

OBITUARIES

Group Captain Frederick Charles Victor Laws, who died on 27th October, 1975, aged 88, had the ability to combine successful careers both in the Services and in the world of commerce.

Born on 29th November, 1887, the son of William Laws of Thetford, he enlisted as a private in the Coldstream Guards in 1905. An active interest in photography brought the realisation of its potential for military purposes and an opportunity for his involvement in such activities arose in 1912. The Royal Flying Corps had been formed and divided into a Naval Wing, a Military Wing and a Central Flying School, recruitment of personnel being necessary for the Military Wing. In order to achieve this, about June or July 1912, a letter was sent from the War Office to every regiment in the British Army asking for volunteers to join the formation. Laws at that period was a Signaller in the 3rd Battalion, Coldstream Guards and obtained a transfer to the Military Wing, which consisted of squadrons divided into those to which aeroplanes were assigned or alternatively balloons and dirigibles. Laws was posted to No. 1 Airship Squadron at Farnborough. After passing the appropriate test and graduating Air Mechanic First Class, he joined the RFC on 12th August, 1912. In a matter of months he was promoted to Sergeant in charge of photography No. 1 Airship Squadron and was the first non-commissioned officer to be in charge of photography in the RFC. Aeroplanes, airships, balloons and even kites were used for air photography at that period and a vivid account of the procedures which were used appears in the paper entitled "Looking back" which was read by Laws to the Photogrammetric Society in November 1958.* In the spring of 1913, airships and balloons were transferred to the Royal Navy, but Laws elected to stay with the RFC and he was, therefore, posted to the Experimental Flight, Farnborough. From that time until 1914 he was concerned with various types of photographic work when a good deal was learnt about emulsions, filters, the effects of shutter speeds and other technical problems. The first specially designed camera for aerial photography in the RFC was the Watson air camera (1913) and Laws was flying in a Henry Farman aircraft with this camera installed in the nose when, at about 3000 feet over Odiham, the engine cut out and the aircraft crashed into a field. That was the last seen of the Watson camera until it reappeared at the Royal Aircraft Establishment, Farnborough, some years later. Fortunately both Laws and the pilot escaped.

At the beginning of the First World War, Laws was sent to France with the British Expeditionary Force and, for a short period, he was posted to an anti-aircraft battery to assist the gunners with aircraft recognition and, after a few weeks, he was recommended for a commission in the Army with the gunners. This did not appeal to Sergeant Laws at all and he rejoined the Experimental Flight which had become No. 9 Squadron in the field in France. In 1915 an Experimental Photographic Section was formed, commanded by the then Colonel Trenchard, later to become Marshal of the RAF Lord Trenchard. It was here that the newly promoted Sergeant Major Laws met Lieutenant J. T. C. Moore-Brabazon, later Lord Brabazon of Tara, who was in the same Experimental Section and who had had an interest in aerial photography prior to 1914. Interesting correspondence between them during the war took place on RFC photographic matters. During this early period of the war, Laws was responsible for the setting up of Wing Photographic Sections and for their necessary equipment and organisation, as well as for demonstrating to pilots and observers how to handle a camera in the air and to bring back the results.

* Laws, F. C. V., 1959. Looking back. *Photogrammetric Record*, 3(13): 24-41.

Subsequently, he formed and commanded a School of Photography at Farnborough to train and provide skilled officers and men for squadrons at home and abroad. At this time (November 1915) he was granted a permanent commission as 2nd Lieutenant in the Lincolnshire Regiment and was seconded to the RFC. He was promoted Major in September 1916, being posted to the Training Brigade under Sir John Salmon. On his own initiative he had learnt to fly; this stood him in good stead for the training of pilots and observers. He became Officer in charge of Photography in France in December 1917.

