

CHAPTER XIX

No. 3 SQUADRON'S OPERATIONS OVER THE SOMME

No. 3 SQUADRON had been operating over the Somme Valley, with the Australian Corps, for a fortnight before Richthofen's death. It arrived on the scene at about the same time as Australian Corps Headquarters Staff, that is to say, at the end of the first week in April. To meet the situation of a still unsettled line, only lightly dug in, where "active and continuous operations" (the official name for open warfare) might be resumed at any moment, the duties of the corps squadron were for a time re-arranged. The artillery-patrols located enemy batteries as they appeared, and called down counter-battery fire upon their guns whenever they were observed to be in action. For some weeks after the squadron's arrival in the Somme area, it carried out bombing and machine-gunning of the German positions on a much larger scale than it had done in Belgium. The fairly constant presence during April of low-flying German scouts showed that the enemy had not yet given up his offensive designs in this region, and on April 11th three R.E.8's, out learning the line at 4,000 feet, were attacked by six Albatros scouts over Hénencourt. After some ticklish manœuvring, in which the enemy were driven off from two of the Australian machines, the third was seen to go down badly out of control. Both pilot and observer (Lieutenants A. W. Rees¹ and G. A. Paul²) were wounded, but by skilful handling of the machine the pilot managed to land within the British lines. On the following day two accidents occurred on the aerodrome through machines crashing in taking off; Lieutenants G. W. Best³ and O. G. Lewis⁴ (observer) were killed, and Lieutenants L. Fryberg⁵ and O. H. Suess⁶ were injured. The

¹ Lieut. A. W. Rees, No. 3 Sqn. Engineer; b. June, N.S.W., 1895.

² Lieut. G. A. Paul; No. 3 Sqn. (previously Infantry). Electrician; of North Adelaide; b. Beechworth, Vic., 7 Nov., 1893.

³ Lieut. G. W. Best; No. 3 Sqn. Draper; of Hobart; b. Hobart, 1 Feb., 1896. Killed in action, 12 April, 1918.

⁴ Lieut. O. G. Lewis; No. 3 Sqn. (previously Engineers). Engineering student; of Armadale, Melbourne; b. Elsternwick, Melbourne, 19 July, 1896. Killed in action, 12 April, 1918.

⁵ Lieut. L. Fryberg, M.M.; No. 3 Sqn. (previously Infantry). Metal dealer; b. Bendigo, Vic., 1896.

⁶ Lieut. O. H. Suess; No. 3 Sqn. Fitter and turner; of Marrickville and Rockdale, Sydney; b. Brisbane, 25 Jan., 1894.

bad weather, which interfered with No. 2 Squadron's air fighting, also greatly hindered reconnaissance by No. 3, but E. J. Jones and Hodgson (observer), diving through low clouds on April 13th along the Bapaume-Albert road, attacked and dispersed two small columns of infantry and transport. Lieutenants Herbert and F. A. Sewell,⁷ while bomb-dropping on a similar target on the Somme road west of Etinehen in the evening of April 19th, were attacked by six Pfalz scouts, but made a skilful running fight back to Hamel. In the course of it, they shot down one of the enemy out of control, and near Hamel four British scouts, in answer to their signals, came to their assistance. A two-seater, well managed, had the advantage over a single-seater in fore and aft armament. The weak quarter, the blind spot, of a two-seater was the rear and underneath, since the observer could not bring his gun to bear in that direction; but, unless an enemy could manage to approach unseen and manœuvre into this position, he always found a two-seater an awkward opponent to tackle. The fight by Herbert and Sewell provided a good example of this. Two days later, April 21st, E. J. Jones and Lieutenant A. L. D. Taylor⁸ fought two Pfalz scouts over Albert for five minutes, and destroyed one. It was a curious engagement in several respects. Jones was on early morning line-patrol, and for three-quarters of an hour had noticed six enemy scouts cruising just over the German lines between Albert and Thiepval. Two of these finally separated and flew towards Albert, and Jones at once attacked them. He manœuvred so as to give his observer close shooting at the Germans, who after a few minutes' firing turned away towards home. Almost immediately afterwards an explosion occurred in one of them, and it fell and burst into flames on the ground.

Counter-battery work gradually increased in intensity as the line hardened in this region, and during the three days April 21st-23rd the Australian artillery-patrol machines located fifty batteries by flashes, sent calls for fire upon

⁷ Lieut. F. A. Sewell, D.F.C.; No. 3 Sqn (previously Artillery). Student; of Kew, Melbourne; b. Caulfield, Melbourne, 7 May, 1898.

