

CHAPTER XVII

MEETING THE GERMAN OFFENSIVE

UNTIL the opening of Ludendorff's offensive on March 21st, the strain of expectation in the Allied Armies was intense. The news of the definite event brought a notable relief. There was never any doubt about the seriousness of the German effort. It was promised as a fight to the death. The British Army knew that it had its back to the wall; the Germans proclaimed this to be their last grand attack. Action, when it came at last, though tremendous the issue, brought new vigour to men haunted by weeks of anxiety. If it were to be its last fight, the British Army had resolved it should be a good one; and—despite many ill-informed stories during those latter days of March concerning the broken Fifth Army opposite St. Quentin—a good fight it was.

In the main, and especially among those troops who had not to bear the first overwhelming shock, the feeling in the crisis was one of exultation. Airmen came back to the British aerodromes that morning thrilled with amazement at the mighty drama which had been unfolded before their eyes on the ground below. The terrific artillery bombardment by the enemy guns at dawn had aroused to the alert the whole neighbourhood behind the British lines. Soon after dawn, a pilot landed at a British aerodrome, white-faced and shaking with excitement at what he had seen through the mist. "There are thousands of them—thousands and thousands," was all he could say. "The whole countryside is alive with them, all advancing." Every aeroplane in the vicinity took the air, loaded with every kind of bomb, emptied the explosives on to the nearest body of enemy infantry, blazed off its machine-gun ammunition into grey masses at close range, and then returned home for supplies to repeat the attack. The work done by the heavy bombers far behind the German lines was enormous. But still the masses of the enemy pressed forward, along lanes which had been shot clean through the British position by the fire of heavy artillery, filtering through at any weak point where resistance had been destroyed, outflanking dazed and gasping rear-guards caught in the fumes

of gas-shells. One British airman, killed on the following day, wrote home on the evening of that twenty-first of March a letter describing what he had seen:¹

“Since an early hour in the afternoon rolling clouds of picric smoke smothered the surface of the earth, almost obscuring it from reconnaissance. The effect was most startling. At one moment the smoke would roll back like a coverlet; the stretch of road and railway, village and field, below would be almost bare of movement. At another, through a rift could be caught a fleeting glimpse of indescribable masses of grey, which at first against the greyer shadow of the earth would appear motionless, then develop animation at various points; a great human snake that writhed this way and that, endeavouring to free itself from its own voluminous coils. I dived lower, and rapidly fired off a tray and a half of cartridges from my machine-gun, encountering little or no defensive fire and certainly causing casualties.

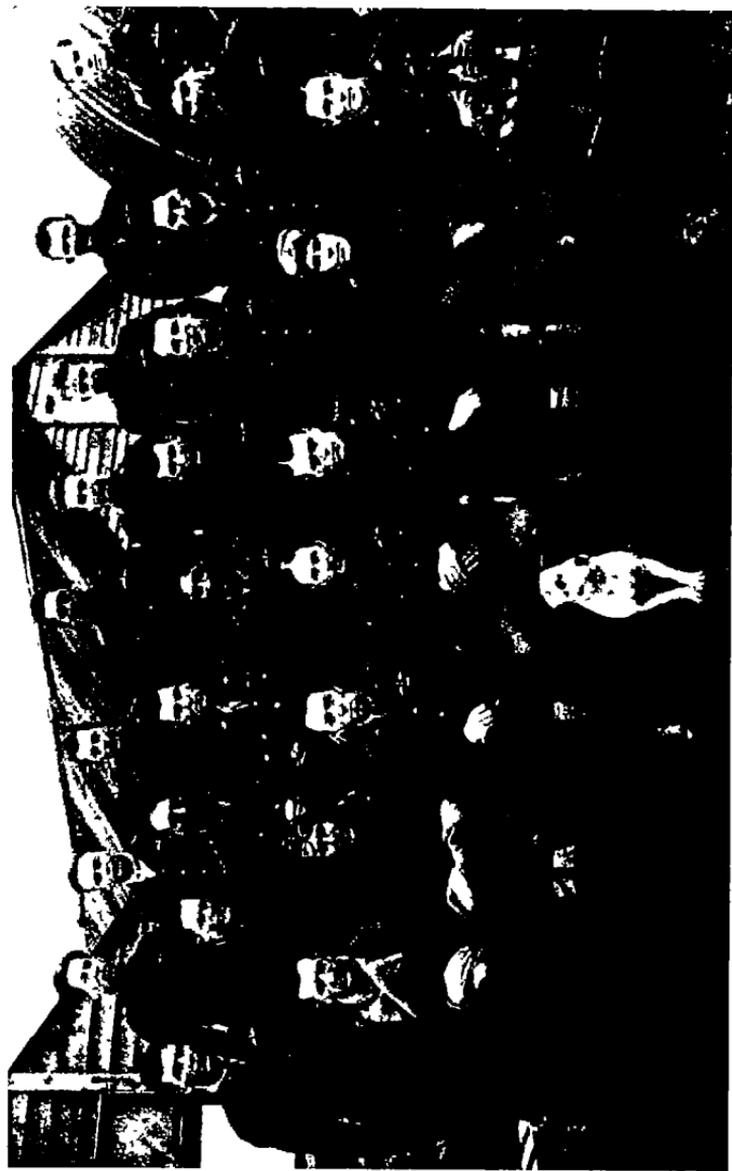
“A broad, straight highway running directly north and south indicated Le V—— (Le Verguier), where a great mass of British infantry (the 24th Division) was lying. Gradually, very gradually, it was dwindling away in long ceaseless tendrils from the main body to a more expansive mass in the rear ground. Tiny shoots of flame stabbed the smoke cloud from all directions. It was denser here, and difficult to distinguish friend from foe. The hurl and shock and recoil of the infantry battle were here plainly visible. By this time I had run out of ammunition.”

