

OE Fighter Aces of the Great War

by Bill Bowden and Michael Partridge



A replica of an original 1918 painting by artist Jack Pelling, which shows Gordon Fox Rule in his DH9 when he shot down two enemy Albatross aircraft

In the course of research into the lives of those who served, and those who died, in the war of 1914–18, we found no fewer than seven Old Eastbournians who qualified as ‘aces’. This is an impressive number for what was then a comparatively small school. The term ‘ace’ was first used by French newspapers to describe the French pilot Adolphe Pégoud who downed five German aircraft and the term has been used since to describe any airman with five or more victories. Remarkably, at a time when the life expectancy of an airman was measured in weeks, if not days, all but one of the OE aces survived the war and four went on to serve in the Second World War.

The most distinguished was **Lionel Wilmot Brabazon Rees VC OBE MC AFC** (B1898–1901) one of the College’s only two holders of the Victoria Cross. Much has been published about him, including a biography and articles in the *Old Eastbournian* magazine. Commanding 32 Squadron and ignoring the order of Viscount Trenchard (Commander of the Royal Flying Corps) that no CO should fly east of the lines, he was credited with eight confirmed victories, comprising one enemy aircraft captured, one destroyed, one ‘forced to land’ and five ‘driven down’. Rees, 10–15 years older than most other pilots, was the only ace to fly the earliest purpose-built British fighter airplane, the Vickers FB5 Gunbus. As his colleague Gwilym Lewis wrote: ‘Everyone knows that the major is mad ... I told you he was the bravest



Lionel Rees



Hugh White

man in the world’. In 1915 the Royal Flying Corps required him to compile an instruction manual for young fighter pilots; *Fighting in the Air* was the result. In 1931, on retirement from the RAF, he gave his medals, sword and aiguillettes to the College. Then, at the age of 57, Rees insisted on serving in the Second World War and for two years commanded the allied aerodrome at Helwan in Egypt. He died on 28 September 1955.

Hugh Granville White CB CBE (S1913–14) joined 20 Squadron in July 1916 at the age of 18, and was nicknamed ‘Child Pilot’. Flying an FE2d on 5 April 1917, he shot down Josef Flink of Jasta 18. He followed up by scoring twice more in late May. After a period in England he returned to the front and, flying an SE5a with 29 Squadron, between 15 and 19 May 1918 he drove down an Albatros DV and destroyed three Pfalz DIIs. His final victory of 19 May was an eventful one, as he collided with Karl Pech of Jasta 29 during a dogfight, killing the German ace.

Hugh White survived the war, and went on to play rugby for the RAF. He continued in the service, through the Second World War, and retired in 1955, having risen to the rank of Air Vice-Marshal. He died on 23 September 1983.

The highest scoring OE ace was **Andrew King Cowper MC and Two Bars** (S1913–15) who was born in New South Wales on 16 November 1898.

He was a good sportsman, playing first XV rugby and first XI cricket for the College. Cowper enlisted in the Royal Sussex Regiment and on 10 May 1917 transferred to the Royal Flying Corps. Posted to 24 Squadron in France and piloting Airco DH5s he claimed his first victories in November 1917, shooting down two German Albatros DIII's. The following month, now flying an SE5a, Cowper achieved his fifth victory. Seven days later he led a formation of six aircraft on a patrol and destroyed one of a party of four German triplanes. He next spotted a Pfalz DIII scout and 'shepherding it by the most skilful piloting west of the lines', forced the aircraft to land, undamaged, at a British aerodrome. Thus, during a period of three weeks, he accounted for six hostile aircraft, bringing his tally to nine. For his 'conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty' coupled with the 'greatest courage and determination' Cowper was awarded the Military Cross.

By the end of March 1918, Cowper had shot down a further ten German aircraft. These proved to be his final victories of the war, bringing his ultimate score to nineteen. Cited for 'gallantry and skill... of the highest order', Cowper was awarded a Bar to his Military Cross.

In addition, he carried out twenty ground-attack sorties between 21 March and 1 April 1918. On one day he executed four separate attacks on German infantry and transport. He set off a second time and successfully assaulted troops and transport forces before carrying out two further raids that day. Cowper was awarded a second Bar to his Military Cross for his 'magnificent dash and determination'.

