

CHAPTER XVI

SPRING FIGHTS NORTH OF THE SCARPE

CHRISTMAS-TIME 1917 saw the appearance in France of the last-formed Australian flying squadron, No. 4. From the training-ground near Birmingham its three flights flew across the Channel on December 18th and landed at the base aerodrome at St. Omer that same day. The squadron entered the field under the command of Major W. A. McCloughry. At this beginning of its service, two of the three flight-commanders—Captains A. H. O'Hara Wood¹ and R. E. A. W. Hughes-Chamberlain²—were R.F.C. officers. The third was Captain Matthews, who had previously gone to the front for a few weeks with No. 2 Squadron, and then, like McCloughry, had been ordered back to join No. 4.

No. 4 Squadron flew Sopwith Camels, which among British aircraft rivalled the S.E.5's for speed and fighting efficiency. Four days after arrival in France the squadron was ordered to the aerodrome at Bruay, where it came under the command of the 10th (Army) Wing, operating with the British First Army. To this same wing in the following month was also posted No. 2 Squadron, which moved on January 7th from Baizieux to Auchel, and a fortnight later from Auchel to Savy, the aerodrome at which No. 3 Squadron had been quartered on its first arrival in France. Between mid-December and mid-January not only No. 4 Squadron but also No. 2 was engaged mainly in fighting and flying practice, for No. 2 had to break in its pilots to their new S.E.5's.

The first fortnight of No. 4 Squadron at Bruay passed in various war-flying practice and in learning the country. "C" Flight began its career with extraordinarily bad luck. On the morning of the 6th of January, 1918, five of the six pilots of that flight were practising formation-flying, when, in crossing during a turn, Lieutenants A. M. Anderson³ and R.

¹ Major A. H. O'Hara Wood, R A F Attached to No 4 Sqn, A F C., Nov., 1917, to Feb., 1918, commanded No 46 Sqn, R A F, 1918. Medical practitioner, of Melbourne, b Melbourne, 10 Jan., 1890. Died of wounds, 6 Oct., 1918.

² Maj R E A W. Hughes-Chamberlain, A F C, R A F. Attached to No 4 Sqn, A F C., Nov., 1917, to Feb., 1918. Lime and cocoa planter; of Dominica, West Indies, b 2 Jan., 1887.

³ Lieut A. M. Anderson; No. 4 Sqn. b Melbourne, 1892. Killed in action, 6 Jan., 1918.

H. Curtis⁴ collided, and, as they fell, a portion of the wreckage struck the machine of Lieutenant J. N. Cash⁵ flying below them, and brought him down also. All three pilots were killed. Before the month was out—on January 28th—another pilot of the same flight, Lieutenant E. B. Nelson,⁶ also crashed fatally on the aerodrome after returning from an offensive patrol.

The squadron made its first sortie into "Hunland"⁷ on January 9th, when two patrols went out, one to escort photography-machines and one on offensive-patrol. For two or three days this work continued uneventfully. Then, on January 13th, occurred the squadron's first air combat. Lieutenant F. B. Willmott,⁸ straggling in behind his formation from a patrol, was cut off by three German scouts, forced to land, and taken prisoner. O'Hara Wood, leading a battle-formation on January 24th, avenged Willmott by shooting down the squadron's first German victim, a D.F.W. two-seater, which crashed near La Bassée.

The weather in January and early February was almost constantly bad, and flying, when not actually impossible, was frequently rendered useless by obscuring clouds. The two Australian squadrons spent this mid-winter period in low reconnaissances, offensive-patrols, escorting photography-machines and bombing formations over the German lines, and, seeking excitement to relieve monotony, in machine-gunning villages in the nearer German areas between Lille and the River Scarpe. The front upon which they were thus operating was one of the classic hunting-grounds of British airmen. It contained many German aerodromes, especially about Lille and Douai, and was studded with anti-aircraft

⁴ Lieut. R. H. Curtis; No. 4 Sqn. (previously A.A.M.C.) Grazier; of Glen Innes, N.S.W.; b. Glen Innes, 1 March, 1894. Killed in action, 6 Jan., 1918.

⁵ Lieut. J. N. Cash; No. 4 Sqn. (previously Artillery). Stockman, of Chin-chilla, Q'land, b. Newcastle, Eng., 1896. Killed in action, 6 Jan., 1918.

⁶ Lieut. E. B. Nelson; No. 4 Sqn. Electrical engineer; of North Sydney; b. St. Leonard's, Sydney; 7 Jan., 1892. Died of wounds, 29 Jan., 1918.

