

William Sholto Douglas

Marshal of the RAF 1st Baron Douglas of Kirtleside, GCB, MC, DFC
Honorary Companion RAeS

23rd December 1893-29th October 1969

SHOLTO DOUGLAS has special claims to be remembered by the aeronautical community. By any reckoning, his name would be included in a short list of great men of the first half century of British Aviation. Indeed, few careers have been as outstanding in both military and civil aviation.

Second of 18 children of the well-known art critic and dealer, Langton Douglas, William Sholto Douglas was educated at Tonbridge and Lincoln College, Oxford. Still up at Oxford reading the Classics when war broke out in 1914, he joined the Royal Horse Artillery from the OTC before transferring to the RFC on 26th December 1914, three days after his 21st birthday.

He immediately began flying operationally over the Western Front as an observer on the BE2As and 2Bs of 2 Squadron and thus started a most distinguished flying career which was to continue throughout the rest of the First World War.

He learned to fly as a pilot on Caudron G3s in May/July, 1915 and was soon again flying on operations on the BE2Cs of 8 Squadron. It was while with this Squadron that he had his famous combat with the two German aces, Boelke and Immelmann mounted on Fokker Monoplanes—those scourges of the BE2C—for which he was recommended for a VC and, in due course, awarded his MC. This was a very narrow escape but it certainly confirmed his skill as a pilot. With interruptions, his career as pilot thereafter included full-time flying appointments right up to 1932. After 1932, he continued flying as a pilot only infrequently until he left the Service in 1947.

Douglas returned to England for a rest and a tour of instructing at the beginning of 1916 before being appointed to his first command—that of 43 Squadron—in May of that year, at the early age of 22. This Squadron was just forming and, after some delay, was equipped with the Sopwith 1½-Strutter, an aeroplane which had marked a significant technical advance when it entered service in April 1916. However, by the time 43 Squadron got to the Front in January 1917 the 1½-Strutter was out-classed. In spite of this, 43 had a most successful record up to the time in May 1917 when Douglas was injured in a crash and sent home.

A short spell in hospital, some leave and an aerial tour of Ireland, selecting sites for new aerodromes, was followed by appointment to command another newly-forming squadron. 84 Squadron was to equip with the then new SE5A, in the opinion of many—and, certainly, as on occasion Sholto himself vehemently argued—the outstanding British fighter of the First World War. Douglas commanded 84 Squadron in France from September 1917 until the end of the War. During this unusually long operational tour, his Squadron shot down 350 aircraft and made its mark as one of the most successful on the Western Front. Its outstanding pilots included Beauchamp-Proctor, VC (54 victories) and Saunders (now ACM Sir Hugh Saunders) (21 victories). Douglas himself destroyed six enemy aircraft and won a DFC and a Croix de Guerre.



With the return of peace, Lieutenant Colonel Douglas, as he had now become, left the RAF and joined Handley Page Transport as Chief Pilot. He thus became one of the first airline captains (his Commercial Licence was No. 4) and, in this capacity for a few weeks, he made a succession of pioneering civil flights in the lumbering multi-engined 0/400s and V/1500s of the period. However, the restlessness that so many feel after a war and disagreement with his employer about his salary led to his leaving the embryonic airline industry and, after a few months of uncertainty, to his return to the RAF with a permanent commission as Squadron Leader.

For the next twenty years Sholto Douglas steadily climbed the RAF promotion ladder. He held a wide variety of appointments with a bias towards staff duties. The general shape of his career at this time is interesting because it is typical of that of all members of that relatively select band of RAF officers—with the necessary ability to work their way up to Air Rank before the Second World War. His successive appointments were:

- 1920: Staff officer at No. 1 Group Headquarters at Kenley.
- 1921: Chief flying instructor at No. 6 Flying Training School at Marston.
- 1922: Pupil at the RAF Staff College at Andover.
- 1923: Staff officer (responsible for flying training) at the Air Ministry.
- 1927: Pupil on the first course at the newly-formed Imperial Defence College.
- 1928: Station Commander of North Weald fighter station.

- 1929: Staff officer at Middle East Command Headquarters in Cairo.
- 1930: Air Officer Commanding the RAF in the Sudan.
- 1932: Instructor at the Imperial Defence College.
- 1936: Director of Staff Duties at the Air Ministry, responsible for staff officer and operational training.
- 1938: Assistant Chief of the Air Staff with the same responsibilities plus operational requirements.
- 1940: Deputy Chief of the Air Staff responsible for operations.

During these years, Sholto Douglas had many interesting experiences—for example, on one occasion, he spent a whole day in the personal company of Mussolini—as well as his share of successes, disappointments, “black marks” and narrow escapes in air accidents.

