

CHAPTER X

GROWING BRITISH SUPREMACY IN THE AIR

FOR some time after the attacks of March and April east of the Jordan Allenby's operations were necessarily restricted. The 52nd and 74th Divisions, together with ten British battalions drawn from other divisions, nine yeomanry regiments, and a number of heavy siege-batteries and machine-gun companies, were sent to France to reinforce the Western Front against Ludendorff's formidable offensive. These troops were replaced by Indian divisions. Not till August was the re-organisation of Allenby's army completely effected.¹ Nevertheless several successful attacks were carried out during the early summer. An advance made in April by the British XXI Corps on a twelve-mile front between the Nablus road and the coast railway was followed by a further slight advance in June on the coast sector with the same general objective—to secure from the enemy certain high ground immediately overlooking the British line. In turn, the Turks on July 14th seized the hill Abu Tellul, near the Jordan, but were promptly ejected by the light horse, and a simultaneous attempt against El Henu ford, below the Ghoraniye bridge, was shattered by Indian lancers before it could be delivered. The enemy remained convinced that the next British general attack, when it came, would be delivered across the Jordan. This induced him to keep considerable forces concentrated in the Amman-Es Salt area, a disposition which weakened his detachments engaged with the Arabs in the south along the Hejaz railway.

During these months of re-organisation, preparation, and waiting for the army's full opportunity, the British and Australian airmen steadily asserted a rising supremacy over their own particular foe. The confidence they felt is reflected in their daring distant reconnaissances and in the increasing list of their victims in combat. It is impossible to avoid the impression that, in making the army acquainted with the enemy's dispositions and with the character of the ground he held through the hills up to the plain of Armageddon, the

¹ See Allenby's despatches, dated 18 Sept., 1918.

airmen infused into the troops whom they served some of their own sense of triumph. The army below had also its own reasons for confidence.

With the end of the east-Jordan operations, No 1 Squadron again devoted close attention to the Nablus area. It moved forward in the last week of April from Mejdal to a new aerodrome outside Ramleh. In the afternoon of May 7th Ross Smith and Mustard (observer) and Tonkin and Camm reconnoitred the horse-shoe road and made a careful count of all camps. Beyond the hills they found the western of the two aerodromes at Jenin increased by seven more hangars. While approaching this place at 11,000 feet they sighted a Rumpler at the same height. Tonkin climbed above the enemy, then discovered that it was a two-seater, and dived at once under its tail to attack.² The two Bristols chased the Rumpler down for 9,000 feet, flying in alternately to close quarters and firing into it, until at length the German dived for the last time, crashed into the side of a hill near Jenin, and burst into flames. On the way home over Tul Keram they engaged and drove down two Albatros scouts. A British formation of nine machines dropped nearly a ton of bombs at Jenin on May 9th, pitted the landing-ground and the railway station with holes, and burned several hangars. Most of the machines of the German No. 305 Squadron were damaged in this raid. Peters and Finlay, who escorted the bombers, drove down a Rumpler after a fight over Jenin aerodrome, from which other enemy airmen would not be enticed to more decisive combat.

Photography for mapping purposes was steadily continued. No. 1 Squadron had already furnished material for the east-Jordan maps. On May 13th four machines in a systematic sweep took nearly 200 negatives, which enabled a new map to be drawn of the Damieh region—"a large and difficult

² The tactics of a two seater differ radically from those of a single-seater. The pilot of a single-seater, in attacking a machine of his own class, seeks the advantage of height, so that he may dive upon his enemy, for to aim his gun he must aim the nose of his aeroplane. If, however, he is fighting a two-seater, he will as a rule attack from below the two-seater's tail, the "blind-spot" which the observer's gun of the upper machine cannot reach. This principle holds good in such case whether the attacker be of the same class—that is, a two-seater—or a single-seater. To attack a two-seater from above is to expose the attacking machine to the fire of the other's observer. A two-seater, attacking from below, would secure full use of the observer's armament, which in the Bristol Fighter consisted of two Lewis guns.



