

## CHAPTER XXVI

### THE LAST GREAT AIR BATTLES

THE retreat of the Germans on the northern front left the Reclinghem aerodrome too far behind the lines, and at the end of September both No. 2 and No. 4 Squadrons moved a few miles farther east to Serny. From that date onwards a series of moves followed the rapid Allied advance. By October 30th the Australian aerodrome was at Auchel, just north of Bruay, the former home of No. 4 Squadron; six days later the squadrons were camped on the field which they had recently harried so pertinaciously south of Lille—No. 2 at Pont-à-Marcq, and No. 4 at Emmetières.

At Serny No. 4 Squadron acquired its Sopwith Snipe scouts, and during the second and third weeks of October it exchanged all its Camels for these machines. The Snipe was then the last word in scout design, and when, after the armistice, No. 4 Squadron took its Snipes with it to Cologne and showed their manœuvring powers in the air to some German airmen, these expressed their astonishment and also their gratification that personally they had had no occasion to meet it in action.<sup>1</sup> The appearance of the Snipes in the last strenuous air fighting was signally effective.

That period began in the second week of October. The circumstances which introduced it have already been explained. After the Hindenburg Line battles in early October the Germans realised that their only hope of preventing a mightier Sedan lay in withdrawal from France and Belgium. The rugged country of the Meuse behind them made such a general retreat no easy operation; the greater part of their still numerous forces had to retreat, as they had originally advanced, through Belgium and the bottle-neck of Liège. To protect this movement the enemy transferred the bulk of his air force to the northern front.

Lieutenants H. N. Kerr<sup>2</sup> and Thornton, from No. 4

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<sup>1</sup> The Snipe, a single-seater fighting scout, 200 horse-power Bentley engine, carried two Vickers guns firing through the propeller. The interrupter-gear was of a different type from that used in the Camel, and the squadron mechanics had heavy work putting this gear into proper order.

<sup>2</sup> Lieut. H. N. Kerr; No. 4 Sqn. (previously Light Horse) Clerk, of Brisbane; b Ithaca, Brisbane, 30 Sept., 1892.

Squadron, at dawn on October 9th were surprised to find a D.F.W. two-seater as far over the British lines as Nieppe, as low as 4,000 feet, and actually attacking them.<sup>3</sup> The two Australians shot it down to a forced landing near Nieppe and captured it intact, but Kerr, landing near it, crashed through striking some telephone wires, and was seriously injured. A few hours later Cole, leading a patrol of five S.E.5's west of Lille, found the sky in that region thick with enemy scouts, and counted forty or fifty in various formations. One of these formations, consisting of eight Fokkers, they engaged at 12,000 feet. F. R. Smith dived from 18,000 feet upon four of them and fired fifty rounds at close range into the topmost Fokker, which fell into a spin and then dropped like a stone. Franks, who dived with Smith, was counter-attacked by five other Fokkers, but the remaining S.E.5's fell on these from above. The enemy turned and flew for home; Lieutenant J. A. H. McKeown,<sup>4</sup> however, shot one down out of control, and Franks another, before the Germans escaped. Ten more Fokkers then appeared on the scene, but the Australians were too scattered to meet this challenge and, in their turn, withdrew. Just after this fight ended, four more S.E.5's, under Manuel, appeared at about 13,000 feet. These also observed a formation of twenty Fokkers flying high over Haubourdin, and some two-seaters still higher up. None of them, however, attacked Manuel. His patrol turned south and, after shooting down a solitary Halberstadt over Pont-à-Vendin, flew home.

After an interval of a few days of bad weather, both British and German machines again took the air in great force on October 14th. Cummings and Smith each led a flight of S.E.5's across the lines south of Lille in the forenoon, Smith's patrol on a bombing raid against Fretin railway station, and Cummings's to escort Smith. Of the escort-patrol Cummings, Simonson, Blaxland, and Dibbs were at 16,000 feet, with

<sup>3</sup> This was a sufficiently extraordinary event, in that, during the last twelve months or more of the war, air combats hardly ever occurred on the British side of the lines. Whenever the Australian airmen met German machines over Allied territory, the Germans were either at a great height—too high to be caught—or instantly turned home without accepting battle. British pilots always counted it a handicap against them that enemy machines, almost certainly destroyed, but without confirmation of the destruction by other witnesses, could so rarely be claimed by wreckage which could be visited on the ground.

<sup>4</sup> Lieut. J. A. H. McKeown; No. 2 Sqn. (previously Infantry). Baker; of Werrabee, Vic.; b Romsey, Vic., 23 Oct., 1894. Killed in action, 14 Oct., 1918.

