

CHAPTER XIV

CAMBRAI AND GOUZEAUCOURT

DURING August, September, and October of 1917 the British Army had been continuously on the offensive in the Ypres area. What was left of the old Ypres Salient after the Battle of Messines and Wytschaete in the previous June developed during the later fighting around Ypres itself into a far more dreadful region of mud and misery. The artillery-fire on both sides was the most devastating of the whole war. The British offensive consisted of a series of attacks, each of which aimed at taking a definite bite out of the German positions. "Positions" they were still called, though shell-fire had torn up the terrain past all recognition and littered it with the débris of houses, trees, trench material, and military transport, while continual rain, accompanying the destruction wrought by the guns, filled the shell-craters with water and made a mud-morass of the entire battlefield. The offensive eventually stopped at the end of the autumn, and at nearly the end also of the endurance of the infantry. The British won the famous Passchendaele Ridge, or what remained of it, but at enormous cost of life and material.

About this time—November, 1917—the German strength being concentrated in Flanders, a blow was suddenly delivered by the British in a distant sector. In this attack very different methods were employed. The system in use at Ypres—that of blowing to pieces by gun-fire the front of the assault—resulted in the destruction quite as much of the attackers' prospects of advancing as of the enemy's defences. At Ypres the roads were destroyed, and not even the lightest wheeled-transport could pass forward over the ground taken. Pack-mules and walking infantry could reach the line only with the utmost labour. The interest of General Headquarters was attracted by a proposal of General Byng, commanding the British Third Army, that he should be allowed to put to the test a plan of breaking the German defences ahead of an assault with a massed force of tanks in place of the customary pounding by artillery. The

Third Army was at that time on the Cambrai front. The Hindenburg Line, the obstacle immediately opposite, was a tough nut to crack, but there appeared to exist an opportunity for a successful surprise attack. At this juncture the heavy reverse suffered by the Italians on the Isonzo front made a counterstroke advisable. Byng's suggestion was therefore approved. His tanks were assembled with all secrecy and launched at the enemy's line immediately north and south of Flesquières in the misty morning of November 20th.

No. 2 Australian Squadron, being in the Third Army, was closely concerned in this battle, and for ten days or so before the attack its pilots practised assiduously at low-flying in couples, machine-gunning ground targets, and bomb-dropping. Despite foggy weather and the dangerous nature of the work even at practice, there was only one accident; through engine-failure one pilot flew into a haystack and broke his machine to pieces, though he escaped personal injury.

The morning of November 20th was misty, as most others had been. Six machines in formation under Captain J. Bell¹ took off soon after the hour of dawn, flew over the advancing tanks and infantry across the Hindenburg Line, and dropped bombs on the best obtainable targets. Selection of such targets was limited; the fog was so thick that low-flying in flight-formation was impossible, and machines, therefore, hunted in pairs instead. The bombs having been released, the pilots flew up and down roads and trenches and over batteries, emptying their machine-guns at every pocket of Germans. It was risky work, for the heavy fog meant that the flying had often to be done at only twenty or thirty feet off the ground; but the rewards were great. These attacks dismayed the German artillery, and McKenzie drove the gunners in panic from one battery near Cambrai. Bell, who was flying in company with McKenzie, was shot through the chest by rifle-fire from the ground, and subsequently died in hospital. Before the first patrol was back at the aerodrome, two more flights, each of six machines, had started out under Wilson and Phillipps on the same errand, and these also hunted in couples over the battle-line. Only one enemy

¹ Capt J. Bell, formerly of No. 1 Sqn.

aeroplane was seen, and that flew away immediately into the fog. Lieutenant A. J. Pratt² delivered his bombs upon two heavy machine-gun emplacements, and then "shot up" the main Cambrai road. Lieutenant F. G. Huxley³ dropped one bomb plumb upon a gun moving out of action, machine-gunned the men around it, and shot three of the horses dead. Having next blocked the road into Cambrai by smashing in similar manner a supply-waggon, he flew on through the mist, and suddenly saw a body of 300 enemy infantry drawn up in fours as if waiting for him. "This parade," he related afterwards, "was dismissed quicker than parade ever was before." Lieutenants Holden and R. L. Clark⁴ made direct hits with bombs on a communication trench full of troops, and then fired into the resulting confusion, until such men as were able left the trench and fled. Holden returned to an advanced landing-ground behind Havrincourt Wood, with his machine a flying wreck. Every part of it was shot full of holes, including petrol-tank, tail-plane, both longerons, and part of the under-carriage, while the elevator control was shot clean away. Lieutenant L. N. Ward's⁵ machine being disabled by ground-fire, he was forced to land behind the German lines, broke his leg in so doing, and was taken prisoner.

