**The Great War- Sky**

(Sombre military music followed by male speaker)

We saw things in Gosport that other people didn’t see. We saw the training of the aircraft in the air practising their dog fights and it must have been spectacular. You would have seen 40 or 50 aircraft in the air all at one time, diving about and firing their guns and it must have been very exciting to watch that. We had our own equivalent to the Zeppelins, the airships Gamma and Beta. No matter where you walked in Gosport, you would have seen these things in the air: massive great things just like Zeppelins.

(Sombre music)

(New male speaker)

The aircraft in the First World War really came into its being, first of all, as a reconnaissance vehicle and proved very successful. But of course, as you have two reconnaissance aircraft meet each other, each from opposing sides, there comes a need to either attack one or defend one. And of course, that then led on to the fact that you needed an escort for the reconnaissance aircraft. Eventually, squadrons of aircraft from both sides went to action purely against each other so they moved from reconnaissance in to fighting aircraft.

Initially, it was basically pistols and rifles. That led on, of course, to machine guns. One of the first weapons was a thing called a Flechette. A Flechette was basically a steel rod, pointed end, fins on the back. And these were in boxes so that therefore the pilot could release the contents of the box above a trench and these steel darts would then fall onto the enemy trenches causing casualties. That then, of course, led on to bombs being used.

(Background of gunfire and bombs)

You only had to be a qualified pilot literally only for a matter of a few days and you were now qualified to teach someone else to fly. So, it was very haphazard: so much so, in fact, that of the fourteen thousand British pilots killed in the First World War, eight thousand were killed in training.

Training consisted of putting the pupil in an aircraft with no lift whatsoever to get him to drive it in a straight line down the airfield. If a suitable aircraft was not available, then there’s photographs of a lad sat in a car and on the car there are wings and there’s an instructor sat in the back and, of course, he has to drive that in a straight line. Once he’s achieved that, then you give him an aircraft which will *just* about fly; it will give the exhilaration of flight. Then you give him an aircraft as an instructor.

(Dramatic music)

No communications. So, the only way you could talk to the pupil was to stall the aircraft and then shout in his ear and put power back on again by putting the nose down. Or it would be taps on the shoulder. So, you had poor instructors, no communications and, worst of all, you probably had the oldest aircraft on the site. So, you can see why the attrition rate was so high and something had to be done about it.

One gentleman that was there, with No 5 Squadron, was a gentleman called Robert Smith Barry and he was going to be very instrumental in developing the art of flying training instruction. And he saw the terrific loss of life of his young pilots: not in enemy action but more through sheer ignorance. He approached the right people. He was sent back to Gosport and so the young lads came to Gosport to learn to fly. But Smith Barry’s real aim was not to teach young lads how to fly but to teach how to fly properly: how to become instructors. He wanted to make Gosport into an instructors’ school. Smith Barry revolutionised flying training at a brushstroke. He did this by, first of all, having a standard dual control aircraft; Avro 504J, Avro 504K.

Next thing, of course, communications and all it required was a simple hollow tube. On one end you had a speaking cup, which the instructor could speak into and on the other end you had a couple of ear shells in a helmet so that the pupil could actually hear what the instructor was telling him.

(New male speaker)

He had these fitted to all his fighter planes. They worked very successfully and it got the nickname the Gosport Tube and it was used for a long time, up until wireless communication came in. And the amazing thing is now, on a modern aircraft, the wire that is used for communication between the pilot and any of the crew is still officially known as the Gosport Tube.

(Previous male speaker)

I think the most revolutionary idea of all was Smith Barry said we are going to teach young lads how to get *out* of difficulties as opposed to *avoid* difficulties. And Smith Barry threw caution to the wind.

And so, the instructor was able to take the young lad up into the clouds and say, “I’m going to do a spin.”

And then, after a few attempts he would then tell the young lad, “You have a go, I’ve got dual control: no problem. So, you put the aircraft into a spin; you get it out of it.”

Just by doing those simple things he must have saved hundreds of lives. You know we still use the Gosport system today; it’s not called the Gosport system. It was adopted by the whole world. I would call Gosport the first ‘Top Gun’ establishment of the world.

(Dramatic music followed by female speaker)

My father-in-law, he was born in 1898 (in Berkshire) and he was called Walter John Seward. So, when the war was declared in 1914, he was actually 16 and he joined the army but as soon as he could, he got into the Royal Flying Corps, which was the up-and-coming thing for young men because flying hadn’t been around for long, so he clearly saw it as a big adventure.

The war had been on for some time and the state of the battlefields in France was appalling; it was extremely muddy. One of the things the Royal Flying Corps wanted to do was do aerial reconnaissance. The aerial reconnaissance side, which he was on, actually had to hold their cameras, which were absolutely huge, over the side of a very flimsy plane so it wasn’t an easy job doing aerial reconnaissance.

So young Seward set of for France in August 1917 and he joined No. 20 Squadron. The weather had been extremely bad over France and the trenches were in a terrible mess. He took off to do some aerial reconnaissance in his plane which resembled a bicycle, really. If you can imagine two bicycle wheels strung together with some very flimsy wood, with some daubs of glue, with some paper covering. They were very, very flimsy. Early flight was based on the bicycle. They just had to get it to go fast enough to leave the ground. But, of course, when you crashed it there was no protection. You didn’t have a parachute; there was no safety harness.

He took off on the morning of September 17th and he flew over Passchendaele. And on the evening, the weather was so bad that night that he managed to ground the plane. So, he crashed his plane; he wasn’t shot down. He was recorded as missing and his mother received a telegram on 17th September from the War Office that said, “Regret to inform you 2nd Lieutenant W. J. Seward, Royal Flying Corps, 20 Squadron was wounded. Further news sent when received.”.

Of course, his mother didn’t know where he was or what he was. He lost all of his teeth, which for a young man must have been very distressing, and he hurt his back and he was shipped home again. So, he managed to last a month over Passchendaele.

The Battle of the Menin Ridge Road took place very shortly afterwards and from the aerial photographs it was very helpful for the Royal Flying Corps and the army, on the ground, to know where the enemy were in that sea of mud.

He’s very unusual in that he served in both wars, survived both wars and went from the bottom of the Royal Flying Corps to almost the top of the Royal Air Force. So, he retired as an Air Vice-Marshall.