⁸ Lieut. A. L. D. Taylor, No. 3 Sqn. (previously 2nd Pioneer Bn.) Engineering draughtsman; b. Williamstown, Melbourne, 1896. Killed in action, 20 May, 1918.

twenty-nine, and of these nine were put out of action. The generally bad visibility in many cases prevented observation of fire effect. Most of this new enemy activity was noticed in the flats south of the Somme, and was counted a sign of impending attack in that quarter. The sequel was the assault in the early morning of April 24th on the British position at Villers-Bretonneux by a Prussian Guards Division. On the 22nd Captain J. R. Duigan⁹ and Lieutenant A. S. Paterson¹⁰ (observer) first detected, firing near Harbonnières, the big railway-gun which was subsequently captured during the offensive of August 8th, and which is now in Australia.

An illustration of the difficulties of the April fogs and clouds about the Somme is afforded by the exciting adventure of Herbert and Sewell when on a special counter-attack patrol in an R.E.8 at dawn on April 24th. The mist was not very thick near Corbie, and they patrolled thence northward along the corps front at about 500 feet. Finding that sector quiet, the pilot turned back to examine also the southern line beyond the Somme. Near Vaire Wood the machine ran into a heavy fog, which shrouded all the high ground about Villers-Bretonneux. The Germans were by that hour in occupation of the town. The fog was unexpectedly thick, and the airmen lost sight of the ground. In a few seconds the only thing of which they could be sure was that they were losing height and were dropping in a steep spiral. The pilot shut off his engine to recover, fell into a side slip, and suddenly saw ground close below him. The danger was immediate. He re-started his engine, flattened out, and thereafter for about twenty minutes flew at about thirty feet from the ground—the fog was then right down to earth—trying to get his bearings. Several times he just skimmed over trees and houses. He could give no attention to his compass, for the reason that he had to use all his wits to dodge looming obstacles. The airmen were completely lost, and knew only that they were over the enemy's lines, for now and again they saw groups of German artillerymen at their guns. Occasionally they could see heavy batteries well camouflaged and out of

⁹ Capt. J. R. Duigan, M.C.; No. 3 Sqn Electrical engineer; of Melbourne; b. Terang, Vic., 31 May, 1882. Built, in 1910, first Australian aeroplane to fly.

¹⁰ Lieut. A. S. Paterson, M.M.; No. 3 Sqn. (previously Artillery). Electrical engineer; of Adelaide; b. Adelaide, 21 June 1889.

action. Realising that at any moment they might be obliged to land, Sewell, determined to do what damage he could, fired bursts from his Lewis gun into every new group of Germans. Herbert was, in fact, casting about for a favourable landing-spot, when suddenly a rift in the fog showed him a battery, limbered up, below his right wing-tip. Sewell fired three times into one group of men beside a limber, and all were either hit or dropped to the ground for cover. Judging, reasonably enough, that to alight and surrender alongside that battery was no longer wise, Herbert zoomed up through some trees—so close a shave that he caught a piece of branch in his right aileron and jammed it. This seemed to declare disaster certain; nevertheless Sewell climbed out and sat on the top wing of the machine to compensate for the jammed aileron, and thereby enabled the pilot to continue climbing. The R.E.8 eventually emerged from the fog bank into sunlight at 1,800 feet. The time was 6.12 a.m.—sixty-seven minutes since they had left the aerodrome—and for nearly half of that time they must have been lost in the fog. By working the control-stick Herbert managed to free the aileron, and the observer then resumed his normal seat. He flew west by compass, but the fog still hid all sight of the ground for the next quarter of an hour. Unable to identify the country at length disclosed, he kept on westward until he caught sight of a British field hospital, and at 7.30 they landed—to discover that they had made Trouville, beyond Rouen. After repairing bullet-holes in the machine and a badly punctured tyre, the two airmen returned to their aerodrome in the evening, after a two hours' flight.

By the end of April the opposing lines on the Somme were hardening again into strong trench-systems. The enemy's last offensive stroke in this quarter was at Villers-Bretonneux and Hangard on April 24th; after the Australians re-took the town in the night following, the Germans made no more attacks on the Somme, and definitely gave up the plan of seizing Amiens. The British construed this at the time as failure of Ludendorff's main plan. The deduction was correct. The Germans continued, it is true, to push their attack against the French on the Roye-Noyon front and, later, towards the Marne and Paris. But their drive at last petered out on the

Marne at Chateau-Thierry; here Foch's counter-offensive in mid-July stopped it dead, and began immediately to roll it back.

On the Somme, as in other parts of the British line, the period May-June-July was a waiting period—waiting for a grand counter-attack by Foch's reserve divisions, reinforced by American divisions now arriving. Nevertheless the Australians allowed the Germans no peace. Constant small attacks by the Australian Corps along the Morlancourt Ridge, and by the 1st Australian Division in Flanders opposite Merris, steadily corroded the German line as fast as it was made. Raids by night and by day were the fashion, and at intervals one brigade after another attacked and extended its position between the Ancre and the Somme. This infantry fighting proved the superior mettle of the Australians; it kept them in good training for any greater attack in which they might be called on to take part;¹¹ and it wore down a series of German divisions in a fashion which the enemy found alarming.

