

THE KILNOCK AIRMAN

By John O'Donovan

During the summer months of 1915, a young Kilnock-born aviation pioneer played a small but vitally important part in a project that would help to curb German air supremacy on the Western Front. At the behest of the War Office, twenty-eight year old Robert Maxwell Pike carried out a service evaluation of the Airco DH2 prototype, the first effectively armed British single-seater fighter plane to be produced. His positive conclusions and recommendations certainly hastened the commissioning of the new aircraft, but Pike's association with the plane was destined to be short and would, within weeks, end in tragedy.

Robert Maxwell Pike was born at Kilnock House on 30 August 1886, the second son of Robert Lecky Pike and his wife, Catherine Henrietta Howard. Having enjoyed a privileged childhood on the family estate, he proceeded to a formal education at Harrow, following there in the footsteps of his older brother, Ebenezer. On the completion of their studies at Harrow, the Pike brothers both opted for careers in the British Armed Forces; Ebenezer joined the Grenadier Guards while Robert decided on the Royal Navy, enlisting at Portsmouth in August 1902, shortly before his sixteenth birthday.

NAVAL OFFICER

Pike's naval training was on board the HMS Britannia, off Dartmouth in Devon, and during this period he earned positive reports from his superiors. His conduct, ability and professional knowledge received favourable comment and he was reported to be 'zealous, active and intelligent'. In March 1903 he was commissioned as a Midshipman and immediately joined the crew of the cruiser HMS Good Hope. As a young naval officer, his future seemed assured, with reports from his ship's captain describing him as a 'good executive' as well as being 'sharp and promising'. However, his career in the Royal Navy was interrupted by illness and, in December 1905, he was declared medically unfit to rejoin the Good Hope due to the onset of synovitis. The following month the condition was diagnosed as tuberculosis of the knee and throughout all of 1906 he was absent from duty, spending some of this time under hospital care. Surveyed by naval medical personnel in December 1906, he was found to be unfit to resume his duties and was admitted to Osborne convalescent home. In February 1907, a further review resulted in Pike being invalided out of the Royal Navy, but he was allowed to remain at Osborne until he was able to travel. But there was also a curious footnote to the young Midshipman's departure from the Navy. The following year he was declared ineligible for a pension, as the disease for which he was invalided was due to constitutional causes, and the naval authorities also dismissed any suggestion that his condition had been aggravated by the treatment he received in Portland hospital. In any event, the outcome from the medical condition that cut short Pike's navy career was the removal of a knee joint, a procedure that left him with a straight leg for life.

Following his discharge from the Royal Navy, Robert Pike returned to Ireland, probably contemplating a future as owner of a medium-sized County Carlow estate. Little is known of his life during this interlude but it is clear that he developed an interest in aviation, keeping abreast of the major advances that occurred during the first decade of the 20th century. It is reasonable to speculate that he had an active

interest – if not an actual involvement – in the plane building project undertaken at Ballykealey about 1912 by his close neighbour, John Rupert Lecky.

INTO CONFLICT

When Britain entered the First World War in August 1914, Robert Maxwell Pike immediately volunteered for service and was accepted into the fledgling Royal Flying Corps, then just two years in existence. It was, of course, no surprise that he joined the war effort, given that he came from a staunchly unionist family that felt a deep sense of loyalty and attachment to the Empire. After just a month's training at the Military School at Brooklands in Surrey – and flying a Bristol Biplane – he qualified for a pilot's licence or a Royal Aero Club Certificate, as it was then known. Commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant, he was initially based at Dartford in Kent, where he received his final training as well as being assigned to home defence duties for the London area. In April 1915, he was sent to France, to join the 5th Squadron of the Royal Flying Corps based at St Omer in the northwest of the country, there for the purpose of carrying out an observation role for the Royal Artillery. Having quickly gained a reputation as a competent and fearless aviator, Pike was promoted to the rank of temporary captain and he became the Commanding Officer of B Flight. Before long he was being mentioned in despatches, effectively an award for gallantry or distinguished service, and in one report his superior officer noted: 'Pike did most excellent work and had a passion for bombing and photography, achieving excellent results by his pertinacity'.

EXPERT OPINION

Pike's abilities and expertise were obviously recognised at higher levels for, in June 1915, he was recalled to England with orders from the War Office to carry out a service evaluation of the DH2 prototype. The Airco DH2, designed by British aviation engineer, Geoffrey deHavilland, was a single-seater fighter plane that would prove more than a match for the Fokker Eindecker being then used by the Germans. Unlike earlier aircraft that required a gunner to be on board, the DH2 was armed with a Lewis machine gun in the cockpit, to be operated by the pilot. It was a measure of Pike's standing in the Royal Flying Corps that, less than a year after joining the service, he was entrusted with a task of such importance.

Robert Pike spent two days at Hendon Aerodrome in north London, observing, examining and flying the prototype. He compiled a comprehensive and generally favourable report, listing a number of shortcomings and suggesting modifications that would improve the DH2's efficiency. In the report to his commanding officer, written 'in the field' after he returned to his posting in France, he made clear his enthusiasm for the new plane when he wrote: 'She will be of enormous value out here. With practice, one should be able to use the gun effectively and the range of fire is very large, and the vision greater than any other machine I have flown. The alterations are to take about a fortnight and the machine will be ready to take to the Front, should approval be obtained'. In conclusion, he noted: 'I have not seen a German machine which can equal this Scout for speed and climbing power'. And, surprisingly, given that it was the one and only prototype then in existence, permission was granted and the DH2 was delivered to Flanders at the end of July. Pike effectively took charge of the aircraft with responsibility for its active service evaluation, but his plans to try out the plane in the eye of the conflict would never be fully realised.

THE PRICE OF WAR

On the morning of 9 August 1915, Robert Pike took to the skies on a scouting mission in the vicinity of Ypres in Belgium. He was flying at a height of 10,000 ft when he encountered a German Albatross two-seater and a dogfight ensued. It appeared that he had driven off the enemy plane, but the incident ended in disaster when the single German bullet to hit the DH2 also inflicted a fatal head wound. He, somehow, managed to land the plane behind enemy lines before dying, almost immediately. Robert Maxwell Pike was accorded a military burial in a local cemetery in the town of Hooges and news of his death was communicated to the British by a German air-drop message, which read: 'The gallant Captain Pike was shot down in mortal combat and was buried in a churchyard behind our lines, with full military honours'.

Robert Maxwell Pike, described by one of the Carlow weekly newspapers as 'the bravest of the brave', lies in an unmarked grave in Belgium but he is 'remembered with honour' on the Arras Flying Services Memorial at Pas de Calais in France. A family plaque, in his memory, can be seen inside the Church of All Saints in Aghade and, in recent years, his was one of the names inscribed on the County Carlow Great War Memorial at Leighlinbridge.