

## Captain Rowland Wynne Frazier RAF



The war time record of Rowland Frazier is one which could have come straight out of the derring-do exploits in the series of 'Biggles' books written by Captain W E Johns in the 1930s. However, Rowland's story is based on his real life experiences in WW1 in a somewhat flimsier plane, a Henri Farman biplane

Rowland, born on 24<sup>th</sup> October 1889,<sup>1</sup> was the elder of two sons born to George Rowland and Louisa Frazier. Around the time of Rowland's birth the family were living at 436 Coventry Road, Bordesley. His father, born in Oystermouth, Glamorgan, earned a living as a 'provision merchant'.<sup>2</sup> The family were sufficiently well-off to employ a general domestic servant to assist Louisa around the house.<sup>3</sup> On 23<sup>rd</sup> August 1892, a second son, Gordon was born.<sup>4</sup>

By 1901 the family had moved to 81 Golden Hillock Road, Aston (now Sparkhill) where George ran a grocer's shop. Rowland was,

by then, in his second year at King Edward's School (KES), New Street where he remained until 1907.<sup>5</sup> On leaving school he was articled to Redfern, Hunt and Co, solicitors of Birmingham at their London office in Frederick's Place, where, in 1912, he was recorded as being a managing clerk.<sup>6</sup> Despite being resident in London, Rowland maintained his links with Birmingham, acting as secretary to the Old Edwardians Association and regularly playing football for them.<sup>7</sup>

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1914, just after the outbreak of war, Rowland signed up as an Ordinary Seaman in the Royal Navy Voluntary Reserve (RNVR), London Division. His joining papers describe him as a 'solicitor' with an address at 50 Leinster Square, Hyde Park. He was tall for the time, standing at 5' 9½" and had light brown hair and blue eyes.<sup>8</sup> In the meantime, back in Birmingham, the family had moved to 29 School Road, Moseley, father George had retired and brother, Gordon, having left KES was articled to Mr C Silk, quantity surveyor before joining the 14<sup>th</sup> Warwickshire Regiment in September 1914.<sup>9</sup>



Figure 1: Seaman R W Frazier

Rowland qualified as a signaller at the Royal Naval Division Depot, Crystal Palace, Sydenham, in south London before being drafted in March 1915 to *HMS Pembroke I*, a name given to the shore barracks at Chatham, for sea service. He then spent the nine months, from May 1915 to January 1916 on trawlers in the North Sea, undertaking minesweeping duties, firstly on *HMT Ordinary King Emperor*, a Hull-based trawler requisitioned by the Admiralty in May 1915, followed by *HMT Emyrean*.<sup>10</sup>



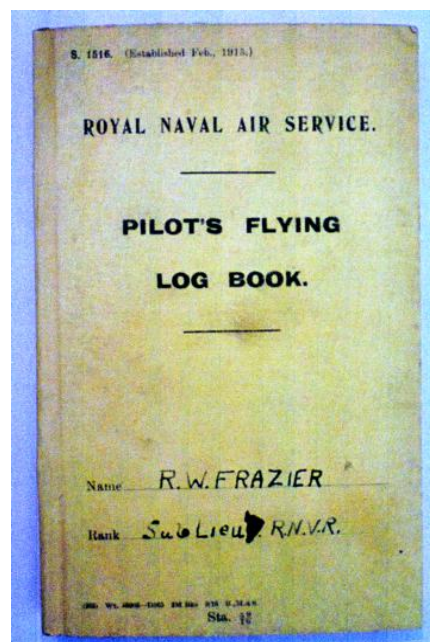
**Figure 2: A hand-painted post card of HMT King Emperor.**



**Figure 3: HMT Emyrean, to the right, moored in Grimsby Harbour.**

On 1st February 1916, Rowland was commissioned as a temporary Sub-Lieutenant<sup>11</sup> and transferred to the Royal Navy Air Service (RNAS) at *HMS President*, a shore establishment of the Royal Navy Reserve, based on the northern bank of the River Thames near Tower Bridge.

The following year, on 24<sup>th</sup> February 1916, Rowland was sent to the Armoured Car Division of the RNAS, based at the Clément-Talbot Motor Works in Barby Road, Notting Hill, followed by a gunnery course in rifle and pistol shooting at *HMS Excellent*, a shore establishment in Portsmouth. Rowland's next training assignment, on 24<sup>th</sup> June, was at Roehampton for a course on map reading, followed by gunnery training commencing on 14<sup>th</sup> July, at Eastchurch, Isle of Sheppey and finally he was given training in shooting and bombing from land and sea planes at RNAS Kingsnorth, Isle of Grain. His log book (see below) records the planes he flew in and the pilots he worked with, as well as, the air fields he flew from and the duration and height of the various flights undertaken. The last column records the skills he was to practise on the day, 'dropping dummy bombs', in the entry for 31<sup>st</sup> July, which was to have repercussions later that year when he was carrying out a real-life bombing raid on German sea planes at Gereviz on the Bulgarian coast.<sup>12</sup>