The renewal of trench warfare on the Somme demanded heavy work of the airmen of No. 3 Squadron, who had now to resume the placing of all enemy batteries for regular counter-battery bombardment, the constant photographing of the corps front, close reconnaissance of trenches, tracks, and transport routes, and all the old trench duty made familiar at Messines in the winter. That duty became the more strenuous by demands upon the squadron for special assistance in the infantry's "minor operations." Bombing and machine-gunning of the enemy defences also steadily increased.

Captain H. D. E. Ralfe¹² and Lieutenant W. A. J. Buckland¹³ (observer) were killed on patrol at dawn on May 6th. They were attacked by five German machines over the Morlancourt Ridge and were shot down in flames. Several

¹¹ The Allies' general counter-offensive, which, during the spring of 1918, was conceived as possible in 1919 at the earliest, developed in August, 1918, as the result of the unexpected success of (1) Foch's blow on the Soissons flank in July and (2) the Australian and Canadian attack south of the Somme on August 8.

¹² Capt. H. D. E. Ralfe; No. 3 Sqn. (previously Artillery). Officer of Aust. Permanent Forces, of Brisbane; b. Sydney, 29 May, 1890. Killed in action, 6 May, 1918.

¹³ Lieut. W. A. J. Buckland; No. 3 Sqn. (previously Engineers). Engineer; of Mirboo North, Vic.; b. Moe, Vic., 1894. Killed in action, 6 May, 1918.

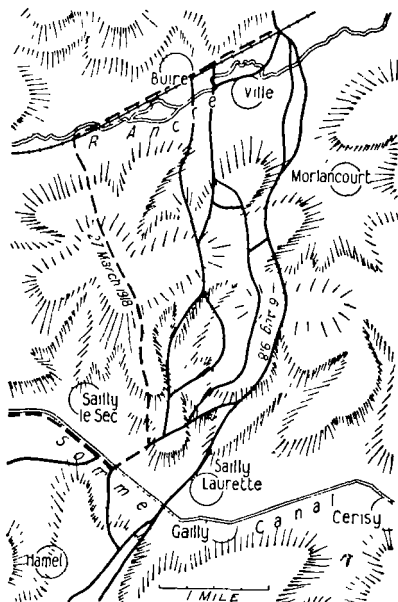
indecisive fights occurred on succeeding days, and on May 9th Lieutenants T. L. Baillieu¹⁴ and E. F. Rowntree¹⁵ (observer) fought three combats during one patrol. Duigan and Paterson were compelled to interrupt a photography-patrol at noon the same day under attack by four German triplanes over Villers-Bretonneux. The R.E.8 made a splendid fight against overwhelming odds, managed to escape after both pilot and observer had been wounded, and landed in the French lines on the flats around Cachy village. The pilot refused to have his wounds attended to until his camera-plates were extracted and sent off to the squadron aerodrome. Every day the same danger was waiting for the relatively slow low-reconnaissance machines. Fighting scouts rode above to protect them, but the sky was rarely clear of clouds, and clouds gave the enemy his opportunity. E. J. Jones and Hainsworth (observer), photographing over Morlancourt on May 16th, suffered Duigan's and Paterson's experience, but with better success. Six Fokker triplanes fell on them. The first two, which dived at the tail of the R.E.8, one on each side, were met by the observer with steady fire; one Fokker turned away, but the other held on, and after a burst from Hainsworth at point-blank range a small flame licked out from under the Fokker pilot's seat, and he went down in a spin. The remaining four Fokkers were shaping to continue the attack, when British scouts appeared on the scene. The enemy thereupon decamped. Jones was again attacked by six triplanes while on duty on May 20th; A. L. D. Taylor, his usual observer, was this time with him. The R.E.8 had ranged a 6-inch howitzer battery on some enemy guns, and was about to watch "fire for effect," when the triplanes appeared. Taylor was shot dead in the fight; Jones was wounded, but managed to fly his machine home. By that time Jones had, while on reconnaissance, engaged the enemy six times in less than three weeks, being on five of those occasions accompanied by Taylor. The R.E.8's, though slower than the German scouting machines, and generally at a disadvantage in the matter

¹⁴ Lieut. T. L. Baillieu, D.F.C.; No 3 Sqn. (previously Artillery). Student, of Toorak, Melbourne; b. Canterbury, Melbourne, 7 April, 1898.

