

OVER THE LINES

JEFFREY HALYBURTON-SMITH

Foreword to:

OVER THE LINES

A story about the Royal Flying Corps from 1914 to 1918 based on fact.

CHAPTER ONE

Bleriot's flight in 1909 across the Channel – for the perceptive- ushered in a new era, a new era particularly in military strategy. The success of the flying machine caused considerable excitement among those who responded to the technical achievements of the new century. The newspapers were full of it, being read avidly by young and old, and those magazines that catered for this new departure forecast the most incredible developments in aerial adventure.

Typical of the public interest ignited by this were Robert 'Robbie' Armstrong and his German cousin Sigmund von Kliest who became crazy about flying, and made up their minds that they would learn to fly as soon as they were old enough. They badgered Robert's father, Brigadier Armstrong, to take them to see the aircraft where it had landed, and marvelled that something that seemed all wires and wood, could have made the trip across the Channel. 'It was a jolly good adventure,' Sigmund said, 'pity it had to be a Frenchman!' Robert's father was quick to upbraid him. He was a military man and conscious of the détente that existed with France, and who made frequent official visits to there. But Sigmund was not 'put down', he had a resilience that both boys shared, and they giggled when he added softly 'pity he hadn't been English!'

The boys, even though they had a deep regard for each other, were very competitive in everything. However, in their childhood and early youth, they could only be together when Sigmund's mother brought him from Germany for the holidays.

Sigmund's mother was Robert's aunt, and had married Otto von Kliest five years or so years before the end of Queen Victoria's reign. There was another member of the 'gang' –Eva Mackintosh, whose parents were also Anglo/German. She was their inveterate companion in all their 'japes', and who was as good at climbing, hunting

and fishing as the other two. In fact the locals believed she was a better shot, and a great deal stronger than she looked. It was noticed that Sigmund assumed a 'big brother' feeling for Eva, though she herself appeared to avoid being 'adopted' by Robbie's cousin.

The boys were the same age, height, and weight, and had a strong family resemblance. When Sigmund was in England he had often been mistaken for his cousin, and this likeness went down even as far as their likes and dislikes.

When they were old enough to ride horses, they took their challenges into the field with Eva as their judge, finding impossible fences, and with a shotgun they could be depended upon to bring down as many birds as each other. Their schooling was spent in both England and Germany, each staying with the other's parents during their time in England or Germany. The result was that the three of them could speak both languages fluently, and could be heard talking together in both languages. The boy's attitudes were identical, even in their nationalism: each holding that their country was superior to the other. Eva, of course, held out for Scotland. Not only was this in the arts and sciences, but in military matters, so that they frequently re-fought the battles in which each country had been engaged. When they disagreed, which happened regularly, the boys settled their differences with boxing gloves, with Eva as referee. Their faces would bear the bruises of their heated conflicts, but their friendship overcame their momentary animosity, and they found in this frequent testing a regard for each other's prowess.

'You are good enough to be a German!' Sigmund would say, slapping his cousin on the back, and when someone else was in contest with his cousin, he would urge Robert on. It was a David and Jonathon relationship and when each enrolled for flying instruction in 1912, it became a matter for challenge which would solo first. It was to

be observed, however, that when the other was flying his cousin would be looking on anxiously. They both completed the course in fine style, receiving the compliments of their instructors, but happier with the approval of Eva and each other. With a flying certificate in hand they each opted to follow a military career, Robert went to Sandhurst military school, and Sigmund joined his father's old regiment, the Uhlans. Eva began a medical course at St. Thomas's vowing that she would 'make and mend' either of them if she received a call. It was a sorrowful parting when they separated and went their separate ways. Eva kissed them both on the platform of the train for Germany, vowing that she would meet them both in a year.

When Britain declared war on Germany, after the latter's invasion of Belgium in August 1914, it seemed that their close relationship was ended. It was September 1914 when Robert received via Holland, a short note from Sigmund. 'I am transferring to the air force. I hope you are well and continue to prosper. Give my love to Eva and my uncle and aunt. Sigmund.' It was after receiving this note that Robert applied to join the Royal Flying Corps.

It was a cold unseasonal morning when Robert journeyed to London, at least warm in his army greatcoat. The building where he was to be interviewed was near Horse Guards Parade, and a sentry in khaki stood at the entrance. Recognising that Robert was an officer he saluted and directed him up a flight of stairs. There were a number of men waiting, some civilians but most of them army men. Robert had a quarter of an hour before his interview, so he sat and waited. Other candidates were called into the inner room, and most of them appeared to be disappointed. It made Robert wonder what the criteria for transfer was, when the Royal Flying Corps were constantly calling for recruits for flying duties. When he was called upon he found himself

facing a trio of army officers, none of whom wore pilots wings. He acknowledged their 'good morning'.

'I see from your application form that you already have a pilot's certificate,' the middle one said, a major in a cavalry regiment. 'and that you qualified in 1912. Why didn't you go straight into the RFC?'

'I went from Sandhurst, straight into my father's old regiment.' Robert replied. 'He was colonel of the regiment and served in South Africa.' Robert paused for his words to take effect. 'I heard the Flying Corps were looking for pilots...so I applied.'

The major gave him a friendly smile. 'I am sure they will be glad to have you. You will probably receive a posting to the Central Flying School in a few days. Don't suppose that you will need any instruction?'

Robert shook his head. 'I have kept my flying fresh...and I am ready.'

The major stood and shook his hand. 'I wish we had more candidates like you Lieutenant.' Robert celebrated his success with Eva, newly qualified, with a candle lit dinner at an exclusive restaurant in London. They lingered along the Embankment finding a new more intimate relationship in the few hours before saying goodbye.

Robbie left her with the knowledge that Eva meant more to him now that they were to be parted by war than she ever had.

Robert received his posting a few days later. His father resplendent in his Brigadier's uniform, saw him off to Hendon, but he was obviously disappointed that Robert had decided not to stay with the reserve battalions of the regiment who were shortly to embark for France. 'Take care of yourself my boy, this flying is a perilous business. Give me a horse any day.' The regiment had done well during the early days of the war, though the news was that they had suffered heavy casualties. Consequently, Robert's father had been impatient to join them. Robert favoured his father with a

fond look. 'I will write you as soon as I know where I'll be...so perhaps we can meet in France, father.' They had enjoyed a close relationship, and Robert knew that his father had always revelled in his successes, and gave him comfort in his few failures. Robert, as he looked into his father's eyes, had a remembered vision of his father's burly figure shouting and waiving the school's fifteen onto a win. They gave each other an undemonstrative hand shake, and Robert boarded the train.

At the CFS, Robert discovered that those who were considered sufficiently advanced were being posted to active squadrons. One of the instructors at the CFS had taught Robert to fly and knew that he had been flying frequently since then. 'Robert is more than ready,' he confirmed, 'and I could wish everyone else was who is going.'

'Robbie' as he found himself addressed, was posted to No.12 squadron, one of three squadrons for France, going via Shoreham for Dover.'

Of the planes who set off, one flight commander was left behind, when the interplane struts of his Farman collapsed as he was taxiing out. Another pilot suffered concussion when he crashed near Shoreham, and yet another was force-landed with engine trouble. Not a very propitious start. Robert was allocated a Farman with a top speed of only 59 miles an hour, as opposed to the Bleriot with 72 that he had been trained on.

The Maurice Farman Longhorn was a biplane, with a span of fifty feet. Four longerons (tail booms) ran out behind the centre section to the box tail, which had two rudders. In front of the main planes was a pair of giant skids. These started below the planes and formed the undercarriage.(where they carried four wheels) and ran forward and upwards, like the prow of an enormous toboggan, to carry the elevator between them at their upper tips. On the lower main plane rested the nacelle, a long shoe, where a 70 hp Renault engine pushed behind in the heel and two passengers sat in

tandem in the toe, which projected out in front of the plane. The controls which consisted of pedals for the rudders, a stick to push and pull for the elevator, and at the top of this a pair of handlebars, which, when swivelled up and down, worked the ailerons. The whole contraption was held together with piano wire, with which it was festooned in every direction – lift wires, landing wires, drift wires, bracing wires; Robert reflected that if one crashed it, there was such a lot between pilot and the ground that one was unlikely to get seriously hurt. It climbed at forty-five, flew level at sixty, and settled down like a kite when landing.

‘Get your tail well up when taking off,’ his instructor had warned him, and with a rather over-weight mechanic in the spare seat, he had to handle the ‘plane carefully. It took nearly three hours to get to Amiens, where he found the atmosphere frenzied following a visit from the local general. There were nearly fifty aeroplanes lined up on the tarmac, and Robbie had some difficulty joining the outer line. He remembered to keep her at fifty-five as he came down.

The next morning all the assembled squadrons were ordered to fly to a forward base at Mauberge, ten miles behind the line guarded by the British Expeditionary Force. One of the BE8s, a plane which was dreaded by most pilots, took fire on take off and fell burning to the ground. Another BE8 suffered control failure en route to Mauberge and crashed near Peronne. A third of these ill-fated machines were later written off. It seemed to Robbie, aware of these disasters, to be a bad omen for the future when the landing squadrons were fired on by the French! When the British army arrived with bands playing, they also appeared to find the aircraft inviting targets! As the British aircraft had no distinguishing markings, the crews took to painting the Union Jack on their fuselages and the underside of the wings. There was an element of gloom in the squadrons.

In the quiet period that followed the arrival of the squadrons, Robbie had a machine gun fitted for the observer to fire. Most of the planes had no armament, and merely carried pistols and a rifle. Whenever a suitable target presented itself, the crews carried hand grenades and home made bombs, which proved largely ineffective. The addition of the gun proved to Robbie that this was not the answer, as the increased weight made it impossible to get to 3,500 feet. The flight commander told Robbie, 'Get rid of it...you'll be a sitting duck to the faster German aircraft.'

Robbie's flight commander was a tall, thin Scot called Jaimie MacDonald, with a strong Glasgow accent and a penchant for reciting poetry on every occasion. Robbie immediately established a rapport with him through following his lead by reciting the second quatrain of Milton's 'On his Blindness'. Mick McMannus the second pilot of the flight was a Geordie Irishman, whose English was impeccable, which he attributed to serving in India with pukka cavalrymen. The other pilot was a diminutive Welshman called Roger 'Bing' Owen, who had been a tea planter in Ceylon when the war broke out. The first order of business with Jaimie was to cement their relationship with a generous nip of Highland Malt.

'Seeing we are going to win this war together...I think we should establish the first rule of business.' Down the hatch in toast to each other, followed by a incomprehensible growl of some outlandish Gaelic phrase from the flight commander. Whilst the squadrons were bedding down, things were happening in Belgium when the Germans put into action the Schlieffen plan, designed by their Chief of Staff to knock out the French by sweeping through Belgium and Northern France; encircle Paris; and cut off the major portion of the French Army from reinforcements. The Belgians held on as long as possible, but confronted with the overwhelming force of the German advance, they had to retreat, obliging the French to do likewise. The gap

between the retreating French and the newly-arrived British was soon exploited by the Germans. Intelligence about their movements was crucial.

As the RFC was largely seen as a reconnaissance arm, the first squadrons to fly this important mission on the 19th August, fell to No.3 and No.4.

To save weight, both aircraft – they were flying as a pair, in case one was hit – they flew without observers. Without a second pair of eyes, the two aircraft got lost in the cloud and poor visibility. On the 22nd, as one of a pair from No. 12, Robbie flew alongside Mick McManus, and observed substantial enemy forces moving towards the British front. Without an efficient method of sighting and communicating their information, GHQ at the beginning were wary of accepting the reality of their messages. But at least it was an embryonic beginning and helped to partially disperse the fog of war.

It was an air activity that nevertheless brought its own price. One of No.5 squadron's planes was shot down by ground fire. Two planes were missing, and a member of No.2 squadron was wounded in the leg. It was a chastening experience, and led Jaimie MacDonald to recite 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' to the assembled mess. The Germans knew now that the British had arrived, and an airborne intruder appeared over the airfield at 5000 feet. Immediately two BE2 machines that were ready went up after it with hand grenades and bombs. One Farman, equipped with a gun, proved the flight commander's cautionary words when it was seen struggling for height at 3500 feet. The German, completed his reconnaissance and bade them a mocking farewell.

In the retreat from Mons that was now gathering pace, the RFC had learned sufficient to give Sir John French, the army commander, invaluable reconnaissance information

. Particularly about the movement of the French who had begun their retreat without first warning the British...

CHAPTER TWO

With the liaison with the French not yet established, the RFC had a new task. In addition to locating enemy forces and reporting their strength and progress, they had to find out what they could about the movements of their Allies. As No.12 squadron had a two-seater monoplane – a Bleriot – which was considered ideal for this job, Robert and Mick were detailed. This partnership had already established themselves as above average observers of ground operations. The weather was good, and at 1500 feet they found that they could detect practically all ground movement; and as they cruised over the battle area in and around Charleroi they saw quite clearly that the French were being driven back.

To their chagrin, when Mick handed in their report – because no information had yet been received of the French withdrawal – it was very coolly received. It had to await the receipt of this intelligence before their report was vindicated. The BEF had not had time to consolidate their position before they found they must either retreat or be annihilated. The French requested that the British make a local offensive to relieve the pressure on the French. To disengage themselves the British had to fight their way out, and this achieved what the French asked for. The Battle of Mons occurred on the next day, the 23 August.

To the squadrons now abandoning their base at Maubeuge, the sight of the retreating army was agonising. They had little time to ponder on this turn of events, when the squadrons were ordered to Le Cateau in the south-west. Robbie was one of those who witnessed the distressing scenes. He echoed the words of a colleague in his diary: 'Roads were crowded everywhere with troops retiring. Poor fellows, they've had no sleep and little food for three nights and days, being driven back and pressed always by the advancing enemy. The Germans have us on the run. We are fighting a

rearguard action against big odds.' The army were in a tight corner, with men, guns and transport blocking the roads. Some of the casualties were riding on the limbers of guns, and walking-wounded were throwing away their haversacks, even their rifles. With the fears of envelopment, the notion of making a stand at Maubeuge was a pipe-dream. One defective Farman had been set on fire lest the Germans captured it. The last of the squadrons took off from the airfield just as the German cavalry were approaching.

Le Cateau turned out to be comfortless, accommodation being limited. Most of the pilots found a haven in a barn where piles of straw made sleeping fun rather than an ordeal. Jaimie recited a scurrilous poem about a lady of the night selling space in her bed. This provoked some laughter and some ribald comment from one of the older observers who was known to have had a chequered past. With the army prepared to make a stand at Le Cateau, the squadrons retreated south-west to St. Quentin.

That afternoon whilst one of the reconnaissance aircraft was refuelling, an intruder was spotted coming from the south. It was an Etrich Taube, One of the pilots of No.5 Squadron shouted: 'There you are, go and take his number!' The refuelling plane, an Avro, took off in pursuit The pilot and observer, Lieutenants C.W.Wilson and C.E.C. Rabagliati, had tacitly agreed on getting below and ahead of the enemy plane so that Rabagliati in the front seat could fire upwards and rearwards over Wilson's head. Wilson had to duck below his cockpit coming to avoid the empty shells being ejected. The Taube pilot avoided contact and landed in a field. The pair returned to Le Cateau without further ado, deciding not to attempt to take the pilot prisoner, as it was too close to the enemy presence. Another pilot Harvey-Kelly later rescued a plaque from the Taube and it was presented to Wilson and Rabagliati.

On the retreat, the crews experienced a variety of contrasts between luxury and discomfort. Sometimes they slept in feather beds with all the comforts of home, at other times they slept under the wings of their planes, sheltering in their greatcoats from the rainstorms. Robbie and his flight spent as much time as they could tending to their planes to keep them airworthy. The reconnaissance flights took them to the rear of the German von Kluck's army looking for targets of opportunity for their makeshift bombs. The German planes they encountered they fought off with rifles and pistols. The problem now became one of landing in a strange field often after dark, homing on their line of transport. Somehow rations, fuel, and letters from home continued to reach them, saying much for the RFC commanding officer's care for his squadrons. Damage to the planes had to be repaired during the night, and the mechanics worked tirelessly. As one of them wrote in his diary, echoed by Robbie in a letter to his father now in France 'It was a picnic compared with the nightmare of horrors and privations from which, for the infantry, there was no escape and no respite' This bred in Robbie and his fellow aviators a resolve never to let the infantry down. This obsession made for many casualties, and the same determination was imbued in the RFC commanders. The retreat was hampered by multitudes of civilian refugees, and their animals and impedimenta clogged the roads. The flights felt safer in the air than on the ground.

As the Second Corps of the British Army was fighting to disengage, the call came out for constant reconnaissance to find out how the battle was going. Robbie's flight was called upon to find out. They observed guns surrounded by their dead gunners, and dead horses and men of the cavalry who had gone to their relief. 'The general retirement along our whole line could be seen,' was reported, 'with officers rallying

and reforming the infantrymen as they streamed back over the fields.’ Sir John French received the report, and as a consequence further planes were despatched.

The squadrons were driven out of St. Quentin by the speed of the German advance, and had to fall back on La Fere, fifteen miles to the south. It was gratifying to glimpse on their return flights the easily identified food lorry, heading for La Fere.

One of their officers, Smith-Barry, who had both his legs broken was in danger of being left behind for the Germans. This did not appeal to him, so he somehow got himself outside the hospital and came careering back in a hastily organised taxi with his legs in splints propped in the front seat!

At La Fere a makeshift aerodrome was organised, and despite a thunderstorm the pilots landed safely almost anywhere on the outskirts of the town. There was no respite for on the 28th after two busy days trying to operate a reconnaissance service, they were told to complete their missions and fly 30 miles south to Compiègne. Even though there was the constant threat of encirclement, the spirits of the crews was high. They found that their temporary landing field was under threat from German infantry, so they were told to complete their missions and fly over the River Marne. This they accomplished to be followed on the 4th September by the Germans, who were only 30 miles from Paris.

What they did not know till later was the written comment by Von Kluck: ‘In spite of the great efforts of the First Army, the British had escaped the repeated attempts to envelope them. They continued their retreat southwards.’.

When it became certain that Von Kluck had abandoned his encircling movement and turned instead to Paris to exploit the successes of the German Second Army, observers were sent out to look for the German cavalry corps. Although the retreat seemed to have halted, the Allied High Command were nervous until that cavalry

corps was identified. With other allied aircraft, Mick and Robbie were sent out again in the Bleriot, and it was not until after dark that the enemy cavalry was sighted by their camp fires. With the French army massing for an attack on the now exposed enemy right flank, and the British moving forward, the RFC were constantly in the air. As Mick said in his most refined accent: 'This is a bloody jamboree!' Flying as low as they dared, they monitored the 100 mile front, that stretched from Compiegne to Verdun, and witnessed the 600 taxis that the French used to ferry troops to the contested front.

It seemed to Robbie that they were constantly in the air, and inevitably there were casualties. On the third day, the leader of the other flight and an observer succumbed to the machine gun and rifle fire tornado that was flung at them.

On the 9th September the German attack was called off and the entire invading force began retreating to the River Aisne. It was a forty mile pull back, and Allied aircraft monitored it until the Germans reached high ground above the river. It was a famous victory from the jaws of defeat, despite heavy casualties. The Allies followed in torrential rain and under intense enemy fire. The RFC were given the task of spotting and ranging hostile batteries, but they were blinded by mist and rain, and the fierce wind that sprang up damaged many aircraft on the ground. No.3 squadron had a Farman blown thirty feet into the air onto another, and No.2 lost several BEs that were blown across the airfield. Across the squadrons only a dozen aircraft could be put into the air, Mick and Robbie's Bleriot had its propeller smashed. As it was Robbie's turn to pilot, he was not amused.

The information that was gathered was not used effectively, so that heavy casualties were sustained in the Battle of the Aisne. The frustrations of this battle led both sides to pursue each other in a race to the coast, and in the movement the RFC were

established at St.Omer. The bad weather, however, did not prevent the squadrons from supplying invaluable intelligence of troop movements. Its receipt consequently led to the First Battle of Ypres, and the saving of this politically sensitive town from German occupation. The war of movement ended with the beginning of the static and attritional trench warfare.

Though its role was changing, the squadrons had proved their value and their strength in men and machines was increasing. Field Marshal Sir John French in his despatch on the retreat commented: 'the admirable work done by the Royal Flying Corps under Sir David Henderson; their skill, energy and perseverance have been beyond praise. They have furnished me with the most complete and accurate information which has been of incalculable value in the conduct of operations. Fired at constantly both by friend and foe, and not hesitating to fly in every kind of weather, they have remained undaunted throughout.' When this praise was received, Jaime insisted in procuring a barrel of brandy and when in the mess all glasses were charged, recited to a willing audience 'The Fighting Temeraire'.

With the onset of winter, and a stabilizing of the front, the squadrons found themselves scouting the same area every day. It was boring work. It was also a time of the first leaves, although only as far as Paris. Robbie and Mick were given three day's furlough, and went off together. Mick had friends in Paris, and Robbie armed with his father's address looked forward to seeing him again after what seemed an age. His father met him at the Gare de Nord, a tall figure impeccable in his army greatcoat and hat with its band of red. They embraced. 'So good to see you my son.' Robbie saw that his eyes were tired, and that he stooped a little. 'I've arranged for you to stay with one of my aides, Gerald Makepeace, you'll find you have much in common. It will give me the chance to see as much of you as you can spare...after all it's your leave.'

His father linked his arm. 'Perhaps we can have a meal together...before I deliver you to Gerald?'

The Parisian restaurant was filled with voluble, laughing people. It was as if there was no war on. The menu bore no visible signs of there being any shortages, although the prices showed the management were making the most of the war atmosphere and people were spending freely. 'You choose for me father,' Robbie suggested, 'I had little time for dining in London before I joined the RFC. Since then the squadrons have been living from day to day...and often in a different place.'

His father nodded. 'I came back from Mons with the regiment...and we didn't have much time for food. The men were magnificent, and when we eventually turned back on them...the Germans learned we had still got plenty of fight left.' He lifted his glass of wine. 'To the regiment.'

After they had eaten a rather sumptuous meal, that Robbie had to struggle with being unaccustomed to anything so rich, his father's expression became serious and he said: 'The general staff have become impressed with the intelligence your flyers have gathered for them. What about casualties? Have they been heavy?'

Robbie considered. 'N-no...not especially. But that could change now that the front is becoming more fixed. We will no doubt be meeting more German opposition on a narrow front...and quite frankly...the aircraft we have are not designed for aerial warfare. Too slow. No armament. We are having to carry a rifle and pistol with us. And rumour has it the Germans have faster aircraft that will be armed to fight.' Robert took out a cigarette case and offered it to his father. 'We will do what we have to...but reconnaissance with a pilot and observer...in our slow planes...' He did not finish. 'I could be speaking out of turn, but taking the fight to the Germans as we

will...could be very expensive in men and machines! Even the BE2c which is beginning to arrive...is a fine plane for joyriding, but not for fighting.'

Robbie's father took a notebook from his breast pocket and scribbled a note or two.

'I can't promise anything...but I will have a word or two in the right ears. I have been posted to GHQ, I was wounded crossing the Aisne...' He touched his shoulder, which accounted for his slight stoop..' and they say they want my experience available to the General staff...' He looked glum. 'Still I might do some good...if it's only to get you lot better equipment.'

As it turned out, Robbie's father did not see him again before he returned to the squadron. In his place came a short note. 'Hope the next time I will have more time. Heard on my return to GHQ that we had received through our agents a list of German squadrons and personnel on your part of the line. Your cousin Sigmund is among them. Hope you don't find yourself fighting him...'

With a feeling of forboding that that day would not be too far ahead, Robbie decided to return early to his squadron. Had Eva been able to get leave from the hospital she was working at he would have stayed on until the end of his leave. At best he was able to speak to her, and assure himself that she was well although tired with the constant flood of casualties. He promised to ring her again and try to meet locally. He journeyed back with Mick who had become jaded with a Paris that was unreal, and too expensive for his pocket...

CHAPTER THREE

The enemy soon found means to relieve the boredom that pilots first complained of with the stabilising of the front. When the flight settled down to an early dawn patrol they found that the German anti-aircraft weapons had quickly acquired an improved accuracy. Robbie, with Mick in attendance, tried to follow the flight directive of seeking a safer height above 5000 feet. This was not easy in any of the machines, and below that level it was dangerous. Even rifle fire was becoming a hazard, with most machines suffering a number of bullet holes, and an occasional casualty.

German observation balloons became a target as they represented a means of gathering vital intelligence which so far the British had not the means to emulate. One of the squadron, a pilot called Mapplebeck, set off with the idea of dropping petrol bombs on them. Without an observer to save the weight, he was intercepted by a German aircraft as he was manoeuvring. He managed to land before losing consciousness from his wounds. This exploit coming on top of another in which he blew up an ammunition train and together brought him a DSO. His wounds included losing the tip of his penis! This caused some hilarity in the mess.

The increased accuracy of the German guns was not the subject of laughter, with the increased prospect of a direct hit. Robbie's letter to his father echoed the squadron commander's feelings: 'Very glad to get out of the heaviest fire I have been under so far. At one time shells were simply bursting all around; in addition to the deafening roar of their guns, we could easily hear the whistle and shriek of bullets. I am getting used to being shelled now, almost indifferent to it in fact; it is marvellous that we don't get hit more often.'

On one occasion, out spotting for artillery, Robbie was heavily shelled. The air was thick with shell bursts from anti-aircraft guns. He kept turning, diving, and climbing,

but in doing so he lost height. Finally at 3000 feet a shell exploded near enough to put a splinter through his propeller, but he managed to limp home. It was only a question of time before one of the squadron was brought down by shellfire. The guns could reach up to 10,000 feet, bursting dirty yellow and blacksmoke and chain shot. The concentration of their shooting was enough to disconcert the most experienced flyer, and this concentration would get worse as the years went on.

It was normal for each crew to do two operational flights a day. Owing to the low cloud, close reconnaissance and artillery observation were frequently carried out below 10,000, and it was difficult to reach this height. One Henri Farman was hit twelve times in three days. One of the other pilots, Read, wondered how his nerves would stand this daily bombardment. He observed: 'I notice several people's nerves are not as strong as they used to be. I'm sure 'Archie' is responsible for a great deal. I would not mind quite so much if I was in a machine that was fast, and would climb a little more willingly.' As Robbie had observed to his father, the machines were inadequate for the job they had to do.

After two months in France, now constantly flying reconnaissance and artillery spotting, the pilots were feeling the effect of battle fatigue. Not only subjected to Archie when in flight, but after getting down came under shelling on the airfield. Some of the shells burst uncomfortably close, and they felt lucky to escape.

Fragments flew about, and it was commented that it might be better to be caught on the ground, than be in a crumpled up Farman, with a long fall from 4000 feet. It was a recurring nightmare, and surprising that there was no resentment at the absence of parachutes. They had not yet been tested for use in heavier-than-air machines.

By the end of October, Robbie, typically, was flying up to 14 hours a day. He felt tired and stale. Every flight was a gamble, as the machines too, were showing the

wear and tear of constant flying. One Henri Farman, when opened up, showed sprouting fungus. The prevailing west wind was another abiding handicap, driving them often further into German territory than they intended, and delaying their return. With only an optimum speed of under 60 mph they would sometimes find themselves hovering over the lines motionless in the wind, a target for enemy fire. The greatest toll of aircraft and pilots, however, still came from take-off and landing. One of the experienced pilots, Read, had his third crash in a week when he crashed a new Henri Farman when its engine failed at a critical moment. The aircraft turned a somersault when he tried a pancake landing. He sustained a broken nose himself, and back injuries to his observer.

