

CAMELS AND CHARACTERS

by

Frank Yeoman

The very first of all the Sopwith Camels was rolled out of the Sopwith Factory on December 22nd, 1916. Although its immediate predecessor in the Sopwith line of fighting scouts was the Pup, some of the features embodied in the new design went back long before that. The wing layout for instance stemmed back to the Sopwith Bat Boat of pre W.W. I days.

The aircraft was soon recognised as a potential killer and contracts were placed with several firms early in 1917. As soon as they came from the production lines these Camels were distributed to the Squadrons of both the R.F.C. and the R.N.A.S.. Varied engines were used on the operational Camels and before the end of the war they were equipped with the following power plants: 110 h.p. Le Rhone, 130 h.p. Clerget, 150 h.p. Bentley Rotary B.R.l., and the 150 h.p. Gnome Monosoupape.

As soon as the pilots had learned to take advantage of the inherent characteristics of the Camel, it became a much feared aircraft on the Western front, and later on the Italian front.

In its lifetime the Camel was flown in almost every conceivable role, - as fighter, ground attack aircraft, night fighter, fighter bomber, seaborne scout and also in special experiments.

Some of the waspishness of the aircraft seemed to pass into the pilots, for there are many instances of a mere handful of Camels wading into much larger formations of Huns, and departing unscathed. One instance springs readily to mind. On November 4th, 1918, six Camels of 65 Squadron R.F.C. met up with a formation of over 40 Huns, near Ghent. The Camels promptly bounced into the Circus and shot 15 enemy aircraft out of the fight before low fuel and ammunition forced them to leave for home. This epic combat is commemorated even today in the badge of the squadron. The design includes 15 swords, one for each victory.

The original F.l. Camel was modified for use as a shipborne fighter and this variant was known as the 2F.l. The prototype was tested in March 1917, and had the 130 h.p. Clerget motor installed. Modifications from the standard F.l. included a detachable rear fuselage section, as an aid to stowing on board ship. The armament was modified, and instead of the twin Vickers guns, the 2F.l. had a single Vickers mounted on top of the cowl, and a rail-mounted Lewis gun on the top wing. The Lewis was swung down for reloading and firing at targets above the aircraft. The rail on which it traveled came down through the unglazed window cut through the center section and not through the cut-out in the trailing edge, as on the S.E. 5's.

The 2F.l. Camel was flown from small decks built onto the forepeaks of warships, and even from take off platforms constructed by laying planks across the gun barrels of the main turrets. Later they were flown from large rafts, towed behind destroyers. The Camel was positioned at the back end of the lighter, as these rafts were called, in a tail up position. The destroyer steamed at high speed into wind and the Camel's

engine was run at full revs. At a signal from the pilot the aircraft was released and everyone hoped hard.

The very first attempt of this nature took place on the 30th of May 1918. The pilot was Colonel C. R. Samson of the R.N.A.S.. The Camel he used had been fitted with skids instead of the conventional wheel undercart, and the skids were designed to run in wooden grooves built for and aft on the deck of the lighter. Samson revved his engine up and when all looked steady he gave the signal for release. The Camel surged forward but immediately the skids jumped out of the grooves and the Camel toppled over the bow of the lighter which naturally overran the wreck. By some miracle Samson fought free of the entangling wreckage and was quickly picked up. He immediately proposed that further tests should be carried out. His spirit was definitely a match for the strength of his namesake.

Col. Samson was an old-timer at the flying game even then. As a Lieutenant of the Royal Navy, he was a member of the first group of Naval officers to have officially sponsored flight training. He commenced his course on 1st of March 1911, flying Short biplanes at Eastchurch, and under the instruction of G. B. Cockburn, (a veteran flyer who held the Royal Aero Club Aviator's Certificate Number 5, gained at Mourmelon on 26th April 1910). Cockburn flew his tests on a Henry Farman. Samson was a good pupil and gained his Certificate on April 25th, 1911. He was the seventy-first to pass the official tests. Pre W.W. I he made several spectacular flights and held several records including the first deck take-off in Europe, when he flew a Short seaplane from the foredeck of H.M.S. Africa on the 10th January, 1912. At the end of June 1914, when the R.N.A.S. was formed, Samson was appointed one of the six Wing Commanders.

