Sir Frederick Sykes and the Air Revolution 1912–1918

Eric Ash

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SIR FREDERICK SYKES
AND THE
AIR REVOLUTION
1912–1918

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United States Air Force Academy

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To Dawn, Austin and Andy

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Foreword

In the history of air power forward-looking airmen have often become victims of bureaucracies, and Sir Frederick Sykes was just such a person. Even among scholars of air power Sykes has never enjoyed the recognition of his more famous contemporaries such as Lord Trenchard, Giulio Douhet, and General Billy Mitchell. He fell instead into obscurity, even though his work in organizing, training and equipping the Royal Flying Corps and the Royal Air Force was crucial to the birth and development of military flying. He had greater vision than many of his colleagues, whose ideas proved more acceptable to the establishment at the time. Sykes, in contrast, never received proper recognition for his seminal accomplishments owing to politics and prejudice. He should have been recognized for the depth and breadth of his conceptual thinking on air power, which led to unique advances in military thinking. He refused to give up in the face of entrenched opposition, and even after he was removed from the center of the military aviation arena he continued to serve in a variety of public positions unrelated to military aviation.

The world's air forces were able to grow into the powerful independent services they are today because of staunchly committed airmen such as Sykes. At long last this study of Sykes brings to light important aspects of air power that had previously been overlooked. Serious students of aviation history should read this book, and I recommend it to all airmen who wish to learn more about their heritage.

General Ronald R. Fogelman
July, 1998

Editor's Preface

The impact of the First World War on the development of air power has long been recognized. There have also been biographical studies of many of the airmen who played leading roles in the rise of British military aviation and the creation of the world's first independent air force, including Lord Trenchard, Sir Sefton Brancker and Sir John Salmond.[1] All these studies were, however, written more than 30 years ago, before the major official papers relating to the Royal Flying Corps (RFC), Royal Naval Air Service and the Royal Air Force (RAF) in the First World War were made available. Largely based on the memories and personal papers of the protagonists, these works were more than usually partial. Therefore, not only does this study of Major-General Sir Frederick Sykes represent the first proper assessment of his life and contribution to military aviation, but it is also the first biographical study of a senior First World War British airman to make use of the full range of official material now available to scholars. In so doing, it not only offers us new and important insights into Sykes himself, but also throws new light on the relationships in the high command of the RFC and then the RAF, and improves our understanding of other important figures involved, especially Lord Trenchard and Sir David Henderson.

There is little doubt that the part played by Sykes in the early years of British aviation has been eclipsed, partly as a result of aspects of his own character, and partly because, ultimately, he lost out in the bureaucratic battle to head the Royal Air Force in the post-war era. Eric Ash succeeds in demonstrating both the originality of Sykes' thinking and the practical contribution he made to the eventual success of the RAF in battle. The analysis is also sufficiently dispassionate and penetrating to reveal the weaknesses in Sykes' personal make-up which so bedevilled his relations with others, and which were to prove a significant factor in preventing his achieving all that he sought for the Royal Air Force and British aviation. At the same time, it reveals the degree to which some facets of Sykes' character have been exaggerated, notably his supposed taste for intrigue.

As students of air power increasingly recognize, the achievements of military aviation in 1914–18 have too often been viewed through the

distorting prism of the later experience of 1939–45. Eric Ash's study is a valuable contribution to the growing body of scholarship devoted to analyzing the policies and thinking of the era in a more objective fashion.

SEBASTIAN COX

NOTE

1. The major biographies are: Andrew Boyle, *Trenchard* (London: Collins, 1962); Norman MacMillan, *Sir Sefton Brancker* (London: William Heinemann, 1935); Basil Collier, *Heavenly Adventurer: Sefton Brancker and the Dawn of British Aviation* (London: Martin Secker & Warburg, 1959); John Laffin, *Swifter than Eagles: The Biography of Marshal of the RAF Sir John Maitland Salmond* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1964).

