

Wing Commander

Lionel Brabazon Rees, VC, OBE, MC, AFC

Lionel Rees, born in Caernarvon, was in Blackwater from 1898 to 1901. Head of House and a School Prefect, he was a member of the first rugby XV's of 1900 and 1901. He passed out from Woolwich top of the Artillery candidates and was gazetted into the Royal Garrison Artillery in 1903. He learned to fly at his own expense, qualifying in 1913, and transferred to the Royal Flying Corps in August 1914. After a few months as an instructor at the Central Flying School, Upavon, by early 1915 he was in France in command of 11 Squadron. By October 1915 he had been mentioned in despatches and awarded the Military Cross. He was one of the first to demonstrate by example and leadership the RFC watchword 'Go in to the attack. Wherever you see the enemy, go for him and shoot him down'. In the autumn of 1915 he was assigned the task of writing a manual for fighter pilots. Called *Fighting in the Air*, it remained the RFC's bible up to 1918.

Now a major, in 1916 he was given command of 32 Squadron. On 1 July, the first day of the Somme offensive, he attacked four enemy aircraft which were joined by several more. He drove one off, forced another two to land and was intent on attacking the remainder until he was wounded in the thigh and his ammunition was exhausted. For this action he was awarded the Victoria Cross with the citation:

For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty. While on flying duties Major Rees sighted what he thought to be a bombing party of our own machines returning home. He went up to escort them, but on getting nearer found they were a party of enemy

machines, about ten in all. Major Rees was immediately attacked by one of them, and after a short encounter it disappeared behind enemy lines damaged. Five others then attacked him at long range, but these he dispersed on coming to close quarters, after seriously damaging two. Seeing two others going westward, he gave chase, but on coming nearer he was seriously wounded in the thigh, causing him temporarily to lose control of his machine. He soon righted it, and immediately closed with the enemy, firing at close range of only a few yards, until all his ammunition was used up. He then returned home, landing his machine safely in our lines.

After some months in hospital, in 1917 he found himself a key (and extraordinarily popular) member of the Balfour Mission to the United States, sent to introduce wartime flying to a nation that had only just joined the war. Next he was given command, as Lieut Colonel, of No 1 School of Aerial Fighting at Ayr, where he trained pilots for combat in the air. By the time that the war ended, the Air Force Cross and the OBE had been added to the decorations on his chest.

From 1920 to 1925 he was Assistant Commandant at Cranwell and later ADC to King George V and Deputy Director of Training at the Air Ministry. Then in 1926 he was given the command of RAF HQ, Transjordan and Palestine, where he made a significant contribution to the study of Transjordanian archaeology, publishing a number of academic papers. By 1929 he was OC 21 Group, Uxbridge. Anxious to avoid any form of desk job, he retired from the RAF in 1931 and presented his medals, sword and regalia to the College.



Rees in 1917

These (apart from the VC) are currently housed in the CCF Building.

In 1933 he set sail in a 34-foot yacht for the Bahamas and 96 days later reached the harbour at Nassau, having made the first single-handed crossing from Britain to the Caribbean. He spent the next few years sailing around the West Indies until in 1940, aged 56, he succeeded in persuading the RAF to re-engage him. He served as OC RAF Helwan, south of Cairo, until in 1942 the RAF insisted on his retirement. Even then he soldiered on without pay for some months. A man of private means, he had long given his pay to RAF charities.

Back in the West Indies, he settled on Andros, built himself a small house, married and sired three children. He died from leukaemia in 1955, aged 71, and is buried in the RAF cemetery at Nassau.

Rees was a shy, somewhat introverted man of wide learning and great intelligence. He was regarded with great respect and affection by his contemporaries and by young RFC and RAF officers who would refer to him as 'Daddy' or 'Uncle' Rees.

A biography, *Against the Odds* by Alister Williams, is held in the Cavendish LRC and in the College archives.

MICHAEL PARTRIDGE



The action which won the VC (courtesy the Imperial War Museum)