Probably the most extraordinary adventure of the day was Lieutenant H. Taylor's.⁶ His machine was shot down, like Ward's, inside the enemy's lines, where it crashed badly. As the occurrence was officially described, he "attacked parties of the enemy with a German rifle, joined an advanced British infantry patrol, led it forward, and brought in a wounded man. He found Captain Bell's machine and tried to fly it, but without success. He then rejoined the squadron at the advanced landing-ground." His flying partner of that

² Lieut. A. J. Pratt, No. 2 Sqn. (previously Engineers). Engineer; b. Ascot Vale, Melbourne, 1893.

³ Lieut. F. G. Huxley, M.C.; No. 2 Sqn. (previously Infantry). Shop-keeper; of Currie, King Island, Tas.; b. King Island, 8 Aug., 1891.

⁴ Lieut. R. L. Clark, No. 2 Sqn. Mining engineer, of Annandale, Sydney; b. Glebe, Sydney, 4 Sept., 1889.

⁵ Lieut. L. N. Ward, No. 2 Sqn (previously Light Horse). Clerk; b. Walkerville, S. Aust., 29 Jan., 1893.

⁶ Lieut. H. Taylor, M.C., M.M., No. 2 Sqn (previously A.A.S.C.) Mechanic, b. Birmingham Eng. 1889. Killed in aeroplane accident, 18 Aug., 1918.

morning, Wilson, relates the glowing detail of Taylor's story. "Taylor and I found the enemy," he says, "being massed to repel the attack—confused and dazed by surprise. Close together we dived down and opened our machine-guns on the Germans, pulling up to the level of the fog again (about thirty feet off the ground), and letting a bomb drop as we rose. For a few moments we continued this, scattering and demoralising troops, and preventing them from concentrating their fire on our own men.

"Then, as I zoomed up after a burst of machine-gun fire and turned to dive again, I missed Taylor. I was half enveloped in the mist, and for a moment thought he must have pulled up into the fog to clear a machine-gun stoppage. The next second the red light of a pilot-rocket showed up beside me. I guessed that it was fired by Taylor, and that it meant he was in distress. Another red light followed rapidly, and then I saw him down on the ground wrecked and among the enemy. That he was sufficiently alive to fire his rockets was amazing. His machine was just a heap of wreckage. One wing lay twenty yards away from the rest of the heap, from which Taylor had scrambled and was now firing his rockets to attract my attention.

"Fifty yards or so away from him were scattered groups of the enemy, who had stood off as his machine came down, uncertain whether it was really falling, or whether the pilot was just diving at them and waiting till the last second to let loose his bullets. I saw them turn as they realised that Taylor had crashed, and lift their rifles to fire. I dived at them immediately and scattered them again. It showed Taylor that I had seen his signals.

"Crouching behind a slight mound, he pulled out his automatic and fired at some Germans who rushed towards him as I pulled up ready for another dive. Then, as I dived and scattered the Germans again, he dashed back a few yards, dropped to the ground, and fired again. He repeated this until he had got back maybe sixty yards from his machine and nearer to our own men, and then I saw him surrounded by a small band of British soldiers. He picked up the gun of a fallen man, and he and his little party lay firing at the enemy, who were gradually creeping up and spreading out

fan-shape to surround them. For a while I saw snapshots of the unequal contest as I dived down and zoomed up repeatedly to try and scatter these groups of Germans. Then there was a crashing sound against my head and I was blinded.

"Two bullets had pierced the wind-screen in front of my eyes, and dust from the triplex glass had been flung into my eyes. Pulling back the 'joy-stick' and giving the engine full throttle, I climbed up into the fog away from hostile fire, to wait until my eyes cleared. For a while I flew about anywhere, certain of one thing only, that I was climbing up clear of enemy fire. Gradually the glass-dust got washed from my eyes, and I was able to see again.

"Descending through the fog bank, I picked up my bearings and sought the spot where I had last seen Taylor fighting with a handful of infantry against odds that seemed to give them no chance. Neither he nor his party were to be seen. Here and there a German jumped up from behind cover and dashed forward between the mud-splashes of falling shells, and little rips in the canvas of my aeroplane wings told me that others unseen were firing at me. It seemed certain that Taylor and his party had been captured or killed—that the ground was in possession of the Germans.

"I returned to the forward landing-ground, which had been arranged for the day just behind the lines, and alongside which French and British cavalymen were waiting to ride forward if the surprise attack should break a hole in the German line. There I reported what I had seen of Taylor, and we gave him up for lost.