The climax of the Allied counter-attack from the air was yet to come. Meanwhile, the two Australian squadrons were also engaged in meeting the German attack. The first to enter the fight was No. 2 Squadron, on March 22nd, when a double formation of ten machines, under Phillipps and Forrest, started at 2 p.m. for their old fighting-ground around Cambrai and St. Quentin, now the scene of the right of the German attack. Two of them had to turn back immediately in consequence of engine-trouble, but the other eight drove on for St. Quentin, and there met five enemy two-seaters and a number of scouts with them. Forrest dived on a two-seater,

¹This description of an eye witness of the great scene is quoted in Middleton's *Tails Up*

which fell in flames from a hot burst at forty-yards' range. Simultaneously McKenzie engaged an Albatros scout and sent it down out of control. These fights took place at 18,000 feet. The formation turned north along the German front, and five minutes later was over Bourlon Wood. There they saw five German triplanes below them. Singling out the leader, Phillipps attacked and chased it downward for 2,000 feet, firing into it at close range. It rolled over on to its back, went spinning down slowly, and was last seen only a thousand feet from the ground, and still spinning. The remainder of the enemy scattered into the haze. Passing on, the Australian formation attacked more Albatros scouts over Bullecourt, and Forrest shot down two of these out of control, and Holden a third, in rapid succession. Shortly after this patrol came in, another went out under R. W. Howard. In a general engagement at 9,000 feet, Rackett drove down an enemy scout north of St. Quentin, but the fight was remarkable chiefly for being the last fought by Howard, the gallant leader of the formation, who was shot down near Epehy and mortally wounded.

At 8 o'clock next morning, March 23rd, Phillipps and Forrest again led out a combined patrol. They began operations with a sweep north of the Scarpe, but found in this region only one two-seater over Brebières at 10,000 feet, which McKenzie shot down in flames. Farther south, over Bourlon Wood, the S.E.5's fell in with eight Albatros scouts. Phillipps shot down one out of control at close range, and the remainder dived into clouds to escape. But the chief excitement in the air was with No. 4 Squadron. This day, the third of the German onslaught, was one of grave anxiety on the Third Army front, whose right flank was compelled to fall back in accordance with the retreat of the Fifth Army. Through March 23rd and 24th the engrossing question was: "Will the Third Army hold?" The fate of the whole British line depended on it, and in the event that line was saved by the magnificent defence of the British divisions at the centre of the Third Army's front south-east of Arras. The right, however, was exceedingly hard pressed, and on the Saturday, March 23rd, was fighting a desperate rear-guard action around Bapaume. That morning the battle was very heavy about



OFFICERS OF NO. 2 SQD AMBON A F C SAVY, MARCH 1918

Числ И в Музейн Official Photo No E1883

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VAULX-VRAUCOURT, FROM THE AIR

It was on the main road, which can be seen running from left to right through this village, that the advancing German transport and reserves were in March, 1918, heavily bombed by British and Australian aeroplane squadrons.

*From the collection of the late Lieut-Col W. O. Watt, No. 2 Squadron, A.F.C.
Taken 1st September, 1918.*

Vaulx-Vraucourt and along the Bapaume-Cambrai road, and No. 4 Squadron was among those detailed to harass the attacking Germans at this place.

The first machines left the aerodrome at a few minutes after 10 o'clock. They were in two formations, under Courtney and Malley respectively, and each consisted of six machines. Courtney, flying at under 500 feet, led his formation in a bombing and machine-gun attack on Vaulx-Vraucourt village and the fields around it. There was no lack of targets for the airmen; the ground was swarming with German troops, and the roads were packed with other marching bodies and their transport. The five machines which first attacked spread dismay and confusion between Vaulx-Vraucourt and Lagnicourt, each firing between 500 and 600 rounds. Meanwhile, Malley's formation, flying slightly above Courtney's, intercepted an attack on Courtney from low-flying Albatros scouts. Malley himself shot down two of these Germans, both of which immediately crashed, and Scott defeated another whose fate was not seen. There was no height for a machine to manœuvre or to save itself from a bad spin. The effect on the infantry may be imagined—the rush down from the misty air of a flight of aeroplanes; the ear-splitting din of the propellers as the machines dived and wheeled and zoomed and dived again above the crowded road and over the village streets; the rush into ditches and holes to escape the searing sprays of bullets; the little broken-legged heaps of men and horses on the road; the collisions of bolting waggons; the new roar of more machines above, as aerial battle was joined over the heads of the low-shooting scouts; here and there the terror of a machine falling to wreck and death, perhaps in the narrow village street, perhaps in the field outside, but anywhere likely to crash upon some part of the crowd below; then the second rush, as the flight escorting the first attackers came down, in its turn, to repeat the first deadly whirlwind.