⁷ "Hunland" was the name used throughout the British air service to designate the territory beyond the German front lines. The Royal Air Force developed a language of its own, as distinctive as that of the Royal Navy. As a short title for "territory under enemy occupation," "Hunland" has particular merits. Other valuable words in the airmen's vocabulary were "stunt," "strafe," and "dog-fight." "Strafe" was a general army term for any enterprise meant to punish or harass the enemy, and was borrowed from the famous German invective, "Gott strafe England!" "Dog-fight" was the universal name among British airmen for the savage *mêlée* of a willing fight between opposing air formations.

⁸ Lieut. F. B. Willmott; No. 4 Sqn. Motor mechanic, b. Adelaide, Jan., 1895.



SOPWITH CAMEL (USED BY NO 4 SQUADRON, A F C FROM DECEMBER, 1917, TILL OCTOBER, 1918)

Aust War Museum Official Photo No. D129



SOPWITH SNIPE (USED BY NO 4 SQUADRON, A F C, FROM OCTOBER, 1918, ONWARDS)

Lent by Lieut T A Stambourne, R.A.A.F. (then of No 2 Sqn, A F C)

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DH5 (USED BY NO 2 SQUADRON, A.F.C., OCTOBER-DECEMBER, 1917)

First War Museum Official Photo No E1445



SE5 (USED BY NO 2 SQUADRON, A.F.C., FROM JANUARY, 1918,
ONWARDS)

First War Museum Official Photo No E1446

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batteries. Over Douai, as the weather improved, roving pilots, out to increase their lists of victims, never failed to find enemy aircraft, and some found more of them than they desired. Hither came the crack British pilots on the full summer days when the sky was empty elsewhere, for when the famous Richthofen Circus⁹ was on the British front, it was generally located at Douai. The scotching of Richthofen was the great ambition of every fighting pilot who had begun his ascent of the glorious ladder of "aces"¹⁰ in the list of "number of enemy machines destroyed." By the time the Australian scouting squadrons appeared in France, the days of the earlier crack German airmen, Immelmann, Boelcke, Wolff, Voss, had ended. Richthofen, the successor of Boelcke in command of the destroying "circus," the star of stars in the German Air Force, was now in the zenith of his fame. First in the Fokker, and later in the improved Albatros, he carried on the tactics inculcated by the admired Boelcke, and would ride the higher air in leadership of his formation, waiting until a hostile formation were met and a fight begun. He rarely fought alone. When battle was joined, and a "dog-fight" was on, his own tactics were to remain hovering high above it until his chance came to dive upon some straggler on its fringe, or upon some opponent who happened to be at a temporary disadvantage. At this moment Richthofen would descend like a hawk upon the selected victim. "Everything that is in the air beneath me," he boasted, "is lost." The machines of his circus were painted red from nose to tail; its pilots were all crack airmen, and they did no other work but hunt for British and French machines to destroy. They were not for reconnaissance, nor for any sort of escort work, save when they escorted those decoy machines which our own men learned to treat with much wariness. An unfrightened lumbering old German two-seater, or a couple of them, in the offing and low down, gave to British aerial huntsmen a direct warning of danger lurking in the sun or the clouds above.

Every airman—and Richthofen must be included among them—had now and then some bowels of mercy for an opponent hopelessly outclassed. Richthofen relates of one

⁹ Circus—see Chapter XVIII, pp. 247-8, and Glossary.

¹⁰ Ace—see Glossary.

fight against a photographing-machine, that he perceived the pilot to be wounded and his aeroplane to be showing signs of catching fire; he manœuvred to compel his adversary to land in the German lines, not wishing to shoot him down. Such consideration was, however, not usual with Richthofen, who was out to beat records in the list of aces. The large account of victims with which he was credited in his own service would, it is said, have required heavy pruning in that of the British. Richthofen's accredited total of eighty victims was widely declared to include some shot down by his squadron in combined attack, where the destruction of a victim was the work of several machines. Australian airmen had at least three brushes with the Richthofen Circus.

