

A Privatised Sense of the Past: Flying Officers' Photograph Albums and the Memory of Air Operations In Egypt, 1915—18

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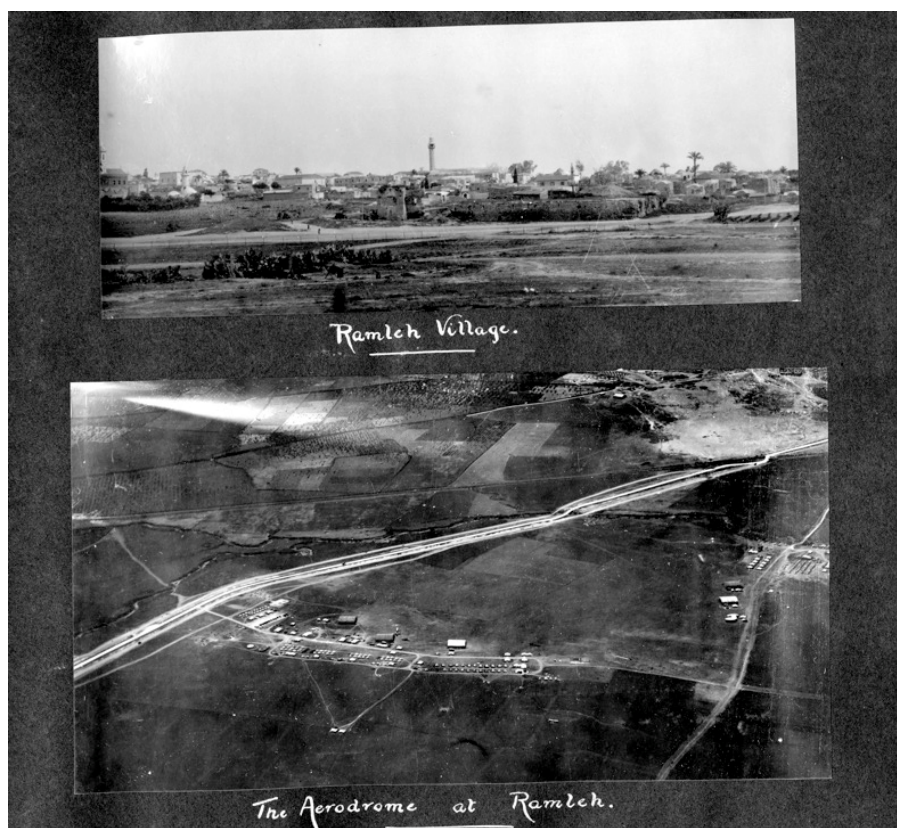
Military aviation played a role in the war in the Middle East from the outset. From January 1915 until the Armistice of Mudros on 30 October 1918, the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS) and Royal Flying Corps (RFC) flew from sites along the line of the Suez Canal over the eastern Mediterranean and Ottoman controlled Sinai Peninsula, and Egypt's Western Desert. Moreover, the Egyptian climate made it an ideal place to train pilots and observers for service on every front. This paper examines how flying officers who had served in Egypt during the Great War made use of airborne photography in their photograph albums to structure their memory of the experience.

The albums compiled by flying officers, now in the archive of the RAF Museum, offer a seemingly haphazard concentration of images. Typical military subject matter comprises: infrastructure, especially aerodromes, shipping and logistic installations; operational activity, including bombing and reconnaissance; Ottoman, German and Arab enemies; and off-duty activities such as sporting events. Many albums also include touristic material, including views of archaeological sites, native types, and the 'Arab Quarter'.

Whatever their subject, the photographic prints pasted into these albums are here figured as displaced samples whose contingent origin was fundamental to their appeal to the veteran owner; every

included object functioned metonymically for what Susan Stewart describes as 'the now-distanced experience'.¹

The paper advances the view that these photograph albums originally served as condensers, crystallising personal memories of wartime experience in Egypt through a process whereby their makers ordered the material at their disposal in order to give shape to memories and thereby construct a 'privatized sense of the past'.²



F. 2Lt George Deacon, *Ramleh*, c. 1918

Courtesy of the Royal Air Force Museum

¹ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), p. 136.

² Timothy Ashplant, Graham Dawson and Michael Roper, , 'Commemorating War: The Politics of War Memory', (New Brunswick: Transaction, 2004), (p. 13).

