

CHAPTER XIII

AUSTRALIAN AIRMEN IN FRANCE

IN both Mesopotamia and Egypt the Australian airmen were among the pioneers of the aerial arm of war, and bore their share in the experimental stages and development of the flying service. On the Western Front, in France and Belgium, they were late arrivals. To this front were sent three squadrons of the four which Australia maintained in the field. There the Australian airmen found air warfare already a highly-developed science, and they were plunged from the outset into an experienced system of fighting, not so much of individual combats, as of strong formations.

The expectations of a short and lively war, prevalent in 1914, had by the spring of 1915 given place to the certainty of a grim and protracted struggle between immense and increasing armies entrenched against each other from the North Sea to the Swiss mountains. While the armies on this front swelled in numbers and accumulated vast quantities of artillery and other engines of war, each side for two years of fluctuating campaigns strove to win on the Russian front the decisive victory which might bring a solution of the deadlock in the west. The breaking of the fortified lines in France would plainly be a costly effort to either army. The serried rows of barbed-wire entanglements, the array of artillery and machine-guns, dismayed the infantry trench-garrisons, both of the Allies and of the Germans. On this Western Front during these earlier campaigns the Germans attempted twice to break through—once at Ypres in April, 1915, before the northern flank of the Allied line was firmly entrenched, and again at Verdun in the spring of 1916. Each attempt failed, although each nearly succeeded. The strategy of the Allies at those dates was governed largely by the policy of assisting the operations of the Russians. The French attack in Champagne, the weak British efforts at Neuve Chapelle and Loos, in 1915, were impressive in their failure to dislodge the confident German line. It became clear that an offensive against that line, wherever delivered, would demand the

concentrated force of all reserves in the Allied armies. Nothing less could succeed.

In 1916 each side attempted such an offensive. The British and French Commands prepared a blow at the point of junction of their armies on the Somme, and this attack was to synchronise with one by the Russians in Galicia. The necessity of waiting for the snows to melt on the Russian front compelled the Allies to delay the operations in the west until the spring was far advanced. The advantage of initiative thus lay with the Germans. They seized it at the earliest possible moment, and in February attacked with great force the French at Verdun. The artillery fire brought to bear on the French forts and trenches was terrific beyond any bombardment yet experienced in war. After a swaying battle of several months Verdun held firm, but the conflict exhausted much of the French strength, and when at length, on July 1st, the Anglo-French offensive began on the Somme, the Allies acknowledged an objective over and above the original plan—the necessity of relieving the pressure on Verdun. Therein the Somme offensive, in which the Australian divisions played a renowned part, met with success; the penetration of the German lines between Bapaume and Péronne, together with the drain of men towards the Russian front, compelled the enemy to relinquish his assault on Verdun. For a time the Somme offensive progressed hopefully, but was then itself brought to a dead halt, partly through the exhaustion of the Allies, but even more through the impossibility of carrying the army forward over a terrain ruined by artillery-fire and swamped by the autumn rains. The effort died away in the early winter.

On the Western Front the offensive in 1917 lay with the Allies. The German plans for that year were to stand on the defensive in France and to attack in Russia. The strategy of the British and French Commands devised a double blow on the German line south of Arras (weakened by the 1916 Somme offensive)—the British to attack at Arras and the French in Champagne. The enemy to a large extent deranged this scheme by withdrawing in the early spring—again before the snows had melted—from Bapaume to the strongly-fortified Hindenburg Line which ran from south-east of Lens to St.

Quentin. The British attack at Arras in April recovered the Vimy Ridge; the French companion-attack in Champagne was stopped after the opening stage by political interference with the French military command and by local but serious mutinies in certain French divisions. Thereafter the British Army alone continued the offensive on the Western Front, and the British Army exhausted itself in four months of bloody fighting at Ypres for the Passchendaele Ridge. When this campaign opened on July 31st, the hope was that the thrust might roll up the enemy's right flank to the line of the Scheldt and win back the Belgian coast. Any such hope was shattered by the wet summer, and from early August till late November the attacking divisions, constantly replaced and retried, floundered in a morass of mud in the blighted countryside east of Ypres. The German Army suffered equal, if not worse, torture in that soul-devastating struggle. The artillery-fire and the rain storms made effective movement on either side impossible.