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This study would have been impossible without God's grace and my family's patience, as well as generous help from friends and esteemed historians. Dr Tim Travers was a superb academic advisor, and the helpful suggestions and support from Professor Holger H. Herwig, Head of the Department of History, University of Calgary, were sustaining during difficult moments. I also appreciated assistance from the following people: Dr John Ferris, Dr James Titus, Dr Harold Winton, Dr Robin Higham, Lord Blake, Mr Sebastian Cox, Wing Commander Peter Dixon; Mr Chris Hobson, Major James Hogan, and Brigadier General Philip Caine, who launched me into this endeavor. I was sustained by the memory of my father, Dr Rodney P. Ash, and by my mother Mrs Anne Ash, who followed me to London as editor and research assistant. I was inspired by my grandfather, Mr Frank Abbott, who fought with the American Expeditionary Force, 42nd Infantry 'Rainbow' Division, at Château-Thierry in 1918. Finally, I especially thank Bonar, Mary and Hugh Sykes for their valuable assistance and warm hospitality at Conock Manor. I appreciated my sponsorship from the United States Air Force Academy and the Air Force Institute of Technology; this study reflects my personal opinions rather than the views of the United States Air Force.

Abbreviations

Adm	Admiralty Files, PRO
ADL	Admiralty Letters, NMM
AHB	Air Historical Branch
Air	Air Files, PRO
BEF	British Expeditionary Force
CAB	Cabinet Office Paper, PRO
CAS	Chief of the Air Staff
CAT	Civil Air Transport (Committee)
CFS	Central Flying School
CGCA	Controller General of Civil Aviation
CGE	Controller General of Equipment
CID	Committee of Imperial Defence
CIGS	Chief of the Imperial General Staff
DGAP	Director General of Aircraft Production
DGMA	Director General of Military Aeronautics
GHQ	General Headquarters
GOC	General Officer Commanding
IAF	Independent Air Force of the RAF
IF	Independent Force of the Allied Air Forces
IFF	Indentification Friend or Foe
IWM	Imperial War Museum
LADA	London Air Defence Area
MEF	Mediterranean Expeditionary Force
MGP	Master General of Personnel
NMM	National Maritime Museum
OHL	Oberste Heeresleitung (Supreme Army Command)
PRO	Public Record Office
RAF	Royal Air Force
RAFM	Royal Air Force Museum
RES	Royal Empire Society
RFC	Royal Flying Corps
RN	Royal Navy
RNAS	Royal Naval Air Service
WAAC	Women's Army Auxiliary Corps
WLMD	Women's Legion Motor Drivers
WO	War Office Files, PRO
WRAF	Women's Royal Air Force

Introduction

On 10 October 1954 a famous flyer wrote to a grieving widow:

> I was deeply touched by your husband's wish that I should scatter the ashes over Salisbury Plain. I will, of course, do so . . . I always had admiration and affection for your husband and will always remember his kindness and help in the early days at Farnborough.
>
> Yours Very Sincerely
> Geoffrey de Havilland

Later de Havilland wrote, 'Yes, of course it will be a Secret and I would hate to have the slightest publicity made out of what is such a private and personal matter.'[1] The founding Chief of the Air Staff (CAS) of Britain's Royal Air Force (RAF) had died. Why such mystery surrounding the final tribute to Sir Frederick Sykes?[2]

Many air power enthusiasts, military historians and active-duty RAF members have never heard of Sykes and would argue that Lord Trenchard was the founding father of the RAF as its first Chief of Staff.[3] This is understandable considering that the Trenchard legend has dominated the air force history of the First World War and that few scholars have written about Sykes. Yet Trenchard demanded the acceptance of his resignation as CAS 12 days before 1 April 1918, the birthdate of the RAF, and Sykes was called in to salvage a tenuous situation as the new CAS of the world's first independent air force. While Trenchard's tenure as the first CAS lasted a few days, Sykes held the position for nearly a year – during some of the most critical moments of the war leading up to the victorious climax for the Allied nations. Nevertheless, in most histories of the First World War Sykes is an unimportant participant, and in many he is never even mentioned.

In 1966 the historian Robin Higham noted Sykes' anonymity and remarked that he should receive more attention, particularly since he played significant roles in the leadership of the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) and the RAF.[4] Recently a few scholars, such as Michael Paris, have begun to recognize Sykes' achievements and influence. Paris concluded that Sykes, not Trenchard, initiated the concept of air power as

a means of imperial control and suggested that, compared with Trenchard, Sykes had been treated unjustly in history: 'Considering the rivalry and mutual dislike of the two men, it was ironic that, although Trenchard became the dominant figure in RAF hagiography ("the Father of the RAF"), it was Sykes' theoretical basis which ensured the continued independence of the RAF.'[5] In addition, Air Vice-Marshal Tony Mason, in *Air Power: A Centennial Appraisal*, supports the interpretation that Sykes was perhaps more responsible than Trenchard for what evolved into the RAF's costly strategic bombing doctrine of the Second World War.[6] The majority of air histories, however, starting with the official history by Sir Walter Raleigh and H. A. Jones, *The War in the Air*, have generally omitted Sykes from the story of early air power.[7] Perhaps this is because histories of First World War aviation started during Trenchard's firm reign as the head of the RAF.