KERAK, ON A RIDGE BETWEEN TWO DEEP GULLIES (EACH INDICATED BY A SHADOW)

"Kerak is built on a pinnacle of rock which rises abruptly from the bottom of a deep gorge. To reach the town from any side it is necessary to descend nearly 400 feet into the gorge down a most precipitous path of loose stones and then climb by a path even steeper and stonier in which there are seven zig-zags to the citadel, which is almost on a level with the rim of the gorge" (Major A. J. Evans, R.A.F. *The Fezzan Campaign*). The citadel is on the neck of the ridge, about the middle of the photograph

*Just Bar Museum Official Photo No B3379
Taken 27th June, 1918*



AMMAN, SHOWING THE AERODROME, VILLAGE, AND RAILWAY STATION, 2ND JUNE, 1918

A line of bursting bombs can be seen across and to the left of the aerodrome

First War Museum Official Photo No B3348.

area," as General Borton described it in an official letter of appreciation. A few days later attention was again attracted to the Mediterranean seaboard. At Mukhalid, Kakon, and Kulunsawe, large gangs of men were collected for the harvesting of crops. On the dawn patrol of May 22nd Ross Smith and Kirk (observer) and Kenny and W. J. A. Weir^a fought two Albatros scouts at 11,000 feet over Nablus. The Bristol Fighters, relying solely upon their observers' guns, attacked from below. Neither of the Albatros scouts fired a shot, and both fell away into clouds, badly out of control. Lieutenants C. S. Paul^b and Weir (observer) and Tonkin and Camm, patrolling south of Nablus about the same time, met four more Albatros machines flying south, and attacked them near Huwara at 12,000 feet. Each shot down one German out of control at the first encounter; Paul and Weir then carried on a long fight with a third, which, spinning away from each burst of fire, flattened out again, only to find Paul at its tail, still shooting. This duel continued until the German was very near the ground at Nablus. In a final dive the Australian pilot overflew his opponent, turned to recover position, and saw the Albatros land heavily and turn on its back. The Australians waited till the pilot crawled out of the wreckage, and then chased him to cover with sprays of bullets. Stooke and Weir (observer) and Peters and Traill shot down a two-seater in flames near the same place on May 29th.

No. 1 Squadron's patrols had for a fortnight watched the accumulation of supplies at Amman, and especially an increase of hangars on the Amman aerodrome. The new hangars doubtless came from El Kutrani aerodrome, which had for some time been little used. The Turks in that southern region were growing anxious concerning Arab movements. Maan, on the railway eighty miles south of El Kutrani, was practically invested by Prince Feisal's^c Hejaz Arabs; the hilly forest country south of the Dead Sea, from Maan to Et Tafle, was occupied by the tribes under the Sherif Nazir,

^a Lieut. W. J. A. Weir, D.F.C.; No. 1 Sqn (previously Light Horse). Plantation overseer; of Sydney and Fiji; b Leichhardt, Sydney, 4 April, 1891.

^b Lieut. C. S. Paul, D.F.C.; No. 1 Sqn (previously Light Horse). Surveyor's assistant; b Thanis, N.Z., 1893. Drowned at sea, 22 Jan., 1919.

^c Son and representative in the field of the Sherif Hussein, King of Mecca and the Arabs of the Hejaz.

and the neighbourhood of Et Tafle and El Kutrani was becoming highly unsafe for the Turks. On May 16th Ross Smith flew to this desert and from his Bristol Fighter landed Lieutenant-Colonel T. E. Lawrence,⁶ the British adviser to the Arab leader, who had visited Allenby's headquarters to discuss Arab co-operation. Lawrence made his way through Nazir's tribal camps to Abu Lesal, south-west of Maan, the Arab headquarters, from which place was to start the Arab expedition to Azrak for the autumn operations.

Throughout the month of June much reconnaissance east of Jordan and the Dead Sea was demanded of No. 1 Squadron's patrols. The immediate activity of both Turks and Arabs around El Kutrani was concerned with the harvesting of the local crops. Between that station and El Kastal the number of white men's tents and Bedouin shelters steadily increased through June, and small trains were busy on the railways. The concentration, however, was not all of labourers, for cavalry and gun-limbers were frequently seen on the Kerak road.

