

# DECK HAND

In making operations from aircraft carrier decks a practical proposition, the flying skills of William Wavell Wakefield were of considerable value **WORDS: IAN GEE**

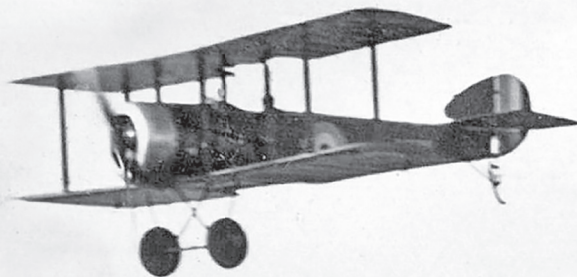
“Last week I fooled around over Sleaford. I was buying a sweater in a shop last Friday and somebody asked me if the person who had been looping, spinning etc had hurt himself badly as they heard he had crashed. I made enquiries as to the day and time and found it was myself whom they had been watching. I said I was feeling very well and would come over again shortly as apparently they liked it.”

That quote typifies the verve of William Wavell Wakefield, pioneering naval aviator. It comes from a letter he wrote home to his

parents on 21 October 1917, while he was serving as a pilot in the Royal Naval Air Service. The following year, he was to be at the forefront of deck landing experiments when they resumed after a series of mishaps. But this was a man of many parts. At rugby union, he captained the RAF — the Inter-Services Trophy is named after him — as well as Cambridge University, Harlequins and England. Later he became active politically.

Wakefield was born at Beckenham, Kent in 1898. His father was a doctor at the London Hospital, but in 1903 the family moved to

Cark-in-Cartmel, north Lancashire — now part of Cumbria — because he wanted to bring Wavell and his three younger brothers up in the countryside, and in a region where the Wakefields have a 400-year ancestry. Wavell went to the Craig School at Windermere, then to Sedbergh School. He stated that his interest in flying derived from seeing his uncle Edward's hydro-aeroplane Waterhen. It was his uncle's previous Waterbird, five months earlier (see *Aeroplane* December 2022), which was first to successfully fly from Windermere. Wavell would then have been either 13 or 14.



Wakefield makes a low pass before setting up for an approach to land his Sopwith Pup, possibly serial 6693, aboard HMS *Vindictive*. The aircraft is equipped with catching gear on the tailskid. ALL VIA IAN GEE

Having visited RNAS Eastbourne, he joined the service aged 18. A letter from the Air Department of the Admiralty directed him to procure a uniform as a probationary flight officer, together with various articles on a list, and report to the commanding officer of RNAS Training Establishment Crystal Palace on 21 January 1917. He spent longer there than expected, in that he played for a United Services rugby team at Rectory Field, Blackheath on 31 March which defeated the Army Service Corps side by six points to three. The ASC team had been unbeaten in 24 matches, with 1,093 points for and 27 points against.

Transferred to France by destroyer, his maiden flight was in a Maurice Farman Longhorn at RNAS Vendome on 4 May 1917, when he ran into a whirlwind. After three months, he was posted to Cranwell for final passing-out exams. There were regular instances throughout his military flying career of engine failures and sorties to search for other aeroplanes which had crashed. For example, in July 1917 — by which time Wakefield wrote he had “just finished” on BE2s — his flight at Cranwell suffered seven crashes in a single week. To cite one such, “This morning [11 July] a chap nose-dived in an Avro with engine full on [from] 3,000ft. It is practically certain he fainted and fell on the controls. It cost him his life. Moral: don’t faint. We are getting as bad as the RFC”. On 1 September 1917, he noted, “Nearly every day in the Admiralty casualties is someone I know very well.”

But his spirit of adventure went undimmed. His 6 July 1917 letter home revealed, “I raced a train in a Curtiss the other day, flew low along its side, licked it into a cocked hat”. He read a letter published in *The Field* magazine of 2 March 1918 about what was considered to be the first occasion on which hunting had been carried out from the air. Having landed, the item said, he “straightaway shouted, like Richard, for a horse or a bike or any form of velocipede which would allow him to join the chase”, a reference to King Richard III calling for his “kingdom for a horse”. That airman was Wakefield, who on 5 February was supposed to have been carrying out half an hour’s landing practice in a BE2a, but was actually away for an hour and a quarter having landed at Leadenham. While an instructor at Cranwell, he also acted as duty night pilot against Zeppelins.



