

# Did The RFC Refuse To Let Pilots Use Parachutes During WWI?

Parachutes have long been at the centre of one of the Great War's most persistent myths: that the device was deliberately denied to aircrew for fear it might weaken their fighting spirit and become a means of avoiding aerial combat. The story has been repeated time and again over the years, often in the same cliché phrases until it has become part of aviation folklore. But is it true? **Paul Hare** examines the evidence behind the allegation, tracing the early development of the parachute, its trials and limitations, and asking whether commanders such as Hugh Trenchard truly opposed its use.

The concept of the parachute has been known for centuries; one design is illustrated in Leonardo da Vinci's *Codex Atlanticus* of 1492 and another in *Machinae Novae* of 1595. However, it was not until the advent of the hot air balloon in 1783 that any opportunity to employ such a device arose. After experiments with animals such as sheep or dogs, the first human descent was made on 22 October 1797 by Jacques Garnerin using an umbrella-like parachute comprising 32 stiff ribs hinged from a flat wooden disc and covered in cloth. By the early nineteenth century, such descents had become a common fairground attraction.

The early parachutes used were very bulky and their attachment to the balloon that carried them aloft had to be severed with a knife rendering them unsuitable for emergencies. By 1887, Tom Baldwin was granted a US patent, No. 10937, for a 'Limp Parachute', and the following year had replaced the original flat cloth circle with a dome-shaped canopy featuring a small hole in the crown for stability. Further developments followed but the device remained bulky, difficult to put on and suitable only for pre-planned descents from a stable platform such as a balloon or piloted aeroplane. Escape from a stricken aeroplane was still not practicable.

## The Guardian Angel

In England, the principal advocate for the parachute in the early years of the 20th Century was Ernest Calthrop, a retired engineer, who developed a static line parachute which he named the 'Guardian Angel', and which was used by William Newell on 9 May 1914, when he made



*William Newell perched on the undercarriage of a Grahame-White biplane with his parachute in his arms before making the first descent from an aeroplane in England on 9 May 1914.*

the first parachute descent from an aeroplane in England. There was no suitable seat or stowage for the parachute on the chosen aircraft, a Grahame-White biplane, and Newell took off perched on the undercarriage with the 'chute bundled up on his lap'. Although the Royal Aero Club awarded Newell their silver medal for the feat, the event was scarcely mentioned in the press. Undeterred, Calthrop continued to develop his invention, eventually cutting its weight to almost a third of its original 98 pounds. He also improved its opening speed until he could

confidently state that it would never fail to open within 100 feet of its initial drop, provided it had been properly packed. However, its packing was admittedly a complex process.

## Early trials

Following official trials in 1915, orders were forthcoming for parachutes for use by balloon observers, but they were considered too bulky to be carried in the aeroplanes of the day, and anyway, aerial combat had yet to become sufficiently commonplace for the need for parachutes to become obvious, to either the high command or the aircrews themselves.

Further trials took place early in 1917 with the pack suspended beneath the fuselage of a BE2c, and the final and most spectacular demonstration of the Guardian





# SWISS NIEUPOINTS

Jan Lienhard - www.il-photography.ch

*The Nieuport Memorial Flyers team at Shuttleworth, July 2025*

Visitors to the Shuttleworth Collection in Bedfordshire, UK in June and July this year have been privileged to see the Nieuport Memorial Flyers' beautiful (and spotlessly clean!) Nieuport 23 C1 reproduction HB-RNB, both in the hangar and in the air at the Festival of Flight and Summer airshows in the skilled piloting hands of its co-builder and owner Isidor von Arx. **Andrew Ferry** went there to meet him.

## Project Origins

The story starts back in 1999, when Swiss violin maker and aircraft restorer Kuno Schaub managed to find three incomplete sets of plans for the Nieuport Type 17, and after a few beers one evening persuaded his friend, pilot Isidor von Arx and a few months later another friend Geri Mäder, to join him in an ambitious project to build three aircraft, one for each of them. The thinking was that building three would cost little more than building two, by making better use of tools and jigs, and through the learning-curve effect.

One year into the project they discovered, completely by surprise, that Switzerland had in 1917 purchased from France, and operated for several years, five of the Type 23 C1 (a near-identical development of the Type 17), and that it was the favourite aircraft of Swiss aviation pioneer Oskar Bider, who coincidentally grew up in Langenbruck, just two kilometres from Isidor's home in Solothurn canton, and who sadly died in a crash flying one of the type on 7 July 1919. As a further piece of good fortune, it was learned that at that very time the Belgian Royal Army Museum in Brussels was fully restoring their original Type 23. The team decided to build their aircraft as Type 23s



Paul Stam

*The original Nieuport 23 at the Royal Military Museum, Brussels*

wearing Swiss colours in tribute to Bider, and to name their partnership the Nieuport Memorial Flyers.