Davies and Captain E. W. Cornish<sup>5</sup> in rear of them and about 1,000 feet higher. A few minutes after 10 o'clock Cummings perceived a formation of sixteen Fokkers some distance below and flying in a north-easterly direction. All four S.E.5's on the lower level dived to attack, while Davies and Cornish flew above the fight to safeguard their comrades from possible interference. Leading the attack, Cummings fired a short burst at 100-yards' range into one Fokker, which dived steeply away, but in his descent the German evidently saw the machines of Smith's bombing formation approaching, and zoomed up again eastward. Cummings was waiting for this, dived on the Fokker again, and shot it down to a crash near Cysoing. The Australians, much scattered, pursued the enemy in a running fight eastward for nearly a quarter of an hour, and Blaxland destroyed one Fokker in flames over Chereng. Dibbs, describing this fight, said:—"After a head-on encounter with one German, in which we liberally sprayed one another with tracer-bullets, I looked around and could see but one other S.E.5 in the fight. This machine, which I afterwards ascertained to be Blaxland's, was in the centre of a bunch of Fokkers, and tracer-ammunition seemed to be flying in all directions. As I turned towards Blaxland, he zoomed suddenly, and I followed him. Together we climbed above the German machines, which, apparently anticipating a renewed attack, dived away east. Both of Blaxland's and one of my guns were jammed and, while we were clearing the stoppages, seven Fokkers appeared from the south and passed a few hundred feet above us. They appeared not to see us, and flew unconcernedly on their way. However, being unable to resist the temptation to put a burst into one of them, I pulled up the nose of my S.E.5 and gave the rear left-hand machine twenty rounds with the remaining serviceable gun. The Germans were forthwith galvanised into activity, and, half-rolling, down they came. Blaxland and I dropped vertically, with stick well forward and a touch of the throttle, and left the German machines behind us. We did not see the remaining members of our own formation, from whom we had been separated in the fight, until we landed at the aerodrome."

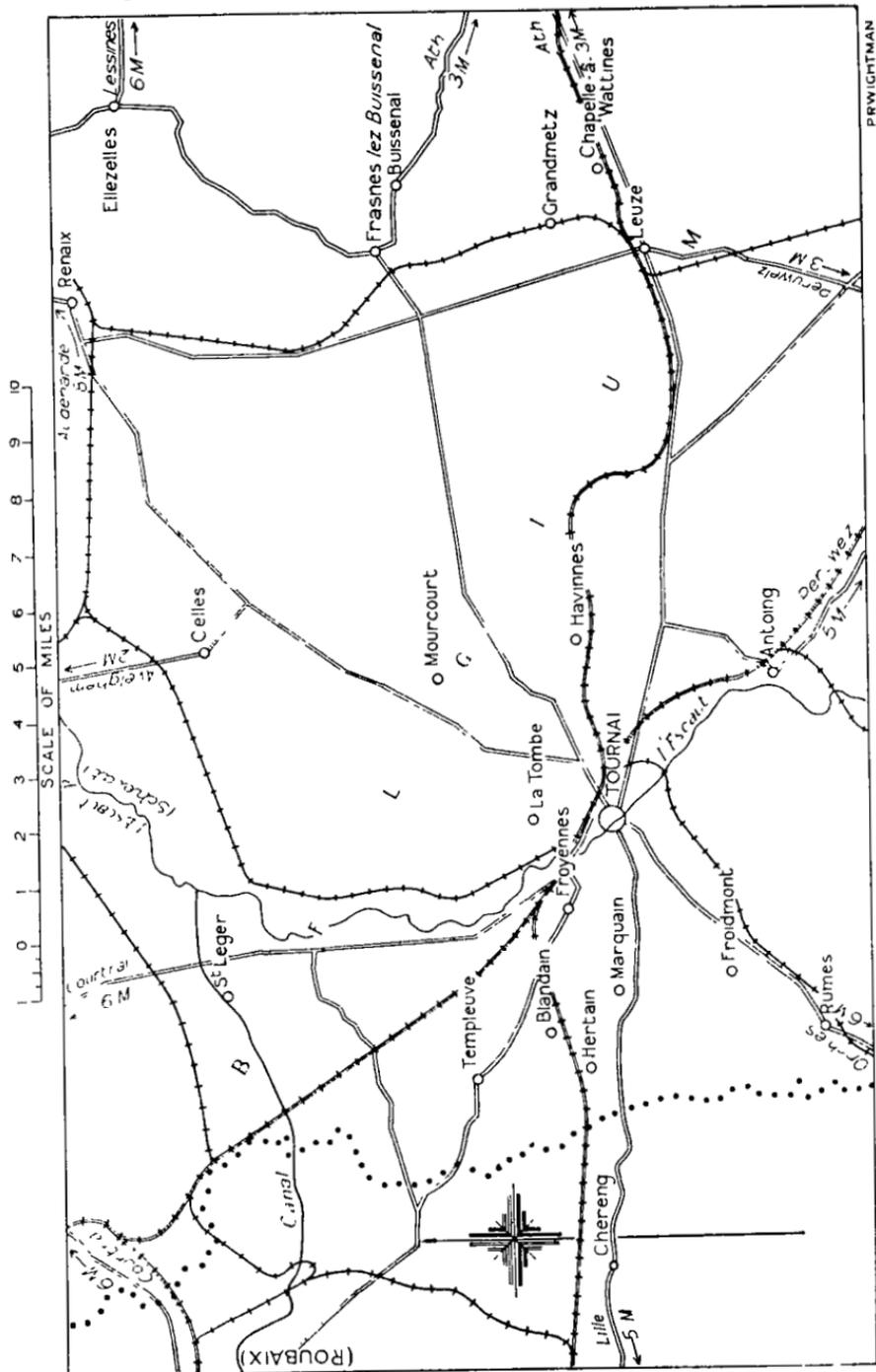
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<sup>5</sup> Capt E. W. Cornish, M.C.; No. 2 Squ (previously Infantry). Clerk; of Drummoyne, N.S.W.; b. Marrickville, N.S.W., 16 July, 1897. Killed in aeroplane accident, 11 Feb., 1929.