By 1917, wheeled aeroplanes were being launched from take-off decks which had been built over the bows of seaplane-carrying ships. However, if there was insufficient fuel to reach a landing area ashore, a ditching in the sea would have to take place. A new aircraft carrier was nearing completion at Harland & Wolff in

“After one accident, he wrote, ‘We are getting as bad as the RFC’”

Belfast during the summer of 1918, when it was decided to rename HMS *Cavendish* as *Vindictive*. It was the first warship in the world designed to both launch and recover wheeled aircraft. An RAF unit comprised of officers and ratings previously in the RNAS was formed for service in this ship, with Lt Col L. Tomkinson as

commanding officer. The previous *Vindictive*, which had served in the April 1918 attack on the Zeebrugge mole, was sunk at Ostend that May.

Wakefield was transferred to Turnhouse during the latter part of August for a few days of flying practice prior to serving in HMS *Pegasus*. On 26 August, he carried out his first deck take-off in a Sopwith Pup. He made two more on the 28th and 30th, each time at the controls of a Pup. The entry in his logbook for 28 August says he flew “under Forth Bridge”, and for 30 August, “Took off in 30ft. 28 knot breeze”. He was then posted to the Isle of Grain, where the *Vindictive* RAF Unit was being assembled.

The opportunity was taken by Wakefield to do as much flying as possible in Sopwith Pups, Curtiss JN-4s and a Grain Griffin. It was intended that the Griffin would carry one large bomb. He was told the idea was to steam into the Kattegat, fly off, drop the bomb on Berlin and return to land in the sea near a ship, situated outside territorial waters if possible. In anticipation of a ditching, he made a practice landing in the Medway on 9 September, close to the shore of the Isle of Grain, in a Curtiss JN-4 with airbags which leaked. In the remarks column of his logbook he wrote, “landing was OK and I did not get wet although the machine half sunk.”

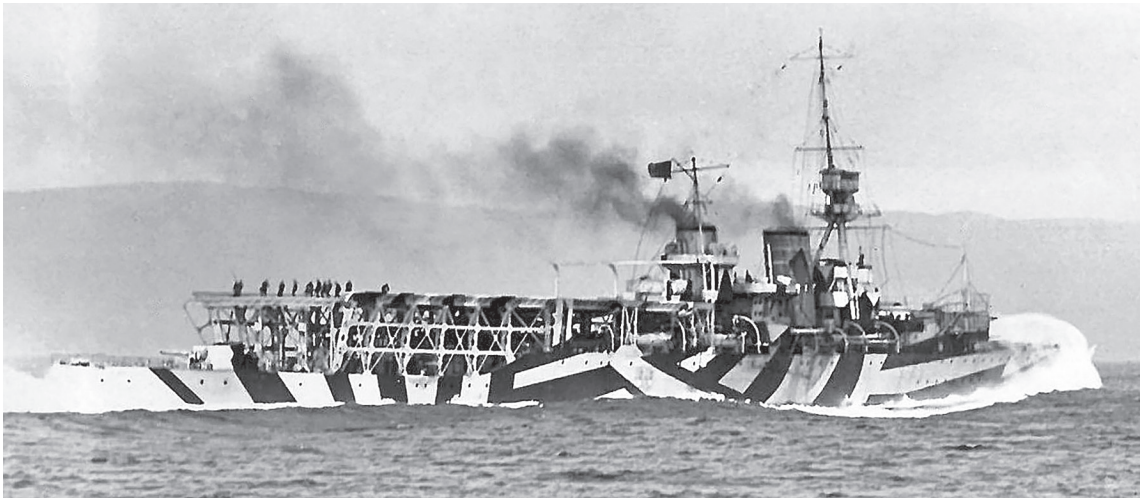
The RAF unit joined *Vindictive* in Belfast during mid-September. *Vindictive* had a take-off deck forward of 106ft long, with a hangar underneath, and a landing deck aft of 193ft long built on an open framework of girders. Folder aeroplanes were able to transfer between the take-off deck and the landing deck by gangway. Steam trials were carried out in the

**LEFT:** William Wavell Wakefield in uniform. He joined the Royal Naval Air Service in 1916, transferring to the RAF upon its establishment on 1 April 1918.

