

FIVE

WAR EXPERIENCES II 1918 - 1919

Just after Christmas I went to Hastings to join the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) training base. We wore a white band round our caps and had the rank of 'Cadet'. It was strange how few new hands there were from the army. I wore on my left sleeve near the cuff a little gold bar to show that I had been wounded, and on my other sleeve a blue chevron for each year at the Front. So I was a veteran of twenty ! And here again the chief interest was Rugger. I was put on the Wing Committee. The meetings took place at the same time as the lectures on Military Law. When I expostulated, I was told that I need not worry about the exam at the end of the course; it would be alright. When the time came, I handed in a blank page with my name on the top, and passed. Once a week there was a cross-country run, so I arranged scrum practices for those occasions. We turned up with a rugger ball, but in our smartest walking-out uniform. When the runners had left, we put away the ball and went off into Hastings.

Either it was a very lovely winter or I wore rose-tinted glasses, for my memories of Hastings are of gloriously sunny days. I remember before one rugger match sitting with others in rugger clothes on the edge of a cliff over- looking the sea with our legs dangling over the edge. One other match I remember was when I played for the Wing against a Canadian team in the finals of some competition. There was a huge crowd in stands with a band of 'rooters' in one of them, who called out remarks in unison throughout the game - either the score or a derogatory but comic remark about a player. I think I must have been the smallest person on the field as I got lots of the rooting. It was a delightful game, but we lost.

At that time it was thought that if one went up to a very high altitude, such as 15,000 ft., one's tonsils would swell so much that breathing would be affected. My tonsils therefore had to be removed. One Sunday a group of us set off too early for breakfast. We arrived at Lewisham Infirmary after the official time for lunch. In the evening we were told that, as we were to be given medicine to empty our bowels before the operation, we could not have anything to eat. Next morning we were given no breakfast, as the anaesthetic would make us sick.

Later in the morning we lined up outside the operating theatre. We had to write our names and what had to be done on a piece of paper and attach it to the top pyjama button. Knowing army wholesale methods, I wrote "Tonsils ONLY". When my turn came I jumped up onto the table. As I was going under, I heard someone reading aloud my label. I was afraid that in their hurry they would start the operation before I was out, so I raised my arm to show that I was still conscious. Soothing remarks came from the butchers and that was all; I was out.

When I woke there was a nurse beside my bed. I muttered one word, "Food". This was Monday evening, and I had had nothing since Saturday. But all I was given was a little milk, which I promptly brought up with a lot of blood. Next morning lovely food was put on the ward table - porridge, sausages, etc. - but none was brought to me. In anguish I cried out, "Where's mine ?" I was told that a special breakfast was coming for me. At last it came and was put down in front of me - a bowl of bread and milk - my first food since Saturday !

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A little later, while everyone was busy, I slipped into my clothes and walked out of the hospital, and took a bus to where my Aunt Alice lived. She gave me a wonderful lunch and tea, and off I went back to Lewisham. There had been a terrific to-do at the hospital when it was found that a patient was missing. A search had taken place all over the building, as the door-keeper had said that he hadn't seen anyone go out. I was duly scolded by Matron and nurses, but I didn't care. I always admired Aunt Alice for the way she fed a starving nephew at a moment's notice in war-time days of rationing.

One night we were warned that there would be a Zeppelin bombing raid, so I stayed awake, as I had never experienced an air-raid in England. Nothing happened. Next night, another warning, so I went out onto a balcony. There were lots of search-lights but no raid. The third night there really was a raid, and patients trooped off to the basement for shelter, but no one noticed that I was fast asleep in bed and did not hear a sound. The only air-raid I had experienced was in France, when we were out of the trenches on "rest". There the padre took refuge in his tent; he said that he knew the canvas could not stop anything, but it made him feel more comfortable. It was the same in the Line during a bombardment. Men would take refuge under a sheet of corrugated iron, just as one did when it was raining; one did not feel so exposed.

When the shake-down at Hastings was over a number of us moved on to Oxford, where the real training started - lectures on aero-engines, bombing, fighting, etc. I was billeted in Corpus Christi College, where a few civilians drifted about in gowns, but otherwise it was all RFC. It was Spring, and we were very, very comfortable. My chief recollections seem to be of comfort; I suppose it was the contrast with conditions in France.

At the end of the course we had to go before a board which was to decide our futures. When it was my turn I was asked what I wanted to fly. Knowing that in the Army one was usually given something other than what one asked for, I said that I wanted to pilot night-flying bombers. When I was asked why, I replied that I thought they were safer. The Board laughed, and the chairman said, "I think your chest is broad enough for a row of medals. You'll make a good fighter-pilot." So the army was true to form.