Amman, too, became busier than ever. The traffic of the harvest accounted for much of it, but the British Command suspected some other business afoot, not unconnected with bigger camps at Es Salt and in the Wady Fara, and with a growing curiosity of German airmen concerning the Jordan Valley. Peters and Traill on May 23rd chased away a prying Rumpler two-seater in the lower Jordan Valley. On June 3rd and 4th German reconnaissance machines were again found over the neighbourhood of Jericho. McGinness and Fysh on June 3rd exhausted their ammunition in an engagement with a Rumpler near Jericho, and had to break off the fight. The following day's combat was more serious. Tonkin and Camm were returning about 8 a.m. from patrol near Damieh at 12,000 feet, when shell-bursts over Jerusalem attracted their attention. Flying towards this spot they discovered a Rumpler just above their level. The Australian machine approached in the face of the morning sun; the Rumpler had its guns pointing upward, and was apparently blissfully ignorant of Tonkin's presence. Tonkin flew

⁶ Lt.-Col. T. E. Lawrence, C.B., D.S.O. Adviser on Arab Affairs, Middle East Division, Colonial Office, 1921/22. Historian; b. Wales, 15 Aug., 1888. Died of injuries, 19 May, 1935. (Changed name by deed poll in 1927 to T. E. Shaw).

directly underneath it, turned, and gave Camm position for a close delivery from both guns into the Rumppler's belly. Then Camm's right gun jammed. Tonkin manœuvred to use his own front gun, but found it would not respond to the control. The Rumppler then counter-attacked, and its observer fired into the Bristol Fighter a burst which hit the engine. Water sprayed over Tonkin, and, not knowing the extent of the damage, he turned for home. The Rumppler made no effort to intercept him, but a final shot from its observer wounded Camm in the wrist, and Tonkin landed at the nearest hospital. Camm's wounds were serious enough to cause him to be invalided to Australia.

At Amman anti-aircraft guns—the result of an effective raid by No. 142 Squadron a few days previously—were noticed for the first time on June 2nd. A second British raid bombed Amman on June 3rd, and the next day three machines from No. 1 Squadron attacked the aerodrome, damaged the hangars, and scattered troops in the neighbouring wady. They then swooped upon the anti-aircraft battery, silenced it with machine-gun fire, and dispersed the crews. A. R. Brown and Letch repeated this performance during another British raid a week later. The same two airmen, patrolling northward from El Kutrani on June 8th, chased down to the ground near Amman a Rumppler into which they fired 400 rounds after its occupants had run away from it.