Meanwhile, during the last stages of the winter, the two scouting squadrons—No. 4, engaged in low-flying attacks upon the ground, and No. 2, flying at a "ceiling"¹¹ of 15,000 feet or more—ranged the whole First Army front, searching every day for the first spring Fokkers to appear. No. 2 Squadron especially was itching to try its new S.E.5's upon them. O'Hara Wood, flying with Lieutenants A. H. Cobby¹² and E. F. Pflaum,¹³ fought several indecisive combats with enemy machines low over Brebières (south-west of Douai) on February 3rd, and drove one two-seater down out of control. On the three succeeding days—days of wind and cloud—No. 4's patrols sighted occasional and distant enemy machines, which remained well in the rear of their own lines. Only once did they see one on the British side of the line, and that at tremendous height over Arras; a patrol led by Captain D. P. Flockart¹⁴ climbed hard to reach it, but at 14,000 feet lost sight of it, still high overhead. Each day the patrols, failing to bring any hostile machines to action, emptied their gun-belts into villages occupied by German troops. On February 5th, after patiently patrolling round about Douai for many days, a patrol of five from No. 2 Squadron, led by Forrest, found four Albatros scouts going home from the direction of Lille.

¹¹ Ceiling—see Glossary.

¹² Wing Commander A. H. Cobby, D.S.O., D.F.C., p.s.a.; No. 4 Sqn. (afterwards R.A.A.F.). Bank clerk; of Glenhantly, Melbourne; b. Prahran, Melbourne, 26 Aug., 1894.

¹³ Capt. E. F. Pflaum; No. 2 Sqn. (previously Light Horse). Auctioneer; of Loxton, S. Aust.; b. Birdwood, S. Aust., 5 Jan., 1892.

¹⁴ Capt. D. P. Flockart; No. 4 Sqn. Electrical engineer; of Melbourne; b. Casterton, Vic., 3 Sept., 1894.

It was hardly a fight, for the enemy, though they had the height of Forrest, avoided engagement; the only Australian machine to climb near enough for a shot was R. W. Howard's, and from him the enemy span away at once into a cloud. Nevertheless the climbing powers of the S.E.5 thoroughly pleased the Australians.

The weather of the days between February 7th and 15th made flying impossible. Then came two or three fine days, which brought out the German machines as well as the British. On February 17th patrols from No. 4 Squadron, led by O'Hara Wood and Flockart, met small enemy formations near Lille in short fights. In the engagement of Flockart's formation Lieutenant F. S. Woolhouse¹⁵ fired a hundred rounds from both his guns at point-blank range into a German two-seater, which went down out of control.¹⁶ Lieutenant C. H. Martin¹⁷ of the same patrol was lost; his machine, while flying unmolested, was seen suddenly to break in pieces in the air, probably hit full by a shell. Such a mishap was sufficiently rare to mark as extraordinary the fact that, not two hours previously in the same afternoon, a similar fate befell a machine of No. 3 Squadron over the Messines Ridge.¹⁸

The Germans were in the air in strength on February 18th, and in the forenoon Lieutenants Huxley and A. L. Paxton¹⁹ from No. 2 Squadron, flying at 15,000 feet between Loos and Lille, met four fantastically-coloured Albatros scouts. The Australians had the height of them, and Huxley dived on the enemy leader, while Paxton stayed aloft to protect him. Huxley fired fifty rounds into his opponent at 150 yards, and saw the German turn on his wing-tip and go down out of control. Another Albatros darted upon Huxley, but as soon

¹⁵ Lieut. F. S. Woolhouse; No. 4 Sqn. (previously Infantry). Signwriter and decorator; of Perth, W. Aust.; b. Roeburne, W. Aust., 21 Feb., 1896. Killed in action, 10 April, 1918.

¹⁶ That a machine "fell out of control" did not always mean that it was destroyed. A pilot attacked from above would often "put his machine into a spin," which meant that it fell away rapidly, whirling in a corkscrew course; and while in a "spin" an aeroplane is not under its pilot's control. While this was a common method of escape from attack, it was also frequently a sign that either the pilot or the machine had been put out of action. In such case a crash frequently ensued, especially when the fight occurred near the ground. The attacker, when he was able, would follow his spinning adversary down and continue firing into him. See Glossary.

¹⁷ Lieut. C. H. Martin; No. 4 Sqn. (previously Infantry). Building foreman; of Port Melbourne, Vic.; b. Port Melbourne, 1 April, 1894. Killed in action, 17 Feb., 1918.

¹⁸ See Chapter XV, p. 210.