Then, at the end of November, came General Byng's surprise attack on the Hindenburg Line before Cambrai. He broke down the German wire, not with artillery-fire, but with a great line of tanks. The effort nearly succeeded; perhaps, if sufficient reserves had been available, its success would have been complete. It introduced new tactics of assault upon fortified trench-lines. It alarmed the enemy, who had affected to despise the tanks. It gave new hope to an army which had been enslaved to nerve-shattering preliminary artillery bombardments. Henceforth disappeared the old plan of blowing to bits the surface of an area which infantry were to assault, and over which subsequently it was generally impossible to move up the necessary guns and stores.

The Battle of Cambrai marked the advent on the Western Front of No. 2, No. 3, and No. 4 Squadrons of the Australian Flying Corps.¹ In the final campaign of 1918 those squadrons played their full part, both in defeating the terrific German offensive in March and April towards Amiens, Hazebrouck, and Noyon, and in the grand counter-offensive of all the Allies, which began under Foch in July between Soissons and

¹ Originally numbered respectively Nos. 68, 69, and 71 Squadrons, R.F.C., and so known on service until Jan., 1918. The squadrons, for sake of simplicity, are referred to throughout this record by their later (Australian) numbers.

the Marne, and in a few weeks extended northwards towards Flanders and eastwards through Champagne.

The three Australian air squadrons—untrained, unequipped, and incompletely formed—arrived in England in the winter of 1916-17, at a time when the British were straining every nerve to beat the Germans in the air. The era when the Fokker had had all its own way was over; on the Allied side improved machines—Nieuports, Spads, S.E.5's, Sopwiths, and Bristol Fighters—were coming forward to challenge the German designers. The race was for manœuvring and climbing speed, and for superiority in the power-unit. Of the Australian squadrons, No. 3, under the command of Major Blake, landed in England on the 28th December, 1916; No. 2, under the command of Major Watt, on the 30th January, 1917; No. 4, under Captain A. Lang,² on the 27th March, 1917. All three squadrons were strengthened by the attachment from No. 1 Squadron of experienced flying officers and aerodrome personnel. No. 3 Squadron was sent for training to South Carlton, Lincolnshire (23rd Training Wing, R.F.C.), No. 2 to Harlaxton, Grantham, Lincolnshire (24th Training Wing, R.F.C.), and No. 4 to Castle Bromwich, near Birmingham (25th Training Wing, R.F.C.).³ Soon after the arrival of No. 4 Squadron in England Major Sheldon took over the command from Captain Lang. The training lasted in each case for about eight months, and was carried out so as to familiarise pilots and mechanics with every possible type of aeroplane which they might have to use in France. The time had arrived when pilots and observers were really taught the new science, and were not, as in the earlier days, sent abroad to pick it up as best they could over the battle-lines. Besides the technique of the aeroplane, they were called upon to learn intimately the construction of machine-guns and Lewis guns, shooting from the air, navigation by compass, observation of country and the tricks of distinguishing ground objects from the new angle, the practice of photography from the air, and the artillery-officer's work of battery-ranging and "spotting" for fire-effect. In addition, pilots and observers

² Capt A. Lang; No. 4 Sqn (afterwards well known as a test-pilot of new fighting-types in England) Motor engineer, of Melbourne, Vic; b. Corowa, N.S.W., 25 Aug., 1888. Accidentally killed, 21 May, 1924.

³ The squadrons' training in England is sketched in Appendix No. 5.

received from experienced pilots regular lectures upon local conditions on the Western Front, and upon the latest tactics in the science of air fighting.

McCudden in his book describes what highly important advantages in this matter the later-trained pilots possessed over those who had fought in the early part of the war. Writing of a period which he spent as a training officer with the home establishment early in 1917, he says:—"I often explained how much better off they (the later pilots) were in their training than were the pilots who had gone out to fight in the air a year previously, for at this time the pilots were receiving very good training indeed, and were quite competent to go into their first fight with a good chance of downing their opponent. At the time I went to France to fly a fighter-aeroplane I had not even flown the type which I was to fly over the lines next morning, let alone not having received any fighting instruction. I must admit that even after I had flown for five weeks over the lines as a pilot, when I went on to De Havilland scouts I did not even appreciate the necessity of turning at once when an opponent got behind me, and I only just realised that I had to get directly behind him to get a shot at him."⁴