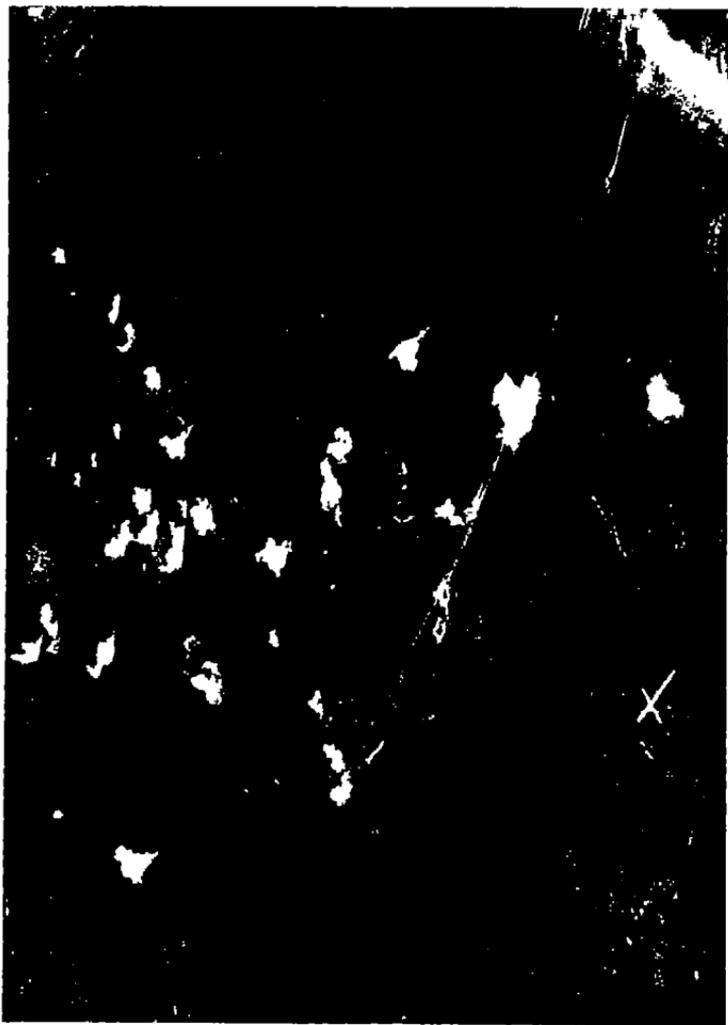
Mid-June was selected by the British air force for a general enlivening of the enemy's harvest operations. On that day British squadrons, escorted by the Bristol Fighters, made three bomb raids on the El Kutrani fields—raids with incendiary bombs as well as the ordinary explosive kind. This visitation caused much panic among Bedouin reapers and Turkish cavalry. After parties of these had been scattered, the escorting Australians lashed with machine-gun fire the unusually busy El Kutrani railway station and a train which, under the attack, "stopped and then ran in the opposite direction." While British squadrons were harassing the Moabite harvest gangs, bombing raids from No. 1 Squadron were directed against the grain fields in the Mediterranean sector. On June 16th—the day of the El Kutrani raid—the squadron sent three raids, each of two machines, with

incendiary bombs against the crops about Kakon, Anebta, and Mukhalid. One of the most successful efforts was that of Peters and Maughan, who dropped sixteen fire-bombs in fields and among haystacks, set them alight for a time, and machine-gunned gangs who rushed up to extinguish the flames.

These were useful operations, but were regarded by No. 1 Squadron rather as diversions from ordinary routine work. The demands for photographs and detailed reconnaissance of camps were unending; the day's work, however heavy, never diminished the volume of the same work to be done on the morrow. While some Bristol Fighters were bombing Amman and El Kutrani or chasing home Rumplers from Jaffa or the Jordan, other patrols steadily pursued their mapping-photography. The series for the new Es Salt sheet were no sooner finished than photographs were ordered for a map of the Samaria-Nablus region. On June 8th Ross Smith and Kirk made the first British reconnaissance of Haifa, examined the whole coast up to that point, and came home with photographs of Haifa port.

Nablus and Messudie railway stations and the Lubban-road camps were unusually active on June 11th and 12th. Lieutenants Stooke and L. P. Krieg,⁷ escorting Ross Smith, chased a Rumpier down to a hasty landing north of Tul Keram during an early morning patrol on June 11th. Two mornings later, just after dawn, Paul and Weir met with better success. While they were waiting for hostile aircraft near the front line at Bireh, anti-aircraft shelling gave notice of a German machine at about 16,000 feet, and the Bristol Fighter at once began to make height. The enemy, a Rumpier, turned homeward as soon as he saw the Australian. Just as Paul was reaching its level, the Rumpier, being then about over Nablus, put its nose down in a straight dive towards Jenin. This manœuvre gave the Bristol Fighter the opportunity to come within range, and the Rumpier opened the action with its rear guns at 300 yards. Paul replied with his forward Vickers, and then flew underneath the enemy and gave his observer

⁷ Lieut. L. P. Krieg; No 1 Sqn. (previously Light Horse). Farmer; of Toowoomba, Q'land; b. Dimboola, Vic., 24 Oct., 1892. Killed in action, 19 Aug., 1918.



AN AUSTRALIAN AIR-RAID ON AMMAN RAILWAY STATION AND AERODROME, 4TH JUNE, 1918
(The white cross or arrow is a conventional sign inserted in most military air-photographs,
pointing towards the north)

Lent by *Lieut Col R Williams, No 1 Sqn AFC*
Imperial War Museum Collection No A628.