¹⁹ Wing Commander A. L. Paxton, D.F.C.; R.A.F. Attached to No. 2 Sqn., A.F.C., 10 Jan. to 26 July, 1918. Rancher; of Sonora, Mexico; b. Sydney, 7 Aug., 1896.

as Paxton dived in turn to thwart him, the remaining Germans broke off and flew away east. As they came home, the pair chased a two-seater to a forced landing from over Festubert. At 12.30 on the same day R. W. Howard and Holden, looking for prey between Lens and Douai at 16,500 feet, saw beneath them six red-tailed Albatros scouts in two flights of three, pursuing an R.E 8. They at once dived on the nearer group, and a hot burst from Howard sent the leader down in a vertical nose-dive with a slow spin from which he was not seen to recover. The other Germans hastily turned and made for the ground near Lille. By the time the Australians had again made height over Douai they met five more German scouts, but, just as the fight was beginning, six Bristol Fighters appeared overhead and the Germans turned tail for home. On the same day the Camels²⁰ also were engaged in several indecisive encounters at lower altitudes with enemy two-seaters, which they drove in from artillery-ranging.

Next day visibility was very bad for all except those who continued the war at 17,000 feet. While rifts in the haze and clouds showed them Pont-à-Vendin on the floor below, McKenzie and Benjamin of No. 2 Squadron had a short, sharp fight with three green Albatros scouts, from which engagement one German fell away in a spin. A little later, in the same vicinity, Lieutenants Huxley and A. G. Clark,²¹ meeting two obvious decoys and refusing to be drawn towards them under a cloud, stood off, to see six German scouts suddenly dash out of it as though expecting to entrap them. Having thus exposed their plan, the enemy, though in force of eight to two, had no heart to wait for the attack which the Australians then prepared to deliver, and turned away home.

In a burst of spring weather on February 21st Lieutenants A. G. Clark, Benjamin, R. Lang,²² and W. Q. Adams,²³ from No. 2 Squadron, encountered over Brebières ten Albatros scouts with silver bodies and red noses, in two formations, six

²⁰ "Camels"—Here and elsewhere in this narrative used as a short term for "Sopwith Camels." See Appendix No. 1.

²¹ Lieut. A. G. Clark; No 2 Sqn. (previously Light Horse) Grazier; of Killara, Sydney; b. Ashfield, Sydney, 11 Aug., 1896.

²² Lieut. R. Lang, M M.; R A.F. Attached No 2 Sqn, 10 Jan. to 21 Feb., 1918. Of London; b. 14 May, 1895.

²³ Lieut. W. Q. Adams, R A.F (previously Lord Strathcona's Horse). Attached No 2 Sqn., A F.C., 10 Jan. to 22 July, 1918. Of Crystal City, Manitoba, Canada; b. Edinburgh, North Dakota, U.S A., 6 Sept., 1893.

and four. Clark, the leader of the Australian four, said: "One hostile machine dived at me. I fired both guns, Lewis and Vickers, into the nose of this machine, getting a burst of fifty rounds into it at a range of forty yards. The machine fell over on its left wing and dropped vertically into an uncontrolled spin." He then led his formation into a climb in order to get height before attacking again. Meanwhile Benjamin, as he said later, suddenly saw a silver-fish dive straight across his front not more than thirty yards off. "I had nothing to do" he reported, "but put my finger on my trigger and keep it there, and the enemy got it fair in the middle." In the climb to continue the fight they all lost sight of these victims for a few seconds, but, as the remainder of the German formation broke away for home, Lang, diving, saw one Albatros crash on the ground and another going down completely out of control. A quarter of an hour later a patrol of four from No. 4 Squadron—Lieutenants J. C. Courtney,²⁴ G. Jones,²⁵ A. W. Adams,²⁶ and A. Couston²⁷—engaged six enemy scouts which were escorting four two-seaters near the line between Lens and Arras. Jones shot an Albatros to pieces in the air, and Adams, chasing another from the *mêlée*, followed it with bursts of fire till he saw it crash near Haubourdin, twenty miles north of the first encounter. Couston, in a duel with a third German, was carried away during the fight nearly to Douai, and was finally shot down by his opponent, but made a landing near that place and was taken prisoner. This engagement was scarcely over when Phillipps and Holden from No. 2 Squadron appeared on the scene at 16,000 feet, and found six red-nosed Albatros scouts over Esquerchin, near where Couston's duel had finished. The two attacked this formation and broke it up. Two of the Germans span away into clouds; the remainder sheered off. It remains to be said that during the rest of the day no German formation was observed in the sky by either of the Australian squadrons.