As the Australian machines finished their attack and flew away for further supplies to renew it, formations from other British squadrons succeeded them. Now bombing began as well. The machines from No. 4 Squadron also brought bombs in their second attack. Bapaume was in the hands of the

advancing enemy, and the first bombs dropped were aimed to fire the British dumps there, which, for want of explosives at the proper moment, had not been destroyed in the retreat. The Germans were crowding into Bapaume by every road from east and south—crowding there because the roads all led to that centre and the wheeled traffic was obliged by the boggy state of the fields to keep to the roads. There was little artillery fire, but against the enemy the aeroplane bombs took the place of shells. Into that packed road-centre nine Australian machines, each in orderly succession, dropped two 25-lb. bombs from so low a height that to miss was impossible; then they spread out to smash up the road-traffic outside with machine-gun fire. German scouts again attacked them while at this work, but with no other effect than loss to themselves. Lieutenant A. E. Robertson, having dropped his bombs on Bapaume dump, rose to meet a formation of enemy scouts, destroyed one Fokker triplane, and shot down two others out of control. Cobby, who was flying with him, drove off another, an Albatros. No. 4 Squadron's scourge had barely vanished when five S.E. 5's from No. 2 Squadron, flying at 17,000 feet over Bapaume, shot down two German two-seaters in succession. Phillipps, attacking one of them at short range, shot dead the observer, whose gun fell out of the machine; the jamming of his own guns then forced him to leave this enemy spinning earthward. Forrest destroyed the other in flames a few minutes later.

In the afternoon of Sunday, March 24th, a critical day, a gap appeared in the British line at Delville Wood, on the old Somme battlefield, and for some hours disaster was feared. The gap was filled by the throwing in of the British 35th Division and some hard-worked cavalry reserves; but the enemy pressure was maintained very heavily around Bapaume also, while on the other side of the Fifth Army the French left was in retreat, with rear-guards greatly outnumbered. Both Australian squadrons had patrols over the Third Army front all that Sunday, and an early flight from No. 4 Squadron, under Courtney, while visiting the Vimy Ridge front before starting for the south, observed German concentration beginning there as well. Two pilots dived and fired some hundreds of rounds into crowded billets and trenches near

Lens. Then the formation of six flew on to Vaulx-Vraucourt and Mory, out-lying villages near Bapaume, to continue there the work of the previous day. The other two flights of the squadron, under Malley and Captain W. B. Tunbridge,² also appeared here about noon. All machines from No. 4 again bombed and machine-gunned the roads behind the advancing German front—roads which were vital for its supplies and artillery, if the advance was to be maintained—and especially the main Bapaume—Cambrai road, which was packed with transport endeavouring to get forward. Throughout the afternoon the airmen flew up and down that road, scattering every large party of infantry and holding up the wheeled-traffic. Since time was vital to the Allied Command, the demoralisation of enemy reserves, however temporary, was good work done. Every machine, when it had dropped its bombs and fired all its ammunition, flew home for more, and as soon as each formation was re-assembled and ready on the aerodrome, it started out again to repeat the attack.

Malley has described the excitement of this work and the scenes revealed to the airmen over the battlefield. "Owing to the Germans' rapid advance towards the Somme, numbers of squadrons from the northern sectors (Arras, Armentières, Ypres, and Belgian fronts) had to carry south petrol, bombs, and ammunition, and fly to the hard-pressed right front of the British Third Army about Bapaume. The British squadrons already in that sector were more or less disorganised. They had orders to pack up equipment or stand-by to leave their aerodromes at a moment's notice. So quickly did these evacuation orders come, that many British pilots who flew out on a patrol in the morning would return a few hours later to find the whole of their squadrons' personnel gone to some unknown destination—in some cases without their stores and equipment—and the aerodrome being shelled by the enemy. This naturally disorganised those squadrons. The pilot would avoid landing if the aerodrome were being shelled, and would fly on to some place of safety—perhaps choosing, as he thought, a flat quiet field. He was often handicapped by shortage of petrol, and in some cases he had to remain with his machine for several days before he

² Capt. W. B. Tunbridge; No. 4 Sqn. (previously Light Horse). Farmer; b. Ballarat, Vic., 7 June, 1893

could get petrol or make communication with his squadron again. This made it necessary to call in assistance from squadrons in other sectors.