**Figure 4: Rowland's Pilots Log Book**

Date and Hour	Wind Direction and Velocity	Machine Type and No.	Pilot	Time in Air	Height	Course	Remarks	
1916 July 18 10-10 am	Instructional flights from Eastchurch Aerodrome. Time in Air: 6 Hrs. 17 min.	Voisin	F.S.L.	20m	6000	Eastchurch & Skeemess	First time in air	
" 26		M. Farman	F.S.L. Speckman	31m	1000	" Aerodrome	Mirror Practice	
" 31		do.	do.	27m	2000	" "	Dummy bomb dropping.	
Aug. 1		do.	do.	20m	2000	" "	"	
" 2, 3-11 pm		B.E.	F.S.L. Bradley	23m	4000	" to Manston	Reconnaissance Practice	
" 2, 5-45 pm		B.E.	do.	26m	4000	Manston - Eastchurch	"	
" 8.		M. Farman	F.S.L. McClellan	15m	1000	Leysdown Aerodrome	Aerial firing, Surface Targets	
" 9		"	"	15m	1000	"	" Gas Bullets	
" 22, 4-45 pm		"	F.S.L. Winter	1h 5m	4000	Eastchurch to Manston & Gillingham & back	Reconnaissance Practice.	
" 23, 5-35 pm		B.E.	F.S.L. Broadman	40m	1000	Eastchurch Aerodrome	First with N.T.	
" 24, 11-10 am		B.E.	White	45m	2000	Eastchurch to Home Bay & back	Reconnaissance Practice.	
" 25, 10-45 am		Voisin	F.S.L. Speckman	40m	2000	Eastchurch Aerodrome	N.T. Practice	
Sept. 1, 6-5 pm		30m Grain	Short Seaplane	F.S.L. Nares	25m	2000	Grain to Skeemess via	First over Medway
Oct. 8, 11-10 am		from H.M.S. Ark Royal 3 hrs	B.E.	J. Com. Marsham	30m	4000	Marsh Aerodrome, Margate	Practice flight for pilot
" 20, 7-43 am			Short Seaplane	F.L. Field	40m	4000	Medway Harbour	Test flight for machine
	do.		Sgt. Com. Kilmer	1h 5m	1000	H.M.S. Ark Royal, Margate, to H.M.S. Empress, Staines	Delivering machine	
Nov. 6, 8-55 am	from Squadron 2 Wing	do.	F.L. Cooper	35m	7000	Sharns Aerodrome	Practice flight	
" 24, 2-55 pm		H. Farman	F.S.L. Greig	2h 15m	9000	Innes to Drama	Bombard Aerodrome	
" 25, 10-15 am		do.	do.	35m	2000	Sharns Aerodrome	Practice flight.	
" 29, 10-15 am		do.	do.	13h 2m	3000			

Date and Hour	Wind Direction and Velocity	Machine Type and No.	Pilot	Time in Air	Height	Course	Remarks
1916 Nov. 29, 2-45 pm		H. Farman	F.S.L. Greig	1h 25m	3000	Sharns to Greving	Bombard seaplane sheds

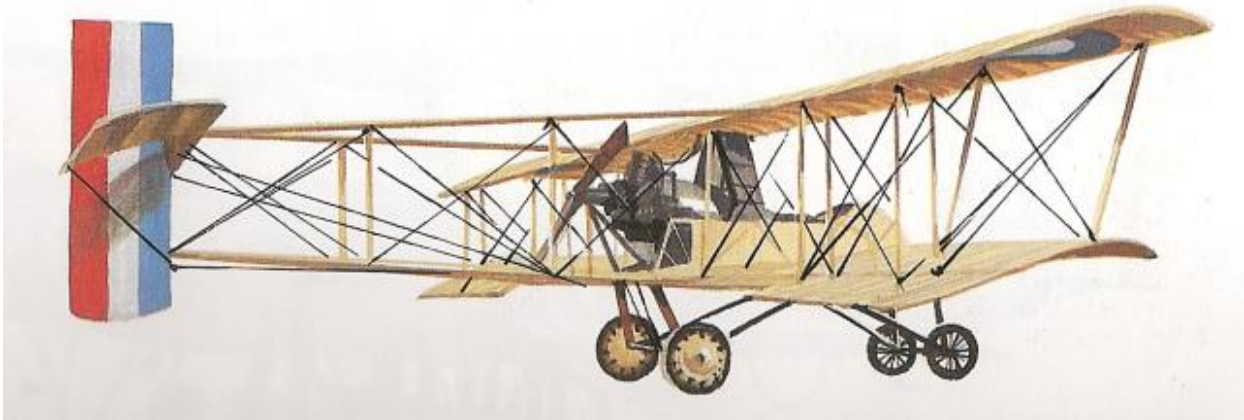
Figure 5: Log book entries of Sub-Lt R W Frazier from 18<sup>th</sup> July to 29<sup>th</sup> November 1916