Meanwhile Smith's formation had appeared, flying lower, and was dropping bombs at Fretin, while Cummings's fight was proceeding. Some of the engaged Fokkers dived on Smith's patrol, but were avoided and beaten off. Smith's S.E 5's, having dropped their bombs, turned westward in a steady climb to reach the level of the fight. When they arrived at 16,000 feet, however, the sky was clear. They flew on in a left-hand sweep towards Tourcoing, as Cummings's patrol had done before them, and north of Lille saw, slightly below them, eight Fokkers manœuvring to attack some British machines lower down. Smith at once dived on the rearmost Fokker and destroyed it in flames. This counter-attack drove the enemy below the British machines, and the Fokkers immediately turned eastward to escape. Two of them, however, strayed from their formation, and Australian and British scouts together cut these off. Smith and Franks, leading, dived on the unfortunate Germans, then near Mouveaux, and each destroyed one.

Manuel's patrol at midday over this same area saw no hostile aircraft, but Smith led out ten machines again in the afternoon, and at 4 o'clock met twelve Fokkers at 16,000 feet over the Scheldt River, north-west of Tournai. A general "dog-fight" at once began, and extended for nearly twenty-five minutes over a wide spread of sky. As the opposing formations met almost head-on, Smith attacked the leader and, after a long burst of fire, ending at almost touching range, this Fokker fell and crashed near the little village of Havron, on the bank of the Scheldt. Stone and Roberts each shot down one German out of control at the first encounter. Smith turned to attack another Fokker on the tail of Stone's machine, fired 100 rounds into it, and that too went down steeply, turning very slowly. Meanwhile Stone, having put his first opponent out of action, found himself at 9,000 feet and in position to dive on another Fokker, which was climbing for the upper air. Into this he fired ninety rounds at deadly close range and saw it crash on the river bank. The fight had now broken up into a scattered series of duels. Three wrecked machines were seen to be lying on the river bank near Havron, but one of these may have been an Australian, for two of our pilots were shot down in the engagement—McKeown killed,

Map No. 18



PRWIGHTMAN

TOURNAI REGION, SHOWING AREA OF OPERATIONS OF NO. 2 AND NO. 4 AUSTRALIAN SQUADRONS, OCTOBER AND NOVEMBER, 1918



COMPOSITE PHOTOGRAPH AND DRAWING, SHOWING AN ATTACK BY A BRITISH SCOUT-FORMATION THROUGH A CLOUD UPON A GERMAN FORMATION

In the distance enemy machines are turning to counter-attack

*From the collection of the late Lt. Col. W. C. Batt No. 2 Sqn. 4 F.C.*



AEROPLANE PHOTOGRAPH OF A POINT IN THE HINDENBURG LINE, SHOWING SYSTEMS OF  
TRENCHES AND WIRF

Leut. Col. K. A. Goodland, 38th. Div. 417  
First War Museum Collection No. 1205

Cornish taken prisoner. Cornish was lost through his lack of experience in air fighting. He was a newly-joined pilot, and had won his captaincy in the infantry. He was a reckless fighter, and his comrades in the squadron were dismayed to see him during this engagement pursue one German, clinging hard upon its tail, through and below a bunch of other Fokkers, regardless of the danger to which he was thus exposing himself. Several of those other enemy machines promptly dived on him and shot him down.

During his withdrawal from Lille to the east of the Scheldt the enemy was favoured by bad flying weather—rain and clouds and haze—and took every advantage of it. The Australian airmen next met the German scouts far east of the Scheldt, which by October 22nd was the westernmost German line. The enemy held this broad and marshy river from Valenciennes northward as far as Avelghem with strong machine-gun rear-guards, while the remainder of his army made all haste across Belgium towards the Rhine. In this season of bad weather, No. 2 and No. 4 Squadrons moved their hangars to new grounds near Lille—Pont-à-Marcq and Ennetières. From Ennetières on October 26th Baker and Barkell led a double-patrol of nine of the new Snipe machines to the east of Tournai, and about 3.45 p.m. at 14,000 feet came upon fifteen Fokkers. The Snipes manoeuvred into the afternoon sun and approached the Fokkers' level. As the two formations met, several of the enemy began to spin away, and when several Snipes dived at them a hot fight began. Barkell destroyed one Fokker in flames and sent down another out of control. Baker engaged the Fokker leader, but both the Snipe's guns jammed; a few seconds later Baker again attacked the German, then on the tail of another Snipe, and shot him down, badly damaged. Lieutenants E. J. Richards<sup>o</sup> and H. W. Ross likewise each drove down a Fokker out of control. The fight died out with the machines spread over a wide area. Barkell, wounded in one leg, landed as far away as Péronne, and a comrade machine with him.