The British infantry's lack of experience made them confuse their own planes as German, even with the Union Jack painted underneath. Tragedy was bound to happen eventually. Though German infantry fire generally tended to be inaccurate, the British infantry fire was right on target when a Allied reconnaissance plane was shot down in flames. A 'flamer' was the pilot's constant dread. Eventually, this hazard became less with the adoption of the roundel, with the colours in reverse order to the French.

Rest days and a few days leave was the answer to the constant tension of flying on surveillance missions. When he complained of being unwell, Robbie and his new observer, Freddie Makepiece, who had been transferred from the artillery, were given a day off in St.Omer. The recent 'show' that caused his unusual malaise happened when he had returned with his machine riddled with bullet holes. Robbie wrote to his father: 'After a long day's flying you sometimes feel you have had enough and don't want to go up again, but a full day's rest and you are as keen as ever. On other days you can feel that you have enjoyed a fine flight.'

Jaimie, the flight commander, flew enough to know when his men needed a break. The nights in the mess, could be riotous and stress relieving. He had a music-hall artists' ability to croak a tune and play the piano. When he found that Robbie could harmonize, songs around the piano – with glasses in hand- became a popular feature. The high spot came when the visiting RFC commander, joined in a chorus or two, turning a deaf ear to the rather ripe words!

To relieve their tensions in the air, they took to dropping home-made bombs on their tormentors. Although they had no bomb sight, and their dropped charges did little damage, it was a case of getting some of their own back!

One of their targets was none other than Kaiser Wilhelm himself: 'Bomb the Kaiser'. The order for the bombing came at the crisis of the first battle of Ypres, when intelligence reporting the Kaiser as inspecting forward troops at Gheluvelt, six miles east of Ypres. Intelligence had approximated his programme, and each pilot was given a place and time to bomb. Everyone bristled with bombs, and observers were left behind. After the attempt one of the pilots commented ironically 'No official information so far that the Kaiser is dead'. It was suggested that he had left before the bombers arrived.

The experience of some of the pilots, who had been over since the beginning, was wanted in England to form and train new squadrons. Robbie and Mick flatly refused and so did the flight leader Jaimie, much to their satisfaction. The squadron's lost a half of their operational flyers, and replacements were largely untrained. Whilst the early attempts at air fighting was more farcical than effective, the unexpected sight of another plane was at first stomach-turning. They still carried rifles and pistols which were not much use in combat. Those who tried dropping bombs on their opponents quickly realised that this was even more difficult. Some attempted to arm themselves

with a rifle with a sawn-off stock, fastened to shoot diagonally forward, so as to miss the propeller. It was a bit like shooting around corners!

The original Farmans had now been either lost or crashed, and Robbie found himself the proud operator of a brand new Avro504, with a 80 hp Gnome engine, and consequently an improved performance. Mick was also allotted one, and when a German reconnaissance plane ventured overhead, they both raced with their compatriot Strange, without helmets, coats or maps, to intercept. It still took them over an hour to get within range. They fired as many rounds as they could from about 100 yards range before the German pilot escaped unscathed into cloud. They were unwise enough to go chasing after him without instruments and got lost. They ran out of fuel over the North Sea and were lucky to be able to land on the beach at Le Touquet. It was a salutary lesson.

Strange was so angry at their impotence that, against orders, he fitted a cross bar over the observer's cockpit, to which a pulley arrangement could be slung to lift a Lewis machine-gun to fire in all directions. When on reconnaissance on the 22 November he and his observer Freddy Small had at last a chance to use it. They spotted a German reconnaissance plane heading for St. Omer at about 7000 feet. It was an Aviatik, and Strange climbed and turned in front of it. At a signal Small fired two long bursts, exhausting his ammunition. Small was in the act of changing a drum, standing in front of Strange, when the German fired a pistol hitting Small in the hand. This did not prevent him from firing another burst that caused the Aviatik to stall and side slip, before coming down near some reserve trenches on the British side of the line.

The NCO pilot thought he had crossed the lines, and when the observer, a superior officer of the Prussian Guard, discovered this he broke furiously free from his captors and kicked and punched the unfortunate man. There were no instances of such violent

disagreements among the RFC personnel, although there were occasions when they slung verbal abuse at each other! It was soon established on both sides of the line that the man at the controls was in charge.

Robbie considered himself fortunate in having such a likeable, willing and efficient observer, though good artillery spotters were few and far between. There was no training programme for observers, it was all 'hands on'. One of these recruits, Captain H.C.T. Dowding, was later to distinguish himself as supreme commander of fighter command in World War II. One of his early exploits, which demonstrated his firm convictions, was his insistence that there were no German fighters on that front, in the face of Sir Henry Rawlinson's determination that there was!

A pilot whom Robbie was soon to admire and to emulate was Lanoë Hawker of 6 Squadron, who had also learned to fly before the war. Hawker's belligerence, his tenacity and aggression, led him deep into enemy territory seeking to fight an enemy with superior machines. However, the weather towards the close of 1914 was such as to frequently ground the squadrons. When it allowed, pilots followed the example of Hawker, and bombed approved ground targets, and ground strafed troops. But the front being static, the main priority lay in cooperating with the gunners and seeking out and pinpointing enemy batteries, and correcting artillery fire.

Identifying these batteries by map reference, and passing on the information, was crude, so it soon became necessary to develop embryo wireless telegraphy. The equipment was bulky, weighing 75 lbs, and filled the front cockpit, obliging the pilot to fly solo controlling the plane with one hand whilst operating the buzzer with the other. As Robbie had played with wireless telegraphy with his cousin Siegfried, in the palmy years before the war, he was quickly fixed up with the equipment. Mick was chosen to become the second pilot in the squadron to be enrolled for this job, and

soon got a reputation for revelling in the role. Together they would take off on their spotting expeditions and return with their aircraft full of holes. 'I've only seen cheese with more holes in it than my plane,' Robbie commented, a mischievous grin on his face. As there was only a receiver on the ground, they were unable to respond to Mick's humorous comments!

The pattern of communication went like this: 'A very little short...Fire...Fire...Fire again.' Each time a correction was transmitted, two or three minutes might elapse as the gun-crew adjusted their aim and resumed firing. Then might come: 'Over...Over and a little to the left.' Another short wait, and then, commenting on the next salvo: 'You were just between two batteries...Search two hundred yards either side of your last shot...' The same terse, staccato, dispassionate morse later announced that success was imminent. Four minutes late would come...'Hit...hit...hit.' When, after an hour of concentrated effort, to a chorus of Archie, they announced 'I am going home', this was often accompanied by a personal comment. Not always complementary to the Germans...

These amateurish spotting methods were soon superseded by a 'clock code' developed by two RFC members, Lewis and James. This involved the use of a transparent celluloid disc with a centre spot surrounded by eight concentric circles, varying the distance from the target from 10 yards to 500, each circle being identified by a letter. Both of these pioneers were eventually shot down by artillery fire whilst applying their method.

About this time, Robbie's flight commander Jaimie, heard the command coming direct from the RFC chief, Trenchard, that squadron commanders must not fly. Too many had been lost through Archie fire. Of course, as flight commander Jaimie felt that it did not apply to him, and with his squadron commanders blessing, ignored the

order. As he said 'One hour of glorious life is worth an age without a name'. Robbie was happier with his flight commander leading whenever the whole flight went out together. His presence seemed to knit the flight together, and add a touch of devil-may-care to their venture across the lines. Jaimie was also a proud possessor of a German camera, and took every opportunity to photograph their section of the front. Photography was still a personal thing, although encouraged by on high. At that time, photographic supplies had to be bought, including chemicals for developing. This would change. As far as Robbie was concerned, he was happy to leave the photography to others. He concentrated on improving the use of the wireless that occupied the observer's seat, that otherwise would be occupied by the photographer. He did have his photograph taken with the rest of the wing, and with a joke about the 'eagle of the air' sent it to his mother in England.

The wing was re-equipped with BE2c's that was only slightly better than the Henri Farman, but still too sedate and toothless in a fighting skirmish. As a reconnaissance aircraft, or when taking photographs, it was fine as long as the pilot did not have to fight. The stabilising of the front made co-operation with the army essential, and Robbie's squadron became part of a wing serving the First Army. By early February the whole German trench system facing the First Army had been photographed. A mosaic of pictures that High Command would find essential when planning the next offensive.

To Sir John French, who was looking for a spring offensive, it appeared from this photographic mosaic which registered enemy batteries, strong points, and possible transport bottlenecks, that the Germans in the village of Neuve Chapelle were holding a salient in no great strength, open to assault on two sides. The immediate objective of the plan devised in detail by Sir Douglas Haig and agreed by French on 19 February,

1915, was to capture the village. Success could also mean the capture of Aubers Ridge, further to the north east, which would threaten Lille. 'For the first time,' records the official RFC history,' the British Army went into action with a picture of the hidden intricacies of the enemy defences.' The only word of caution came from intelligence reports which suggested that the enemy would be capable of rushing in substantial reinforcements within a day or so...

CHAPTER FOUR

The commander of the RFC, Trenchard, had impressed Sir Douglas Haig by his realistic manner when discussing reconnaissance and artillery spotting. He had stressed the importance of the weather's influence on flying. Haig had said: 'I shall expect you to tell me before the attack whether you can fly, because on your being able to observe for the artillery, and carry out reconnaissance, the battle will partly depend. If you can't fly because of the weather, I shall probably put off the attack.' The squadrons knew nothing of this exchange.

Three machines of No.3 Squadron were chosen to take off at six o'clock on the 10 March to bomb what was believed to be an enemy defence headquarters at Fournes, six miles east of Neuve Chapelle. The raid was led by Eric Conran with the squadron commander Jack Salmond in the front observer's seat. The accompanying two planes flew solo in order to increase their bomb load. Attacking at three minute intervals, they reported direct hits which set fire to the target; the leading aircraft made doubly sure by dropping bombs from a hundred feet in three separate runs. How far the enemy's battle control was hampered could only be guessed at.

The main tactical bombing programmed for the first day of the battle was aimed for mid-afternoon, to coincide with a lull in the infantry attack. Robbie was piloting one of two aircraft bombing each of two targets; Strange was piloting the other. Following reports of trainloads of German reinforcements passing through Courtrai station; this was to be their target. Each of the men was flying a BE2c, that was stripped of everything that could be discarded and with an empty front cockpit, to maximise the bomb load. Crude bomb-racks were fitted under the wings and fuselage for carrying and dropping three French-made bombs. Each of these bombs weighed 25 lbs. With these weapons the two planes were expected to devastate the target, and their success

was believed to be a matter of life or death to Haig's soldiers. As Strange put it to Robbie: 'we are going to get quite a reception...I don't rate our survival very highly!'

The second target chosen was a railway junction north of Menin station, some ten miles short of Courtrai. This target was allocated to Carmichael in No.5 squadron, as he was one of only three pilots who had flown the chosen aircraft: a new single-seater Martin-and-Handasyde S1. It was a small sporting tractor biplane fitted with a Lewis gun above the centre section, firing outside the radius of the propeller blades.

The two attacks were synchronised to be over the target area simultaneously: the first to take off at 15.23, the second to follow seven minutes later. When Robbie took off, the weather was breaking up; the cloud base had lowered to 3,000 feet and visibility was poor. To keep track of his position Robbie had to stay below the cloud, presenting an inviting target to Archie. This eventually forced him to seek cloud cover. He aimed to the north of Courtrai, his sense of direction carefully honed by spotting for artillery. When he could see the roofs of the town, he made a diving left turn, and got his first sighting of the railway. It ran in a straight line to the town. He levelled out at two hundred feet, following the track until he could see the station. Robbie came in lower, spotting the train standing at the station platform, a troop train several coaches long. As he approached a sentry took pot shots at him with a rifle. Remembering the hand grenade in his pocket, he took it out, held the stick with one hand; extracted the pin with his teeth and tossed it at the feet of the sentry. As he veered away, he became the focus of small arms fire from all directions. The roof of the station was dangerously close as he yanked back on the stick and pulled the bomb-release mechanism. A cluster of telegraph poles blocked his escape route, so he yanked on the stick again, and as he drummed clear, looked behind at the turmoil he had caused. He was to discover later, through an agent, that it had indeed been a troop

train, and his bomb had killed and wounded seventy-five soldiers, and delayed rail traffic for three days. When Robbie got back they counted three dozen bullet holes in the fuselage.

Carmichael in the other plane, had only one bomb, so his success depended upon a single shot. To help his view of the target he had a hole cut in the cockpit floor so that he could look vertically down on the railway line. To achieve what he hoped was a quiet approach, he switched off his engine but a machine-gunner persuaded him to switch it on again. He came down to 100 feet, judging when to release his bomb. He estimated that five seconds after sighting Menin station he would release. He pulled the toggle, and not feeling any change in the plane's motion, thought he was still carrying the bomb. He expected a lift, then the bomb exploded and the blast seized the Martinsyde and thrust it forwards and upwards on a cushion of air. Carmichael, himself was half-concussed, but collected his senses. He looked back to see a column of black smoke rising 200 feet above him. The point of impact, as far as he could judge, had occurred a few yards short of the junction. He veered east, hoping to throw the German gunners off target, but a fusillade of shots put one engine cylinder out of action. With careful low flying, he nursed his plane home and landed without further damage. He commented: 'two hours ten minutes of a somewhat exhilarating afternoon'. When Robbie returned back, Jaimie thrust a large scotch into his hands humming '...hail the conquering hero comes.'

The 10th March saw the infantry capture the village, but the second day the weather broke and flying seemed to be out of the question. The Germans rushed in reinforcements and nothing much could be done to prevent them or to exploit the British successes. However, early that morning three pilots of No.4 Squadron took off in darkness from Bailleul, using electric torches to view their instruments. Their

objective was another rail junction, this time at Lille. Apart from a short practice flight, the three pilots had no experience of night flying. The squadron commander was not happy about this adventure and sought a cancellation from HQ.

It was refused, so the pilots had to go. One pilot crashed on take-off, and the other two failed to return. It was discovered that one of these was shot down and died from his injuries; the other was also shot down but survived the experience. This survivor set fire to his BE2a; and was hidden by Belgians. This was a capital offence, and the mayor of Lille, who helped him, was subsequently shot. The pilot called Mapplebeck, got across the Dutch frontier whilst the sentry was lighting his pipe; crossed Holland; took passage on a fishing smack and presented himself at the War Office. Five weeks later he was back with his squadron.

The battle of Neuve Chapelle continued with heavy storms and enemy counter attacks. The RFC was limited to locating the fluctuations of the battle line and an occasional bombing run. One of these by No.3 squadron was on a railway station at Don, but there bombing activities were curtailed when a Moraine, being laden with French bombs, exploded killing twelve and wounding four more.

The battle had had limited success, and with the worsening weather was called off.

Among those who survived the battle were volunteers to the RFC, who had enough of trench warfare, and brought with them knowledge of the horrors of war on the ground.

It was a comfort to Robbie that his father was no longer fit for the ground battles and was only a phone call away at HQ.

Following the limited success of Neuve Chapelle the Allies conducted an assault on Hill 60, on the Ypres front, to test the enemy's strength. The Germans were alive to this and surprised the Allies with their own assault. A German prisoner boasted that a lethal gas was going to be released on that front to force a breakthrough. The

squadrons were sent on reconnaissances to determine if this was true. It was not until the 22 April that a cloud of bilious, yellow-green smoke was being blown westwards towards the Allied lines. It was toxic chlorine gas causing asphyxiation and drove the Allied troops away in panic. The gap was eventually sealed, but ground had been lost. The reconnaissance aircraft reported a build up of German troops preparing to attack, which was beaten off, but a second gas attack forced further withdrawals.

Attacks by the squadrons were launched at German reinforcements moving towards the salient, but these attacks proved futile, some crews losing their way and some of the bombs failed to be released. The rail junction at Courtrai, 35 miles behind the lines, was again the target for a pilot from No.2 squadron. Intelligence had it that 40,000 troops were being rushed through the junction, which was surrounded by a vortex of Archie fire that was considered impenetrable. Although warned not to come down too low, the pilot, a New Zealander, knew that his 112lb bomb needed to be dropped at minimum height to create havoc. He took off in his BE from the aerodrome at Merville at 3.15pm on the 24 April 1915, and crossed the lines at 1000 feet. There was little chance of interception and he located the junction without incident. He dived on his target at 300 feet and dropped his bomb, feeling the blast as it exploded.

Such a juicy target became the focus of a nest of guns ringing the junction, backed by hundreds of rifles and machine guns. A direct hit from a belfry at point blank range rocked his aircraft, and a bullet pierced his thigh. Somehow he pulled away, bleeding profusely, with his plane crippled. He could have chosen to crash land, but the value of his attack lay in reporting back, so he turned away. Wounded again, this time in the abdomen, he was bleeding profusely, but when carried out of his cockpit refused medical help until he had made his verbal report. This he did in Trenchard's hearing.

'If I must die,' he told the padre, 'give me a drink.' At his request his body was sent back to England to be buried on the family estate in Dorset. Three weeks later he was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross, the first RFC man to be so decorated. Confirmation of the success of the raid came later when it was reported that he had blasted the junction, delaying reinforcements, and the official despatch described his 112lb bomb the 'most important dropped in the war so far.' His successful attack occurred during the 2nd Battle of Ypres. Of 141 bombing raids launched between the 1 March and 20 June 1915, only three could be regarded as successful, and the cost in men and machines was prohibitive. What was needed was a more effective bomb sight than the few nails and wires so far employed, and a more effective strategy for the proper deployment of men and machines. In a few months a Central Flying School (CFS) bombsight was produced to be employed that autumn, together with a policy of bombing railways, especially cuttings where the blast was contained. Both British and French air units would be co-ordinated for joint attacks in conjunction with ground troops.

Robbie and his flight were now constantly involved in keeping GHQ informed of enemy movements, and in one instance provided a progress report as a battle unfolded. Not that they did not continue to spot for the artillery, Robbie in particular was now quite expert in using his wireless and map reading, and established a remarkable degree of mutual understanding with the artillery men. This rapport was by no means common, for among some of the artillery men there was still scepticism about the value of the RFC reports. As Mick commented after receiving unbelieving looks from the artillery after going to some risk to report accurately: 'Where would the artillery be without us? The bastards have no idea what it costs!' Another pilot,

Biffy Borton, who struggled back with his report even though severely wounded, missed his VC because he survived!

Although the battle of Neuve Chapelle was over, there was no reduction in the amount of reconnaissance work and artillery spotting conducted by the RFC. A telephone call from a battery to confirm or learn the objectives; also requested a check with map co-ordinates; and agreed a time for the shoot. It was becoming usual for the pilot's observer to call up the battery in morse code, the ground operator putting out his coded strips, so that the observer could call upon the battery to fire. After he had reported on the fall of the shot, the battery corrected its sights and fired again.

Eventually, when the range was found, the observer signalled OK. Throughout this sequence, as always, the aircraft would be under fire. As there was no appropriate signals procedure existed to allow the air observer to communicate opportunity targets – for instance, during the fighting for Hill 60 a number of guns were in a position to be engaged – they escaped unscathed.

Robbie and his flight members found this inefficiency frustrating and urged the development of a new method. This happened when No.1 squadron, with a flight of Avro 504s and two Morane Parasols, evolved a method where the observer sent an agreed signal and a map reference: the code letters meaning 'I see a good target. All guns please engage it.' Mick was the first one to use it in No.12 squadron, and celebrated its success in the mess with a bottle of bubbly.

By now the relations between the flyers and the gunners had become convivial, so it was not surprising that a get-together was arranged at an estaminet a few miles behind the lines. Robbie's flight with a hilarious Jaimie leading the way, arrived to find not only a dinner had been arranged but a cabaret with an attractive singer complete with the latest songs. Some of the songs were decidedly risqué. After the

meal, Robbie offered the toast: 'To the square-shooters of the 23rd Battery, who always put their shells where we tell'em.' There was a raucous laugh at this, and a suitable response: 'to the pilots of Jaimie's flight who never get lost'. Many a bottle was emptied and many a toast offered to the 'brilliant minds of GHQ' and the known generals. The evening ended with a rendition of 'Roses of Picardy' and several infantry songs that were unrepeatable.

The opportunities for a break from the daily tedium of reconnaissance were few and far between. A lot depended on the squadron commander, but that individual was constantly being reminded by GHQ that the RFC's raison d'être was to support the British Army. Trenchard's guiding principles was co-operation with air superiority – to be fought for, gained, and retained at any cost through an aggressive posture. The war to be conducted whatever the casualties. The morale of the squadrons was supported by Trenchard's frequent visits and his personal encouragement. The dictate was ruthless, for it was really a war of attrition. Not only on the ground but in the air. The squadrons did their best, with aeroplanes that were not fitted for the kind of war in the air they were now having to fight. This became more apparent when Jaimie's flight were among the first to encounter the German kite balloon...

CHAPTER FIVE

Kite balloons, the latest development, were useful aids to artillery co-operation, and they had been neglected by the RFC, but a word from Douglas Haig, who had learned of the successes enjoyed by the French in their use, soon had fourteen of them installed opposite their German counterparts. Unlike the aeroplane they could stay up all day, only needing to be hauled down at night, or when about to be attacked by aircraft. To deter attacks, anti-aircraft batteries were located nearby, and being provided with its own transport could be moved if desired.

They generally worked in pairs, released to a height of anything from 1000 to 5000 feet. They were connected by telephone line to the battery, and were equipped with the coordinates of the target they were to locate and followed the same process of correcting used by the aircraft. They were positioned a mile or so behind the line, and with good visibility their view was tremendous. The only disadvantage the balloonists had was that they had to camp in dug-outs in the mud, and were often blasted out by shell-fire. The wind was also a disadvantage causing the balloon to spin, like 'a polo pony' one described it as. The cable could also be bent by the wind which could yank the balloon down by a hundred feet or so. Then, when it ceased the balloon shot up again. With disastrous effects on the balloonist's stomach. The balloonist could also decamp if necessary by parachute, but it would not necessarily open!

The most unpleasant occurrence to the balloonist's duty was the attention of enemy aircraft, who could suddenly appear and shoot up a row of balloons, much to the enjoyment of the bored and watching infantry. If the balloon was set on fire the occupants had to jump, and sometimes if the winch crew thought things were getting too hot, they hauled the balloon down. The parachute was attached to the basket, and was operated by the balloonist's weight. They were not always dependable, as Basil

Hallam, previously a West-end actor and entertainer, discovered when his balloon broke free and he decamped with a parachute that did not open. The German heavy guns could be elevated sufficiently to take pot-shots at British balloons, adding to the nightmare quality of service aloft. The use of parachutes in aircraft was limited by the sheer bulk of the parachute, but the development of them was frowned upon because it was suggested that pilots might be too ready to jettison their aircraft!

The shooting down of balloons was a perilous business with the amount of protective fire. Jaimie was one of the first to recognise that the balloonist was more important than the balloon which could easily be replaced, but he thought it unsporting to shoot the man in the basket. In September a German albatross single-seater had no reluctance in aiming for the operators, and they were lucky to escape the burning balloon. Thirty-three balloons were shot down that month.

The German balloons suffered no better as the British military took exception to so many of them observing their trenches. With Mike in a second machine, Robbie was ordered to eliminate a gaggle of them observing a particularly sensitive part of the front. What began as a hilarious turkey shoot, became they became the object of a new German single-seater the Eindecker with a forward firing machine gun. Robbie was attacking his third balloon when he realised he was under fire from behind. The bullets ripped into the fuselage behind him and thudded into the metal plate he had fitted behind him. When his engine began misfiring he knew he had to get the hell out of it. Without Mike's timely intervention he would not have had the opportunity to swing back over the lines and drop down to tree height. He made the airfield with just enough speed to prevent a stall, and rolled to a stop. The Eindecker gave up when Mike turned on him as if to collide. Robbie and his rescuer had reason to congratulate

themselves when they reported their contact with the new German machine. It had already accounted for three unarmed British planes.

Fitting a Lewis machine gun, which was lighter than the Vickers, appeared to be the answer but where to fit it? Offsetting it to miss the propeller required an ability to head in one direction and to fire in another – quite a trick! The most effective position was fixing the gun high enough above the top plane for the bullets to clear the propeller-tips. Jamie's flight were so fitted. Having experienced the Eindecker with its forward firing machine gun, they were a little sanguine about future successes. A lot would depend upon the shooting ability of the observer who would have to operate the gun.

It was midsummer and the weather for flying was good. Attacks on reconnaissance planes became more determined, and the squadron commanders entrusted the longer-range reconnaissance to better armed machines. When the Germans dropped a note about the death of such a pilot and the capture of his observer, it was realised that this did not accord any greater safety. Some of the squadrons were being supplied with the FE2b, a pusher-type of pre-war de Havilland design, that was easy to fly and had a reliable 120 hp Beardmore engine. Its design gave the pilot and observer a wide view from the spacious cockpit. Two machine-guns, linked together and fitted to a pivotal mounting, could be fitted in the front cockpit. The observer could stand up and fire to the rear over the top planes and over the pilot's head, giving some protection astern. This was a fighting machine that could hold its own against the newer and faster German machines now coming into service. Unfortunately, there were very few of them appearing at the front.

The new Bristol Scout was, like the BE2c, was unarmed. When one was allocated to No.12 Squadron, it was naturally allocated to Jaimie, but being the unselfish man that

he was, he shared it with the other pilots of his flight. As he said: 'I'm not the only hot-shot pilot in the flight.' Jaimie supervised the fitting of a front mounted machine gun, firing obliquely forward as Strange had done, to the port of the propellers. A speed of 89 mph, and a climb of 6,500 feet in ten minutes, was a great advantage over the BE2c. At a ceiling of 15,500 feet Robbie found that he could come diving down at 120 mph on any unwary German. As he reported on his return: 'Exhilarating to be above and behind a Hun with the machine gun rattling away.' Although trailing smoke the enemy plane finally got away.

At this time Lanoe Hawker of No.6.Squadron was developing methods of aerial fighting that was new, and effective. He also accomplished most of his successes in a similar Bristol Scout, that encouraged Jaimie to keep the machine constantly available to his flight. The first score fell to Mike who encountered an Aviatik over Lille and in the chase put two burst of machine gun fire into it, so that it came down just beyond the German lines and burst into flame. Happily, his Lewis gun did not jamb which it sometimes did when the drum had to be changed. This happened to the redoubtable Hawker on one occasion, when he found himself upside down after struggling with a jammed drum!

It was soon adopted as a principle to attack the enemy from above and out of the sun. Lanoe Hawker had evolved this tactic, and his increasing list of German victims attested to its effectiveness. Whenever Jaimie's Bristol Scout was in the air, the pilot was reminded of Hawker's principle, and although a success was not always the result, the squadron's pilots were becoming more experienced and expert.

They always had to venture over onto the German side of the lines as enemy aircraft at this stage of the war seldom came onto the British side. It was after a successful foray that Hawker shot down two aircraft, and the bonus was that the body of the

observer carried a map that showed two batteries of guns that had been harassing the British for some time. Hawker was recommended for the VC.