The next move was to another training place at Uxbridge. I do not remember what we did there; I think the idea was to keep us busy and occupied while waiting for places at aerodromes. At each change we had splintered off in different directions, so that there were few of the fellows that I started with. Here we mixed up with a lot of men from the Dominions, who had done their preliminary training overseas; they naturally wanted to see something of London, but we were not allowed to go there. Needless to say, on the first Sunday lots of us went off, and I went home. On our return from the station we found Military Police (MPs) on the bridge across a small river, waiting to take names. Unfortunately the leading men were Australians and New Zealanders, who had seen a lot of fighting and were not going to stand this school-boy stuff, so they picked up the 'redcaps' and dropped them into the river, and over the bridge we went. The following weekend there were no MPs.

On our arrival at Uxbridge we had had tinned salmon and cucumber for tea. We were astounded at this luxury in war-time. We had it again for breakfast next morning, and at lunch and at tea, and at breakfast the day after, and again at lunch and tea, and for

breakfast the following day. This was too much of a good thing, so when we were dismissed at the end of the morning parade, we all sat down and refused to go into lunch. Mutiny ! There was a terrific to-do. The C.O. came along to interview the leaders; and we all went into lunch, but there was no more salmon and cucumber. It was thought that the Quartermaster must have got in a large consignment on the cheap, in order to save on the meat.

This course lasted only about two or three weeks and just before it ended there was an epidemic of a kind of 'flu. One went down suddenly without warning. I was at home for the day when I was struck, but I had to get back to Uxbridge as I was 'absent without leave' (AWOL), an awful crime, nearly as bad as 'desertion' in war-time. All army rules seemed so exaggerated to us, who were really civilians dressed up. They had probably been made in the Duke of Wellington's time, for the soldiers of the period, and never changed since. Anyway I got back to Uxbridge more dead than alive and went to bed. A friend brought a tin containing eight sections of different kinds of pills. I took two out of each section, slept like a log, sweating all night, and woke feeling quite well but very weak. What an extraordinarily silly thing to have done, when neither my friend nor I knew what the pills were for. I took them because we were due to go on to actual flying, and I did not want to report sick. But when the postings were put up, my name was not on it, so I was sent on 'indefinite leave'.

After a fortnight I wrote to the Air Ministry, and got a telegram ordering me to report to Eastbourne immediately. I packed, dashed off, arrived, but no one had been informed, so I had to moon around for a couple of days - and missed Eleanor's wedding !

My arrival was just about the time when the Army and Naval flying corps were amalgamated into the RAF, and we were a few of the first to arrive at what had been an RNAS station. Everything was done in naval language. We had 'divisions' instead of parades; we went 'ashore' from the aerodrome, in a 'liberty' lorry. And, what was unheard of in the army, we had women to look after us and our rooms. Young ones looked after rooms occupied by a number of men, but older ones for those occupied by one. I had a room to myself and a motherly person who cared for me and my things. We lived in what had been a girls' boarding school in the residential part of Eastbourne, and the Navy had made themselves very comfortable indeed, so much so that I seldom wanted to go elsewhere in the town.

We went to the aerodrome at Pevensey in two shifts - before breakfast and afternoon, or morning and evening. The aerodrome was flat land near the sea with a lot of drainage 'dykes', which had been boarded over. There were two groups of canvas hangars, one with Avros, the other Camels. We learnt to fly on the former and graduated later to the latter. In both, the propeller was fixed to the engine and both revolved on a fixed crank-shaft, cooling the engine.

The Avro was a two-seater, the instructor in the front seat with the pupil behind, in two separate compartments. They had dual controls so that the instructor could correct the mistakes of the pupil. A rudder-bar worked the rudder, and the "joy-stick"* worked

• This word was current slang for a 'phallus', and was quickly adopted for this particular control in an aircraft, both because of its shape and its position between the pilot's legs !!

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everything else. One merely pushed or pulled it according to what one wanted the plane to do - forwards and it went down, backwards and it went up, sideways and it tilted to the right or left, a mixture of two, e.g. forwards and sideways, and it went down tilted to one side. The throttle, worked by hand, was seldom used except on the ground, or when flying in formation. In the air it was fully open all the time. There were no brakes, so on the ground one also used it to control one's speed. When the engine was just ticking over, the plane did not move. There was no self-starter, so someone had to swing the propeller, a dangerous job if there were no chocks under the wheels, as the plane could lurch forward and the now revolving propeller chop up the man swinging it. In the air, if one had to, one started the engine by diving.

Our flying kit was a pair of sheepskin boots (wool inside) stretching up to the thigh, a long leather-lined coat stretching down to the ankles, leather gauntlets, a leather flying helmet (fur-lined) and goggles, but one usually used the helmet and goggles only. The planes were open to the sky and one's head stuck out of the top, but, as we seldom went above 8,000 ft., we were not often cold. We wore ear-phones and there was a speaking tube to communicate with the instructor. The lower part of our uniform consisted of breeches, puttees and boots, but most of us wore trousers, socks and shoes, or breeches, stockings and shoes. Discipline was naturally very slack, except where our flying was concerned. We were still looked upon by the public as something special, and were a very happy crowd. There was always a great deal of laughter and fun. We had to live very much in the present, as the death rate was high. In France, it was said that one's life lasted a month, by the end of which one was dead, wounded or a hero. The death rate while training was just as high, as the planes were nothing more than kites with engines, but we thought them grand, the most modern and up-to-date things in the world.

