

CARRICKFERGUS AND DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY



J.M. (JACK) McCLEERY, RNAS/RAF (1898-1983)

Jack McCleery was one of the world's first aircraft carrier pilots during World War 1. He flew from the Royal Navy's 'hush-hush' ship, the aircraft carrier *HMS Furious*. He was born in Belfast the son of a well-to-do textile mill owner, John McCleery, and grew up in Ava House on the Old Cave Hill Road just off the Antrim Road. He was educated firstly at Duncairn Infants School, Belfast Royal Academy and Merchiston Castle School in Edinburgh.

Jack joined the family business as an apprentice late in 1915. In 1916 he joined the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS). He trained at Crystal Palace, Eastchurch, Cranwell, Freiston Calshot and the Isle of Grain. He flew more than a dozen landplanes, seaplanes and flying boats, gaining his wings in 1917 as a Flight Sub-Lieutenant. In July 1917 he was posted to the newly commissioning aircraft carrier, *HMS Furious*, which was based at Scapa Flow and Rosyth and stayed with this ship until February 1919 flying Short 184 seaplanes and then Sopwith 1½ Strutters off the deck as well as a large number of other types from shore stations at Turnhouse, East Fortune and Donibristle. During the conflict he witnessed the Tondern raid in 1918, the world's first carrier mission, and took part in more than a dozen sweeps into the North Sea by elements of the Grand Fleet and carried out reconnaissance missions off the coast of Denmark, landing in the sea to be picked up by waiting destroyers. He witnessed the surrender of the High Seas Fleet. Promoted to Captain (Royal Air Force) he acted briefly as CO of F Squadron for a time after the war.

On leaving the Navy, Jack went into the family business. He married Meta in 1922 and they had one daughter. Meta died in 1930 and he married Madge Kernahan in 1935, with his son, John, arriving in 1938. During World War 2, Jack was OC Home Guard (anti-aircraft) in Holywood, Co. Down. He retired in 1969. He enjoyed good health and an active life: he died in 1983 with a cup of tea in his hand.

Note: The information used in this article was taken from the biography by Guy Warner entitled *World War One Aircraft Carrier Pioneer the Story & Diaries of Jack McCleery RNAS RAF* published in 2011 by Pen and Sword Aviation.

John Hulme