This redoubtable pilot bagged the first of the feared Fokker Eindecker, which was becoming a scourge. He had been returning from a reconnaissance via Lille when the ammunition and tired from his reconnaissance, it took Hawker all his talent for fighting and manoeuvre to master the Eindecker and send it crashing down. He was the kind of man and pilot that everyone wanted to fly with, unfortunately this kept him continually in the air so that he was never far from exhaustion.

In January 1916, the first de Havilland DH2 Scout came into service. Powered by a 100 hp Gnome Monosoupage of French design and manufacture, and had an unearned reputation for liability to go into a spin. Unlike the BE2c, it needed to be handled by experienced hands, and this meant that a lot of pilots needed familiarisation time. It seemed with the arrival of these machines, the Bristol Scout, the DH2s, and the Vickers Gunbus, that now was a time to neutralize the Fokker scourge.

To make shooting a machine gun through the propeller a practicality, the French had fitted deflector plates to their propellers. This allowed for a maximum of bullets going to the target. Roland Garros, the French air ace, quickly shot down two German planes with this device. When he was brought down whilst on a reconnaissance mission his plane fell into the hands of the Germans. They went one better, adapting a prewar patent for a synchronised gun with a timing mechanism that allowed all the bullets to pass through, and with belted ammunition also prevented the stoppages that drum ammunition was fraught with. This was the first efficient gun for scout pilots. The Fokker scout plane so fitted had become the first purpose-built attack plane produced by either side.

The German air ace, Immelmann, had shot down a British two-seater bomber on the German side of the lines on 1 August 1915, the first confirmed Fokker victory. He demonstrated the Fokker's hawk-like ability to dive vertically in surprise attack, then using his diving speed for a swift zoom to gain height, pulling up into a loop before a half-roll off the top so that he was upright and above his target, flying in the opposite direction. By falling away into a stall turn he was ideally placed for surprise attack, or to escape if need be. The head-on form of attack, in which the aircraft itself was aimed at the target, revolutionised air marksmanship and with it air combat. The Fokker scourge began in autumn and winter when the new German planes were being grouped into special units. The old faithfully BE2c, its popular quarry, became known as 'Fokker Fodder'. The victims tended to be the least experienced of pilots, so that three weeks became the average for pilot longevity. Robbie and his flight were saddened by the procession of bright young men who came and went.

In the September of 1915, General Joffre began his autumn offensive, hoping to do wonders with the growing strength of the Allied forces. He looked for a breakthrough following the planned advance across the undulating Champagne country. Haigh objected, aware that they were short of ammunition, proposed a subsidiary attack in the region of Loos, directly north of Vimy Ridge and the important town of Arras. The RFC by the autumn of 1915 had 160 aircraft in twelve squadrons in three wings, made up of a miscellany of aircraft mostly BE2cs, Morane Parasols, with some Gunbuses and FE2bs. Jamie shook his head at the variety and commented: 'We are very short of spares. God help us if we have to advance.' The bombing squadrons had been working night and day in preparation for the offensive. They kept their machines fully operational during the day on reconnaissance and artillery spotting, and devised and fitted bomb-racks at night. It was exhausting work with an early start at 6.30am.

Robbie and his flight were to be solely engaged on artillery co-operation during the whole period of artillery bombardment that would precede and accompany the British attack. Much would depend upon their skill and persistence in first in locating enemy batteries and then directing the fire to nullify them. Two wings were to delay and harass the expected flow enemy reinforcements by bombing the important Lille-Douai-Valenciennes rail communication triangle. French bomber would also be active on the Champagne front.

A few days before the big push began Robbie's flight and the rest of the First Wing were out at dawn, so that when the preliminary bombardment began on the 22nd September the communications with the batteries were well established. The weather was good when it began, but by the 24th it began to rain and was still raining the next day when the infantry went over. The squadrons did well until the visibility deteriorated and it became difficult even to observe the movement of the attacking troops. Even with Trenchard's motivation, golden opportunities were missed due to the still primitive form of air/ground signalling. The gas released by the British began blowing back further complicating the situation.

The BE2cs of one squadron enjoyed some spectacular success on the 25th with a low flying attack at 150 feet on a bridge which carried a light railway over the main line at Valenciennes. They succeeded in cutting the one and blocking the other. . The next day, despite appalling weather, and attack on the locomotive sheds at Valenciennes blew up two ammunition trains and exploded twenty trucks of shells, halting all traffic at a crucial time. Reconnaissance flights reported rail activity further south near Cambrai which brought down bombing raids that cratered the permanent way. Unfortunately, some of the bombs used on bombing raids failed to explode.

The consequences of all this activity by the RFC was prohibitive losses, partly due to ground fire but also the increasing aggression of the German air force, particularly the Fokkers which for the first time were becoming a serious threat. All the squadrons lost heavily, particularly the new young officers whose experience was limited. It made the survivors callous seeing new faces disappear so rapidly. Robbie's flight miraculously survived intact, though the rest of the flights lost most of their officers during the battle. Though it was grim, nobody thought of trying to escape the daily bloody grind. The losses on the ground were appalling. Rumours had it that the infantry had suffered 50,000 casualties, and as most of the experienced officers had served in line regiments before transfer, they knew how fortunate they were. 'Thank God for our aeroplanes!' Mick said as he drank his first whisky in a week.

It was little consolation to the squadrons to be told later that at the height of the campaign that the German communications had been disrupted. However, the lines had never been completely cut, and though considerable damage had been caused, it had been quickly repaired. German reinforcements had managed to get to their destinations on time. Their fierce counterattacks showed the truth of this, and Haig's requests for reserves was delayed by the French not being willing to release them. He was eventually obliged to pull his army back. The shortage of ammunition frustrated the British artillery and made the RFC feel the whole campaign was futile.

Jaime reminded his flight of the Trenchard dogma that whatever the end result: 'It is a means of forcing the Hun to come up and fight us at our own time and choosing.'

It was after the next mission that Robbie had word of his cousin Sigmund who was flying with a German squadron on their front.

CHAPTER FIVE

Kite balloons, the latest development, were useful aids to artillery co-operation, and they had been neglected by the RFC, but a word from Douglas Haig, who had learned of the successes enjoyed by the French in their use, soon had fourteen of them installed opposite their German counterparts. Unlike the aeroplane they could stay up all day, only needing to be hauled down at night, or when about to be attacked by aircraft. To deter attacks, anti-aircraft batteries were located nearby, and being provided with its own transport could be moved if desired.

They generally worked in pairs, released to a height of anything from 1000 to 5000 feet. They were connected by telephone line to the battery, and were equipped with the coordinates of the target they were to locate and followed the same process of correcting used by the aircraft. They were positioned a mile or so behind the line, and with good visibility their view was tremendous. The only disadvantage the balloonists had was that they had to camp in dug-outs in the mud, and were often blasted out by shell-fire. The wind was also a disadvantage causing the balloon to spin, like 'a polo pony' one described it as. The cable could also be bent by the wind which could yank the balloon down by a hundred feet or so. Then, when it ceased the balloon shot up again. With disastrous effects on the balloonist's stomach. The balloonist could also decamp if necessary by parachute, but it would not necessarily open!

The most unpleasant occurrence to the balloonist's duty was the attention of enemy aircraft, who could suddenly appear and shoot up a row of balloons, much to the enjoyment of the bored and watching infantry. If the balloon was set on fire the occupants had to jump, and sometimes if the winch crew thought things were getting too hot, they hauled the balloon down. The parachute was attached to the basket, and was operated by the balloonist's weight. They were not always dependable, as Basil

Hallam, previously a West-end actor and entertainer, discovered when his balloon broke free and he decamped with a parachute that did not open. The German heavy guns could be elevated sufficiently to take pot-shots at British balloons, adding to the nightmare quality of service aloft. The use of parachutes in aircraft was limited by the sheer bulk of the parachute, but the development of them was frowned upon because it was suggested that pilots might be too ready to jettison their aircraft!

The shooting down of balloons was a perilous business with the amount of protective fire. Jaimie was one of the first to recognise that the balloonist was more important than the balloon which could easily be replaced, but he thought it unsporting to shoot the man in the basket. In September a German albatross single-seater had no reluctance in aiming for the operators, and they were lucky to escape the burning balloon. Thirty-three balloons were shot down that month.

The German balloons suffered no better as the British military took exception to so many of them observing their trenches. With Mike in a second machine, Robbie was ordered to eliminate a gaggle of them observing a particularly sensitive part of the front. What began as a hilarious turkey shoot, became they became the object of a new German single-seater the Eindecker with a forward firing machine gun. Robbie was attacking his third balloon when he realised he was under fire from behind. The bullets ripped into the fuselage behind him and thudded into the metal plate he had fitted behind him. When his engine began misfiring he knew he had to get the hell out of it. Without Mike's timely intervention he would not have had the opportunity to swing back over the lines and drop down to tree height. He made the airfield with just enough speed to prevent a stall, and rolled to a stop. The Eindecker gave up when Mike turned on him as if to collide. Robbie and his rescuer had reason to congratulate

themselves when they reported their contact with the new German machine. It had already accounted for three unarmed British planes.

Fitting a Lewis machine gun, which was lighter than the Vickers, appeared to be the answer but where to fit it? Offsetting it to miss the propeller required an ability to head in one direction and to fire in another – quite a trick! The most effective position was fixing the gun high enough above the top plane for the bullets to clear the propeller-tips. Jamie's flight were so fitted. Having experienced the Eindecker with its forward firing machine gun, they were a little sanguine about future successes. A lot would depend upon the shooting ability of the observer who would have to operate the gun.

It was midsummer and the weather for flying was good. Attacks on reconnaissance planes became more determined, and the squadron commanders entrusted the longer-range reconnaissance to better armed machines. When the Germans dropped a note about the death of such a pilot and the capture of his observer, it was realised that this did not accord any greater safety. Some of the squadrons were being supplied with the FE2b, a pusher-type of pre-war de Havilland design, that was easy to fly and had a reliable 120 hp Beardmore engine. Its design gave the pilot and observer a wide view from the spacious cockpit. Two machine-guns, linked together and fitted to a pivotal mounting, could be fitted in the front cockpit. The observer could stand up and fire to the rear over the top planes and over the pilot's head, giving some protection astern. This was a fighting machine that could hold its own against the newer and faster German machines now coming into service. Unfortunately, there were very few of them appearing at the front.

The new Bristol Scout was, like the BE2c, was unarmed. When one was allocated to No.12 Squadron, it was naturally allocated to Jaimie, but being the unselfish man that

he was, he shared it with the other pilots of his flight. As he said: 'I'm not the only hot-shot pilot in the flight.' Jaimie supervised the fitting of a front mounted machine gun, firing obliquely forward as Strange had done, to the port of the propellers. A speed of 89 mph, and a climb of 6,500 feet in ten minutes, was a great advantage over the BE2c. At a ceiling of 15,500 feet Robbie found that he could come diving down at 120 mph on any unwary German. As he reported on his return: 'Exhilarating to be above and behind a Hun with the machine gun rattling away.' Although trailing smoke the enemy plane finally got away.

At this time Lanoe Hawker of No.6.Squadron was developing methods of aerial fighting that was new, and effective. He also accomplished most of his successes in a similar Bristol Scout, that encouraged Jaimie to keep the machine constantly available to his flight. The first score fell to Mike who encountered an Aviatik over Lille and in the chase put two burst of machine gun fire into it, so that it came down just beyond the German lines and burst into flame. Happily, his Lewis gun did not jamb which it sometimes did when the drum had to be changed. This happened to the redoubtable Hawker on one occasion, when he found himself upside down after struggling with a jammed drum!

It was soon adopted as a principle to attack the enemy from above and out of the sun. Lanoe Hawker had evolved this tactic, and his increasing list of German victims attested to its effectiveness. Whenever Jaimie's Bristol Scout was in the air, the pilot was reminded of Hawker's principle, and although a success was not always the result, the squadron's pilots were becoming more experienced and expert.

They always had to venture over onto the German side of the lines as enemy aircraft at this stage of the war seldom came onto the British side. It was after a successful foray that Hawker shot down two aircraft, and the bonus was that the body of the

observer carried a map that showed two batteries of guns that had been harassing the British for some time. Hawker was recommended for the VC.

This redoubtable pilot bagged the first of the feared Fokker Eindecker, which was becoming a scourge. He had been returning from a reconnaissance via Lille when the ammunition and tired from his reconnaissance, it took Hawker all his talent for fighting and manoeuvre to master the Eindecker and send it crashing down. He was the kind of man and pilot that everyone wanted to fly with, unfortunately this kept him continually in the air so that he was never far from exhaustion.

In January 1916, the first de Havilland DH2 Scout came into service. Powered by a 100 hp Gnome Monosoupape of French design and manufacture, and had an unearned reputation for liability to go into a spin. Unlike the BE2c, it needed to be handled by experienced hands, and this meant that a lot of pilots needed familiarisation time. It seemed with the arrival of these machines, the Bristol Scout, the DH2s, and the Vickers Gunbus, that now was a time to neutralize the Fokker scourge.

To make shooting a machine gun through the propeller a practicality, the French had fitted deflector plates to their propellers. This allowed for a maximum of bullets going to the target. Roland Garros, the French air ace, quickly shot down two German planes with this device. When he was brought down whilst on a reconnaissance mission his plane fell into the hands of the Germans. They went one better, adapting a prewar patent for a synchronised gun with a timing mechanism that allowed all the bullets to pass through, and with belted ammunition also prevented the stoppages that drum ammunition was fraught with. This was the first efficient gun for scout pilots. The Fokker scout plane so fitted had become the first purpose-built attack plane produced by either side.

The German air ace, Immelmann, had shot down a British two-seater bomber on the German side of the lines on 1 August 1915, the first confirmed Fokker victory. He demonstrated the Fokker's hawk-like ability to dive vertically in surprise attack, then using his diving speed for a swift zoom to gain height, pulling up into a loop before a half-roll off the top so that he was upright and above his target, flying in the opposite direction. By falling away into a stall turn he was ideally placed for surprise attack, or to escape if need be. The head-on form of attack, in which the aircraft itself was aimed at the target, revolutionised air marksmanship and with it air combat. The Fokker scourge began in autumn and winter when the new German planes were being grouped into special units. The old faithfully BE2c, its popular quarry, became known as 'Fokker Fodder'. The victims tended to be the least experienced of pilots, so that three weeks became the average for pilot longevity. Robbie and his flight were saddened by the procession of bright young men who came and went.

In the September of 1915, General Joffre began his autumn offensive, hoping to do wonders with the growing strength of the Allied forces. He looked for a breakthrough following the planned advance across the undulating Champagne country. Haigh objected, aware that they were short of ammunition, proposed a subsidiary attack in the region of Loos, directly north of Vimy Ridge and the important town of Arras. The RFC by the autumn of 1915 had 160 aircraft in twelve squadrons in three wings, made up of a miscellany of aircraft mostly BE2cs, Morane Parasols, with some Gunbuses and FE2bs. Jamie shook his head at the variety and commented: 'We are very short of spares. God help us if we have to advance.' The bombing squadrons had been working night and day in preparation for the offensive. They kept their machines fully operational during the day on reconnaissance and artillery spotting, and devised and fitted bomb-racks at night. It was exhausting work with an early start at 6.30am.

Robbie and his flight were to be solely engaged on artillery co-operation during the whole period of artillery bombardment that would precede and accompany the British attack. Much would depend upon their skill and persistence in first in locating enemy batteries and then directing the fire to nullify them. Two wings were to delay and harass the expected flow enemy reinforcements by bombing the important Lille-Douai-Valenciennes rail communication triangle. French bomber would also be active on the Champagne front.

A few days before the big push began Robbie's flight and the rest of the First Wing were out at dawn, so that when the preliminary bombardment began on the 22nd September the communications with the batteries were well established. The weather was good when it began, but by the 24th it began to rain and was still raining the next day when the infantry went over. The squadrons did well until the visibility deteriorated and it became difficult even to observe the movement of the attacking troops. Even with Trenchard's motivation, golden opportunities were missed due to the still primitive form of air/ground signalling. The gas released by the British began blowing back further complicating the situation.

The BE2cs of one squadron enjoyed some spectacular success on the 25th with a low flying attack at 150 feet on a bridge which carried a light railway over the main line at Valenciennes. They succeeded in cutting the one and blocking the other. . The next day, despite appalling weather, and attack on the locomotive sheds at Valenciennes blew up two ammunition trains and exploded twenty trucks of shells, halting all traffic at a crucial time. Reconnaissance flights reported rail activity further south near Cambrai which brought down bombing raids that cratered the permanent way. Unfortunately, some of the bombs used on bombing raids failed to explode.

The consequences of all this activity by the RFC was prohibitive losses, partly due to ground fire but also the increasing aggression of the German air force, particularly the Fokkers which for the first time were becoming a serious threat. All the squadrons lost heavily, particularly the new young officers whose experience was limited. It made the survivors callous seeing new faces disappear so rapidly. Robbie's flight miraculously survived intact, though the rest of the flights lost most of their officers during the battle. Though it was grim, nobody thought of trying to escape the daily bloody grind. The losses on the ground were appalling. Rumours had it that the infantry had suffered 50,000 casualties, and as most of the experienced officers had served in line regiments before transfer, they knew how fortunate they were. 'Thank God for our aeroplanes!' Mick said as he drank his first whisky in a week.

It was little consolation to the squadrons to be told later that at the height of the campaign that the German communications had been disrupted. However, the lines had never been completely cut, and though considerable damage had been caused, it had been quickly repaired. German reinforcements had managed to get to their destinations on time. Their fierce counterattacks showed the truth of this, and Haig's requests for reserves was delayed by the French not being willing to release them. He was eventually obliged to pull his army back. The shortage of ammunition frustrated the British artillery and made the RFC feel the whole campaign was futile.

Jaime reminded his flight of the Trenchard dogma that whatever the end result: 'It is a means of forcing the Hun to come up and fight us at our own time and choosing.'

It was after the next mission that Robbie had word of his cousin Sigmund who was flying with a German squadron on their front.

CHAPTER SIX

The next operation that involved No.12 Squadron was a bombing raid with each bomber given an escort of a reconnaissance aircraft to protect them, alternatively two or three bombers might be sent together while the escorts tried to keep the air clear. It was not a promising operation, with six aircraft of the squadron being involved. It was not clear what the target was, and this confusion caused the escorts to be spread out. When the operation ended, it was found that two of the escorts had been shot down. The atmosphere in the mess was depressed, and nothing Jaimie could do with his amusing music hall songs, could lighten it.

The next morning at dawn a German Eindecker flew low over the airfield and dropped a message attached to a streamer. The enemy flyer was gone before the defences had time to open fire. Mike ran out and collected it. It was a very short message: 'Captain Reynolds, the pilot of one of your missing aircraft, is wounded but will survive. Sigmund von Kleist.'

It gave Robbie a jolt. He took the message out of the flight commander's hands, and recognised Sigmund's scribblerly writing. Sigmund had never been any good at writing English even though he spoke the language without a trace of accent.

'Sigmund von Kleist is my cousin. My father, the brigadier, told me that he had joined the German airforce. It looks to me as though he has really dropped this message to let me know he is in one of the German squadrons on this front. He is a good flyer and in one of those Eindeckers will be a formidable adversary!'

Jaimie clapped Robbie on the shoulder. 'It's going to be up to you to deal with this family problem.' With the whisky he poured he offered a toast to a known adversary.

As far as the quality of the German pilots was concerned, intelligence informed Trenchard that Immelmann had recorded his fourth victory – a BE2c – though the Germans still organised their superior aircraft in twos and threes. As Trenchard pointed out to the RFC squadrons there would come a day when they would assemble them in squadrons, and it would remain to be seen how well the British pilots would hold their own. It was astonishing how well they were doing.

The winter now set in and ground operations virtually ceased. Sir John French was blamed for the failure of British arms to make any real headway. As far as Haig was concerned it was a relief when he replaced French as Commander in Chief. The war of attrition that Joffre appeared to be fighting, and which he believed would succeed, did nothing to appease public opinion. The RFC continued its normal duties, and those who had survived the Loos campaign, found themselves becoming fatalistic. So much for the one time hope of a short six-month war. Another Christmas was approaching, yet surprisingly they still had some of the idealism that they had begun with twelve months before. There one thought now was home leave, and as they counted the days, they recognised that there was a tremendous gulf between Trenchard's brass hats and the men at the sharp end. Prosecuting the war was all very well, but...

Dermot Allen of 8 Squadron wrote: 'Two more fellow missing from the squadron. They went on a long recce in one of my 'spot' machines and unfortunately didn't come back. One is affected by one's own show a great deal.' Adding with fatalism: 'One has now quite fallen into a groove. This war has quite become part and parcel of one's existence.' Peace was a thing of the dim and distant past, and no one cared to guess when it would return. 'It always strikes me as peculiar how really little interest

nearly everyone takes in the war in general. We each have our own little job... We are dominated by our own little corner.'

During these winter days, Sigmund was frequently on Robbie's mind, but before anything could materialise in that direction, Jaimie was promoted to command the squadron, and Robbie found himself directing the flight. Mike and the others received orders to return to the UK to help train new squadrons. The policy now was that no one could command a squadron in France until he had first commanded a reserve squadron at home, and certainly Mike was well suited. Robbie was asked by Jaimie whether he wanted to do the same, but he was quite content to take over Jaimie's flight. Robbie was sad to see Mike go. Their relationship had deepened and their ability to work together on operations had already received some commendation.

The bad weather did not postpone operations, and Robbie found himself almost daily leading his flight on several reconnaissances and bombing raids. Bombs were being dropped for the sake of bombing something. 'Wouldn't it be better to husband our resources?' Robbie questioned Jaimie whose orders allowed no discretion.

The wastage in pilots was crippling. By Christmas, Robbie's flight had been replaced three times over. When word leaked out that forty-nine pilots and observers were lost in action in the last two months of the year, largely due to the fact that new pilots became operational after only twenty hours' solo flying. Finding that his replacements had no idea how to avoid trouble, or how to extricate themselves when in it, Robbie tried to give his young pilots some rudimentary training between flights. This helped to slow down the losses but did not eradicate them.

It was particularly galling to read in the UK press so little about the support the RFC had given to the ground troops during the battle of Loos, and in the same issue colourful accounts of the depredations of the Fokkers. This did nothing to bolster the

confidence of the new pilots who arrived with a frightful idea of the Hun's superiority. Robbie and Jaimie had an argument in the mess about what to do when trying to avoid a diving Fokker. Jaimie was of the opinion that the 'best thing to do was to fly straight on. That's the only way to give your observer a chance.' Jaimie's observer had shot down a Fokker using these tactics. Robbie contended, a glass of remarkably good wine in his right hand, 'I prefer to turn in underneath them. Your method may work against the rank and file, but you wouldn't stand a chance against experienced German fighting men.'

It so happened that a few days later, Robbie had the opportunity to try out his theory. He was leading a flight in the direction of Douai, when he saw six tiny, thin black lines suspended in the sky. They were Eindeckers which are notoriously difficult to spot head on. Robbie had a choice: should he fight the enemy with an advantage of six to four, or try and run for it. Aware that the Eindeckers had superior speed he signalled his flight to copy his run in. He was conscious of one of his flight spiralling down as he dived underneath his attackers. His observer spewed bullets at the nearest Fokker, and Robbie smelt the cordite. He heard him shout: 'I've got him!' Just as another Fokker pull up in front of him in a steep climb prior to beginning a loop. It could only be Immelmann!

With a heart stopping twist Robbie pulled away and down towards the ground, the Fokkers in pursuit. Because he was flying so near the ground the Germans were unable to execute their favourite diving attack without hitting the ground. The survivors of this flight were following his lead, giving themselves the same protection. The observers were able, now that they were flying level, to give the enemy planes a burst from their guns, which dissuaded them from coming nearer. In a heart-stopping ten minutes they crossed the lines, and the Fokkers flew off. The

remaining three planes of Robbie's flight landed safely, bearing the bullet holes that was evidence of their close run-in with the Fokkers. The escape from what could have been near-disaster, not only gave the squadrons an up-lift, but became a tactic that was drilled into all new pilots. Whilst it was not in line with Trenchard's aggressive policy, it was an employable method whilst the Germans had such a superiority in speed and armament. Certainly, it had Jaimie's approval and the other squadron commanders were not slow to promulgate the episode.

The Vickers Gunbus and the FE2b planes were in service with some squadrons, but these were still too limited in speed to stand up to the Fokkers. The pilots of the FE2b would eventually evolve a method of frustrating their attackers by forming a defensive circle. The first time Jaimie tried this, and it worked, he finished up roaring with laughter at the frustrated Fokkers. The rest of the squadron found nothing amusing in it. One of the newly-arrived young pilots was horribly sick. He said he felt that he was in a shooting gallery, and he was the target. It took more than Jaimie's ribald singing and reassurances to put the squadron into a better mood.

With the entrenchment of the front, there was not longer a free passage to anyone wishing to cross over into enemy territory. This meant of course that agents seeking intelligence about the enemy movements, build up of armaments etc. could not be easily obtained. The French had already solved this by the dangerous practise of landing agents by aircraft behind the lines. With the observer's seat filled with an agent, the returning pilot had no one to man a machine gun in the event of being attacked. The word came down from on high that the squadrons immediately behind the lines had to be prepared to undertake this hazardous task. Jaimie called in Robbie one early March day in 1916, and proposed that his flight be ready to make the attempt. Looking at the young faces of his flight, Robbie decided that he would make

a first attempt at this dangerous mission. So it happened that several days later he was introduced to a middle-aged Frenchman of a very nondescript appearance. He was also glad to discover that he would not have to pick him up for a return flight. ‘Non monsieur...I will be reporting my intelligence by carrier pigeon. Then I will make my way back through Holland or Belgium.’

As the agents chosen almost exclusively landed in their known home territory, there was a better prospect of success. Not all the agents dropped were French, as with the increasing success of the early missions, it was soon used to drop English agents.

Robbie was astonished to discover that one of the agents he dropped prior to the commencement of the Somme battle was an old classmate! As he watched the man disappear in the early morning light, he could only speculate about his chance of success. None of the agents that Robbie dropped ever came back for another venture.

The spring of 1916 was a reminder that it was going to be a long war, and the role of the RFC in it was to continue giving visual and photographic reconnaissance, in spotting and directing the artillery, and in denying the enemy air force the same facilities by bombing their airfields and intercepting their intruders. Each of the four British armies was supported by an RFC brigade, made up of two wings, one for the Corps (army co-operation) squadrons and one for the army (bombing and fighting) squadrons. Each squadron was to be brought up to a total of eighteen machines, from the previous twelve. By mid-summer, all being well, the RFC would have doubled in size in only nine months, but unfortunately still largely equipped with the BE2c.

By mid-summer the British Army would number fifty-seven divisions, and ready to assault the enemy. The plan was to break through, followed by the French who would soak up the German reserves and inflict a crushing blow. The assault was to be preceded by a massive bombardment intended to annihilate the German first and

second line trenches and open the way for the infantry. The Somme was chosen as the battleground because the Allied armies could fight their side by side.