This notion of displacement is significant. Every image in these albums was first co-opted into a personal archive relating to the collector's wartime experience, then subsequently 'down selected' for inclusion in the album. In the time available, I will address material relating to just two categories of image: the archive resulting from photoreconnaissance missions flown to develop military knowledge about Britain's opponents;



Unknown flying officers,
Port Said Seaplane Base, c.1918
Courtesy of the Royal Air Force Museum

and an equivalent body of photographs of British flying stations and aerodromes. The paper explores the work images originating from these two archives were put to in the course of album production and consumption.

Albums constructed and consumed in private contexts nevertheless reveal convergent thematic preoccupations: they cohere as a body of objects that articulate memories of what Ashplant, Dawson and Roper describe as 'directly cognate, or common, wartime events'.³ Together, they suggest the existence of a post-war 'fictive kinship' in the British veteran community, comprising former air warfare practitioners whose life stories of service in Egypt, crystallised in their private albums, constituted what Jay Winter calls a 'family of remembrance'.



F. 2Lt George Deacon, *40 Wing RFC: Headquarters Staff, and Elements of 111 Sqn, Ramleh, c.1918*

Courtesy of the Royal Air Force Museum

³ Ibid. p. 18.

The makers of these albums were members of the first generation to conduct air warfare, *and* to make choices about how that experience might be represented. These albums shaped memories of a wartime in-group defined by its collaborative exploitation of state-of-the-art technologies; the conduct of an unprecedented type of combat; and of quotidian life on a new type of military installation—the aerodrome, a prohibited place in which a gated community of high-value specialists went about its professional duties.



Unknown photographer, *Royal Flying Corps NCOs at the Pyramids, after 1915*

Courtesy of the Royal Air Force Museum



Cpl Pugh-Lloyd, *Tourist Photography*, 1916

Courtesy of the Royal Air Force Museum

Air operations were without precedent, but Europeans had been making photograph albums of Egypt for over half a century. The material culture of Nile tourism was invested in dominant notions of what visitors should do, and how they should behave. Travel album makers typically conformed to precedent mandating site or activity-specific content, not least posing for a group photograph at Giza, and to conventions determining how album prints should be handled, positioned, and captioned.

Off-duty wartime tourism and its representation is beyond the scope of this paper, but we shall discover that the ruins of ancient Egypt and the infrastructure of leisured travel were never far removed from attempts at self-representation at war. What is striking about these wartime albums is that much of their military content is without precedent, because air warfare and its representation had no precedent.

Photography was as fundamental to the development of military aviation as it had been to tourism. Photoreconnaissance was a core function. Pilots and observers received instruction in the use of airborne cameras, and specialist technicians staffed aerodrome camera bays.⁴ Prints emanating from aerodrome dark rooms became an essential element of the narrative resources of an emerging technocratic culture, and were therefore constitutive of social identities. Like stocks of tourist prints maintained by commercial photographic studios in Lower Egypt, this growing military archive developed a repertoire of shared and recognised forms that was subsequently appropriated by the makers of souvenir albums in order to locate themselves, through processes of remembering, within the structure of their former social worlds.

Remembering

⁴ By December 1916 photoreconnaissance skills were taught at all the 'Higher Training' squadrons in Egypt, at Aboukir, Suez, and Ismailia. See Royal Flying Corps, 'Diary of Important Events No.3 School of Military Aeronautics', (Egypt, 1917).



Cpl Pugh-Lloyd, *Souvenir D'Egypt*, after 1916

Courtesy of the Royal Air Force Museum

The title page of Cpl Pugh-Lloyd's album, *Souvenir d'Egypt*, reminds us that albums were invested in processes of remembering.

Elizabeth Edwards argues that:

It is not merely the image *qua* image that is the focus of contemplation, evocation and memory, but that its material forms, enhanced by its presentational forms, are central to its function as a socially salient object. These material forms exist in dialogue with the image itself to make meaning and to create the focus for memory and evocation.⁵

The albums examined here are objects in which three ontological layers combine. The *content* of each *photograph* continuously depicts a past moment; the *prints* themselves are material objects, selected and retained, then revisited and again selected for

⁵ Elizabeth Edwards, *Photographs as Objects of Memory*, in Fiona and Raiford Guins Candlin, *The Object Reader*, (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 332.

inclusion in an album; while, thirdly, the *entire album* is an object whose inclusions, omissions and privileges reveal something of the owner's negotiation of the past.