**BELOW:** With a Caudron G.III at RNAS Vendome, central France, where he trained.







ABOVE: HMS Vindictive was to have been named Cavendish, before the previous Vindictive was lost.

Clyde and, in October, *Vindictive* proceeded up the west coast of Scotland for Scapa Flow. On 26 October, Wakefield took off from Smoogroo aerodrome — also known as Smoogro — in a Sopwith Pup and flew around *Vindictive* at anchor. He did the same on the 29th with the ship under way, accompanied by his CO in another Pup. His logbook states, “I did experiments with Col Tomkinson all round ship to find out the bumps, with a view to landing on deck.”

After this flight, it became very clear to Wakefield that with hot air from the funnels, and the turbulence caused by the superstructure amidships between the take-off deck forward and the landing-on deck aft, the air conditions were so disturbed as to make a successful landing on the after-deck a virtual impossibility. However, he concluded that if the ship were to steam 15° out of wind so the turbulent air was carried over the starboard quarter, he could sideslip in to land from the port quarter in calm air. He therefore arranged with Capt Henry Grace — a son of the great cricketer Dr W. G. Grace — that *Vindictive* would do so, with

a landing speed for him of not less than 20kt, nor more than 25kt. Flying folder Sopwith Pup serial 9944 with a south-easterly wind of force 1 to 2, Wakefield took off from Smoogroo on 1 November. After testing the air conditions astern of the ship, and finding adequate calm air on the port quarter, he sideslipped in and onto the deck.

“Finding adequate calm air, he sideslipped onto the deck”

There was no arrester gear, only ropes to protect the superstructure. His wheels touched down within 18in of the start of the deck. The extract from his logbook was, “Very calm. Landed on Deck 104ft run. Swung a bit, otherwise O.K. Tail skid caught edge of a plate and broke.” Sqn Cdr Edwin Dunning had, of course, made the first landing

on a warship under way aboard HMS *Furious* on 2 August 1917. However, following his death on 7 August, no further full-stop landings were permitted. After the recommissioning of *Furious* with a landing-on deck, between 20 March and 26 April 1918 there were 13 attempts to land. Six resulted in damage to the aeroplane, three were abandoned and one went over the side of the deck. Catching gear had been erected for the Pups, which were specially provided with skids. The landing-on deck was completely abandoned after nine crashes into the catching gear. Wakefield had heard about these efforts but did not know the reason for the lack of success. However, as soon as he had made the necessary air tests astern of *Vindictive*, it became obvious.

Although Wakefield had demonstrated it was possible to make a successful landing on the after-deck of an aircraft carrier by use of the 15° angle into wind and the correct headwind strength, it was apparent that to do so with ideal conditions in Scapa Flow was very different from performing the same thing at sea on operations, perhaps in bad weather, with submarines in the vicinity and pilots exhausted after an operational sortie. Moreover, throughout the spring and summer Wakefield had been at Cranwell giving advanced flying instruction, with particular attention paid to forced landing techniques. So, he had special knowledge, and had acquired the skills to make such a deck landing.

In the event, no further attempts were made to land an aeroplane on the after-deck of either *Furious* or *Vindictive*. Trials were conducted by *Vindictive*, during which two Grain Griffins were lost in accidents. Wakefield flew a Griffin round Smoogroo on 4 November. Ten days

RIGHT: Wakefield's logbook entry for his first landing aboard Vindictive.