Several Australian pilots, in the two fighting-scout squadrons which were being trained in England, obtained their first experience of war in the air before their squadrons did. They were pilots who early revealed marked proficiency during the home training, and it was obviously to the advantage of a raw unit that it should include as many experienced men as possible. As has already been explained, there were distributed among all three service squadrons in England both flying officers and mechanics who had seen service with No. 1 Squadron in Egypt. This was especially the case with No. 2 Squadron.⁵ Air fighting in France, however, was considerably more severe and made far heavier demands upon the scout pilot than air fighting in the East. Of the two Australian scout squadrons in England, No. 2 was two months ahead of No. 4 in general training, and was therefore due earlier for

⁴ *Five Years in the Royal Flying Corps* (pp. 175-6).

⁵ The late Colonel Watt stated that No. 2 Squadron was composed (except for ten of its ground personnel) entirely of men who had been on service in Egypt with the light horse or with No. 1 Squadron, or with both.

despatch to the front. In July and August, 1917, several pilots of No. 2 Squadron were sent to France for a period of three or four weeks' battle-flying experience with British fighting-scout squadrons on service at Ypres. Among these were Lieutenants V. A. Norvill⁶ (attached to No. 29 Squadron), and Lieutenants G. C. Matthews,⁷ G. C. Wilson,⁸ H. G. Forrest,⁹ and Captain R. C. Phillipps¹⁰ (attached to No. 32 Squadron). Four of the five returned from this service and shortly became flight-commanders in their own squadron.¹¹ Norvill flew several times with British fighting patrols during the reconnaissances preliminary to the Third Battle of Ypres. He was shot down, wounded, and taken prisoner on July 29th after a sharp fight over the lines between seven British machines and twenty-five German scouts.

The honour of being the first Australian flying unit to arrive in France belongs to No. 3 Squadron. Leaving observers, transport personnel, and other details to go by water, the three flights (each of six machines) left South Carlton by air on the 24th August, 1917, under Major Blake and flew to Lypne in Kent, the first stage. Each pilot carried an air-mechanic in the observer's seat. One machine, which was forced to land in Kent before reaching Lypne, crashed on taking off again, and both occupants, Lieutenant F. C. Shapira¹² and Air-Mechanic W. D. Sloane,¹³ were killed. The other machines were detained at Lypne for some days by orders from France and by bad weather, but finally, on September 9th, flew across to St. Omer, and thence next day to their appointed aerodrome at Savy, half-way between St. Pol and Arras. Here the squadron was posted to 1st (Corps) Wing,

⁶ Lieut. V. A. Norvill; No. 2 Sqn. Mechanical engineer; b. Melbourne, 31 May, 1895.

⁷ Capt. G. C. Matthews, A.F.C.; No. 4 Sqn. (previously Light Horse). Master mariner; b. Stranraer, Scotland, 25 July, 1883.

⁸ Capt. G. C. Wilson, M.C., A.F.C., D.C.M., No. 2 Sqn. (previously Engineers). Pattern maker; of Newcastle, N.S.W.; b. Minmi, N.S.W., 6 Oct., 1895. Accidentally killed, 11 March, 1929.

⁹ Capt. H. G. Forrest, D.F.C.; No. 2 Sqn. (previously Infantry). Clerk; b. Brunswick, Melbourne, 5 Dec., 1895.

¹⁰ Maj. R. C. Phillipps, M.C., D.F.C.; No. 2 Sqn. (previously Infantry). Accountant, of Perth, W. Aust.; b. North Sydney, 1 March, 1892.

¹¹ See note at end of chapter.

¹² Lieut. F. C. Shapira; No. 3 Sqn. (previously Infantry). Accountant and station overseer; of Edgecliff and Wallandbeen, N.S.W.; b. Stepney, London, Eng., 30 July, 1889. Killed in aeroplane accident, 24 Aug., 1917.

¹³ Air-Mechanic W. D. Sloane (No. 694; No. 3 Sqn.). Motor engineer; of Mulwala, N.S.W.; b. Mulwala, 1890. Killed in aeroplane accident, 24 Aug., 1917.