A friend of Sykes once wrote, 'In no country is lionizing more difficult than in England.'[8] That statement has remained valid for some British airmen more than for others. It is sardonic that the two front pews of the RAF church in London are side-by-side memorials of two enemies – Sykes and Trenchard. The left pew is practically the only dedication to Sykes to be found in Great Britain, while across from it lies one of many tributes to Lord Trenchard – legendary 'Father of the RAF'.[9] The 'Trenchard school' has dominated the story of early British air power, while Sykes has been labeled both insignificant and a 'scheming intriguer', driven by personal ambition to maneuver his way into positions of leadership. This study will show clearly that Sykes' influence in the air war was significant and that he was not an intriguer.

Sykes was, however, partly responsible for his own historical demise. He accepted loss of popularity among his peers by fighting for overly ambitious air programs, and even when in positions of authority from which he could have ensured proper recognition for his accomplishments, he was reticent to speak up. It was beneath him to ask for accolades, and later, he simply did not desire to re-engage with Trenchard. Because he rejected the rank of Air Vice-Marshal in 1926, on the basis that it would be embarrassing so many years after he had left the RAF, Sykes' rank of Major-General remains somewhat of an anomaly in RAF history, as it became customary for the CAS to be promoted to at least an honorary Marshal of the RAF.[10] Hence, in some ways he deserved his rejection by the RAF and his reward of relative anonymity, which has hardly been an oversight. During the twenty-fifth anniversary of the RAF, for example, an official Air Ministry publication stated: 'Honour to the pioneers of military flying – Henderson, Longcroft and Brancker, Sueter, Samson and Lamb,

and to that towering martial figure, Lord Trenchard, whose genius, foresight, leadership and driving force fused the naval and military elements of air power into one mighty service, the Royal Air Force.'[11] Sykes was easy prey for demigods with less humility.

When Sykes was given posthumous credit for his accomplishments in a London *Times* obituary, the anti-Sykes and pro-Trenchard/Henderson (Director General of Military Aviation) cause was heralded by Edward Ellington, who attacked the story as improperly crediting Sykes with achievements belonging to others.[12] Ironically, Ellington was writing from the United Services Institute in Whitehall, where Sykes first presented his visionary talks to the Royal Aeronautical Society in 1912. Perhaps the one exception to the RAF's general abandonment of Sykes came from Sir Robert Saundby in 1954, when his article in *The Aeroplane* acknowledged Sykes' unmerited anonymity: 'Though but little known to the modern generation of airmen, Sykes must be counted among the few, those very few, who shaped and guided the early growth of British air power, and he deserves an honourable place in the history of the Royal Air Force.'[13]

The only other places where Sykes received any credit in aviation histories were in his own autobiography, *From Many Angles*, and in his earlier work, *Aviation in Peace and War*.[14] Sykes' autobiography is more a collection of ideas than a chronology of events. A major focus is British survival during the Second World War, when the book was published, as Sykes takes ample opportunity to suggest that, had the military and political authorities listened to him earlier, Britain might not be in such a difficult situation. As for the First World War and Sykes' role with the RFC and the RAF, not surprisingly, in both books he has a positive perspective on his influence and the effectiveness of the air service.

The air power story has moved with the ebb and flow of historiographical trends. Initially, in works such as the official history, the RFC and the RAF were lauded as effective organizations that 'saved the British Expeditionary Force [BEF] at Mons', and then went on to capture air supremacy and help the Allied war effort indirectly – by dislocating German war-making. Exciting stories and airmen's personal accounts accompanied the positivist approach as exemplified by L. A. Strange's *Recollections of an Airman*, and Gwilym Lewis' *Wings over the Somme*.[15] Focusing on 'everyman's war', historians portrayed the romantic image of Trenchard's heroic flyers and their superhuman efforts, and 'blood and guts' depictions that bordered at times on the mythical. Histories such as H. R. Allen's *The Legacy of Lord Trenchard*, P. R. C. Groves' *Behind the Smoke Screen* and David Divine's *The Broken Wing* reversed course to condemn air force leaders whose stubborn commitment to offensive doctrine cost the