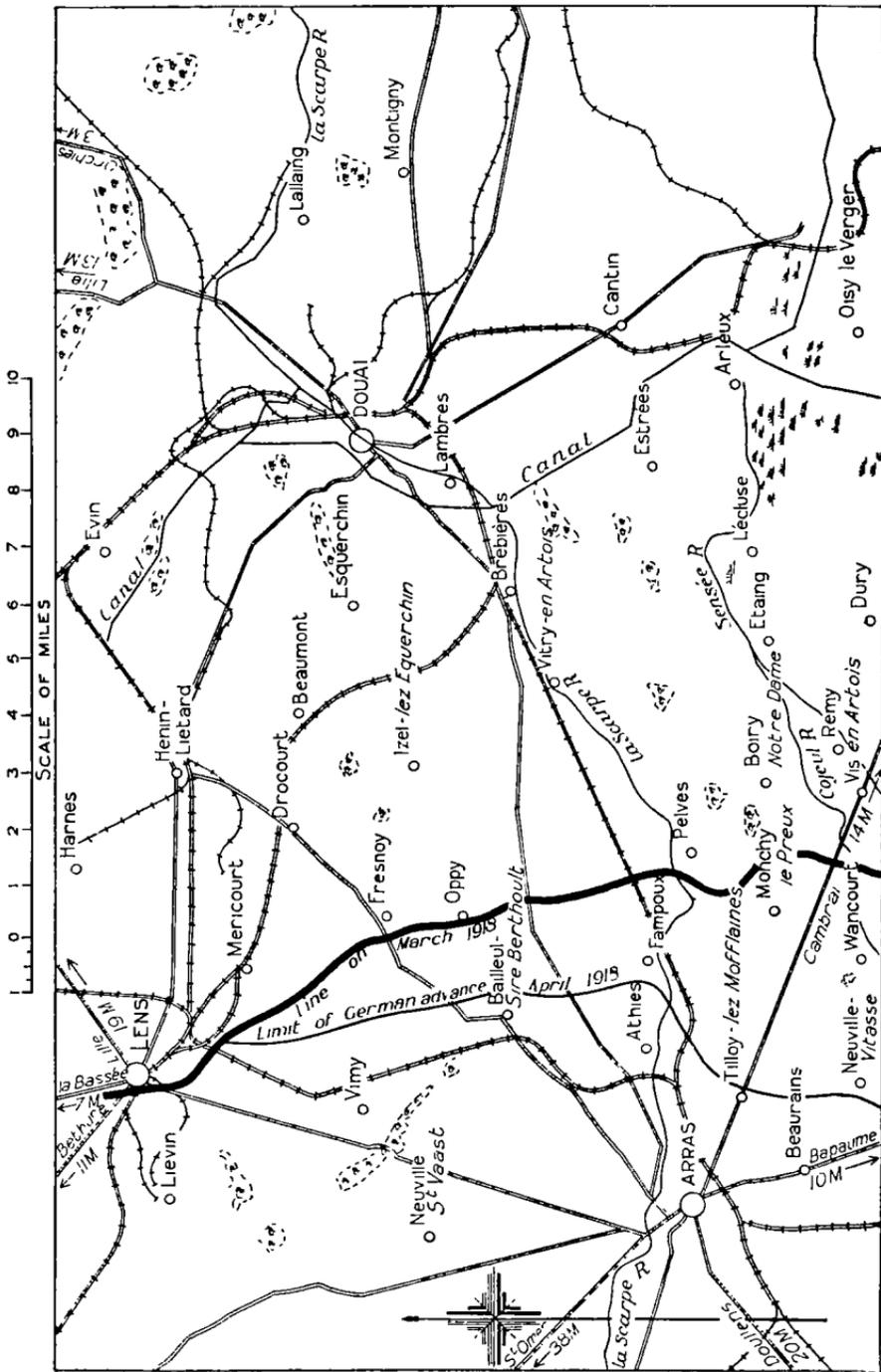
²⁴ Lieut. J. C. Courtney, No. 4 Sqn. Fitter and turner; of Manly, Sydney; b. Auckland, N.Z., 14 April, 1893. Killed in action, 7 April, 1918.

²⁵ Group Capt. G. Jones, D.F.C., p.s.a. No. 4 Sqn. (previously Light Horse; afterwards R.A.A.F.). Motor Mechanic; of East Melbourne and Rushworth, Vic; b. Rushworth, 22 Nov., 1896.

²⁶ Lieut. A. W. Adams; No. 4 Sqn. Rubber worker; b. Woodend, Vic, April, 1894.

²⁷ Lieut. A. Couston; No. 4 Sqn. (previously Machine-Gun Corps). Telephone mechanic; b. Launceston, Tas., July, 1893.