¹⁵ Lieut. E. F. Rowntree, D.F.C.; No 3 Sqn. (previously Infantry). Engineer; of Hobart; b. Hobart, 23 Jan., 1894

of height, were, when well-handled, no mean antagonists, as will appear from the combats above-mentioned. Moreover the enemy scouts, brave enough against a solitary two-seater, were always wary of the R.E.8's in company. When, on the evening of May 28th, eight Pfalz scouts attacked two R.E.8's near Hamel, and were driven off by answering fire, they made haste to withdraw as soon as a third R.E.8 appeared on the scene. The exacting duties which devolved upon No. 3 Squadron at this time resulted in all three of its flight-commanders becoming casualties in one fortnight—Ralfe killed, and Duigan and Jones wounded and sent to hospital.

The success of the 6th Australian Infantry Brigade's attack at Ville-sur-Ancre on May 19th was greatly assisted by No. 3 Squadron in the air. Some description of what that assistance amounted to will illustrate the general work of the squadron at that time. The capture of Ville greatly annoyed the enemy, for it entailed the loss of a local observation position. The corps front had been thoroughly photographed by No. 3 Squadron in preparation for the infantry operations. In the early morning of May 18th patrolling R.E.8's noted every feature in the threatened sector, and then passed on to drop bombs and empty their magazines upon Hamel. These machines had hardly left duty, when two more R.E.8's appeared; one flew low along the front line on close reconnaissance; the other directed 9.2-inch howitzers on to an enemy battery near Morlancourt, and destroyed several gun-pits. Hostile scouts



The black lines indicate successive minor advances made between 27th March and 6th August, 1918.

appeared in the offing, but were met by British scouts and French Spads, which shot down one German. Then a fresh R.E.8 arrived and began a bombardment by 6-inch howitzers of another Morlancourt battery. Visibility deteriorated, and, damage to the target being uncertain, the airmen dropped bombs into Morlancourt village and went home. All this before breakfast-time.

The counter-artillery work continued through the forenoon. Two more German batteries were put out of action in the early afternoon, and several explosions, the result of British field-gun fire, were seen in Albert, Hamel, and Sailly Laurette. If the enemy suspected an attack, he was being puzzled as much as possible as to the point at which it would come. In the afternoon the Ville-sur-Ancre front was photographed again for evidence of damage by artillery-fire, and three enemy batteries on the Hamel flats were silenced and damaged by bombardment. In the early evening two more R.E.8's patrolled the front, looking for gun-flashes and dropping bombs into Hamel and Morlancourt. Ville was by this time on fire. Another machine practised message-dropping with a reserve infantry brigade in rehearsal of the next morning's task. A German battery at Morlancourt was bombarded under air-observation till daylight failed.

After this heavy day's work in preparation, contact-patrols were over the line before 4 o'clock next morning (May 19th) to accompany the attack of the infantry on the Ville position. As the assault progressed, the airmen called with Klaxon horns¹⁶ for flares, and, from the answering lights of the Australian infantry below, located the new line beyond Ville. Messages containing this information were then dropped at brigade and division headquarters. Three more R.E.8's were out at 4.30 a.m.—two to observe enemy artillery action, and one specially to observe counter-action by the enemy's infantry. Every possible detail of the aftermath of the fight was recorded by these airmen by message to headquarters. The examination was repeated at 6 o'clock and again about 10, while another R.E.8, taking up the duty of watching for active enemy guns, directed the corps artillery on to four batteries in succession. The German reply to the Australian attack

¹⁶ See Appendix No 6.

was confined mainly to artillery bombardment of the new line, and this provided further work for No. 3 Squadron in directing¹⁷ counter-battery fire. On May 20th, for example, eight batteries were located by flashes, and six others were put out of action by bombardments; on the following day seventeen were located from flashes, and five were silenced.

Between the occasions of these minor offensive operations, photographing and counter-battery work from the air never ceased. On every day of favourable visibility, five or six such batteries would be "successfully engaged"—sometimes twice that number. While watching the rounds of the British guns, the recording airmen would drop bombs on other targets in order to distract the enemy's attention from the main work in hand. The front opposite the Australian Corps was one of the most thoroughly photographed enemy sectors on the British front. German aircraft constantly sought to interfere, and the R.E.8's often had to defend themselves, but help from escorting scouts was rarely far distant. There were, however, occasions when they were obliged to fight without such assistance. One such occasion was a dawn patrol on June 3rd; T. L. Baillieu and Sewell (observer) were attacked three times between 4.20 and 4.30 by two Albatros scouts over Hamel. The enemy were twice beaten off, but a third attempt brought on a close combat. At this moment Lieutenants R. C. Armstrong¹⁸ and J. H. Jeffery¹⁹ (observer) appeared, and just as they were making to cross the lines near Vaire Wood, the two enemy scouts dived on them. Baillieu promptly joined the fight. The nearer of the Germans received the fire of both Australian observers simultaneously and at close range; he fell steeply, and burst into flames on the ground beside the wood. Ten minutes later the other Albatros attempted again to interfere with Baillieu over the Somme, but finally gave up and