"The rest of the story comes from Taylor himself—or, rather, from the people who brought him back, for whenever Taylor was asked about his own work he just grinned and said something which had nothing to do with the case. The party of men he had found had lost their officer. He had stayed with them till they battled their way, edging back yard by yard, to the main body of troops from whom they had advanced too far. Here he left them to try to get back to the advanced landing-ground for another machine. On the way he found the damaged aeroplane of Captain Bell, who had been shot down earlier. With the help of some troops he tried to start the engine, but it refused to work, and he

continued back to the aerodrome, which he reached in time for dinner."

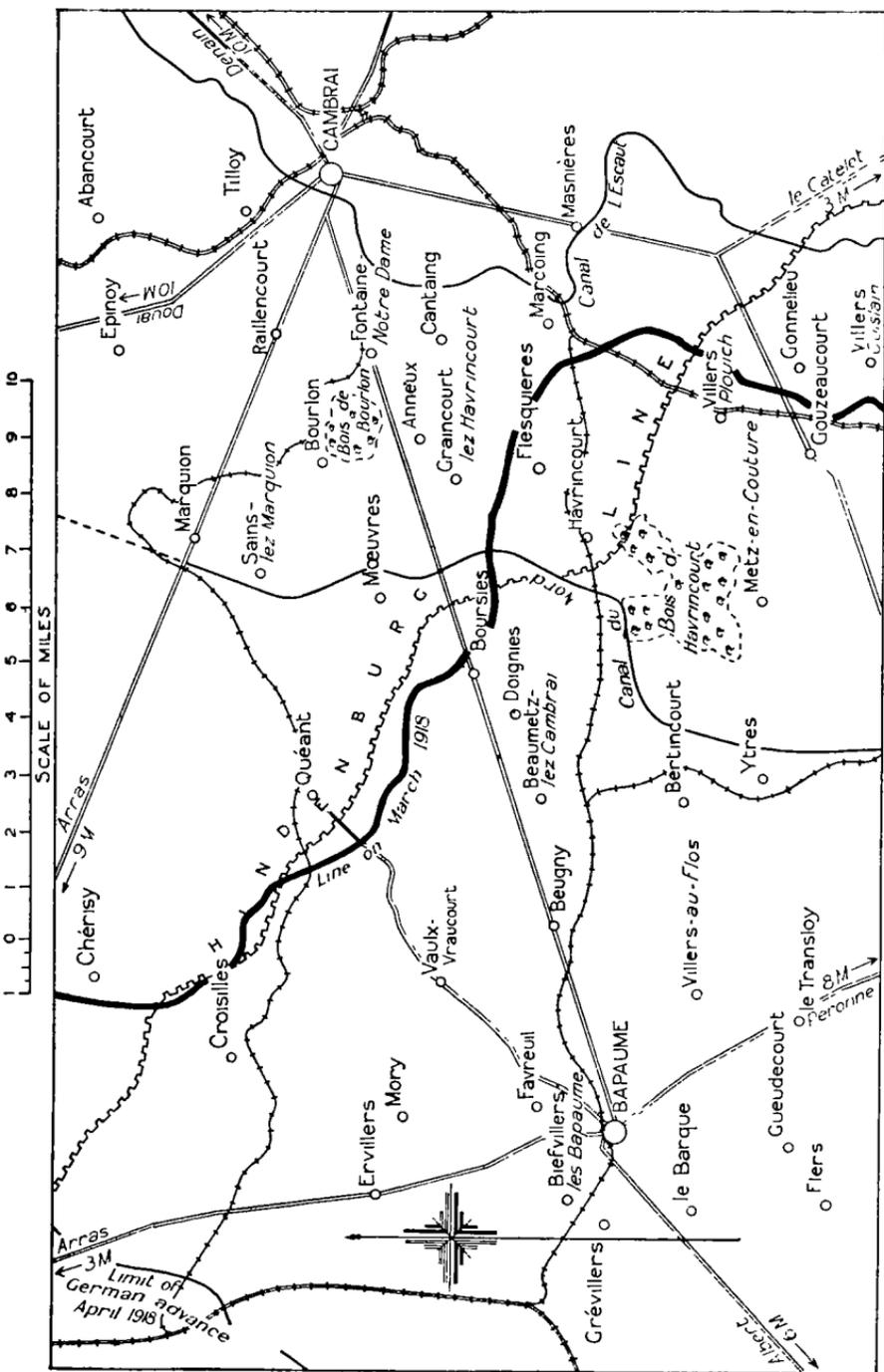
Out of eighteen machines which took part in the low-flying battle on that day, No. 2 Squadron lost in all one missing and six shot down, and of pilots one missing, one dead of wounds, and one wounded. The entire operation was a splendid performance for a new and untried squadron, under conditions of risk which portended, if not general disaster, at least considerable sacrifice. Whether the Battle of Cambrai would have finished differently if the cavalry had been more adventurously used is a debatable question, but the fact remains that the cavalry were hardly used at all that day, and for what success the army had, after the first piercing of the line by the tanks, it owed its thanks mainly to the "cavalry of the air." Major-General Trenchard,⁷ commanding the Royal Flying Corps in the field, visited No. 2 Squadron on November 22nd, and, on his return, he wrote to General Birdwood—