Intelligence painted an alarming picture of the German air force's increasing superiority. They were receiving delivery of quantities of the Fokker EII, with its more powerful engine, and the EIII, with a further speed increase. The German pilots still operated almost exclusively on their own side of the lines, and were waiting for those aircraft that pursued Trenchard's aggressive policy. There was enough of the Fokkers now to operate in groups of three or four, and they made short work of the machines they encountered. The carnage in the early months of 1916 was horrific. Trenchard was obliged to issue a directive admitting the enemy superiority. 'Until the RFC are in possession of a machine as good as or better than the German Fokker it seems that a change of tactics employed becomes necessary.' He laid down a hard and fast rule: that any machine employed on reconnaissance must be escorted by at least three fighting machines. 'These machines must be flown in close formation and a reconnaissance should not continue if any of the machines become detached.' This was an operational restriction of extreme severity. Engine trouble alone could cause this fragmentation. 'Flying in close formation must be practised by all pilots.' It had always been considered dangerous. Robbie drilled his flight whenever the weather or operational demands allowed. Tight flying rather than combat training was the order of the day. As he said to his flight: 'Survival is the first priority!' Word was going around that new fighter planes were close to delivery, and Robbie's flight raised their glasses to that.

Great excitement was caused by the arrival of the first British single-seater scout squadron on the 8 February, equipped with the DH2. Unfortunately, the excitement was dampened by two of the planes spinning into the ground. The DH2, quickly

earned the grisly sobriquet of the 'spinning incinerator'. The commander of this squadron No. 24, Lanoe Hawker, took the next plane up and put it through a series of remedial actions, and provided there was sufficient height, it always recovered. 'It's all right you fellows,' he was reported to tell the anxious pilots, 'You can get the DH2 out of any spin. I have just tried it out.' His eager pilots gathered around whilst he explained the correct manoeuvres until they all understood them clearly. They went out to follow his example. Robbie went over to 24 squadron to question Hawker, against the possibility of being allocated the same aircraft.

In the meantime the BE2c continued in service, and questions were asked in the House of Commons about the shortcomings of the War Office and its failure to design and supply suitable modern machines. The charge was that 'quite a number of our gallant officers in the Royal Flying Corps had been rather murdered than killed'. The majority of fatalities were occurring at the training stations rather than at the front, due it was claimed to faulty aircraft. The training programme had to be radically altered if this was to be avoided. That this situation was recognised by the instructors is exemplified by the example of Cecil Lewis, a seventeen-year old.

Even after being given a BE2c, to regard as his own, and to do all the flying he wanted, he confessed a day or two later that his total flying time was only fourteen hours. 'It's absolutely disgraceful to send pilots overseas with so little flying time,' he was told by his flight commander at St.Omer, 'you don't stand a chance. I'll speak to the major and try and keep you here for a bit...another 50n hours and you might be quite decent, but 14! My God, it's murder!'

At this time, replacement pilots were arriving at St.Omer at the rate of about ten a week, an insufficient number inadequately trained. New squadrons were being formed, under the pressure of the phenomenal expansion programme, and being sent

out before they were ready. There was no shortage of eager volunteers, wishing to embark on the miracle of flying. Cecil Lewis described it: 'We who practised it were thought very brave, very daring, very gallant. We belonged to a world apart.'

With these wonderful young men, both British and French, the allies were hoping to stem the onslaught of the bulk of the German air force under the ace Boelcke, over the terrible battle of Verdun.

Much to Jaimie's chagrin, Robbie was given one of the new squadrons, No.24 and thrown into the battle...

CHAPTER SEVEN

Whilst the French pursued Trenchard's policy of the offensive, they attained a marked superiority, so much so that the Germans were forced to deploy their Fokkers to protect their air reconnaissance machines. For the commander of the French *Aviation Militaire* these tactics were supported by the new machines coming into service: the latest Morane and particularly the Nieuport 11 or Bebe, small in size but speedy and with a good rate of climb. It had a Lewis gun on the top wing firing over the propeller arc. It was in a machine of this type, superior in most respects to the Fokker, that reputations were made above the Verdun battlefield by the emerging French aces. Robbie was delighted to discover that 24 squadron had received two of these aircraft, the perfect means in which to drive and inspire his new squadron. The rest of the squadron were equipped with the DH2, a great improvement over the old BE2c, and when skilled in formation flying, the fresh pilots found themselves now on more even terms with the dreaded Fokker.

Escorting reconnaissance and photographic machines became no longer a hazard when they found themselves driving off their attackers. The Fokker could only escape by diving, which meant that few of them were shot down. The deployment information the RFC obtained was considerably greater than that secured by the enemy who were becoming loth to venture over the British lines. Over a four-day-period, a front of twenty miles was successfully photographed without the loss of one plane. A captured Fokker was used in mock combat, and firmly established that, apart from the lame BE2c, all the current planes showed well against it.

Whilst familiarizing himself with the virtues of the Nieuport 11, Robbie heard on the grapevine that a young Albert Ball was beginning to demonstrate his fighting abilities by shooting down a Albatross two seater whilst flying a Bristol scout. He soon

transferred to a Nieuport Bebe and to notching up more kills. With such inspiration Robbie sought to emulate Ball, but not in individual hunting, which was Ball's trade mark. Taking up a flight of DH2s on a dawn patrol over Lens, Robbie sighted three Fokkers some distance below. Immediately he led his flight into the attack. The leader of the enemy with a streamer from the top of his helmet, began to execute an 'Immelmann turn' to bring himself above and behind his chosen target. Countering this move by following the Fokker in its steep curve in the nippy Nieuport, Robbie gave the enemy a burst from his Lewis. The enemy realised that his manoeuvre was unsuccessful and that he was in danger of being shot down, so the German pilot flung himself into a steep dive, breaking off the engagement. Robbie turned back to his flight, and saw that one of them, an eighteen-year old, had shot down a Fokker. After the patrol, they gathered in the mess to celebrate the victory. In the midst of the high jinks, one of them said 'That plane you were fighting Robbie, had a marking on the side 'S.v.K.'. Did you notice it?' It was then that Robbie realised that the streamer from the pilot's helmet was a half-remembered old school tie. It was his cousin Sigmund! He had very nearly shot him down! Memories of the many times they had been together, and the deep regard they had had for each other, flooded into his mind. He knew in that instant that he would never have to hesitate if they met again. The members of his squadron could be put at risk if he did not seek to shoot him down. Robbie gave a silent prayer that somehow he would be saved from killing his cousin. Would Sigmund think similarly if he knew that he was jousting with his cousin? Or had he changed in these months of war, and saw in Robbie just another enemy aircraft to be destroyed? There was no doubt about it, that Sigmund would be a hard man to shoot down. He previous skills in so many different situations suggested that he

would be as near a perfect killing machine as it was possible to be. Before he turned in for the night, Robbie raised a quiet glass to his cousin.

The following morning the squadron was buzzing with the news that the German ace Immelmann had been shot down by an FE2b flown by a South African pilot of 25 squadron. The death of the German ace somehow made the flying on that front less deadly, but it also increased the confidence of the RFC pilots. After all, if an ace such as Immelmann could be shot down in combat, there was every reason to believe that the British pilots and their machines were now equivalent to the enemy. It was reported that the German press did not believe that one of their heroes had been bested in combat and put his fatality down to mechanical failure. A message of condolence was dropped by another South African pilot over a German aerodrome. Rather than risk another death to a well-publicised pilot the Germans withdrew Boelcke from the line.

Yet there were still planes that were not up to fighting standard. 27 Squadron had Martinsyde G100s which were sluggish in combat although, as the BE2c had been, they were effective as escorts and reconnaissance machines. As Robbie encouraged in his squadron, the mechanics could make modifications that brought them up to standard. One aviation commentator said ‘...many modifications and improvements were made in the field’. Most of these modifications were made at the behest of disgruntled pilots, and Trenchard himself commented: ‘These men are the backbone of all our efforts.’

Whilst there was a brief period of relative quiet, Robbie put his squadron through some intensive training. The new pilots were at first resentful, until they realised that the ‘skipper’ was trying to fit them for combat before the beginning of the ‘big push’.

The French were suffering badly at Verdun, and they pleaded for a diversionary action. The British commander Haig, planned to use the 4th Army on an eighteen-mile front stretching from Maricourt, north of the Somme, to Gommecourt. On the left was to be right-hand corps of the Third Army under Allenby: nineteen divisions in all. South of the Somme, eight French divisions were to hold a ten-mile front opposite Peronne. Opposing these armies, and holding strong positions on high ground, well protected by deep dug-outs, was the German Second Army under von Below. Haig's plan was to subject the German fortified positions to eight days of crippling bombardment, using a massive concentration of artillery on targets already registered in previous weeks by air observation.

The RFC, in addition to its routine spotting, reconnaissance, would mount an assault on the enemy kite balloons that stretched along the reverse of the German lines, whilst their bombers would aim at airfields and communications targets. Unfortunately, bad weather hindered the opening of the offensive, being particularly severe on the British kite balloons. As late as the 24 June, only seven days before the launching date of the infantry, pilots were struggling in the heavy rain to direct the artillery for the opening of the bombardment. Thus the softening-up got off to a dismal start.

On the 25th the RFC shot down five German balloons which preceded the intended barrage. During a halt in the shell fire several of the squadrons, including Robbie's, took photographs to judge its effectiveness. They proved of inestimable value, but four days of fog prevented further photography.

With the ground attack commencing on the 1st July, the RFC now had in support 421 active aeroplanes, and over 200 in reserve. On this the first day, the corps squadrons embarked on the first of systematic contact patrols. The object was assist forward troops in not being cut off from their support, commanders sometimes being unaware

of their precise whereabouts. The contact patrol, flown at heights of 500 to 1000 feet, and lower when necessary, aimed to provide liaison between front line and battalion headquarters, closing the intelligence gap. A pilot subsequently wrote: 'a pilot patrolling at low level could see the red flares which the Tommies carried and were instructed to light at different times.' The observer marked the position on the map provided, recorded the co-ordinates, and put a message in a weighted bag; the pilot then swooped low over the relevant headquarters and dropped the bag. By this method, pin-pointing of the flares fixed the movements of the forward troops for the commanders hour by hour.

However, the troops were naturally loth to display their positions, so that the method did not work as was intended. All too often their flares remained unlit; a complete failure. Flying so low, the air crews found themselves weaving through the shells of their own guns to get information. Operating for five or six hours a day, sometimes more, for days on end, they flew so low they could distinguish which side was which from the colours of their uniforms. After a few days this cooperation improved. The use of klaxons by aircraft proved audible and understandable.

The intention to destroy the enemy's first and second line had only been partly successful. Only the French with heavier guns achieved an early success. The early tidings of the battle brought back by the contact squadrons were grim. The element of surprise that Haig had hoped for was forfeited by the heavy bombardment. The result was that there was 57,000 casualties, 19,000 of them killed. The biggest loss ever suffered by the British Army in a single day. The losses were not confined to the army. The RFC also suffered serious losses, another item of the cost of Trenchard's aggressive policy.

Most of the squadrons were still operating with the BE2c, and their crews, scarcely resting, varied long hours spent on artillery control and photography, by loading up a few 20lb bombs and heading for enemy airfields, railheads and sidings. Their escorts were FE2bs, Martinsyde and Morane scouts, two flights of Sopwith 1 ½ strutters, the first two-seater fitted with a synchronised gun, two squadrons of DH2s – Robbie's squadron included – and in long offensive patrols to re-affirm air superiority and make the work of the corps squadrons possible. This heavy influx of penetrating RFC planes more often than not, found the Germans turning tail. The crews of the spotting planes, particularly the FEs would recce and bomb all day. Their high morale was commented on by the pilots of the escorts. 'They recce and bomb all day long'. It was questionable whether the Germans or the penetrating they suffered in their open cockpits, even in the summer, was the greater discomfort.

The bombing losses, as the targets were often opportunistic, were heavy. Hitting the target was a rare occurrence, and of six machines that went out to bomb St. Quentin, only three got back. The bombs on this occasion were heavy, weighing 110lbs each, and a plane carried two. To save weight and improve speed, the observer was dispensed with, and even the machine gun. The bombing of St. Quentin was surprisingly successful, with the station filled with German reinforcements, and two hundred ammunition wagons, all of which exploded, killing 180 soldiers. On another occasion, an attack on a train caused havoc, the burning debris from exploding carriages burning all day. Even the FE2bs, whose primary job was to fight, carried 20lb bombs for targets of opportunity. By engaging the enemy fighters they kept them occupied whilst the spotting planes got on with the job. When the targets were attacked with sufficient numbers of escorts the Germans rarely interfered

One occasion this happened to Robbie's A flight when they were providing the fighter escort. The object was an accumulation of German transports on one of the main roads to the Somme front, and 20 squadron were providing FE2bs loaded with 20lb bombs. It was a clear early morning, typical of early summer, with a high cloud and visibility unlimited. Robbie had his flight hovering 500 feet above the bombers, on the lookout for trouble. The target came into view, and intelligence had it right, for there must have been over a hundred wagons trundling slowly along the main road. The leader of the FE2bs went into the attack promptly, and at least half of the bombs hit targets, creating explosions and debris. At this moment a flight of Fokkers seemed to come from nowhere, and oblivious of the fighter screen, plunged into the attack. At the first pass one of the FE2bs peeled off, his engine smoking. Robbie gave the signal and they dived on the Fokkers. The sky became a ballet of twisting machines, and Robbie chose the leader of the enemy pack, a red painted plane. It immediately became apparent that the enemy pilot was no novice, swirling up into an Immelman turn, seeking to find Robbies rear. Expecting this manoeuvre, Robbie hurled himself up and inside the Fokker, with his Nieuport tighter on the turn. As they came out of the loop, Robbie gave him a burst from his Lewis, seeing the blast of bullets chew forward from the tail of the Fokker. The plane seemed to stagger and then drop. The pilot was undamaged but the plane was losing height rapidly. Robbie followed him down, and when the enemy would have landed behind his own lines, Robbie signalled him with a burst of machine gun and an unmistakable hand signal to carry on towards the British lines.

The Fokker had just enough height to make an open patch a mile or two beyond the trenches. Robbie came down behind him. Infantrymen from behind the lines were running towards the enemy plane, their rifles at the ready. As Robbie came in behind

the Fokker he waived the soldiers to keep back. The enemy pilot climbed out of his damaged plane he reached inside the cockpit with the intention of firing his plane. Robbie fired a burst from his machine gun in warning so the enemy pilot stood back resigned. Robbie climbed out of his plane and walked towards the German pilot who was holding his left arm, the sleeve of his jacket bloody. As Robbie came to him the soldiers surrounded them, their rifles at the ready. The German pilot took off his helmet, revealing his blonde hair, a broad smile on his face. Robbie realised that it was cousin Siggy! 'My God! Siggy...I could have killed you!'

Siggy laughed uproariously, Slapping his thigh with his good hand so vigorously that it jerked his bad arm. 'That's what we are supposed to do Robbie...or have I got it wrong?' They embraced each other to the surprise of the infantry onlookers. At this point the onlookers were joined by an infantry officer who was finding the whole affair more than a little puzzling. When he took out a revolver, Robbie waived it down. 'There is no need for that.'

Robbie turned to him. 'Will your take care of my prisoner until I can return with a car to take him to hospital? It is the customary for enemy pilots shot down by the RFC to remain their prisoner for twenty-four hours before they are carted off to prisoner-of-war camp. Receiving the officer's agreement, Robbie said: 'I'm going to have you meet someone at the hospital that I know you will be delighted to meet again.' Siggy bowed, and stood among the soldiers as Robbie climbed back into his aircraft and flew away...

CHAPTER EIGHT

After collecting Siggy from the reluctant infantry, who had made their minds up that they should keep such a distinguished captive, Robbie drove off to the nearest military hospital. Siggy by this time was looking the worst for wear, his arm and shoulder festooned with temporary bandages. He was trying to be light hearted, but making a poor job of it. Robbie gave him a pull at a hip flask of brandy, that he had taken the trouble to acquire from the squadron.

‘Come on Siggy, cheer up...you’ve got a wonderful ‘Blighty wound’ that many another would be delighted about.’ Siggy snorted as they took a corner on two wheels. ‘If I get to the hospital in one piece...your driving has not improved.’ He was still wearing his leather flying helmet, and the open ends flapped in the breeze.

‘Anyway...who wants to go to Blighty? Just turn me loose and I’ll find my own Blighty’.

‘Not a chance Siggy. I’m going to deliver you to the arms of someone who I know you will be delighted to see again.’ Siggy merely grunted as he struggled to light an evil-looking cheroot he had taken from the inside pocket of his flying jacket. They ferried their way through a chain of ambulances which indicated that the offensive was costing the British army dear. In the portico of the hospital a doctor in bloodied whites was separating the wounded as they were being assembled. He took one look at Siggy’s bandaged arm and his uniform and threw a question at Robbie.

‘I shot him down...and I’ve brought him in. Needs to be closely watched...or he’ll make off!’ The doctor gave Robbie a tired smile. He unwound the bandages and examined the bullet wound. ‘Needs cleaning up...and stitching.’

‘We’ve got someone dear to us working here,’ Robbie said, ‘Eva Mackintosh. Is she on duty?’ The doctor shrugged. ‘For such a distinguished patient...’ He directed

Robbie and his 'prisoner' into a nearby ward for treatment and sent an orderly for Eva. Siggy's wound was quickly attended to, stitched and re-bandaged, and he was swinging his leg on the edge of a bed when Evan arrived. She was astonished to see them side by side, each in a pilot's uniform, and now laughing together as if they had not been apart.

She embraced them both with a kiss on the cheek. She looked wonderful, her blond hair tied back, her blue eyes alight with the pleasure of seeing them again. 'Tell me...'

Siggy laughed, a boyish laugh that filled the ward with happy sound. 'You'll never guess...Robbie shot me down...and then brought me here. I can forgive him shooting me down...now that I see you.' The look he gave Eva, said it all. That devotion that he had always shown Eva, shone in his face. 'I can see me enjoying my stay here. Until I find somewhere better to go to.'

'It will be a prisoner of war camp for you my lad...once you are fit to travel.' Robbie only just avoided giving him a playful punch on the arm. 'And I'll come and see you when I'm not busy shooting down more Germans.' He gave Eva a kiss on the cheek, and with a left-handed shake of the hand with Siggy, left them, but not before he warned Eva to keep a close eye on a possible escapee.

When he got back to the squadron, he arrived as a lorry drew up delivering three replacement pilots. 'God,' he thought, appraising their smooth, eager, untroubled faces, 'they are getting younger.' He questioned them and learned that the most flying time they had on DH2's was ten hours. When he had had them shown to their billets, he went on to HQ. The admin officer was not sympathetic. 'They are the best we can give you ...we would all like experienced pilots. You'll have to do your best with them.'

'But there is no time for combat training. You want all my squadron, flying tomorrow. They'll be sitting ducks!' The phone at the other end went down. With a curse Robbie slammed his into the cradle. Impossible. He knew though that other squadrons were being similarly reinforced. The GOC's aggressive policy had to be implemented come what may, and in his saner moments Robbie had to admit that their tactics were keeping the German pilots behind their own lines. Now that the RFC had planes currently as good as the enemy, at least they were not having to fight with the outclassed BE2c.

The following morning he paraded the squadron and allocated their tasks. Some of them would be escorting the bombers, and other would be attacking any supply traffic feeding the German front lines. Robbie decided to take the new pilots interspaced with experienced pilots for their first baptism, knowing that they needed time to orientate themselves as the ground features would be incomprehensible to them. It was a clear chill morning, and archie gave them the usual rake of fire. Robbie took his group up to 2000 feet and headed towards the railway lines that interlaced the German rear areas. He had a new pilot on each side of his aircraft and he had warned them to follow him closely. When he saw a chain of loaded wagons moving towards a junction, he signalled his group that he was going to attack and that they were to follow at short intervals as he had briefed them. The train of supply wagons was defended by machine guns. He swooped through a hail of fire as he gave them a long burst conscious that he was hitting home. The second plane came thundering through as he pulled up for height. In a space of a few minutes Robbie's flight had followed him and the train of supply wagons was on fire here and there. So far without casualties. He looked back and saw that there was a cloud of black smoke along the line which was riven by explosions. The attack had been a success and he hoped that

the new pilots would have acquired confidence from their first brush with the enemy. He signalled a return home, and in the same shepherding formation brought the flight back to the airfield.

The flight that had escorted the bombers, however, did not return unscathed. The flight leader, fighting off a group of Fokkers that were attacking the bombers, succumbed to a hail of fire from two of the enemy. He went down in a spiral and did not recover. There were sad faces around the mess, particularly among the new pilots who were facing a future prospect of being casualties that had now suddenly been brought physically home to them. Robbie had them turn on the phonograph and roused them to singing the popular songs that were common among the squadrons. With so much to do and having to husband the inexperienced pilots as best he could, Robbie had little time to think of anything else. It came as a shock to have Eva on the telephone to tell him that Siggy had quickly recovered from the disability of his wound and made his escape. From the little she was able to tell him, Siggy had 'borrowed' another patient's uniform, 'acquired' an official car, and made his way across the border into Holland. Not for him the ignominious transfer to a prisoner of war camp in Northern France before being shipped to England. With such an early escape Siggy would soon be back with his squadron on the Western Front. The more he thought about it, the more Robbie accepted that Siggy was bound to make the attempt, and no doubt he would be hearing from him very soon.

Word went around the squadrons saying that when targets were attacked in sufficient numbers, with a strong escort, the German pilots rarely interfered. It was exemplified by an attack by six RE7s with a 336lb lbs bomb load escorted by four Martinsydes on an enemy infantry headquarters and ammunition dump at Bapaume. During the attack six Moranes of 60 squadron patrolled the area. The attack was a success, and fire

coloured the eastern sky. There was little enough resources to stage such a combined attack, and as Robbie proved, low-level attacks on rail targets could be subject to heavier casualties. There was sterner opposition to attacks on troop trains carried out on the 3 July, and those on St. Quentin suffered from losses and rebuffs. Not only were they unable to protect the bombers but found themselves hard pressed by a dozen enemy machines at twenty thousand feet including several Fokkers.

Throughout these days GOC Trenchard continually toured the squadrons, to talk to the men, to encourage the crews and inspire them with his presence. Whilst he was against his senior RFC commanders flying, he nevertheless turned a blind eye to his squadron commanders leading their men. Knowing Robbie's father, Trenchard was pleased to have a private quiet word with Robbie. It gave Robbie the opportunity to bye-pass the chain of command and express his dissatisfaction with the lack of experience of replacements. 'I stressed the need for as much flying time and combat drill as the training schools can give them,' Trenchard said, 'but I know they are doing their best. It is up to experienced squadron leaders like yourself to do what you can...and at the same time keep at the enemy. I know you are doing your best.'

When he waived Trenchard off, Robbie decided to spend a bit more of the pilots' time between flights with chalk and blackboard. They might think it schooltime, but he was determined to put tactics in pictures.

With his pilots gathered in the mess, he brought up the menace of the Fokker. That brought their attention. 'You may not know...but the Germans gave us a present of one recently and I got a report on it. Seems that the plane was being delivered to one of their forward squadrons and the pilot flew over the lines and obligingly landed on one of our airfields!' There was a shout of laughter. 'A sort of mystery surrounded the Fokker. Nobody knew whether it had a rotary or a stationary engine. Few having been

attacked by it had come back to tell the tale. One lucky pilot accredited it with a stationary engine, and it was reputed to have a fantastic performance. We now know that it is not as good as all that, and that it had a rotary engine. To discover its performance it was to be tested against a Morane Bullet. All the General Staff assembled to watch the tests. After take off, it soon became clear that the Morane was quicker in the climb, faster on the level, and when the two machines began a mock fight over the aerodrome, the Morane had everything its own way. So you can be sure that when you meet one, your DH2 is as good, if not better, than the Fokker.' A cheer went around the mess. 'Just remember the tricks I have been trying to teach you. Keep a level head and give yourself and your machine a chance.'

Later Robbie heard more of Trenchard's morale boosting efforts.

To sustain it Trenchard applied for a VC or two, but these were not granted.

In the early days of the Somme offensive, a formation of ten enemy bombers crossed the lines near Festubert. DH2s of 32 squadron under Lionel Rees had been airborne in the area since 03.40, but it was not until 05.55 when Rees took off again with Lt. John Simpson, a 26 year-old Canadian that the latter made contact with the enemy. Though the odds were against him, Simpson attacked immediately, taking the fire from three of them. Simpson's machine was hit, and began falling from 5000 feet to the ground. Observers thought the machine was under control, but in fact Simpson had received eight bullet wounds in the head. Rees had not been close enough to observe any of this, and because it was unusual for German to penetrate so far, thought at first they were a British patrol. They evidently thought Rees would be an easy conquest, but when he held his fire, splintering the fuselage of one hostile at short range with his first burst, they must have had second thoughts. When he attacked another, it wobbled crazily and went down out of control. The three remaining machines immediately

turned away with Rees chasing them. As he gained on them Rees sustained a wound in his leg losing control of his rudder. Yet he still bore down on the leader firing until he ran out of ammunition. He had scattered a major German raid single-handed, one crew jettisoned its bombs over their own lines. It was Rees's last operational flight. He was one of those intrepid flyers who made a reputation for courage, and whose influence was felt among the squadrons long before the advent of the aces.

The first phase of the Somme battle lasted a fortnight, and at enormous cost on the ground of gaining six thousand yards. Trenchard's policy of keeping the German Air Force too preoccupied in defence was commented on by General von Below: 'The enemy's aerodromes enjoyed complete freedom in carrying out distant reconnaissance. With the aid of aeroplane observation the hostile artillery neutralised our guns and was able to range with most extreme accuracy on our trenches. By means of bombing and machine-gunning from a low height against infantry, battery positions and marching columns, the enemy's aircraft inspired our troops with a feeling of defencelessness.' The German troops themselves commented: 'The English are always flying over our lines directing artillery shoots, thereby getting all their shells into our trenches. This moral defeat has a bad effect on us all.' As for their own air force they said: 'One must be too ashamed...it is simply scandalous. They fly as far as this village, but no further...whereas the English are always over our lines.' Their official records subsequently described July and August 1916 as 'the blackest days in the history of the German Air Force.'

The second phase of the battle, which lasted for two months, until mid-September, settled into a tense and debilitating struggle for the main ridge. Most significant for the RFC was the appointment of General von Hoepfner to be responsible for the centralised administration of the German Air Force. Meanwhile Boelcke was brought

back to organise the formation of *jagdstaffeln* or *jastas* (pursuit or hunting squadrons) each to consist of fourteen newly-developed machines, namely the D-type Albatross and Halberstadt. Both mounted two fixed machine guns firing through the propeller arc, and all would be flown by carefully selected pilots who had been through advanced air training schools. Command of *Jasta 2*, which was formed on the 30 August, was given to Boelcke, who invited a two-seater pilot and former observer whose enthusiasm had impressed him, Monfred von Richthofen, to join him. The first batch of the new machines was delivered on 6 September, and Boelcke's first combat mission was flown on the 17th, two days after Haig renewed the assault in what became the third and final phase of the battle.

For most of that summer, Robbie and his squadron, together with the rest of the RFC enjoyed an air superiority they were never to know again. They visited artillery units, partly to talk shop, partly to kill time in bad weather, and partly for good will. The RFC lived a civilised life, comfortably housed in Nissen-hutted camps, in farms and sometimes in chateaux, with three course meals in the mess, wines, coffee and liqueurs. One observer who had experience life in the trenches on the Somme, would never forget the appalling conditions. 'In the trenches you faced death every second, not knowing when it might come; in the RFC you could certainly say between flights that you had many more hours to live. On the other hand, in the air, you could see death coming, especially if you caught fire at height. With no parachutes, whether you stayed in the machine or jumped, the result was the same.'