During the next two days offensive-patrols from both Australian squadrons reconnoitred far into Belgium and

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<sup>o</sup> Lieut. E. J. Richards; No. 4 Sqn. (previously Infantry). Journalist, b. Tyrendarra, Vic, 13 May, 1883.

half-way towards Brussels. Few enemy machines were met; the weather was cloudy, with high winds; and only a few fleeting engagements took place. From one such engagement on October 27th F. Howard, of No. 2 Squadron, was shot down and killed over Tournai. Next day the Germans took the air in great numbers, and Cole's forenoon patrol of fourteen machines from No. 2 Squadron, ranging as far east as Ath and Mons, found the sky strewn with ragged formations of scouts and two-seaters of all types. Many of these were too distant to engage, but about 11.15 a.m. twelve Fokkers were seen over Peruwelz attacking a bombing formation of D.H.9's at 15,000 feet. Cole immediately led his formation to the attack. He himself intercepted the leading Fokker at the tail of the rearmost D.H.9, engaged it in a furious duel, and after firing 300 rounds into it, mostly at close range, set it on fire. The German pilot jumped from his machine with a parachute and "apparently descended safely."<sup>7</sup> He must have had an exciting journey earthwards, for, besides his own machine, several other Fokkers tumbled near him over the same distance—two in flames, shot down by Blaxland and Alberry; a fourth, shot down by Alberry and crashed near Peruwelz; and a fifth, shot down in a crippled spin by Stone. The S.E.5's, having dispersed this formation, chased six other Fokkers as far as Mons without overhauling them. Activity in the air was pronounced throughout the afternoon, when twelve S.E.5's under Murray Jones set out at 2 p.m. to bomb the town of Lessines, north of Ath, accompanied by an escort of ten Snipes under King. The sky over the Dendre River was thick with Fokkers; in the neighbourhood of Lessines alone there were one formation of fifteen at 10,000 feet and two more of seven and four respectively at 7,000. The S.E.5's dropped their cargo of bombs hastily on the town, and, without waiting to observe results, climbed to the combat. Meanwhile King and his Snipes had arrived over Ath, and at 12,000 feet attacked and annihilated a formation of six or seven Fokkers. The enemy was slightly higher, but did not seem to be aware of the Snipes, until King, finishing a climb, half-rolled on the leader

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<sup>7</sup> This was the first instance recorded by the Australian Flying Corps of any airman leaving an aeroplane by parachute.

and fired his opening rounds into the enemy at fifty feet. The Fokker spun away under continual fire for 3,000 feet and then dropped on its back. Major W. A. McCloughry, in that part of the patrol which followed King, fastened on to another enemy and fired at him till he crashed outside Ath. Palliser shot down a third, which also fell near Ath, and, while climbing to rejoin formation, engaged and destroyed another Fokker. Baker led the other half of the Snipe formation to the attack from the sun and shot down the remaining two Fokkers—the first one completely out of control, and the second observed to crash near Ath. The S.E.5's were unable to reach the level of the fight before it was over, except one machine piloted by Simonson, who at 6,000 feet shot down one Fokker which was attacking a Snipe and followed it with a rattle of fire till it fell on the ground south of Lessines. Egan, of this formation, while climbing from the bombing, met an L.V.G. two-seater and destroyed it.

As King's formation of Snipes was returning home, it passed four other Snipes from No. 4 Squadron under H. W. Ross. These had hardly crossed the Scheldt over Tournai when twelve Fokkers dived at them. The Germans must have been astonished when the Snipes, instead of turning away with the usual tactics, put their noses up and climbed at wonderful speed to meet the attack. The manœuvre threw the Fokkers into confusion, and one of them, which got below Ross, received a shattering fire of 200 rounds from the double guns at fifty yards, and went down on its back.

These engagements were followed next day, October 29th, by one of the greatest air battles of the war. British machines were penetrating too far for his liking over the enemy's line of retreat, and his full available air force was now concentrated to thwart this reconnaissance. Early in the fine but hazy afternoon fifteen Snipes under King and Baker left the aerodrome for offensive-patrol of the area east of Tournai. This force towards the end of its patrol met about sixty Fokkers just east of Tournai flying at varying heights. Several British two-seaters were in the offing lower down. Five Fokkers promptly attacked King, who was flying lower than the others. King spun away to avoid them and at 3,000 feet ran across an L.V.G. two-seater in his path. Attacking

this, he missed at the first dive, but returned a few minutes later, met the two-seater head-on, and destroyed it.

Meanwhile the others, at various levels between 14,000 and 11,000 feet, were fiercely engaged. Three machines led by G. Jones at 11,000 feet were the first in action, when, climbing to meet fifteen Fokkers just above them, they saw ten of this formation dive towards the British two-seaters. Jones's force at once attacked the ten, and at the same moment six Snipes under Ross entered the fight with a swarm of fresh Fokkers. Jones in his dive destroyed two of the enemy in quick succession; one crashed north-east of Tournai, and the other burst into flames. Almost simultaneously Palliser set another Fokker on fire. He turned at once to attack a second which whizzed past him on the tail of a Snipe, and destroyed that enemy also. Then four Fokkers in turn attacked him, and he was obliged to spin away to escape them. The air was so thick with German machines that, high or low, in every direction, a machine leaving the ruck of a fight could not fail to meet them. So Palliser, diving for safety, found another enemy lower down in his path, and this, too, he shot down out of control with a burst of eighty rounds ripped into the enemy as he dropped. Jones's patrol of three completely dispersed that particular body of Fokkers, but lost Sims. Sims was seen by Palliser to destroy one Fokker in flames, but shortly afterwards was himself shot down and killed.