A GERMAN AEROPLANE BROUGHT DOWN IN THE BRITISH LINES IN PALESTINE BY NO. 1 SQUADRON
A.F.C., AUGUST 1918

the target. A running fight ensued for twenty minutes. Each machine manoeuvred skilfully, and each several times secured the desired position of advantage on the underside of its opponent. At length the enemy's observer was put out of action, and Paul finished the engagement with his front gun. From a spin near the ground to escape a head-on attack, the Rumpler flattened out, met a final and decisive burst from the Bristol's forward armament, and crashed, nose first, into the side of a hill.

The German airmen were certainly making an effort to do the duty required of them, if not exactly to challenge the growing supremacy of their adversaries. Their favourite time for visiting the British line was at the first light of day. Their inquisitiveness concerning the Jericho and lower Jordan area has been mentioned, and it was persistent. Ross Smith and Kirk on June 9th drove off from the river-line a high-flying Rumpler, which was forced to land near Damieh, but only after fighting a remarkably good fight and striving for five minutes of close combat at 16,000 feet to get the advantage of the Australians. During this time, records the Australian pilot, "we flew around in circles, the E.A. (enemy aircraft) doing numerous Immelmann turns,⁸ apparently with the object of getting on my tail. I remained under E.A's tail, and my observer kept up a steady stream of short bursts, but accurate shooting was difficult, owing to the rate of manoeuvre. E.A's observer returned a large volume of fire, but his shooting was very wide, and he appeared to have numerous stoppages. He finally disappeared in his cockpit altogether." While the Jordan area remained apparently of particular interest to the enemy—possibly in preparation for his July attack in that region—his dawn patrols also visited the Lubban-road sector of the front and the coast sector. Over the coast he generally appeared from a wide *détour* seaward. Addison and Fysh (observer) and Stooke and Sutherland caught a formation of four Albatros scouts south-east of Bireh on June 23rd, split them up, and chased them from 10,000 feet to near the ground before the fight was abandoned in low clouds. According to documents found later, one of these machines broke up in the air and crashed.

⁸ See Glossary.

On June 26th, Lieutenants Murphy and A. W. K. Farquhar^a engaged over Ramleh an Albatros two-seater which came in from the sea at nearly 18,000 feet, and the two machines fought an exciting combat. At 5,000 feet the Albatros, its observer being by then out of action, made as if to land on the Australian aerodrome, when Murphy noticed that Farquhar also had sunk into his cockpit. Murphy had a stoppage in his own gun, and by grace of this delay the enemy escaped. When the Bristol Fighter landed, Farquhar was found to be dead from bullet wounds.

On such ventures over the lines the German airmen almost invariably flew at a great altitude, and it was to be presumed that their observation of the ground lacked detail. The Australian airmen frequently reported that reconnaissance even at 10,000 feet was difficult, owing to heat haze. The efforts which the enemy was now making in the air were his last on this front, and they lacked the real aggressive spirit. They were prompted by a sort of desperation, by the reproaches of the Turkish Command, and by the growing animosity between German and Turkish officers. The earlier morale of the enemy air force under Felmy had vanished. Its intelligence-patrol reports were now as a rule vague or incorrect. Its pilots were disheartened; they must have counted a reconnaissance successful if all machines returned safe from the flight, a combat satisfactory if they survived with a whole skin. Such close scouting as the Australian airmen counted a daily duty was, on the side of the enemy, utterly impossible. The pilots of the British squadrons made straight at enemy formations whenever sighted. The instinct on the other side was, as a rule, to fight only if escape seemed otherwise impracticable. A new indication of the enemy's helplessness in the air now began to appear.

Machine-gun attacks upon Turkish ground-troops were first practised to any notable extent during the east-Jordan operations of March and April. They offered excellent fun for the airmen and wrought demoralising damage upon infantry, cavalry, and transport alike. As disinclination on

^a Lieut. A. W. K. Farquhar, No 1 Sqn. (previously Light Horse). Jackeroo, of Woollahra and Merriwa, N.S.W.; b Ingham, Q'land, 15 Aug., 1894. Killed in action, 26 June, 1918.