Robbie made sure that either the piano or the gramophone was playing the latest hits from the London stage as well as books and newspapers. Parties and binges, and the horseplay of the mess he encouraged as a relief from the strain of facing Archie and a

highly skilled and courageous enemy, not to mention the missing faces and the perpetual fear of a 'flamer'.

If there was one discomfort from which the airmen suffered it was the cold. In particular, in the FE2b, the spacious and draughty exposed cockpit became a refrigerator. The wearing of silk underwear, silk gloves, leather gauntlets and a leather face mask, with fur-lined garments from head to foot, was never proof against 70- and 80- knot winds at temperatures far below zero. Pilots were known to have been unable to move out of their cockpits for several minutes, and when they did were unable to straighten their legs. Greasy overalls, accidentally turned out to be the answer, and the idea was developed into a flying suit.

Encouraging his squadron to adopt the new flying suit, was only one aspect of Robbie's paternalism. When some of his DH2s were replaced by newer machines, the FE2d, he realised that he was being equipped to take on the new German fighter squadrons...

CHAPTER NINE

Whilst some of the squadron commanders accepted the restrictions placed upon their flying, most turned a blind eye to Trenchard's policy. Robbie, like most of his contemporaries, flew enough sorties to keep in touch. He believed in leading from the front, and with the formation of the new German fighter squadrons, knew that he must give the example he wanted his pilots to follow. Like the less experienced members of the flights, their leaders were also drilled in the various manoeuvres of aerial combat, and it paid off in fewer casualties. Robbie knew that his seniors, under pressure from army and corps commanders, often exaggerated the urgency of their requirements, forcing him to send out his pilots when a little more indoctrination would have paid handsome dividends.

Like Lanoe Hawker of 24 squadron, Robbie began the practise of de-briefing followed by lively discussion. It was surprising how much the experiences of the newer men drew out useful advice from his more experienced pilots. As the morale of the squadron was high, these sessions were often the subject of much laughter. He also made sure that there was no empty seat at the breakfast table, and a new man to be inducted and trained. Robbie always sat with his men at breakfast, and if for some reason he was not flying, he saw his flights off. New men were always weeded in with the older men, and cautioned to keep their eyes peeled on their leaders. Robbie's comment on the lack of training of replacements, employed the kind of words he would have been reluctant to use in front of his father. 'Bloody murder', he said, followed by a few expressions about the higher command that men in the trenches would have appreciated.

One of the other squadrons flying the Morane lost so many pilots due to its inferiority as a fighting machine, that it had to be pulled out of the line. By 3rd August the

squadron had lost more than half its original complement, which was followed by two more machines, two pilots and two observers. Most of the Moranes were replaced by the Nieuport 17 or Super-Bebe, far and away the best single-seater scout at the time. A new recruit, Albert Ball, joined the squadron, to become a leading ace. He was described as a boy with a kindly nature, but was uncannily swift and sure. 'He had one idea, to kill as many Huns as possible.'

Yet there was little hatred for the enemy. As Ewart Garland was later to express it: I would go as far as to say that flying men on both sides felt less personal antagonism than say footballers in the heat and excitement of play...there was no hate between enemy airmen, and quasi-affectionate references to German airmen were quite usual.' Cecil Lewis wrote: 'They were our friends the enemy. We treated them well when they were captured, and they us.' He spoke of a strong magnetic attraction between airmen matched against each other at altitude. 'I have felt this magnetism engaging an enemy scout three miles above the earth'. Albert Ball commented to his father: 'I do not think of them as devils. I only scrap because it is my duty, and I do not think anything bad about the Hun'.

Having a loved cousin fighting on the other side, was for Robbie an antidote to any feeling of animosity he might feel for the enemy. He was saddened by the losses his squadron sustained, but it did not lead to hatred. At the same time he did not view it as a game, it was too deadly for that, and the constant replacements were a constant reminder of that. The reminder of Siggy's presence on the other side of the line came with a low flying albatross dropping a note on a streamer just after daybreak. A member of the repair and maintenance crew came running with it to Robbie.

'Robbie. I know that you are anxiously awaiting to hear that I am safely back. With this you will know that I am leading *Jastra26*. Look forward to meeting you soon.

Siggy.’ Robbie added the words: ‘This is not a friendly invitation!’ and pinned it on the notice board.

With Trenchard’s demands for greater expansion was causing some consternation at home, he responded: ‘With regard to the number of pilots we have had and are asking for,’ he explained, ‘I admit the demand is enormous. We are fighting a very big battle, and fighting in the air is becoming intense. The fighting will increase, I regret to say, not decrease, and it is only a question of keeping it up longer than the Hun.’ The war of attrition was brutal, and by the arithmetic of casualties the Germans must lose.’ As the months went on, leading up to the final phase, Trenchard amplified his worries: ‘I must warn you now that in the next ten days, if we get fine weather, I anticipate a very heavy casualty list ...But what is to be chiefly remembered, is that whatever we suffer, the Huns are suffering more...’

In a position to fight off the enemy, Robbie’s squadron was one of those that did a lot of bomber escort work. The results of Allied bombing in this period – the delay and damage caused, and the effect on ground troops – may best be judged from the response of German defences. The normal load for a bombing machine was two 112lb bombs or eight 20-pounders, with escort machines often carrying a few 20-pounders for good measure, and there were some spectacular successes. The Germans reacted aggressively, and although the escorting DH2s, FE2bs, and Sopwith 1 1/2 strutters held their own, the bombers suffered severely.

When, Haig, in the third and final phase of the battle, which began on the 15th September, decided to employ his new weapon –the tank – Robbie’s squadron was one of those used to night-fly over the lines to drown the sound of the tanks moving up. The other danger to the tank concealment was the enemy balloon, and although the best weapon against the kite balloon was the *Le Prieur* rocket only fitted to planes

of 60 squadron, Robbie led a flight against them, shooting down two with tracers. 60 squadron were equally effective against them, but one of the pilots selected for the operation did not return and the other two had their planes riddled with bullets from the massed batteries. It soon became apparent, the German intelligence had known of the tanks, and the thirty-six that were employed, proved largely ineffective. The close cooperation of the RFC in reporting the results of their low-flying did prevent the massacre of an intended attack following the tank attack. 'It would have resulted in the complete wiping-out of the attacking force.'

A contact patrol of No.9 squadron observed 50 British infantrymen pinned down by a German machine-gun nest, and used their Lewis guns so effectively that the nest was removed. It was these contact patrols that 'alone were the witnesses of the whole titanic struggle, and through their eyes the army commanders could follow the fortunes of their troops.' Robbie had drilled his pilots in the use of the klaxon horn, which could be heard above the din of battle. It asked the infantry on the ground to indicate their positions by ground signal, could be communicated back. The work was dangerous, and though appeared to be unspectacular, was invaluable and cost high in lost crews. Robbie knew the cost and at debriefing praised his men.

When his planes were on a bombing mission, the observer had a particularly hazardous job. They were not strapped in, and they had to move around the roomy cockpit of the FE2d oblivious of their own safety. They stood up on their boxes, firing forwards, now rearwards over the top plane, wielding their Lewis guns in the icy blast as though they wielded no more than rapiers. They also operated the bomb sight and released the bombs. Although sluggish and unmanoeuvrable, the machine was sometimes thrown about in combat, and then the observer sat on the floor, with both legs from the knees down hanging over the outside of the cockpit, gripping the gun

with both hands to hold on. At the best of times they had little more than a strong grip and a Lewis gun to hold on to, yet they claimed to have no fear of falling out. The airstream held them in.

Throughout the summer of 1916 the bombers of the RFC continued to distribute their bombs on enemy railheads and sidings, and even on one occasion hit General von Below's headquarters. When a report was received of forty trains on the lines in the Cambrai region awaiting to transport troops, they were divebombed by eight Martinsydes who created havoc, destroying the trains and a supply depot nearby. It was at this time that one of the flight commanders of 27 Squadron – Robert Bourdillon – initiated target-marking attacks at low level to guide his fellows. Most of the fighting took place over Bapaume, which was bombed by BEs escorted by FEs of Robbie's and other squadrons. On one day twenty-four German machines were brought down for the loss of six RFC machines, with nine crews missing. Robbie's squadron accounted for four of the enemy, though the 1 ½ strutters of 70 squadron saw most of the action. Its leader Guy Cruikshank demonstrated his superb courage in an unequal contest against Boelcke's new fighting machine, eventually crashing to his death.

On the 16 September the first bulk delivery of the new Albatross and Halberstadt pursuit planes was made to the German front-line squadrons. On this day eight BEs of 12 Squadron each carrying one 112lb bomb and four 20 –pounders – which meant leaving their observers behind – were despatched to attack the junction of the main Peronne and Bapaume line. Reduced to six by engine failures, the BEs dropped their bombs, and turned for home- into the path of the German fighters. The escorting FEs tried to protect them but they were hopelessly outclassed by the increasing number of German planes, now joined by seven more. Four of the six FEs and two of the BEs

were shot down. This was the first victory for the pilots of *Jasta 2*. Manfred von Richtofen had taken part, and landed beside the FE he had shot down in time to see the observer die. It was the first of sixty victories in the next few months. Trenchard, when he heard the details, realised that the new German machines, faster and more manoeuvrable, with their two machine guns firing through the propeller arc, and fighting in formation outclassed anything the RFC had. Aces like Richtofen, refusing to engage the enemy unless favoured, and by operating only over his own territory meant that he did not have to risk Archie. 'Let the customer come to the shop,' he said.

In that month of September, the Germans destroyed 127 British and French planes for the loss of twenty-seven. Both Trenchard and Haig warned that more squadrons and more efficient machines were needed if the Germans were to be contained behind their own lines. With a break in the weather, there was a little time to reflect. Robbie's squadron had also suffered from the increased attention of the enemy's new fighters, and he was not one to await developments. If the weather was subduing the RFC it also must be dampening down the Germans. So why not risk the weather and attack the *Jastas* on their home field? He was two pilots short, but ten of the FEs loaded with bombs could make a sizeable dent in Siggy's *Jasta*.

Without referring the matter to HQ Robbie briefed his pilots. With some rain and mist obscuring the ground, he led them off and across the German lines. Dawn was breaking and the German archies were only just awake. The German airfield was only four miles behind the front, so they were there in a few minutes. The enemy fighters were assembled in straight lines, and only a few figures were attending them.

Satisfied that he had brought his squadron intact over the target, Robbie gave his flight commanders the signal and led the first group over the enemy fighters. The first

bombs took out two of the fighters, and the flight pulled up and round the airfield perimeter. Each successive flight flew over and dropped their bombs. By the time they had all released their bombs the line of fighters was a trail of smoking wreckage. Turning again to the hangers and accommodation huts, the successive flights raked them with machine guns. By this time the airfield batteries of machine guns were spraying the attacking planes with a curtain of fire, and as Robbie's squadron turned away to head for home, one of the rear FEs burst into flame and crashed. The remaining nine planes formed behind Robbie and thundered over the short distance to the front lines. The day was only just beginning.

The squadron's jubilation was muted with the loss of one of their companions. They assembled in the mess for breakfast, for which the table had now three empty places. Robbie sat with them and by dint of happy talk about the damage to the *Jasta* raised their spirits. 'Someone at the end of the table shouted: 'I wonder if we can expect a return engagement?' They looked at Robbie who replied: 'I don't expect them today...but you can be sure they will call before breakfast soon.'

The 'phone rang in his office, and the sergeant went to answer it.

'HQ for you Sir,' he called. The voice at the other end was as usual terse and the message short and unequivocal. Another bombing sortie near Cambrai.

'Do you mind if we make this later today?' Robbie spoke quietly. 'We have just made a call on *Jasta 26* and destroyed all their new machines. My lads need a few hours break and the planes need attention.' The voice at the other end spluttered. 'Who gave you the order?...I'll have to report this independent action to the General...'

Robbie tried to calm him with: 'The General I'm sure will be pleased... to know that at least twelve of the newest German fighters have been destroyed for the loss of one of my squadron.' The phone at the other end went down.

The door to the office had been open so that the assembled mess heard every word.

CHAPTER TEN

The estaminet in Amiens was already in full swing by the time Robbie and his squadron arrived. It was largely a high room, panelled with fly-blown mirrors, studded with marble-topped tables, buzzing with the conversation of French and British officers, alive with waiters, white-aproned, greasy haired, whisking around drinks on trays. Someone was singing a French song uneasily with a tipsy English accent:

Et si par hazard
Tu vois ma tante
Compliments
De ma part.

Someone joined in gaily. Robbie's men grabbed sufficient chairs and formed a series of four-man groups. Immediately the shout went up: 'Garçon..garçon! 'M' sieu?' 'Vin rouge et fines, sil vous plait.' In a matter of moments glasses were filled, and a cloud of grey smoke leaked upward from cigarettes. The atmosphere was rank and heavy. The floor reeked of spilt wine-slops.

One of the more experienced pilots got to his feet after consuming his first drink and went to a group of well-painted young and not so young ladies and invited them to join the party. There was another shuffling of chairs and the women were interspersed among the airmen. Few of the men could speak French, and those that could were too busy drinking to do much interpreting. It did not matter. There was always 'Vive la France!' to fall back on, to which the women responded with 'Vive l'Angleterre!' This was a cue for smiles all round another round of drinks.

A couple of hours passed in growing hilarity. It was now dinner time and the whole party decided to eat upstairs. Dinner was only slightly less hilarious than drinking below, and the women were happy to find themselves eating a meal they obviously

did not expect. By the end of the meal enough young ladies had joined the party to prompt one or two pairs to slip away. Assignations were made for other nights, and those who declined to enjoy the charms of a companion decided to walk to another café in the square where a tender would pick them up at 10.30pm. *'Bonne nuit, bonne nuit. Bonne chance, mon petit.'* All in all, the squadron had enjoyed an unexpected night in Amiens, consolidating their already strong good-fellowship. Robbie was picked up by car, declining to nursemaid them back to base.

The next morning the bad weather set in. The reconnaissance work of the squadrons proved to be less than its usual value. For a crescent-shaped area of about six miles across at its widest point, that had begun as a diversionary attack to relieve the French at Verdun, had burgeoned into a main battle without a hoped-for breakthrough. It had cost the lives of 419,000 British, 194,000 French with the grim consolation that the Germans, already outnumbered, lost 650,000. When the winter set in on the 22 November, the RFC losses from the 1st July amounted to 308 pilots, 191 observers, and 782 aeroplanes. German losses were less than half that number, yet by the end of the campaign the RFC still controlled the air above the battlefield. They had fulfilled their *raison d'être*: working for the army. Trenchard's men had not failed him.

24 Squadron had lost eight pilots, six observers, and six machines. The squadron had done well, and temporarily suspended the operations of *Jasta26*, one of seven now across the lines.

It seemed to Robbie that the policy of the fighter squadrons going well into enemy territory deliberately provoking the Germans as a means of diverting the Germans from the slow, sluggish BEs who were engaged on bombing and surveillance, was not as effective as scout planes escorting the bombers. It also seemed to him that making the new German fighter squadrons seek them out, would at least give the scout planes

a psychological advantage, and the opportunity to work out tactics. Artillery work, contact patrols, and bombing went on day after day along the whole front, penetrating as much as forty miles beyond the lines. Strong headwinds were a perpetual hazard that placed the allied planes at the mercy of machines that were twice as fast and twice as handy. To support the escort tactic, on rare occasions when the British fighters buzzed around at twice the speed as the bombers in tight formation, the enemy kept a respectful distance. The bomber crews constantly urged that the fighters 'look after us'. With a policy of giving the fighter boys much publicity and rewarding them with decorations, the recce boys found that their hazardous work was constantly underrated. Robbie determined that wherever the briefing allowed, he would support the bomber and reconnaissance planes and let the Germans come to him. His opportunity to employ this policy came a few days after the binge at Amiens.

It was a chance remark on the phone from HQ that alerted him to the fact that his brief to take his fighters along the German road route to Bapaume coincided with a bomber attack on a rail junction near Albert.

It was a cold clear morning when Robbie took off, leading two flights of his squadron. The pilots were alerted to the fact that he intended to protect the bombers in the event that the Hun tried to intercept them. The bombers from 27 Squadron had taken off fifteen minutes before him, heavy laden and slow. Robbie's flights overtook them when they were within sight of the target, a gathering of ammunition wagons stretching for a hundred yards. As the bombers strung out to drop their bombs, a cluster of German Albatross fighters came out of the sun their multi-coloured fuselages glittering, deadly. Robbie waived his flights to meet them at their increased height. The German had been so intent on the bombers that the attacking FEs took them by surprise. Shot at from below, the Albatrosses broke formation, and in a

moment the sky was filled with a deadly dance of whirling planes. With the advantage of the attack, the FEs shot down two of the Albatrosses in those vital seconds. At Robbie's signal they reformed as he had briefed them in the mess, into a tight formation that further compounded the German's confusion, and persuaded them to turn and fly off.

By now the bombing was completed, smoke and flames and an occasional explosion from the railway junction. The leader of the bombers signalled that they were returning home, and a 'thank you' for the shepherding of the fighters.

It seemed a ridiculous aftermath to their confrontation with the Albatrosses, that Robbie was hit by the German archies as they came over the lines. As he struggled to control his spiralling plane, employing the down-turning techniques that had been so efficacious in the past, he knew that, apart from the damage to the plane, he had sustained a shrapnel wound in his leg. His leg was numb to the waist, and the FE was responding sluggishly to the rudder. With the flights hustling around him, Robbie used all his skill to keep a level flight, then bring it gently down to the airfield. An ambulance came racing to meet him as he brought the plane to a stop near the assembly area. The rest of the flights came in one at a time as the medics helped Robbie out of the cockpit.

He called the senior flight leader to him as they strapped up his leg. 'Take care of the squadron Tommy...and let them know at HQ that I'm going into hospital.' Before they put him in the ambulance, he called Tommy back again. 'Don't forget that *Jasta 26* will be looking for our scalps after our last social call! Keep a sharp lookout!' With a waive to the assembled concerned faces of his pilots, he was driven off. Damn it, he thought, just when things were going smoothly.

The doctor in the reception recognised him from his previous visit with Siggy. 'You've come yourself this time...No German pilot to add to our worries.' The doctor gave him an amused grin. 'We lost him, you know, and Nurse Mackintosh felt it was a personal loss.' The examination of Robbie's leg prompted him to say 'Ward 2 for surgery.' He was quickly stripped of his flying gear, and was given a shot of morphine for the increasing pain that overcame the numbness. As he lay under a sheet, Eva came to see him. She kissed him on the cheek, her eyes full of concern and her cool hand took his. 'You're in good hands, Robbie. Doctor Gillespie is one of the best surgeons.' 'Is it much?' He asked quietly. She pursed her lips. 'He'll tell you the answer to that after the operation.'

The operation took two hours, and when he came round Robbie found himself in a two bedded room and so strapped up he could not move. At a low cough that caused him pain, a cool hand came to his brow. It was Eva. She wet his dry lips. He looked up into her blue-grey eyes that seemed to have the world in them. 'You are doing fine Robbie...the operation went well.' At his anxious look, she added: 'You haven't lost anything...but it could be a long recovery.' Robbie managed a nod. 'Doctor Gillespie will be along to see you before he goes off duty. He'll tell you all you want to know.' She was avoiding telling him anything herself.

Doctor Gillespie came along whilst Eva was there. He was a tall, grey-haired man with a slight stoop, and his face was care-worn, and his grey eyes tired. When she would have gone, he motioned her to stay. He stood at the head of the bed side.

'I understand you are old friends?' His voice smooth and low. At her nod, he went on: 'The big question you want me to answer is 'Am I going to be alright?' He paused for a moment. 'The damage to your leg has been repaired...but there is a lack of feeling in it that will prevent you from flying when the wounds have healed. How long it will

take for the nerves in your leg to function properly...I can't say. A lot will depend on your constitution, your patience, your willingness to go forward slowly.' Gillespie looked into Robbie's eyes, a slow compassionate look. 'If you are lucky it might only take weeks...on the other hand it might never be properly restored. You have been lucky...or unlucky depending upon your point of view. Walk with a stick and don't push it too hard.' He reached forward a large capable hand and shook Robbie's right hand. With a nod, he turned and walked away. 'Thanks for everything Doctor,' Robbie called after him. When he looked at Eva she was quickly wiping away a tear. 'There's a bag of tricks to live with,' he tried a smothered laugh, not very successfully. 'Siggy was luckier than me.'

Eva's smile was back in place. 'In a few weeks time you will be going to the Blighty that Siggy missed. In the meantime, I will have to try and keep you amused...not an easy job if I remember.'

Her words snapped him out of the self-pitying study that he was slipping into after the Doctor's verdict. No good to feel sorry about anything, he knew it was just the luck of the draw. Many another would be happy to get away from all the killing, all the bright young men of the squadron who were dying and would continue to die. The burden of sending men to their deaths would become a different burden: the burden of realising that he could do nothing to help them. He could only hope that whoever replaced him would see the need to continue the on-sight training and instruction, the schooling of his men to follow the tactics that were already beginning to reduce casualties and increase operational efficiency.

'Right, nurse,' he mock-bullied her, 'untie me a little. I'm trussed up here like a celebration chicken. I might not be able to feel my leg much, but I don't want the circulation stopping!' She did as she asked, conscious that in a sense they were

replaying some of the make-believe of their childhood games. She had often to tie up a graze or an arrow or sword wound. With a laugh she said: 'We've done this before.' When he grabbed at her wrist, she leaned over and kissed his cheek. 'I've got to go and see to some more deserving patients. Go to sleep and start getting better.'

After a week he was beginning to get restless. Then he had a visit from his father who had come down from army HQ. He saw at a glance that he had been promoted to General. His tall military figure filled Robbie with a sense of pride, and a rare amusement at the bottle of champagne he was carrying. His father took off his red-banded hat and placed it on the locker by the bedside. 'I only heard about you yesterday...I think they were trying to keep it from the enemy!' He took Robbie's hand in two of his and held it as if he would not let it go. The look in his eyes and the faint smile on his lips said it all.

'Sit down father. I'm pleased they could spare you a few minutes from the war.'

'Don't I get 'Dad' anymore? I'm only a general after all.'

As he sat down, they laughed together. The old familiarity had not changed, even though there was an element of hero worship in Robbie's attitude to his father.

'Bye the bye, I have a bit of news for you.' The father's face lit with a mischievous grin. 'You have been awarded a bar to your 'never-mentioned' DFC and a DSO. My boss, General Haig, had something to do with them.' He laughed. 'But I must say that old 'Boom' Trenchard was only too happy to comply.'

His father became serious for a moment. 'I understand from Dr. Gillespie that your leg is not likely to recover for sometime...so you won't be going back to your squadron...yet, anyway. When you can get about you will be going home. A long Blighty leave. Your mother will be glad to have you back for a while.'

Robbie studied his father's face, seeing in it the confidence that his father was trying hard to show. 'Let's not be too gloomy, Dad. I'm sure I can fly with one leg as well as most of the RFC with two.'

'I doubt if your commanders would allow you to try.' His father said, definitely, but gently. Then he added, obviously the product of some thought since seeing

Dr.Gillespie: 'You have told me about the need for trained flying instructors...maybe you can do that...if only in the meantime?' Robbie could hardly restrain a smile at his father's knowledge of his son's need to be doing something whilst he was hoping for a return of his leg's capacity. 'Sure...that's a possibility. Lots of those young lads would rather fight knowing they don't stand much of a chance...rather than drop out and risk a label like 'Lack of moral fibre'. I've had to send them up ignoring the fact that they were terrified. Those that I had time and opportunity to teach a few tricks survived longer. Those that survived a bad time...or a bad accident...needed time to come to terms with it. In some cases sending them straight back up again...whilst it worked with some...was fatal with others. There was not a moment when they were not scared to death...but then that was the same for most of us. The man who knew no fear was a freak.'

His father nodded his understanding. 'They are brave young men...they went up anyway. They are worth your home leave to give the flying school some of your expertise. Eh?' After your months of leading your squadron, I expect you could do with a rest anyway?'

Robbie nodded his acceptance of the situation. 'A friend of mine Tommy Traill put it succinctly: 'To go home wounded would have been an honourable way out of immediate danger and a temporary relief from the conflict.' He had thought himself wounded on returning from an operation. Another of my colleagues, Gwilym Lewis,

said to me: 'Ultimately the strain reduces you to a dithering state, near to imbecility. You are glad to go out and do the job, you could never say frankly: I am afraid, I can't face any more. So you continually had to win battles over yourself and your fears.'

His father took Robbie's hand. 'I know what leading a squadron means. I see something like that in the trenches.' He paused and smiled at his son's upturned face. 'Go home and rest. If you can... try and give the new recruits some of your experience. When he left, he stopped for a moment to talk to Eva who was coming to see the patient.

The next two weeks were for Robbie an interminable time, gaining strength. Learning to walk with a insensitive leg, and a stick. Several of the squadron called, and one of the flight commanders who was now commanding the squadron, sent him a heart-felt greeting and a flask of cognac. Eva was encouraging though she knew that Robbie would soon be going home. During those two weeks they found a new intimacy founded on mutual respect and a similar practical view of life in wartime. When a car came to take him to Dover, they parted without promises but with a knowledge that sometime, maybe, they would come together again.

Her last words were: 'If Siggy calls...I'll give him your regards.' They laughed together.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Robbie's reception at home was a mixture of smiles and tears. His mother fussed over him almost to distraction, and family friends tried to treat him as a hero. After a few days he escaped to his father's club in London, but the atmosphere was too frenetic. The crowds of determined pleasure seekers, the free-spending of the high-earners and profiteers safe from the war, filled him with disgust. When he travelled down to the coast the few holidaymakers were a reminder of how remote the civilian was from the war, with no conception of what it meant to the fighting man. The few weeks without the comradeship of the squadron, were as much as Robbie could stand.

He found when he made an enquiry at the War Office that not only was a posting to a training squadron possible, but very welcome. It seemed that the constant criticism of the active squadrons, and those of Trenchard's staff had those responsible for training searching for solutions. His warrant for the trip to Gosport and a training squadron came within days. A tearful goodbye with his mother and he left with a sense of relief. He found the training squadron's mess and quarters at Gosport were in a disused coastal-defence fort. The commandant, Richard Wainwright, was an ex-20 squadron pilot who had been shot down, given a DSO and posted to Gosport. The training aircraft were BE2c's and Avros, and training concentrated on turning out pilots in ten or fifteen hours. Sometimes according to Wainwright, the instructions from on high meant cutting the training programme drastically. As some of instructors were pilots who had broken under the pressure of reconnoitring and spotting over the enemy trenches, the standard of training had to concentrate on learning to fly, not learning to fight. The trainees acquired their fear of spinning from their instructors who had no idea how to get out of one. As Wainwright explained the situation, Robbie could see that the instructors needed training first. The commandant did not disagree.

Most of the training aircraft were Avros, beautifully light and responsive, an excellent training machine, unlike the BE2c which was so stable that the pupil got an exaggerated idea of their own competence. The Avro was driven by an 80 hp. monosoupape engine, a seven cylinder French rotary engine. The explosive mixture entered the cylinders from the crankcase through a perforated skirt (in the manner of two-stroke engines), and was discharged through the single valve in the head. The admission of the mixture into the cylinders could not be accurately controlled, and the engine had always to run at full throttle. The button switch controlling the engine was not robust, and if, as could happen, it broke off. The engine raced and the unfortunate novice, panic-stricken, in a machine with a runaway engine, was deserted by the clear thinking necessary to act quickly. The answer was to switch the petrol off, easy when you knew how...