His near-fatal exploit with the Camel resulted in the towing platform being modified. When the lighter was stationary, the deck was parallel to the water, and it was found that the tail end tended to drag down as soon as the towing ship gained speed. In effect this meant that the pilot had an uphill take off. The modified lighter had a deck which sloped down towards the bow and this gave a level platform under tow.

A second attempt at taking off from this raft was put under way, and the pilot chosen for the experiment was Lt. S. D. Culley. This time the Pup-style skids were not used and the Camel was fitted with a normal undercarriage unit. The test was made close to land, and was completely successful. Culley circled round and then flew towards dry land and made a normal touchdown.

A few days later he went to sea with his Camel mounted on a lighter towed behind the destroyer 'Redoubt'. For him it was to be a memorable trip. Early on August 11th, the ships were shadowed by four German seaplanes, and at 8:30 a.m. the Zeppelin L.53 appeared on the scene. Immediately things started to happen. The lighter signalled the destroyer to prepare to launch the aircraft, and Culley quickly kitted himself ready for the flight. Quickly the 'Redoubt' turned into wind and Culley seated himself in the tiny cockpit of his aircraft. The engine was started and after a quick check the pilot gave the signal to release the Camel. The combined effect of the ship's speed and the engine at full throttle the Camel came unstuck in a few feet, and as soon as he was safely airborne Culley headed and slimed towards the great sirship, which was still lurking in the vicinity. Half an hour later the Camel was at 18,000 feet but still about 1,000 feet below the L.53. Ten minutes after this, at 9.41, the Camel was still 300 feet below and could climb no higher. Carefully Culley jockeyed into position below the airship. At this time and height, he

couldn't afford to lose a single foot of altitude by coarse use of the controls and a target like this was normally only something that Training School pupils dreamed about. As his Camel was fitted with twin Vickers guns, he was unable to fire without lifting the nose of his aircraft so gently he drew the stick back and his thumbs depressed the trips. Both guns opened fire, but one stopped after a few shots. The other poured a stream of bullets into the skin of the Xepelin and then the Camel fell away unable to maintain the firing position. Culley glanced back, the airship was still cruising on, but suddenly a feather of flame shot from it and in a very short time the whole craft was wreathed in flames. Rapidly the great torch fell towards the sea and while still many thousands of feet up it broke into two parts spilling tons of charred debris into mid air.

His mission achieved beyond his wildest dreams, Culley not set to, and headed back towards the ships. At first he sought in vain, but finally spotted them in the hazy distance and ditched his Camel beside the destroyer. Both he and the aircraft were safely picked up. The Commander of the Naval force, Admiral Tyrwhitt, flashed a signal to all ships, referring them to a certain hymn in the Naval Hymnbook. As the officers found the verse in question, it proved to be a well known one.

'Oh, Happy band of pilgrims,
Look upward to the skies,
Where such a light affliction
Shall win you such a prize.'

The Sopwith Camel in which Lt. Culley scored this memorable victory is still preserved in the Imperial War Museum, London, England. The service serial number is N.6812. The engine installed, is the original 150 h.p. Bentley.

Other known Camels, still in existence today are four in number. First, and best, is the Tallman Camel, recently covered in 'True'. There is one in Canada, belonging to the National Research Council. It has a Clerget Rotary engine, and carries the serial D.8156, from the batch D.8101-D.8250 built by Ruston Proctor of Lincoln, England

A fine example is preserved in the collection of the Royal Aeronautical Society, at Weybridge, Surrey. Built by Boulton Paul it is one of a batch of 200, and is numbered F.6314. It was bought from Aircraft Disposals in the early 1920's, less engine, and was actually flown with a 40-45 h.p. Anzani for some time. Its performance on this miniature is hard to imagine! Later it was towed to Wales behind a small Fiat car by a new owner, but nothing more was heard of it, until it turned up in the hands of a Mr. D. C. Mason, at Hornchurch, Essex, in late 1935. A few months later it was bought for the Nash Collection, and Mr. Nash fitted it with a 140 h.p. Clerget. The collection was bought en bloc by the R.Ae.S. in 1953.

The last known survivor of this famous breed is hung up in a very dusty Belgian Museum. It was bought along with other aircraft, by the Belgian Air Arm in the closing stages of the war, and has been in the museum since the 1920's. It is B.5745, built by Clayton and Shuttleworth and its present home in the Palace du Cinquantenaire, at Brussels. The engine is a 130 h.p. Clerget.