¹⁷ It will be understood that this term, used for the sake of brevity, means, as it did in the air force on service, that the aeroplane observed for the heavy-artillery battery which engaged the hostile guns. That a German battery was silenced under bombardment indicated as a rule little more than that the British fire was accurate and the enemy's gunners had left their guns. A battery was by no means necessarily destroyed even when its position was seen to be more or less demolished. But accurate shooting against it generally meant that it would have to move position.

¹⁸ Lieut. R. C. Armstrong, D.F.C.; No. 3 Sqn. (previously Infantry) Engineer; b Footscray, Melbourne, April, 1894.

¹⁹ Lieut. J. H. Jeffery; No. 3 Sqn. (previously A.A.S.C.). Draper; of Brighton, Melbourne; b Armadale, Melbourne, 28 Oct., 1890.

retired. Meanwhile Armstrong and Jeffery flew over Vaire Wood near the destroyed Albatros. They dropped four bombs and fired 100 rounds into the dugouts and defences of the wood in order to emphasise the victory of which the German infantry had been spectators.

The woods along the Somme between Saily Laurette and Etinehem and on the ridges south of Hamel were becoming active enemy artillery areas, and eight batteries were silenced in that region on June 6th. On the following day nine more gun-positions thereabout were engaged and damaged. Gun-pits were plainly seen to be wrecked by direct hits, and in some cases 150 or 160 rounds were fired at one position under airmen's observation. This work proceeded with the constant bombing of woods, villages, and important trenches; it was, in part, preparation for an attack projected by the 7th Australian Infantry Brigade above Saily Laurette.

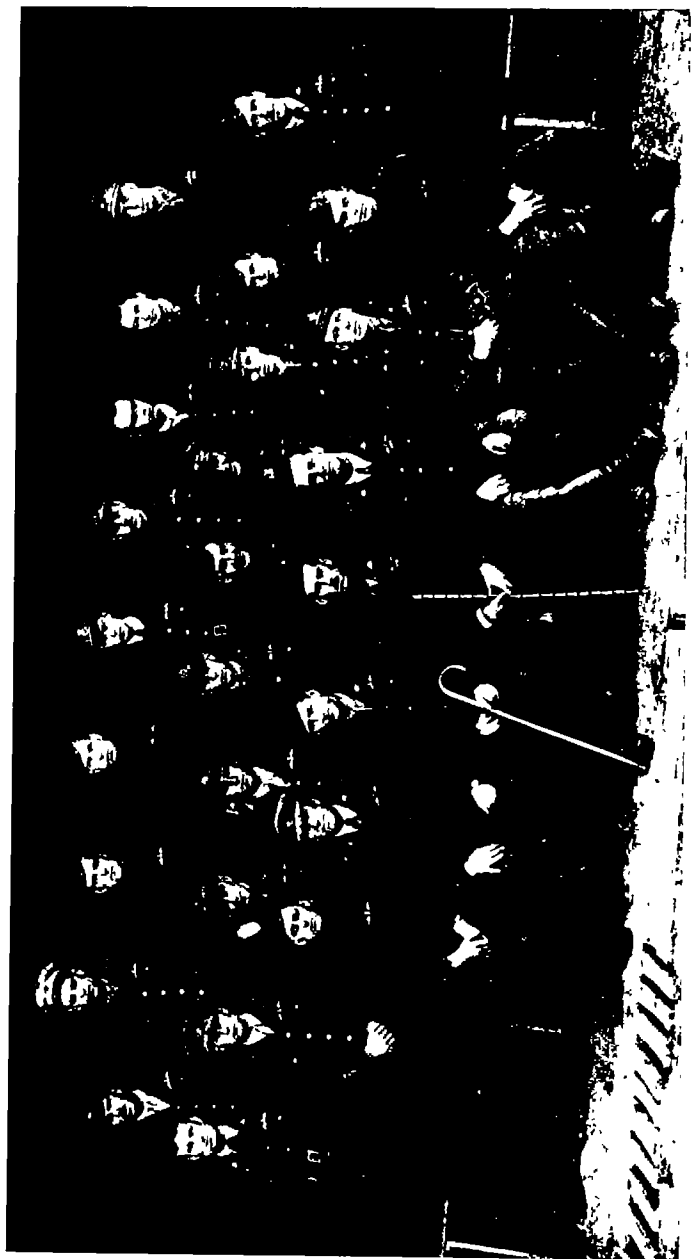
Lieutenants Armstrong and F. J. Mart²⁰ (observer) were on artillery-patrol in the forenoon of June 9th. The front was all quiet, and little fire of any sort had been observed. The R.E.8 had dived and machine-gunned Morlancourt for the edification of the Australian trench-garrison opposite, and was returning to the aerodrome, when, over Querrieu (well behind the British lines), the airmen noticed anti-aircraft fire. This could mean only one thing, and the pilot steered for the shell-bursts. There at 2,000 feet he came upon a Halberstadt two-seater, making eastward for home. It appeared later that this German machine had been engaged with others in low-flying patrol during an attack on the French lines near Montdidier, and that its pilot had lost his bearings. He and his observer betrayed some lack of experience—afterwards admitted—by their faulty knowledge of the country and by the panic they betrayed as soon as the R.E.8 cut them off from home. They made no attempt to shoot, and, after one or two feeble efforts to escape, consented to be driven west like a sheep. No other simile will fit the case; Armstrong shepherded the Halberstadt towards Flesselles aerodrome like a dog working a lone wether. Once he had set the Halberstadt on the desired course, the Australian pilot maintained position about 300 feet away behind it and slightly above, and forced

