome. Gerald took off at 11.25 and flew A4863 for three quarters of an hour, orientating himself with the surrounding countryside and picking out useful landmarks. His diary entry for the next day simply reads: 'Started altering machines, taking off windscreens etc', and the lack of entries for the following ten days gives mute evidence of the work involved in modifying the SE5s in readiness for war flying.

As Charles and his mechanics and fitters worked on the engines, rigging, fuel systems and guns of the SEs, the clumsy windscreens were removed and replaced by the much simpler 'Avro type'; the armoured seat was taken out to save weight and a plain board substituted, positioned lower than the original seat and placing the pilot lower in the cockpit.

While the squadron tackled these modifications, the battle of Arras began on 9 April in snow and sleet, and during the next three weeks 19 and 66 Squadrons were fully engaged in the fighting above the trenches. Some measure of the unsuitability of the SE5 for combat flying is evident in that, although the RFC squadrons were hard pressed and casualties were mounting daily, 56 Squadron, flying the Corp's latest fighter, could not be used to relieve the pressure on its sister squadrons of the 9th Wing. During the early months of 1917 the pendulum of technical superiority in the air had once again swung in favour of the *Luftstreitkräfte* (German airforce) and with the introduction of the Albatros DIII fighter in late March the scene was set for the heavy casualties of April and May 1917. Although the Sopwith Pup and Triplane, the Nieuport and Spad, were all more manoeuvrable than the German Albatros, they were armed with a single machine-gun against the twin Spandau carried by the German fighter, and the slightly higher top speed of the Albatros at operational height enabled the German fighter pilots to initiate or break off combat at will.

As the SE5s became ready they were test flown by their pilots. Gerald flew his first test in A4863 on 16 April – a short flight of twenty-five minutes – followed by a longer flight of an hour on 17 April. By the evening of 21 April all the squadron's aeroplanes had been tested and pronounced satisfactory and Blomfield informed Wing Headquarters that the squadron was ready to commence opera-