lives of many young flyers.[16] Recently, with the growth of war and society studies, air histories have focused more on social issues, politics and strategies than on individuals. Contemporary scholars, such as John Morrow, in *German Air Power in World War I* and *The Great War in the Air*, have concentrated on the aircraft production battle, technologies and doctrines.[17] The increasingly structuralist histories by Michael Paris, Denis Winter, Alfred Gollin, B. D. Powers, Malcolm Cooper and Lee Kennett have discussed air power in the context of its social environment: command structures, political agendas, media campaigns and public influence.[18] The role of Sykes throughout these trends has been similar – he has been seen as a tangential issue to the air power story. As this study of Sykes will show, however, he was more than a merely peripheral figure in the history of the British air service.

That Sykes has been overlooked is obvious; less apparent is the slanted approach used when historians have discussed him: Sykes' antagonistic relationships with other airmen, particularly Trenchard; Sykes' supposed 'intrigue' against Henderson; and Sykes' notorious 'secretive personality'. These themes provide interesting reading, and Sykes' apparent inability to get along with other airmen may have influenced the British air effort to some extent; but there are more important topics in the story of Sykes: his visionary theories and significant achievements as policy maker, organizer and leader. Contrasting personalities contributed less to the animosities than Sykes' deliberate fight to achieve goals and help in winning the war with air machines.

What follows is not a biography but an analysis of Sykes' theories, influence and leadership in various positions in the RFC, the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS) and the RAF before and during the First World War. It focuses on his achievements: organizing, mobilizing and commanding the Military Wing of the RFC that went to war in 1914; reorganizing maritime air power at Gallipoli in 1915; commanding the Air Staff of the RAF in 1918; and helping to create strategic bombing prior to the Armistice on 11 November 1918. This study will show that Sykes was a key player in establishing British aviation and fighting the first air war, and that his influence helped to revolutionize warfare by promoting a relatively quick and fundamental change in the way armed forces fought which had a lasting effect on the conduct of warfare. This occurred during the First World War, despite the fact that air power was in its infancy and its destructive effect was marginal compared with that caused by the much larger ground forces.

Sykes helped to lead a revolution in warfare, brought about by the scientific application of air power. People and their ideas create revolutions; machines do not. The conventional air history of the First

World War has portrayed the developments in aviation incorrectly as ineffective, *ad hoc* reactions to external pressures: German bombing, public demands, economic forces and politics. As Morrow recognized recently, there was an enormous growth of aerial fighting and of the aviation industries during the war, and air power was a top priority of governments.[19] He is correct that the air arm – in particular the embryonic strategic bombing arm – did not determine the outcome of the war, but its impact was more than most authors have perceived. Although British air forces in the first air war struggled against a steep learning curve and, like the other services, often failed to live up to expectations with the brutal use of infant technologies, Sykes and some fellow air-minded disciples promoted a new dimension of warfare that was not only an essential aspect of the Allied victory but changed the way armed forces fight.

It is difficult to convince some academic historians that an aerial revolution has ever taken effect, much less during the First World War, particularly when scholars insist on looking only at the meagre damage caused by long-range bombing in comparison with that resulting from artillery. What many recent historians have failed to acknowledge is that the many facets of air power, in addition to strategic bombing, worked synergistically to change the face of battle. Historians may be blind to this reality, but combatants in the First World War certainly were not. German war diaries from the Somme in 1916 focused primarily on artillery; however, during and after the German spring offensives in 1918 German soldiers expressed one complaint above all others – aircraft . . . aircraft . . . aircraft! British aerial attacks stopped their movement, killed troops and horses, cut off supplies and prevented sleep. The soldiers were completely exhausted and their morale was low. They were convinced that warfare had changed.