Ross's formation of six had meanwhile taken up the combat at 11,000 feet. Ross himself picked off a Fokker from the tail of another Australian machine, fired one short burst into it at close range, and saw it crash at Mourcourt, north-east of Tournai. Lieutenants Thornton and O. Lamplough,<sup>8</sup> attacking with him, shot down two more Fokkers, one being seen to hit the ground in a wreck. Baker led his five machines to the attack from the sun, but the fight was at the moment so confused that for a few minutes none of these Snipes found an enemy. Then Baker attacked two Fokkers hard on the tail of another Snipe, and destroyed one of them between Mourcourt and Tournai. Several of the Snipes in this engagement were very badly shot about, and Cottam was forced to land, damaged, at Menin on the way home.

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<sup>8</sup> Lieut. O. Lamplough, D.F.C.; No. 4 Sqn. (previously Infantry) Bank clerk; of Caulfield, Melbourne; b. Donald, Vic., 13 March, 1897.

In the following afternoon, October 30th, strong morning patrols from both Australian squadrons observed considerable activity at the German aerodrome at Rebaix, just north of Ath. It was resolved to attack this aerodrome in the afternoon. Twelve S.E.5's from No. 2 Squadron and a formation of D.H.9's with heavier bombs composed the raiding party, while eleven Snipes under King formed the escort. The wing-commander (Colonel Strange) took part in the bombing in a Sopwith Camel. The scouts dropped fifty-one bombs in the Rebaix aerodrome, and destroyed several hangars. In front of the hangars were seven or eight L.V.G. two-seaters lined up on the ground, and at least three of these were reported wrecked.

A cloud of Fokkers arrived during the bombing, and were met by the Snipes at 4,000 feet over Leuze. King and H. A. Wilkinson<sup>9</sup> opened the action by attacking two Fokkers which were diving at a D.H.9. Wilkinson shot his opponent into flames and King sent his down badly crippled, but could not follow it below 1,000 feet, as four Fokkers then set upon him from all sides at once. King, in his own words, "zoomed up through their formation and turned across in front of the highest enemy machine, which I had not previously seen. This machine fell over on its back in avoiding a collision, and, so doing, fell on a second Fokker which was zooming up at me below him. These two machines fell to pieces and crashed." Trescowthick destroyed another Fokker from a formation of eleven, and Baker at 8,000 feet shot down one so badly damaged that it dropped on its back, tail first, and when last seen was still falling in that attitude at 2,000 feet. The Australians lost Lieutenant M. J. Kilsby,<sup>10</sup> a newly-joined pilot, who was forced to land in enemy territory and was taken prisoner.

During these days all the British squadrons practically lived over the enemy's lines. With the whole German Army in rapid retreat eastward, the main roads and railways were crowded night and day with their troops and transport. All attempt to conceal the situation was abandoned. The morale of that once iron-disciplined army was abandoned also. Where appeals by the officers to German patriotism were still effective,

<sup>9</sup> Lieut. H. A. Wilkinson; No. 4 Sqn. Engineer, of Mosman and Lithgow, N S W.; b. Tumut, N S W., 31 July, 1893.

<sup>10</sup> Lieut. M. J. Kilsby; No. 4 Sqn. Station hand; of Blacktown, S Aust.; b. Mount Gambier, S Aust., 25 Nov., 1894.

the troops obeyed their leaders under the assurance that mutiny would involve them in a worse disaster. But often appeals to patriotism and discipline were of no effect; many of the German soldiers were already revolutionaries, after the pattern of the Russian Army. Only the best troops made any stand against the irresistible Allied advance. Among those who fought to the last were the German airmen, and the odds against them in the sky were overwhelming.

The four days after the air battles on October 29th and 30th were stormy and wet. The enemy kept out of the air and our own men flew little over the lines. In an interval of better weather on November 1st Cummings and Davies destroyed a solitary L.V.G. two-seater over Antoing. Then a bright day on November 4th brought on several severe air-fights east of Tournai. This was also the day of the last great British attack, at Landrecies, thirty miles to the south. All three flights of No. 2 Squadron left the aerodrome at 7 o'clock that morning, and while they were sweeping a few miles east of Renaix, Davies, flying at 15,000 feet, dived at an L.V.G. two-seater at 12,000 and destroyed it. Almost immediately afterwards, Stone and Wellwood, in Blaxland's flight, sighted seven Fokker scouts near Renaix, and, being closer than the other S.E.5's, promptly attacked. The Fokkers began circling and losing height. Wellwood fired several bursts before he overhauled and engaged one Fokker at close range, which then fell away and crashed near the village of Tombelle, south-east of Renaix. Stone also destroyed a selected opponent. By this time Davies' flight joined the combat and dived out of the sun upon the Fokker formation. Davies fired 120 rounds into one machine, saw it fall on its back and spin slowly down, but was then himself overturned in the air by a near anti-aircraft burst. Simonson, following Davies, shot another Fokker into a somersault and it also crashed near Tombelle.