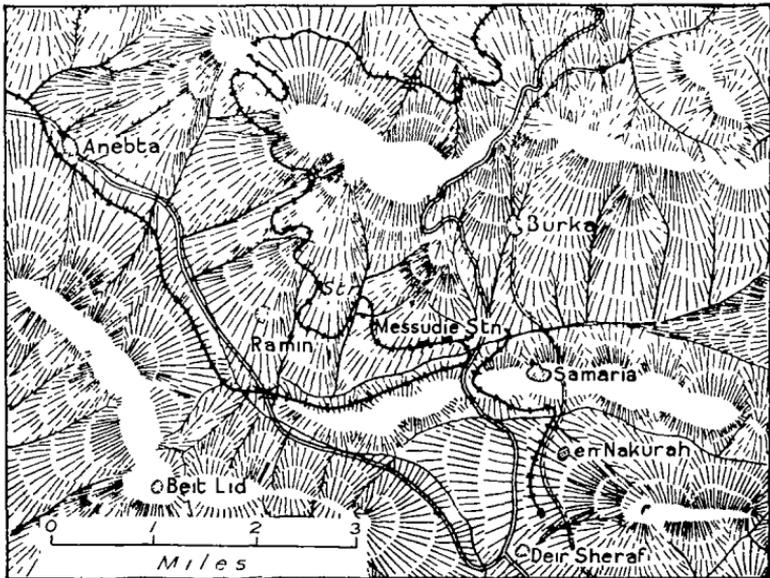
the part of German airmen to keep the air became more and more marked, British and Australian pilots sought out such other enemy as they could find to fight, and with their machine-guns "shot up" rest camps and road-transport far in rear of the Turkish lines. Their air supremacy carried no sharper sting than this. Bombing formations began the practice; machines upon ordinary reconnaissance followed suit. This galling form of attack may be said to date from a notable reconnaissance made on June 21st by two Bristol Fighters, manned respectively by Ross Smith and Kirk (observer) and by Paul and Weir.

These machines were that day over the Nablus-Tul Keram area on the morning patrol between 6 and 9 o'clock. They flew up the Lubban-Nablus road, counting camps, road-transport, and parties of troops, saw breakfasts being prepared at camps north of Nablus, and flew on up the road and railway to Jenin. The aerodrome there was peaceful, and no German machines disputed the detailed survey of it. This was all as usual. They then flew back again on their course, and, when about Burka (north of Samaria), they saw at a siding on the railway line an engine and light rolling-stock with infantry entraining. The Australians promptly dived at this target, and at 1,000 feet fired several furious bursts into it. Within a few seconds the peace of a calm summer morning was dissipated in a mad local panic. This initial success sent the Australian airmen on a joyous career of destruction along the line from Burka to en Nakurah (south of Samaria). The best description of it is their own. Ross Smith reported—

"We descended to 1,000 feet and machine-gunned train and troops in station. Panic ensued, and troops ran everywhere. Train started north, and we flew alongside it firing at close range with apparently good result. Both machines concentrated fire on locomotive and varnished coach with white roof. We then turned south and attacked Messudie station from 1,000 feet, causing panic amongst troops. We flew along road to en Nakurah station, firing at motor-transport and other targets on the road. We attacked the M.T. park, a large camp, and the station at en Nakurah, from 1,000 feet. Troops ran from tents and dumps seeking cover in all directions, apparently very demoralised. One two-horse

limber bolted—last seen going south. Considerable machine-gun and rifle fire experienced at all railway stations.”

Paul's story was equally exciting. “Weir fired 200 rounds,” he says in his report, “from 1,000 feet at train while stationary, and another 200 after it had pulled out on its way to Jenin. Dived on and fired a burst of fifty rounds from front gun at engine. We then proceeded to Messudie station at the same height, where I fired fifty and Weir 100 rounds at troops in station buildings, with apparently demoralising



effect. I next fired 200 rounds in en Nakurah from the same height at station buildings and motor-transport on road. Troops scattered in all directions. We experienced considerable machine-gun fire and rifle-fire at all stations, especially at en Nakurah, where smoke-tracer ammunition was used.” Between them they expended 2,000 rounds in this fashion. They then finished their reconnaissance *via* Tul Keram and Kulunsawe.