R.F.C.¹⁴ For purposes of initiation into active service it was ordered to act as supporting squadron to the British corps squadrons¹⁵ on duty with the two army corps in the line—No. 5 Squadron, R.F.C. (with the Canadian Corps), and No. 16 Squadron, R.F.C. (with the XIII Corps). The Australian pilots and observers, who were at first given but minor tasks, in order to “learn the line,” settled down promptly to the duty of watching for enemy gun-flashes, observing movement in the German forward areas, and conducting some of the counter-battery work of the two British corps squadrons.

No. 2 Squadron followed twelve days later under Major Watt. All its machines flew on September 21st from Harlaxton to St. Omer in the one day—a record in the British service—and next day to Warloy, close to Baizieux, the site of their appointed aerodrome. In Baizieux, fated in the following year to become still more closely connected with the Australian forces, the squadron installed its D.H.5's in its first service hangars. There it was attached to the 13th (Army) Wing, R.F.C., operating with the British Third Army.

In the course of their early reconnaissances several machines of No. 3 Squadron fired their first shots at the enemy at close quarters, though without serious combat. No. 2 Squadron—naturally perhaps, being scouts—fought the first Australian air combat. A patrol of four D.H.5's led by Captain W. A. McCloughry,¹⁶ when coming back from over St. Quentin at 10,000 feet just before noon on October 2nd, saw an enemy two-seater below, and the leader immediately dived towards it. The German made for the ground, and the D.H.5's had to abandon the chase, the German having the speed of them. A quarter of an hour later they met another two-seater, which Lieutenants L. H. Holden¹⁷ and R. W. Howard¹⁸ attacked; but this too escaped by superior speed.

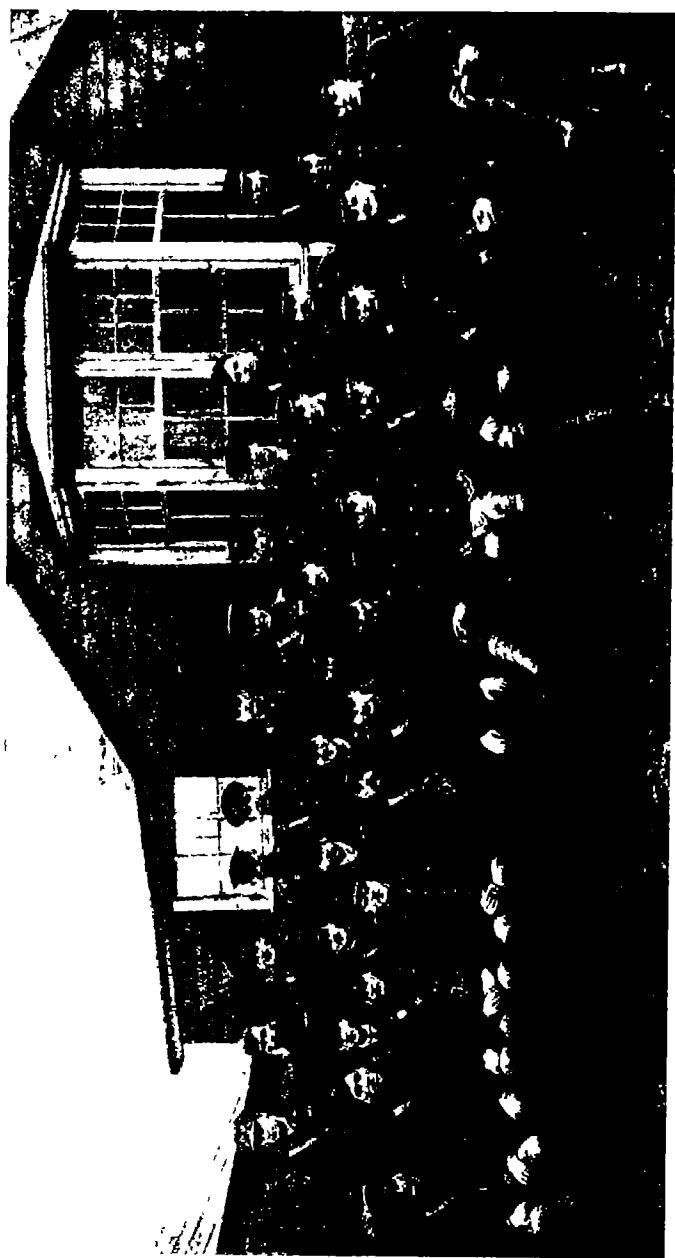
¹⁴In consequence of the amalgamation of the Royal Flying Corps and the Royal Naval Air Service on 1 April, 1918, under the new title of the Royal Air Force, the initials R.F.C. in the description of British squadrons became changed to R.A.F.