Figure 6: Some of the aircraft mentioned in Rowland's training log: (Top to bottom)

A Voisin Biplane

A Farman Biplane MF II shorthorn 1915

A Royal Aircraft Factory BE2, a light bomber, trainer and coastal patrol aircraft





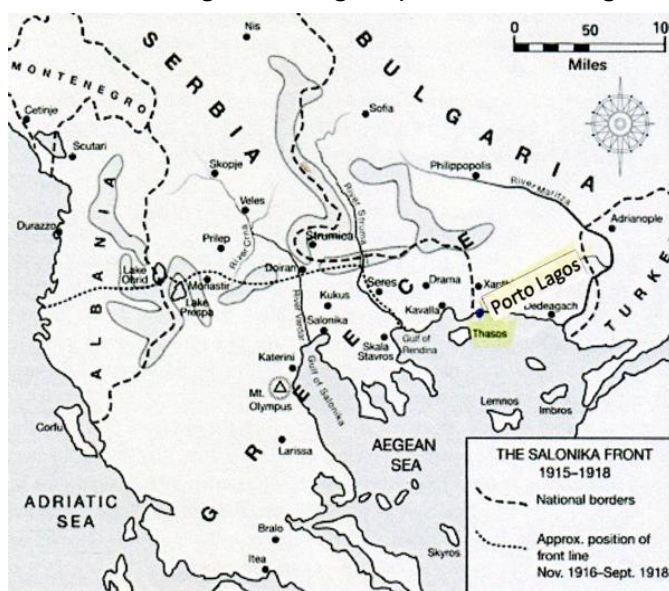
**Figure 7: HMS Ark Royal**



**Figure 8: Observer Sub-Lieutenant R W Frazier**

Having completed his RNAS observer training, Rowland was posted on 4<sup>th</sup> September 1916 to *HMS Ark Royal* patrolling in the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>13</sup> At 5 pm on 22<sup>nd</sup> November, Flight-Lieutenant Greig, RN and Rowland left the ship for the island of Thasos to prepare for action.<sup>14</sup> A week later, 29<sup>th</sup> November, Rowland and Flight-Lieutenant Greig, together with another plane made a successful bombing attack on the German seaplane sheds at Gereviz, near Porto Lagos on the Bulgarian coast. Rowland was in the second of the Henri Farman F27 planes (No 3916), which had been modified with Canton-Unné engines one of the most successful early radial designs. Rowland managed to drop, by hand, a 65-pound bomb on a canvas hanger and a long wooden shed with the second bomb. The shed caught fire and huge flames sprang up with volumes of black smoke as if a petrol store had exploded. Keeping low and almost skimming the water, Rowland noted for future reference that the anti-aircraft guns and high explosives were targeted on the first plane as it climbed as fast as it could to escape from enemy fire. There was much celebration in the mess that night when the two crews returned safely to base.<sup>15</sup> Following this earlier success, the Squadron-Commander decided to repeat the performance on 1<sup>st</sup> December, in order to finish off the remaining sheds. Rowland had misgivings, recognising the probability that the German defences would be better prepared now for repeat enemy attacks.

He was proved to be right in his assumption. Just as his plane descended from the cover of the clouds towards its target, a burst of enemy fire broke out and the bullets started to splinter the bottom of the plane. The machine gave a heave and nearly capsized them but, somehow, the pilot managed to regain control despite having been hit in the leg by a bullet.



**Figure 9: Map showing the location of the Island of Thasos and the location of Porto Lagos**

Because of damage to the plane it could not be controlled sufficiently to drop the bombs. The best chance of survival was to go for a crash landing but since there were still two 65-pounder bombs on board, it was going to be highly dangerous. Flight-Lieutenant Greig managed to land with one wing tilted so it hit the ground first, but the undercarriage was almost crushed flat. By the greatest of luck the safety catches on the bombs held. Within minutes of landing, a line of Bulgarian infantry was observed fast approaching, the leading man on horseback. When it was ascertained that they were English, Rowland and his pilot were taken prisoner. Flight-Lieutenant Greig was taken to hospital by a Red Cross representative. Just before being led away Rowland had the presence of mind to ask permission to get their caps from the plane. They had been given the useful tip to fly always with their caps handy, so that, if captured, they could be recognised as officers.