The training was very simple : We started in Avros with the instructor who taught us the rudiments, for example, taking off, flying and turning, landing on the aerodrome or in a field. When we had mastered these, we flew 'solo' and were encouraged to do anything we liked. We could take up a plane whenever there was one available, so we had to have a list of bookings as on public tennis courts. We were not allowed to go up in pairs or carry a passenger, and when we flew solo we still occupied the back seat, as we had done our training in it.

One's first flight was a test to see one's reaction to flying. My instructor was Lt. Lemon; he and I climbed into the cockpit by stepping on the lower plane (wing) and getting in over the side of the fuselage. A mechanic swung the propeller, the chocks were pulled away and we taxied to a spot suitable for taking off. There was no concrete runway; it was just a large flat grass field with boarding over the dykes. The plane was pointed into the wind at a convenient spot, the throttle was opened and off we went. The feeling was heavenly as we left the ground. The first thing one had to do on getting into a plane was to do up the wide belt round one's tummy, but there wasn't one. It did not surprise me, as that was what one expected in the army. So I held on tightly with my arms round two struts and tucked my feet under a cross-piece of the framework. We did turns and climbs and dives. A voice asked how I liked it and I replied, "Fine". Then we flew a few feet above the sea just off the beach. Lemon told me to do the waving, while he flew, so I waved to the people on the beach, who were delightedly excited and waved back.

The Lion and the Bicycle

Now that I was used to being in the air, we climbed up to an altitude of about 4,000 ft. and began stunts - looping the loop, rolls, flying up-side-down and everything. Finally we landed, and Lemon leaned over my cockpit and asked how I had liked it. I said that it was perfectly wonderful, but that I would have felt safer with a belt. He was aghast; he was probably picturing what would have happened if I had not been holding on when we were upside-down. However, he admitted that, when not in use, the belts were done up behind the seat, so that they would not interfere with the controls if the plane was being flown solo; he had forgotten to tell me. I wonder what he said to the other instructors !

Flying an aeroplane was a very simple matter in Avros . If the engine stopped, one could glide a mile for every 1,000 ft. of altitude. There was a long skid on the undercarriage to help in the landing. It was difficult to spin, as it came out of one of its own accord, and one could do all the stunts one wanted to. My only difficulty was landing, as I was too short to see over the front of the plane. I had to look over the side, which meant that my body was twisted. However, we were all taken up by our instructors for short flights of half an hour or so to practise this or that, such as turns or landings or just manoeuvring the plane.

One day Lemon needed to land for a moment, so we came down on a golf course. A number of cows came along and wanted to lick the plane. While I chased them away from one side, more would approach from the other. When Lemon returned we both shoo-ed them off, but they would not go far enough to allow us room to take off. I swung the propeller (without chocks), got into the plane and we tried to frighten them by taxi-ing about the fairway, but they just ran a few feet away, returning and staring. Finally, I got out and chased them well to one side, rushed back to the plane and climbed in as the plane took off. We were well off the ground as I got over the side into the cockpit; a rather silly thing to do, but it illustrates our care-free attitude to everything at that stage of the war.

We were all probably a little conceited by the admiration we got from everyone. Another stunt, which I never did, was to fly round the country until one saw a garden party. Then the pilot would switch the engine off and on to make it sound as if something was wrong. Finally he would land in a field nearby and, of course, he and his passenger would be invited to join the party. Afterwards, they would 'mend' what was wrong and fly back to the aerodrome.

On one occasion a pupil flying solo saw a 'brass-hat', i.e. a senior staff officer, addressing a ball on a golf course. As soon as he was about to hit the ball, the pilot dived on him, flying away in a straight line so that the golfer could not take the number of the plane, which was on the side. He kept this game up for quite a time until the 'brass-hat' went off to the club-house. A complaint was made, and from then on the number was also painted in large figures on the underside of the bottom wing.

One experimenter very nearly had disastrous consequences. He had landed on the top of Beachy Head to admire the view, but did not know how to start the engine when he wanted to return. He could not swing the propeller with no one in the plane, so he got into his seat and let the plane run down the slope towards the edge of the cliff. This would have been all right, if he could have got up enough speed, but he was not airborne as he went over and smashed the tail on the edge of the cliff. Fortunately, he went down at an angle and fell into the sea away from rocks. He was rescued, but not the aeroplane.

