

OBITUARY.

SIR WALTER RALEIGH.

Aviation has suffered an irreparable loss in the death of Sir Walter Alexander Raleigh, the official historian of the War in the Air.

When the Royal Air Force became a separate arm of the forces of the Crown, taking rank with the Navy and Army, its tradition was already safe. But tradition is a great thing, and to exert its proper influence on a service it must be recorded and handed down from generation to generation to inspire them with accounts, fittingly told, of deeds of heroism and devotion to duty; and in the case of the Air Service of battles with the elements as well as with enemies—a story peculiarly its own, dealing with its own special trials—a story of the chivalry of the air.

The question as to whether there should be a separate Air Force is one which still stirs deep feeling, but this question has already been settled. The Royal Air Force has outgrown its pupilage to the older services and is now one of their partners. When it was officially decided that the history of the War in the Air was to be written, the Royal Air Force found its destined historian in Sir Walter Raleigh. During a discussion as to the form this history should take, he exclaimed, "It is a chance of a lifetime."

Before attempting his task Sir Walter decided to see something of the War in the Air. He proceeded to France on the 14th August, 1918, and returned on the 8th September. During that fortnight he was taken over the various headquarters and depots and saw what he could of the work of the Air Force under war conditions and made a keen study of the personnel. He was flown over parts of the front. Writing home on the 26th August, 1918, he says: "Now I am with a fighting squadron (for the first time) and I hope to get into a Bristol Fighter. The Camel and Snipe are not for me. I got right up to the front to see artillery working with aeroplanes, and I am on the way to understand sound-ranging, which is a wonder. Also, I am picking up the Ac Beer Cee Don language. . . . Where I am now we are bombed every suitable night."

He started to write the history of the War in the Air at the beginning of 1919. Its beginnings caused him considerable anxiety. He found official records scanty and bare. He planned and replanned the book. At first he only intended to devote a chapter or two to the pre-war period, but he soon realised that if the story was to be worthily told the history of the conquest of the air must first be dealt with. This involved considerable labour. A host of technical details had to be carefully studied. Not a fact would he accept without having previously mastered its significance. If he were told that the upper surface of the plane contributes most lift he would want to know why. On being informed that wireless reception in an aeroplane with the engine running at full power was first accomplished in September, 1913, he wanted to know by what special means, and before he left the subject he had made a study of wireless itself. The reported incident of an R.E.8 aeroplane flying itself for two hours with a dead pilot and observer led him into a detailed study of aeroplane stability and so on.

It is fortunate for aviation that Sir Walter, who only intended to summarise the early history, found himself drawn more and more into it with the result that about half of the first volume of the official history of the War in the Air is a classic on the art of flight itself. Aviation could have found no better friend,

no more enthusiastic student and no one more competent to tell the stirring story of the conquest of the air.

The following extract from a letter which he wrote at the very outset of his last great task is typical of what he felt to be his theme:—

“The humblest flier who went and strafed a Boche and got done in is not going to be sacrificed or even subordinated to the star performers. Every V.C. shall be clearly told that men who deserved it as well or better than he did are forgotten, in large numbers, because they faced certain death without witnesses. The hero of the book is chosen and is the Air, not the stars.”

After finishing his first volume he decided to carry out his visit to the eastern theatres of war—a visit which was originally intended to follow closely after his visit to France in August, 1918, but the Armistice intervened and the visit was deferred. The dangers of such a visit to his health were pointed out to him, but this only made him more determined than ever. It was for his book, the story of the Royal Air Force, and he would allow no real or imaginary danger to stand in his way. On March 16th, 1922, he left London for Port Said, travelling via Marseilles. He proceeded to Jerusalem and then to Amman. From Amman he was being flown to Basra when a forced landing had to be made in the desert owing to one of the three aeroplanes of the flight breaking down. A halt of four days was made under bad weather conditions. On arrival at Baghdad all was not well with Sir Walter Raleigh. He was next flown to Mosul. Here he contracted fever, for which he was treated, and he was advised to await proper recovery. But he wanted to get back to his work at Oxford so he returned to England while suffering from fever. He came back on the 25th April and not many days afterwards the fever had him in its grip. Typhoid was diagnosed and peritonitis supervened. He was operated on on the night of Thursday, 11th May. Although he rallied after the operation he died early on Saturday morning, the 13th May.

Sir Walter Raleigh had attained great distinction as an authority on English literature, as an eminent critic and as a pre-eminent stylist, before he took up with aeronautics. But it is the opinion of the author of this brief tribute that his fame will ultimately rest on the last literary achievement of his great life—the history of flight and the British Air Service. Although he only lived to complete one volume his services to aviation are outstanding. No man was better fitted to tell the story, in so far as words can express it, of the mastery of the air. No other man of mature years could have shown such youthful enthusiasm, such a wonderful grip of the temper of the air.

The author was only privileged to know Sir Walter Raleigh during the past three years in connection with the history of the War in the Air and does not feel competent to discuss his life and influences on literature. The object of these notes was to place on record some account of his work and devotion to aviation and the Air Service.

Walter Alexander Raleigh was born in 1861. His father was Dr. Alexander Raleigh, the Scottish Congregationalist divine. He was educated at University College, London, and King's College, Cambridge. At the age of twenty-three he was appointed professor of English literature at the Chief College, Aligarh. There he remained for two years, but for reasons of health he returned to England. His next appointment was assistant to Sir Adolphus Ward at Owen's College, Manchester. A year later, in 1890, he succeeded Mr. A. C. Bradley as Professor of English at Liverpool University. This post he held for ten years and during that period he earned a niche in the temple of fame by bringing out his books. “The English Novel” in 1894, “Louis Stevenson; an Essay” in 1895, “Style” in 1897 and “Milton” in 1900.

In 1900 Walter Raleigh was appointed to the English chair at Glasgow, again in succession to Mr. A. C. Bradley, and there he remained four years. During

this period he published "Wordsworth" in 1903 and "The English Voyagers" in the following year. In 1904 he was appointed to the new chair of English literature at Oxford. In 1907 he produced his "Shakespeare" and in 1910 "Six Essays on Johnson." He was knighted in 1911 and became a Fellow of Merton College, Oxford, in 1914.

During the war he was the moving spirit in getting good literature supplied to the troops by means of broadsheets. He firmly believed that English literature was the highest possible expression of freedom and in this he was right. In 1917 he produced his book "Romance."

In addition to writing some stirring appeals during the war, he edited the "Oxford Roll of Honour" after the war. Perhaps the most enjoyable years of his life were the last, when he was busy with the theme which fascinated and held the whole of his being. Never were his lectures so inspired as when his lecture theatre was crowded with the post-war students, many of whom were war veterans.

Concerning the history of the War in the Air, he said:—

"Some authors seem to seek fame; I shall be satisfied with forgiveness."

In this one line Sir Walter wrote his own obituary.

He was married in 1890 to Lucie Gertrude, the daughter of Mr. Mason Jackson. He leaves three sons and one daughter.

