



As a major auction stirs memories of a flight into history that ended in Norfolk more than 90 years ago, **STEVE SNELLING** looks back at the epic achievement of the airship R34 and her gallant crew.

**THE TIMING WAS PERFECT. ALMOST SUPERNATURALLY SO.** AS the giant airship drew close, the grizzly grey smother that had masked its momentous progress was suddenly punctured by shards of light to reveal a wondrous sight in all its gargantuan glory.

To an awe-struck reporter on the ground, it was a beguiling moment strangely befitting one of the most magnificent feats of "enterprise and endurance and intrepidity" in British history, the conclusion of man's first double aerial crossing of the Atlantic.

In that parting of the clouds over Norfolk, he saw "a pretty compliment from the skies" that seemed to crown a truly epic achievement, while others observed in her majestic landfall a tantalising glimpse of the future.

As the following morning's Eastern Daily Press commented: "It has brought the air liner into vision as a practical possibility of the near future..."

Less than a month after Alcock and Brown's first one-way flight across the Atlantic had ended, somewhat ingloriously, with a crash-landing in an Irish peat bog, the airship had stolen a march on the aeroplane.

The seemingly impossible had been accomplished not once but twice and spectacularly so. And the EDP was not alone in believing that the remarkable flight that ended at Pulham air station 92 years ago showed, "by way of contrast with the recent aeroplane attempts, in what direction lies the development of long-distance trans-ocean aerial travel".

Few could have foreseen that the remarkable flight of the R34 would mark not so much the beginning of a brave new era but the start of a troubled and torturous decline that has ensured the trail-blazing odyssey of 1919 remains unsurpassed as the pinnacle of British airship achievement.

The faltering dream of a world made smaller by British-built passenger-carrying dirigibles survived little more than a decade before being consumed by the flames that ravaged the R101.

But now, almost nine decades on, ghostly reminders of that false dawn and a vanished era when a rural air station in the flatlands of South Norfolk was at the centre of national airship development are being revived by an auction to stir the imagination.

For tomorrow, in the heart of London, one of the year's most prestigious medal sales will feature richly-prized honours and awards presented to men who played leading roles in the greatest British

airship adventure of all.

Once worn with well-deserved pride by John Shotter, R34's engineering officer, and Edward Pritchard, who flew as the Royal Navy's official observer, the decorations are expected to fetch more than £10,000 when the hammer falls on Lots 4 and 5 in Spink's Bloomsbury auction room, although few would be surprised if the final figure soars even higher.

Spink medal expert Mark Quayle makes little attempt to hide his excitement.

"Awards to airshipmen as a whole are rare, but items relating to the R34 and one of the most iconic flights in history are scarcer still and here we have two collections so interest is bound to be great and competition fierce.

"These groups of medals were earned by men who were venturing out virtually into the unknown at a time when airship technology and aviation technology as a whole was limited and long-distance flight was hazardous in the extreme. Make no mistake, the men who flew aboard the R34 were truly brave."

That much is plain from reading the medal catalogue which chronicles the two men's eventful lives as well as charting their part in an aeronautical exploit destined to be forever associated with a Norfolk air station famed as the home of the so-called 'Pulham Pigs'.

Of the two, Shotter provided the most significant contribution, while Pritchard took centre stage in one of the more spectacular incidents in a pioneering journey regarded by many as a mission impossible.

Indeed, R34's fantastical voyage was the riskiest of undertakings at a time when aerial navigation was in its infancy and when no one knew precisely what perils lurked in the high atmosphere above the Atlantic, or anywhere else for that matter.

More than that, the 31-man crew, a figure swollen by a single stowaway, were attempting something that had never been previously tried – an east-west crossing of the Atlantic against the prevailing winds in an airship with the most primitive living conditions imaginable and with engines of questionable reliability.

Not surprisingly, their chances of survival were rated at little more than 50-50 and there were moments on the way out when the odds against them lengthened appreciably.

Few among them were more aware of the dangers or the airship's

**END OF AN AERONAUTICAL EPIC:** Main picture, the R34 is man-handled into one of Pulham's giant airship sheds on July 13, 1919. The aerial leviathan, the size of three Jumbo jets, completed the first double crossing of the Atlantic at an average speed of just over 40mph.

**HONOURED:** Left, John Shotter's medal group headed by an MBE and including a rare Air Force Cross awarded for his role in the R34's historic flight.



# Heady heights of

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Medal expert  
Mark Quayle

shortcomings than John Shotter: As captain George Scott's right-hand man for the flight, he was responsible for maintaining and sustaining R34's five Sunbeam 'Maori' engines as they struggled against adverse weather conditions.

In his late 20s and with three years' airship experience under his belt, he was under no illusions about the immensity of the challenge. And while the stresses and strains imposed by the mission were felt by every member of the crew, there was no doubting that the greatest burden fell on Shotter's shoulders.