²⁰ Lieut F. J. Mart; No. 3 Sqn. (previously 5th Tunnelling Coy). Station overseer, of Semaphore, S. Aust.; b. Semaphore, 24 April, 1889.

it steadily down. The forward Vickers gun of the R.E.8 was trained on the enemy. Now and again Mart would shout to his pilot—"Give him a burst to make sure," but Armstrong would look back, grin, and shake his head. He meant, as he said afterwards, to "take him home." Eventually the Halberstadt landed with all docility on No. 3 Squadron's aerodrome.²¹ The captured Halberstadt, quite intact, was claimed as a war trophy, and was subsequently presented to the Australian Government. Maps and papers giving the details of the German forces employed against the French on the Noyon front were found on the captured airmen.

The attack by the 7th Brigade was over the southern side of the Morlancourt Ridge, where it goes down in a broad and bare slope, with a deep, long gully on either side, to the Somme above Saily Laurette. It was another nicely calculated bite into the German lines. The brigade carried out the operation after dusk in the evening of June 10th, dug itself into the new position during the night, and at dawn next morning contact-patrols from No. 3 Squadron made record of the new line from flares, as on previous occasions. The visibility in the morning was poor, and, to counter the heavy enemy shelling of the ridge, the Australian artillery was compelled to fire without air-observation. During clearer light in the evening of June 11th the airmen enabled the guns to silence two batteries behind Morlancourt and four behind Hamel, which were concentrating fire on the new line. Nevertheless the German guns exceedingly distressed the forward infantry, for the newly-won ground, besides being open to view, was open also to a galling enfilade fire from the woods around Hamel beyond the Somme and eastward in the Somme Valley. The reader may picture himself standing in the infantry's trenches on the bare Saily slope, with German earthworks visible in front on a similarly bare patch of the main ridge; over his right shoulder, and almost indeed behind his back, on the lower and gentler slopes across the river, lay the German position about Hamel. He may then translate himself in imagination to the German batteries there hidden, and recognise the splendid target offered to them at about 4,000 yards' range by a series of new and shallow trenches

²¹ See note at end of chapter.



OFFICERS OF No 4 SQUADRON, A F C CLAIRMARAIN, JUNF. 1918

Just War Museum Official Photo No E2543

To face p 270.



THE HALBERSTADT TWO-SEATER DRIVEN DOWN AND CAPTURED ON FLESSELLES AIRFIELD BY AN
RES OF NO. 3 SQUADRON, A.F.C., ON 9TH JUNE, 1918.

Lent by Lt Col T. A. Stambourne R.A.F. (then of No. 2 Sqdn., A.F.C.)

running up and over the ridge, in full view and beyond all hope of camouflage. The said batteries had simply to shoot straight up those trenches over open sights, and this they did, with great discomfort, and no inconsiderable loss, to the infantry garrison. Though the 7th Brigade's attack did not entirely create this situation—which had existed in some degree since the Australians took up their position in April—it enlarged the German gunners' opportunity and advertised it to all their batteries on the south bank of the river. The situation has been thus described in order to make clear one excellent reason for that attack on Hamel which was shortly afterwards made by the Australians, and which was at this time being prepared.