Finally came THE DAY. Lemon and I went up for a trip and came down again quite soon. He asked me whether I would like to take it up on my own and got out. Off I went solo; it was simply glorious. After flying around wherever I wanted to go, I climbed up to 6,000 ft. A friend had looped the loop on his second solo, so I decided to do it on my first. Really this is the easiest of stunts, though the most spectacular. One dives at great speed, pulls the 'joy-stick' right back, and over one goes. The art is to keep the rudder-bar very steady; otherwise the loop becomes an untidy spiral or a half-roll. It is better to switch off the engine at the top of the loop to reduce one's speed, to avoid doing a loop and a half. The whole thing is a matter of timing and steadiness. So with plenty of height I looped. Fearing that my previous loops with an instructor's hands on the controls might have been assisted, I looped again, to make sure that I was really able to do it. Then I came over the aerodrome at 4,000 ft. and looped. I wanted my friends to see me do it, as to loop on the first solo was a record that could not be broken. This time I came down to 2,000 ft. and could see my friends standing about, so I looped once more, landed and taxied to them, having established a record that could be equalled but never broken. Thereafter it became the recognised thing to do on one's first solo.

My second solo was equally spectacular but not so glorious. Landing was always my trouble. Taking off and flying in the air are as easy as breathing, but it takes a pilot to land. My trouble was that even with extra cushions I could not see the ground, and had to guess where it was. On this occasion I guessed wrong and landed about fifteen feet above it. The plane dropped like a stone, and one leg of the undercarriage broke. I had to get out and walk, leaving the plane sitting in the middle of the aerodrome like a hen with a broken leg. This took all the swank out of me, as I could not mention my first solo without someone mentioning my second. A glorious crash is one thing, but a broken undercarriage was the depth of degradation.

I decided that something must be done, so the next time I went up I practised landing on clouds. This was not satisfactory as a cloud has no surface. However, I got the answer a few days later, when the engine of my plane suddenly stopped firing. I had run out of petrol, and I was too low to be able to glide back to the aerodrome, so I chose an L-shaped flat field, but it was surrounded by trees. Gliding in at the bottom right corner, I found that I was too high to land slowly and too low to circle, so I tilted the plane on one side to skid down lower. I turned the corner of the 'L' and was able to land. A man came out of a house to see if he could help and offered me the use of his phone. This was the very first time that I had ever telephoned, so he had to show me how to use it. I got on to Lemon, and he came out, landing in the same field. On these Avros there was a reserve tank of petrol, which I did not know about, and my plane was switched to the reserve, instead of the main one.

We pulled the planes as far back to the bottom of the 'L' as possible to take off, in order to make sure of clearing the trees. I then swung his propeller and he mine. To give me as much speed as possible he held on to the tail of mine as long as he could and suddenly let go. I shot off, keeping as low as possible a few feet off the ground to gain speed. Near the trees I pulled the joy-stick back as far as it would go and climbed safely over them. When we got back to the aerodrome Lemon said that he had feared that I would hit the trees, and was wishing that he had not let me try.

But that taught me how to solve my landing problem. I experimented first on clouds; I flew over one, tilted the plane and came down rapidly in a side-slip, righting the plane just above the cloud. If I did this from too high, I came down too quickly, so I had to judge the right height. Finally I came down over the aerodrome, throttled down, side-slipped until I could distinguish the blades of grass, and there I was, just right for a landing, safe and spectacular. It also meant that I could land, if necessary, in a very small area.

Then came formation flying. This was done with one's hand on the throttle as one had to change speed all the time, in order to keep one's position, especially on the turns. The leader went where he wanted to; the next pair flew on either side, but higher up; the next pair went further up still on the ends of the 'V' on a turn the outside man therefore had to race while the inside man went much slower. Although we had practised with a pal, just with two planes, it was quite a business with a number, and felt rather crowded. At first one was all eyes with head twisting in all directions, but after a bit one just watched the neighbour towards the centre. I never enjoyed it; it was like being a soldier on parade. However, one had to pass all these tests before going on to Camels, and it was Camels I wanted to fly.

The Sopwith Camel was an extraordinary aeroplane; it was made to be flung around. It had a short thick fuselage with short wings, the lower not parallel with the upper but sloping up towards the tips. It had an air-cooled, nine-cylinder, rotary engine. Everything about it was quick, and the pilot had to keep very alert. For example, it did a roll so quickly that one easily found oneself doing a roll and a half. As soon as one put the controls in position for any movement one had to do the opposite at once. The strength of the rotary engine tended to pull the plane to the right, so that in doing a right turn one had to put on left rudder to prevent the nose going down. Then the plane was so small that the end of the crankshaft was only a few inches from one's body, which meant almost certain death in a crash. But one had a clear view of any enemy in front. The two machine-guns were inside the fuselage to prevent wind-resistance and fired 'through the propeller', i.e. the bullet left the gun just after the propeller blade had passed in front of the muzzle and just before the next blade came in front. One just pointed the plane at the target and fired. In earlier models there was a Lewis gun fitted on the top wing, but this took 5 mph off the plane's flying speed, and was soon discontinued.

In March 1918 the Germans broke through the allied front where the British and French joined. In the debacle the British retreated towards the Channel ports and the French towards Paris leaving a wide gap through which the enemy just had to walk. There were no available troops at all to plug the hole (at this time there was no united over-all command of the Allied forces) so Camels flew up and down roads, firing at convoys and dropping twenty-five pound bombs on any concentration of troops or supplies. One plane could hold up the advance by five minutes at least. This was so successful that the British had sufficient time to bring up men to throw back the German advanced troops, who had out-run their supply columns. From then onwards 'ground strafing' was added to the Camel's many duties, and many were also shot down. The most dangerous height to be was between fifty and a hundred feet; the safest almost ground-level.