The first step was to produce a full set of CAD working drawings, based on the various plans already collected and on accurately measuring the components of the Brussels aircraft. They expected to find differences in detail between the Type 17 and Type 23 (whose only external distinction is the location of the machine gun, central on the Type 17 but offset by 10cm on the Type 23). The sesquiplane Nieuports were known to have



# Did The RFC Refuse To Let Pilots Use Parachutes During WWI?

Parachutes have long been at the centre of one of the Great War's most persistent myths: that the device was deliberately denied to aircrew for fear it might weaken their fighting spirit and become a means of avoiding aerial combat. The story has been repeated time and again over the years, often in the same cliché phrases until it has become part of aviation folklore. But is it true? **Paul Hare** examines the evidence behind the allegation, tracing the early development of the parachute, its trials and limitations, and asking whether commanders such as Hugh Trenchard truly opposed its use.

The concept of the parachute has been known for centuries; one design is illustrated in Leonardo da Vinci's *Codex Atlanticus* of 1492 and another in *Machinae Novae* of 1595. However, it was not until the advent of the hot air balloon in 1783 that any opportunity to employ such a device arose. After experiments with animals such as sheep or dogs, the first human descent was made on 22 October 1797 by Jacques Garnerin using an umbrella-like parachute comprising 32 stiff ribs hinged from a flat wooden disc and covered in cloth. By the early nineteenth century, such descents had become a common fairground attraction.

The early parachutes used were very bulky and their attachment to the balloon that carried them aloft had to be severed with a knife rendering them unsuitable for emergencies. By 1887, Tom Baldwin was granted a US patent, No. 10937, for a 'Limp Parachute', and the following year had replaced the original flat cloth circle with a dome-shaped canopy featuring a small hole in the crown for stability. Further developments followed but the device remained bulky, difficult to put on and suitable only for pre-planned descents from a stable platform such as a balloon or piloted aeroplane. Escape from a stricken aeroplane was still not practicable.

## The Guardian Angel

In England, the principal advocate for the parachute in the early years of the 20th Century was Ernest Calthrop, a retired engineer, who developed a static line parachute which he named the 'Guardian Angel', and which was used by William Newell on 9 May 1914, when he made



*William Newell perched on the undercarriage of a Grahame-White biplane with his parachute in his arms before making the first descent from an aeroplane in England on 9 May 1914.*

the first parachute descent from an aeroplane in England. There was no suitable seat or stowage for the parachute on the chosen aircraft, a Grahame-White biplane, and Newell took off perched on the undercarriage with the 'chute bundled up on his lap'. Although the Royal Aero Club awarded Newell their silver medal for the feat, the event was scarcely mentioned in the press. Undeterred, Calthrop continued to develop his invention, eventually cutting its weight to almost a third of its original 98 pounds. He also improved its opening speed until he could

confidently state that it would never fail to open within 100 feet of its initial drop, provided it had been properly packed. However, its packing was admittedly a complex process.

## Early trials

Following official trials in 1915, orders were forthcoming for parachutes for use by balloon observers, but they were considered too bulky to be carried in the aeroplanes of the day, and anyway, aerial combat had yet to become sufficiently commonplace for the need for parachutes to become obvious, to either the high command or the aircrews themselves.

Further trials took place early in 1917 with the pack suspended beneath the fuselage of a BE2c, and the final and most spectacular demonstration of the Guardian





# AIRFIX HANNOVER CLIII

## The classic trench fighter gets a facelift

I've had a soft spot for the Hannover since 1967 when I spotted Airfix's latest release in the window of my local shop, writes **Haris Ali**. I was thrilled because, despite being a biplane, it was easy to build, and it had a standing gunner figure – a change from the blobby pilot figures in other kits. The markings were OK, but that paint scheme? I didn't bother and that light blue plastic kit stayed as it was, adorned with some badly applied decals. Nearly 60 later, and that same model is back on my bench.

It still isn't a bad kit, but it's definitely not up to today's standards, and given a few years of practice, I thought it would be a challenge to breathe life into it. It's a departure from my usual scales, but I'm all for mixing it up to keep my modelling skills sharp.

I can't understand why a modern kit hasn't appeared in 1/72 scale since then, as all other main scales have been covered, most recently in 1:144 by Valom, with Wingnut Wings in 1:32 and an early Eduard release in 1:48. So, if you want a model of this important trench fighter in 1:72 scale, this is the only route you can follow.

So, where to start? I think I'll use a pair of side cutters this time around!

### Construction

After dry-fitting the parts, cleaning began with the removal of all rib detail from the wings and tail surfaces using different grades of abrasive paper. Once a smooth finish was achieved, the centre section of the upper wing was reinstated by careful scribing. A gravity tank was fashioned from 0.5mm plasticard, while the radiator was made from a strip of MiG Ammo's self-adhesive aluminium sheet, which allowed for the careful pressing of the vent detail using a sharpened cocktail stick. The two small grab handles were drilled out with a 0.4mm drill. Wing and tail control surfaces were removed with a sharp scalpel blade. As the tail fin was slightly smaller than shown in 1/72 drawings, a new one was made from sheet plastic.