"No. 4 Australian Squadron devoted many days entirely to this sort of relief work. Flights would leave Bruay for Bapaume, and begin bombing and 'shooting-up' enemy transport and infantry along the roads, around Vaulx-Vraucourt, Bapaume, and farther south. The weather at the beginning of the advance was indifferent for flying, being very misty, and heavy ground clouds made it difficult for pilots to gauge with accuracy the position of the German skirmishing line, especially while advancing so fast. Pilots would often fly for ten miles without seeing ground, and then would dive through dense clouds to try and pick up bearings, only to find themselves from fifty to a hundred feet above dense formations of Germans, who would hear a machine long before it appeared beneath the cloud, and would be ready to open fire on it directly it emerged from the mist. If the pilot were lucky, and were not vitally hit, he would immediately ascend into the cloud again and fly west, very often too far, and would have to feel his way back again to the moving line. Each day pilots had to judge for themselves the local situation.

"After the first few days, the weather began to clear a little. Australian pilots who had fought in the infantry through the battles of the Somme, in 1916, felt outraged on finding the Germans not only again in possession of Bapaume, but advancing also on Pozières, Albert, and the River Ancre.

"The Bruay aerodrome was a busy spot. Sometimes five squadrons of aeroplanes were lined out on the green—loading bombs and ammunition, checking sights, filling up with petrol, and overhauling machines. Pilots, chafing to get off to the line again, were all working with the mechanics and testing ammunition, which was of vital importance so that faulty rounds might not jam the guns in action. Each pilot arriving from the line would invariably have exciting news to impart to his comrades.

"After dropping bombs, and using up their ammunition, pilots always made a point of lingering for a while to survey the spectacle of the one army advancing against the other.



A FLIGHT OF NO. 2 SQUADRON, A.F.C. (SE5'S), WAITING TO START FROM SAVY AERODROME,
25TH MARCH, 1918

Inst. H. at Museum of Flight No. E.1879

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A FLIGHT OF NO 4 SQUADRON, A.F.C. (CAMELS), PREPARING TO START FROM BRUAY
AERODROME, 20TH MARCH, 1918

Details of this colossal movement visible from the air held one spellbound: villages for miles around all on fire; the smoke climbing from each blaze, and uniting at a great height to form a dense haze, pierced here and there by gun-flashes; roads teeming with transport; aerodromes, ammunition-dumps, Nissen³-huts, and engineers'-dumps being dismantled, burnt, or shelled. One incident of six British tanks in retreat made a queer spectacle. Artillery, horse-transport, and motor-transport, a little farther back from the line, crowded the roads. Infantry were stolidly tramping the shell-riddled fields.

"Much to our relief, German anti-aircraft batteries were not a great deal in evidence, apparently owing to field-guns having preference on the crowded roads. German aircraft, although seen flying at a great height and well over their own side, seemed indifferent about attacking, or attempting to approach our line. The great numbers of British machines evidently made them feel uncomfortable. Occasionally one of them would sneak through the mist and shoot at the British infantry. Often it was his last shot. Others merely fired a few rounds and raced away back to safety."

The German airmen—at all events in the experience of the Australian squadrons—were, in the main, unable to interfere. Such hostile scouts as at times appeared were either driven off by protective British battle-formations or intimidated by the sight of them. On March 24th, nine Australian S.E.5's encountered eight Albatros scouts and three two-seaters over Bapaume. In this engagement A. G. Clark shot down a scout out of control, and Phillipps shot away the wings from a two-seater, which then fell like a stone. The chief danger, as always, for the low-flying aeroplanes was from ground-fire, and though none of the Australians was lost this day, their machines came back full of bullet-holes, and G. Jones returned from the last bombing attack of the evening wounded in the back.

During the next two days, March 25th and 26th, the bombing of the Germans' communication routes increased in intensity. Till now the chief targets had been infantry reserves. On the Monday every road leading to Bapaume, and all the other main roads south of that place behind the

* Semi-circular army huts of corrugated iron, so named after the designer.

German front, were crowded afresh with transport. The German drive had so far proceeded mainly on the strength of such food and ammunition as the infantry could carry with them. Now supplies were wanted forward, and guns had to be brought up. The enemy's wheeled-transport was obliged in most places to keep to the roads, for the fields alongside were wet and holed and boggy. The Bapaume-Cambrai road was one of the main arteries for the supply of the advancing German front in this region. Over that road the machines of No. 4 Squadron made a sort of ant-trail in the sky. Pilot after pilot recorded that his bombs burst in the middle of troops or transport, and so thick was the traffic that any block in it must prove serious. The airmen blew craters in the road-surface with their bombs, and then concentrated their attack on the traffic, which became bunched at such craters in the effort to make the narrow passage round them. With machine-gun fire the airmen ditched motor-lorries, blocked the road with broken waggons and maimed horses, set field-gun teams into panic-gallops away from their route, and played all possible havoc with the German rear-services. A bomb from W. B. Tunbridge blew up a dump on the main road just north of Bapaume and caused a big fire. Parked vehicles and guns in Vaulx-Vraucourt were badly damaged by the fire of one machine after another. Marching infantry were scattered in all directions into temporarily panic-stricken bunches of men, who either fell or fled and were chased over the fields. Courtney dropped one bomb fair on to one of the hated "flaming-onion"⁴ batteries which had come into action against the aeroplanes, and thereafter there was no more shooting from it. No. 4 Squadron fired in all 15,000 machine-gun rounds that day. The attack was interrupted once—at noon—by German scouts. The Australians were ready for them with watching machines, and A. E. Robertson shot down two triplanes and an Albatros—one triplane being seen to crash—while Scott destroyed a Rumpler two-seater.