Map No. 13



DOUAI REGION, THE "HUNTING" AREA OF ALL BRITISH SCOUT SQUADRONS. MANY AERODROMES PRYCHTMAN OF GERMAN SCOUT SQUADRONS WERE SITUATED IN THE VICINITY OF DOUAI ON ACCOUNT OF ITS CENTRAL POSITION

Hitherto No. 4 Squadron had been seriously handicapped, as compared with other fighting squadrons, by reason of having only eighteen machines on its strength. Towards the end of February it received six more machines, making up its full complement, and from that time the efficiency of the squadron in offensive-patrols and in the extent of its operations was greatly enhanced. A further mark of the squadron's progress was its proved capacity to provide its own flight-commanders, and on February 18th O'Hara Wood and Hughes-Chamberlain, who had been lent from the British service, returned to their own corps, and Australian pilots took their places as flight-commanders.

For nearly a fortnight air fighting died down during stormy weather. Australian patrols continued on every possible occasion their bombing and machine-gunning of enemy villages and road transport. In this work Lieutenant W. B. Randell,²⁸ of No. 4 Squadron, and Lieutenant G. C. Logan,²⁹ a newly-arrived pilot in No. 2, were shot down by anti-aircraft fire over German lines and taken prisoners. The German battle-squadrons were nursing their strength for the great offensive, which every man on the Allied front knew to be in preparation. By March 11th all British airmen were ordered to hold themselves specially on the alert.

The enemy's preparations were multiplying. Pilots from distant reconnaissance daily brought reports of new field-hospitals springing up behind the German lines, of the growth in numbers and sizes of ammunition-dumps, and of an immense increase in artillery. The German plan—as has already been explained—was to prepare everywhere at once, in order to set the British Intelligence Staff the problem of guessing the precise point of the intended offensive. Many of the new battery-positions were dummies; many more were real enough, but unoccupied. In some places, as on the Champagne front, German artillerymen were set to driving waggons up and down and round about false battery-positions in order to distract observation from the real points of concentration.

The bad weather broke at the end of the first week of March, and German aircraft at once appeared upon

²⁸ Lieut. W. B. Randell; No. 4 Sqn. (previously Artillery). Electoral inspector; of Walkerville, S. Aust.; b. Mt. Pleasant, S. Aust., 14 Sept., 1891.

²⁹ Lieut. G. C. Logan, R.A.F. Attached No. 2 Sqn., 10 Jan. to 21 Feb., 1918. Of Peterborough, Ontario, Canada.

reconnaissance and to range the German guns upon British batteries. On the morning of March 6th seven machines from No. 4 Squadron observed several Rumpler two-seaters, escorted by six Albatros scouts, over the British lines at Arras. Flockart's patrol of four machines climbed to meet the escort, while the other three dispersed the two-seaters. The Albatros formation turned for home, but was brought by Flockart to action, in which he and Woolhouse shot down one, which crashed near the River Scarpe. Lieutenant F. J. Scott³⁰ chased a Rumpler as far as Lens and destroyed it. March 8th was a glorious flying day. Every available Australian machine was in the air; the sky over the Douai area was filled with these winged huntsmen waiting for the enemy to break cover from his aerodromes. An early patrol of four S.E.5's under Lieutenant R. L. Manuel³¹ sighted near Lens twenty-six German scouts in two formations. Two of the Australian machines had given signs of engine-trouble, and Manuel accordingly avoided engagement. News of the enemy was reported to the aerodromes, and at 10 a.m. twelve Camels left Bruay, while four more S.E.5's took off from Savy aerodrome. They spent no time in looking for the reported German armada, but made for the vicinity of the enemy's aerodromes in order to meet him there. Just west of Douai Flockart's formation attacked a bunch of German scouts, presumably some of the earlier fleet returning; Flockart and Woolhouse shot one of them down in flames, and Lieutenant G. Nowland³² sent another down out of control. A little to the north of them four S.E.5's under R. W. Howard attacked two two-seaters and forced one to land in a hurry. Returning a quarter of an hour later from scouring this area for traces of the enemy, they drove down out of control another two-seater. An Albatros scout which then appeared from the direction of Douai met with the same fate. The S.E.5's were turning towards home, when they saw a black two-seater flying over Henin-Liétard. They dived on this too eagerly, for, as the two-seater put his nose down

³⁰ Lieut. F. J. Scott, M.C.; No. 4 Sqn. Grazier; b. Korumburra, Vic., 1895.

³¹ Capt. R. L. Manuel, D.F.C.; No. 2 Sqn. (previously Infantry). Farmer; of Kerang, Vic.; b. Kerang, 7 Oct., 1895.