Following the signing of the Armistice in 1918, Major Laws was concerned with the clearing up work being undertaken in the field and he was then posted, early in 1919, to the Air Ministry in London with the rank of Squadron Leader, the RFC having become the Royal Air Force. A branch had been created, under the Director of Research, for the purpose of designing specialised photographic equipment for post-war purposes and, for the next four years, Laws filled a post at the Directorate of Research (RD. Inst 4) his brief being to lay down a specification of photographic requirements to meet the needs of the RAF. It was considered essential to design a camera with a larger format than the standard 5 x 4 in. plate camera and it was equally clear that plates should be replaced by film. Laws' experience placed him in an excellent position to advise on these matters; he had in fact been granted an Award by the Government for camera design as stated by the Royal Commission on Awards to Inventors published in 1925. What emerged from his experience and association with H. B. Stringer of the Royal Aircraft Establishment, Farnborough, was the F8 film camera with various focal length lenses and a format of 7 x 7 in. Thirty of these cameras had been ordered from the manufacturers but to Laws' astonishment, even before they had reached their destinations, they were rejected by the Air Ministry on the grounds that they were too big, too heavy and too expensive. They were replaced by the well known F24 camera having a format of 5 x 5 in. In October 1924, Squadron Leader Laws was posted to Farnborough to command the School of Photography, later being promoted to Wing Commander to command the RAF Station at Farnborough. After this came an appointment away from the photographic branch to command the depot at Hinaidi near Baghdad. This occurred at the end of October 1930 and was a two year posting.

On returning to the United Kingdom, he was again posted as Wing Commander to command RAF Farnborough, but by this time he felt frustrated and thought that photography was a dead end with no possibilities of advancement. He therefore asked to be placed on the retired list in 1933 and went to Western Australia to carry out aerial surveys, later becoming Director of the Australian Mechanised Prospecting Company. He was back in the United Kingdom four years later, becoming Managing Director of the Williamson Manufacturing Company, but he was recalled to the RAF in 1939, being posted to the Headquarters of the Air Component, British Expeditionary Force, France. The medium bomber aircraft fitted with F24 cameras with which the Air Component was equipped for aerial photographic reconnaissance proved to be totally inadequate. In order to achieve the necessary photographic scales for interpretation, the aircraft had to fly at relatively low altitudes and consequently they proved easy prey to enemy fighters. It was obvious that some fundamental change in photographic policy had to be made, particularly as the Spitfire photographic aircraft of the Heston Flight, which became the first Photographic Reconnaissance Unit, were becoming highly successful at producing information although the Flight needed cameras with longer focal length lenses and a larger format. Laws expressed his views vehemently on the matter and, in order to resolve the situation, the Air Ministry decided to form a new Branch with Laws being

posted as a member of the Air Staff to the newly formed Deputy Directorate of Photography under the Chief of Staff, Technical Requirements. He had been promoted to Group Captain in November 1940 and this was his rank as Deputy Director, Photography, which position he took up on 20th February, 1940. In addition, he was also to become Chairman of the Photographic Research Committee which came under the Ministry of Aircraft Production.

The first step made by Laws was to provide the high level aircraft of the Heston Flight with the discarded F8 cameras and, from the time of his appointment, there came a steady stream of improved and new photographic equipment for the RAF, including the highly successful F52 camera fitted with various lenses, including the 36 in., and having a format of 9 x 7 in. This apparatus, like much other equipment used during the Second World War, was designed at the Royal Aircraft Establishment, H. B. Stringer playing a leading role. Night cameras came into use and darkroom apparatus was improved with the introduction of more sophisticated film drying equipment used in conjunction with hand processing. Automatic film processing machines and film duplicating equipment came into service and eventually the introduction of fully equipped mobile photographic trailers altered the whole practice of photography in the field.

Group Captain Laws remained at the Air Ministry until 1946 and in addition to being mentioned in despatches in both World Wars, he was awarded the C.B.E. in 1944 (O.B.E. 1919) and the C.B. in 1946. His contribution to military photography had been outstanding.