The story was the same next day, March 26th, on the roads and villages a little nearer west. The Germans were pushing out westward and northward from Bapaume, and were

⁴ "Flaming-onions"—These were fired from a revolver-gun similar to a howitzer; six or seven white or green balls of fire, apparently chained together, leaving a like number of black smoke-streams. The fire-balls rose to above 5,000 feet.

beginning to extend the attack along the front before Arras. Relays of patrols from No. 4 bombed all the length of the roads from Bapaume to Ervillers on the north, to Achiet-le-Grand on the north-west, and to Miraumont on the west and south-west. The bombs rarely missed their targets, and heavy casualties were plainly inflicted upon the German reserves.⁵ It was known later that the aeroplane attacks affected severely, and perhaps decisively, the success of the German offensive against the Third Army. Neither gain of ground nor the breaking of Gough's Fifth Army was the enemy's objective. He meant to reach Amiens at least, and, if he had taken Amiens, Abbeville should reasonably have fallen soon afterwards, and the Anglo-French Armies have been forced apart. That, and nothing short of it, was his plan: the rolling up of the British lines on the one flank and of the French on the other, a situation from which, in the bad morale resulting from so stunning a defeat, the troops of each command might not have been able to recover. A thorough examination of the action of the Allied air forces at this critical time before Amiens, in the closing days of March, makes it almost certain that, while it was the heroic infantry of outnumbered British and French divisions which held up the enemy advance—and the Australian divisions played a glorious part in the later stages—it was principally the untiring exertions of the airmen in delaying, damaging, and disheartening the enemy's reserves, and throwing his whole transport system out of gear, which enabled the Allied infantry to succeed.

The work of the Australian squadrons was only a fraction of what was happening along the whole front of the German assault, and the bombing of trains, supply-centres, and the enemy's traffic system went on by day and night right back to the big busy railway centres on the borders of France and Belgium. "Our hat was in the ring," as the Americans said, and the air force was ordered to count no cost whatever in machines, pilots, anything, but to fling itself at the mass of the German divisions behind the skirmishing line, to smash it, and to go on smashing it, night and day. If this was to be our final defeat, the air force would be the first to sacrifice

⁵ See Appendix No. 7.

itself; if it was to be the beginning of the Allied victory, it lay first with the airmen to turn the tide. The fight was to save the morale of the Allied Armies.

Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday were the critical days. Farther south, General Petain, the Commander-in-Chief of the French Armies, ordered every flying squadron within striking distance of Ham to take the air and attack the German reserves. "Within half-an-hour of that order," says Middleton,⁶ "the air was black with machines from French aerodromes making for this immediate strategic centre." At one point of the advance Reuter's special correspondent on the French front reported on March 27th that, south of the Somme, two entire German divisions advancing towards the battle-front were disorganised, before they were able to fire a single shot, by machine-gun fire and bombs from over a hundred French aeroplanes. This incident is also mentioned in an airman's letter from the front quoted by Middleton:—

"On Tuesday morning," writes this airman, "I saw a pretty bit of work. Fully 25,000 Germans were advancing below—under our very eyes, from 10,000 feet above—when from the direction of Chauny there swung round seven French fighting squadrons, 105 machines, glinting in the sun. They manoeuvred beautifully. Fancy, Jim! a hundred 'planes in a vertical turn at once! They sprang a lovely E-flat note, and 50,000 German ears heard it. It was laughable and tragic. Down swooped the Frenchmen with a whiz. They spread fanwise. A mighty crescent of 100-lb. bombs fell, then another, then small stuff. Hundreds upon hundreds were killed. I saw 5,000 men flat on their faces at once trying to escape. It was just awful."

On the British side of the German drive the air work was just as intense, and the severity of it may be judged by the British and German official reports of losses. During the five days, March 21st-25th, the enemy claimed to have shot down ninety-three Allied machines and six balloons. During the same period the British pilots alone destroyed or captured 137 German machines, drove down eighty-three more out of control, and burned three balloons. Many of the machines on each side were shot down from the ground while flying low.

⁶ *Tails Up*, p. 248.

There was not an aeroplane in the Australian scouting squadrons which was not riddled with bullets; yet, during this hot period of fighting low near the ground against infantry, they lost only two pilots—Lieutenants T. Hosking,⁷ killed, and O. T. Flight,⁸ shot down and taken prisoner. Three were wounded and evacuated to hospital—Lieutenants G. Jones (as already related), A. W. Adams, and J. W. Wright.⁹ Of these, Jones and Wright returned to the front in July.