The administrative and logistical developments to bring about such a change also point toward a revolution. The RFC entered the war in 1914 with fewer than 50 airworthy machines and the industrial and organizational infrastructure to replace those aircraft was practically non-existent.[20] By the Armistice, however, the RAF had 22,000 aircraft, coming from a supply system that could replace thousands per month. In terms of squadrons, the quantum leap in four years was over tenfold, going from fewer than ten squadrons in 1914 to almost one hundred in 1918. The RFC and the RNAS entered World War I with 276 officers and 1,797 men of other ranks. The RAF ended the war in 1918 with 27,333 officers and 263,837 other ranks.[21] Finally – fundamental to revolutions – there was a change in organization. To support such an air service and to pursue new thinking in terms of warfare with aircraft, a new Air Ministry was created and the RAF was

separated from the other two services. And although the focus of this study is on Sykes and his air service, the revolution was not limited to British aerial warfare as similar developments and changes in fighting were taking place in other countries as well.

In addition, Sykes' work and influence did not die after the war. His exhausting struggle against his opponents, including Trenchard, to establish organizational structures and make seminal changes in aerial doctrine and strategy have endured to the present. As this study will show, Sykes helped to create new thinking about the application of technologies in modern war. Most notably, he was a paramount influence in the implementation of the long-range bombing force, the Independent Air Force (IAF). His visions of aerial warfare in strategic and tactical arenas, combining air power with military and naval efforts – using wide-ranging innovations varying from aircraft carriers, to aerial routes, to civil reserve fleets – were decades ahead of their time. His prediction of the dominant role air power would play in war and peace has become reality.

The story of Sykes begins with his challenging formative years, which tempered an independent character and an immured personality. Sykes constantly tested himself and rarely sought an easy path. He had great ambition and continually sought adventure, which became manifest in flying. As the First World War loomed on the horizon, Sykes promoted British aviation development, organized military flying and commanded the wing that would enter the war. During the war he orchestrated numerous developments in army and navy aviation and ended his participation as CAS of the new RAF.

It is argued that although Sykes was not involved in the conception of the RAF and the IAF, he had to direct their delivery and nurse them to fighting stature. Sykes assumes command as the Air Staff is in chaos over Trenchard's resignation and the RAF is fighting for its life against the most threatening German offensive of the war, Operation Michael in spring 1918. After establishing administrative stability at the top of the air hierarchy, Sykes fights other services, fellow airmen and foreign governments, to create the IAF – his crowning achievement – which had the capability and the intent to bomb Berlin as the war ended.

This study then involves a retrospective analysis of Sykes' personality and difficult relationships with key leaders and with the air service in general. It concludes with an assessment of his theories, the air revolution in warfare and a brief look at his post-war years. Sykes thought strategically and technically, motivated by the desire to wage war by the most efficient manner possible. His ideas were to promote and exploit technologies by applying them scientifically; to support the army and navy with air power, but to use it as a separate arm; and to

bomb strategically. These ideas were contrary to military traditions and ahead of their time. Sykes fought those traditions to implement his ideas and contribute to the air revolution, which was just beginning to take hold when the Armistice was declared.

Throughout his life, Sykes remained staunchly devoted to his country, and he struggled against people, traditions and institutions to promote his visions and goals. At times his perspective was too far ahead of its time, clouded by idealism, and seen by military and political bureaucrats as foolish. This led to his estrangement from RAF circles and air power history. Yet, driven by an insatiable work ethic, Sykes was haunted more by his desire to help the British Empire prosper than by his disappointing lack of recognition as a founder of British flying.

Surprisingly, this is the first study of the founding CAS of the RAF. It is not intended to elevate Sykes at the expense of others for his achievements stand on their own. This story must, however, correct historical misperceptions and is bound to spark controversy in its conclusion that Sykes was a paramount influence behind the rise of air power during the First World War.

NOTES

1. De Havilland to Lady Sykes, 10 October and 28 October 1954, Sykes Private Papers, Conock Manor, Devizes, England. The famous De Havilland had started as the Assistant Designer at the Royal Aircraft Factory in 1910.
2. The Sykes family's desire for privacy is understandable, but the lack of public recognition at the passing of such an influential and significant actor in the formation of the RAF is indicative of Sykes' depreciation in the RAF during the latter half of his life and his relative anonymity in British air power history.
3. Air Commodore Henry Probert, author of *High Commanders of the Royal Air Force* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1991), spoke to an audience of air power enthusiasts in spring 1994. A member of that audience (a retired RAF officer) mentioned in a telephone interview, 25 May 1994, that when a picture of Major-General Sykes was shown, no one admitted recognizing the face.
4. Robin Higham, *The Military Intellectuals in Britain: 1918–1939* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1966), 120–1.
5. Michael Paris, *Winged Warfare: The Literature and Theory of Aerial Warfare in Britain, 1859–1917* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 39, 214, 241–2.
6. Tony Mason, *Air Power: A Centennial Appraisal* (London: Brassey's, 1994), 34, 42. Mason states that after the First World War Trenchard was against the strategic bombing doctrine in concept but inherited it nevertheless.
7. Walter Raleigh and H. A. Jones, *The War in the Air* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1922). There are numerous histories, such as Basil Collier's *A History of Air Power* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1974) and Richard P. Hallion's *Rise of the Fighter Aircraft 1914–1918* (Annapolis, MD: Nautical & Aviation Publishing Co., 1984), that make no reference to Sykes. David MacIsaac, 'Voices from the

