



Sir Alan John Cobham (1894–1973)

Alan John Cobham joined Aerofilms Ltd in 1920 as a photographic pilot flying sorties with photographer Albert Russell.

“A colourful pioneer of aviation....few people in Britain have done more to popularise flying and bring it to public attention” (*Flight*, 1973:688).

Alan John Cobham was born on the 6th May 1894 in Camberwell, the only surviving child of Frederick Cobham and Elizabeth Burrows (England & Wales FreeBMD Birth Index: 1837-1915). After leaving school at 15 years of age in 1909 Alan started an apprenticeship with Hitchcock Williams, a clothing wholesaler, in London for 3 years. In 1913 he took the opportunity to become a farmhand on his father’s cousin’s farm at Brockbury. Becoming a farmer had been a childhood dream of Alan’s and his intention was to possess his own farm when he was older. During this time he learnt basic veterinary skills with sheep and horses, a skill that would prove useful in a few years time. Alan enjoyed this work but due to financial difficulties he had to quit the farmhand work at the end of 1913. He returned to London and found employment with Hicks and Smith, a lingerie company (Cobham, 1978). The first jobs Alan had were never really his passion, even though owning a farm got close. From a young age what he had really wanted to do was fly. Little did he know but the opportunity would present itself in the most unexpected of ways.

At the outbreak of the First World War Alan was eager to join up and, after several failed attempts to join with a cavalry regiment and the Honourable Artillery Company, he enlisted with The Army Veterinary Corps on the 14th August 1914 (British Army WWI Medal Rolls Index Cards, 1914-1920). After first being sent to complete clerical work at Woolwich, Alan was soon asked to

become an orderly for Lt. Hannay in France which he accepted despite not having been trained and only recently been given a uniform! In France Alan was attached to the 45th Brigade, Royal Field Artillery but he moved locations frequently, from the front line on the Western Front to a convalescent horse farm in Normandy. Alan was eventually sent to a veterinary hospital in Forges-les-Eaux where he was trained as Staff Veterinary Sergeant and spent the next few years treating the horses on the front line and in the depots (Cobham, 1978). It was during this time that Alan's thoughts turned to his future after the war. With his desire to make something of his life and make a mark on the world he looked to one of the 'growth-industries' of the day – aviation. Alan transferred from the Veterinary Corps to the Royal Flying Corps in the closing stages of the war (British Army WWI Medal Rolls Index Cards, 1914-1920) and in May 1918 he was posted to Manston for flying training. Alan passed his exams and practical flying tests with high marks and a certain amount of natural ability showed through when piloting the aircraft (Penrose, 2004).

After the war ended Alan turned his interest towards civil aviation and in 1919 he set up the Berkshire Aviation Company with Jack Holmes which was, in essence, a joyriding company allowing the paying public to be passengers in a flying aircraft. He joined Airco Ltd briefly as a photographic pilot and in 1920 joined De Havilland Aircraft Ltd as a taxi pilot (Penrose, 2004).

“I took Alan Cobham from joyriding and gave him his first commercial contract. He turned out a grand photographic pilot” (Wills, 1938).

In February 1921 Alan joined Aerofilms Ltd where he was based at Stag Lane Aerodrome. Alan flew sorties for Aerofilms with aerial photographer Albert Oscar Russell. Together they made a very good team contributing to the high productivity of images by Aerofilms in the early stages of its growth as a

company. By using such techniques as keeping the engine speed down they were able to keep the aircraft in the air for longer enabling the pair to visit more sites and waste less time landing and re-fuelling. On average they would visit 30 to 40 sites with six exposures at each, enough negatives to allow Aerofilms Ltd to only need one aircraft in the air. This was the result of careful planning with the two deciding on their route and exact areas that needed photographing, often staying up in to the early hours of the morning. Alan describes a typical five day flying tour which saw him fly between Lincoln, Newcastle, Swansea and Cheltenham amongst other places (Cobham, 1978).

In 1922 Alan married Gladys Marie Lloyd (England & Wales Marriage Index: 1916-2005). They had two sons – Geoffrey and Michael (Cobham, 1978).

During his early career Alan made various successful expeditions and tours across the globe. Working for the De Havilland Hire Company in 1921 he made a 5,000 mile air tour of Europe with a rich American passenger called Lucien Sharpe. They covered 17 countries in three weeks. In 1925 he flew to the Cape of Good Hope and back in a DH50 taxi plane (Penrose, 2004).

On the 30th June 1926 Alan started a tame sounding flight from Rochester to Westminster. However, this would be no ordinary flight and certainly not a tame one as the route would take him via Australia. The journey was a success despite Alan suffering from depression and the sad loss of his engineer and friend, Elliott, who was shot and killed whilst in flight over Basra. Alan succeeded in getting a great amount of publicity for the world of aviation, and himself, so much so that he was summoned by King George V for a knighthood. From now on he was no longer just Alan Cobham but *Sir* Alan Cobham (Cobham, 1978)

During the years of 1929 to 1935 Alan set up, and implemented, two schemes to “make Britain air-minded” (Cobham, 1978:150). The first of these which lasted from 1929 to 1931 was his Municipal Aerodrome Campaign whilst the second was the more substantial National Aviation Day Campaign which ran from 1931 to 1935. His aerodrome campaign involved touring various towns and cities in Britain and encouraging them to set up their own aerodromes. Not only did this benefit the cause of making aviation ‘national’ but allowed Alan to advertise himself as an aviation consultant (Cobham, 1978).

National Aviation Day was set up to let aviation reach the general public in Britain most of whom had never seen an aircraft before. Based at Ford Aerodrome in Sussex Alan assembled a fleet of different aircraft ranging from the ‘Giant Airliner’ (a Handley Page W.10) to medium sized Avros to the small gliders and autogiros. The collection of aircraft gained the name Alan Cobham’s Flying Circus (*Flight*, 1973:688). The circus would tour Britain visiting as many towns which could provide a suitable landing ground as possible. The day involved flying displays, wing walking and even gave the opportunity for the public to have a flying experience as a passenger in one of the aircraft (Cobham, 1978). Aerofilms Ltd often had a presence at these events, promoting their services to the public.

For the second half of his life Alan dedicated himself to making the possibility of long distance flights a reality by refuelling aircraft mid-flight. In 1936 Alan set up his own company called Flight Refuelling Ltd which did exactly as its name suggests. The company was a relative success and paved the way for in-flight refuelling in the future (Cobham, 1978).

Alan spent the later years of his life with his wife Gladys on Tortola in the British Virgin Islands. Alan died on the 21st October 1973 at the age of 79 (England & Wales, Death Index: 1916-2007).

Sources

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