Having helped oversee her construction, he had been instrumental in preparing 'Tiny', as the 643ft long R34 was affectionately known, for a peacetime mission designed to catapult Britain into the forefront of airship development. The unrelenting pressure before and during the flight in July, 1919, however, took its toll.

As early as the second day, Brigadier General Edward Maitland, Britain's highest-ranking airship officer and senior observer aboard the R34, noted in his diary that Shotter, "who, through many causes, has been prevented from getting his fair share of sleep, is beginning to feel rather exhausted, and is dosed with aspirin..."

In fact, Shotter scarcely slept at all throughout a gruelling, 4½-day crossing beset with mechanical difficulties that tested his engineering ingenuity to the limit.

Typical of the worrying and wearying problems that had to be overcome was an early one affecting the starboard amidships engine. Maitland's terse daily log barely does justice to the drama. "Engine stopped," it begins. "No details yet. Engine restarted. A small screw on water jacket had worked loose, and this has been made secure with a piece of

copper sheeting and the entire supply of the crew's chewing gum (which was hastily chewed first by Engineer Officer and two engineers!)"

More frightening moments followed. On one occasion, during a severe squall, Shotter was caught unprepared as the airship suddenly tilted forward. He had been enjoying a rare rest and was lying dangerously near to an open hatch in the bows. His hurtling descent towards the open sea and almost certain death was arrested only at the last when he managed to hook one of the girders with his foot.

Another time, he exited the airship deliberately, in mid-air, to examine damage wrought by a flying saucerpan lid! Sucked out of one of the engine-cars, it struck the whirling propeller before ricocheting against the vulnerable envelope of the airship.

With the engine stopped, the propeller showed no sign of damage, but Shotter wasn't taking any chances. Fastening a rope round his waist, he clambered out on to the roof of the gondola and inched his way backwards through the slipstream until he had convinced himself that all was well and the engine could be restarted without endangering the airship.

"Not a pleasant job, with nothing else between me and the Atlantic 3,000ft below" was his characteristically-understated recollection of the flight's single-most astonishing act of cold-blooded heroism.

But Shotter had other anxieties to contend with, the biggest bugbear of which was a shortage of fuel made worse by bad weather conditions.

Three days out from East Fortune, R34 had exhausted 75pc of its fuel supply and was still more than 1,000 miles short of its intended landing site on New York's Long Island.



**MEDALS:** Right, Edward Pritchard's medal group headed by an OBE and Air Force Cross awarded for services in airships.



in Scotland, where a large welcoming party included most of the crew's families. But late on, and when already in wireless contact with its Scottish base, R34 was rerouted to Pulham and a place in Norfolk aeronautical folklore.

Precisely why has never been satisfactorily explained, although it has been speculated that the diversion may owe something to a power struggle being waged in the Air Ministry between proponents of heavier-than-air craft and airship supporters.

Whatever the truth, thousands of people across South Norfolk were treated to the extraordinary spectacle of R34's trans-Atlantic homecoming. Hundreds of recently-demobbed servicemen crowded on to Pulham air station to act as an impromptu landing party and they were joined by a smattering of journalists whose first sighting of the returning airship was as a "gleam of silver" on the horizon in the early morning of Sunday, July 13.

To the watchers, R34's progress appeared "stately". The man from the EDP reckoned her "triumph" was made all the more complete by "her quiet dignity and majesty". In fact, and in keeping with so much of her epic flight, only two engines were still running as an airship the size of three modern-day Jumbo jets dived, dipped, twisted and turned before making two final circuits of the landing ground.

She eventually descended to the sound of the Pulham air station band striking up The Call of Duty followed by the more appropriate See the Conquering Hero Comes.

Although, inevitably, low-key by New York standards, the welcome home was as nothing compared with the niggardly distribution of honours to R34's stout-hearted crew. Aside from the CBE awarded to her captain, only nine medals were spread among the 31 men who had flown into the history books.

Of these, one, an Air Force Cross, deservedly went to John Shotter. Edward Pritchard, whose subsequent award of the AFC, was unconnected with the epoch-making flight, received nothing save one of the silver-mounted propelling pencils presented to the crew by the New York Fire Brigade!

More than 90 years on, such official parsimony seems strangely in keeping with the rapid demise of Britain's airship service in the wake of its finest hour. A little more than a decade after R34's historic landfall in Norfolk, Pritchard, Maitland and Scott would all be dead, victims of airship disasters which dogged and ultimately destroyed all hopes of building on their trailblazing triumph.

As for John Shotter, the officer hailed the greatest hero of the double Atlantic crossing walked away from the R34 a mightily relieved man, survived an airship accident and headed off to China where he earned fresh distinction before becoming an adviser to Chiang Kai-shek.

Looking back on it all a year before his death in 1974, R34's engineering officer, who had done more than anyone to ensure the mission's success, lamented that a pioneering journey that had paved the way for modern-day air travel had become known simply as the 'Forgotten Flight'.