Central Blue: The Air Power Theorists', in Peter Paret (ed.), *Makers of Modern Strategy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 624–47, failed to attribute Trenchard's post-war theories to their originator, Sykes. MacIsaac did not even mention Sykes as a theorist, which is surprising, considering that Sykes' air power theories were published as the Lees-Knowles Lectures on aeronautics at Cambridge University in 1921 and were contemporary with those of Giulio Douhet. In Myron Smith's *World War I in the Air: A Bibliography and Chronology* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1977), only two books out of 2,000 on air power are about Sykes – both written by Sykes!

8. Lord Sempill to Lady Sykes, 4 October 1954, Sykes Private Papers.
9. The RAF Church of St Clement Danes, also known as the 'Oranges and Lemons Church', was consecrated in 1958 as the RAF's Central Church.
10. Sykes to Samuel Hoare (Air Minister), 18 January 1926, Sykes Private Papers; and Probert, 99–141. Sykes rejected the offer on the basis that it was not a promotion at all, but a lateral rank change, as Major-General and Air Vice-Marshal were equivalent ranks.
11. Air Ministry Broadcast, 0900 hours, 28 March 1943, Trenchard Papers, MFC 76/1/411, Royal Air Force Museum (RAFM), Hendon. Sykes was mentioned only once in the program notes, and he was omitted from the Reception Committee and the historical synopsis, 'RFC and R.N.A.S. Family Tree'.
12. Sir Robert Inaswell and F. H. Brown, 'Sir Frederick Sykes, A Many-Sided Career', *The Times*, London, 2 October 1954. Undated letter to *The Times* by Edward L. Ellington in Sykes Private Papers.
13. Robert Saundby, 'Sir Frederick Sykes', *The Aeroplane*, 15 October 1954.
14. Sykes, *From Many Angles* (London: Harrap, 1942); and *Aviation in Peace and War* (London: Edward Arnold, 1922). Although the latter was published as Sykes' Lees-Knowles Lectures, which he gave at Cambridge University in February and March 1921, Sykes had contracted with Edward Arnold in 1916 to write the book.
15. L. A. Strange, *Recollections of an Airman* (London: Greenhill Books, 1989; first published in 1933); and Gwilym H. Lewis, *Wings over the Somme 1916–1918*, ed. Chas Bowyer (London: William Kimber, 1976).
16. H. R. Allen, *The Legacy of Lord Trenchard* (London: Cassell, 1972); P. R. C. Groves, *Behind the Smoke Screen* (London: Faber, 1934); and David Divine, *The Broken Wing* (London: Hutchinson, 1966).
17. John H. Morrow, *German Air Power in World War I* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982). Morrow, *The Great War in the Air, Military Aviation from 1909 to 1921* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), p. xiv. Morrow stated that, while the stories of famous flyers and their machines are popular, the studies of doctrine, politics and industry are the subjects of scholarship.
18. Denis Winter, *The First of the Few* (London: Allen Lane, 1982); B. D. Powers, *Strategy without Slide-Rule: British Air Strategy 1914–1939* (London: Croom-Helm, 1976); Alfred Gollin, *The Impact of Air Power on the British People and Their Government, 1909–1914* (London: Macmillan, 1989); Lee Kennett, *The First Air War 1914–1918* (New York: Free Press, 1991); Malcolm Cooper, *The Birth of Independent Air Power* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1986).
19. Morrow, *The Great War in the Air*, 364.
20. In 1914 the RFC and the RNAS had a combined total of 218 aircraft, 52 seaplanes and 7 airships. Yet many of these were in poor condition to fly, much less fight. See Mason, 18.
21. Ibid.