A couple of hours later, Cato, leading four Snipes from No. 4 Squadron, saw seven Fokkers a little above him at 10,000 feet north-east of Tournai. Joining four British S.E.5's, he climbed towards the enemy. The S.E.5's manœuvred to the north, and the Snipes to the south, of the enemy, and, having made their height, dived at the Fokkers from 15,000 feet. Cato shot one down out of control, but two of the Snipes

were lost in the scrimmage; Lieutenant E. J. Goodson,<sup>11</sup> hit by an anti-aircraft shell, crashed in the canal at Tournai, and Lieutenant C. W. Rhodes,<sup>12</sup> a newly-joined pilot, shot down in combat. Both were taken prisoner.

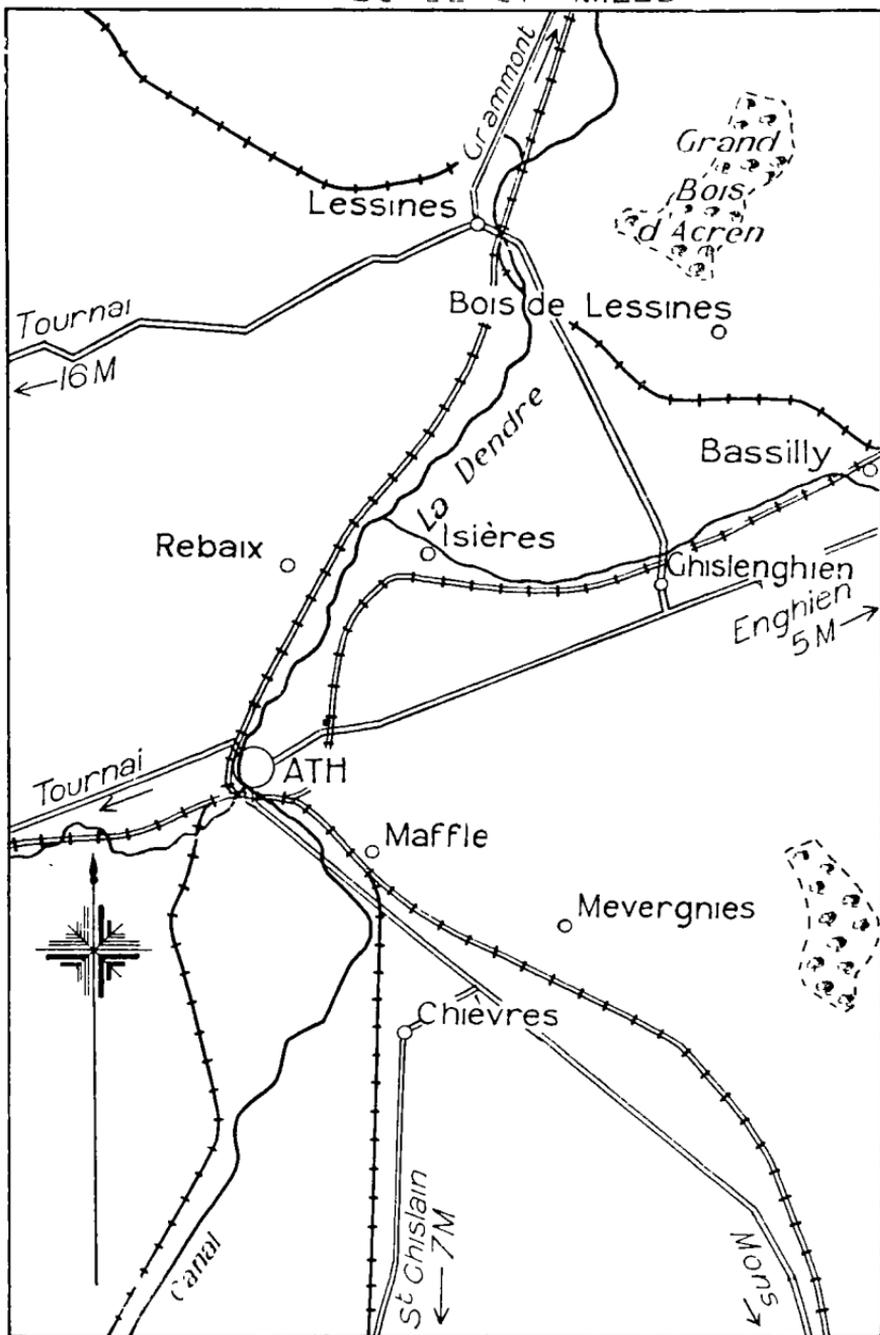
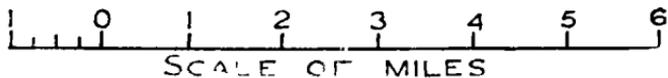
At noon the whole wing took the air to harass the German retreat on the Leuze-Ath road and to raid the aerodrome at Chapelle-à-Wattines just north of it, east of Leuze. The full squadron of Snipes formed the escort. Every machine of No. 2 Squadron was loaded up with bombs for the low-flying attack, as were also the heavier British bombers of the D.H.9 squadron. The S.E.5's were about to descend and bomb the aerodrome at Wattines, when the leading machines were attacked by five Fokkers, at 4,000 feet from the north-east. A number of other Fokkers appeared above these five. The Australians released their bombs in a shower at the aerodrome and at once joined combat with the enemy. Colonel Strange (flying a Sopwith Camel) and the D.H.9's proceeded to a more leisurely bombing, and saw four hangars burning, one fired by No. 2 Squadron's bombs. Strange then flew in a northerly circle and with machine-gun fire stampeded horse-transport and troops at Grandmetz and at Leuze station. Meanwhile the first five Fokkers were all shot down after a furious encounter—two by Davies, and one each by Blaxland, Stone, and Simonson. The ground was hidden by a thick carpet of cloud, and into this the Fokkers fell spinning, one by one; beyond it they could not be watched. Of the upper Fokkers only three or four came down to fight, but these, on sighting the Snipes, sheered off.