Thereafter such attacks became the rule with every patrol sent to El Kutrani and Kerak; and in that more open region cavalry and infantry parties were wont to scatter as soon as

they sighted an aeroplane. During June the Bristol Fighters constantly visited this district, where, after the rush of the harvest was over, road-making and railway gangs maintained the number of the camps. German aeroplanes were rarely seen thereabout, but in the early morning of June 27th two Bristol Fighters unexpectedly sighted two heavily-armed A.E.G. two-seaters making north from El Kutrani and 4,000 feet above them. The Australians—A. R. Brown and Finlay (observer) and Oxenham and L. H. Smith¹⁰—at once gave chase. The Germans held northwards for a few miles while the Australians climbed, but eventually turned south again, and Brown at length overhauled one of them and engaged it from below. At Brown's second attack this German went down in a straight dive, belching out much smoke, landed hurriedly, and fell on one wing. Meanwhile, well away in the distance, Oxenham was fighting a duel with the other A.E.G. Brown flew to rejoin, and arrived just as this second German machine also landed. Both its occupants ran into a wady, and the Australian machines at Amman. Lieutenants S. A. Nunan¹¹ seater. While so engaged, Oxenham was fatally hit by a bullet fired from the ground, and his machine crashed. Later a letter was received from Smith, wounded and a prisoner, describing the disaster.

Oxenham's loss was avenged next morning by two Australian machines at Amman. Lieutenants S. A. Nunan¹¹ and Finlay (observer) and Adair and Vyner were making a close reconnaissance of east-Jordan camps. As they were nearing Amman at 10,000 feet, six Albatros scouts came up on their left front, 500 feet above and slightly in the sun. Adair, escorting, at once fired a red light to warn Nunan, and flew upward straight towards the enemy. At 300-yards' range he opened fire, and the enemy formation divided as though to envelop the two Bristols. Adair clung, firing, to the machine he had first engaged, until it heeled over and fell in a vertical side-slip; he followed it down, still firing at it, till another Albatros dived at him in turn. A rapid climbing turn by Adair avoided this attack and placed him on the German's

¹⁰ Lieut. L. H. Smith; No 1 Sqn. (previously Light Horse). Salesman; of Hurstville, N.S.W.; b. Cardiff, Wales, 7 July, 1896.

¹¹ Lieut. S. A. Nunan; No 1 Sqn (previously Engineers). Motor salesman; of Parkville, Melbourne; b. Malvern, Melbourne, 9 July, 1892. Died in Australia, 10 Dec., 1921.

tail. Vyner, his observer, put in one hot burst at the top of Adair's climb, and this was followed by a delivery from the pilot's own gun at the finish of the manoeuvre. This Albatros also then span away out of control. At this point Adair had to pull out of action to clear a stoppage, and, while doing this, he saw his first opponent crash behind a sand-hill east of Amman station. His gun stoppage cleared, Adair was about to rejoin Nunan, when he caught sight of two Albatroses, which had evidently retired from the fight, gliding towards Amman aerodrome. He dived at these, fired into them, and gave Vyner a close shot at them. The Germans seemed quite demoralised, and fluttered down aimlessly with Vyner shooting into them at every chance. Seeing Nunan still engaged above with two of the enemy, Adair decided to lose no more altitude, and flew to join his comrades.

Meanwhile Nunan had fought a duel with two of the enemy whom, at the opening of the combat, he had chased northward. He fastened on to one Albatros and punished it heavily during its dive for safety. It hit the ground in an orchard and burst into flames. The second Albatros had not been inclined to venture too close to Nunan, and after the destruction of its companion it flew away north with another Albatros, the last of the six. These were the two machines Nunan was pursuing when Adair rejoined. The two Bristols between them had fired 1,700 rounds, Adair's gun was out of action, and they had scarcely any ammunition left. They therefore gave up the chase over the Nahr ez Zerka, and turned for home. The enemy made no attempt to re-engage.