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Casting the Net

At a young age Frederick Sykes began making his own way through life. He was born in 1877 to two Sykeses, distant cousins from Yorkshire who lived in Western Villas, North Park, Croydon, south of London. Frederick was the youngest of seven children: three brothers Henry (called Guy), Godfrey and Frederick; and four sisters Edith, Hilda Mary, Lilian (called Loly) and Ethel. Ethel, whom Frederick referred to as 'Number 2', was Frederick's closest sibling, and the one with whom he corresponded the most.[1] His father Henry Sykes was a mechanical engineer and successful businessman; however, his parental influence on Frederick was negligible, as he died two years after Frederick's birth.[2] His mother Mary Sykes had an indomitable spirit and, although she suffered from ill health, was able to keep the family going as well as enter into her husband's business as a partner following his death. Frederick was quite close to his mother and admired her ambitious and courageous attitude. He also had a fondness for his older sisters, who raised him until he was sent off to boarding school at age seven. This was not unusually early to be departing for boarding school and it most likely suited Frederick's adventurous spirit. It established a pattern early on of self-reliance that would last throughout his life.

Sykes' education was chequered as he moved from one school to another. He corresponded regularly with his mother, but he lacked a father-figure to emulate or to ask for advice. Sykes first attended a boarding school in Brighton that was run by a Mrs Hodges and another lady, and he then transferred to the Whitgift School, an old and well-established public school, which he attended from 1889–91.[3] Whitgift may have been a difficult social adjustment for Sykes, but it prepared him well academically and marked the end of his formal education.[4] When he was nearly 15 he left for Paris to learn French and German. There a succession of widows taught him and for a time he worked in various jobs to support himself. Sykes took education seriously and received a firm enough scholastic foundation so that he had little difficulty in demonstrating his intellectual abilities later in life.

While in Paris, Sykes first began to exhibit traits which would mark his personality. To satisfy an inner drive to explore the unfamiliar and to challenge himself, he set goals to test his limitations and determine his level of endurance.[5] Perhaps this was because he was physically smaller than most of his peers and felt the need to match them (which he certainly did). Sykes was not only self-reliant but self-confident – carrying himself with an erect posture, eyes straight ahead, as if posed to challenge any obstacles than might appear in his path. At the age of 16 Sykes dared to traverse potentially dangerous areas of Paris, walking, during one particular adventure, over 60 miles in a day.[6] He was undaunted by the fact that he was a boy of slight build, living in a foreign country and without much family support. His ambition at that time to serve in the Diplomatic Corps was both idealistic and unrealistic for he had no finances. After visiting Switzerland as part of his education, Sykes returned to London to work temporarily in a shipping firm before launching another quest, this time to the island then known as Ceylon.

Still in his teens, Sykes had chosen a rather ambitious and exotic adventure to learn the business of tea planting in the hope of working his way up the system to become a successful plantation owner. A hard worker, the actual labor involved in farming tea was not difficult for Sykes, even though the geography and especially the climate of Ceylon were quite different from those of London or Paris. Writing home about the thick jungle, infernal dampness and lack of floors or running water in his bungalow, Sykes stated, 'It is an awful life for any one but I think if I were a woman out here I would shoot myself straight off.'[7] He challenged himself, gained respect from fellow workers and plantation owners who thought he would never last in the environment, and was offered the position of assistant manager of an estate. Nevertheless, after working in the tea industry for a time he noticed that most of his fellow workers wished to leave but stayed because of indebtedness. Sykes surmised that his prospects for great success were dim and decided that a better quest might be in Africa.

The opportunity to leave did not come quickly, however. Sykes endured his situation and adjusted to the different life by socializing and seeking new physical and intellectual challenges. For Sykes, trying to mix with a crowd was much more difficult than climbing a mountain or learning a new language. He proudly wrote home of his accomplishments at a local dance – that he had danced and had actually enjoyed himself, quickly reassuring his mother that he had not become drunk like the other men.[8] He tried to improve his accommodation in case a member of the family came for a visit, and he explored the island in his free time. Perhaps his most ambitious endeavor was a 40-mile journey in the dark through thick jungle up

steep mountain slopes to the Temple of Buddha's Footstep.[9] Despite having tried to embrace the culture by learning Tamil and exploring the teachings of Buddhism, Sykes became frustrated with his surroundings. He relayed to his mother his regret that he had felt animosity toward some of the local people who had taken advantage of his innocence and inexperience.

