

William H. Chisam
World War I Photographs

MS – 166

Wright State University
Special Collections and Archives

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Introduction

The collection consists of seventy-two photographs recording William H. Chisam's leaning to fly at the Wright School of Aviation and his service in No. 3 Squadron, Royal Naval Air Service during World War I, 1914-1918. The photographs are copies donated by Margaret Chisam Partington, Chisam's daughter.

Biographical Sketch
(from: Article "Shell-B Personalities: W.H.C."; pg. 4; 1952)

One of his colleagues in the North Eastern Division said of Bill Chisam, Staff Supervisor: "He has the knowledge of life and of men and women that all persons ought to have – and few have." His appearance, too, behind his big desk, is grave and reverend. He has endless patience – no individual staff problem is too small to claim his undivided attention in the heat of a busy day. Always he is ready with unwearied kindness and wise counsel, leavened with a sense of humour.

Who would think, to look at him now, that Mr. Chisam learned to fly in 1915 at his own expense the primitive aeroplanes of pre-World War I vintage and went on to shoot down Germans on the Western Front; that in the boom days of the early twenties he was a producer of oil in Mexico and dangled an asphalt paving contract before the soon-to-be-assassinated President of Guatemala? But so it is.

It was in 1912 that he emigrated from his native Cumberland to Canada and became a farmer and later a fireman in a Saskatchewan soap factory. The fireman job terminated when he narrowly missed blowing up the boiler. After trying various means of earning a living, he turned his skill in shorthand to account as clerk to the magistrates, first in the Courts of Winnipeg and then in Edmonton, Alberta.

The 1914-18 war had not long begun when he volunteered for the Canadian Army. He found the infantry no more congenial than did 'Bomber' Harris, and was soon heading across the American border with his whole capital of 1,000 dollars in his pocket to learn to fly at a civilian flying school in Dayton, Ohio and Augusta, Georgia. (America was neutral.)

The aeroplanes were Wright 'B' models, and there was no recognizable cockpit. The intrepid – intrepid was the word – aviator sat between the two wings of the biplane clutching a wheel which worked what few controls there were. A bar sticking out parallel to the lower plane acted as a foot rest and carried the throttle. A four cylinder engine sat on the lower plane, completely exposed and insecurely held by four frail bolts. Cycle chains carried power from the engine to the twin propellers during such time they remained on the sprocket wheels.

Only on days of the most balmy weather was it safe for novices to leave the ground. The instruction fee was one dollar a minute – or four hours of actual flying for 250 dollars. The passing-out test was to fly to 400 feet and land without either killing oneself or smashing the plane. On the day Mr. Chisam did his test a piston rod broke and thrust its way through the cylinder block while he was in mid-air. His guardian angel was very wakeful that day and he got down in one piece.

A qualified (!) pilot now, Mr. Chisam headed back across the Atlantic in the liner *Adriatic* after a state call on President Woodrow Wilson at the White House. Soon he was over France in the Royal Naval Air Service – flying, amongst various types, a Camel inscribed with the name 'Aileen' – happy recollections of one of the many who had given the exiles hospitality during the last stages of their training at Augusta, Georgia.

Demobilized and seeking a peacetime career, Mr. Chisam turned to oil, and was soon heading for Mexico as an employee of the Mexican Eagle Company. His first job was that of camp boss and cashier in an oilfield camp in the Tampico area – riding around on a burro (donkey) to pay the peons on the pipelines.

In search of knowledge he transferred to the production department and worked with the drilling crews on the derrick floor. Keen drilling competition between the companies made speedy completion necessary, and crews worked 12 hours on, 12 hours off, seven days a week, at the wells and then went on the spree in Tampico with their pockets bulging. Following the period of practical work came an administrative appointment as practical work came an administrative appointment as Camp Supervisor, but, by 1923, salt water intrusion on the producing wells had ended the boom.

Mr. Chisam moved to the Dutch La Corona Company, and after a spell looking after marine river transport at Tampico he took to selling asphalt in Mexico City. He flew to Guatemala with the possibility of negotiating a million-dollar contract with the President. Three months later the President was shot by revolutionaries.

In 1931, Mr. Chisam ended his roving, came back to England, and became Branch Manager for the Dominion Motor Spirit Company, in Leeds. He volunteered for the RAF after the 1938 Munich crisis, was called up three days before war began, and served in Intelligence throughout the war, mainly with Fighter Command.

He was made Assistant Manager, Shell-Mex and B.P., in Leeds after the war, a post he held until 1950 when he became Staff Supervisor under the reorganization.

Container Listing

Box 1, File 1

<u>Item</u>	<u>Description</u>
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2	William H. Chisam in the uniform of the Royal Navy
3	William H. Chisam in the uniform of the Royal Navy
4	William H. Chisam seated in a Royal Aircraft Factory R.E. 5
5	William H. Chisam in the uniform of the Royal Navy
6	William H. Chisam in tent
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8	Unidentified Royal Navy Officer
9	Avro 504C, Three Quarter Left Side View
10	Curtiss JN-4, Three Quarter Left Side View
11	Bristol Bullet, Three Quarter Left Side View
12	Royal Aircraft Factory B.E. 2D, Left Side View
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16	Unidentified Officer, No. 3 Squadron, R.N.A.S., Bray Dunes, France, Sep. 1917
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18	No. 3 Squadron, R.N.A.S., William H. Chisam "fifth from left"
19	Sopwith F.1 Camels of No. 3 Squadron, R.N.A.S. on Flight Line, Dunkirk, Feb. 1918
20	Unidentified Officer, No. 3 Squadron, R.N.A.S., Bray Dunes, France, Sep. 1917
21	William H. Chisam and Ally Shaw with Sopwith Camel
22	Sopwith Pup "Aileen" Taking off, Augusta, Georgia
23	Sopwith Pups on Flight Line
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27	William H. Chisam in Aircraft Cockpit
28	William H. Chisam on his first cross country flight
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30	William H. Chisam and Ally Shaw with friends, Dayton, Ohio
31	3 rd and Ludlow Streets, Dayton, Ohio, ca. 1915
32	William H. Chisam and Ally Shaw seated in front of Wright Flyer Model B
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34	Wright Flyer Model B in Flight
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36	William H. Chisam
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38	William H. Chisam, Ally Shaw and other Candidates for the Royal Naval Air Service

<u>Item</u>	<u>Description</u>
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39A	William H. Chisam seated at controls of Wright Flyer Model B
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62	Sopwith 1 ½ Strutters on Flight Line
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64	Damaged buildings
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