"I have just been to see the Australian fighting Squadron No. 68 (*i.e.* No. 2) for the second time in the last week, and I have talked to some of the pilots who carried out the great work on November 20th, 21st, and to-day. Their work was really magnificent. . . . These pilots came down low and fairly strafed the Hun. They bombed him and attacked him with machine-gun fire from fifty feet, flying among treetops; they apparently revelled in this work, which was of great value. You might like to let some of your people know that I think them really great men, and I am certain that in the summer next year they will all give a very fine account of themselves. They are splendid."

No. 2 Squadron, it should be remarked, was only one of a number of British aeroplane squadrons engaged in the low-flying operations.

On the evening of November 20th notions of the magnitude of the British success were rather inflated, but by the evening of the following day it became clear that Byng had failed to break through the German front. Cambrai, the fall of which was to be the signal of strategic success, remained in

⁷ Marshal of the Royal Air Force Viscount Trenchard, G.C.B., G.C.V.O., D.S.O. Commanded 1st Bde., R.F.C., 1915/16, R.A.F. in the field, 1916/18, Chief of the British Air Staff, 1918/29, Commissioner, Metropolitan Police, London, 1931/35. Of London, b. 3 Feb., 1873



CAMBRAI REGION, SHOWING AREA OF OPERATIONS OF No. 2 AUSTRALIAN SQUADRON IN NOVEMBER AND DECEMBER, 1917, AND OF No. 2 AND No. 4 AUSTRALIAN SQUADRONS IN MARCH, 1918, DURING THE GERMAN OFFENSIVE

German hands, and even Bourlon Wood, which was taken, was held only by a desperate defence. The battle was at its fiercest on November 22nd and 23rd, when strong German reinforcements of guns and infantry came up. The British holding on to Bourlon Wood were especially hard pressed. On these days again No. 2 Squadron, among others, had all available machines out low-flying and bombing, or escorting other patrols. While they were engaged upon this work in the forenoon of the 22nd, the first enemy aeroplane to be destroyed by the squadron fell to Huxley. Huxley had bombed and "shot-up" a column of infantry marching on the road running south-west from Raillencourt—an effort which completely cleared the road, except for two large holes and two heaps of dead—and had risen to turn away, when he saw an Albatros scout flying below and in front of him. "It was a gift," he said. Huxley dived straight on to the German's tail, and at fifty feet fired thirty rounds into him. The German hovered for a moment and then nose-dived into the ground.

Between 11 o'clock and noon that same morning, R. W. Howard, having dropped his two bombs upon troops on the roadway in Raillencourt village, skimmed low along a German trench near Marcoing, and machine-gunned troops assembling there. He then climbed, and, finding himself alone, joined a British formation of S.E.5's. One of these machines, straggling from its formation, was attacked by an Albatros scout. Howard turned, drove off that assailant, and a few minutes later, having dived with the S.E.5's to 1,000 feet, met a D.F.W. two-seater. The Australian fired the opening shots, and the German immediately began to glide down. Two S.E.5's joined in the attack, and the D.F.W. was driven down to a landing in the British lines. Phillipps, who, also out bombing and machine-gunning enemy posts beyond Bourlon Wood, saw Howard's combats, was himself attacked by an enemy scout from above. Phillipps eluded this adversary by a sharp turn, dived back upon the German, and fired 150 rounds into him. The enemy, avoiding further fight, continued his dive to the ground and landed.

The low-flying work could not be done without casualties. Pratt was wounded by anti-aircraft fire on November 22nd,

and, in trying to land, crashed in the front-line trenches. The German anti-aircraft batteries, always efficient, were now being brought up in increasing numbers. Pratt was rescued, but before being taken to hospital he reported the location of a German battalion headquarters at the north-west corner of Bourlon Wood, which he had bombed and attacked with his machine-gun. Two more pilots were lost that day—Lieutenants A. Griggs⁸ and D. G. Clark,⁹ who were both shot down and mortally wounded by ground-fire over Bourlon Wood; and a third, Lieutenant S. W. Ayers,¹⁰ met with a like fate next morning in the same locality. Griggs on the 22nd had already carried out one successful and daring low-flying attack on the trenches and strong-posts beyond the wood, and he was on a second mission when he was brought down. Holden again brought his machine in wrecked, almost every part holed or broken—clear evidence of the dangers of the work and of his own good luck.