■ For more information about Spink's medal sale, telephone 0207 563 4000 or visit the auction website at [www.spink.com](http://www.spink.com)

## REX HANCY IN THE COUNTRYSIDE



Taverham, November 22

# Headache of playing plant name games

Tony Leone's phoned to describe a plant like a strawberry and bearing masses of fruit. A shady corner of his relative's garden was colonised and covered by the rhizomes. The small fruit were disappointingly tasteless.

An hour or so later Tony arrived bearing a sample plus the title found on the internet – *potentilla indica*, or false strawberry. We consulted our doorstep-sized book from the Royal Horticultural Society where we were referred to *fragaria indica* and finally to *duchesnea indica*.

The sample we divided. One was placed in a pot for us to see how it will fare. The other went to the garden of friends with greater expertise. Ours has already tried to put out a yellow flower and extended a groping tendril over the side of the pot. There our sample will stay, as no corner of our sandy plot could provide the moist, shady footing preferred.

Two days later our copy of *A Flora of King's Lynn*, by Frances Schumann and Robin Stevenson, arrived. Much to our surprise and I have to admit, delight, there we found an excellent photograph of *duchesnea indica*. In the detailed entry showing distribution in the Lynn area the name *potentilla indica* (formerly *duchesnea*) is used. This is an example of one of the problems associated with a survey and book of this kind. I recall the hours spent checking the names of causers in my *Plant Gall* book, only to find many changed months, if not weeks, after printing.

Whatever the problems and shifting sands under their feet, Frances and Robin have produced a book of immense value not just for us here and now but for the future. We desperately need detailed accounts of every square kilometre of our townscapes as well as countryside. Only by such detailed stock-taking do we appreciate what we have and, sadly, what we can so easily lose.

Acknowledgement is made of the help and encouragement given by botanically-minded friends. Lynn may be classed as a compact town but it does encompass a huge diversity of habitats from sandy banks to tidal mud flats. More problems! Keeping on the move to stay warm is not easy when trying to identify an obscure plant with polar air chilling fingers.

The area surveyed covers 25 square kilometres which includes the town and immediate environs. Maps showing the distribution of species form the bulk of the book. The remainder discusses topics relating to plant species, introductions and conservation.

Copies can be obtained from Norfolk and Norwich Naturalists' Society, this is its Occasional Publication number 13.

### WHERE TO JOIN

- Norfolk Wildlife Trust: 01603 625540
- Norfolk and Norwich Naturalists' Society: 01603 457270
- RSPB (East Anglia): 01603 661662
- Norfolk Ornithologists' Association: Tel:01485 525406
- British Trust for Ornithology: 01842 750050

# 'Forgotten Flight'

Only by careful rationing, which involved shutting down two of the airship's five engines, was R34 able to reach Mineola and even then it was a close-run thing.

At one point, Shotter had to "whistle up" a squad of engineers and riggers, equipped with cups, pots, jars and anything else that could hold liquid, "to scoop every last drop of petrol from the dregs of the petrol tanks and pump it into the feed tanks to the R34's five engines".

By the time, the huge airship made her triumphant landing at 1.54pm on July 6 she had just 140 gallons – barely enough for two hours' flying on reduced power – swilling around in her tanks. R34 had completed the journey against the wind and the odds in a world endurance record time of 108 hours and 12 minutes, the last 80 of which John Shotter had spent battling to stay awake.

On touching down, not surprisingly, R34's indefatigable engineering officer promptly passed out!

Even before the airship's feted arrival, however, one member of the crew had already made an historic landfall in America.

In comparison with Shotter's exhausting passage, Edward Pritchard had enjoyed a relatively trouble-free crossing. An accomplished airship pilot turned technical staff officer, he had recently been honoured with the Order

of the British Empire for his services to the Allied Armistice Commission to Germany and had joined the crew of the R34 as a passenger-observer.

By rights, his duties should have involved nothing more strenuous than making notes and taking photographs on behalf of the Admiralty. But as the airship closed New York, the distinguished Cambridge-educated airship commander found himself elevated from 'backroom' role to leading player.

For with the commander of the American landing party stuck in Massachusetts, where it was feared the fuel-starved airship would have to divert, the captain of the R34 was unwilling to trust his fate to inexperienced hands. The only alternative was to literally parachute an experienced man in to take charge. And who better than Pritchard.

So it was that Major Edward Maddock Pritchard, OBE, AFC, having exchanged his flying suit for his smartest uniform, became the first foreigner to make an airborne landing on American soil.

By comparison with the outward journey, the homeward crossing, completed in three days, three hours and three minutes, was largely uneventful, barring the almost obligatory occasional engine failure.

The original plan was to land back where they had started, at East Fortune

**AIRSHIP HERO:** Far left, Engineering officer John Shotter, left, with Brigadier General Edward Maitland aboard R34. Shotter climbed out on to an engine gondola 3,000ft above the Atlantic to inspect damage caused by a flying saucer lid.

**PARACHUTE PIONEER:** Left, Edward Pritchard was the first man to make an airborne landing on American soil.