The result of all this was that, as soon as one had mastered the flying techniques, one had to learn to stunt in the air and to fly as low as possible. In fact we were encouraged to do just what we liked as long as it was successful, and we did not frighten animals. One's greatest chance of survival in France was the ability to manoeuvre one's plane.

There was a specially adapted Camel that could carry two, for teaching the first steps. It was a tight squeeze and one could only learn how different it was from the Avro. After two or three outings in this we went off on our own. As turning to the right was the most dangerous manoeuvre, one could always tell a pupil on his first solo as he took off in a very straight line and disappeared in the distance gradually gaining sufficient height to risk a turn. Then he would gently turn to the left. There were no stunts on the first solo, and one was only too glad to get back on the ground again safely.

The art of flying was in having relaxed control, as in driving a car or motor cycle or riding a horse, and this was very much the case with a Sopwith Camel. I went up quite high and practised large figures-of-eight, but no stunts, and eventually managed to land without discredit. But landings were to be my bug-bear. Bad landings in a Camel were far more obvious, as it would bounce about like a 'wild west bronco'. Later, when more experienced, I did the side-slip stunt which I had learnt with Avros.

In 1918 Camels were being shot down in large numbers, and I was certain that it was due to pilots going out when only half-trained. It was obvious that we were winning the war, so those who had never been on active service tended to rush through their training to get to the front before it ended. That was why so many did not last longer than a month. I was determined to be master of my plane, so whenever I went up, I stayed up until the petrol tank was nearly empty. I fought battles with clouds, flew about in fields hopping over trees, dived into the valleys of Beachy Head and at the same time got experience of picking out land-marks for guidance. The cross-country railway line from Tonbridge to Guildford was a good one, for example. This sort of thing would be useful in France to get one's bearings after a scrap.

When there were not enough planes for everyone, some fellows would be sent off to a rifle range to practise firing machine-guns. They would be taken out in a lorry and would telephone when they wanted to return. One day I saw some friends at the range so kept flying in at them when they were firing, so they began throwing stones at the plane. After a while I flew away, but at lunch the friends were absent. During the afternoon they arrived at the mess, very hungry and after my blood, as in one of my charges I had flown through the telephone wire. Being unable to ring for the lorry, they had had to walk back!

On another occasion I flew off to Kent, but it became very misty at ground-level and I could not see where I was. I spotted a railway line and I flew along it to the next station. It was an open one without a top, so I flew between the platforms and read the name of the station - Canterbury West. After flying round a bit I saw a tent on the top of the Downs so landed near it. The camper was a Wye College student who had been turned down for the forces on medical grounds and was madly keen on aeroplanes. He knew all about Camels, but had never been near one, so this was heaven for him, and I was very welcome. After a thorough examination of the plane, he got tea, and we spent a very pleasant evening together. When I thought it was time to go, I had intended running down the slope, but he wanted to swing the propeller. So I gave the engine as little throttle as possible to prevent the plane going forward on to him, and then off I went.

But by the time I got to Eastbourne it was dark, and there were no flare-paths or lights in those days. Fortunately the moon made the wet boards over the dykes shine, so I knew vaguely where the ground was. I went round and round in big circles getting lower each time. At last my wheels touched the ground and I switched off the engine, and wasn't I glad to be down safely. I left the plane in the middle of the aerodrome, and a truck came over to me. The men had been working late and were just about to drive off when they heard the plane trying to land, so they had waited in case of accident, and were able to drive me to the mess. This event was looked upon as a great achievement as no one landed in the dark in those days, and even instructors came to ask me all about it. I had not thought that I was doing anything wonderful; there was just nothing else I could have done. However, I was advised not to take such risks again.

We Flight Cadets were learning other things besides flying, as we were to become officers. We had to do duties such as 'Officer of the Watch' and 'Orderly Officer'. I spent one very wet Sunday in a small office on the empty aerodrome. My duties as Officer of the Watch were to record barometric readings in a book every few hours and to deal with the pilot of any incoming plane from another aerodrome. My only companion was the Orderly Officer; our only visitors all day were the men bringing our meals. The rain fell steadily and it was Sunday, September 29th, and my twenty-first birthday. Towards evening an American plane, a Liberator, arrived. The Canadian pilot asked whether he could arrange a forced landing, as he wanted to visit his fiancée, who was staying in Eastbourne. While we were talking another plane arrived, and I suppose the pilot must have been blinded by the rain for he landed on the wing of the Liberator. The Canadian was delighted, as he would now have to spend a week in Eastbourne, while waiting for a new wing. He thanked me profusely, as if I had arranged it specially for him.

