

A SCARCE GREAT WAR 'BALLOONATICS' D.F.C. GROUP AWARDED TO BALLOON COMMANDER, ROYAL FLYING CORPS, LATER ROYAL AIR FORCE WHO WAS WOUNDED IN ACTION IN JUNE 1918 AND WAS LATER DECORATED FOR HIS CONSPICUOUS GALLANTRY FOR CONTINUING HIS OBSERVATION WORK FOR OVER FOUR HOURS, DESPITE HIS BALLOON BEING SUBJECTED HEAVY FIRE DURING THIS PERIOD WHICH PUNCTURED IT IN NINE PLACES. HIS FELLOW OBSERVER, AN N.C.O. WAS AWARDED THE D.F.M



DISTINGUISHED FLYING CROSS, G.V.R. 'LIEUT. R. S. BELL.', CONTEMPORARILY ENGRAVED NAMING; BRITISH WAR AND VICTORY MEDALS 'LIEUT. R. S. BELL. R.A.F.'

D.F.C. *London Gazette* 3 August 1918:

"For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty. At Ecurie, on the 19th of July, 1918, Lieut. Bell ascended in the Balloon at 2-26 p.m., and, whilst in the air, the Balloon was shelled continuously from 3-25 p.m. to 6-5 p.m. In all, 12 rounds (air bursts) were fired and although several of the rounds burst very close to the Balloon and punctured it in nine places, this officer continued his observation work; locating the hostile gun which was shelling the Balloon. He then gave observations for the Battery, engaging the hostile gun for neutralisation.

Lieut. Bell has been in the Balloon on seven previous occasions when it has been subjected to similar hostile fire and on one occasion, although the wind was estimated at 65 miles an hour, he remained in the air and in each case continued to carry on his observation work. Lieut. Bell has, on all occasions,

set an excellent example to his Section thereby largely contributing to the excellent work carried out by them."



Robert Stevenson Bell was born on 5 May 1882, he was a Bank Clerk with the Chartered Bank of India, China & Australia in the City of London prior to joining the General List on 28 March 1917. He served at Roehampton with the rank of Temporary Second Lieutenant (on probation) before going to South Farnborough. He was then promoted to Temporary Second Lieutenant as a Balloon Officer on 30 May 1917. He was then transferred to the Kite Balloon School returning to Roehampton before going to 20 Balloon School on 11 June 1917.

He served in France as a Balloon Observer with 8 and 20 Sections, 1st Balloon Company, Royal Flying Corps from at least October 1917 and was appointed Balloon Commander and Temporary Lieutenant on 1 April 1918. Bell carried out a British Expeditionary Force Senior Officer's Course for Overseas Artillery at Salisbury in at some point in 1918 (exact date not given). On completion of this he returned to the front and was wounded in action on 20 June 1918. However he was back with his unit by mid-July, for it was for his gallantry on the 19th of that month, that he was awarded the D.F.C.

On 1 November 1918, he transferred to no4 Balloon Company and was transferred to the Unemployed List on 31 March 1919. Entitled to the BWM and Victory only.

An account of the action for which Bell was awarded the D.F.C. appears in an article by C. H. Palmer D.F.M, who was Bell's fellow observer on that day. The article entitled Life with the Balloons:

"As for aeroplanes the Luftwaffe never attacked me, though for some months we faced von Richtofen's "Red Devils" Circus so called because their fuselages were painted red. The baron commanded a squadron of the Luftwaffe's greatest Aces, and they usually appeared on that part of the Front which was due for an all-out attack. They frequently brought balloons of our Section down in flames and fired bursts at the ground crews. We were lucky to sustain no casualties, although at one time a successful German attack at Bapaume meant that our right flank was exposed and we were subjected to a lot of shell fire from front and side. This gruelling lasted a couple of months.



Many were the eventful occasions of which I could give details, but I will conclude with an account of an epic flight which lasted 4 3/4 hrs. and occurred on 19th July 1918. I accompanied my C.O. Flt. Lieut. Bell, and with good visibility we settled down to directing fire at German targets, doing two shoots each. We must have given them a pain in the neck, for our old enemy DBI soon attacked us and with more accuracy than usual. Despite evasive action we found the first six shells uncomfortably close. With counter battery fire we managed to send him scuttling back into his hide-out and, for about half an hour, we continued with our batteries firing on enemy points - when back comes DBI with another half dozen shells, this time so accurate that he holed the balloon in nine places, also damaging the CO's parachute and parts of the rigging. We could not haul down without the possibility of "air burst" being changed to "ground burst" which would have caused heavy casualties among balloon crew. The CO told me to jump, but as his parachute was useless and he seemed to be suffering from shell shock I decided to stick it out with him. By counter battery fire we drove DBI to ground and quickly made our descent without further mishap. Glad indeed were we to get our feet on firm ground once more. For this mission Flt. Lieut. Bell was awarded the DFC, and I was awarded the DFM."



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A scarce Great War D.F.C. group