When the RAF faced its sternest test in 1940, it was in a way also the trial of the work between the Wars of Douglas and his colleagues. The fact that Fighter Command saved the Nation that summer and the RAF then went on to make its fundamental contributions to final victory is evidence enough that their work had been well done. Douglas had had over-all responsibility for the RAF's operational training from 1936 to 1940 and for Operational Requirements (the formulation of new aircraft requirements) as well, from 1938 to 1940. He had thus been much involved in bringing to fruition several earlier policy decisions of the greatest importance to the RAF's effectiveness in the approaching war. Radar, the eight-gun monoplane fighter, the air defence system and the four-engine heavy bomber all emerged in operational form at this time.

Immediately after the victorious ending of the Battle of Britain, Air Marshal W. S. Douglas, the ex-fighter pilot, was given an unexpectedly large step up when he was appointed to succeed Lord Dowding as Commander-in-Chief of Fighter Command. From this time, until he retired from the Service as Commander-in-Chief and Military Governor of the British Zone of defeated Germany in November 1947 he was to be a C-in-C continuously for seven years—the longest spell by any officer in such high office.

Sholto Douglas's appointment to Fighter Command has been linked by some writers to his alleged involvement in what has come to be known as the “wings controversy” during the Battle of Britain. This was a debate between Keith Park at 11 Group and Leigh-Mallory at 12 Group about whether fighters should be used at squadron or wing strength when intercepting enemy attacks on this country. In fact, the whole disagreement had been exaggerated and misrepresented. Neither Dowding nor Douglas had much contact with the argument at the time and Sholto himself, far from taking up a strong position in support of wing formations, always acknowledged that Keith Park had no choice but to use his fighters in squadron formations in the circumstances of short warning time and limited resources which faced 11 Group in 1940. However, he did feel that the liaison between Park and Leigh-Mallory during the Battle was inadequate and that, if it had been better, both Groups would have been more effective.

When Sholto Douglas took over Fighter Command the top priority task had switched from day to night. The “Blitz” was hitting Britain and our night defences were proving seriously inadequate. However, during the following few years the RAF made good this gap in its preparations for War and achieved one of its greatest successes by developing an effective night fighter defence. So much so, that the RAF established itself as the pioneer and remained for some years the leading exponent of night fighter operations. Sholto Douglas deserves to be particularly remembered for

getting this development under way during his time at Fighter Command.

In 1943 came appointment to Middle East Command where he was AOC-in-C during the period when the Germans and Italians were finally driven out of Africa. However, partly because the air forces in the central Mediterranean were taken away from Middle East Command soon after he took over, partly because of indecisive operations in the Eastern Mediterranean and partly because of the political atmosphere in Cairo, he always looked back on this appointment as an unsatisfactory and frustrating one. Frustration came to a head late in 1943 when, after being disappointed in his hope that he would be made Supremo in South East Asia, he was told that, for political reasons, he was to be made deputy to a much junior American officer (Ira Eaker) in the Mediterranean theatre. After a difficult period of uncertainty during which he argued hard against being given the Mediterranean job and even seriously thought of resigning his command, Sholto Douglas was given Coastal Command early in 1944.

In contrast to the Middle East appointment, Coastal proved to be an enjoyable and rewarding assignment. This was the period of the War during which the Germans launched a major final effort in the Battle of the Atlantic by means of new U-boat tactics and improved equipment. For a time it looked as if the ascendancy which the Allies had gained earlier in the anti-submarine war, would be overthrown and that the Germans might yet achieve decisive results by cutting our vital sea lines of communication. Coastal Command under Sholto Douglas was in the thick of this and its eventual success not only sealed the fate of the U-boats but provided the essential basis for the final victorious campaigns of the War.

At the end of the War in 1945, Sholto Douglas was given command of the British Air Forces in Germany. A year later, he was made Commander-in-Chief and Military Governor of the British Zone in Germany. He now had to cope with problems very different from anything of which he had had previous experience. These included the increasingly difficult Allied/Soviet relations, the rehabilitation of devastated Germany and wide political and administrative responsibilities in the government of a defeated country. One of the most repugnant of many unpleasant tasks was the confirmation, on behalf of the British Government, of the sentences imposed by the Nuremberg Tribunal on the leading German War Criminals, including the death sentence on Hermann Goering, Head of the Luftwaffe and leading First World War fighter pilot who, as commander of the famous Richthofen Circus, had often fought against 84 Squadron over the Western Front in 1918.

On retirement from the RAF in 1947, Sholto Douglas joined the Labour Party—with which he had long been in sympathy—and was made a peer in the 1948 New Year's Honours. Soon afterwards, he was appointed to the Board of BOAC but left it again in March 1949 when he was made Chairman of BEA, a full-time executive appointment.

Thus, at the age of 54, he returned to Civil Aviation and began a new career which was to prove as distinguished as his previous military one. In 1949, BEA had been formed less than three years earlier as an offshoot of BOAC, also incorporating the European post-War operations of RAF Transport Command and the UK domestic services of a number of small private airlines which had survived from before the War. Inevitably, a new organisation derived from such diverse origins faced many difficulties. In particular, there was a complete lack of any sense of a corporate entity.

