

Biffy Borton's Bomber



Handley Page O/400, C or D9718 of No 58 TDS at Cranwell in 1918, showing the size of the bomber to good effect. With an endurance of eight hours and a top speed of 97.5 mph (at sea level) it was ideally suited for the proposed flight to Egypt. :RAF College Library

In the early evening of Thursday 8 August 1918, as the heat of the day was easing, an aircraft approached Cairo from the Northwest, circled the Pyramids several times and then landed at Heliopolis, the city's military airfield.¹ With a span of 100 feet and a gross weight in excess of 6 tons, the Handley Page O/400 bomber was by far the largest aircraft ever seen in the Middle East, and one that had just travelled nearly 2600 miles. To the crowd of excited and expectant onlookers, who thronged around the machine once the engines had stopped, its sheer size would have made the greatest impression. There must also have been considerable pride at witnessing the successful completion of the longest aerial journey undertaken up to that time and, one imagines some quiet satisfaction at so tangible a demonstration of British military power. For the 31-year old pilot and author of the entire enterprise, Brigadier-General Biffy Borton, there were personal words of congratulation from his colleagues and the prospect of a lavish dinner later that evening in Cairo.

With hindsight, the event is endowed with even greater significance. In flying direct from England – with a total time of 36 hours 13 minutes in the air and covering a distance of 2592 miles – it was not only the longest flight to date but also anticipated the creation of the Empire Air Routes.² In strategic terms, it graphically demonstrated the flexibility and reach of air power, marking the first out of area operational deployment undertaken by the newly formed Royal Air Force (RAF). Indeed, this single bomber made a significant contribution to the final defeat of the Turkish armies in Palestine and in so doing demonstrated the potential of aerial policing in the Middle East. Finally, it was the first of several important record breaking long distance flights that would start at Cranwell, although it was the only one to involve personally a future Commandant of the RAF College.

Biffy Borton was one of those larger than life characters that appear to have stepped straight out of the pages of *Ripping Yarns*.³ He was born on 20 September 1886, the younger son of Lieutenant Colonel Arthur Borton, JP of Cheveney, Yalding, Kent. Christened Amyas Eden, he was thereafter known as 'Biffy' and his elder brother as 'Bosky'. Biffy joined the Black Watch from the Militia in 1906 where one of his fellow officers was Lieutenant, later Field-Marshal Lord Wavell: *He was very self-possessed from the start; shortly after he joined, he committed some breach of*

*regimental etiquette and it fell to me... to reprove him. I did so with pulverising effect, as I thought. At the end of my remarks, he put his hand on my shoulder: 'Most ably and eloquently put, old boy; it shall not occur again, let us now have a drink.' It was irresistible, and I doubt if a harsh word has ever passed between us since.*⁴

In 1911 he learnt to fly while on leave from his regiment and was seconded to the Military Wing of the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) in April 1914, flying to France with No 5 Squadron on the outbreak of war. It was during this period that he is officially credited with the naming of German anti-aircraft fire as 'Archibald' – after a popular music-hall song. Before the end of the year he was back in England at Brooklands where he was joined by Bosky, now an observer in the RFC.⁵ Biffy returned to France in April 1915 as a flight commander on No 8 Squadron, but was severely injured on 7 June in aerial combat when he was hit in the jaw by a rifle bullet. He was subsequently awarded the DSO for his bravery in safely landing his aircraft and observer (Captain Anthony Marshall, Indian Army), despite severe loss of blood.⁶

Biffy's recovery from his wound was slow and it was not until February 1916 that he returned to France, as a major, in command of No 27 Squadron.⁷ After six months on active operations, he was recalled to England and promoted again, this time to help set up a new training wing, at Felton, Bristol. In the New Year, however, he was appointed OC Fifth Wing in Palestine, in succession to Lieutenant-Colonel Joubert de la Ferté.

Leaving Plymouth on 10 January, Biffy arrived at Alexandria on 28 January, and took over command of the Fifth Wing on 5 February 1917. The wing comprised just two squadrons and a total of 42 aircraft, but was to play an important role in the subsequent Battles of Gaza and the capture of Jerusalem. In October, Biffy moved to the newly-formed Fortieth Wing but his tenure was brief as, following the reorganisation of the RFC in the Middle East, he was promoted to brigadier-general on 14 December and given command of the entire RFC Palestine Brigade, comprising four squadrons and some 70 aircraft.

Biffy proved to be an inspirational leader and was highly regarded by his squadrons: *He was good to the eye was Biffy; and good to the ear; and to the soldiers's heart. With his easy, straight-backed carriage, set off by a perfect tunic; with breeches cut as only an English cutter can cut; and field*