The owners of souvenir albums conserved and valued them because they promised their owner access to his past on his terms. Stewart proposes that souvenir objects serve as traces of an authentic past experience outside the parameters of the normal, repeatable world in which they come to be stored, handled and viewed: the souvenir: 'always displays the romance of contraband, for its scandal is its removal from its "natural" location. Yet it is only by means of its material relation to that location that it acquires its value.'⁶



Flt Lt Sitwell RNAS and Lt E Williamson E Yorks Regt, *Beersheba Station*, 1917

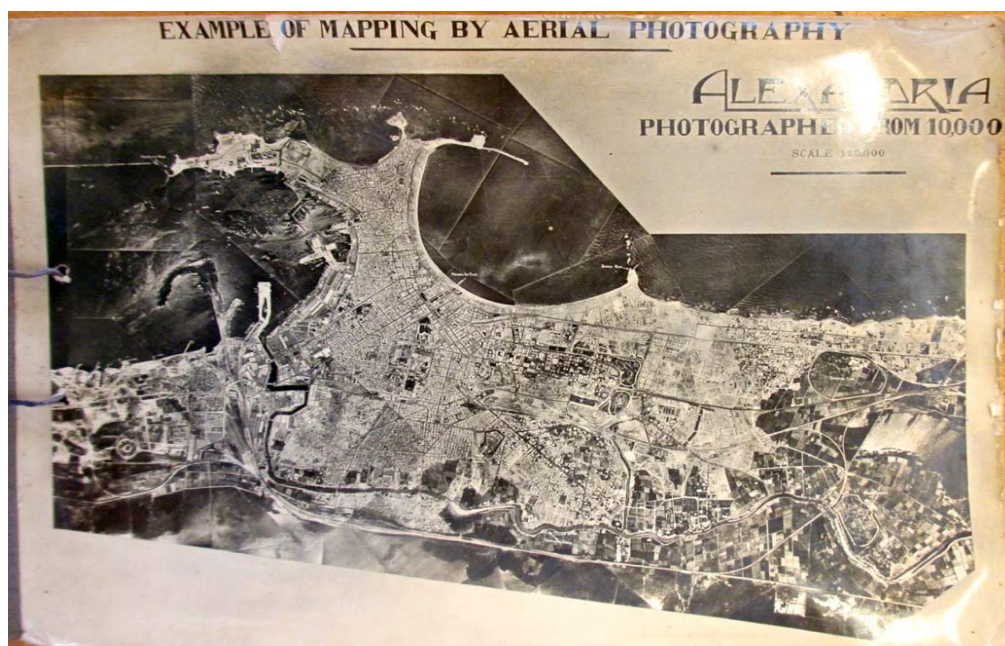
Courtesy of the Royal Air Force Museum

⁶ Stewart, p. 135.

These albums continue to be conserved and esteemed today because their military content offers visual access to the origins of British airpower. With minimal recourse to captions, and little or no access to the vast quantities of documentation generated by industrial warfare, they make possible a re-seeing of the infrastructure and activities of the nascent RNAS and RFC, organisations without an established identity, or much of a history, when the material that came to be selected for inclusion was collected.

One way in which these photograph albums enable a re-seeing of beginnings is through prints taken from plates exposed over enemy territory of locations of intelligence interest.

Such images are supreme examples of photographs privileged for their documentary, or use value; as images that, when analysed, revealed apparently inalienable facts about enemy activity, terrain and infrastructure. When analysed in conjunction with other images of the same location taken over time, they provided the means to develop a detailed understanding of potential target sets, such as the railway junction at Beersheba, for example.