Meanwhile Australian air-reconnaissance was directed specially to those positions on the Morlancourt Ridge itself and along the Ancre towards Albert, against which a series of night-raids was being planned by the Australian 5th Division in the Ancre-Somme sector. Every useful point on the enemy's side was bombed, a few more batteries were found and bombarded, and, as a matter of course, a new series of photographs was taken specially of the areas marked down for the raids. The precision with which every detail was worked out—the allotment of targets to the artillery, trench-mortars, and machine-guns, the organisation of each infantry group in numbers not too many and not too few for each act of the raid—made these operations as certain of success as human ingenuity could do. It was good training for fighting; it was excellent training for junior staff officers and battalion and company commanders. The airmen oversaw them all, and fed them constantly with intelligence. Between June 18th and 25th several battalions of the 15th and 8th Brigades thus raided the German trenches on the Morlancourt Ridge for prisoners and for the sake of moral effect.

There now began the work of close reconnaissance from the air of the Hamel position—the location of enemy batteries, dumps, assembly-points, and approach-march tracks, in preparation for the intended assault. Long reconnaissance-patrols every day closely observed the whole area along the Somme as far east as Bray. No. 3 Squadron also rehearsed an extensive programme in assistance of the infantry—the

ordinary contact-patrol work of sketching an advancing line from flares, of marking down hostile batteries in action, and of bombing and machine-gunning in advance of the infantry line to co-operate in the reduction of hostile strong-points. Further there was practice in a device for dropping boxes of small-arm ammunition on the captured position, thus saving the infantry carriers extra labour and danger. The dropping was done by parachute from bomb-racks underneath the fuselage, and experiments on the aerodrome convinced the corps and the army staffs that the idea was good.²²

In the evening of June 26th Francis and Lieutenant H. A. J. Sturgeon²³ directed fire upon four batteries behind Hamel. These gun-positions were demolished. Lieutenants F. N. McKenna²⁴ and W. S. J. P. Heslop,²⁵ while engaging another battery between Hamel and Cerisy next morning, were surrounded by twelve Albatros scouts, which hovered over the R.E.8 and fired long-range bursts at it. The R.E.8 withdrew by skilful manœuvring, but was forced to land, damaged, behind Corbie. On that day, June 27th, the whole Hamel position was photographed on an extensive series of overlapping negatives. Nine more hostile batteries were engaged in the evening, and either damaged or put out of action; but this work cost the squadron further loss, for Lieutenants P. H. Kerr²⁶ and A. O'C. Brook,²⁷ while returning from that duty at about 9 p.m., were shot down by a Pfalz scout. The observer was killed in the air and the pilot wounded; the machine was wrecked in landing at Pont Noyelles. During June 28th there were eleven long

²² Major Blake (No. 3 Squadron commander) has stated that "this device for dropping ammunition from aeroplanes was first obtained from a captured German document. General Rawlinson (Fourth Army commander) asked whether it could not be copied. The job was handed over to No. 3 Squadron and the preliminary details were worked out. Captain Wackett was the pilot chosen to make the early trials, he had a gift for mechanical invention. The apparatus used was the ordinary bomb-rack and release-gear adapted to hold two boxes of ammunition attached to parachutes. Much credit is due to the squadron's workshop mechanics under Sergeant Nicholson, whose skill made the success of the gear eventually produced. It was adopted throughout the R.A.F. for this purpose" (Sgt. W. H. Nicholson, motor mechanic; of Cronulla, N.S.W.; b. Parramatta, N.S.W., 15 Aug., 1894.)

²³ Lieut. H. A. J. Sturgeon; No. 3 Sqn. (previously Signal Services). Clerk; of Sydney; b. Brighton, Eng., 22 Dec., 1897.

²⁴ Lieut. F. N. McKenna; No. 3 Sqn. Public accountant and auditor; of Taradale, Vic.; b. Bendigo, Vic., 15 Jan., 1890.

²⁵ Lt.-Col. W. S. J. P. Heslop; No. 3 Sqn. Grazier and student, of Wonthaggi, Vic.; b. Preston, Melbourne, 6 July, 1894.

²⁶ Lieut. P. H. Kerr; No. 3 Sqn. (previously Light Horse). Station manager, b. Melbourne, 3 Jan., 1889.

²⁷ Lieut. A. O'C. Brook, No. 3 Sqn. Telegraphist; of Tallangatta and Benalla, Vic.; b. Dederang, Vic., 6 Aug., 1893. Killed in action, 27 June, 1918.

reconnaissances of the back areas, and six more batteries were bombarded. Twice R.E.8's were attacked, but each time beat off their opponents. The days following were equally strenuous. On the 30th the Hamel front was again photographed, and throughout the heat, haze, and dust of the first three days of July long reconnaissances were made over the enemy's front and reserve positions.

