

Forgotten Sentinel



One hundred years ago, a field in Suffolk became part of Britain's first line of defence against the aerial threat from German Zeppelins and Gotha bombers. In response, the Royal Flying Corps set up base on this farmland, and young men drawn from across the globe volunteered to serve in this new flying service. Equipped with primitive aeroplanes and aided by new electronic technology, they ventured into the freezing black skies over night-time England to seek airborne raiders. They and their leaders were unaware of the hazards to the human body when it is exposed to altitude and cold, and many young pilots paid a terrible price. By 1918 the newly-formed Royal Air Force succeeded in thwarting enemy attacks, and Britain had created the world's first independent air force with an integrated air defence system to protect the nation. This legacy would serve the country well two decades later.

This same Suffolk field is the occasional destination of personal pilgrimage in memory of American aviators who flew from here in the Second World War. No obvious sign of the RFC had been left by those early aviation pioneers, and the story of No.75 Squadron which served here between 1917 and 1919 had been eclipsed. This forgotten sentinel lay waiting to be re-discovered.

A research project was set in motion by Elmswell History Group to discover the truth behind local stories that suggested the RFC had once flown from a farm near the villages of Elmswell and Great Ashfield. Extensive archival research and archaeological exploration of this First World War aerodrome enabled the real story to emerge.

A piece of history has now been salvaged from obscurity, and the men and women of this Home Defence squadron are duly recognised and commemorated.