³² Lieut. G. Nowland; No. 4 Sqn. Tent-maker, of Clifton Hill and North Fitzroy, Melbourne, b. Fitzroy, 23 March, 1892. Killed in action, 22 May, 1918.

eastward, the Australian patrol was suddenly attacked by eight Albatros scouts from the sun.³³ Howard perceived them in time to avert disaster, and turned towards the British lines, making a left bank and climbing sharply in order to gain height. The Germans did not press the attack, and the Australians, having been out for over an hour and a half and running a risk of petrol shortage, courted no further action, but made for home.

From March 11th onwards German airmen became increasingly active. Though the Australians were constantly meeting them and exchanging shots, such encounters amounted as a rule to no more than sparring matches. The Germans were waiting for the day of Ludendorff's offensive. Machines on both sides now flew in large formations. The manœuvring by a formation on either side would be for advantage of height; if such a manœuvre succeeded, the opposing formation would dive away in order to avoid attack, and then either seek to climb again for a counter-attack or else break off the engagement. All depended on advantage of position. On neither side had the scouts the speed of their opponents in any considerable measure, except that the S.E.5 and the Camel could usually beat the Albatros on the climb. The bringing on of a "dog-fight"—where both sides were willing and where they met on fairly equal terms of position—depended for a time either on the enemy formation being so cornered by the British scouts that it had no other hope, or upon that formation being one of the aggressive circuses whose members were known by their machines, and whose prestige was such that they always fought as a matter of principle.

Ten S.E.5's under R. W. Howard cornered some of the enemy on March 12th over Wingles, just north of Lens. Flying in a wide spread, the Australians found themselves well over six Albatros scouts escorting a two-seater. Howard being in the sun, and evidently unseen, dived on the escort. The enemy scattered in all directions, and one, turning desperately to escape Lieutenant A. R. Rackett,³⁴ who was fast on its tail, suddenly gave Holden an excellent target. Holden zoomed up and fired into it a stalling burst of fifty rounds.

³³ See note 13, Chapter VI, p. 72.

³⁴ Lieut. A. R. Rackett; No. 2 Sqn. (previously Signal Services). Painter; of Mt. Gambier, S. Aust.; b. Port Adelaide, 18 Feb., 1896.

The Albatros forthwith fell out of control and was seen to hit the earth in flames. McKenzie dived clean through the enemy scouts upon the two-seater below, fired ninety rounds into it, and that also fell in flames. Another Albatros was destroyed next morning by the same pilot—again over Wingles—when nine Australian machines cut off from home two German scouts, well separated. These were not days for scouts to fly alone, and one of the Germans paid the penalty for his foolishness.

The tactics of this waiting period were further demonstrated by the experience of No. 4 Squadron. Soon after sun-up on March 13th a patrol of eleven Camels under Courtney found large numbers of German two-seaters at work between Lens and La Bassée, but could not attack them, for the reason that enemy scouts were waiting in the sun well overhead. But two days later Courtney, leading a patrol of ten, routed a number of German two-seaters observed to be without escort south of the Scarpe, and shot down four, two of them out of control. These fights were only preliminary air skirmishing. The German airmen, as has been explained, were avoiding battle until the desired moment; the plan of the British squadrons was to draw them on to engagement, and offensive-patrols swept the enemy's front, searching for his strength, bombing his aerodromes, taunting him to fight, probing unceasingly to discover the main secret—the selected moment of his onslaught. It was expected that the first shock would be felt in the air. The patrols sought for that shock, for the first touch of the enemy's battle-fleet. It might appear at any part of the front and at any moment. Each day after March 11th increased the strain. British battle-patrols multiplied their efforts.

Suddenly No. 4 Australian Squadron made the desired touch. In the morning of March 16th two flights, of five machines each, under Captain N. L. Petschler³⁵ and Lieutenant G. F. Malley,³⁶ set out to bomb Douai railway junction, Malley escorting. Petschler and two others were compelled to turn back by engine-trouble. Seven Camels

³⁵ Capt. N. L. Petschler; No. 4 Sqn. Indentor; of St George District, N.S.W.; b. Rockdale, Sydney, 22 Nov., 1892.