An instance of the value of such air fighting in close contact with the infantry was reported on the morning of November 23rd, by Huxley. The infantry were still striving to wrest Bourlon Wood from the enemy. Huxley went out with three others on the usual low-flying patrol, and saw three British tanks held up in the wood by a German battery. He flew over to the battery and, from a hundred feet, dropped four bombs, one by one, on the guns, silenced them, and enabled the tanks to advance. The other machines wrought havoc among parties of German troops retiring along the road from Bourlon and Fontaine towards Cambrai. Victory seemed within grasp that afternoon, when Fontaine and Bourlon Wood were reported taken and the airmen had seen the tanks advancing from Fontaine towards Cambrai.

But since Byng was without reserves, the prize of Cambrai was beyond his reach. The fighting subsided during the next two or three days; the airmen reported that there was hardly any movement of troops before Cambrai, and the whole front-line area was very quiet. Taylor, patrolling over

⁸ Lieut. A. Griggs; No. 2 Sqn. Civil Engineer; b. Meridian, Miss., U.S.A., 23 Sept., 1887. Died of wounds, 23 Nov., 1917.

⁹ Lieut. D. G. Clark; No. 2 Sqn. Grazier; of Killara, Sydney; b. Picton, N.S.W. Killed in action, 22 Nov., 1917.

¹⁰ Lieut. S. W. Ayers; No. 2 Sqn. Mechanic; b. Cootamundra, N.S.W., 1893. Died of wounds, 24 Nov., 1917.

Bourlon Wood at 1,500 feet on November 26th, met a D.F.W. two-seater at the same height. When 500 yards separated them, the German turned away, nose down. Taylor immediately dived upon it, and opened fire at 200 yards. The D.F.W. continued its flight straight into the ground, "where it stopped dead," reported the humorous Taylor, "without any run and with no signs of life." On November 29th R. W. Howard had a spirited fight with a fast German two-seater at 400 feet near Cambrai. After some manœuvring he put out of action the D.F.W's observer, and the machine then made for the ground and landed. On that day German aircraft were out in force, a fact which, considering what subsequently happened, might have been deemed significant by the British Intelligence Staff. In the forenoon a bombing patrol of four D.H.5's under Wilson was resolutely opposed by eight Albatros scouts over Bourlon Wood and Fontaine. The Germans made no effort to attack so long as the Australian machines did not cross the lines, but at every attempt to do so the enemy patrol would dive at them. The D.H.5's were handicapped for manœuvring by the extra weight of four 20-lbs. bombs each. Finally they dropped the bombs, and, thus unencumbered, climbed to meet their opponents. The enemy, however, did not wait, and, having the speed of the D.H.5's, they made off east.

The morning of November 30th came, foggy as all mornings were at this season in those downland valleys, and with it an unheralded German counter-attack on the southern side of the newly-won ground, towards Gouzeaucourt. It was the morning when, outside that village, the general commanding a British division was surprised in his pyjamas, and cooks and batmen had to be lined up with rifles to cover the rescue of staff papers. The Germans had broken, without trouble and with no artillery warning, through the thin British line—a foolishly thin line it was deemed after the event—and in the thick shrouding mist no co-operation between the defenders was possible. The Germans were, in fact, replying in kind to the British surprise attack, and with the great advantage of not having to cross heavily-fortified trenches of the sort which had confronted Byng's infantry. They brought out their aeroplanes also, meaning to retaliate upon

the British with the same scourge from the air. No. 2 Squadron, with all other units, received the alarm just after breakfast, and two flights went off promptly into the fog. They found gun-fire very heavy on the whole front, but on the northern side of the battle-area the hard-won Bourlon Wood was still held by British infantry. Great numbers of German aeroplanes were seen, but were flying so low that air fighting in such conditions of the weather was almost impossible. Only four of the Australian airmen carried bombs. They dropped them on parties of Germans wherever found, and also used their machine-guns on the same troops; but for a time No. 2 Squadron's chief duty was to smash the enemy's air attack upon the infantry. This task was rendered the more difficult by the hazy atmosphere. Here and there a pilot would see some vague form flicker past him in the haze, chase it, and lose it again immediately in a new belt of fog. Lieutenant H. G. Cornell¹¹ was shot down near the line, and spent twenty-four hours in a shell-hole under hot fire before he escaped and got home again.

