

Lieutenant Colonel Harold Wyllie



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Obviously in a moment of weakness I offered to talk about Harold Wyllie. In my searches I've discovered he appears to have been a very private man – most of what I have found is primarily from military sources (brief and to the point) and some artistic references.



Wyllie in the ward room of HMS Foudroyant (bearded, fifth in from the left)

As a cadet arrangements were made for me to visit the Foudroyant. I went out with him and once on board he disappeared into the Captain's Cabin whilst I wandered about the ship for an hour or two, then before we left he showed me a plan of how hammocks could be slung for the whole ship's crew (14 inches, 16 at the sides). This was my only personal contact with him and he said very little.

He was born in London on 20th June 1880, his father was William Lionel Wyllie RA a very well known marine artist (see the 42ft by 12ft "Battle of Trafalgar" panorama in the Royal Naval Museum, Portsmouth). Harold inherited his father's love of the sea and ships particularly the development of sailing ships in maritime history and became a world expert. Thus he and his father were appointed to the committee to restore "Victory" to her "Trafalgar" state and Harold had the responsibility for the rigging, this I assume would be between 1928 and 1938. He also built a model of the "Victory" now in the Royal Naval Museum. It would seem much of his work must have been done whilst in uniform.

Now for the statistics:-

1898 He was sent to the USA as artist to the "Graphic" newspaper.

1900 He was in South Africa as a Lieutenant in the West Kent Regiment, gaining a medal and three bars.

1912 I believe the Royal Flying Corps was founded.

1914 Awarded "Pilot's Certificate no. 921" by the Royal Aero Club. From 1910 to 1914 some 1032 men were qualified by the Royal Flying Corps.

1914 to 1918 Was one of the first volunteers to transfer to the Royal Flying Corps, he commanded various squadrons both in France and the United Kingdom including the first night flying squadron. Early tasks included flying in a FE2B as observer with Lord Brabazon as pilot. A primary job was to sketch enemy positions and mark the front lines on maps. A problem was holding onto maps while sketching in an open cockpit (the FE2B had a rear engine).

1916 Granted a permanent command in the Wiltshire Regiment as a Major, he was also a Major in the Royal Flying Corps.

1919 Awarded the Order of the British Empire.

1920 Retired from the army with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel, then requalified as a pilot in the Royal Air Force.

1930 25th July. Retired from the RAF as Hon. Wing Commander. Dated in the London Gazette.

1932 "Wooden Walls" :- "Implacable" and "Foudroyant" were moved to Portsmouth following the death of Geoffrey Wheatley Cobb in 1931 and Wyllie became Superintendent of both ships.

1934 He was appointed "Hon. Marine Painter of the Royal Yacht Squadron".

1940 Wyllie was recalled to the RAF and Mr Stuart Moore became Hon. Superintendent of the two ships.

1941/2 Wyllie was released from the RAF at the request of the RN to be Director of Training on HMS "Foudroyant" & "Implacable" with the rank of Lieutenant (aged 62 years) for newly entered ratings to be given instruction in communications, i.e. the "Bounty Boys". He was promoted to Lieutenant Commander at the end of the war in 1945 until the ships were decommissioned in January 1947. Thus he held senior positions in all three services – *surely* an almost unique achievement.

1943 September 1st (70 years ago) The first class of "Bounty Boys" joined the RN and the ship for five weeks initial training – a class of forty two of which I was one.

After the end of the war in 1947 the decision to scuttle the "Implacable" was made. Then to decide on the "Foudroyant". With eight votes to six it was decided to restore the ship under the direction of Wyllie.

1949 The “Foudroyant Trust” was set up and Wyllie retired from work with the ship. He eventually retired with his artistic wife Hilary Strain to Perthshire. His great talents were widely acclaimed – painting in water colours and oils, making etchings, engravings and sculptures, exhibiting at the Royal Academy and at many Municipal Art Galleries.



HMS Foudroyant by Harold Wyllie

He was still accepting commissions well into his nineties until he died in London on 22nd December 1973 at the age of 93. A man of many talents and even more achievements, but of little recognition in today's world.

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