

Richmond Mayson, 74 Squadron, A Memoir of a World War I Pilot

A Few Thrills

About 3 o'clock on Saturday morning, the 28th September, 1918, I was awakened by a terrific din. I jumped out of bed, went outside and saw a wonderful spectacle. The big battle had begun and for miles in all directions the sky was lit up by flashes from thousands of guns, both large and small.

The sky was also lighted up by red rockets sent up by the Germans -- a signal for help.

At 5:30 a.m., the boys are to go over the top, but just before they do, the rain commences to come down in torrents. What a pity it should start just then. I learnt afterwards that the rain did not stop our infantry in any way whatever for they advanced eight miles in places before that day was finished. There was a great concentration of our aeroplanes in the morning. They did great havoc amongst the retreating foe, bombing and machine-gunning the enemy transports and infantrymen.

The heavy rain caused us to lose a number of our machines. Their propeller got broken beating against the rain, so were forced to land in the German lines.

I went up in the evening on my first active patrol. Two others and myself went up to protect our balloons from any enterprising Hun who wished to come over and force any of them down in flames. Every time I saw a machine, I was wishing it would be a Hun that we might have a fight. Unfortunately, the trip proved uneventful and we didn't meet any enemy aircraft.

The next day, we did not go up until the evening, as the weather was very bad. It cleared up a little after tea, so up we went on an offensive patrol, taking two bombs each. However we were not up for long when a thick mist came over. It became very difficult to see each other, so the leader gave the disband signal and we all came home again.

A few days later, we had a very busy time. It was fine and clear, so the activity in the air became greater than it had been for some time. I went on three patrols this day, just short of two hours each patrol, so by night I was very tired indeed.

My first two patrols were along the line. Our work was to fly low over our troops to prevent Hun aeroplanes from machine-gunning them. No Huns just came over, so we must have frightened them away by our presence.

My third patrol, which was in the evening, was much more interesting than the others. A dozen of us went in one formation and carried two bombs each. We climbed steadily after leaving the aerodrome. We passed over Ypres and flew on east till we came to Courtrai. By then, we were about 12,000 feet high. Some trains were moving into the town as we arrived, so our leader flew over them and gave the signal to "Drop bombs!"

Down went my hand to a small lever on my right -- a pull and down fell my "two pills". These "pills" that we carry each weigh 25 pounds. They are not to be taken with water, so we administer them to the Germans in the only way they can be digested.

From each machine, I can see two bombs dropped and go down, down. I cannot watch where they fall; the leader has turned so we have to pay our attention to the formation and keep our place.

The Germans think we ought not to be allowed to come and drop bombs and go away without returning the compliment in some form or another, so they immediately begin with their anti-aircraft guns -- this

gun is nicknamed "Archie" -- Archie is a fairly good shot at times, but still we don't pay much attention to him.

Of course, we must not fly straight on or he will get us, so the leader commences a number of turns. We do likewise. All the time, we must keep our place in the formation.

This is my first reception by "Archie".

I hear a "Wonk!" above the roar of the engine. My heart almost leaps out my mouth. I look to my instruments, thinking something has gone wrong with my engine -- I also see visions of myself landing in Hun-land and having to spend the rest of my time during the war in a prisoner's camp.

I look up and see a big puff of black smoke. I realize that that it was only our friend "Archie". Thank goodness I can have my dinner tonight at our own aerodrome and not in Hunland. A few more "wonks" and puffs of black smoke appear round about. They do no damage.

After flying for about 2 hours, looking for Huns and dodging Archie, we turn our machines west and in a long glide we go home. I feel quite pleased with myself having dropped two bombs.

Nothing occurred of importance during the next few days beyond moving back to our old aerodrome at Clair Mairia near St. Omer. The French want this one. They can have it with pleasure. It's so small that every time we land, we almost run into the dyke on the other side. Sometimes, we have to take off quickly or run into the dyke and smash the machine up, perhaps ourselves too.

My next thrill occurred on October 9, though at the time it was actually happening I had no time to think of anything but what I was doing.

This was a fight with 5 Huns. By the way, this is my first fight and the first time I have seen any Hun machines. Our patrol of three machines left the ground at 8:20 a.m. Captain Smith was leading and following him was Lieutenant Bardgett and myself. (Perhaps you noticed in the Mid Cumberland Herald of about three weeks ago, a picture of Lieut. Bardgett, Royal Air Force, of Penrith, reported missing. It was from this flight that he was missing.)

Before leaving the ground, we were told there were lots of Huns flying along our front so prospects of a fight were good. We climbed steadily from leaving the aerodrome until we were above the line about Rouhlers. By then we were about 10,000 feet up.

Almost as soon as we arrived above Rouhlers, we noticed another of our formations diving on five Fokker biplanes -- they made an awful mess of it, as their formation got split up and the leader was shot down, but fortunately landed on our side of the line with nothing more than a severe shaking up.

Just as soon as our leader got into position, he dived down with Lieut. Bardgett and myself following him. Until one gets used to these fights and the sight of lots of other machines in the air, they have difficulty in recognizing the EA (enemy aircraft) from our own.

As we dived down, all I could make out were lots of machines doing various stunts around each other and machine gun bullets flying about. I saw Bardgett driving down, but did not watch him. I was too busy. This was the last seen of him. Most likely, he dived too far and the Hun turned and dived on him in turn and shot him down. He did not return and nothing has been seen or heard of him since.

Diving down into the fight, I saw one of our machines on the tail of a Fokker. I got my sights on to this Fokker as I was above. I shot, but missed. Then I saw another Hun going down to get away. He was doing a sort of half-spiral and half-spin to the right. He then flattened out. I did the same as he did and came to him head on.

Can you imagine two machines, each traveling at between 150 to 200 miles an hour and coming head on? And yet I never realized the danger of it. I don't think he knew I was in front of him until I began to fire and bullets began to hit his machine. He then seemed to go out of control -- or did so purposely to get away.

By this time, which by the way had only been a few seconds, I was so very close to him and he was just a little higher than I was that had I tried to zoom I should surely have crashed into him. So I had to put my nose down and dive under him. Then I pulled up and looked around for him.

He was nowhere to be seen, so I can't say if I shot him down or not. I may have done so or he may have gone down out of control purposely to get away.

Looking about, all I could see out of the 15 machines of the flight were two of ours, myself, and one lucky Hun. He tried to get behind me to shoot me down. I dived under our leader, who chased the Hun away. This Hun then dived east and went home as fast as he could.

Often, I wondered what I should feel like in my first fight, but now it had come I really had not had time to think of being afraid or of anything else but shooting that Hun in front of me down. After it was over, which had only been about three or four minutes, I felt thankful for being safe and quite thrilled that I'd been in a fight.

All during the fight, I'd had two bombs under my machine. Had a bullet hit one of these -- well, I guess that would be another chapter to write about. Not wishing to meet any more Huns while having these bombs on, I flew over Rhoulers, released the bombs and down they went....

...During the day, we had done between five and six hours of flying, so by night we were dead tired, thoroughly worn out and ready for bed. This work is very nerve trying for the whole time you are up, your nerves are continually on edge. Looking for Huns and trying to avoid being surprised and, at the same time dodging "Archie", I can now understand why an airman cannot last much more than 6 months out here.