One day we were all very cross, as it was announced that there was to be a General's Inspection, and we were to line up on the 'Main Deck in Number Ones'; this was the parade ground in our best uniforms. We all thought that a General should see us flying, not standing in rows. As we were the new RAF, we did not want anything that smelt of Navy or Army. But above all, we lost an afternoon's flying. As we were a very mixed bunch from all over the world, who had never drilled together before, with a mixture of naval and military terms, it was decided to put us in lines and leave us there until the general had had a look at us. We were in our nice clean clothes, and the General was just arriving, when a gorgeous figure was to be seen marching across the aerodrome. This was a comic Scot, a regular in the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, wearing full peace-time uniform of that regiment - kilt, sporran, white spats, red coat and bonnet. I don't remember whether he had a claymore as well. However, he was obeying instructions and was in his 'Number Ones'. He put himself on the end of the line amidst a roar of laughter and cheers just as the General's car drove up.

This sort of thing sounds very silly, but we were living in an extra-ordinary period. Edward VII had died only four years before the 1914 War broke out, turning peaceful England completely upside-down. Bleriot had flown across the Channel (twenty-one miles) in 1909, and a queue a mile long, with me in it, had lined up in Oxford Street to look at the machine in Selfridges' department store. I remember standing with Dad and Dick the whole morning at Wormwood Scrubs, watching Graham White trying to take off in the Daily Mail race to see who would be the first man to fly from London to Manchester. When war started aeroplanes were still of the 'pusher' type,

where the pilot sat on a plank between the wings in the open with the propeller behind him. So when a year or two later there were planes like the Sopwith Camel, although the people looked upon us as dare-devils and we behaved as such, we thought we were enjoying the very latest in scientific development, and had no fear of anything or anybody. We were of the twentieth century, and were about to build a new world.

Flying was a new experience for all of us, instructors and pupils alike, and we had to learn what we could do with aeroplanes, by trial and error. Instructors all warned us about making experiments too near the ground, and most accidents were the result of breaking this rule. But who could tell us how much space was actually required? Besides, we had to pack a lot of experience into a very short time, as we were so badly needed in France.

In the mess at night, after all planes had been put away, most of our conversation was about flying and our experiences that day. Most of us had tried something worth telling the others, and the next day we would try it for ourselves. We were explorers in a new world. It was only a very short time since Bleriot's flight.

As we grew more experienced we had to do a lot of formation flying. This was difficult to do well, as a Camel answered so quickly to any movement of the controls. A slight acceleration and one was out of the formation as if shot from a catapult, and then the job was to get back into place gracefully. One couldn't just mark time. And if one did a circle to come into place from behind, the instructor leading might turn off in another direction, leaving one miles away. It was such a straggler that would get pounced on by the Germans in France, so we needed plenty of practice.

One day I was told to lead a formation. The other four were advanced pilots too, so we practised flying in a very tight group. We dived and turned and did all sorts of things other than aerobatics. We did some very low flying at tree top level and down into the valleys of Beachy Head. One was so narrow that the formation had to split up and go in single file. There was a large working party of German prisoners of war coming along a track with a stile on it. We were so low that they could not climb over it, and they scattered in all directions under trees. The escort was furious, but we looked upon it all as experience. The signal to reform was to fly slowly in a straight line. I did this and everyone got into his place. When we landed, we felt we had done a good morning's work and had learnt a lot, which, of course, was the instructors' object in sending us off on our own.

The most important thing to learn was how to fight. The key position when fighting was on the enemy's tail, anywhere just behind him when in a single-seater, just below in a two-seater to avoid his rear-gunner. We had many practice battles, using a camera-gun instead of a real one. The roll of film was developed, and one could see the results of one's shooting. How easy it was to miss one's target!

One day an inspecting big-wig arrived in a German plane, and I was chosen to represent our station. I went up first and flew around at about 5,000 ft. He took off, flew off somewhere and came back slightly below me. We had a great battle. He could climb faster than I, so he kept diving, hoping that I would follow, so that he could get well above me when he climbed again. But I did not take the bait. I could turn faster, and did a very tight turn and got onto his tail. I stayed there only a few feet away. He got the wind-up, knowing that I was only a pupil and thinking that I was going to crash into him, but by this time I could really fly and knew exactly what I could and could not do.

We got lower and lower. He waved his hand trying to tell me to go away. I waved cheerily back, as if I thought it was a friendly greeting. The whole aerodrome was watching the fun. At last when we got within a hundred feet or so of the ground we parted. He told our C.O. that he had never in his life been so frightened, but it gave me great confidence, as I would be going to France very soon.

There was a terrific gale of wind blowing one morning, so no one with less than a certain number of hours' flying time was allowed to fly. I was one of the very few, and I wanted to try something I had seen birds do - to ride on the wind. It could not be done on a crowded aerodrome as one always had to take off into the wind. On this occasion I took off down wind in the gale, rushing across the aerodrome at a great speed without rising. Then I did a steep turn and climbed into the gale, just as the birds do. It was like a vertical take-off and a splendid feeling. It is one of the thrills of modern gliding, which had not been thought of at that time. I did it over and over again, but not straight off the ground. Later, landing in the gale was a bit tricky, as I had to keep very straight into the wind, to prevent my being blown over sideways. It was all a very enjoyable experience.