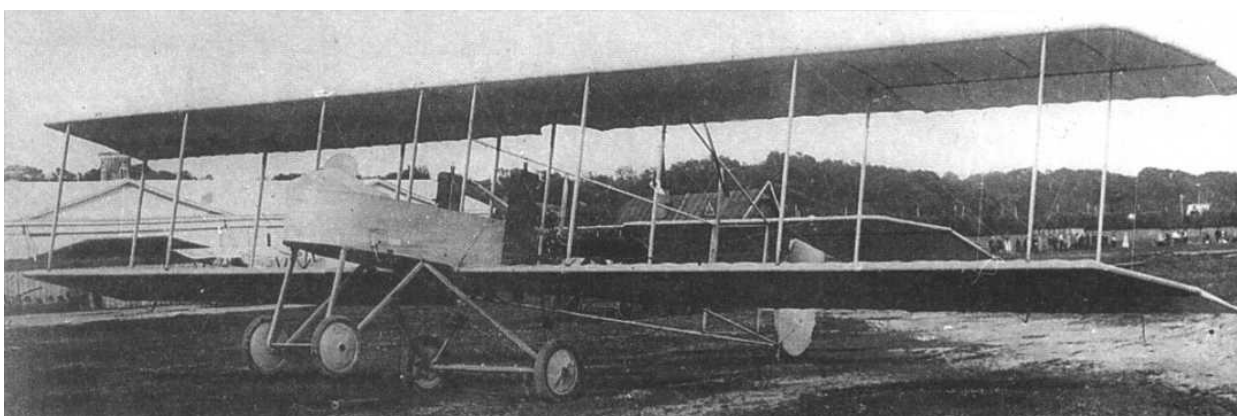


Figure 10: Henri Farman F27 plane

A Bulgarian official communiqué dated the 2<sup>nd</sup> December contained the following:

*Two enemy seaplanes flying from the island of Thasos towards Porto Lagos were received by our artillery and machine gun fire. At the same time two German seaplanes bore down upon them. One of the enemy seaplanes was brought down on land and the other in the sea. We made prisoners of the four aviators, one of whom was wounded.*

They were taken to a prison camp in Philippopolis. At that time the officers were as a rule grouped in twos and threes in cubicles separated by partitions made from rush matting in their allocated wooden huts.

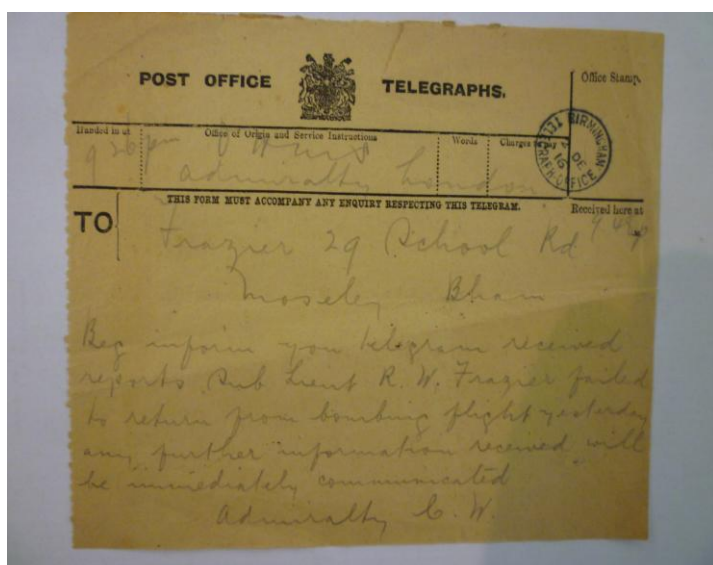
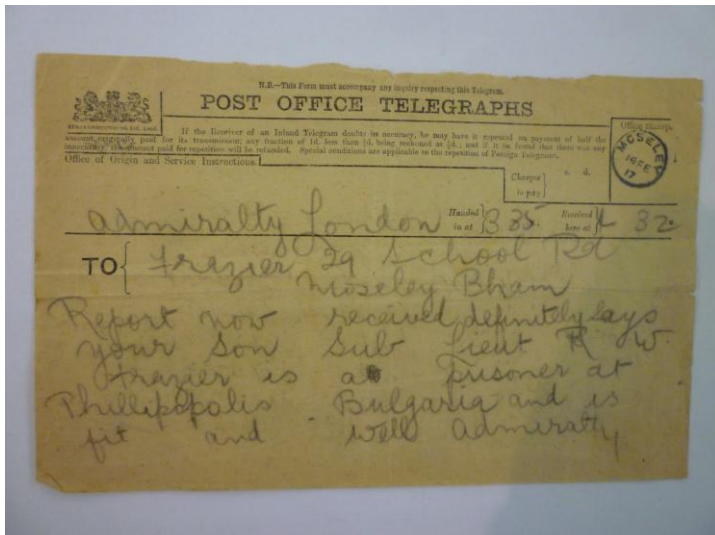


Figure 11: Telegram home reporting Rowland missing

On 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1916, the family received a telegram saying:

*'Beg inform you telegram received reports Sub Lt R W Frazier failed to return from bombing flight yesterday. Any further information received will be immediately communicated'*

It must have been a very worrying time for Rowland's family not knowing whether he was dead or alive.