As mentioned in the previous article, the Camel was a holy terror to the novice pilot. However, the pilots who could handle the little beast were amongst the best in the world. One in particular was noted for the star performances which he gave. His name was Armstrong, and he was a member of 44 Squadron R.F.C. stationed at Hainault Farm in Essex.

The mechanics and fliers at Waddon were surprised one day to hear the wail of an Aero engine approaching, but no aircraft was in sight. Suddenly from apparently nowhere, a Camel appeared, and starting at an altitude of no more than 1 foot above the airfield, it did five consecutive loops and disappeared as rapidly as it had arrived. When the spectators had cranked their jaws back up, a burble of conversation broke out. Who was he? Was it a mirage? No one ever handled a Camel like that, life was much too sweet!

It was no mirage, for a few days later he was back again, only this time he apparently considered looping at ground-level far too tame. The demonstration given to the staggered and amazed spectators was one of flick-rolling at about 15 feet! Eye witnesses state that his wingtips were actually running through the long grass on the way round. The Camel came wailing across the airfield, and flick - over she went, the people on the ground catching momentary glimpses of a dark mop of hair, instruments on the dashboard, and the greasy castor-oil-coated belly. And then he was gone again.

Later, Armstrong joined the night-flying Squadron, 151, (see 'TRUE', April 56) and while serving with this unit, he was killed in France. He got no victories, and had no medals, but what a pilot! He was killed when his Camel spun into the ground on a routine flight.

No other Camel pilot could match this performance of aerobatics at such a suicidal height. Probably the nearest approaching him were Harry Hawker, the Sopwith Test Pilot; Oliver Stewart who did a deal of test flying on Camels when they were considered as aerial tombstones, and Major Chris Draper, who was acknowledged as one of the finest Camel pilots in the world. Chris Draper was back in the news a few years ago when he flew a light Auster sportsplane under about 15 Thames bridges at London, in a successful attempt to prove that he was still a useful man to have around.

Even as late as 1941 a Sopwith Camel made the news headlines. Way up on a wild Scottish Moor, never visited in many years, a person is said to have found the wreckage of a Camel crashed among the rocks and heather. The skeleton of the pilot was still in the cockpit exactly as he had crashed to earth nearly 25 years before. It is believed to have been an aircraft from the old Training School at Turnberry, Montrose. Several aircraft never returned to their base there, and all were assumed to have been lost into the sea.

Although Manfred von Richthofen scored relatively few victories against Allied scout aircraft, three of his last five kills were Camels. His 76th was a Camel flown by a Captain Smith, and it fell to earth near Lamotte. His last two victims, both Camels, were destroyed on April 20th, 1918. The story of this combat is a typical tale of the days of great dogfights.

Lt. D. G. Lewis completed his training at Reading and joined No. 78 Home Defence Squadron at Hornchurch. With this unit he spent 8 months night-flying Sopwith Camels. After this tour, he joined 3 Sqdn. in France, under the Command of Major Raymond Barker M.C. (Military Cross).

On April 20th two flights were ordered out on an Operational Patrol over the lines. Bad weather kept the pilots grumbling for most of the day but towards evening the clouds and mists cleared and twelve Camels took off and headed out over the scarred strip of earth which marked the front lines. Puffs of smoke and dull flashes marked the nesting places of the artillery shells, and then the view was blotted out

by clouds. Emerging on the far side of the cloud, Lewis discovered that the two flights had become separated. Captain Bell led his six aircraft on over the lines at about 9,000 feet. In this formation were both Lewis and Major Barker.

After cruising around for awhile, Bell spotted a bunch of Fokker Triplanes creeping around a cloud, and immediately signalled the attack by rocking his wings. Six triplanes detached themselves from the main formation and very soon a lively battle was in progress.

Almost immediately a triplane attached itself to Lewis and started pumping lead at him. Bell spotted this and took time off to repay the compliment and the triplane dived away. About this time Major Barker's Camel blew up in the air, and flaming shreds of wood and fabric fell to earth. By this time it was apparent that the triplanes belonged to the Richthofen outfit, and things were not going any too well for the Camels. Lewis flipped onto the tail of a bright blue Fokker and was shooting it up when he felt the impact of bullets on his own plane. Pulling out of the stream of lead, Lewis glanced quickly round, and wasn't very pleased to find the all-red triplane of the Baron himself, a few yards behind him. He flicked the Camel into a rapid turn but the Fokker still clung to him. The Camel was twisting and turning like a mad thing, and still the bullets were hitting it. The compass exploded in Lewis's face, spurting the liquid into his goggles and cutting down visibility to nothing, but this situation was rapidly eased when a homing spandau slug shot the offending goggles clear off his face. The slipstream now blurring his vision, Lewis held his tight turn, but twanging wires and splintering struts told their own story. The Baron was still breathing down his neck. A sudden roar of flames told Lewis that things were not improving any. The bullets had stopped but it was a case of out of the frying pan and very literally into the fire.

