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## **'BROLGA HILL'**

**By Ken and Bert Gyford,**

The *Cross and Cockade Journal*, Great Britain, volume 2, number 4 has a good short history of 29 Squadron R.F.C. On page 100, the second paragraph starts '*Two more Albatross D III's were added to W.B. Woods score on July 23rd, but the following day 2Lt. A.B. Hill (B-1546) failed to return -a prisoner of the Germans'* unquote. A great many pilots simply failed to return and were not seen to go down. This is the story of one of them, written as he told it to us on 25th November 1972.

"I propose to give my reminiscences of a time over a half a century ago. I was an Overseer on a sheep station about 100. miles N.W. of Brisbane in Queensland when the war started. We had mustered 3 paddocks of 6400. acres in each, these paddocks were named Inkerman, Waterloo and Balaclava. We finished the shearing and I gave notice and did the 160. miles down to Sydney in N.S.W., which is my home State, and went to the Victoria Barracks. I saw a great crowd of men lined up and I asked a guard, who wouldn't let me in, who they were and what they were doing. He told me that they were Artillery and were about to march out to their camp which was in the National Park 18 miles South of Sydney. I wandered around for a while until they started to march and spotting an empty place in the rear of one of the ranks I went over and filled it, marching with the new recruits to the railway station. We caught the train to the camp and on arrival a roll call was called, which singled myself and another man out from the others. I was asked what I was doing there and I said that you have about 13. horses, mostly untrained and I'm a bushman and a buckjump rider, and I thought that possibly this would be where I'm most wanted. My name was taken and a few particulars and then I was told I was in the 14th Battery Artillery, 5th Brigade 2nd Australian Division. The date was 8th of September, 1915. I took my kit to tent No.7 which was a large bell tent and found a most extraordinary thing. The eight occupants of this tent were school mates of mine. As time went on I noticed that nearly everybody was a bushman. It was many years later when I read that someone wanted to put a battery together composed of N .S .W. bushmen, and this was it.

We had a Sergeant Major Garland, whose initials were M.A.N. and he was every bit of it - a wonderful soldier. We fell in next morning and whilst he was talking my nose started to itch so I scratched it. "You there" he shouted pointing at me "*If you want to pick your nose, take one step to the rear, pick it and fall in again. smartly*", I was a bit surprised but did as I was told. Then a little later on the flies were annoying me and one in particular kept settling near my eye. When I thought the sergeant wasn't looking I made a swipe at it and immediately heard "*You there*" and there was the sergeant pointing at me "*Take one step to the rear, catch that fly, wring its neck and fall in again smartly*". I did as I was instructed. I remember that first day very well.

As time went on we broke those horses in and there was a lot of buckjumpers among them too. I didn't get much training at all, as a little over two months later, on

the 19th November, we embarked on board ship and left for overseas. There was the 13th, 14th and 15th Batteries, all with 18 pounders. We disembarked at Suez in Egypt and went to a place called Ismalia. We didn't stay there long before we were put on a train for Cairo and from there went to a place called Mardi, on the Nile. There was nothing doing there in the way of artillery work but marching and filling in time. Later we went by train to Tel el Kebir on the Suez Canal. We were camped out in the desert near an old battle ground and I remember seeing mounds of earth, probably of trenches and fortifications as well as human bones, like pelvises, leg bones, all big stuff, no skulls tho'. All this was just lying around. We went back to Ismalia and here a funny thing happened. Some of us were ordered about 4 miles into the desert to make a sort of outpost because the Truks were expected to attack. We had a lot of equipment loaded on camels. My rank was driver you see, and one of these animals was a nasty brute, you couldn't trust him at all, so I left him till last when it came to unloading. When I removed his load he was up and off. I dropped the load and grabbed at the long rope I kept him on. He didn't stop and he dragged me, oh I don't know how far, over the sand. I dug my heels in and must have been the first man to do sand skiing. I saw my Commanding Officer of the 14th Battery, shot him a salute and fell over. I wore the heels off my boots and my feet were so hot I could hardly stand it.

The Turks never did come so we went by train to Alexandria and were told that the 2nd Division was going to France. We boarded a ship called the '*Minnewaska*' in March. Guns were in short supply so we left ours behind for the 3rd Division to train on, When we left Australia we took practically every gun with us. We had our horses and harness with us though and set sail, When opposite Malta we heard that the sister ship, the '*Minneapolis*', had been torpedoed. Fortunately, she was on her way back after taking the first batch of Australians to France and she was empty, She sank near Malta whilst being towed by a destroyer. Anyway, we had the whole of the 5th Field Artillery Brigade on our ship and as we went on our way we sighted a submarine. This submarine got closer and closer, and then we saw it was a dead cow, all swollen up floating in the sea. That was my first scare.

On landing at Marseilles, we immediately boarded a train and were carried off towards Paris, unfortunately we went around this city and didn't stop - disappointed a lot of us I can tell you. We were taken to a place a few miles from Fleurbaix on the Somme, near Armentiers. We dug into position after picking up some English guns and to our amazement we were issued with 8 shells per gun, per day, We didn't know then that the shells were being saved for a coming offensive, we thought that somebody was a bit tight with our issue. We worked out our bearings and distances, and used our 8 shells per gun and then the Huns got stuck into us and almost blasted us out of position. He had plenty of shells. We moved several times and the same thing happened. The local people there were still living just a few hundred yards from the front line and we found that our position was being given away by a man using a white horse and ploughing a field behind us. When we moved, so did he. We got rid of him quick smart. Because of the Huns unerring accuracy on our important targets we had this spy scare, he was one we found and another was an old lady dressed as a Nun who operated from an old cemetery. We didn't learn much about artillery because we didn't have enough shells to fire.