No. 4 Squadron continued the same work on March 27th around Bray and in front of Albert—where the German advance was now slowing down before the reinforced British line—and on March 28th immediately east and south-east of Arras, where the enemy was attacking in force the centre and left of the Third Army front. On the former day, before Albert, the Germans were definitely stopped, partly by combined artillery and aeroplane attack on the roads entering that town, partly by determined infantry resistance from the British line, which was ordered to stand at Albert and was reinforced by part of the 4th Australian Division. That afternoon, just in front of this infantry, in an encounter between formations of low-flying Australian and German scouts, Lieutenant E. R. Jeffree,¹⁰ of No. 4 Squadron, destroyed two Fokker triplanes which were harassing the British trenches. Scott and Feez, of the same squadron, when low down, were attacked by a two-seater; after manœuvring from a bad position Scott destroyed the German. Next morning, Feez, when on patrol, was forced by engine-trouble to land south-east of Arras, and was captured. The German attack at Arras on March 28th was so decisively repulsed by the British that for the next three days No. 4 Squadron's scouts were relieved from "ground-strafting," and resumed on the Flanders front the higher offensive patrols of their normal duty.

It has already been explained that the chief work of No. 2 Squadron during this period was offensive patrolling to

⁷ Lieut. T. Hosking; No. 4 Sqn. (previously Infantry). Electrician; of St. Kilda, Melbourne; b. Brockley, London, 1896. Killed in action, 28 March, 1918.

⁸ Maj. O. T. Flight, No. 2 Sqn (previously Engineers). Student, b. Bendigo, Vic., 1895.

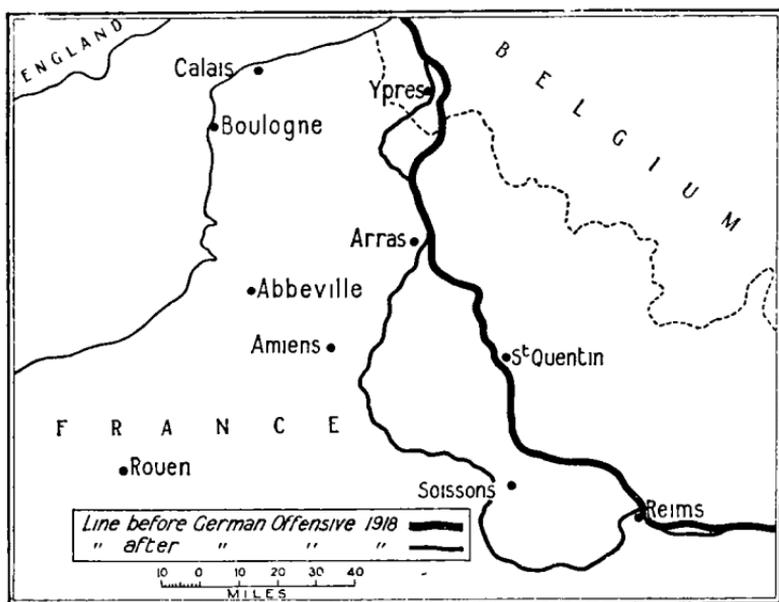
⁹ Maj. J. W. Wright, D.F.C., No. 4 Sqn (previously Light Horse), and 8th Div. Art., A.I.F., 1940. Factory manager, of Wahroonga, Sydney, b. Quirindi, N.S.W., 4 Jan., 1893.

¹⁰ Lieut. E. R. Jeffree, No. 4 Sqn (previously A.A.M.C.). Clerk; of Sydney; b. Sydney, 29 June, 1895.

protect No. 4 Squadron's formations flying below them. Some of the escorting S.E.5's occasionally joined in the low-flying attacks on the roads. Benjamin, one of Manuel's patrol on the morning of March 26th, destroyed an attacking Albatros scout over Bapaume, and Holden's patrol the same morning chased away a two-seater and shot its observer dead. A formation of four machines under Phillipps next day reported an excellent example of the responsibility of an air escort. The weather was still misty, though the hour was noon, and, flying in the haze at 2,000 feet near Albert, the S.E.5's suddenly caught a glimpse of eight German triplanes above them. Phillipps promptly fired a warning light and zoomed up into the mist. He emerged into clear air over Pozières on the tail of a triplane, chased it southwards to Suzanne, and there put fifty rounds into it at close range. The German went down in flames. Meanwhile the other three Australians failed in the haze to find the rest of the enemy formation; but none of the triplanes, as it happened, attacked the bombing formation from No. 4 below. Twenty minutes later, Phillipps destroyed another German scout at Méaulte. That same morning Forrest and Manuel, flying south of the Somme, destroyed a German two-seater over the French lines at Démuin.