Date and Hour	Wind Direction and Velocity	Machine Type and No.	Passenger	Time	Height	Course	Remarks
1 <sup>st</sup> 1026	S.E. 1-2	Folder Pup.	Solo	05	3000	Northern shore of Scapa Flow searching for torpedoes	
" 1133	"	6693 Sof. Pup. 9944	Solo.	20	"	From Smoogroo to Deck of H.M.S. Vindictive	Very calm. Landed on deck 104ft. run, swung a bit. Otherwise O.K. Tail skid caught edge of a plate & broke.
TOTAL TIME IN AIR				AS PILOT	584 50 568 20		



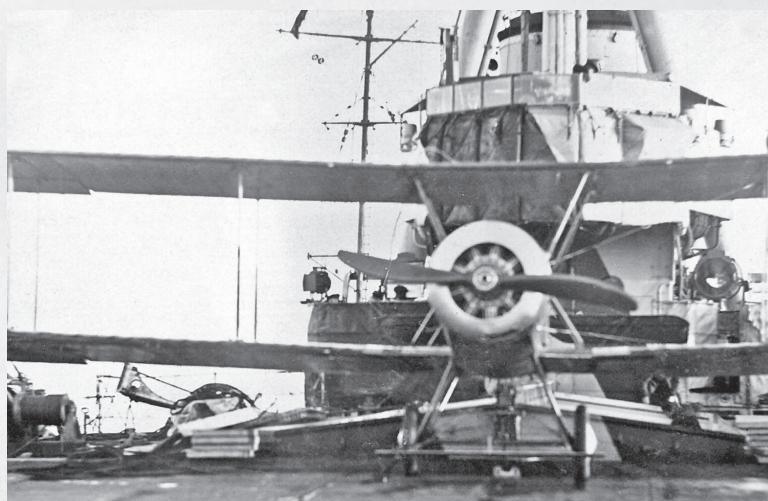


later, he took off in the Pup from the after-deck of *Vindictive* when the wind was calm and landed at Smoogroo. The logbook entry included, "Cowling was not fastened up properly and sparks from the exhaust were coming into the fuselage". The future would be the flight-deck carrier, the first of which was HMS *Argus*. However, both *Vindictive* and *Argus* were too late to see operational service.

He flew over the surrendering German fleet, having flown the length of the Firth of Forth. "It seemed to me as a young man", he wrote, "that never again ever would mankind be so stupid as to enter into the world war which had just then finished and therefore I would be seeing something that never again anyone else would see". Wakefield was a friend of fellow RNAS pilot William Dickson, who had done his initial seaplane training at RNAS Windermere. Dickson shared a view

of the surrender at ship level, and went on to become Marshal of the RAF Sir William.

While still with the fleet, in February 1919 Wakefield received a message from the Air Ministry, ordering him to report to London to join the RAF rugby side being formed for the Inter-Services League. He was made secretary, selector and captain at the same time. Always he received great encouragement from Marshal of the RAF Sir Hugh Trenchard and Air Marshal Sir John Salmond. In 1922-23, the RAF became service champions, beating the Royal Navy 3-0 and the army 13-5. He also reached the final heat of the Varsity 100 yards competition, which included Harold Abrahams and Guy Butler, but could not compete due to the army match. Attending Pembroke College on a two-year services scholarship, he graduated in 1923 with a degree in mechanical sciences.



**ABOVE:**  
As an MP (left) with Winston Churchill, who joined him on the hustings at St Marylebone in 1945.

Wakefield's last flight was in a Bristol Fighter at Farnborough on 9 August 1923, following which he left the RAF. He had flown 24 types, with a total of 590 hours. While being the Conservative MP for Swindon and later St Marylebone from 1935-63, he continued his attachment to aviation: he was Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Air between 1940 and '42, the first director of the Air Training Corps from 1941 and, as such, proponent and test pilot of the one-off Slingsby Water Glider. Knighted in 1944 and ennobled as Baron Wakefield of Kendal in 1963, he died in 1983. But it was in the deck landing experiments that he truly joined the ranks of the pioneers. **A**

Thanks to the Wakefield family archive and *The Field* magazine. For further information, visit [www.waterbird.org.uk](http://www.waterbird.org.uk)

**LEFT:**  
A Grain Griffin on the forward deck of *Vindictive*, which was the only ship to carry the type.

**BELOW:**  
Taking off from *Vindictive* in the Pup, with corvette HMS *Cleopatra* in the background.