¹⁵For organisation and duties of the British air service in the field see Appendix No. 6.

¹⁶Air Commodore W. A. McCloughry, D.S.O., M.C., D.F.C., p.s.a.; Aust. Flying Corps (afterwards R.A.F.) Commanded No. 4 Sqn., A.F.C., 1917/18. Law student; of Adelaide. b. Knightsbridge, S. Aust., 26 Nov., 1894.

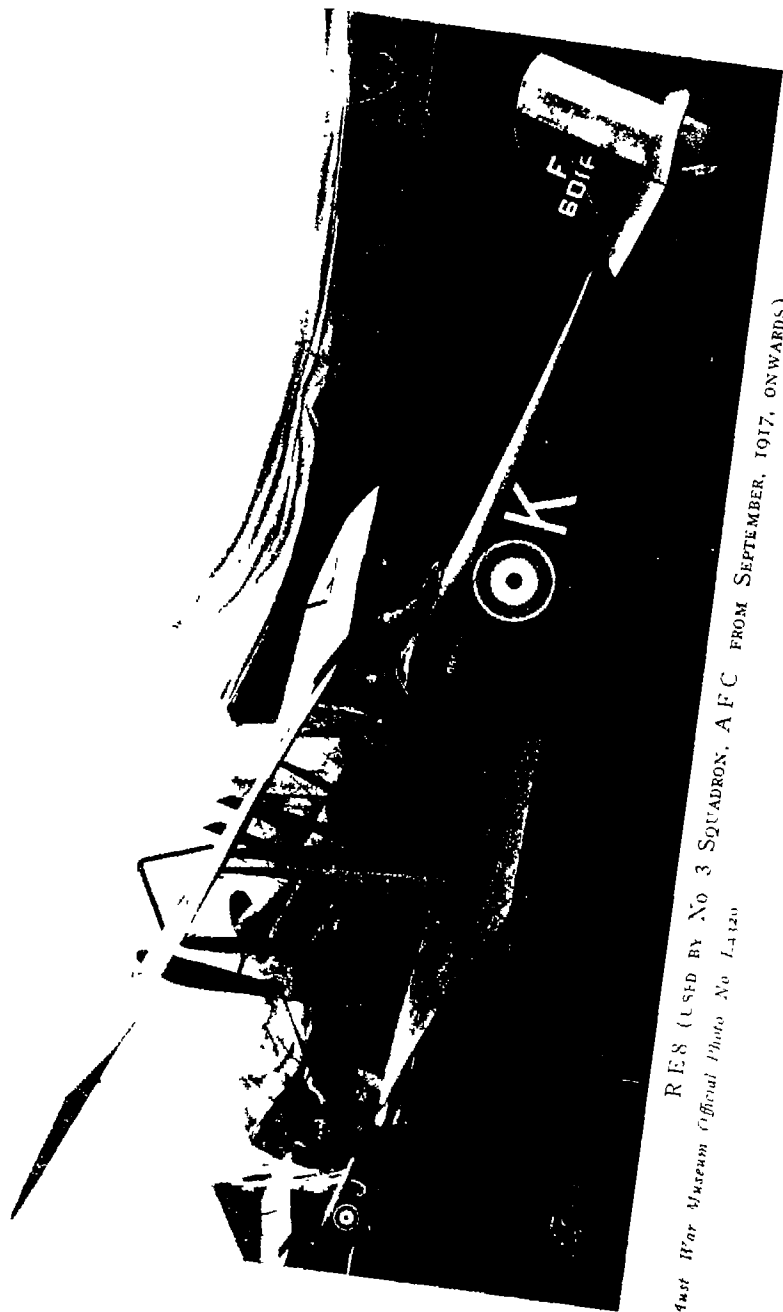
¹⁷Capt. L. H. Holden, M.C., A.F.C.; No. 2 Sqn. (previously Infantry). Assistant-manager; of Turramurra, Sydney, b. East Adelaide, 6 March, 1895. Killed in aeroplane accident, 18 Sept., 1932.