**Figure 12: Telegram dated 14<sup>th</sup> February 1917 confirming that Rowland was a prisoner of war at Phillipopolis, Bulgaria**



**Figure 13: Vindolanda letter from a Roman soldier home around 1600 years earlier**

On 14<sup>th</sup> February 1917, the family received another telegram:

‘Report now received definitely says your son Sub Lt R W Frazier is a prisoner at Phillipopolis, Bulgaria and is fit and well’

It must have come as a relief but not without on-going concerns for his well-being.

Meanwhile, Rowland was able to write his first postcard home to his family. It is very similar to a letter written over 1600 years earlier to a Roman soldier, also thousands of miles away from home. The Roman soldier was stationed in Vindolanda, a wall fort near Hadrian’s Wall during a very cold winter.

*ram tibi paria udon[um  
t. ab Sattua solearum [  
duo • et subligariorum [  
duo solearum paria du[o*

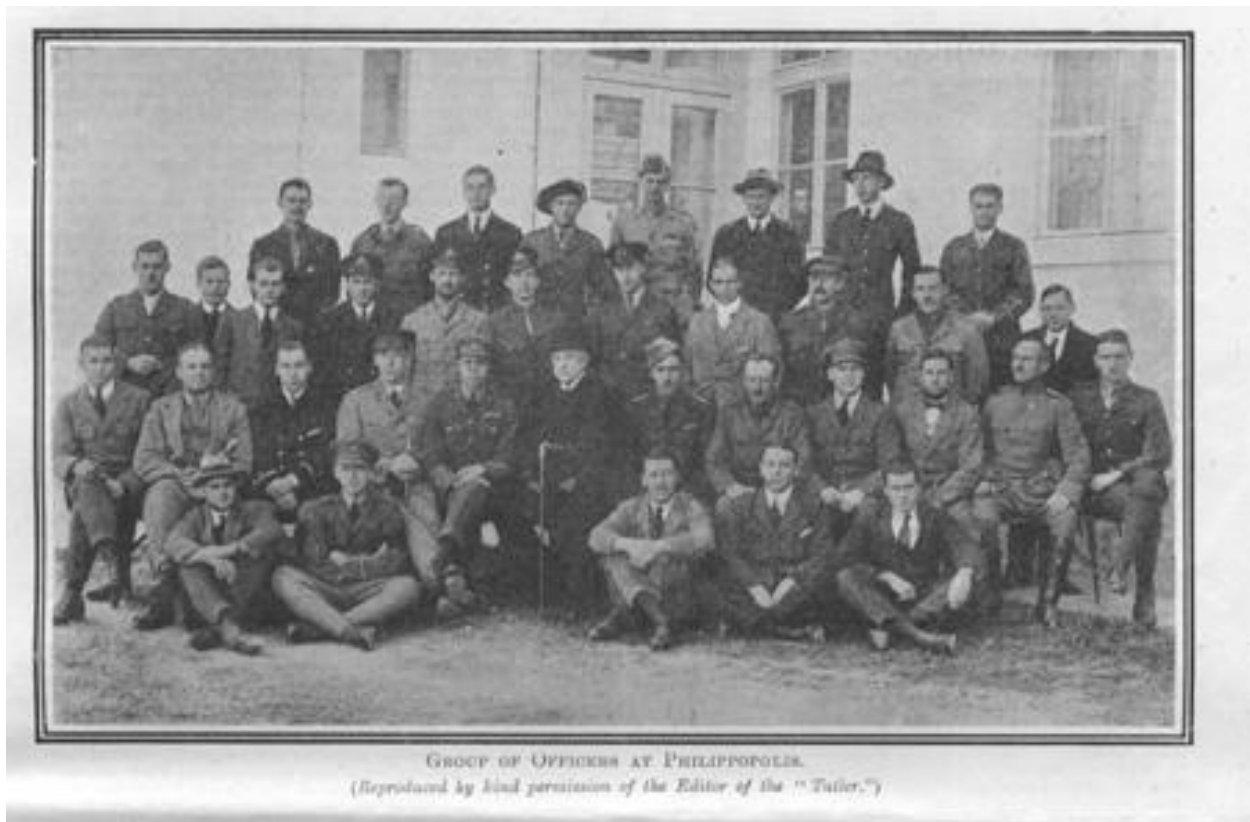
I have sent you ? pairs of socks from Sattua, two pairs of sandals and two pairs of underpants, two pairs of sandals<sup>1</sup>...