He retired from the RAF on 13 February 1920 and returned to Australia and, moving to Sydney, became proprietor of a seed and plant merchant company. On the outbreak of the Second World War, he enlisted in the Royal Australian Air Force and served in the Administrative and Special Duties Branch, rising to the rank of squadron leader. He was discharged on 2 March 1945, his final posting being to RAAF Base Rathmines. Cowper died on 25 June 1980.

Gordon Fox Rule DFC (G1914-15) was the son of a Brazilian father and British mother. Born in Brazil but raised in England, he joined the Royal Flying Corps in 1917 and was posted to 49 Squadron in January 1918, becoming a flight commander and captain on 15 May 1918. By 14 August 1918 he had scored seven victories flying DH4 and DH9 aircraft.

He was awarded a DFC, the citation stating:

'Whilst on a bombing raid this officer dived to 100 feet and obtained a direct hit on a bridge, completely destroying it. Seeing a body of the enemy on the bank of the river he attacked them, causing them to disperse in disorder. He was then attacked by five biplanes; these he drove off, though his observer had been hit twice, and he landed safely at a French aerodrome. In all, he has taken part in thirty bomb raids and ten photographic reconnaissances, invariably displaying a marked offensive spirit.'

He was also awarded the Croix de Guerre avec Palme by the French.

In 1921, serving in Ireland, he was hospitalised during the troubles and resigned his commission. At the age of thirty he returned to Brazil where he received the 17th Brazilian brevet. Fox Rule was fluent in Portuguese and owned property in Jardim Icarai, São Paulo, where a street was named in his



Andrew Cowper



Gordon Fox Rule



Frederick Hall



Frederick Gordon

honour. In 1925 he was responsible for introducing rugby football into Brazil. Before his death in 1987, he donated his First World War photo albums to the Imperial War Museum in London. They constitute an extraordinarily detailed record of his war and of his Royal Flying Corps colleagues. He also published a small book about his war service. Rule died on 10 June 1987 aged 89.

Frederick Vincent Hall (W1911), who also attended Highgate school, received the Royal Aero Club Aviator's Certificate 3898 on 1 December 1916. Posted to 4 Naval Squadron on 26 April 1917, he scored one victory flying a Sopwith Pup. He was awarded a medal by the citizens of Dunkerque for bravery in defending the town from hostile aircraft on 2 May 1917 before being reassigned to 8 Naval Squadron on 5 May 1917. He was wounded in action when he was shot down on 23 May 1917. When he recovered he was posted to 10 Naval Squadron where he scored six more victories flying a Sopwith Camel. Hall was killed in a collision with another Camel pilot on 15 May 1918.

Frederick Stanley Gordon DFC (S & Home Boarder 1911-12) was born in Auckland, New Zealand. After attending the College he worked as a farmer before in October 1917 receiving his Royal Aero Club Aviator's Certificate in New Zealand. Known as 'Freddie' or 'Sweet Freddie', he served with 74 (Tiger) Squadron during the summer and autumn of 1918 and was credited with nine victories, seven aircraft and two balloons. Ira Jones, in his book *Tiger Squadron*, writes affectionately of Gordon.

Gordon was awarded the DFC in June 1919 and the Belgium Croix de Guerre in July 1919. After the war he returned to New Zealand and during the Second World War held the rank of Flight Lieutenant while serving at Wigram and as adjutant of the Advanced Flying Squadron. He died at Cromwell, Otago, in June 1985.

Alexander Beck DFC (B1913-16). The son of English parents living in Argentina, he joined the RFC and after pilot training was posted to 60 Squadron in July 1917 aged just 17½. When his parents discovered that he was in France, they had him posted home in August, even though he had already flown 13 sorties over the lines. He returned to 60 Squadron in March 1918, became a flight commander and was awarded a DFC whose citation said:



Alexander Beck

'A bold and skilful leader, who has himself shot down four enemy aeroplanes. His personal courage and able leadership have had a marked influence in maintaining the efficiency of the squadron.'

In all Beck achieved 11 victories, three of which were shared. Beck married in 1937 and owned farms in both Argentina and Lower Heyford in Northamptonshire.

Note:

This is an abbreviated version of a longer article on the exploits of these seven OEs which will be published on the Eastbourne Society website in due course.