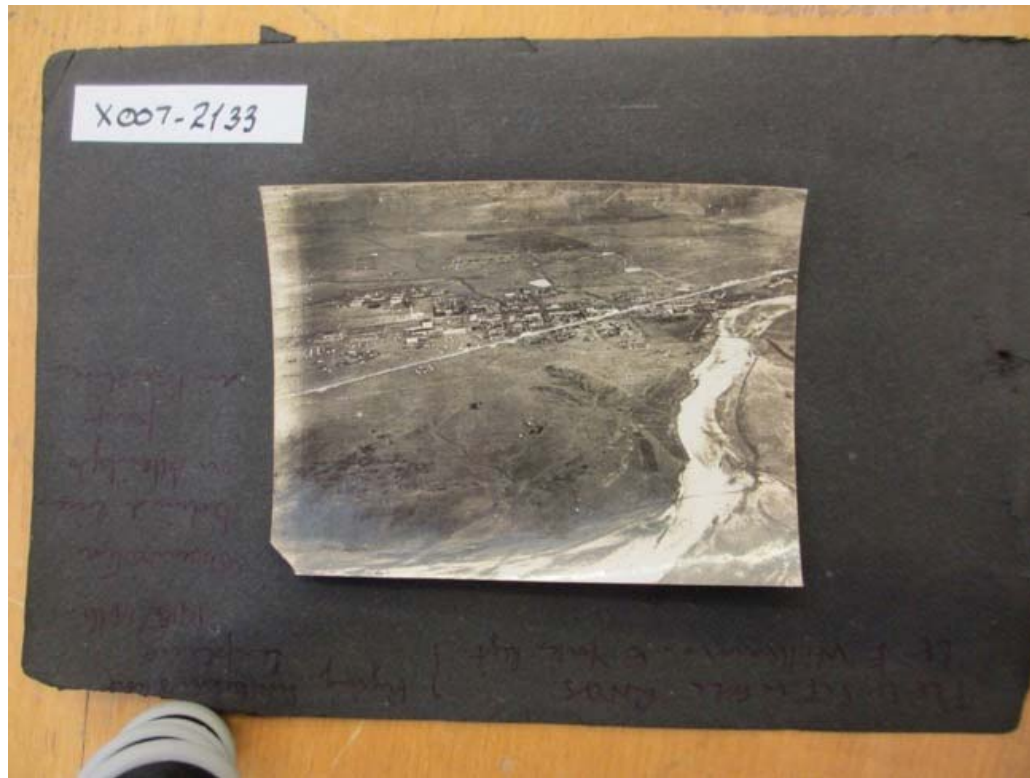
Unknown flying officer's album on grey card, *Example of Mapping By Aerial Photography: Alexandria Photographed from 10,000, Scale 1:5,500, after 1915*

Courtesy of the Royal Air Force Museum

Reconnaissance photographs are ostensibly resolutely utilitarian, exhibiting what Molly Nesbit categorises as 'openness': a capacity always to be defined by the viewer.⁷ Their original use value as

⁷ Nesbit argues that: 'When photographers discussed the photographic document, they passed over it quickly, speaking of it in a general way as a supremely useful picture, much like one would speak of the doorman or the maid. That level of generality was the key feature of the document. It gave an idea of the document that seems unbelievably open-ended, lacking intellectual rigour, flexible to the point of vagueness or rampant imbecility. Yet the document was in large part defined by this very openness.' Molly Nesbit, *Atget's Seven Albums*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 16. The capacity of the camera to furnish useable documents is rehearsed in George Bernard Shaw's exploration of the limitations of photography in relation to art practice. Speaking about the unsuitability of photography for the representation of wholly abstracted, mythic, or moral subject matter (e.g. Shakespeare's Juliet), Shaw considers that while photography can improve on nature, "The process of photography is out of place there. Somehow or other photography is very stern. There is a terrible truthfulness about photography that sometimes makes a thing ridiculous...The photographer finds [a] pretty girl; he dresses her up and photographs her, and calls her "Juliet" but somehow it is no good—it is still Miss Wilkins, the model. It is too true to be Juliet. There is a whole quality of truth

intelligence sources privileged their status as objective documents: open, practical and neutral. But their intended use value was surely not what flying officers who had taken the photographs privileged when they pasted them into their souvenir albums.



Flt Lt Sitwell RNAS and Lt E Williamson E Yorks Regt,
Unknown Location, 1917

Courtesy of the Royal Air Force Museum

It has recently been commonplace to talk of the 'cold gaze' of the photographic lens at war: of a distanced, remorseless objectification of embodied experience, seemingly symptomatic of the character of industrialised warfare.⁸ Berndt Hüppauf has argued that:

about it...the camera sees everything in the most provoking way....". Quoted in (and vehemently rejected by) Temple Scott, 'The Terrible Truthfulness of Mr. Shaw', *Camera Work*, 29 (1910), 17.