The details of the squadron's part in the battle were arranged with the same meticulous care which marked the infantry plan on the ground below. The theatre of the attack was divided into areas, and the important hours between 3 and 10.45 a.m. were similarly divided into patrol periods. In accordance with this table, two flights maintained artillery-patrols on the line until the battle was over; thereafter two machines in reliefs constantly watched the enemy till dusk, meanwhile photographing the new line as it was dug in. The third flight provided both a counter-attack patrol of one machine over the line throughout the day—an aeroplane sentry, regularly relieved—and also contact-patrols during the battle to follow the infantry and report by dropped messages to Australian Corps Headquarters. Except these contact-patrols, every machine carried bombs, with instructions to drop them either on specially allotted targets or, failing the urgency there, upon the best hostile living targets wherever found. A detailed scheme was worked out under which every pilot, when desiring to call for neutralising artillery-fire, had certain field and heavy guns waiting ready for his signals.

Just before the launching of the infantry attack at dawn in order to distract the enemy's attention from the sound of the tanks approaching over the last few hundred yards to the line, aeroplanes flew low over Hamel, making as much noise as possible and dropping bombs into the village. The result was that, till the moment of the opening artillery bombardment, the enemy knew nothing of the fate about to fall upon him. The whole operation moved by the clock in the smoothest fashion, and was completed at remarkably light cost in casualties to the attacking troops. By a few minutes after 5 a.m. the first airmen on contact-patrol had returned messages showing the new line at the desired position beyond Hamel. They saw little but the locating flares, here and there

the lumbering tanks crawling over German posts, small fires of burning houses, a rain of shell-bursts sweeping the enemy area, and only a few vain reply-shots from the German guns; vague knots of men in the half-light, and little columns of pioneers going up to dig in; over all a haze of mist and smoke undispersed by the first shafts of the rising sun. No. 9 British Squadron (also R.E.8's), operating from the Australian aerodrome, performed the work of dropping ammunition on the new line, and delivered nearly 12,000 rounds by this means. All enemy batteries seemed to be smothered in the counter-fire of the British guns. The air-men's reports through the day told of complete success throughout the battle-plan. No. 3 Squadron's machines had their own victories also. Lieutenants A. E. Grigson²⁸ and H. B. James²⁹ (observer), on artillery patrol near Accroche Wood, were twice attacked by enemy scouts. Two dived on them in the first combat, and the R.E.8 destroyed one; three more attacked it a few minutes later, but were beaten off, losing one driven down out of control. Lieutenants D. F. Dimsey³⁰ and Mart, on counter-attack patrol, also had two flights at about the same time and place, and shot down a Pfalz scout from a formation of three which was attacking another R.E.8. During the afternoon three machines photographed on 108 negatives the whole of the new front line.

In all the war the Australians fought no more finished and successful fight than the attack at Hamel. The Corps Command gave much of the credit for that success to the airmen. It is not too much to say that Hamel first showed many soldiers a vision of the days to come, when battles might be directed chiefly from the skies.

Note.—The squadron-commander (Major Blake) thus described the arrival at the aerodrome:—"The Germans landed with their engine still ticking over, and appeared to be on the point of taking off again, when the situation was saved by the corporal of the guard, the only armed man in the vicinity, who ran up with his revolver and presented it at the head of the pilot with the order, 'Hands up!' They did."

²⁸ Lieut. A. E. Grigson, D.F.C.; No. 3 Sqn. (previously Artillery). Jackeroo; of Sydney, b. Sydney, 9 Nov., 1896

²⁹ Lieut. H. B. James; No. 3 Sqn. (previously A.A.S.C.). Draughtsman and surveyor; of Goulburn, N.S.W.; b. Harden, N.S.W., 7 Sept., 1895.

³⁰ Lieut. D. F. Dimsey, D.F.C.; No. 3 Sqn. Customs officer; of Albert Park, Melbourne, and Mildura, Victoria; b. Dimboola, Vic., 2 July, 1891.

"The German had ample ammunition for both front and rear guns. About this time complaints had been made by both sides as to the use of explosive and incendiary bullets. In common with other squadron-commanders, I had received orders, in the event of a German machine being captured, to seal up any ammunition remaining in trays, drums, magazines, and forward it to A.H.Q. for expert examination. This was to be done in the presence of the enemy pilot and observer, if still physically competent to understand our action. As luck would have it, this machine fell into our hands immediately after the receipt of the orders. I sealed the ammunition of pilot and observer separately in empty ammunition boxes with paper seals, which I directed the two Germans to sign. The observer complied, but the pilot, with visions of a wall behind his back and a firing-party in front, refused volubly, explaining in French that British pilots were never treated that way when captured. He persisted in this refusal after explanations, but finally, on production of sealing wax, the temptation to use a very ornate seal he carried overcame his scruples and he sealed the box. The box contained both explosive and incendiary bullets."

Comment on the use of incendiary bullets will be found in Appendix No. 9.