¹⁸Capt. R. W. Howard, M.C.; No. 2 Sqn. (previously Engineers). Engineering student; of Hamilton, N.S.W.; b. Sydney, 9 Oct., 1896. Died of wounds, 22 March, 1918.

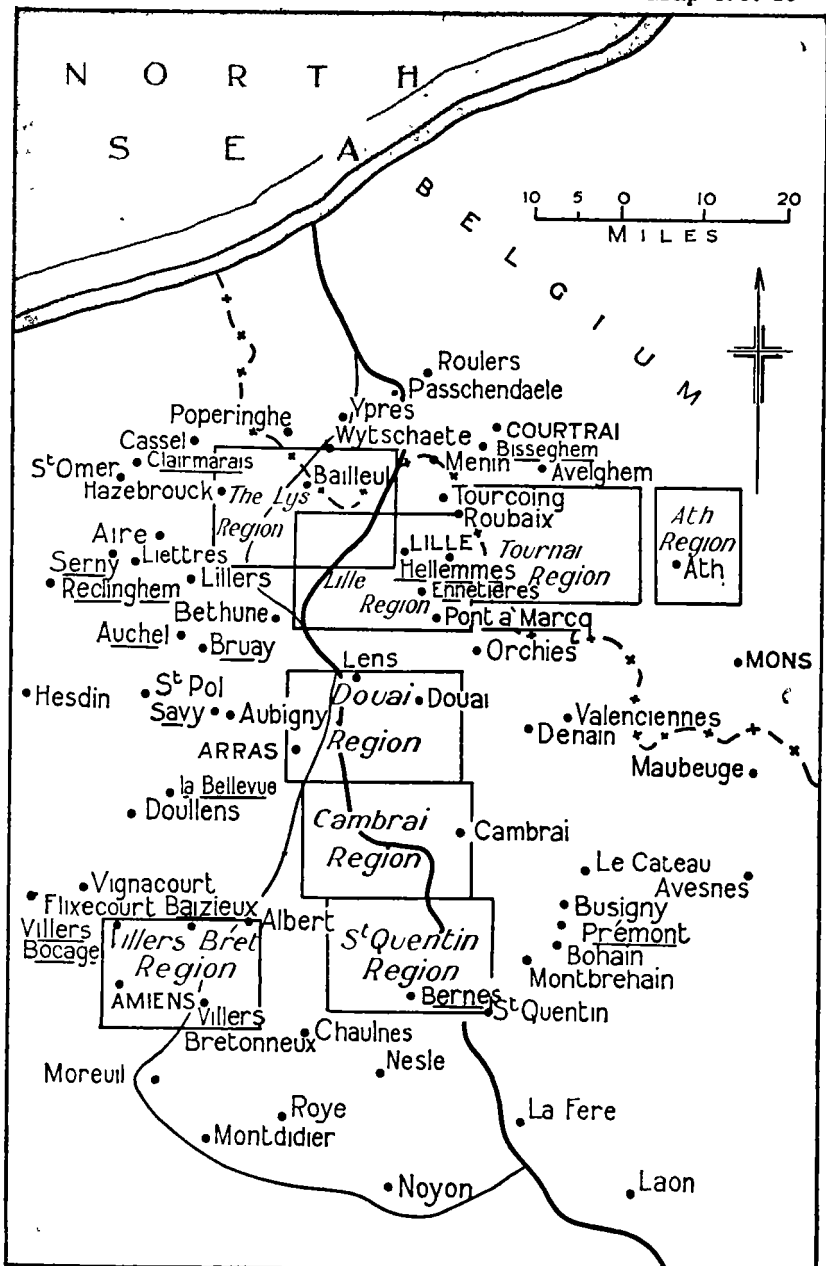


OFFICERS OF NO. 3 SQUADRON, A.F.C., BAILLIFFOU, NOVEMBER, 1917

Just It at Museum (Official Photo No. E2-65)



RES (USED BY NO 3 SQUADRON, AFC FROM SEPTEMBER, 1917, ONWARDS)
East War Museum Official Photo No L-4120