The first air patrols came in at 10 30 a.m. At 11 o'clock, Wilson led out another formation of four machines, which met with exciting adventures. They dropped their bombs immediately on the foremost German troops. "There was no chance of using machine-guns on ground-troops," reported Wilson, "owing to the presence of numerous enemy aeroplanes." Taylor met four enemy two-seaters at 2,000 feet flying towards him. He faced them, and flew directly at the leader. Under the threat of a head-on collision, Taylor held his course till he had the German pilot filling his Aldis sight,¹² and then at point-blank range delivered a burst of fire into his opponent. The enemy turned sharply away to the right, and Taylor wheeled swiftly after him, but seeing the other three Germans about to attack, he zoomed into the clouds, and there lost them. Wilson had his petrol tank shot through by a splinter of anti-aircraft shell, was forced to turn back, and landed at Bapaume. On his return towards the battle-area, when near Gonnelleu village—by that time in German hands—he met a D.F.W. two-seater at 1,600 feet with

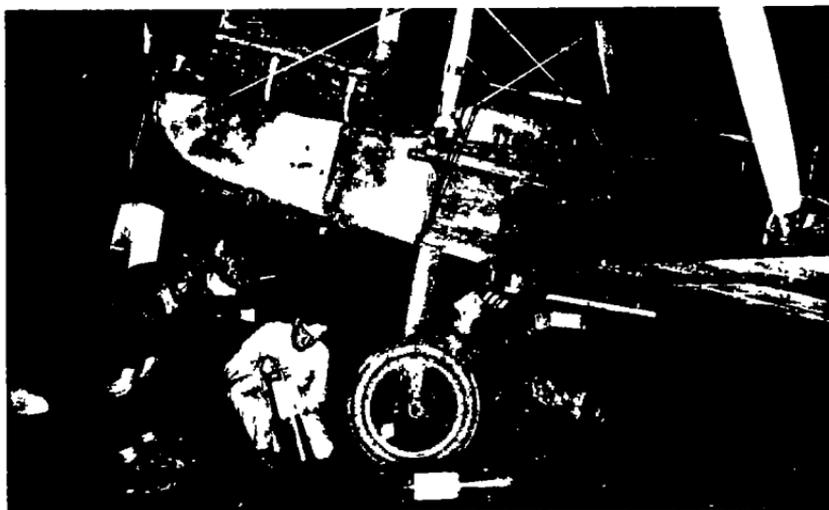
¹¹ Lieut H. G. Cornell; No. 2 Sqn Electrical engineer, of Ballarat, Vic.; b. Richmond, Melbourne, 10 Aug, 1891. Killed in action, 11 Dec., 1917.

¹² Aldis sight—see Glossary.

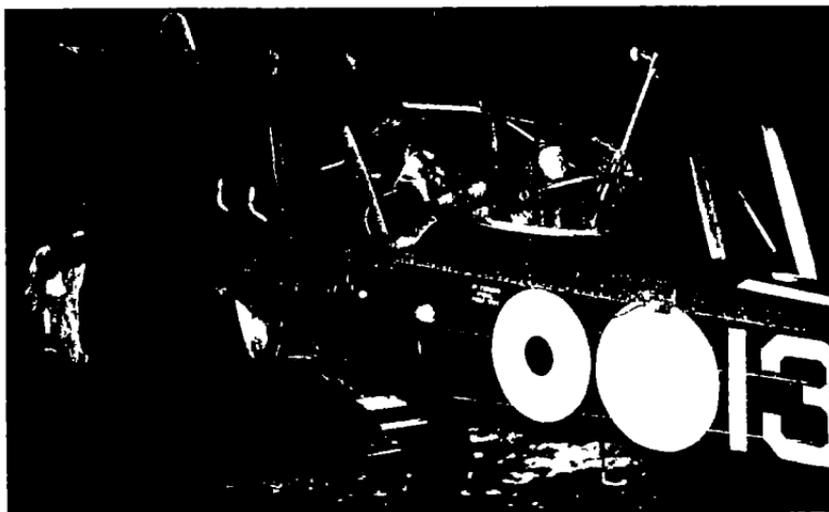
only its rear gun in use. The two machines opened fire at the same moment, and at Wilson's first burst the German observer fell down into his cockpit and his gun stuck up in the air. Wilson pursued this enemy as far as Bantouzelle village, firing without visible further effect, and then was attacked by a second D.F.W. He made a sharp turn, got directly underneath the German, and fired forty rounds into him. The D.F.W. fell steeply, recovered control, and tried to land, but in doing so turned completely on its back. Wilson had one bomb left in his racks. He flew down to the D.F.W., dropped this bomb on it, and blew it to pieces. He had now no more ammunition left, and made for home, but was intercepted by a third two-seater, which opened fire at long range. Bluff was Wilson's only remaining chance. He flew straight at the German, feigning attack. This settled the matter; the enemy turned away and flew east, and Wilson made a bee-line for home.