The new Chairman soon began to make his presence felt and, helped by Peter Masefield who became Chief Executive in October 1949, he surprisingly quickly welded the new airline into an effective organisation with a strong team spirit.

During the early years BEA, like BOAC, had to be heavily subsidised (there was a loss of £2.75 million in 1949) but a policy of expansion and rationalisation was energetically pushed ahead, based on the use of a succession of successful new British transport aircraft developed to its requirements. These included the Viking, Ambassador, Viscount 700 and 800, Vanguard, Comet 4B and Trident series. As a result, the financial position steadily improved until, by 1955, BEA was able to declare a profit—a performance which was repeated in each of the following six years.

In 1955 Peter Masefield left the Corporation and, for six months, Lord Douglas combined the duties of Chairman and Chief Executive. Tony Milward (now Sir Anthony) became Chief Executive in May 1956 and continued in this post until he succeeded as Chairman on Sholto Douglas's retirement in March 1964 after fifteen most successful years.

Highlights of his time with BEA included: the first scheduled helicopter services to be run by an established airline; the first scheduled services by gas turbine-powered and turboprop aircraft; first airline outside the United States to carry a million passengers in a year and after that, successively, first with up to five million per annum; first major airline to operate an all-turbine mainline fleet; and, perhaps most important of all, the firm establishment of BEA as the foremost European regional airline. During this whole period, BEA had a proud record of technical and commercial leadership and of financial success—a record profit of £3 million was achieved in the year that Lord Douglas finally retired. Unfortunately these successes had less than their due of public recognition from a Press which tends to be biased against the nationalised industries.

Although it has had temporary setbacks, BEA has continued to go from strength to strength on the foundations so well laid by Lord Douglas. It is sad, and a sorry commentary on British policy-making, that there is now a grave risk that much of the particular management and operating expertise and skills, team spirit and traditions of Britain's specialist short-haul airline will be gradually dispersed as the airline is progressively absorbed into the enormous combined BOAC/BEA organisation, which the Government appears to have in mind in its recent White Paper.

During his final years with BEA and after his retirement, when he became Chairman of a firm of travel agents, Sholto Douglas tried his hand at another skill—that of author. Although he himself wrote little of the many papers, memoranda, reports, articles, speeches and lectures which appeared over his name during his airline career, he could—when the occasion required—write both fluently and incisively. The two volumes of his autobiography, produced with the help of Robert Wright (who had been his PA in the RAF during the Second World War), are written in a compelling and eminently readable if, in places, somewhat stiff style. These

books were published in the mid-1960s under the titles "Years of Combat", covering his career up to 1920, and "Years of Command", about the years from 1920 to 1947. In their different ways, they are valuable contributions to the historical record of their times.

I knew Lord Douglas only while he was with BEA but I had the privilege of working closely with him during an important part of this period. The original announcement of Lord Douglas's appointment to BEA caused many to think, at first, that this was another unjustifiable case of "jobs for the boys" by the politicians wishing to reward a distinguished retired serviceman who happened to share their political views. Nothing could have been more unjust. In BEA Sholto soon proved to be an out-and-out aviation man who understood, it seemed at times almost instinctively on the basis of a lifetime's experience, the most subtle problems and technicalities of aircraft and their operation. He was, moreover, a born leader and a shrewd and most experienced administrator who quickly adapted himself to the differences from the Service approach required in running a successful business.

As a person, he was an unusual mixture. Basically shy and introspective, he strongly disliked formal occasions and public speaking. Nevertheless, he enjoyed the social life and had a large circle of friends—many of them famous, including such widely assorted characters as Aristotle Onassis and King Farouk of Egypt. He knew many notabilities particularly from the World of the theatre and the arts and had friends in every part of the World. Yet, in daily business, he often presented a rather cold and even forbidding exterior. Although always calm and quiet in manner, he never suffered fools gladly nor bothered to conceal his impatience with verbosity, indecisiveness or woolly thinking. On the other hand, he would go out of his way to give each point of view a fair hearing so that decisions, when taken, could be seen by all to be based on a proper balance of the arguments.

Sometimes perhaps rather selfish with those close to him, he nevertheless liked, and was respected by, people from a wide range of backgrounds. He had an instinctive sympathy for the underdog which helped him particularly in all matters affecting labour relations.

In his home life, the birth of his only child, Katharine, to his third wife Hazel, when he was 63 years of age, was a source of tremendous happiness and pride. It was therefore particularly sad that his health increasingly failed early in his retirement.

In both War and Peace, for nearly a quarter of a century between 1940 and 1964, Sholto Douglas was one of Britain's most effective leaders. Before that, for another 25 years, he had been a prominent figure in British Aviation. He will not be soon forgotten.

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