He put the Camel into a steep dive hoping that the flames would be driven away from him, but the aircraft was well and truly on fire and the flames stayed right in his face. About 500 feet from mother earth the flames had subsided so Lewis gently drew the stick back and glanced down, looking for a likely spot to put her down. As the fire has stripped all the fabric aft of the cockpit and nearly all of it from the elevators, she was very slow in raising her nose. Still not quite up to the level position, she hit the ground at very high speed. The pilot took his second flight of the day, but this was short and not very sweet. He was hurled from the wreckage and deposited some distance away, suffering from nothing worse than burns and bruises. His maternity jacket and helmet were in charred strips, and he had bullet holes through his trouser leg and sleeve.

Not far away, the remains of Major Barker's aircraft were burning furiously and Lewis ran over to the spot to see if there was any chance of the Major's survival, but he was unable to get very close for the intense heat. At this point Richthofen flew over the place and dipped his wing to the figure on the ground before departing. No doubt the German ace was elated with his two victories, little knowing that they were his last and that within 24 hours he would be shot down and killed by a Camel pilot. The story of that episode is too well known to need repetition here.

Lt. Lewis spent the next six weeks in Cambrai hospital recovering from his injuries and experience, and following that was a prisoner until the close of hostilities.

The Red Baron's combat report for this fight is reproduced here. "Three minutes after I had brought down the first machine I attacked a second Camel of the same

enemy squad. The adversary dived, caught his machine and repeated this manouvre several times. I approached him as near as possible when fighting and fired 50 bullets until the machine began to burn. The body of the machine was burned in the air, the remnants dashed to the ground north-east of Villers-Bretonneux."

In the closing stages of the war, the Camel was used in several experimental roles, a tapered wing being fitted to one variant. Another was built with a single 'I' strut and a third was a combination of the two. A parasol wing version was built and called the Scooter, and later the Swallow appeared as a variation of the former monoplane. Late in the war, a Camel was slung up under the British airship R.23, but the idea was abandoned at the Armistice.

The close of the war wrote finis for the Camel, as it was not a very suitable aircraft for civil flying. Most of the Service aircraft were flown to disposal units, and broken up. Only the five mentioned earlier have lived through to the present day, although we can hope that others may be unearthed from some dusty hiding places in the future.

The Camel was built as a killer and in this role it served its purpose without faltering. Born for fighting, it was unable to accept the easy going pace of peacetime existence and it could be said that it quietly crept into a hangar and died. But did it? No, like the old soldier it is, the Camel will never die, at least in the thoughts of those who flew and fought them, and in the capable hands of Frank Tallman, America has an aircraft of which all can be justly proud.

CAMEL FACTS AND FIGURES

TYPE	ENGINE	WING AREA	M.P.H. SPEED AT 10,000'	CLIMB TO 10,000' IN	ENDURANCE IN HOURS	CEILING
Camel F. 1	110 h.p. Le Rhone	231	118.5	9.2 Min.	2 3/4	24,000'
Camel F. 1	130 h.p. Clerget	231	113.0	10.6 Min.	2 1/2	19,000'
Camel F. 1	150 h.p. B. R. I.	231	115.0	9.4 Min.	—	20,000'
Camel F. 1	150 h.p. Gnome Mono.	231	117.5	10.3 Min.	2 1/4	21,000'
Camel 2F.1	150 h.p. B. R. I.	229	103.0	11.4 Min.	2 1/4	17,500'

TYPE	EMPTY	FUEL & OIL	WEIGHT IN POUNDS		
			MILITARY LOAD	CREW	ALL-UP WEIGHT
Camel F. 1	889	252	101	180	1422
Camel F. 1	929	243	101	180	1453
Camel F. 1	962	228	101	180	1471
Camel F. 1	993	249	101	180	1523
Camel 2F.1	1,036	223	91	180	1530