In the last days of March the German advance on the Somme front was definitely brought to a halt about Albert (just held by the enemy), Corbie, and Villers-Bretonneux, the line occupied by the newly-arrived Australian Corps. To the immediate north the Third Army decisively repulsed the attempted widening of the German assault—the attack on Arras. To the immediate south of the Australian area, Petain's French reserves stayed the progress of the drive south-westwards. The Germans, however, were staking everything on their offensive, and were obliged to continue it; their scheme had not yet succeeded. The failure to reach Amiens meant that the British and French Armies had not been forced apart. Had the enemy continued to attack straight along the Somme, there were now reserves at hand ready to meet him there. With the idea of attracting these reserves to other parts of the front, the Germans next began to press upon each distant flank of this central position—upon

the British line in Flanders between Bethune and Ypres, and upon the French towards the Chemin-des-Dames and Soissons. The attack on the British began in April, and that upon the French in June.



Of the Australian air squadrons, No. 3 was now with the Australian Corps in the Somme Valley; No. 2 was in the same vicinity, and, after one or two moves, was stationed at Bellevue, east-north-east of Doullens, as part of a British circus wing; No. 4 was operating in Flanders on the front of the First Army. Before describing the new activities of the No. 2 and No. 3 Squadrons, it will be best, for the sake of the continuity of the story, to follow No. 4 Squadron in its work against the German drive through the Portuguese Division on the Lys, about Laventie.

If the failure to capture Amiens was not a warning to Ludendorff that his plans were breaking down, the failure even to dent the British line at Arras must have been so. Throughout the first week of April the patrols of No. 4 Squadron, roaming the air between Lens and the Scarpe River witnessed the recoil of the discomfited enemy in that

quarter, and from the reserve, or Hindenburg, line at Drocourt to the front lines in the chalky plain before Arras they worried with bombs and machine-gun fire the thickly-held villages and trenches and the crowded battery-positions. Concealment was gone; gun-pits were mostly open to view, and billets of reserve troops were plainly distinguishable. For the first three days of April the Australian squadron shared with other British squadrons the ceaseless duty of thus hammering home upon the German storm-troops the penalty of failure. Then came three days of bad weather, when flying was impossible. When the machines took the air again on April 7th it was clear that the enemy's centre of gravity hereabouts was shifting northward. The dawn bombing patrols that morning attacked as usual the trenches about Oppy and Lens, but in the forenoon the attack was concentrated for the first time on unmistakable German preparations between La Bassée and Armentières. The new German spearhead seemed to be pointing straight at Bethune along the Lille-La Bassée road, a fact of especial interest to No. 4 Squadron, since its own aerodrome was at Bruay, just behind Bethune. The Australian machines bombed that busy road, as far as Fournes, heavily and effectively, but in the operation Courtney's machine was hit by one of the much-hated "flaming-onion" batteries and fell in flames.

On April 9th the storm broke on the Portuguese before Fleurbaix and Laventie—the old "nursery sector"¹¹ of the line—and smashed through it at once. The assault was just north of the allotted area of No. 4 Squadron, and the Australian airmen entered the fight there on the evening of that day. The Germans had then reached the Lys at Sailly and the little creek called the Loisne about Lacouture and Vieille Chapelle. Then began another season of the same work which the squadron had been doing in the theatre of the enemy's southern offensive around Bapaume. Morning, noon, and evening the Camels of No. 4 Squadron attacked the reserves and transport behind the enemy attack, of which the foremost wave was pouring on over the wet flats towards Bethune and Hazebrouck. British reserves could not arrive

¹¹ It had long been a quiet sector into which new divisions were sent in order to obtain their first experience of trench-warfare.

for some days, and meanwhile the holding of the enemy on the ground had to be done by scattered and weak rear-guards, for with every yard of retreat the line extended and the men available to hold it grew fewer. The Scots of the 51st Division fought magnificently to save Bethune, and were assisted in that effort by the 12th (Army) Brigade of Australian Field Artillery, which was sent up hurriedly from a position on the Vimy Ridge. Farther north, before Merville, a British colonial cavalry regiment, King Edward's Horse, fought the finest day of its varied war service by holding up all day long on April 10th most of a full German division. North of them again the 29th and 31st Divisions maintained a gallant rear-guard action against heavy odds from the Lys right back to the outskirts of Hazebrouck, where they were joined at length on April 13th by the 1st Australian Division, newly-arrived from the Somme.