Robbie was glad to find out that the other machines were the FE2b, a pusher, a development of the Vickers fighter, which had a 160 hp Beardmore engine and an Oleo telescopic undercarriage. These in the air, hung down like a pair of stilts on wheels, but when you touched the ground, it shut up, taking the weight and the shock of uneven landings and settling the machine on to the ground in a long comfortable rumble. It was a fine machine, slow, but very sturdy, and carried a pilot with an observer before him, in a boot which stuck out in front of the machine. Forward it had a fine arc of fire and, attacked head on, was extremely formidable. Attacked from the rear, it was necessary for the pilot to stand up in his seat, hold the stick with his knees and use his own gun, which fired backwards over the top plane- not an easy job, but frequently resorted to in a dog fight.

From what he knew from other squadrons which employed the aircraft, Robbie was aware that with good battle tactics, a flight of these machines was very deadly, even

to an enemy with far greater speed and manoeuvrability. This was a fact that needed to be instilled in young pilots. Often when they were used for bombing raids and reconnaissance, they fought their way home from twenty miles beyond the lines, continually circling to protect each other's tails, surrounded by enemy scouts. The British pilots could be trained to withstand a running fight in which the enemy could outpace, outclimb, and out-turn the FEs. It was the last word in British aircraft.

Robbie spent the first week observing, and quickly concluded that the deficiencies of the new trainees was the subject, between instructor and pupil, of their inadequacies. The disparaging comments at the end of training flights did nothing for the trainees' confidence. Only short of being insulting, the comments brusquely put down any question the trainee made.

Through the station commander, Robbie assembled the instructors. 'If I had you gentlemen in my squadron, I doubt whether I would allow you to fly. It is obvious to me that your skills in the air are limited, and you are not even passing the little you know on to your pupils.' There was a momentary uproar. 'Before the next intake of recruits, I intend to take each of you up in an Avro and show you some of the things one needs to know when facing the enemy. Anyone who fails to meet the basic standard I will expect, will be returned to their regiment...We will begin tomorrow.'

Over the next two weeks, Robbie was constantly in the air. As he expected the standards were low, and little was known of the tactics to be employed when facing a Hun. Nothing about coming out of the sun. Nothing about coming up from below behind the tail of the enemy. Nothing about tight turning to get inside the enemy. Nothing about how to get out of a spin...or forming a protective circle when under attack.

Each evening there was no fun and games in the mess. A restraint was placed on the serving of alcohol during his lectures with board and chalk. Robbie prodded them to answer his questions, and acknowledged the occasions when they got it right.

Gradually, those that were any good absorbed his instruction, and when he took them up they were not unhappy to demonstrate their new knowledge. Those that were no good, he weeded out. Better a few good instructors than have to rely on bad ones. The station commander, who had never been a fighter pilot, only an observer, sat in on Robbie's programme and gave it his support. He admitted that it had been necessary, but that he had not the skills to do it himself. At the end of two weeks, when the next intake came in, there was a different atmosphere on the station.

The word had got back to Trenchard's staff, and experienced pilots being sent home for a rest were seconded to the training school. Whilst the pressure for replacement pilots continued, apart from a grumble at the top, the new intakes were given twenty weeks training. Not enough, but with the more effective training, they had at least a chance of surviving a brush with the Germans. Robbie watched over them, and eventually saw them off to France.

Whilst Robbie's leg was still not functioning properly, he was aware that feeling was gradually coming back into it, and he could get around without a stick. He felt rested, and impatient to get on with something nearer the action. Therefore, a call from his father alerted him to the fact that he would shortly be given a new squadron, came as welcome news. As his father put it: 'As squadron commander, you are not expected to fly anyway...so why not nurse a new squadron with all you know about training?' 'Boom' Trenchard wants you back over here.'

Sweet words! His orders came through and he was to take a newly formed squadron of FEs to a little village called La Houssye , not far from Albert.

The straight road from Amiens to Albert was the artery which nourished the Somme battle. Troops, guns, ammunition, food and transport columns of all kinds were continually on the move up and down it. Beyond Albert was the redoubt of Fricourt, the head of the salient against which the offensive was launched, and so from Albert the roads forked along the arms of the salient, north towards Boisselle, east towards Montauban. Albert, the junction, came in for a great deal of shelling. There wasn't much left of it. The church was in ruins; but the Virgin at the top of the spire was still intact, though tottering, and it was a common superstition that when she fell the war would end.

The squadron aerodrome stood outside the little village of La Houssoye, right on this arterial road, a single straggling street of tumbledown farm buildings, mud-spattered walls, crumbling plaster, and plenty of rank manure to foster flies. Most of the personnel were quartered up and down the street, and three messes (for the squadron did not mess together, but by flights) stood along it. Beyond the village, towards the lines, where the poplars started again to flank the dusty road, was the aerodrome. A row of Bessonneau hangars (canvas-covered, wooden-framed sheds, holding four machines each) backed onto a small orchard where the squadron offices stood. The sheds faced the lines, fifteen miles away; but they were hidden from our direct view by the rolling undulations of the ground. A wide featureless landscape, typical of northern France, miles and miles of cultivated fields, some brown from the plough, others green with early spring crops. A mile or two south of the road, lay the shallow valley of the Somme. It was always there on the right hand, as the pilots left the aerodrome for the lines. The battle continued to rage below.

The squadron arrived in good order in the late afternoon after an uneventful trip. One of the planes sounded a bit sick, but otherwise the rest appeared to be in good order.

The ground staff were already there and awaiting the squadron, so mechanics got to work on the ailing machine. There would be little time for orientation, if Robbie knew the HQ. He took the opportunity on the first evening, to get acquainted with his pilots, and found gratifying the knowledge that most of them had at least twenty hours flying time logged. The squadron was already organised into three flights of four, each with a more-or-less experienced flight commander. The best of these seemed to be a Scotsman named Ian MacGregor, who had a tally of three enemy shot down. Sounding him out, Robbie decided to make him second in command. Seeing them all seated with a drink of some sort to follow a very respectable dinner, Robbie addressed them: 'We are a new squadron...nothing to unlearn...and we will be watched closely to see whether we match up to the standards of the RFC. We are well equipped, unlike some other squadrons, and as our primary role is to protect the bombers and reconnaissance aircraft operating in our sector. By 'protect' I mean...to engage enemy fighters whenever they attack our charges. I can tell you that they will...there are more than one *Jasta* to contend with...and we will contend. Our GOC Trenchard expects us to adopt an aggressive policy. You inexperienced pilots will best learn by copying the actions of their seniors, and I mean closely follow them. I'm not against the lone fighter pilots like Albert Ball ...but I want us to operate like a closely-knit team. That way we will be most effective. It worked for my previous squadron, and it will work for us.' Robbie lifted his glass in a toast. 'To the squadron...and our enemy's downfall!'

In the brief lull that followed their arrival, Robbie practised the squadron in infantry contact drill. At low altitude, in flights, the pilots sought out the red flares that the infantry used to indicate their positions. The observer would pinpoint the position on the map, put the information on a slip of paper and drop it in a weighted bag at

battalion headquarters whose position was known by a semi-circular sheet of white cloth pegged out on the ground. It was valuable training for the unfledged pilots and when bombing and strafing missions began in earnest a few days later, they were unlikely to get lost.

The Somme battle had ended in stalemate. Kitchener's volunteer army had been destroyed, though certain objectives had been achieved. The first was the relief of the French at Verdun that had been in danger of likewise being destroyed, but had recovered. And lastly, the enemy troops had been delivered a morale-busting campaign from which it was never to completely recover. The Allies had demonstrated an unsuspected ability to work together to the point of exhaustion. During the beginning of the battle the air battle had shown a transformation. The enemy's trenches were photographed without the Fokkers attacking. Artillery cooperation had been an essential requirement of the battle, with the new Sterling wireless transmitter now in general use. Bombing had been heavier than hitherto, and extended throughout the hours of daylight. The ineffective German airforce had been driven back from their lines, though at a cost of four casualties to one. Altogether, the RFC had lost a thousand air crew: 499 pilots and observers killed or missing; 250 wounded or injured; 250 found unsuitable and removed from service. This was the price of too rapid growth and inferior training. Robbie's squadron was one that had been earmarked for early engagement, but he had delayed its departure until he had completed the minimum training.

The new Albatross and Halberstadt scouts were clearly better than the FE2b, and there were more *Jastas* – it was reputed that some twenty five had been formed by the end of 1916. Trenchard appealed for twenty of the new scout squadrons in addition to those already agreed. He wanted a ratio of two scout squadrons to one corps squadron.

Word came down to existing squadrons that the German chief Hindenburg had said that 'our fighter squadrons which are far from numerous must not be equally distributed over the whole front. They must be grouped sometimes here, sometimes there, so as to prevent the enemy's observation for a few hours at least, and make our own observation possible.'

Aeroplanes since the early days were faster, flew higher, and the demands on aircrew in the techniques of patrol, spotting, map reading and communication were severe. Robbie knew this and schooled his men in 'safety first' techniques, that placed the protection of the bomber and spotters primary. Those of his squadron who could be described as 'firebrands' were not discouraged but cautioned to pick the right time for engaging the enemy in dog-fights. Robbie went up enough times as an observer with his men so that they got used to his tactics, and when circumstances prompted it, urged his best men to confront the enemy. What he did not know was that the Germans were adopting a new strategy, that would also affect the air war...

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Germans were constructing a new defensive line – the Hindenberg line – well behind their existing trench system. They were preparing to give ground, pulling substantially back, but secretly so that they were be fighting on ground of their own choosing. The Allies meanwhile were preparing for another massive frontal assault, territorially deprived as they were. There seemed no alternative if they were to inflict on the enemy a final and overwhelming defeat. The Germans were also committed to a war of attrition, but they no longer believed in outright military victory looking to unrestricted submarine warfare as a route to victory, a compromise peace that would leave the Germans with the fruits of their victories. This new strategy, they hoped would be effective before any American intervention.

It was not until 25 February, 1917, that the Allies had irrefutable evidence of the construction of the Hindenberg line. Six Sopwith Pup pilots of 54 squadron reported the movement of German troops to the new positions, from Lille to Metz. When the British made an unopposed advance on 17 March, finding the devastated ground an obstacle in itself.

General Nivelle, the new French commander-in-chief, put aside the tactics of General Joffre for a cautious step-by-step advance, and advocated a single decisive blow at maximum strength. Lloyd George, the new prime minister, was in favour of a more vigorous prosecution of the war. Douglas Haig, the British C-in-C, had misgivings about such a strategy. The newly formed British War Cabinet appointed Nivelle in overall command giving him the final say. Haig decided not to resign and gave way. He would have preferred an attack further north, to clear the Flemish ports and deny their use to U-boats.

Haig was aware of the ascendancy of the new *Jastas* with their superior aeroplanes. He had expressed his view forcibly, because he believed in the air war. He pointed out that the RFC would not be ready to support a major offensive in early April, the projected date. He wrote: 'Our fighting machines will almost certainly be inferior in number and quite certainly in performance to those of the enemy. Supremacy in the air could not be looked for in April, and might even pass to the enemy. The new types of aircraft: the Bristol fighter, the SE5, and the Camel, were expected to be superior to the Germans but were not yet available. The aggressive policy, notwithstanding the likelihood of heavy casualties, would continue. The RFC were superior in numbers, there were 24 squadrons alone – 365 aircraft - on the Arras front. The weather during the winter of 1916/17 was abysmal, greatly hampering operations.

It was during this uneasy spell that Robbie was called to headquarters for a meeting with his commanders. He drove over with a feeling of unease, notwithstanding the spoken support he had had to his policy of tight formation flying to reduce the casualty rate. The general who received him Robbie recognised as one of Trenchard's staff who had visited the squadron with this chief.

'Take a seat major,' he began, offering Robbie a cigarette from a silver case. 'You know the Germans are constructing the Hindenberg line?' Robbie nodded. The General went on: 'You chaps have been taking photographs of it, for some weeks...but we need more than that.' He paused and directed Robbie's attention to a map on the table in front of them. The Hindenberg line was sketchily drawn on it. 'We have an agent working with the Germans, and the last message from him suggest we pick him and his detailed report up, and bring him over.' The general looked Robbie full in the eye. His mouth was set and the rest of his face emotionless. 'We need that report badly, major. A new offensive will start soon, and we can't send our

men in without the information in that report. I have convinced Haig and Trenchard that you are the man who will see that he is picked up and bring him back...’ He lit another cigarette, blowing the smoke slowly into the air, giving time for Robbie to digest this proposal. Robbie slowly nodded. ‘Yes ...we’ll do it. Show me where...and when.’ They poured over the map together. The general put his finger on a spot ten miles or so behind where the German HQ was reputed to be. ‘Here,’ he said, ‘it’s a level piece of ground...although there are trees around the perimeter.’ He took a piece of paper from his pocket. ‘Map co-ordinates and date and time. I’m afraid it is only two days hence. The agent’s name is Jacque but he understands English.’ Robbie put the paper in his inside pocket. A little piece of paper, but a lot of risk. The General took Robbie’s hand and shook it. ‘Good luck to your airman...we *do* need that report.’

As he walked back to his car, notwithstanding a leg that still did not function properly, Robbie decided that he would do it. The General did not say that he could not. It would mean low flying both there and back. An early morning return flight. He would take an FE2d, and if necessary would fight his way back. There was the option of taking another plane with him, but on reflection decided that would double the responsibility and the sight of two planes crossing the lines would perhaps alert the Germans that something special was happening. He would trust to luck, and at the moment he felt lucky. Before his departure he briefed his flight commanders for that day’s operations, an attack on two batteries of guns concealed in a small wood that were becoming too accurate on Allied ammunition dumps.

Daylight was at 6.15am, and when he was taking off on his outward trip, there was a light wind from the east. It was very cold even at ground level, and Robbie, as warmly wrapped as possible, fastened his fur-lined mits tightly. The plane’s rotary engine

started evenly, and to his finely tuned ear, everything sounded good. He had a map open on his knee, but this was merely for emergency use only; he was familiar with the approach and his memory visualised the ground with the trees. When he crossed the lines it was still half light, so the German archies gave only a desultory chatter. He came back down to little over a hundred feet and held a course of east-north-east. It was only a few minutes and he spotted the stretch of level ground which was his target. At little over stalling speed he flew around the perimeter, looking for a sign of life. On his second circuit he saw a figure emerge from the trees and make for the centre of the field. The figure waived an urgent hand, looking behind him at the trees he had left, evidently fearful of something. It was the lights from the muzzles of pistols or rifles. As Robbie came down as near as he could to the running figure, the man staggered slightly but kept on running. Robbie brought the plane to a stop, with the engine running and the propeller turning. He jumped out of his seat and ran to assist the agent who was struggling to get to him. He grabbed the man by the shoulder and half-dragged him to the observer's cockpit. He unceremoniously bundled him into the seat, jumped in behind him and gave the plane full throttle.

The bullets were whistling around them as they roared down the open ground for a hasty take-off. The plane just lifted over the trees to clear, then dropped down again to skim obstacles before them. It was certainly not unlikely that the German archies and fighters were waiting for him. The short flight seemed to take forever. The agent had not moved since he was bundled into the observer's cockpit, and Robbie was too busy to give him more than a quick glance. The exploding archie bursts rocked the aircraft, and a hole or two appeared in the fuselage. Then they were clear, and the enemy aircraft that Robbie had half-expected from the knowledge that his passenger was missed, did not materialise. They landed without further incident, and Robbie could

not help a sigh of relief. Ground staff that had been waiting his return, came running to the machine as it came to a halt. It was soon seen that the agent had been wounded in the leg, and had to be carefully helped onto a stretcher. The man was clutching a bag, and resisted being relieved of it. 'Into the ambulance,' Robbie shouted, 'take him to hospital and I'll let them know he is coming.'

As the ambulance disappeared off the airfield, Robbie went to the telephone. He first rang the hospital, and told them of the wounded man on the way and the need for security. He then rang HQ and told the General that the agent had been collected. That he and his papers were on the way to the hospital, as he had suffered a shrapnel wound in the leg. The sound on the end of the phone was one of relief, followed by congratulations for an operation well done. 'I think you will get a medal for this Major,' the general added as he put down the telephone. Robbie shrugged his shoulders, at that moment all he wanted was a large whisky. He stood with it in his hand as he watched the dawn patrol leaving.

With the superiority of the new German aircraft, casualties began increasing. In the last week of March and the beginning of April, Robbie's squadron lost four pilots. Not as bad as some of the others, but then Robbie's safety first tactics had already proven to be sparing of casualties. One issue raised by 25 Squadron was the value of using safety-belts. The commander of that squadron forbade his crews from using them on the grounds that in a crash the occupants would be thrown clear, instead of being crushed by a rear mounted engine when it plunged forward. It was an issue that Robbie decided to discuss in the mess, after all they did all the flying. There was a difference of opinion, as there were not many survivors in the squadron of a crash. In the end Robbie said: 'I'm going to leave it to the individual. It's not an issue that I am going to issue a command on.' When the following day a crew survived a crash and

still wore seat belts it still left the matter undecided. The communication between flying crews was more important, and the system of hand signals that Robbie had devised was further refined for formation flying. Every new pilot was rehearsed in the various formations that were off-putting to attacking German aircraft.

When the squadron was instructed to photograph important rail communications in preparation for an attempt to capture Vimy Ridge, Robbie decided to send the flights in groups of three, with the lead machine in each case carrying the camera, and two attendants in close escort. The observer in the lead machine took the photographs with the camera fixed to the outside of the cockpit. The pilot, of course, was behind him, slightly elevated on the petrol tank, with the engine and radiator at his back. He had a magnificent view forward, but he could see nothing behind. The observer had to operate the Lewis gun in front, as well as another mounted between him and the pilot. By standing up somewhat precariously, he could fire upwards and rearwards over the top wing. Whereas in 1916 the FE had been more than a match for the Fokker monoplane, it was now totally outclassed.

The two accompanying aircraft in each group of three were to act as close escort, and Robbie had been told that simultaneously there would be offensive patrols above and around them, as well as several other scouts patrolling the area. What HQ did not tell him, assuming they knew, was that Richthofen was now operating the latest German fighter, the Albatross D111 and had shot down only the previous day an FE8, the latest and last, an already obsolescent pusher-type fighter.

Robbie was to learn later on de-briefing that the leader of the first three climbed to 10,000 feet as he crossed the lines, then signalled his observer to ascertain if the escort pair were in place. The observer shook his head. For some reason they had outpaced them. He fired a green Very light as the signal to close up, and when his

observer nodded, he set course for the target. At pilot's signal the observer leaned over the starboard side of the aircraft and began taking photographs. Neither man realised that the escorts had dropped back. The pilot, in the next moment, heard machine gun fire and saw a line of bullet holes appear in his lower left wing. They were taken completely by surprise. In turning to face the attack, the pilot, attempting to get the enemy plane in front of him, nearly jettisoned his observer. Another burst of fire, this time from the starboard side, silenced his engine and pierced his right ankle, knocking his foot off the rudder bar. As he continued to circle, trying to catch sight of his attacker, he was saved again and again by the bulk of the engine behind him as bullets poured in. Now down to 2000 feet, he was conscious that the firing had stopped. He headed for the lines only three miles away.

The observer now pointed dramatically upward, and the pilot saw a very fast scarlet biplane, giving them a murderous burst of fire, skimmed over them so fast there was no time to use the back gun, and the front gun had jammed. The plane's engine spluttered and died. The pilot tried everything he knew to restart but without avail, so they had no option but to land where they could, somewhere between Vimy and Frenoy, avoiding the numerous shell-holes. When they examined themselves it was to find their leather coats full of bullet-holes, and both of them had been wounded.

Happily they were on the right side of the line. When they learned that the scarlet machine was flown by Richtofen, they realised how fortunate they had been.

The two escorting planes had both had engine trouble, and were unable to keep up. It was an unfortunate ending to what should have been a well planned and successful operation. The escorts at least were able to avoid the Germans and get back. The profit and loss account was not entirely unsatisfactory as the few photographs taken were found to be valuable.

Word was percolating through the squadrons that better aircraft were in the pipeline. They had heard this before and for months now they had been operating with aircraft so far below the German fighters it was suicidal going up with them. Being more in numbers than the enemy was no consolation when it seemed that all they were doing was presenting more easy targets. 40 Squadron, on the 9 March, had gone out on an offensive patrol with nine FE8s. One machine was forced down with engine trouble, but the remaining eight were swooped on by five Albatross D111 led by Richthofen. Four were shot down and the other four forced to land in a damaged state, a catastrophe which persuaded the High Command to re-equip the squadron with Nieuports. A few DH2's which tried to help lost one of their number.

Outclassed though they were, the squadron had fought to the death, very nearly achieving the impossible by shooting down the Red Baron himself. With petrol pouring into his cockpit from a pierced fuel tank and his engine riddled, Richtofen looked a certainty for a 'flamer', but, mercifully for him and tragically for his future victims, he forced-landed safely.

With the news of this calamity to the FE8s came word from on high, that Robbie's squadron was to lose their obsolete aircraft and would be replaced by FE2ds with the Rolls-Royce engine, not the best solution but better than they had. His men were more enthusiastic as a consequence, but Robbie was not to know that his squadron was entering the last days of March and April that would become known as 'Bloody April'...

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

When Robbie's squadron heard about the change of aircraft, some unbelieving bright spark said 'Don't hold your breath!' It was a surprise then, when over the last days of March, the new aircraft were ferried down from the pool at Bethune Headquarters. With them came an unexpected understanding of the pilots, giving them freedom from operations for a few days. Robbie used the time to test the aircraft, note the increased speed and manoeuvrability, and evolve a formation tactic to suit. As he understood it, these aircraft were a stop-gap until the better fighting machine, the SE5, became available, but as he reminded his pilots 'don't stare a gift horse in the mouth!' How well these temporary planes would fare against the *Jastas* remained to be seen...

The battle for Vimy Ridge was still going on, and the squadron's main duties were still reconnaissance, photography, spotting for the artillery, and bombing raids. They were quickly aware that formations of enemy scouts, taking advantage of their superior machines, were patrolling their side of the lines ready to pounce. The routine of their duties might be pedestrian, but they could not get bored with the constant attention of the Germans. Those of the squadron who had successful encounters with the enemy, were encouraged at the debriefing to pass on their experiences to the others. That way the squadron as a whole seemed to become more expert. Morale was high, even though the regular loss of crews continued.

There was no gainsaying the confidence the enemy had acquired with the superiority of the Albatross and Halberstadt, but they were still cautious in their new machines. One of the pilots reported after a three hour photographic shoot in the morning on two Hun batteries, that he had a scrap with a Halberstadt. 'He beetled off to his lines

afterwards at low altitude.’ For once the assembled pilots agreed that it was caution and inexperience of the average German pilot that saved the Englishman, and probably countless others at this time. On another occasion a flight of three ran into a group of five Hun machines and chased them off. However, they found the next group they encountered less timid, and in the melee one of the squadron was shot down. Meeting Richthofen or any other *Jasta* led by an aggressive leader was quite a different matter.

The formation flying of the *Jastas*, where an experienced fighter like Richthofen led his squadron in a tight group, was the method they followed, and Robbie drilled his flight commanders to hold their flights tightly in hand. The air war was changing.

Whilst the exploits of the aces like Albert Ball, were an essential part of the image of a fighting RFC, there was more merit in saving the lives of pilots until they had acquired enough individual experience. The tactic worked – certainly in Robbie’s squadron - and even though it was invariably the flight leader who shot down the enemy, the squadron as a whole acquired a confidence that showed in a reduction in the ‘butcher’s bill’.

Some of the gaiety of the early days began to return to the squadron, and detailing flights for hazardous low flying in support of the men on the ground, was less of an ordeal for Robbie, with the positive attitude of the pilots. This happy state of affairs was given a jolt when, among the replacement pilots, Robbie thought he recognised one of the teenaged young men. As they introduced themselves to the squadron commander with their names and meagre flying time, the familiar face identified himself as the young brother of Eva. ‘I think you know my sister...Sir. She’s a doctor in the hospital near Amiens.’ The young face reminded Robbie so much of his sister, it was heart stopping. He nodded gravely, trying hard to give a smiling welcome.

‘Yes, Jack,’ Robbie replied, ‘I thought you were still at school? Anyway, how did you manage to get posted to this squadron...a coincidence?’

Jack’s young face broke into a broad grin. ‘I persuaded them I knew you...and that you were like my elder brother...I hope you will forgive my fib, Sir?’

Robbie shrugged a shoulder. It really did not matter where he came from. The boy would have to take his chance with the others, though Robbie knew he would not relish the task of reporting his loss...if it came to that. ‘I don’t often get the chance to see Eva...this is a fighting squadron. I only visit the hospital when I go to see to one of my wounded flyers.’ He dismissed the young men with a smile, reminding Jack to ring his sister. He had no intention of ringing Eva himself, and being invited by her to ‘take care’ of her brother. On reflection though, knowing her as he did, she was not likely to put him such a situation. Nevertheless, he could have wished that the boy had gone to another squadron.

The following morning, with Vimy Ridge almost invisible under a blanket of shrapnel from British guns, Robbie allocated Jack to the flight that had recently lost a pilot. Dawn patrol was to be a sweep over a stretch behind the German lines where new artillery groups were doing some devastating shelling of British forward positions. Robbie did not fly with them as he was burdened with an annoying amount of paper work that Headquarters insisted he return ASAP. When the first flight returned two hours’ later, it was obvious that they had met some heavy opposition. Two planes were badly damaged, and one observer wounded. Jack’s flight came in a half an hour later, and one plane had been shot down out of the four. The boy’s face was a sickly colour. The flight leader’s report was typically that of an experienced pilot: ‘We located the two Hun batteries that were giving our lads merry hell. We reported them and spotted for our artillery. Both batteries were silenced. We were then attacked by a

group of five Hun machines. That's when we lost Phillips. We fought them off and one enemy machine went down in flames. The enemy turned away and I took the flight up to 1500 feet to meet another group of Albatrosses before they had time to dive on us. We exchanged a lot of fire without any losses, and when the Germans turned away, I brought the flight back home. Young Jack here did alright.' Robbie nodded in acknowledgment of Jack's baptism of fire. With a break in the weather – a snow shower – Robbie took the opportunity to give a dinner in Auchel to celebrate the award of an MC to one of his flight leaders. The dinner was a great success, and it put the smile back on young Jack's face.

The following morning word came down for photographs to be taken of part of the Hindenberg Line. Robbie decided on two flights: one to take the photographs and the other to patrol above them and defend against any attack. There was a lot of cloud about and the German archie was as troublesome as ever. The operation took nearly three hours and towards the end of it the expected attack came. From the red colour of the machines the flight leader, hovering over his charges, guessed it was Richtofen. He signalled for the flight to form a ring – a 'ring –o-roses' and as they careered around over the German lines, one of the flight, who was laggard in getting into position, was shot down. The squadron were learning the cost of what was to become known as 'bloody April'. After some minutes of this defensive tactic, the Jasta lost interest and broke away.