Again, in the afternoon, ten machines were out from No 2 Squadron, and most of them made two sorties over the German lines, bombing and machine-gunning. They recorded thirty direct hits with bombs on bodies of enemy troops and 4,000 rounds fired into them from machine-guns. To the British artillery—whose observers were still blinded by the mist—the reports of the Australian pilots were invaluable, enabling the guns to concentrate their shelling upon the enemy's assembling infantry.

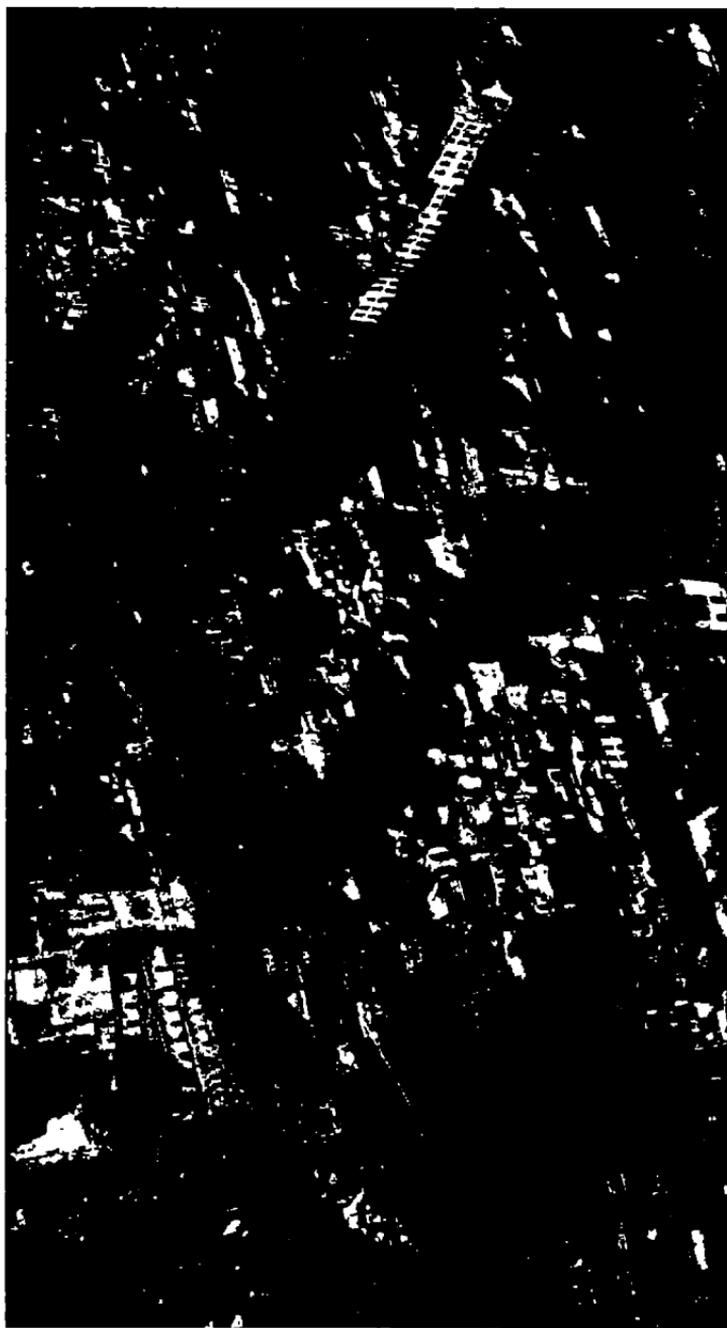
The German thrust on the Gouzeaucourt side, continued on December 1st, was held, but the gain of ground by the enemy on the southern side of the salient seriously weakened the British hold on the whole position, and next day it became clear that Bourslon Wood and Fontaine would have to be abandoned. On both these days the infantry fighting in this region was intense and of uncertain advantage to either side, and the duty of the British air squadrons was to arrest enemy pressure while the line was re-formed. On December 1st, the early morning patrol of four Australian machines found the mist as heavy and deceptive as ever. A fog-bank, seemingly impenetrable to the pilot flying through it at a few hundred feet, would suddenly end with a clear view down to the ground. Then the mist would drift over again. But the



Aust War Museum Official Photo No E1176.