Below is a transcription of Rowland’s first letter home on 9<sup>th</sup> February 1917. (See figure 19 to view the original letter). It reads:

*Dépôt des Prisonniers de Guerre, Philippopolis, Bulgaria*

*I hope you have heard I arrived here unhurt. I am well and comfortable, but as all luxuries come from home, I shall be glad of a food parcel every week of Tea, milk, sugar, butter, dripping and jam at least, also some boots, underclothing and toilet articles, for use when those I have got wear out. Being an aviator I arrived with plenty of clothes. I remember walking home with mother from the pantomime this time last year. In a situation like this, before settling down to the monotony, one’s mind dwells a lot in the past and by-gone scenes and events seem very near or recent. It is fortunate that the mind can bridge time and distance like this as it is often possible to go to sleep and dream of home. Hope my luggage has arrived home, also the parcels which had not reached me and which will have been returned, I suppose. I wonder if the picture houses are as popular as ever and how everybody is. I hope all are well and not worrying.*

*With love from  
Rowland*



**Figure 14: British prisoners of war March 1918. Referring to Rowland's letter below, he must be the figure in the middle row, second along from the left**

The photo above appeared in 'Tatler in March 1918. Rowland makes reference to it in a letter home on 29<sup>th</sup> April (See figure 20 to view the original letter). He writes:

*We were photographed in a group last November. I am sorry it got published and hope you have not stopped sending parcels after reading what was printed underneath! My fellow townsman is the one with glasses in the top row - the second from the left of the photo. My pilot is in the same row as I am, the fourth on my left, in a line with the drain pipe. The second on his left is the officer who was in the football group sent you from the ship. I looked a bit more pleased in the football group, from your description. I suppose some people are glad to get their photos in the paper under any circumstances, but I would rather have it left out altogether, than appear in such a group. However, perhaps the fact that I had a photo and description all to myself, last time, has rather spoilt me for subsequent appearances! I was forgetting that since my bluejacket photo, one or two others have been in the newspaper, which I have not seen. Am hoping to hear soon that you have had the one I sent from here.*

Love from

Rowland



During the course of their stay the British contingent of officers began to get 'odd' postcards from relatives they had never heard of, but thought nothing of it believing them to be a practical joke. Eventually, the possibility of any cryptic meaning was eliminated. Serendipitously one of the postcards was soaked in water. As the top layer was peeled away a map appeared under the top surface showing the country to the south of the prison camp. A later post card contained a pass, in Bulgarian, signed by the Chief of Police.

When translated it read:

*To the authorities in the district of Philippopolis and on the coasts of the Aegean Sea:*

*Please give safe conduct and every facility to Lieutenant Fritz von Arnst, of the Imperial German Navy, and companions who are passing through the country on a tour of inspection.*

Despite misgivings, Rowland and his fellow officers decided that as the Admiralty had gone through so much trouble and expense on their account the least they could do was to seize the opportunity they were given and attempt to break out. The first escape was made by four officers on 14<sup>th</sup> August, but ten days later they were captured at Chepelari. On 28<sup>th</sup> August 1918, after much preparation, Rowland and fellow officer Beare, slipped out of camp but suffered the same fate as the first group and the two were brought back to camp on 12<sup>th</sup> September. Rowland's pilot, Flight-Lt Greig, was not so lucky. Having recovered from his earlier injury he was shot by a sentry when he attempted to escape the day Roland was returned to camp and died in hospital the next day. Less than a fortnight later, on 29<sup>th</sup> September 1918, the Bulgarian government suddenly announced an armistice. One can only imagine the mixed feelings they must have felt on hearing this news having so recently attempted, unsuccessfully, to escape with the loss of one of their own. By the middle of October all the prisoners were on their way to Salonica for repatriation.<sup>16</sup>



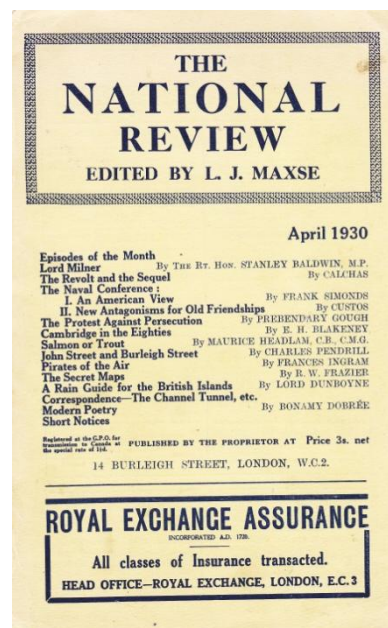
**Figure 15: WW1 medal set of Captain R W Frazier**

The two air services, the RFC and RNAS, amalgamated on the 1<sup>st</sup> April 1918 into one unit. As a result, Rowland, previously a Lieutenant from 1<sup>st</sup> October 1917,<sup>17</sup> was made a Captain in the newly formed RAF.<sup>18</sup> News of his demobilisation came through on 7<sup>th</sup> February 1919. For his service to King and Country from 1914 to 1918, he received the 1914-15 Star, Victory and British War Medals.