³⁶ Sqn Leader G. F. Malley, M.C., A.F.C.; No. 4 Sqn. (previously Artillery; afterwards R.A.A.F.). Mechanic; of Mosman, Sydney; b. Mosman, 2 Nov., 1893.

reached Douai, and had just climbed to about 16,000 feet after dropping their bombs, when they were attacked from above by sixteen enemy scouts. It was Richthofen's Red Circus, renowned as stormy petrels. The Germans dived upon the Australians in twos and threes and at once broke up Malley's formation. In all twelve attacked in this fashion; the other four remained hovering above the fight, in order to prevent any recovery by the Camels for counter-attack. Lieutenants Malley and C. M. Feez,³⁷ avoiding the first onset, fastened upon two red Albatros scouts which were diving together, and shot both of them down in flames. Lieutenant A. W. Adams, who was flying 2,000 feet below Malley when the action began, fought a fierce duel with a couple of the enemy and sank one, which was believed to have crashed. On the Australian side the fight was a desperate effort to escape, which barely succeeded. Lieutenant W. H. Nicholls,³⁸ a newly-joined pilot, was chased down to the ground and just failed to reach home. He was forced to land in the German front line, and was taken prisoner. Lieutenant P. K. Schafer³⁹ received the full force of the enemy's opening fire; he dropped 10,000 feet in a spin earthward, followed by three red scouts, all shooting at him, and was saved chiefly by the Germans' reluctance to continue the struggle at low height over the British lines. Schafer reached Bruay aerodrome with sixty-two bullet-holes in his machine, including several through the wind-screen in front of his face.

The report of Richthofen's Circus in action over the Scarpe sector sent a thrill through local British air squadrons. For the next two days no further important events happened. Large Australian offensive patrols north of the Scarpe failed to pick up Richthofen or any other enemy, but fired some thousands of machine-gun rounds into the German trenches near Lens and La Bassée. R. W. Howard, leading a flight of S.E.5's destroyed a solitary Rumpler two-seater near Lille on March 18th. Then fog shut down on the front for three days,

³⁷ Lieut. C. M. Feez; No. 4 Sqn. (previously Artillery). Grazier, of Yeronga, Brisbane; b. Brisbane, 14 Dec. 1897.

³⁸ Lieut. W. H. Nicholls; No. 4 Sqn. (previously Light Horse). Auctioneer; of Snowtown, S. Aust.; b. Adelaide, 7 Aug., 1895.

³⁹ Lieut. P. K. Schafer, M.M.; No. 4 Sqn. (previously Infantry). Clerk; of Melbourne; b. Ascot Vale, Melbourne, 1897. Died, 21 Aug., 1933.

and through this fog, on March 21st, Ludendorff's mighty offensive burst upon the British lines at St. Quentin.

The probable region of the assault had been deduced by the British High Command from a variety of evidence. Divisions in the line there had been warned, and on March 20th No. 4 Australian Squadron received orders to extend its patrols south of the Scarpe to cover the region of Bapaume. At 8 o'clock in the morning of March 21st, in a dense mist, ten machines left Bruay in two formations, under Courtney and Cobby, to search the new area. Cobby with his five scouts led, while Courtney flew above and behind him to watch the tails of the leading flight. The mist made flying in good formation almost impossible. "The country was obscured by mist," reported Cobby, "and after about forty minutes' flying I confess that I, the leader of the whole patrol, had but a vague idea of where I was. Every now and then we would see a captive balloon peeping through the mist. Finally I determined to follow this line north until near home, then strike across towards Bruay and endeavour to locate the aerodrome.

"At 9 a.m. we were flying north at about 4,000 feet, just above the balloons and fog, when three Albatros scouts came through the fog just below and to the left of us. They were followed by a straggling line of Pfalz and other scouts, and were flying on a line parallel to our own. Apparently they did not see us, for they made no attempt either to fight or avoid us. Rocking my machine fore and aft—the usual signal to follow the leader into action—I dived into the centre of the enemy formation. Courtney came down from above and joined in, and for about four minutes an all-in dog-fight ensued.

"It was Richthofen's Circus again; all were red machines, except one yellow-and-black Albatros. The leaders first seen did not join the fight; they were ahead in the fog." Cobby destroyed two of the enemy. Lieutenants Pflaum and A. E. Robertson⁴⁰ each shot down a selected opponent, pursued him through the ground-mist, and saw him crash. Lieutenant G.

⁴⁰ Lieut. A. E. Robertson, M.C.; No. 4 Squ. Electrical engineer; b. Prahran, Melbourne, April, 1892.

M. Elwyn⁴¹ fought a strenuous duel with one red scout, and then, his own engine being badly damaged by bullets, had to land behind the British lines near Bapaume.

By evening of that day the attention of both the Australian scout squadrons was turned to the northern area of the battle, the right front of the British Third Army, in the Bapaume sector.

⁴¹ Lieut. G. M. Elwyn; No. 4 Sqn. (previously Light Horse). Stock and station agent; b. Texas, Q'land, 1894.