The Canadian ground forces, on whose front Squadron 24 operated, were due to attack on the 9th and needed fresh photos of the Ridge. The planned air offensive was not due to start until the day after the request reached Robbie's squadron. 'A' flight volunteered to do it, which meant using machines that were being serviced for the planned offensive. The Germans were alert to the pending attack, and made every

effort to prevent the flight taking the photos. Their scouts came diving again and again firing both incendiary and ordinary bullets. Fortunately for 'A' flight a group of three Nieuports from 60 Squadron were patrolling the lines to help any reconnaissance planes in trouble, and joined the melee. With a sense of relief 'A' flight turned back to the British lines and the safety of the aerodrome. The photographs proved to have been worth the risk and were well received by the Canadians. 'A' flight needed a lot of patching up before the machines were fit for the next day's operations.

The Vimy Ridge offensive began on the 4th April 1917 with a massive five-day bombardment of 2,800 guns. On the 9th the infantry would go over the top. Unfortunately, the bad weather made artillery cooperation very difficult. Even so when two flights of Robbie's squadron took off they found the sky thick with British machines. A major effort was being made to provide the army with all the spotting, and low flying it needed. It was also a debut of the new Bristol fighters of 48 Squadron, that had been in France four weeks, and had yet to be blooded. The Brisfit was a sizeable machine: 26 feet long and with a 40 feet wing span. The two crew sat back to back, the pilot with a synchronised Vickers, the observer with a Lewis mounted on a Scarff Ring with a swivel seat, firing on the flanks and to the rear. It was the observer's wide field of fire that was regarded as the bullpoint, especially as the plane was suspected of having inherent structural weakness which prohibited aggressive manoeuvring. A doze of action would prove it capability.

The commander of the flight was William Leefe Robinson who had made a name for himself shooting down a German airship over London. The route chosen for this first offensive patrol, seemed designed to precipitate a meeting with Richtofen over Douai. The new plane should have been employed, like the F2b, with an offensive and

defensive role based on the observer's gun, in close formation for mutual protection. Not doing so offered a target to Richtofen and his Jasta, and four of them were shot down. Two by Richtofen. A fifth was badly shot about but got back along with the sixth. Leefe Robinson was shot down, but landed and was taken prisoner. It was a calamitous baptism of fire for the new plane. Richtofen considered his Albatross vastly superior to the new British machine, but after a few technical and tactical adjustments to it, he was to be proved very wrong.

So far 'Bloody April' had not proved to disastrous to the FE2ds of Robbie's Squadron but the Nieuports of 60 Squadron and the FE2ds of 57 Squadron suffered badly. A bombing offensive which began on the 5th, aimed at forcing the enemy to withdraw anti-aircraft defences and aeroplanes from the front line, also suffered costly setbacks. The only bright spot on the horizon was that America had declared war on Germany.

But there was no let up, the battle was still raging and artillery spotting was even more important. Wherever possible British low-flying aircraft were expected to report on the forward positions of infantry, even though the soldiers were reluctant to betray their positions by using flares. This meant that aircraft were sometimes having to go lower than a hundred feet, and expose themselves to a barrage of machine gun and rifle bullets.

Knowing that British pilots would take any risk to obtain accurate intelligence for the decision makers at GHQ, the top brass were only too willing to ask for and expect that pilots would endanger their lives to get what they wanted. In the five days of the preliminary bombardment, from 4th to 8th April, the RFC lost 75 machines in action and 105 pilots and observers – 19 killed, 13 wounded and 73 missing. Because so many of the replacement pilots were inexperienced, it was a destructive period for accidents.- 56 planes were wrecked. The wastage on some squadrons, particularly of

observers, was catastrophic. 43 Squadron reported 'of observers who came out with us from England – eighteen in number – not one remains'.

Trenchard, though suffering from bronchitis, toured the front line squadrons in an RE8. It was an early morning visit when he arrived at Robbie's squadron, but not before the dawn patrol had already taken off. Two flights were to escort a group of bombers making for a vital junction ten miles behind the German lines. There was reported to be a whole line of ammunition wagons – and what was unusual for the Germans who were averse to mixing men and explosives – at least a thousand reinforcements. It was a unique opportunity, and not to be missed. As the flights were expected back within the hour, Trenchard waited with Robbie on the field, anxious not only for the success of the operation, but evidently wanting to know whether the Rolls-Royce -engined FE2ds were coping better with the German fighters. Robbie had only begun to explain his method of the best use of the faster-engined plane when the first of the dawn patrol began to arrive. They counted them in...one, two, three...five out of nine, and two of them were damaged.

The first flight leader, an Australian called Burke, came limping across. 'They were waiting for us...' He blurted out, dragging off his leather helmet. 'A tempting target, and a trap! The bombers did a little damage...and half of them were shot down by a flock of Albatrosses.' He paused, his eyes on Trenchard. 'I think another flight could take advantage of the confusion and cause some more... I'll be happy to lead another flight in?'

Robbie, conscious of Trenchard's presence and his policy, shook his head. 'No, I'll take them. Let me have everything that's ready.' He excused himself from his chief, and hurried back to his office for his helmet and gloves.. With the remaining three machines, complete with observers, he took off, acknowledging Trenchard's 'good

luck' with a waive. The young Jack was one of the three, flying at Robbie's right hand. As they approached the junction which was wreathed in smoke, he motioned to Jack to keep tight in. They swooped in at full throttle. They would have to make do with whatever damage they could wreak with three twenty pound bombs on each plane and their machine guns. They were very low and risked fire and explosions. They were still together when they got beyond the junction and turned for another run. By now the ammunition train was on fire, and one of the infantry trucks was derailed. Out of the corner of his eye Robbie saw that they were coming under attack from German fighters, a Jasta in multi-colours. There was at least six of them and they came swooping down, following a leader with a trailing helmet ribbon. The plane on Robbie's left went first, turning over and crashing into the ammunition train. Robbie and Jack kept on firing as they pulled out beyond the junction, but Jack did not make it. His plane seemed to fall apart and crashed down onto the track. Robbie had only time to try a swift left turn to avoid the hail of lead, then his plane went into a wobble its tail shot away. He was already close to the ground and pancaked in a field beyond the junction. When he tried to get out of the cockpit, he realised he had been shot again in his weakened leg. He sat back glad at least that the plane did not burst into flame. He could not torch his plane without burning himself. Three more planes lost out of the squadron's depleted number, and their CO a prisoner...

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The time between being hoisted out of his cockpit and finding himself lying in a hospital bed was a haze of pain. The bullet had gone through a fleshy part of his leg and though the wound was extensive, was easily patched up by the German doctors, but the numbness he had known so well had returned. The German doctor, in attendance, tested all the reflexes and movements that he had been subjected to with his earlier wound. Robbie did not acquaint him with the fact that he had recovered from his previous wound sufficiently to allow him to fly a plane. Unaware of this the German doctor, with a serious face, pronounced: 'Herr Major...you will not be able to walk again without a stick...and no more flying. I'm so sorry.' The doctor was surprised how well his patient took the bad news.

The attention he received was exemplary, and the other patients, German soldiers, treated him with great courtesy, calling him *der flieger*, and shared their parcels with him.

From the comments of his nursing staff, Robbie quickly realised that it was a consequence of a request from the Jasta that had shot him down. A week later he received a visit from the German squadron commander, Gerard von Schultz, an ace with the ribbon of the Pour le Merite round his neck. He was sufficiently recovered to be allowed to sit outside in the sunshine and smoke. Schultz came with his adjutant, and after saluting him, sat beside him. In a quiet confidential voice that demonstrated that he had learned his English accent at Oxford, he said: 'I am complimented to meet you Major, having had many a foray with your squadron. Your RFC will have difficulty replacing such an expert squadron commander.' He offered Robbie a cigarette from a silver case. 'I am a friend of your cousin Sigmund von Kliet, and have told him that you are here. He expresses his regrets that you have been crippled

and will call upon you as soon as he can. In the meantime, I am to see that you neglect nothing that will improve your health and your comfort.’ At a signal from Schultz an attendant came forward carrying a tray of drinks. ‘Champagne, Major? The best that I could find.’

They toasted each other and their squadrons. ‘I think that if your squadron had been flying your new....Bristol fighter...it might have been a different story.’ Robbie acknowledged the rightness of the comment with a bow, but would not be drawn on the merits of the new plane. He was aware that its first appearance before modification had been disastrous, but that now it was earning an effective reputation. He would have given a great deal to fly the Bristol in combat, particularly against such a redoubtable opponent as Gerard von Schultz. The German commander, in his turn, was only to pleased to discuss the Albatross he was using, dwelling at length on its turning ability and its speed in a dive. ‘I regret that I will not have the opportunity to meet you in combat Major...I think you and I would have had a ‘joyful’ ...if that is the right English word ...few minutes against each other.’ He got to his feet. ‘I must leave you Major...but if I can do anything for you...the staff here will pass on any request.’ He saluted Robbie, than leaned forward and shook him warmly by the hand. Robbie watched the German commander leave with his adjutant. Meeting a squadron commander from the other side of the line had been a pleasure, particularly over a glass of champagne.

A few days later, he was hobbling down the path that traversed the hospital lawn, when Siggy paid a visit. Robbie stumbled in turning around, and gave a hearty curse. There was a bellow of laughter from his cousin as he walked to meet him. ‘Your war wound has not improved your language, Robbie!’ Siggy took him a warm embrace,

and then guided him towards a garden seat. Siggy looked at his cousin, his eyes full of mischievous laughter. 'That is not a grey hair I see...making you look older than me?' To Robbie, Siggy had a new maturity, an older confidence that the boy he knew so little time before, did not possess. The war was leaving its mark on him, and there was a crease around the side of his mouth that suggested he most often firmed his lips and perhaps gritted his teeth. Robbie wondered if he looked the same to his cousin. He realised that the time he had been in hospital had eased an ache in his shoulders that was constantly there. With the lives of their men to conserve, and their morale to maintain, was a responsibility that was more exhausting than the thrilling minutes of combat.

'Have you seen Eva? Is she still working at that hospital?' Siggy looked at him intently. 'I know that you care about her too.' Robbie shrugged. 'Of course I do...we are too much alike not to want the same woman. To answer your question: I have seen very little of her...and now...I don't want to be the bearer of bad news.'

Siggy lifted an enquiring eyebrow. Robbie explained: 'Her brother Jack wangled his way into my squadron...I did what I could...but I had to include him in that last operation...when he was shot down.'

Siggy put a comforting arm about Robbie's shoulders. 'That is the price of this war...you could not do anything other than use him. He would not have expected anything else. Those that survive are the lucky few...Anyway...my cousin...and my friend, you are out of it now. You won't be having to send young inexperienced men up to fight anymore. I've had a word and there is a good chance you will be repatriated as unfit to fight. So maybe...you will get the opportunity to give my love to Eva...my undying love!'

Robbie looked his surprise. He had not even given a thought to that possibility.

Siggy nodded. 'After you leave here you will be sent to a rehabilitation centre to await the Red Cross arranging your repatriation. I can't have the son of a general and the cousin of Germany's famous flyer...waiting in a queue!'

For an hour they talked of old times. The times when they spend holidays together and vied with one another in play. Siggy had brought a hip flask of Schnapps, and they toasted each other and their air forces. It recaptured some of the magic of their old relationship, and they revelled in it. It ended with a quick embrace, and best wishes for mutual good fortune. And Siggy turned abruptly away and left Robbie seated on the bench seat. For the first time he felt alone.

It was a few interminable weeks before he was sent to a holding station awaiting the drawn-out process of innumerable documents and the allocation to a small passenger vessel. At the end of September, Robbie arrived in Dover with a few score of other repatriated service men. His father had arranged for him to be met and transported home. It was all too bewildering. Yet adjusting to the abrupt chain of events, Robbie knew that given some improvement in his leg he would have to be back in France again in some capacity or other. One thing he could not endure was the strange disconnection from the war that the civilians seemed to revel in.

Robbie got in touch with the War Office, flagrantly using his father's name, and arranged to see a very senior official. Before the appointment he practised walking, trying to look at ease with only the lightest use of his stick. When he arrived in the designated office, he was relieved to see his interviewer wore a RFC uniform with wings on his breast. He was aware that the officer was watching keenly as he walked in and took the seat provided.

'And what can I do for you Major?' The man was smiling. 'I am Captain Lockhart.'

‘I want to go back to France,’ Robbie began abruptly, ‘I can run a squadron without having to fly. Most of my last tour I spent directing my flights and organising combat training for new pilots.’ He realised that the officer was eyeing his ribbons of DFC, MC, and DSO. He riffled through the file in front of him, turning over papers, examining lists. Eventually he said: ‘You were repatriated as being unfit to fight, and to take up a post such as you suggest, violates the terms of your repatriation. As much as I want to help you and oblige the General...you are placing me in a most difficult position...’ His voice trailed off, his expression neutral. Robbie had the impression that he was waiting for Robbie to accept the situation and leave. This was he something that Robbie did not intend to do.

‘If I can’t command a squadron...why can I not advise squadrons who are having trouble...untrained replacements...heavy combat casualties. You can see from my file that I have plenty of experience...’He paused, not wishing to press too hard..’There has to be room for an **adviser** ...I’m sure General Trenchard – who knows me and my father – would approve...Why waste my experience when there is a shortage of men with a good combat record?’

Lockhart considered the proposal. At last he gave a half-hearted nod. ‘I can’t decide this...it might have to be referred to General Trenchard.’ He closed the file. ‘I will do what I can...I know of your record...and will deal with the matter as quickly as the system will allow...but remember the terms of your repatriation.’ He stood up and held out a friendly hand. ‘Good luck, Major.’

After two weeks of impatient waiting Robbie had all but given up, so that when an official-looking letter arrived, he was having coffee with his mother and he looked at it apprehensively before opening it. The letter was signed by a Colonel of appointments and instructed him to proceed to RFC headquarters now at Amiens and

await further instructions...Robbie could not help but whoop with excitement, oblivious to his mother's stricken look. He passed her the letter. 'I'm almost going to be a civilian, Mother.'

As she recovered herself, she said. 'I don't trust you within sight of a plane. I must give your father a ring, and ask him to keep an eye on you!'

When Robbie arrived at RFC headquarters, Trenchard and his adjutant and faithful secretary, were out visiting the squadrons. The admin officer was anxious that he take a few days to familiarise himself with the office routine and the posting of the squadrons.

There was a message from his father proposing a meeting in a restaurant in Amiens that evening. But first he had the sadness of seeing Eva and telling her how sorry he was about the death of young Jack. He found her in a quiet mood, but her welcome to him was as warm as he could have wished for. Her kiss was sweet, and her smile removed any awkwardness he felt at seeing her again. If she had allowed him to, he would have taken her to Amiens to meet his father, but as she quietly said 'I think your father has every right expect to see his son alone. After all, how often have father and son fought in the same army?' As they parted she gave him the sort of hug, that he had often seen his father give his mother.

The waiter in the restaurant evidently knew his father, and a bottle of good wine was waiting on the table. Robbie saw in his father's face the strain of the last three years, yet his eyes had not lost their humour. They embraced before they sat down opposite each other. 'Good to see you father,' Robbie said, 'it has been a long war year or two.'

His father nodded, then slowly poured the wine. He lifted his glass in a toast. 'To those of us who have gone before. May they sleep a well-earned rest.' When the toast

was done he spoke in that well-remembered cultivated voice. 'Your mother is anxious that you do not look for more hazard than your new job entails. She is hoping that, as you have done your bit, as they say, you can let others do the fighting.' He looked at Robbie carefully. 'I am not asking you to do anything other than you feel you must...your record to date is exemplary, and needs no justification. All I would ask of you is that you remember I have only one son...and I am rather attached to him.' His father reached over and squeezed his hand on the table.

Robbie nodded. They understood each other well enough. 'I am over here, Father, because I think I can still help. Too many of our young men's lives are being wasted. Inexperienced young men are leading squadrons...I think I can give some useful advice...that's a bad word...but you know what I mean.'

There dinner had been chosen by the general, and it was good, even for the fourth year of war. They left together, his father dropping Robbie off at RFC headquarters. The next morning one of Trenchard's staff had a message from the chief: Robbie was to visit 25 Squadron (who were adjusting to the arrival of the new Bristol fighter) and talk tactics with the Squadron Commander.

Captain Monroe (Monty) Pierce was awaiting him when he arrived on the station. They had met casually before, at some inter squadron sports occasion, and as a consequence their meeting was more relaxed than it might have been. They shook hands outside the Mess Hall, and walked in together. There was only a couple of men there, and at Robbie's questioning look, Pierce said: 'I anticipated that you would want to address the squadron...after we have had a chat.' He indicated the way to his office. Robbie refused a drink, it was too early for him. Pierce helped himself to a whisky with a lot of water.

‘Let me make my position clear,’ Robbie said, looking the commander in the eye, ‘I am not here to undermine your authority. I am hoping I can offer some tactics which will improve your safety, your effectiveness with the Bristol fighter. If you don’t want to employ my suggestions...so be it. But remember Captain, I have had three years fighting the Hun...’

Captain Pierce nodded. ‘You’ve cleared the air...I will be glad to have you talk to my pilots.’

When they were assembled, Robbie was the centre of their attention. Several of them with a few weeks experience were trying to appear nonchalant. There was no talk, Evidently, if their Squadron Commander was in favour of this, it was all right with them.

Robbie had asked for a chalk and board which caused a wry smile or two.

‘Gentlemen, ‘ he began, ‘you are going to fight with a new machine. This is both good and bad. Good because it is as good as anything you will face up there. Bad because it takes an experienced pilot a few hours flying to get accustomed to its vagaries. And believe me it has some...I’ve flown it.’ He paused and drew three rectangles on the board. One at the base, one at the left hand but higher, and a third on the right hand but higher still.

‘These rectangles represent formations of your planes. The bottom one at 6000 feet; the next at 7500 feet on the left; and the top one at 9000 feet on the right. Each will be a section of five planes, a much better fighting unit than four or six. The flight leader in each case will carry his group into a fight, and be the sharp point that will down the Hun. This staggered arrangement over 3000 feet, allows for some protection from above, and those below will be able to protect the underside of those above. It has been found that the Hun is not happy about attacking such a formation...and the

casualty rate has proved to be very low.’ Robbie looked around the young faces watching him.

‘For the next few days I want you to practise this, and I will discuss with Captain Pierce a propose route over the lines. ‘ He paused. ‘You may not know it...I have only just found out myself...that the *Jasta* commanded by Sigmund von Kliest has been moved into your sector. I know him well, so be careful up there.’

As the pilots filed out of the mess to join their new aircraft, Robbie silently wished them ‘good luck’, and went out to watch them take-off.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The squadron was away for three hours, for Robbie waiting and smoking, an interminable time. When he heard the roar of their engines he went out and stood observing how they landed their unfamiliar machines. He counted them as they came down. There was two missing...and one of them was the squadron commander who had insisted on going. With a sense of loss, Robbie waited at the door of the mess, They trooped in disconsolate. There was no youthful repartee, no joyful ragging. Robbie waited until they were seated and smoking. He looked at one of the flight leaders, a tall sandy-haired man, who returned his look, a saddened expression on his face.

The pilot said: 'Everything worked out well after Captain Pierce organised the sections. We got into position easily. He was leading the bottom lot and led us along the route you had proposed, well clear of 'archie', At the turning point it went like a well-rehearsed ballet, and we swung around, keeping our height and positions like we had been doing it for weeks.' He paused and cleared throat. Took a deep pull at his cigarette. 'Then the German *Jasta* attacked us. At least I think it was them. I know we haven't met them before. About fifteen planes.' He indicated a circular movement with his hand. 'They were evidently unsure how to attack us and kept circling around. We were moving back to our starting point, and the three groups of our planes closed up, but still essentially in the same relative positions.' The man coughed into a nervous hand. 'Then one of our younger pilots broke free...nervous I guess...and turned for home. The skipper went after him. I guess that was what the Germans were waiting for ...the whole *Jasta* went after them, better to get these two...

The youngster went first...burst into flames. The skipper who had been trying to cover him, went down in a cloud of smoke. Didn't see him crash land...maybe...'

Robbie nodded. 'A man like Pierce is hard to kill. If that young lad hadn't broken out...you could have taken them on, a flight at a time. You were already formed. I take it that the Germans broke away after Pierce went down?'

The flight leader nodded. 'They weren't waiting to find out. By now we were spoiling for a fight...next time...'

When Robbie reported the loss of the squadron commander the voice at the end was unmoved. 'Well you are there...and we need a bombing mission on the railway junction east of Amiens. I suggest you send them up as soon as possible. Good luck.'

The phone went down at the other end. So much for being an adviser...

The pilots were sitting around where he had left them. They looked up as he approached them.

'Until they provide a replacement for Captain Pierce...I am to run this squadron.'

There was a long silence with one or two of them looking at each other. 'Not what I want personally...I thought my days of running a squadron were over. However, you have learned today that the tactics I suggested work...now we have to apply them to a bombing raid on a railway junction near Amiens.' Robbie paused, and looked around at the mixed emotions on the faces of his pilots. 'We'll keep the same flights...and I will lead the bottom group.' He knew that his flying was not what HQ intended, but then he knew what the loss of the skipper meant to the squadron. He could only hope his gammy leg would not give out...

Unaware of the bigger picture, Robbie did not know that in this winter of 1917-18 the pendulum between attack and defence had swung drastically away from General Haig towards the German General Ludendorff. Their Russian allies, following the October

Revolution, were negotiating a separate peace, and an armistice had been signed with Germany on 15 December. The consequence was that vast quantities of war supplies and manpower were released for Ludendorff to use in a 1918 campaign. On the Allied side, the French were still consolidating with an eye on the American build-up. There was disillusion with Haig after the disaster of Passchendaele. The British Army adopted a method of defence that relied on a thinly-held front line or Forward Zone, with a Battle Zone a mile or two behind it, supported by strong-points in depth, and a Rear Zone, four to eight miles behind the Battle Zone on which the defence could fall back if necessary.

The tactics of this elastic defence were overhauled and practised by the British Army in preparation for the imminent German offensive foreshadowed by intelligence reports and by aerial reconnaissance. The German were believed to intend to use a specially trained *sturmmtruppen* who by infiltrating their adversary's forward positions to create confusion and panic. Trenchard, who was going back to England to take up other duties in the formation of the Royal Air Force, left his recommendations on how the squadrons could best be employed in a ground campaign based on defence. The first and foremost duties would lie in reconnaissance, watching for signs of possible attack and helping army commanders to determine whence and in what strength such attacks might come. Secondly, once preparations for an attack were established, would come the routine work of (a) artillery cooperation (b) bombing aimed at hindering the enemy's preparations and harassing his troops, and (c) an energetic offensive against the enemy's air force to facilitate (a) and (b). Once an attack started, the primary duty would lie, as always, with the corps squadrons, 'to render our artillery effective'. If this object could be attained, said Trenchard, 'it will be the most material help which can be rendered to the infantry although it may be invisible to

them'. Haig was fortunate in having in Trenchard, a man devoted to the army, for whom nothing must detract from the RFC's primary duty. Having said this, Trenchard also saw a secondary duty: the violent low-level strafing of enemy reinforcements behind the lines, of his communications, and of his advance troops, in close cooperation with the infantry. It was to be in the low-level strafing of enemy reinforcements, when the battle that was looming started, that Robbie's squadron and the others so equipped, would take perhaps their greatest personal risk.

For Robbie the immediate moment was the bombing mission that would demand all his attention and experience.

Robbie's flight was the last to take off, giving the other flights time to get to the height he had instructed them to attain. The field was shrouded in an early morning mist, which was being dissipated by a keen wind. Robbie looked the flights over as he climbed to 6000 feet, reassured that they appeared poised for action. The target was only a few minutes away once they had crossed the lines, and survived the German archie. He gave the arm waive they were waiting for. The railway junction was familiar to him, and in the early morning light looked busy and unprotected. He knew this was a false impression, and as he led his flight into the attack, heard as well as felt the barrage of defensive fire aimed at them. In line ahead they swooped in on the junction and its clutter of trains and wagons, releasing their bombs, then up and out. The junction erupted in fire and smoke, wagons being tossed around as if toys.

Robbie's flight took station behind him at a thousand feet, whilst the other two flights added their bombs to the maelstrom down below. Almost before flights two and three had taken station above Robbie, they were attacked by a swarm of German fighters coming out of the early morning sun. With a waive of his arm Robbie signalled them to close up. When they were in tight formation, he turned towards the British lines,

not avoiding a fight – this would have been bad for squadron morale – but poised to break into flights of five when the enemy positions were vulnerable. Within sight of the trenches, he signalled his flight leaders to break away and seek targets. The leaders were experienced enough to take their flights among the German fighters like flaming spearheads.

A whirling dervish-like pirouetting and planes began dropping from the sky, some aflame, others putting out smoke. Two German fighters fell to Robbie's flight, but his extreme wing man on the right spiralled away in a cloud of smoke towards the British lines. In less than ten minutes it was all over, and the three flights of British planes came back together and made towards their airfield. They landed in good order, taxiing to their normal flight positions. There were several exuberant shouts as the pilots went into the mess room. For Robbie it was an indication that the squadron knew they had done well, and their confidence was at a new high. When a tally was made, it was a sobering thought that they had lost two pilots.

'When you have had time to draw breath,' Robbie said quietly, 'I know you will be pleased that you have successfully survived an encounter with von Kliest's *Jasta*, in addition to causing the Hun a great deal of damage at Amiens.' He took out a cigarette and lit it, blowing the smoke appreciatively into the air. 'But...is that enough for one day?' The seated pilots suddenly became alert, looking their question at their new squadron commander. His smile was conspiratorial. 'There will be some confusion on *Jasta IV*'s airfield. After all we did shoot down three of them this morning...and they will be licking their wounds. So why don't we re-arm our machines with bombs and bullets, and give them a friendly call? It is time they were better acquainted with this squadron!' One or two of the younger pilots let out a 'yelp'.

An hour later the planes were rearmed, one with a damaged tail was replaced, and in the increasing light the three flights took off, adopting the same positions as had proved so effective at Amiens. The *Jasta* airfield was only ten miles behind the German lines, and Robbie knew it from a previous visit. When they were within sight, it was obvious that with typical German thoroughness they were assembling all the undamaged aircraft into tight lines. There was at least fourteen brightly coloured fighters presenting a mouth-watering target. Robbie could hear their claxons wailing at the sight of the British formations, and figures were scurrying around. Duplicating the manoeuvre of earlier, Robbie led his flight down and across the assembled planes. The bombs went crashing down. The field and the lines of planes erupted into fountains of earth and smoke. The defences on the periphery of the field threw everything they had at the attacking planes. Flight two and three followed Robbie and increased the devastation, turning as Robbie had done to use their machine guns on those planes that had so far escaped the bombs. Two of the German planes near the main buildings, so far immune, taxied for a take off. One of them was the squadron commander, von Kliest, the markings on his fuselage betraying his identity. Robbie could feel his cousin urging his fighter to take off. As the plane struggled for height, Robbie signalled his squadron to hold off, to finish the destruction of the *Jasta* with their machine guns. It would have been an easy matter to shoot his cousin down, as he reached for higher sky.