PRWIGHTMAN
 NORTH-EASTERN FRANCE, SHOWING THE AREAS ILLUSTRATED BY OTHER MAPS IN THIS VOLUME. THE DARK LINE MARKED SHOWS THE FRONT HELD BY THE ALLIES IN OCTOBER, 1917, AT THE BEGINNING OF THE A.F.C. OPERATIONS IN FRANCE. THE THIN LINE SHOWS THE LIMITS OF THE GERMAN ADVANCE IN 1918. THE NAMES OF AERODROMES OCCUPIED AT ANY TIME BY AUSTRALIAN SQUADRONS ARE UNDERLINED

The Australian formation flew home, missing Lieutenant I. C. F. Agnew,¹⁹ who had been present at both engagements. Later the squadron received news that he had been forced to land in enemy territory and was a prisoner of war. He was the first battle-casualty among the Australian flying squadrons in France. The same squadron's patrols fought several other indecisive engagements during October, notably on the 16th, when McCloughry's patrol of four beat off an attack by eight Albatroses of the "black-tailed circus." These encounters depended, as a rule, on the enemy's willingness to stay, his machines being the faster. The members of the squadron looked forward to the newer and faster scouts known to be coming to them; they realized what the British airmen had told them, that battle in the air had not merely to be offered to the enemy but offered without alternative. The time was coming when Australian scouts on offensive patrol would scour the entire British front.

An encounter on October 13th was also unlucky for the Australians. In the forenoon of that day a patrol of five D.H.5's was returning from the duty known as "C.O.P." (close offensive patrol), and was about over Quéant at 8,000 feet, when one machine, piloted by Lieutenant D. G. Morrison,²⁰ was observed to be some distance in rear. His fighting partner, Lieutenant R. W. McKenzie,²¹ went back to pick him up. At this moment four fast Albatros scouts approached from the north and pounced upon the straggler. McKenzie flew straight at the enemy leader and fired a burst into him at long range, but almost immediately developed engine-trouble and had to make for home. He had no time to observe effect of his fire, but although he was crippled the Germans made no attempt to prevent his escape. The next news heard of Morrison was that he had been shot down by enemy aircraft near Quéant, and had fallen in No-Man's Land wounded in three places. He was rescued by men of the 13th London Regiment, but died soon afterwards. The Germans shelled his crashed machine to pieces as it lay between the lines.

¹⁹ Lieut. I. C. F. Agnew; No. 2 Sqn (previously Artillery). Pastoralist; of Epping Forest, Tas; b. Oatlands, Tas, 17 Feb., 1893.

²⁰ Lieut. D. G. Morrison; No. 2 Sqn. Orchardist; b. Kilmore, Vic., 8 May, 1895. Died of wounds, 29 Oct., 1917.

²¹ Lieut. R. W. McKenzie, M.C.; No. 2 Sqn (previously A.A.M.C.). Chemist; b. Adelaide, June, 1895.

No. 3 Squadron, at Savy, with its R.E.8's, was in different case, as has already been explained; its duty was intelligence work over the front line, and not the seeking of combat. Nevertheless, the R.E.8's found much fighting in the course of that duty, even though British scouts of the army wing were generally out to protect them. The squadron's first scene of action was the area between Arras and La Bassée. On October 21st, Captain Anderson and Lieutenant J. R. Bell²² (observer), flying near Lens while observing a bombardment for a 4.5-inch howitzer battery, were attacked by four Albatros scouts. Anderson maintained a gallant and skilful fight until two other R.E.8's came to his assistance, when the Germans retired. Ten days later a similar combat occurred during the ranging of a battery near Neuville St. Vaast. Anderson and Lieutenant K. C. Hodgson,²³ escorted by Lieutenants E. J. Jones²⁴ and E. R. Dibbs²⁵ in another R.E.8, beat off four fast Albatros scouts. These encounters, and the squadron's participation on October 31st in a great daylight bombing raid on the enemy's lines about Oppy and Neuvireuil, east of Arras, were the principal excitement during the learning weeks at Savy. Those weeks provided valuable experience in every department of the varied work of a corps squadron, and on November 9th No. 3 Squadron was moved to responsible charge of an area of its own—the Messines sector held by the I Anzac Corps (later the Australian Corps). Here the squadron's headquarters were at the well-known aerodrome beside the cemetery at Bailleul. It was natural that the Australian airmen should be vastly pleased to be serving with their own countrymen.