AN RE8 OF NO 3 SQUADRON, A.I.C., DETAILED FOR NIGHT-BOMBING
Taken at Savy aerodrome October, 1917 Upper photograph—loading
the bomb-rack, lower—ready to start



AN AIRMAN'S VIEW OF THE RUINS OF YPRES, 31ST OCTOBER, 1917

First War Museum Official Photo No. F.1457

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same interval would be marked by a spasm of furious anti-aircraft fire directed at the disclosed machines. In one such interval, Huxley, suddenly emerging from the fog, saw an Aviatik two-seater only a hundred yards away on his right and just below his level. He made a diving turn at the German, whose observer opened fire from underneath. The Australian pilot turned rapidly aside, and fired a hot burst into the enemy. Before the Aviatik's observer could switch his gun over to meet Huxley's manœuvre, he was hit, and collapsed into his machine. After receiving a further hundred rounds, the Aviatik went into a nose-dive, hit the ground, and turned over on to its back. Two hours later, when on a second bombing mission, Huxley saw it there surrounded by a group of Germans. He dropped a bomb into the middle of the group, and blew off the tail of the wrecked machine.

During this same patrol Taylor had two short indecisive encounters with enemy machines, which flickered into sight and vanished again in the mist. His own machine was much damaged by ground-fire, and he was forced to land away from home. Lieutenants L. Benjamin¹³ and W. A. Robertson,¹⁴ patrolling at noon beyond Gouzeaucourt, were also compelled to land with machines badly holed. Nevertheless their shooting and bombing worried the Germans, who retaliated by sending over, under escort of five scouts, a large three-seater machine, looking like a Gotha bomber, to fly low and fire into the British trenches. Forrest and McKenzie with the noon patrol, encountered this enemy formation in the mist near Villers-Guislain. Forrest immediately rose, drove a scout into the clouds, dived again, zoomed up under the three-seater, and fired into it from below until it turned away homeward. Meanwhile McKenzie, zooming up behind Forrest, fired a fierce stalling¹⁵ burst into a revealed Albatros scout. This immediately dived for the ground. McKenzie saw it land badly and pitch on to its nose in a shell-hole.

All efforts of the enemy against Mœuvres, at the northern

¹³ Lieut L. Benjamin; No. 2 Sqn. (previously A.A.M.C.). Student, of St. Kilda, Melbourne; b. St. Kilda, 23 Aug., 1896.

¹⁴ Capt. W. A. Robertson; No. 2 Sqn. (previously Engineers). Engineering student; of Albert Park, Melbourne; b. Albert Park, 30 March, 1896.

¹⁵ Stalling—see Glossary.

end of the salient, were beaten back. By the morning of December 4th, the British line had been withdrawn to south and west of Bourlon Wood, and the Cambrai battle was over. With No. 2 Squadron the intense low-flying attacks gave place to the more normal duties of reconnaissance and close offensive patrols. On the afternoon of December 5th, a formation of seven machines from No. 2, under Wilson, crossing the line to attack the German aerodrome at Awoingt, ran into twelve Albatros scouts and four two-seaters. A hot fight seemed certain, and the D.H.5's dropped their bombs to clear for action, but Wilson had a bad stoppage in his machine-gun as soon as he opened the attack, and was obliged to fall out to remedy it. While preliminary firing was still in progress, two other D.H.5's were compelled to break off—McKenzie with gun jammed, and Robertson with engine-trouble. The Germans, however, did not press the engagement, and as the Australian machines, by now scattered over a wide area, flew to rejoin formation, the Germans made off east. The Australians wondered at the enemy's reluctance, until they perceived overhead a strong patrol of S.E.5.a scouts from a British squadron. They watched the new arrivals with interest; they themselves were in a few days' time to change to S.E.5's, which were superior to the D.H.5's in both speed and fighting efficiency.

The Germans attacked again at Fontaine in the late afternoon of December 6th. It was too dark to observe the progress of this attack clearly from the air, but two Australian patrols were out, each of four machines—one led by Wilson and one by Howard—and they thoroughly bombed the main reserves of the attack. Howard's patrol, finding the roads east of Bantouzelle village congested with German troops and traffic, dropped its load of bombs right among the closely-packed masses. Wilson's formation dispersed in the failing light an enemy concentration in a bleak quarry by Lateau Wood. These events occurred before the Germans were fully deployed for their assault, and they must have had much of the heart taken out of them. Huxley, in Wilson's patrol, having launched his bombs, made out two D.F.W. two-seaters below him in the half-light, dived at them, and sent one to the ground in flames with his first burst, delivered at fifty-feet range

The other attempted to attack Huxley from behind, but, seeing his companion drop, made off eastward.

This was the last fighting of No. 2 Squadron with the D.H.5 machines, and during the next few days the Australians were busied in exchanging them for S.E.5's.¹⁶

¹⁶ For the sake of brevity, these machines are styled "S.E.5's" throughout this narrative. They were strictly of the type S.E.5a, an improved model.