King, leading the Snipes, escorted the bombers back across the lines and then, seeing twelve Fokkers following his formation, turned back, climbed, and dived on the enemy's leader. He fired 150 rounds into this machine, which stalled, fell on its side, and dropped earthward on its back. A general scrimmage ensued. King fastened on to another Fokker, which was shooting on the tail of a Snipe, and sent it down in flames after four rapid bursts of fire at 100-foot range. G. Jones attacked the rearmost German of the formation,

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<sup>11</sup> Lieut. E. J. Goodson; No. 4 Sqn. (previously Infantry). Motor driver; b. Upton-on-Severn, Eng., 27 April, 1892.

<sup>12</sup> Lieut. C. W. Rhodes; No. 4 Sqn. Surveyor's assistant; of Sydney; b. Perth, W. Aust., 31 May, 1894.



PRYWIGHTMAN

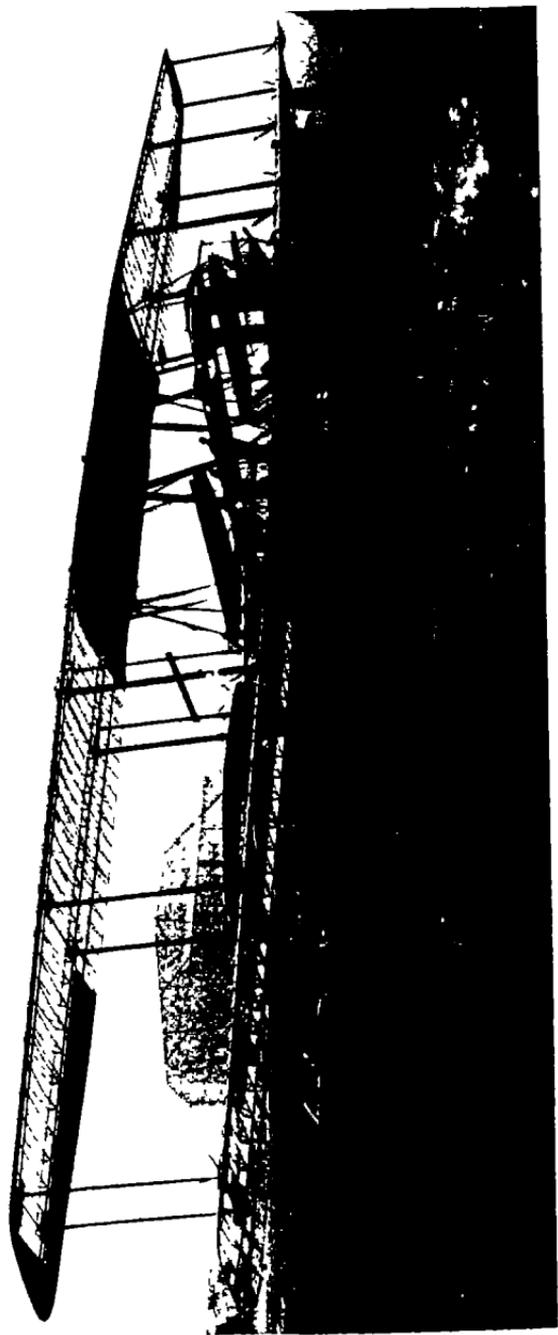
ATH REGION, SHOWING AREA OF OPERATIONS OF No. 2 AND No. 4 AUSTRALIAN SQUADRONS, OCTOBER AND NOVEMBER, 1918



A BIG HANDLEY-PAGE BOMBER, OF THE TYPE USED BY THE ROYAL AIR FORCE ON BOMBING RAIDS INTO GERMANY

*Just* at Museum *Official Photo* No. T. 733

To face p. 38.