⁸ See Ernst Jünger, 'War and Photography', *New German Critique*, 58 (1993). Anton Kaes, 'The Cold Gaze: Notes on Mobilisation and Modernity', *New German Critique*, 59, Special issue on Ernst Jünger (1993). and ,Brigitte Werneburg and

Aerial shots do not represent sensuous or moral experiences of space.... Without careful analysis they are silent, manifestations of a new mode of mediated perception and organisation of battlefields.⁹

Clayton Koppes has cautioned against this tendency, arguing that:

[One] may go too far in stressing the “dematerialization” of war; like many contemporary theorists, everything becomes a matter of representation. [Kaes may discern] a strategic necessity where historians may sense coincidence or contingency; conventional causal arguments are too earthbound for high-flying theorists.¹⁰

I argue that a causal approach to album content is necessary in the context of memory work, and here involves our imaginative understanding that attempting to take usable images of designated locations while being shot at, as these album makers did, was both a sensuous and a moral experience. Detached from the prescriptions of military intelligence production, photoreconnaissance album prints served metonymically to uphold flying officers' memories of the successful execution of technically demanding sorties in contested airspace.

Training photography

Christopher Phillips, 'Ernst Jünger and the Transformed World', *October*, 62 (1992).

⁹ Hüppauf, 'Experiences of modern warfare', 57.

¹⁰ Clayton Koppes, 'Review: War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception by Paul Virilio', *Technology and Culture*, 32 (1991).



F. Sergt Yoxall, *Road and Rail Bridges Over The River Great Ouse, Huntingdon, 1917*

Courtesy of the Royal Air Force Museum

Not every aerial photograph included in souvenir albums was an outgrowth of wartime intelligence activity and its archive. Many, including Sergeant Yoxall's image of the bridges over the River Great Ouse at Huntingdon, were the product of the enabling training regime. Album makers were able to reprise the technological mastery of airframe and camera when returning to this category of image too, for they were the product of sorties to develop relevant skills.

The river crossings at Huntingdon, just minutes flying time from the RFC training school on Wyton Aerodrome, was a logical training target, because intelligence about transport and communications infrastructures was crucial to the conduct of industrialised warfare. Such prints furnished evidence that the album's owner had once been able to place a designated target at the centre of a militarily

useful image, thereby affirming his status as a skilled practitioner in an operational 'culture of work'.

Training imagery was epistemologically distinct from its operational equivalent: the training organisation was oriented inwards, at the skill sets of its trainees, and subject matter was ultimately of no significance. The category distinction is important. When flying officers graduated from the structured regimes of the *ab initio* training programme and deployed to operational squadrons in Egypt, the non-consequential nature of training imagery meant that they were to some degree at liberty to select subject matter that appealed to them, when they planned sorties to test equipment or develop skills. The choices they made were subsequently refracted in decisions about what to include in souvenir albums.



Unknown flying officers, *Kantara Aerodrome*, Suez Canal, 1918
Courtesy of the Royal Air Force Museum

Aviation infrastructure and prestige

Aerodromes in Egypt, including the major operational facility at Kantara on the Suez Canal, were common subjects; like bridges and railway junctions, they were after all broadly similar to equivalent installations in enemy territory. They too had no intelligence value—there was, after all, nothing unknowable about British infrastructure in Egypt, although they were used to identify locations from the air.

But more importantly in the context of the souvenir album, photography of key installations asserted the prestige of organisations prosecuting the first ever air war. The combination of command, communications, aeronautic, motor transport, logistic, and life support facilities, all readily discernible in such images, made for a type of operational site without precedent.



Geoffrey Gibbs, *Aerodrome Motor Transport Section*, after 1915
Courtesy of the Royal Air Force Museum

When subsequently inserted into souvenir albums, photographs of activity on aerodromes authenticated their maker's association with a prestigious manifestation of military-industrial modernity at the dawn of air power.