Following the end of hostilities, he became Managing Director of the Air Survey Company (now Fairey Surveys Limited) and, at the time of his death, he was President of that organisation. His interest in photography extended to other fields and from 1946 to 1963 he was Managing Director of the Race Finish Recording Company.

The Photogrammetric Society owes him a great debt in that, with J. E. Odle and F. L. Wills, he succeeded in steering the Formation Committee to a successful conclusion.* He became Vice-President of the Society in 1952, was President from 1955 to 1957 and Chairman of the National Committee for Photogrammetry from 1955 to 1963. He was awarded the President's Medal in 1958 and Honorary Membership of the Society in 1962. Laws had a reputation for resourcefulness and toughness but he could be a good and helpful friend. He always enjoyed outside social contacts and he had been a Liveryman of the Worshipful Company of Coachmakers and Coach Harness Makers for many years. He was duly appointed to the Court and became Master of the Company in 1956. He became a Fellow of the Royal Photographic Society in 1920 and, as well as the honours already mentioned, he had been awarded the Legion of Merit Degree of Officer (U.S.A.) in 1945 and both the Legion of Honour and Croix de Guerre (1939-45) with Palm (France).

He is survived by his daughter, Millicent, who was one of the original team of WRAF plotters of aerial photographs in 1939.

P. L.

Personal reminiscences from J. E. O.:

I knew Victor from 1939, when he left the Managing Directorship of Williamson and I joined in a very junior capacity. My earliest impressions of him were his calmness and confidence. I never saw him lose his temper; in fact, when I knew him better, he used to say that every time you got angry it took a minute off your life.

He was a very good administrator and by firmly insisting on standardisation of equipment and, consequently, high production he did the RAF a great service. In

* LAMBOIT, P., 1974. History of the Photogrammetric Society. *Photogrammetric Record*, 8(43): 5-18.

that context, I recall that when the Americans came into the war they thought a lot of Victor. I was at a number of meetings where all kinds of new ideas for cameras were discussed. Victor made sure that nothing was ever approved which was likely to upset his main target, a photographic capability night and day for reconnaissance and mission success in virtually every RAF aircraft. Of course in the war years, the organisation of air photography was much simpler! Victor, as D.D. Photo., was the kingpin; H. B. Stringer ran RAE Photo Division and the Products side of the business was headed by Hugh Barker. You could obtain decisions in days. Considering his seniority and administrative load, Victor retained a great interest in the technical aspects of photography, which led to his interest in the race finish camera and which he asked Williamson's to design for him. He had a great zest for life, was rightly proud of his achievements and was a good friend to his juniors.

My most vivid recollection was the period of the Moehne Dam raids. Victor instituted special servicing of the F52 cameras at Williamson and, when the negatives looked promising, he had the printing done in a mobile unit in St. James's Square. He invited me to go with him and see the prints coming off the multiprinter. We stood quietly while all kinds of Air Force top brass watched the photographs appearing off the drying drum. He was a great help in the early years of the Photogrammetric Society and was ready to stand up and be counted against opposition.

R. T. L. R. writes:

After P. L.'s comprehensive biographical note and J. E. O.'s personal reminiscence about his association with Victor Laws, there is little that I can add.

In 1954, I had the honour of taking over from Victor Laws as Managing Director of Fairey Air Surveys (as it was then known) after Victor had persuaded me to retire from the Sappers in order to take up a business career. Victor had set a very high standard, as he was one of the few who achieved a considerable measure of success and distinction in his service career, as well as in his business ventures. He proved a wonderful mentor as well as friend. His guidance was invaluable and he did not hesitate to hand over full responsibility as soon as he considered that the recipient was ready to assume it. His experienced advice was always available on request, but he never attempted to interfere in management.

Besides his exceptional knowledge of everything connected with aerial photography, Victor Laws had great financial acumen, which he exercised with success during his distinguished business careers. He has rightfully assumed a permanent place in the professional hall of fame as the "Father of British Aerial Photography" and he will be forever mourned by all those who had the privilege of being his professional or business associates.