

WING COMMANDER R. C. PRESTON OBE, AFC, CEng, FRAeS 1892-1972

RAPHAEL CHEVALLIER PRESTON, who died in a Cambridge hospital on 9th November 1972, aged 80, was one of the legendary band of pilots who opened up the African air routes with light aeroplanes. In 60 years of aeronautical activity he served with the RFC and RAF, was personal pilot to the Duchess of Bedford (famous for her aerial travels), industry test pilot, wartime accident investigator and, come the peace, ATC commander. He helped to found the Guild of Air Pilots and Air Navigators, and was a chairman of the Northern Ireland Advisory Council for Civil Aviation. He never gave up piloting, celebrating his 79th birthday by a 40 minute flight in a Piper in Cyprus. He made constant use of the Society's facilities. He liked writing and sketched well. He maintained a wide circle of distinguished friendships and was much loved. May he rest in peace.

Born on 5th April 1892, in Athlone, Co. Meath, the son of Captain J. P. Preston, RM, he was educated at Mourne Grange and Marlborough. After three years at the City and Guilds Engineering College, his studies were interrupted by the war so he never got his diploma. He was a pupil with John I. Thorneycroft Ltd, at Basingstoke and it was on the train between there and Reading that he used to study aviation from the weekly pages of *The Aeroplane*.

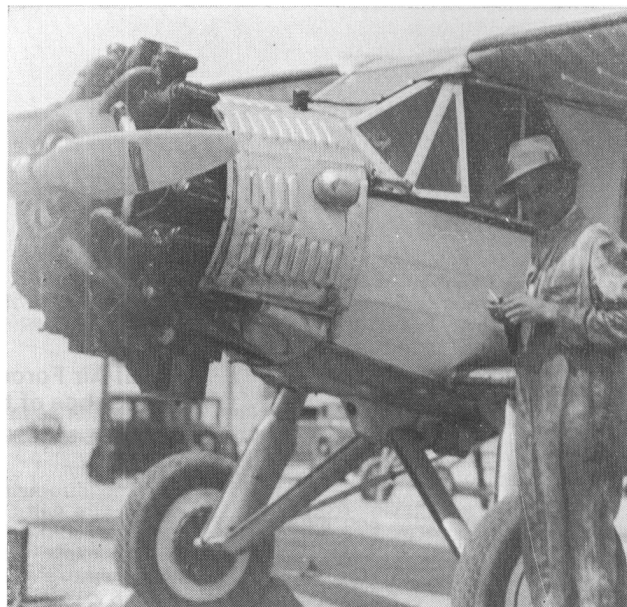
In 1914 he was commissioned in the RE and served in France and Salonika. Transferring to the RFC in 1917 he learnt to fly in Egypt in May of that year and became an instructor. He served with 145 Squadron, Palestine; and HQ, MEAF. In 1920 he was technical adjutant to No. 2 School of Technical Training (Boys) at Cranwell where a contemporary was Peter Portal, later wartime CAS. In 1926 on the reserve he was posted to No. 502 (Ulster) Bombing Squadron. In 1927 he founded the Ulster Flying Club of which for a time he was chairman. He never lost touch with it.

In 1929 National Flying Services was formed with headquarters at Hanworth to develop private flying. "Raph" Preston became an instructor. They wore a smart black uniform. Chairman and managing director was the Rt. Hon. F. E. Guest who decided to open up business for NFS in Africa and took an expedition there in the autumn of 1929. The aircraft were three Gipsy I Moths and pilots Preston, Winnie Spooner and E. J. Hordern. The Moths, shipped out by sea, were uncrated at Nairobi and on 9th November Preston set off for Tanganyika and the Rhodesias. He actually got as far as Johannesburg. He found time during the year to support the founding of GAPAN. Later he made another trip to East Africa with Guest who this time took a Bellanca.

In 1931 he was off to Africa again. This time as pilot to the American millionaire Marshall Field who was taking his English bride on a honeymoon trip in a Loening amphibian—this is a story which has yet to be told. Back in England, Preston with the help of Duncan Davis organised in 1933 a civil air display at Brooklands for the newly fledged GAPAN. Their meticulous arrangements were disrupted by the arrival in his Vickers Viasra of the Prince of Wales.

Sometime in 1933 Preston substituted for H. M. Schofield, who was away from duty with a stomach ulcer, in test flying for General Aircraft who were building the twin-engined Monospar.

On 5th January 1934, Preston was engaged by the



Flt. Lt. R. C. Preston (as he then was) at Cairo doing maintenance work on the Wright-engined Bellanca in which the Hon. Freddie Guest and his family were ferried around Africa to Kenya in 1932. Preston flew the machine out from Hanworth and back again.

Duchess of Bedford, already famous for her travels by air, as her personal pilot. At that time he held a pilot's "B" licence, instructor's certificate and ground engineer's "A" and "C" licences. On 7th April he left Woburn with the Duchess in a Puss Moth and flew down the West African coast to Bathurst. On the way back they were shot at. A blocked jet (in the carburettor) almost forced them down on the sea while flying from the Canaries to the mainland. A year later they were off in the same machine. This time they went south across the Sahara, with some forced landings on the way, to Gao—then eastwards to Kano and home by the Nile, North African coast and Tunis.

Two years later (1937) the Duchess was lost over the North Sea on a solo flight. Preston was left her Percival Gull and took it back with him to Ireland. There he became personal pilot to Lord Londonderry (Secretary of State for Air 1931-35 and staunch supporter of GAPAN). There is record of Preston flying Lord Londonderry with Jean Batten to Dublin in a Percival Q.6 and later he took Lord Londonderry and his family to the South of France and Italy in the same machine. In 1938 there was a hurried trip to Munich also in the Q.6 to accompany Prime Minister Chamberlain on his historic visit.

All that came to an end in 1940 when Preston joined the Accidents Investigation Branch of the Air Ministry under Air Cdre. Vernon Brown (later knighted for his services). Preston's engineering training and widely based experience of flying, coupled with his equable temperament, made him particularly suitable for the job. He was given East Anglia as his area.

When the war was over he returned to Northern Ireland. He commanded the Northern Ireland Wing of the ATC from 1950 to 1958, being promoted Wing Commander. He was awarded the OBE in 1958. For much of this period he was a member of the Northern Ireland Advisory Council for Civil Aviation and its Chairman from 1961-64.

In 1970 he sold his property in Northern Ireland and retired to Cyprus.

He is survived by his second wife Mary, two children by his first marriage, two by his second and five grandchildren.

Thurstan James