Unknown photographer, *RNAS Port Said Seaplane Base*, after 1915
Courtesy of the Royal Air Force Museum

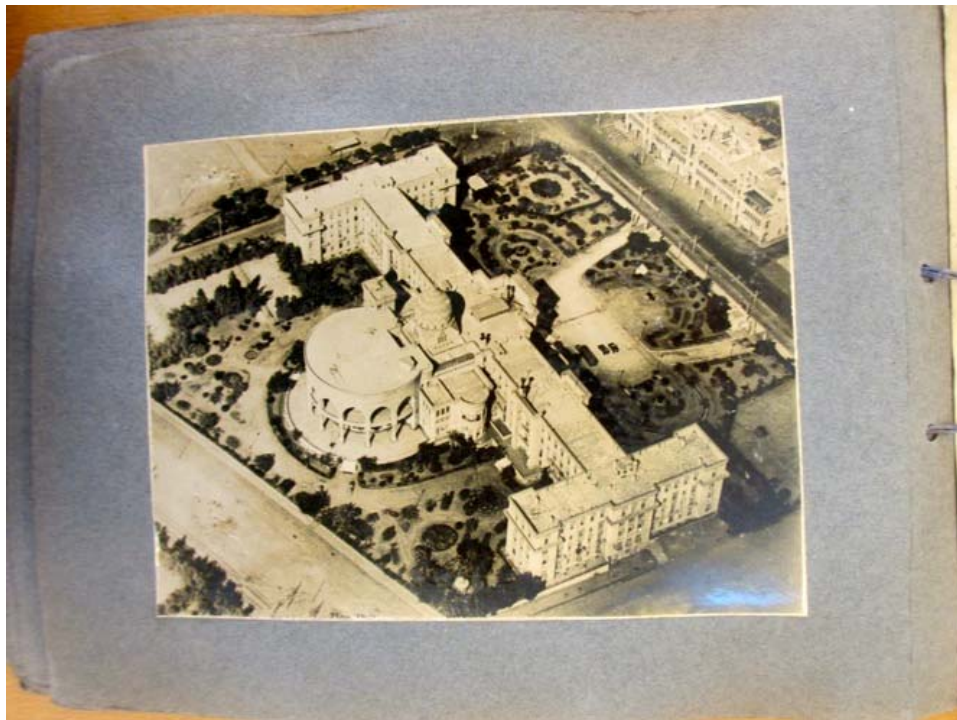
The sense of both professional and emotional investment in a station is conveyed in an undated newspaper cutting included in the papers of the officer who commanded the Port Said Seaplane Base, Lieutenant Colonel Risk:

It so happened that I had not seen this station since some months before the war, when it consisted of three or four beautifully kept sheds grouped around a concreted yard, whence a solitary slipway ran to low-water mark [...]

As we approached the station by water the multiplication of slipways made it look like a ship-building yard more than a mere seaplane station, and I found it difficult to identify the original

sheds among the young town of futuristically painted steel and corrugated iron buildings which have spring up all round it.¹¹

An oblique view of the Port Said Seaplane Base was included on the programme cover of the 11th annual reunion in 1933.



Unknown flying officers, *Heliopolis Palace Hotel*, after 1915
Courtesy of the Royal Air Force Museum

Aerodromes and flying stations weren't the only prestigious sites in Egypt associated with technological modernity. The Heliopolis Palace Hotel was frequently included in albums. Completed in 1910 by Belgian industrialist Édouard Empain, Heliopolis catered for Egyptian and European elites. The Palace was conceived of as a landmark hotel; the French management company proclaimed it the most luxurious in Africa.

¹¹ Unknown, 'Description of Port Said Seaplane Base', *Unknown*, (c.1918).



Unknown flying officers, *Heliopolis Palace Hotel and Environs*, after 1915

Courtesy of the Royal Air Force Museum

Moreover, the Heliopolis Palace already had an association with aviation. In February 1910 Empain had promoted the complex by staging the international *Grande Semaine d'Aviation d'Égypte* on adjacent land.

The Heliopolis Palace was an electrified modern building complete with all the necessary administrative facilities, transport links, and electronic communications infrastructure. When No. 5 Wing RFC arrived in Egypt in November 1915, its commander, Lieutenant Colonel Geoffrey Salmond, selected Heliopolis as the hub for air operations.¹² He moved his staff into the Palace Hotel, and while No 14 Squadron deployed directly on operations, No. 17 Squadron set up an adjacent military flying station and pilot training school.¹³

¹² The headquarters directing air operations against Turkey was established at 2 x Kantara (Quantara) aerodrome, midway along the line of the Suez Canal.