SKELETON OF A LARGE GOTHA BOMBER, IN THE HANDS OF No 4 SQUADRON, A.F.C. AT COLOGNE,  
GERMANY, DECEMBER, 1918

*Aust War Museum Official Photo No E4147*

*To face p 383*

overran it during his opening fusillade, and sped on to another, which was attacking H. A. Wilkinson. This Fokker also fell in flames. Wilkinson, delivered from it, dropped with a quick turn on two more Fokkers behind and below him, fired a close-range burst into the nearer one, and saw it fall out of control. Such is the vignette of a short and willing encounter preserved in the laconic narratives of the Australian pilots. The fight lasted but two or three minutes, and died out in the usual way, with machines spread over a wide area and making to regain formation. When the Snipes had re-formed it was found that three splendid pilots had been lost in the action—Baker (a flight-commander), and Lieutenants Palliser and P. W. Symons.<sup>13</sup>

By November 8th the enemy rear-guards were in full retreat from the Scheldt, and the British and Belgians were pursuing them towards Mons and Brussels as fast as damaged roads and railways and destroyed bridges would permit. The morning patrol of No. 2 Squadron on November 9th reported explosions along the road and railway from Ath to Enghien, and in the afternoon another large bombing expedition, the full strength of the 80th Wing, attacked these communications and an aerodrome at Marcq, on the south side of Ath. A hangar and a Fokker on the ground outside it were destroyed by a few bombs dropped at Marcq aerodrome. The raiders then flew towards Enghien. From Ghislenghien onward great numbers of troops, transport, and trains were seen making east, and the bombers, swooping down on this crowded traffic, wrought terrible havoc. The D.H.9's dropped several 112-lb. bombs on troops and transport near Croisette aerodrome, demolished a hangar there with one heavy bomb, cut a train in two with another, and made three direct hits with other bombs on the road traffic. No. 2 Squadron released thirty-nine bombs on several trains at Enghien junction and station, of which twenty-one made full and direct hits. An ammunition-truck exploded, and all the trains began burning. Enghien railway station was also in flames. Several thousands of rounds were fired into the road traffic by all machines. The attacking force performed its work of destruction without any

<sup>13</sup> Lieut. P. W. Symons; No. 4 Sqn. (previously A.A.S.C.). Farmer; of Matland, S. Aust.; b. Moonta, S. Aust., 4 Aug., 1893. Killed in action, 4 Nov., 1918.

interference from enemy aircraft. Motor-lorries were set on fire or wrecked; horses bolted over a confined area of ditches and farms and rising hilly ground on each side of the main road. The road itself was blocked with fallen waggons in a dozen places and littered with dead and dying men and animals. The raiders' only loss was F. R. Smith, leader of No. 2 Squadron's formation, who was shot down by ground-fire and taken prisoner, but returned through the enemy's lines three days after the Armistice.

The attack was repeated in this vicinity twice next day, the eve of the Armistice. Both Australian squadrons were out in full force—No. 2 bombing, No. 4 escorting. The morning raid between 8.30 and 10.30 found five trains in the blackened Enghien station and the town and roads crowded with troops and transport. The bombs from the S.E.5's damaged a railway bridge, destroyed an anti-aircraft battery, and hit the trains and the railway station in many places. Leaving the station enveloped in a cloud of smoke, the attackers dived upon the road transport, which was still very heavy, and spread panic along the route with their machine-guns. Five Fokkers endeavoured to interfere, but were beaten off or destroyed by Bristol Fighters, also escorting. The afternoon raid continued the same harrying work, with similar disastrous results, upon the retiring German columns at Enghien and on the Enghien-Hal road eastward.

This was the last aggressive operation of the Australian scouting squadrons in the war. After the Armistice machines from both No. 2 and No. 4 Squadrons maintained balloon-line patrols for some days, but these were mainly practice exercises. The enemy was beaten; his surrender, cautiously doubted by the army for some days, was final.

After the Armistice it was generally believed that the Australian Corps would advance with the Fourth Army to the Rhine, but eventually that army did not cross the German frontier, and only the Second Army moved on to occupy the Cologne bridgehead. No. 3 Australian Squadron remained in Belgium near Charleroi with the Australian Corps. No. 4 Squadron was the only Australian unit in the British Army of

Occupation, and that squadron entered Germany at 11.45 a.m. on December 7th, spent some days at Euskirchen, and arrived at the Bickendorf aerodrome, Cologne, on December 14th. No. 2 Squadron remained in the vicinity of Lille (Hellemmes) until demobilisation.

By the end of November No. 3 Squadron was running an aerial postal service between Fourth Army Headquarters at Namur and Australian Corps Headquarters at Ham-sur-Heure (south of Charleroi), and from Australian Corps to the divisions in the Hallencourt area near Abbeville.

The two and a half months spent by No. 4 Squadron at Cologne were uneventful. Soon after its arrival it took over 150 surrendered aeroplanes of all types from the German Air Force, and exhibited for the delectation of German pilots the flying qualities of the Snipe.

By the end of February each of the three Australian squadrons had handed over its machines and stores, and was preparing to depart from the war theatre for Le Havre, England, and home. March and April saw them on Salisbury Plain, and the members of all three squadrons embarked early in May on the transport *Kaiser-i-Hind* for Australia. No. 1 Squadron had sailed from Egypt by the *Port Sydney* on March 5th. The disembarkation at Melbourne was a general leave-taking among members of the Australian Flying Corps, and the airmen's sentiments have been fittingly expressed by one of them in a short account of the history of No. 4 Squadron. "Doubtless," he writes, "many of them will meet again, not only in every town and city of Australia, but right throughout the crowded highways and the wide, lone places of the whole world. Wherever two or more of them meet each other, one thing rests assured; their memories will go winging back to those happy times of splendid comradeship and strenuous endeavour among the pleasant fields of Britain, along the straight, tree-bordered roads and straggling villages of France, the wind-swept desolations of Belgium, and the final weeks with the Army of Occupation on the Rhine."