The first bombing formation out from No. 4 Squadron on the morning of April 10th caught large bodies of enemy infantry at the Rouge Croix cross-roads between Neuve Chapelle and Estaires, and also parks and moving columns of guns and transport on many roads between Laventie and Richebourg-St. Vaast. The splendid targets for aeroplane attack in this region were but a short distance from the Australian squadron's aerodrome, and in an average time of thirty or forty minutes a formation could start out, drop its bombs, empty its machine-guns into the enemy, and return to the aerodrome. No. 4 Squadron's bombing relays were therefore considerably more rapid than at Bapaume in the previous month. From dawn till early afternoon every available machine was engaged in the work. Even when weather permitted, it was rarely that this strenuous duty could be maintained all day long, since pilots required rest, and machines, inevitably much shot about by fire from the ground, had to be patched and mended. Within the limits of the capacity of men and machines, No. 4 Squadron carried on to its utmost the counter-attack from the air. The first attacking formation on April 10th left the aerodrome at 6 o'clock, the next at 8, and five others followed during the forenoon. Heavy punishment was inflicted on struggling transport columns and bodies of men marching towards the Loigne about

Vieille Chapelle. Roads were blocked by fallen horses and broken waggons; other waggons were ditched in the effort to make détours across fields round the obstacles; bodies of infantry scattered in panic or by order, re-formed after the blast from above had passed over them, and scattered again before another hosing of bullets. This sort of treatment takes much heart out of troops, and—what is of more immediate importance—saves precious time for the defence. The defence was here hard-pressed, and above all things required time to allow supplies and reinforcements to be brought up, sundered companies and battalions to be re-formed, and guns to be saved. In the event the Germans were unable to pass Merville for several days, and one agent in holding them up and harassing every effort to send forward men and guns and supplies was again the air force.

The wonder is that the losses were so slight, for there was no time to count any risk. No. 4 Squadron lost two more pilots in the morning of April 10th, both shot down by ground-fire near Laventie. Woolhouse was apparently hit, his machine crashed out of control, and he himself was killed in the wreck. Almost at the same time Lieutenant H. K. Love¹² also had to land in enemy territory, either wounded or with his machine damaged, and was taken prisoner. He was seen to land under control, but hit a fence, and his machine went over on its back. An hour later Cobby destroyed near Estaires an Albatros scout which came up to interfere with the bomb-dropping.

Weather grew worse on April 11th, but the air attack continued with little interruption. Some German batteries were now beginning to come into action hereabouts, near the stream of the Loisme—a sure sign of a stiffening British defence against the skirmishing line farther forward. Most of the airmen made direct hits with bombs on machine-gun and field-gun positions behind the Loisme. By April 12th the Germans were definitely held around Bethune, and the airmen began to transfer their attentions to the Estaires-Merville road, farther north. On that day the enemy was in Merville, and the main road running east from the town was crowded

¹² Flight Lieut H. K. Love, A F C.; No. 4 Sqn. (previously Infantry, afterwards R A A. F.). Electrical engineer, of East Malvern, Melbourne; b. Brighton, Melbourne, 9 Oct., 1895

with his traffic. By evening No. 4 Squadron was concentrating its attacks on Merville and the roads south-west from it towards Robecque and St. Venant, and during the next two days this vicinity was one of the chief points of danger. Robecque was in the direct road for Lillers, and any further break in the defence at that point would have meant the loss of Bethune by out-flanking from the north-west. The efforts of the British infantry, seconded by the fierce assaults of the airmen on the road junctions of Calonne and Pacaut, stayed the enemy's thrust. Pacaut village was full of German batteries in position, and the German losses here in men and material must have been very heavy, for throughout the morning of April 14th No. 4 Squadron put its full force into the bombing of that nest. The road through Paradis, a village just behind Pacaut, was filled during the afternoon by a large column of troops marching north to Merville. Shortly after 3 o'clock, one patrol from No. 4 flew straight along the road, and the six machines dropped twenty-four bombs along that column, almost all fair among the troops. Two hours later another six machines repeated the performance. The results of such an attack are far greater than the actual casualties caused; the effect was undoubtedly to render quite useless for offensive purposes that night the entire enemy force concerned.

During April 15th and 16th the enemy was held north of Merville in the direction of Hazebrouck, where reinforcements (including the 1st Australian Division) had now arrived, and by the 17th the airmen of No. 4 Squadron withdrew from the bombing of the Merville neighbourhood and resumed their attack on the thickly-held German positions before Bethune. The enemy was suspected of designing further assault on that town, but, if he did so, the attack never developed. April 18th, 19th, and 20th were days of steady bombing of the enemy's central position between Merville and Bethune, a centre containing many batteries and supply-dumps; and the morning of April 21st was devoted to the devastation of new German supply-dépôts at Lestrem and La Gorgue, on the south-west side of Estaires. By the 22nd the end of the immediate crisis on the Lys was indicated by the resumption by No. 4 Squadron of its ordinary duty of offensive-patrols.

Meanwhile the enemy airmen had been bombing as strenuously as the British, though more by night than by day. Night after night the Gothas hovered over Bethune—among other places—to drop the big bombs, whose explosions could be heard miles away. Among the night-bombers were several which would pass Bethune and fly on to Bruay to attack No. 4 Squadron's aerodrome. Bruay, too, was now under fire from the German heavy guns. These circumstances compelled the squadron to move at the end of April to an aerodrome at Clairmarais North, north-east of St. Omer. Here it received improved long-stroke Clerget engines for its machines in place of the short-stroke Clergets hitherto employed; here also it entered upon a new career of offensive air fighting, which endured until the signing of the Armistice.