Robbie came alongside him, and signalled with a customary waive. Siggy knew who he was, and shook an angry fist at him, turning his aircraft into a loop and a turn to get behind him. So it was to be a fight to the finish. By this time his squadron had joined him, and it would have been an easy matter for them to crowd the German and shoot him down. Robbie signalled them to return home, and leave him to it. There was some

hesitation to leave a squadron commander who had already obtained the pilots' respect if not affection. As the squadron drew away west, Robbie went into a spiralling turn, seeking to come up and behind his cousin. Not this time. Siggy flung his machine up into a classical Immelmann turn, it was tight and Robbie could hear the German machine roaring. Robbie took a sharp right dipping turn, almost bringing the plane over on its back.

A burst of machine-gun fire sprayed the space where the English machine had been a split second before. Robbie had a moment when he could return the fire, and he saw the bullets rip into the German machine, then he was away again. The Bristol fighter had a tighter turning-circle than the Albatross, and Robbie manoeuvred to get his cousin into a circular motion. Siggy was evidently aware of the Bristol's superiority in that manoeuvre and took a violent dipping turn to avoid it, coming up behind Robbie for a fraction of a second. But the British pilot was elusive, and deadly. In a turn that taxed the machine's capability, Robbie coaxed every ounce of the fighter's speed and came broadside on to his cousin. The machine gun spat a hail of bullets and Robbie saw the German machine stagger, a cloud of smoke coming from the engine. The Albatross spun down, Siggy struggling to control it. There was no feeling of jubilation as Robbie followed him down, praying that the Albatross would not burst into flame. When he pulled out of his following dive, he saw Siggy's plane hit the ground hard but not crash. He was not sure whether his cousin got out of his plane before it burst into flame. If he was alive at least he was on the right side of the lines....

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

It was some weeks before intelligence reached the squadron that the *Jasta* had been completely destroyed, wiped off the German list of effective squadrons. It was replaced by a new squadron of bombers, that the enemy hoped to employ in their forthcoming last desperate offensive. It was now the early days of March, 1918, and Ludendorff had now assembled all the troops and guns that the armistice with the Russians had released to him. The Allies knew it was coming. The combined Allied air forces had reported the massing of troops and equipment all along the front. But where would it fall?

Trenchard had gone home, and the new Royal Air Force was to be commanded by Jack Salmond when the new identity came into being on 1 April. The squadrons were only casually aware of all this, as they were struggling to maintain the ascendancy as the pendulum of attack swung back and forth. Ludendorf at the beginning of 1918 was in the driving seat. Not knowing where the blow would fall, meant the RFC had to spread its strength, which would give the attackers a numerical advantage wherever they struck. Indications seemed to be strongest that the main assault would be at the centre where the British Third and Fifth armies of fourteen and twelve divisions respectively, faced three German armies totalling twice that number. A factor that would soon become distressingly apparent.

During this period of uncertainty, the surveillance of enemy dispositions was now more important. The corps squadrons, protected as far as possible by fighter squadrons, did not neglect the artillery, whilst bombing went on night and day.

Robbie's squadron was one of those escorting an assembly of fifty three machines of various types, which took off to bomb and strafe a group of German aerodromes from low level. In all, eighty-eight bombs were dropped, scoring direct hits on hangars and

buildings, without any casualties. It was concluded that the raid would have been more effective if the bombers had been concentrated on one target, and if there had of been successive waves of bombers they would have multiplied the effects.

Though the weather was bad, this did not greatly reduce the numbers of operations by the RFC, who were much more active than the Germans. They were difficult to bring to battle. A rarity was the day when it was reported that Richtofen's Circus was out, a chance not to be missed.

No.3 Squadron in a field adjacent to Robbie's squadron, was called out. They were the only pilots immediately available – just four of them. Long before they reached the lines, one of the four dropped out with engine trouble. Now reduced to three Camels, they found themselves facing six Albatros single-seaters at 13,500 feet, and from their markings identified them as members of the Circus. The first collision saw the flight commander sheer off with a damaged tail plane, leaving two only to face six. Two German planes were the first to go down, but inevitably the remaining four quickly despatched the Camels. The pilot of one of them called Alderson, going down out of control, had his leg shattered by an explosive bullet that hit his rudder bar. He lost consciousness, and the plane, still at full throttle, continued to spin and somersault under its own volition. He survived the crash and a week later found himself in a German hospital.

During the hiatus between January and March there were attempts to operate three squadrons together in one large formation at different heights Camels at 15,000 feet; SE5As at 16-17,000 feet, and Brisfits at 18-19,000 feet, to put the wind up the Germans. To entice the enemy an alternative was tried: three squadrons, flying independently, to meet at a prearranged point – perhaps a German aerodrome – then turn westwards together, sweeping up any enemy patrols between them and the lines.

Oddly, this arrangement met with fierce German resistance, and fierce dogfights developed. As these confrontations occurred fifteen or twenty miles east of the lines, casualties were heavy. With so many planes in the dogfight, pilots found themselves independent, often had to return alone with a damaged machine or a failing engine, and were quickly picked off. The tactic was pursued, and showed dividends when the enemy were outnumbered.

Whilst Robbie was happy to participate in these larger operations, he was less convinced that sweeping up the enemy was more important than to protect the corps machines on their surveillance missions. Most of the work his squadron was called upon to do that early winter lay in seeking out the enemy's reconnaissance two-seaters at various levels up to 20,000 feet, and escorting bombers in daylight. Whilst he was aware of the psychological effects on the enemy of the exploits of Mannock, McCudden, Ball, and other aces, he saw his principal task as conserving and training his pilots for what he felt was the great task looming up.

On the area of the considered German attack, the Third and Fifth Army fronts, the RFC had mustered a total of 579 serviceable aircraft, of which 261 were single-seater fighters. Opposing them were 730 German machines, of which 326 were single-seater fighters. Though the Germans could no longer claim technical superiority, numerical superiority which the RFC had hitherto enjoyed, had passed to them. The readiness of the Circus to engage the RFC in dogfights was only one of many indications that the great German spring offensive was about to begin.

It began at 4.30am on the morning of 21 March. The three squadrons based at an aerodrome at Flez, nine miles west of German-held St. Quentin, were awakened by a tumultuous roar. It had begun. Sleep was impossible. The pilots stood in anxious groups outside their huts, their flying clothes over their pygamas, smoking. They

would soon be called into action. Their thoughts inevitably went to the 'the poor bloody infantry in the trenches'. They already knew what they had to do in assisting the repelling of the German masses. The two brigades were immediately involved. One comprised four RE8 squadrons for gun-spotting and photography; three Camel squadrons to protect the corps machines; three SE5 squadrons for engaging enemy fighters; a Brisfit squadron for low-level strafing; and two bomber squadrons, one day and one night. The second, had five corps squadrons, and in fighters, one Camel, two SE5s, one Brisfit and one Spad squadron, and again two bomber squadrons, one day and one night.

They were equal to the enemy in quality, although not in quantity because the enemy could concentrate. Every pilot knew his specific duties and the target and tasks to which he would be assigned. This did not make their anxiety the less, with the din of the bombardment, whilst they awaited their orders to engage the enemy. The blanket of early morning mist prevented an early start even at 6.30am. It did not prevent the Germans whose fifty-six divisions, with twelve in reserve, were massed along more than fifty miles of front from moving forward an hour later. They swarmed out of the mist, penetrating and infiltrating British positions before they were aware of it. Plans for enfilading fire to decimate the advancing *sturmtruppen* were aborted, and many of the forward troops were overwhelmed and annihilated. Although the timing of the German attack was known, the volume of it, with the unparalleled concentration of firepower, with a gas attack for good measure, came as a cataclysm.

The British armies were in headlong retreat with the Germans advancing along the entire Somme front. The initial thrust seemed to threaten the junction of the Third and Fifth armies, but no one could be sure. Only in the north were successful

reconnaissance attempts made, though even here gun crews contemplating retreat had not erected their aersials. There was no way they could contact the aircraft.

When visibility improved in the south, the three army squadrons at Flez - Bristols, Camels, and SE5As – lined up their machines in front of their hangars in readiness. Meanwhile, the bombardment continued with undiminished fury, driving out several squadrons who left for Roye, fifteen miles south of Flez, burning their buildings and hangars. South of St. Quentin, in a previously thought impregnable position, the enemy had broken through. It was estimated that there were many thousands of Germans on these roads. Some bombing was attempted: two hundred 25lb bombs were dropped on bridges over the St.Quentin canal but they survived intact. The German air force, intent on supporting the advance, mostly avoided contact.

Robbie's squadron had some success on the first day, low level strafing enemy infantry. Even those without experience of this type of action, joined in with spirit. Robbie reported later: 'after lunch, I was ordered to head a formation along the St.Quentin/Estrees-en-Chausee road to bomb and fire on enemy transport and infantry. We descended to 500 feet and found enemy infantry everywhere, advancing in the open and in large columns on the road. First the bombs were dropped to lighten the aircraft, exploding on the road scattering the enemy columns. Then we dived on the troops in the open, each machine discharging its 800 rounds of ammunition, until it was exhausted. Then I led them home. Only one plane was lost.'

The bombing and strafing of the advancing German columns was a great success. They were later to report that when visibility improved the British airmen 'flew in the most daring manner very low over the ground and threw bombs causing us considerable losses. The signal officer was killed instantly, and the regimental staff was decimated.' One regiment which halted temporarily in a hollow was so heavily

bombarded from the air that they were ordered to fall back. And on the Third Army front, about a dozen English low-flying battle aeroplanes whizzed up, and from an incredibly low height bombed the German advancing troops, causing great confusion. 'The English got valuable support from their aircraft, which attacked regardless of the consequences. Our airmen were absent.'

Unable to cooperate with the artillery, the RFC used every means to slow down the enemy advance. It was a form of attack that the enemy, despite their much-vaunted battle flights, seemed unable to mount in comparable violence. A form which their troops were to dislike even more intensely than the pilots who mounted it.

The first day of Ludendorff's offensive was a disaster for the British, with casualties of 7500 killed, 10,000 wounded, and 21,000 taken prisoner. The guns lost numbered 382 for the Fifth Army, and 150 for the Third. The retreat along the whole front reached a depth of nearly ten miles. The Germans did not go unscathed, suffering even more severely than the retreating armies, who continued to inflict heavy losses on their pursuers.

On the second morning, 22 March, the heavy fog cleared about eleven o'clock, when corps and army planes went into action. Robbie's squadron, and those operating from Flez, went on strafing missions, and reported masses of the enemy still advancing, pushing the defenders back by sheer weight of numbers. One pilot reported on the heavy German casualties: 'I saw what seemed to be a long wall of sandbags,. I could not understand for a moment why I had not seen it before, until diving at the enemy behind it. I noticed that it was a wall of dead bodies heaped one upon another. The enemy were on the east side of it, so I was able to sweep this wall with machine-gun fire until there must have been a hundred or so German soldiers to add to the human wall.'

Casualties were high among the attacking British squadrons. Robbie was convinced that large formations were too cumbersome for ground strafing, as they got in each other way, risking collision. He decided that in future they would hunt in pairs. When attacking they would dive separately, firing from 500 feet down to 50 feet before zooming away in a climbing turn. He believed it was safer, and in the first few days did not lose a single pilot to ground fire. It became known that the Germans experience awe at the way the RFC pilot attacked and the casualties and confusion they caused. The 730 25-pounders they dropped caused an extreme pessimism in one regiment: 'Under heavy artillery and machine-gun fire and frequent attacks by air squadrons the attack cannot go on.'

The second day saw the German air force still operating without a coherent plan, so there concentration of numbers was not the advantage it should have been. British squadrons continued to pound away at the same railway junctions, so that Robbie's pilots joked about going to 'catch a train'. The intelligence they gleaned was such that, when passed to General Gough of the fragile Fifth Army, he decided not to offer battle east of the Somme, but to gradually withdraw west of the river. Thus he saved the Fifth Army from a defeat that would have opened the approaches to Amiens.

The relentless pressure continued, on the 23 March, along the whole battle front, and the RFC were called upon to redouble their low-level strikes. In addition, the corps crews were flying below 1,000 feet and dropped bombs on any targets they saw.

Crews flew several patrols daily, reporting on bridges destroyed, spotting concentrations of enemy troops to be blasted by available artillery, and strafing advancing infantry.

The enemy were so close to Fez aerodrome that pilots having breakfast could hear the rattle of machine-gun fire. After a brisk morning of attacking the enemy, Robbie's

and the other squadrons after 'a hasty lunch', abandoned the airfield and took off for another eleven miles away near Ham, south west of St. Quentin. The pilots were upset to leave the Hun in possession of their old aerodrome, even though they had burnt the mess and hangars before they left. Five squadrons were crammed into Bruay, instead of the usual two, and they continued feverishly to bombard the German infantry.

One of the pilots, carrying four 20lb bombs, found a macabre humour in 'laying nice little eggs' on 'rows of fat Huns'. The bombs were a curtain raiser to the main entertainment of shooting them up, and 'seeing them run in all directions'. It was good to laugh, but 'everything is spoiled at the time by being so frightened'.

Frozen on high-level patrol – 17-19,000 feet – then down to low-level strafing, the patrols merged with each other, leaving few cohesive memories. Thirty-nine German machines were destroyed on that day for only five British losses, Robbie claiming one of them when leading a flight. Though extremely tired, his squadron were in high morale, and working together with an efficiency that surprised even him.

Ludendorff's son was killed on this day.

With things going badly for the British whose two armies were being forced apart, that Haig warned 'We are again at a crisis of the war', with the German object of destroying the British Army. The RFC reacted so ferociously throughout the day that several German regiments were forced to pause, one admitting that 'very active fighting and bombing squadrons to the enemy in the clear air imposed a very cautious advance on us'.

At one point, south of Peronne, where German troops were assembling after crossing the Somme, low-level strafing was ordered. Twenty or more British aircraft suddenly appeared, diving until they were virtually scraping the earth. This madcap, trigger-happy low flying and bombing created havoc wherever it was applied, but not without

cost. In Robbie's squadron alone, of eighteen pilots before the German attack, there was now only ten, and he, himself almost lame with the numbness in his leg had to fly a great deal less...

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Whilst the 24th March had seen forty-two German machines shot down for a loss of eleven missing, eight burnt or abandoned, and forty-six wrecked, the crisis deepened and the RFC commander ordered 'These squadrons will bomb and shoot up everything they can see on the enemy side of the line. Very low flying is essential. All risks to be taken. Urgent.'

All the pilots were aware that the fateful hour had struck. One of them commented: 'The situation is apparently very serious. The Hun was now in Peronne and Bapaume and was likely to be in Albert at any moment.'

It was a glorious morning when a squadron set out for the lines. They were the only machines in the air around Albert, which was in ruins, although the Virgin still stood on the church. However they were soon joined by others, including Robbie's squadron, to take advantage of the slight haze on the ground – perfect strafing conditions. They worked the entire day on this front, making seven trips in all during the day. Each squadron dripped about twenty bombs and fired 4000 rounds of ammunition, before they retired for the night. Robbie counted themselves lucky that they only lost one pilot.

The influence of the RFC, diverted wholly to ground strafing, was indisputable. The Germans were to report that in the huddled camps around Bapaume, life was 'not very pleasant because airmen bombed us causing heavy losses.' West of Bapaume the advancing troops were given no respite. After only twenty minutes marching the first British planes flying low sought to delay the advance with machine-gun fire. There was about thirty planes above them at one time. There was no cover.

That evening the RFC chief called for every available machine to be concentrated in the Albert-Bapaume area next morning. No less than 37 of the total sixty squadrons

on the western front were directed to this area. At Pozieres, three miles north of Albert, Camels and SE5's flew up and down the main road continuously from early morning, attacking troops, whilst DH4 bombers caused extensive damage at Bapaume, Peronne, and Pozieres, setting fire to trains containing ammunition and supplies. 'Continual heavy explosions could be heard as one wagon after another was blasted.' On the Bapaume area alone, 177 heavy bombs, and 1300 25-pounders were dropped, and more than a quarter of a million rounds were discharged at advancing troops. This great effort, coming at a crucial time, helped Commonwealth troops to stabilise the situation north of Albert.

The enemy effort on the Third Army front transferred to the junction of the British and French, threatening to separate them. Massive German forces, as seen and reported from the air, were concentrating in an arc around Roye, where a gap had been forced. Squadrons that had been cooperating in the Bapaume area were redeployed, placing a heavy burden on them. The strain of low-level strafing left them with no appetite for food, many settling for a cigarette at the end of a flight. They learned that it was more effective to fly in pairs, and the pairs found a strong bonding in the face of the Hun retaliation. The Germans looked in vain for their own air force. When bad flying weather caused a lull, some of the squadrons took the opportunity to visit Amiens for dinner at the Savoy. Energies were miraculously restored, and they honed in on Charlie's Bar chattering like magpies about the events of the last few days. Robbie's men returned to the airfield to find congratulations awaiting from a general, and an urgent instruction to save Amiens itself from the German troops advancing on the Bray-Corbie road.

The best news on 26 March was the appointment of General Ferdinand Foch to coordinate the Allied armies on the western front – a measure forced upon some reluctant generals. Petain appeared to be more concerned with covering Paris than cooperating with Haig's plan to use the First and Second armies near Arras for a counter-attack. Foch became the Supreme Allied Commander, and his first task was to save Amiens. Bombing on that night reached a new intensity. The word was: It is of the utmost importance to delay enemy reinforcements coming up at this crisis.

Robbie, leading a flight, found the Bapaume-Albert road showed up incredibly white in the frosty moonlight. From 1500 feet he could pick out individual vehicles, then a long blob of marching troops, perfect targets for his anti-personnel bombs. He returned twice during the night, as did many others. Two Handley Page squadrons carrying 250- and 112 pounders, joined in the bombardment.

From dawn on the 27th onwards, low-level strikes were resumed in unremitting sequence. With the DH4's freed from height restrictions, and in bombing and strafing generally, the RFC reached a peak on this day. Sholto Douglas, one squadron commander, commented: 'Our efforts were of course entirely directed to the assistance of our hard-pressed infantry...low-flying attacks against the advancing enemy. Many very gallant deeds were done by our low-flying aircraft of which only the scantiest records were kept: we had little time for writing up our achievements.'

It was impossible to carry out any but the smallest repairs to machines and engines; our machines stood out in the rain for days at a time. But both pilots and mechanics, inspired by the importance of the occasion, worked themselves to a standstill.

Everyone felt that the great effort expended was directly helping to stop the enemy's victorious advance.

The casualty rate was high, particularly among new pilots who were arriving with as little as 40 hours solo experience. There was no time to give them squadron training, and almost at once they were sent into the line. Newcomers found great difficulty in coping with the atrocious weather, and there were many crashes. Pilots with little or no knowledge of the terrain had to climb to get a view and thus exposed themselves to sharpshooters. As the retreat lumbered on to its high water mark, one of the pilots, a Canadian, commented: 'We were really in the thick of it, flying and sleeping and flying again...the turbulence of passing shells and bursts on the ground and in the air, made me more airsick than I had ever been before.' He passed over an ammunition dump when it blew up. 'I went up over a thousand feet with the blast and debris before I righted the plane and found it all in one piece.'

Although the enemy advance north of the Somme had been halted, the Allied withdrawal from Bray-sur-Somme had exposed the left flank of the Fifth Army, so Ludendorff seized the opportunity to attack it. The Fifth Army fought stubbornly, supported by the low-level attacks by the RFC. The Germans were so fully occupied by the peppering of its own troops, that they largely deserted the upper air, although it was known that their scouts were out on the 27th March. Robbie, leading a flight of six in formation followed by a rearguard of five, took off at 10.30am, and after following the twists and turns of the Somme, spotted a formation of eight enemy scouts over Peronne. With the advantage of height, he went straight into a dive, spearheading his flight. The leader of the rear guard saw a further group of Germans about to attack Robbie's flight, and turned to intercept them head-on. The leader of the Germans hesitated then zoomed up over him. As the leader of the rear guard subsequently reported: 'We both turned...going round and round, each trying to make a sharper turn than the other. But then the Hun did the wrong thing...He changed or

attempted to change from a left-hand to a right-hand circuit, thus giving me the opportunity, and I let him have it...he went down in a steep nosedive and burst into flames...A glorious sight at the time, since one does not realise that a human being like oneself is within, for after all as far as war is concerned it is merely a mechanical bird.' It was gratifying to the rear guard flight leader to be told that Robbie's flight had shot down three of the eight they had attacked After lunch it was bombing again at low-level, attempting to stifle the enemy's reinforcement routes, and 840lbs of bombs were dropped and 18,000 rounds of ammunition were fired.

On the 28th after a brief but intense bombardment, Ludendorff launched another series of attacks, beginning north of the Somme towards Arras. They were repulsed and incessant attacks by Camels, SE5A's and DH4s caused panic and stampedes. South of the Somme, where the Fifth Army were still under pressure, the Germans had infiltrated through to the Amiens-St.Quentin road. Ludendorff, confident of success, had not realised how exhausted and demoralised his troops were. At this point the Fifth Army, under General Gough, were relieved by the Fourth Army which had been kept in reserve.

This change meant nothing to the RFC who had to continue with maximum effort. In the morning there was heavy rain, with low cloud clinging to distant hills. It was unheard of sending planes out in such weather; things were getting critical. With the clouds at 200 feet the pilots were compelled to fly beneath them, and in the driving rain losing sight of each other. The Germans were attacking across the river at two points: at Maricourt and Cerisy-Gailly, apparently trying to outflank the British troops defending the Amiens road four miles to the south. Everywhere was a mass of smoke and flame, of 60-pounders and heavies of all kinds, all firing at Mericourt and Cerisy. The large stone bridge over the river at Cerisy was covered by a mass of Hun troops

edging across, under fire from the British artillery south of the river. One of the attacking British aircraft, piloted by a man called Stock of 54 squadron, decided to drop his bombs on the mass of troops who were approaching the bridge, then machine-gun the men endeavouring to cross. He dived on several parties of the enemy who remained on the bridge almost completely annihilating them. Not satisfied with this, he began disorganising and hindering the enemy's advance by attacking troops and transport. Attacked by German planes, Stock shot down three of them. A member of the same squadron, Crowden, had meanwhile bombed the bridge, and having exhausted their ammunition and bombs, flew back together. They were later awarded the MC.

Many fighting squadrons were diverted that day south of the Somme. It was on this day that an extraordinary number of enemy troops were reported and our machines had a field day attacking columns in groups of four. Heavy casualties were inflicted. The replenishment of ammunition for German artillery, broke down owing to the bombardment of British aeroplanes, and an attack was beaten off. There was little fighting in the upper air that day, the Germans doing their best to avoid combat, although seven of their machines were shot down. It was surprising that the Germans failed to persist in low-level assault on the retreating army. Maybe it was because of the heavy casualties in the first few days, that made them seek to defend against the RFCs aggressive tactics. The RFC's casualties were high, but largely from ground fire. March 28 was the worst day. One of the pilots commented: 'We lost more of our squadron than on any other single day. I feel certain that if it had not been for the splendid example shown by our CO we would never have carried on... We came back from the firing line several times utterly done, and caring naught for anything or

anyone, to find the CO awaiting us or perhaps about to take off on his own and trench-strafe.’

The planes were in an appalling state, cobbled together like patchwork but still showing bullet-holes everywhere. Some pilots came back with half an arm or leg, and others did not come back at all. It was partly threw the cheerfulness of the COs of the squadrons that they managed to carry on, when so many were wounded or missing. RFC losses that day were seventeen machines missing with twenty five crew, thirty-five machines wrecked, and six more burnt or abandoned, not to mention the wounded. But on the ground everything had gone well. The 28th was the pivotal day, and when the German pressure continued on the 29th, the relieving Fourth Army dominated. On the 30th the vulnerable German infantry voiced their bitterness of the unopposed Allied air attacks. ‘The French and British flying men circle over Moreuil Wood and join in the battle, attacking with bombs and machine-gun fire. One bomb dropped at a negligible height places the whole staff of the 1st Battalion *hors de combat*. Moreuil Wood is hell’ Comment was later made that the low-level form of attack perfected by the RFC in these battles was an important factor in stemming the German onrush.

The most serious problem for the British was to keep the squadrons flying, to find new aerodromes, arms, and personnel. Transport had been ordered and supplies in good time. The supply of new planes to make good the losses was never a problem. British troops in this retreat were never unmolested, but the enemy pilots, after the losses of the first few days, were never to approach the carnage caused by Allied squadrons. The *Jastas* still fought magnificently, but their overall tactics were haphazard, whilst the RFC had become a fully-fledged airforce in fact as well as in name. The 1st April saw the foundation of the Royal Air Force.

Even before the end of March, Ludendorff's Somme offensive was beginning to falter, despite having made advances of up to forty miles in places, no decisive results were achieved. Resistance both on the ground and in the air was undiminished.

Amiens only ten miles distant was tantalisingly beyond the German strength.

Ludendorff switched his attacks to Flanders at the juncture of the First and Second British Armies. Allied High Command were sceptical that the enemy had abandoned the Somme, and when Ludendorff struck, bad weather contributed to a situation of extreme gravity. On the 12th April, Haig issued his famous 'backs to the wall...each one of us must fight to the end'.

Once visibility cleared, the RFC flew more hours, dropped more bombs, and took more photographs than ever before. Throughout the whole of that vital day, the advancing German divisions were subjected to relentless attacks by the British squadrons. From dawn to dusk. There was not break either in the air fighting. As if to compensate for their poor showing during the Amiens offensive, the German low-flying machines, supported at altitude, disputed the RFC's ascendancy and were sharply rebuffed. Robbie's squadron shot down ten aircraft, his personal score was now twenty eight, but No.43 (Camels) were credited with thirteen and one balloon. In all, forty-nine hostiles were brought down and another twenty five driven down out of control.

By the 18th April, with the help of French reinforcements, the German advance had been halted. German casualties since 21st March amounted to some 350,000, while Allied casualties, most of them British, exceeded 300,000. Over a thousand aircraft had been wrecked or lost. Whereas the Allied squadrons could fall back on undamaged airfields, there were no fresh landing grounds for the Germans to find in the devastated areas. It was now mobile warfare, and the RFC quickly adjusted. Speed

became a vital factor, as artillery moved forward and back, new positions were registered by air reconnaissance, and photographs taken to a depth of four miles behind the lines.

On the 21st April, Richthofen was shot down. He was buried with full honours and some of those who had flown against him sent floral tributes. It came at the nadir of German hopes. Ludendorff's last great gamble was in Flanders. By the 8th August, the Germans abandoned any hope of a successful offensive. There was still three months of desperate fighting ahead, and the RAF despite enormous losses, achieved something approaching mastery of the air.

In these final weeks with the Allied offensive pushing the Germans back, Robbie strove to contain the exuberance of his squadron, there was still a need to conserve the lives of his pilots and replacements given time to find their air legs. With the ascendancy of Allied squadrons, and with confidence in his flight leaders, Robbie spent less time in the air. He even allowed himself the time to visit Eva in the hospital, and found their attachment to each other made stronger in the months of absence. It was during just such a visit that he was joined by his father, who gave him a very welcome piece of news. 'I know that you will have had little time to think of your cousin, whom you shot down...but I am sure you will be pleased to hear that Sigmund survived the crash. Like you,' his father laughed, 'he has a game leg!' When the armistice was signed on November 11th Robbie had time to go to an estaminet with his pilots and to raise a glass to a gallant enemy. 'To Sigmund von Kliest, my cousin, and the pilots of his *Jasta*.'