¹³ Wireless operator H. M. Fryer recalls how: 'In about October [1915], I went to Egypt with No. 17 Squadron and commenced at Heliopolis, mostly on fatigues. I



F. 2Lt George Deacon, *Heliopolis Palace Hotel*, after 1915

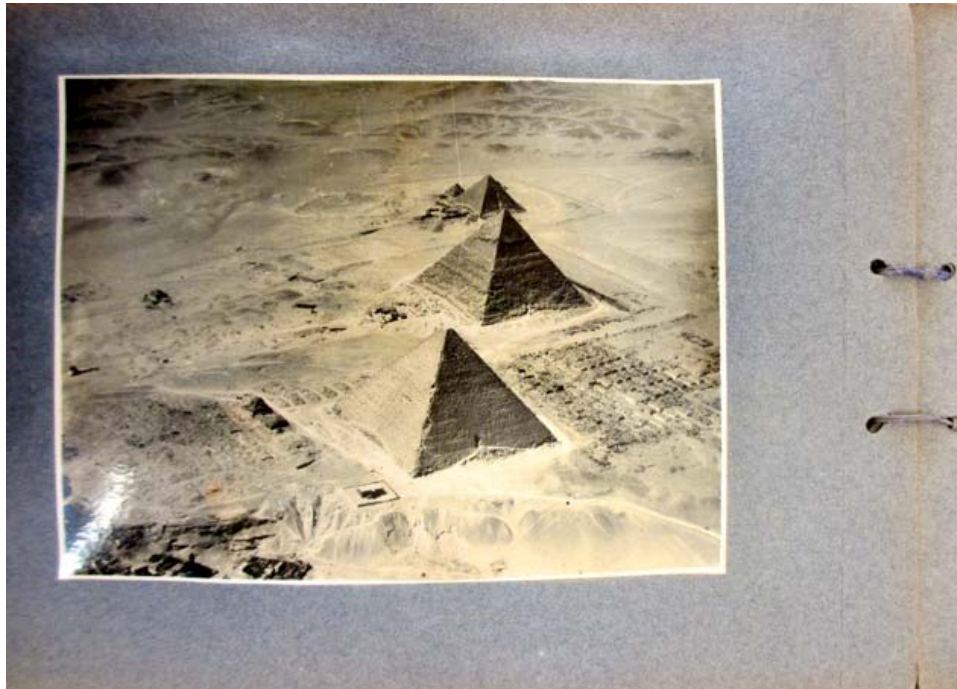
Courtesy of the Royal Air Force Museum

By moving into the Palace Hotel Salmond placed himself in a position where he could capitalise on what Gustav Le Bon, had recently termed 'acquired', or 'artificial', prestige.¹⁴ Le Bon argued that prestige is persuasive, citing the Parthenon to argue that once a cultural object is regarded as prestigious its cultural appeal may be transmitted unreflexively from generation to generation. The

remember one of the jobs was digging a two feet trench right around the aerodrome, and going out in the desert looking for stones, which were whitewashed and placed in the trench for the benefit of the pilots.' E. J. Piercey remembered the: 'Sudden call for Wireless Operators for the first Squadrons to go to Egypt. Left Devonport about October in "Anchises". Landed at Alexandria and thence to Heliopolis with No. 14 Squadron – No. 17 Squadron was also with us. Slogged, putting up canvas hangars and assisted in the erection of Mauric Farnham B.E. 2c. Thence to Ismalia [sic] and on to Kantara.... Typed oral testimony, 'Oral Testimony, Royal Flying Corps Wireless Operators in the First World War. Theatres, Other Than the Western Front', (After 1918), pp. 1-2).

¹⁴ Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd*, (New Brunswick, N.J: Transaction, 2005), pp. 153-54.

Heliopolis Palace Hotel was Salmond's Parthenon; he invested in its status even before his squadrons were ready to take the fight to the enemy.



Unknown flying officers,
The Pyramids At Giza, after 1915
Courtesy of the Royal Air Force Museum

The Palace Hotel ranks with the pyramids at Giza as the most commonly recurring subject in these albums. By 1918, the newly-established prestige of aviation reflected reciprocally on landmark architecture, including the state-of-the-art Heliopolis Palace Hotel, and the most prestigious icons of luxury travel—the ancient pyramids at Giza. Album photographs of these subjects, set alongside images of aerodromes and operational missions, served to prompt memories of the mastery of aviation technologies, of the successful prosecution of dangerous air operations, and of membership of newly-prestigious military institutions.



Unknown flying officers, *Abu Sueir Aerodrome*, c.1917

Courtesy of the Royal Air Force Museum

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