Back home, Rowland slipped back into normal life. In 1920 he was called to the Bar and became a pupil in the chambers of Norman Birkett at 41 Temple Row.<sup>19</sup> In the spring of 1927 Rowland married Jessie Bradsworth and set up home at 44 School Road near to his parents who were still at number 29. Jessie and Rowland had two daughters Alison Heather (known as Heather) and Jean.

Eleven years after the end of the war, Rowland published an account of his escape from Philippopolis Camp, entitled 'The Secret Maps' in the April, 1930 edition of the *National Review*. This is available to be read on the Moseley Society Local History website

Figure 16: The National Review, April 1930



In May 1933, another account based, this time, on his experiences in the bombing raid on Gereviz, entitled 'My Most Thrilling Flight: An Adventure in the land of the Heroes' appeared in the magazine *Popular Flying*. The editor of this magazine was none other than William Earl Johns, the creator of the character Bigglesworth, better known as 'Biggles'. The magazine was first published on 16<sup>th</sup> March 1932. It is in this first April edition that the fictional airman, 'Biggles', first appeared under the pseudonym William Earle.<sup>20</sup> Alongside Rowland's article in the May 1933 edition of *Popular Flying* are two articles by W E Johns, one of them entitled 'The Trap', a 'Biggles' story, the other, 'McCudden, King of the Scouts'. The first two items are available to be read separately alongside this article on the Moseley Society Local History website. It is quite likely that Rowland knew or had at least heard of W E Johns as he was a fellow officer in the RAF. Captain W E Johns, technically a Lieutenant, lived in Birmingham in 1923 working as a RAF recruiting officer.<sup>21</sup>



Figure 17: May 1933 edition of *Popular Flying* publishing Rowlands 'My most thrilling adventure'

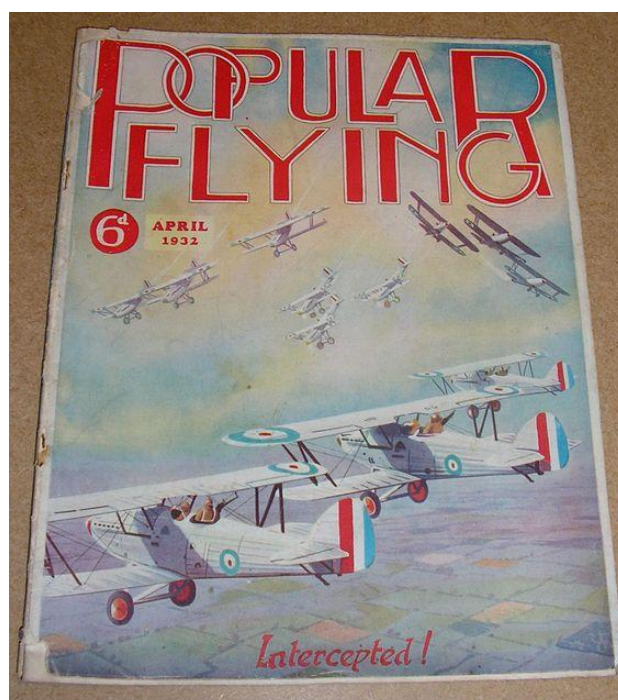


Figure 18: The first edition of *Popular Flying*, April 1932, that carried the first Biggles story

Rowland went on to have a successful career at the Bar becoming chairman of the Court of Referees and a member of the Edgbaston Debating Society. He wrote several books on Law including: *The Law of Civil Defence*, 1930; *The Law of the Fire Brigade*, 1933; *The Tithe Act*, 1936; *The Factories Act*, 1933; *The Livestock Industry Act*, 1937; *The Law of Fire Brigades and Air Raid Precautions*, 1938 and *The County Court Litigant*, 1938. He also enjoyed sporting activities as did his brother Gordon. Rowland's sporting activities included cricket (both brothers were members of Ashfield Cricket Club), tennis and acting as referee for the Old Edwardians RFC.

Later in life, Rowland's days as a prisoner of war were to have a profound effect on his health. It was noticed, when he was in his late forties, that he was experiencing difficulties with rigidity and slowness of movement and trouble with his voice. Rowland was eventually referred to Professor Cloak, a neurologist at Birmingham University. In the process of identifying the problem, Rowland must have mentioned that during his time as a POW in Bulgaria, he had lost consciousness and lain in a coma for ten days. During this time he had been well looked after and nourished and appeared to have made a full recovery. Professor Cloak diagnosed Rowland's condition as the result of a microorganism that had been picked up during his time in Bulgaria and that had lain dormant all those years.