I used to go about a lot with a fellow named Crew. He was the same size as me, and just as enthusiastic about flying, but not quite so experienced. He had the same need of spare cushions to reach the rudder bar and to see over the front, so naturally he tended to copy all my unusual methods. One day we were told to do our height test and while doing it Crew was to practise formation flying with me as leader. The test was very simple as one had only to go up to 15,000 ft., fly around and come down again. This height was the Camel's ceiling, where the plane wallowed and did not readily answer to the controls. We donned our full flying kit of leather coat, sheepskin boots and all. Climbing steadily was very dull and slow, so to speed it up I flew towards London in a north wind, closely followed by Crew. To ease the monotony, and to give Crew formation experience, I did not stick to a straight line, but flew all over Surrey and Kent. As we were a long way from Eastbourne, I thought it expedient to call at Hounslow Aerodrome for more petrol, but London was hidden in a low white fog. Not knowing exactly where Hounslow was, I turned towards Tilbury, which was clear, to fly west until we got there.

Now the most dangerous thing to do with a Camel was to get into a right-spinning nose dive, which was fatal. It usually happened in a right turning climb, causing a pocket between the rudder and the rear hinged-plane for making the plane climb or dive. I used to argue with chaps that, if one put all the controls into the normal position, the plane should come out of the spin, just as it did from a roll. So over Tilbury I tested the theory; I got into a right spin. It was so rapid that I saw only a blur, but I managed to set the controls as planned. The spin turned into a straight dive, out of which I carefully and slowly came, but by now I was only about a thousand feet up; I had come down 14,000 ft. in just a few seconds! I flew round and round quietly to get back my wits and decided never to try it again. I had proved my theory, but it was no wonder that a right spin was looked upon as fatal.

I suddenly remembered Crew. He was nowhere to be seen, so I flew west looking for him, but found that the fog was at ground level. St. Paul's dome appeared just to my right, so I knew that was above the buildings, and the ground was slightly

War Experiences II

visible in patches. Fortunately, there was the River Thames, so I came down and flew up it, hopping over the bridges and hoping to find Hounslow. Coming down again after jumping Putney Bridge, I found myself among houses - I had not come down soon enough on that sharp bend. At one moment I was just over a street and could see people and traffic just below. By this time I had given up thoughts of Hounslow; Richmond Park was a safer objective. I wasn't far from it when I came to a 'balloon wing' where new hangars were being built (which I had not expected to be there). Everything happened so quickly that there was no time to take evasive action, or to worry. There were two tall piles of timber frames, and the plane went between them. The tips of the wings hit the timber and broke off, the under-carriage hit something else and also came off, and the fuselage with me in it went slithering along the ground. I sat there quite unhurt and could see figures running from all directions towards me; the mist wasn't quite so dense, perhaps because of trees. The plane had ceased to exist, and I had not even a scratch or bruise on me.

I was taken to the officers' mess and given hot coffee. I saw the C.O., who finding out where I lived, asked jokingly why I had not made my crash in Kensington Gardens. I borrowed a pair of shoes, rolled up my flying kit and was taken by a WRAF driver to a railway station. I was sitting beside her when we discovered that the back of the car was on fire. I suppose someone in a passing bus had thrown a cigarette end over the side; there were no roofs to buses then. We got out the fire-extinguisher and managed to put it out - a comic finish to an exciting morning. I got home and stayed there for a couple of nights to recuperate.

As I got out of the train at Eastbourne the following day, there was Crew also getting out. No one would believe that it wasn't a put up job to have a couple of nights in London. He had not followed me into the fog of London, and, as he could not find an aerodrome, had decided to land on the flat land near Tilbury. He did so, but found that instead of a solid field, it was very soft mud into which his plane sank, so he left it there and went home. I had to see the C.O. next morning to recount my doings. All he said was, "Never mind, you've had a lucky escape". And that was that.

One of the tests we had to do was to fire at an object on the ground. A huge target, about twenty-five feet square, was marked out and we dived at it, firing. No one kept a score, but I suppose that the object was to have real experience, and it was out of the question to have pilots flying around firing just anywhere. The top of the joy-stick was shaped like a spade-handle with two small levers in the middle. Holding it with both hands, one pressed the levers with one's thumbs to fire the guns. So one had to think of guiding the plane towards the target with one's hands and firing the guns with one's thumbs. With my usual difficulty in seeing the target, I could see it while approaching it, but then had to guess when to start diving. If there was a strong wind behind, I overshot the target. A side-wind could be just as frustrating. So I flew until, over the side, I saw the target immediately below me, then turned the plane upwards so that it stalled and slipped over sideways into a vertical dive. Then it was easy, but one had to come especially gently out of a vertical dive.