Thus in Ceylon Sykes first exhibited his preference for proper society and his utter distaste for injustice and laziness. He wrote in a fit of frustration, 'I do hate these natives more and more the longer I stay amongst them I think. Cowardly, mean, despicable, villainous, beasts, there – that ought to have done me good.'[10] In contrast to them, he found the theosophist Mrs Besant, who had an Ashram in Madras, to have been charming and wonderfully eloquent.[11] Ceylon was an important ingredient in Sykes' early years, as it reinforced his determination to work hard to achieve a satisfactory position in life.

His return to England also was not without adventure, as he took a circuitous route through the Orient and North America. Just as the English had decided that China, Burma and Japan were the 'Far East', Sykes held similarly ethnocentric attitudes during his youth. During his trip around the world he was impressed by all the contributions his British ancestors had made. This impression remained with him for life, as he envisioned the English-speaking peoples to be the hope of the future for world peace and endeavored to help the Empire in that noble quest.[12]

When the long-brewing hostilities in the Orange Free State and the Transvaal erupted into war, Sykes finally saw an opportunity to satisfy his zeal for Africa and serve the Queen at the same time. This change of direction toward the military would transform his life. He sailed for South Africa and upon his arrival in Cape Town enlisted with the Imperial Yeomanry Scouts and was soon on a train to Bloemfontein. Although in the bottom ranks, Sykes took notice of different commanders' leadership styles and approaches to combat. He appreciated Lord Roberts's 'great forbearance' with the Boers, but acknowledged that it was less successful than that of his successor Lord Kitchener, who pursued a more ruthless policy of search and destroy. Sykes most admired the leadership of the enemy – particularly of the commanders Christian De Wet and Louis Botha – and their use of irregular warfare. He also appreciated the response of the British colonies, who strongly supported Britain's side in the conflict by sending troops immediately.[13]

Sykes was not impressed with the British military. He stated that they were 'caught napping', had poor intelligence, were outnumbered, and fought unsuccessfully against an unconventional army. After an all-night march to reinforce the poorly-defended post at Roodevall,

Sykes' unit encountered the enemy from all directions. Without any artillery to counter enemy shelling, the traditional British tactics in battle failed under fire. They argued heroically against the thought of surrender but surrendered nevertheless.

Sykes' experiences as De Wet's prisoner of war constituted his most significant memories of the Boer War. Used to long marches under difficult conditions, Sykes again proved his remarkable endurance by outlasting the enemy. The Boers were unable to keep their prisoners any longer and freed Sykes, who made another long walk over the pass to Ladysmith, where he caught a ride to Cape Town. Yet his impressions of the enemy lasted. He respected the way they treated their horses, and he admired their organizational system. Against the poorly prepared British forces they were efficient and effective.

Back at Cape Town, Sykes did not arrive with pomp and circumstance as the survivor of a great ordeal. Instead, the Imperial Yeomanry Scouts were disbanded and Sykes had to seek new employment. He joined the bodyguard of Lord Roberts, who would later play a significant part in Sykes' military career by supporting his endeavors in air power.[14] After six months of duty, Sykes experienced his second significant event of the war. His unit, out on patrol, was ordered to ride to a particular location to reinforce a town. Because they had seen the enemy earlier and had been deceived into thinking the Boers were fleeing, Sykes' cavalry column moved vulnerably up a valley where they soon encountered their forward scouts returning under fire. It was too late to avoid envelopment as the enemy had established a successful ambush. In the fray Sykes was knocked off his horse by a Henri-Martini bullet that passed through his chest.

He was once again at the mercy of the enemy. While lying on the ground and unable to move, he realized that enemy raiders were stripping his body of uniform items and equipment that the Boers badly needed. Fortunately, Louis Botha's brother, one of the enemy commanders, intervened to stop the plunder. Soon British reinforcements arrived to chase off the enemy, and a field ambulance rescued Sykes.

One bullet had entered his lower right side, shattered ribs, pierced his liver and traveled through his lung before exiting at his shoulder. Another had hit his arm. Once in the hospital, Sykes complained of 'beastly aggravating' living conditions and of his difficulty in breathing, but he was optimistic that soon the unpleasant holes would close up, allowing him to return to his men. For some time, however, he remained bent over, could not move his right arm and could hardly walk. He was convalescing from his wounds at the time Queen Victoria died.[15]

Sykes was unable to return to the war, and his recovery from the