Rowland's condition continued to deteriorate. With the help of colleagues and friends, a war pension was applied for and, after a long battle, Rowland was awarded a hundred percent disability pension. The family moved to a bungalow at 128 Oxford Road, Moseley in 1959. Although Rowland was unable to hold a conversation, he was able to say a few words to his wife, Jesse, to say how lucky he was not to be in any pain and to have been looked after with such loving care.

Rowland died on 26<sup>th</sup> December 1965. Jessie was with him at the time of his death.<sup>22</sup>

Researched and written by Edwina Rees, Moseley Society History Group.

## Endnotes

- 
- 1 1939 Register
  - 2 1891 census
  - 3 1939 Register
  - 4 1939 Register
  - 5 Service Record of King Edward's School 1914-1919, Midlands Historical Data
  - 6 Record of Service of Solicitors and Articled Clerks with His Majesty's Forces 1914-1919, Published by Spottiswood, Ballontyne & Co Ltd, London, 1920, p 198  
<https://archive.org/details/recordofserviceo00soli>
  - 7 *Birmingham News*, February 17<sup>th</sup> 1917

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- 8 Leeds University Library. Ref GB 206 Liddle Collection SAL 027
- 9 See 5 and 7
- 10 See 5 and 8
- 11 *London Gazette*, 4<sup>th</sup> February 1916, Issue 29463, p 1365
- 12 See 8
- 13 See 8, RNVR Service record
- 14 Log Book HMS Ark Royal  
[http://www.naval-history.net/OWShips-WW1-04-HMS\\_Ark\\_Royal2.htm](http://www.naval-history.net/OWShips-WW1-04-HMS_Ark_Royal2.htm)
- 15 *Popular Flying*, May 1933: My most thrilling flight by Captain R W Frazier RAF (ret), p 74,75,104
- 16 See 8
- 17 *London Gazette* 5<sup>th</sup> October 1917, Issue 3032, p 10297
- 18 *London Gazette*, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1919, Issue 81206, p 2861
- 19 Pugh, John Mervyn Cullwick. 2005. *One Man's Life and Death*. Waleside Press, Winchester, p 14
- 20 A brief biography of Captain W E Johns by Peter Berresford Ellis and Jennifer Schofield  
<http://www.wejohns.com/Biography/Biography1/>
- 21 See 20
- 22 Wendy Frazier, Rowland's daughter

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- Figure 4 See 8
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Figure 19 From the Leeds University Special Collections for R W Frazier

Depot des Prisonniers de Guerre  
Philippopolis Bulgaria 9th Feby. 1917

I hope you have heard I arrived here unhurt. I am well & comfortable, but as all luxuries come from home, I shall be glad of a food parcel every week of Tea milk sugar butter dripping & jam at least, also some boots, underclothing & toilet articles, for use when those I have got wear out. Being an aviator I arrived with plenty of clothes. I remember walking home with Mother from the pantomime this time last year. In a situation like this, before settling down to the monotony, one's mind dwells a lot in the past, and by-gone scenes & events seem very near & recent. It is fortunate that the mind can bridge time & distance like this, as it is often possible to go to sleep and dream of home. I hope my luggage has arrived home, also the parcels which had not reached me, & which will have been returned, I suppose. I wonder if the picture houses are as popular as ever, & how everybody is. I hope all are well, & not worrying. With love from

Figure 20 From the Leeds University Special Collections for R W Frazier

29 April 1918  
Glad to say your letter of 20 Feb. came on  
27 April. After getting yours of 17 Mar. in a  
little over a month, I expect the dates will go  
backwards, till the missing 4 weeks letters have  
all come. We were photographed in a group  
last November. I am sorry it got published,  
and hope you have not stopped sending parcels,  
after reading what was printed underneath! My  
fellow townsman is the one with glasses in the  
top row - the second from the left of the photo. My  
pilot is in the same row as I am, - the 4th. on my  
left, in a line with the drain pipe. The second on  
his left is the officer who was in the football group  
sent you from the ship. I looked a bit more  
pleased in the football group, from your descrip-  
tion. I suppose some people are glad to get their  
photos in the paper under any circumstances, but  
I would rather have it left out altogether, than  
appear in such a group. However, perhaps the  
fact that I had a photo & description all to my-  
self, last time, has rather spoil me for sub-  
sequent appearances! I was forgetting that since  
my bluejacket photo, one or two others have been  
in the newspaper, which I have not seen. Am  
hoping to hear soon that you have had the one I  
sent from here. Love from Rowland