Crew decided to try this. He did everything correctly, but pulled his plane too suddenly out of the dive; the wings broke off and he was killed. I was in our quarters in Eastbourne, when someone rang up to tell us that Woods had been killed while shooting

The Lion and the Bicycle

at a ground target. It is not often in life that one hears one's own Obituary Notice. Someone watching the exercise had assumed that it was I from the diving stunt.

That was the end of my stay in Eastbourne. I was now ready to go to France. I packed up my belongings and set off for Marske, in Yorkshire, which was a collecting station and aerodrome. But the Germans must have got wind of my coming, for they asked for an Armistice ! - the end of the War.

I arrived in London on Monday 11th November, in the afternoon. When I got home I found Dad walking up and down in his night things in his bedroom. He said, "John, I have come to the end of my tether, I think I had better have a doctor". We knew then that he must be very ill, as he had always refused to see one. His health became steadily worse. His naval experiences of doctors had taken away all confidence in the medical profession. He said that he knew more about his own body than any 'Sawbones' could.

I had to go on to Marske, and flew once or twice that week, but on Saturday I got a telegram. I caught the night train from York on Sunday and got home early on the Monday morning, but Dad had died early on Sunday morning in his sleep.* I was allowed twelve days leave to give Mother a hand, and Dick came from Scapa Flow for a couple of days. Then I had to report back to Marske.

While I had been away, someone had been killed while flying, and as a result, a lot of Camel pilots refused to fly, since the War seemed to be over. A sheet of paper was put on the notice-board for the names of those who did not want to fly any more. I did not add my name, as I was not sure; I was wondering whether I would try and get a regular commission in the peace-time RAF. The list was taken down; all those whose names were on the list stopped getting flying pay and were given all sorts of ground duties.

I was reprimanded for not attending Pay Parade. I pointed out that as an officer I should not attend, as my pay went into my Bank Account in London. But I was told that I was on the books as a Flight Cadet, so it was my duty to attend the parade. So once a week I put my flying coat over my uniform, to hide my rank, and drew both Flight Cadet's pay and flying pay. I had to do this to satisfy the books. While I was in the room, I was a Flight Cadet, but as soon as I was outside I was an officer again, but the books were satisfied and this was easier than all the office work involved in sorting out the mistake.

In the draw for Christmas leave I was lucky and went home for another twelve days, and by the time I got back to Marske it was January, 1919. No one was interested in anything except to get out of the Forces. Somehow the pleasure had gone out of flying. To go up and fly around for no particular reason seemed pointless, so I applied to be demobilised.

When I had joined up in 1916 my occupation was described as 'Student'. In 1919 students were demobilised first, so that they could continue their studies, but Dad's pension had died with him, and Mother's was the magnificent sum of £92 per annum.

* Three months earlier, Dad had said, "All my children, except Ted, are settled for life; I shall not be able to see to him, so there is nothing now to live for". Bill was in B.E.A; Dick was in the Navy; Tom was dead; Amy and Eleanor were married; Ted was a schoolboy of twelve.

This meant no university for me, as there were no State or County scholarships at that time. Besides, Bill wrote to say that he was coming home and had all sorts of plans to discuss. I did not put my name on the 'no flying' list, nor did I fly more than two or three more times. On most days I went for long walks with another fellow. The weather was very pleasant, and at the beginning of February I went home as a civilian to wait for Bill to arrive. By then, 4 Lux. had stopped being a family home, it was a house with our things in it, with a lot of uninhabited rooms. There were no resident servants, and Daisy came in as a 'daily'. Mother and Ted lived alone in a four-storey house with nine living-rooms.

Bill's leave was postponed several times, and I had to fill in a whole year. There were no temporary jobs going; there was no dole. I was twenty-one.

* * *

Postscript

The story of Dad's flying adventures had a fitting sequel (Swan Song, perhaps). He spent the last few years of his life (before his death in 1992) at homes for the elderly near Whitby, and therefore close to us here in Yorkshire, and also, as it happened, not far from Marske Aerodrome.

In 1990 a young curator, Phil Philo, at Kirkleatham museum, was doing a research project on Marske Aerodrome in the First World War. We saw mention of it in a local newspaper, so I rang him up and told him that my father had spent time at Marske. Phil wanted to know whether we still had any of his artifacts - log books, clothing, medals. "We've still got him - aged 93 !" I replied. Phil could not imagine that any of those pilots could still be alive, so rushed down to see him, spending two hours learning first-hand about the era he was studying, and how to fly a Sopwith Camel.

A few months later Phil was giving a lecture on his findings to a local audience and invited Dad. I took him along and we had two reserved seats in the front row. Dad was spell-bound, seeing old photographs of the inside of the Pilots' Mess and various spectacular crashes, some of which he remembered.

At the end of the lecture, Phil invited questions, but told his audience that a man in the front row could probably answer them better than he could. It turned out that much of the audience consisted of Second World War RAF personnel. They descended on Dad and grilled him for two hours on precisely how to fly those "virtually unflyable" Sopwith Camels. Dad's recall was crystal clear, and of course he loved it, but I could see that he was getting totally exhausted, so had to drag him away in the end.

Peter

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