Note.—Among the pilots of the Australian squadrons training in England Phillipps acquired a notable place. He had been a captain in the 28th Australian Infantry Battalion, was wounded in the first Australian infantry raid in France, and was invalided to Australia with a leg partly paralysed. He returned to England with No. 2

²² Sqn. Leader J. R. Bell, p.s.a; No. 3 Sqn. (afterwards R.A.F.) Accountant, of Devonport West, Tas., b. Scottsdale, Tas., 25 May, 1889.

²³ Lieut. K. C. Hodgson; No. 3 Sqn (previously Engineers). Metallurgist, b. Camberwell, Melbourne, 1892.

²⁴ Capt. E. J. Jones, M.C., D.F.C.; No. 3 Sqn (previously Engineers) Railway surveyor and draughtsman, of South Yarra, Melbourne; b. Abbotsford, Melbourne, 1 June, 1892.

²⁵ Capt. E. R. Dibbs, No. 2 Sqn. (previously Infantry). Bank official; of Mosman, Sydney; b. North Sydney, 9 March, 1894.

Squadron as adjutant, and during training in England, after several flights as a passenger, he secured permission to train as a pilot. Before the conclusion of his term of war-flying experience in France Phillipps was actually patrol-leading with the British squadron to which he was attached.

Before the formation of the Australian squadrons, large numbers of Australians enlisted in the British flying service. In April, 1917, in response to a call for volunteers for the air service, seven officers and twenty-five other ranks were selected from applications among the A.I.F. and were sent to England, understanding that they were to be trained as observers for the Australian Flying Corps. "There, for some unfathomable reason," writes Lieutenant Dibbs, one of the seven officers, "the officers were trained as army-squadron observers, and the twenty-five others as corps-squadron observers. The only Australian two-seater squadron training in England, as we knew, was No. 3 Squadron—a corps squadron. With No. 3 Squadron the twenty-five cadets went to France, but the other seven were sent to France to British squadrons." Of these Lieutenants K. W. Holmes²⁶ and C. R. Edson²⁷ lost their lives. Lieutenant A. G. Bill²⁸ was seriously wounded, and his pilot killed, in an action from which the Australian observer, with great difficulty, landed the machine. On recovery from his wounds Bill was transferred to kite-balloons. A fourth, Lieutenant Dibbs, met Major Blake in London just before No. 3 Squadron went to France, and told him that these Australian observers, meant for the Australian Flying Corps, were in British units. A few weeks later Lieutenants Dibbs, V. P. Barbat,²⁹ and S. J. Moir³⁰ were ordered to leave their British squadrons and join No. 3 Squadron at Savy, which they did. The seventh man, Lieutenant B. J. Blackett,³¹ remained with the R.F.C. on intelligence work.

²⁶ Lieut. K. W. Holmes; R.A.F. (previously Australian Infantry). Civil engineer; of Armadale, Melbourne, b. Prahran, Melbourne, 30 June, 1890. Died while prisoner of war, 11 Aug., 1917.

²⁷ Lieut. C. R. Edson; 22nd Sqn., R.A.F. (previously A.A.S.C.). Customs officer, of Port Adelaide; b. York, S. Aust., 3 Nov., 1893. Died of wounds, 17 Aug., 1917.

²⁸ Lieut. A. G. Bill; Aust Flying Corps (previously Infantry). Surveyor and engineer, of Melbourne; b. Armadale, Melbourne, 16 Nov., 1892.

²⁹ Lieut. V. P. Barbat; No. 3 Sqn. (previously Engineers) Draughtsman and engineer; of Ipswich, Q'land; b. Newtown, N.S.W., 23 Nov., 1892.

³⁰ Flight Lieut. S. J. Moir, A.F.C.; No. 3 Sqn. (previously Infantry). Dental student; of Canley Vale, Sydney, b. Paddington, Sydney, 12 Sept., 1896.

³¹ Lieut. B. J. Blackett, R.A.F. (previously Australian Infantry). Civil engineer and tea and rubber planter; b. Potters Bar, London, 23 June, 1886.