Around May we had the Stokes gun affair. This occurred In the Bridoux Salient which was held by the 18th Battalion, They had been using the new Stokes trench mortars and around about this time G.H.Q. decided that the Stokes mortar was still secret and that special care was to be taken to avoid their capture by the enemy but when the 20th Battalion took over the Salient they weren't told about this special care to be taken bit. The Huns bombarded this Salient and sent a raiding party over during a lull and captured 2 Stokes mortars and some prisoners. I don't think the Huns realised the value of the mortars, fortunately, for they never copied them. These things had a high rate of fire and were much faster than the Hun mortar.

From there we went to Pozieres and that's when we learnt what artillery was about, We were stationed at Sausage Valley, a great mass of artillery, there were rows and rows of guns. We were all pretty new and fresh but we soon learnt about artillery. When we got going the noise was terrific. The 18 pounders were packed so close together that the tin helmets were blown off our heads by the rush of air from the guns behind us. We supported the battles around Pozieres which went on for several months. I don't think that there was so much concentrated artillery fire for over such a long period anywhere else in the war. We just pounded each other to dust almost. I find it impossible to describe my experiences of that period, but I really saw what artillery was all about and what war was.

I think it was around July when a call went to the artillery for volunteers to act as runners. The shelling was so intense that the telephone lines just didn't last any time at all. The command post in this area was known as Gibraltar and there were artillery observers in there with the infantry and because there were no telephone lines, runners had to carry messages from here to the guns for corrections etc. My motto has always been 'Try anything once' so I volunteered and became a runner. I found Gibraltar to be a deep underground affair with several floors and the roof was made out of concrete, about 12 foot thick. A call came for a runner and I went into this place. There were two British Officers in there and they had come to this shelling straight from England. Tears were pouring from their eyes as they worked. I shot my salute to them and was given a message to take to Lt. so and so - I forget his name. I asked if it was important and he said why do you ask. I told him that I didn't think I could get through at the moment because the shelling was so bad and I'd like to wait until it slackens off. He gave me a good telling off and away I went. I got through, I had to travel over 4 to 500 yards of broken trenches that were being shelled to bits. I gave this Officer the message and asked if there was a reply. He said, "No, I'll read this to you" - *'If you're not doing anything on Saturday I would like you to stroll around for a yarn.'* I can't tell you what my utterances were!

From there we went to Albert, that's the city with a statue leaning over as if about to fall from the top of some building. The general belief was that when the statue fell the war would end, There was one thing I remembered about this time. The Huns had evacuated one town, I don't know where it was and had blown up most of the buildings except the Town Hall. The building was taken over and some days later a mine went off underneath it and got most of the people in it. The noise of war is indescribable, guns going off all the time. The ground was churned up so much that it became loose and sticky with all sorts of muck. I've seen chaps that had fallen into this stuff and become really stuck in it; at first horses were used to pull

them out with ropes but the earth was so sticky that it gripped the men tight and the poor devils would be pulled nearly in half.

I was observing for the 14th Battery most of the time even though I enlisted as a driver. Well, we moved again to Poperinghe and after a period in the front line I was handed a leaflet, asking for volunteers for the R.F.C.. I felt like a change so I filled it in. I don't know how long I waited for some sort of reply but I was still at Poperinghe when I was told to go to a town nearby. There was about 30. of us there. We paraded before an English Major who was dressed in grey, and this colour and the way he moved reminded me of our grey cranes in Australia. He wandered up and down the lines and told me to fall out. I thought, *'My God I'm the first picked,'* I nudged one of the others who fell out after me and said we've been picked and got no response. I turned and looked at him and recognised him as the man who used to jump out of balloons over Sydney Harbour advertising Penfolds Wine. He was as deaf as you could make them. I realised then that I was rejected so I hung around and watched the remainder form ranks and listened to the questioning. You've no idea of the yarns these chaps were putting over, who they were etc, so I thought I'd have a go. I was a bombardier at the time and got a sergeant to parade me before the Major. I threw my salute and told him that I had noticed I wasn't questioned but was put out on sight. He answered that "I suffered from his complaint, being too heavy, too old and too tall." Well I was tall and I weighed 11 stone. Anyway he said "you never know" and asked me who I was and what I was. I told him I was a grazier. He didn't know what that was, so I told him *"I wasn't one of those little fellas who measures his land in hundreds of thousands of acres but one who measures his land in thousands of square miles."* The Major seemed impressed so I went on about the thousands of sheep and cattle I had. He asked me my favourite sport and I said *"Pig sticking, buckjumping and polo"*. This seemed to satisfy him and he told me to wait outside, Well, I waited and watched an observation balloon, one of ours, which had broken loose and was drifting towards the lines. They were using a machine gun on it to let the gas out and as I was watching this a chap came up to me and asked if my name was Hill. I said it was and he said that the Major had been calling for me for five minutes. I went before him and he asked me if I was deaf before telling me to fall in. He made a speech and called out the names of the men he had chosen to go to England for training in the R.F.C., and believe it or not, my name was the first chosen. I felt pretty good at this.

We didn't leave straight away but returned to our units. The Battery moved to a spot near Flers on the Somme in the Autumn. Here, the Infantry divisions were supported by twice the numbers of guns than he usually was. Well, I got my orders to leave for England - I had been with the battery for 1 year and 99 days with not 1 hour's leave. The night before I left, I was drying out my sopping wet boots over a fire and some bloke having a lark pushed them in and I lost them. I was in a hurry so I made some footwear out of old bags and departed for Le Havre. When I got there I was bailed up by a Pommy guard for being improperly dressed. I refused to get into a Pommy uniform and I said *"I'm an Australian and I'll wear an Australian uniform."* I was arrested and put into a compound, but I managed to sneak out before the boat left and landed in England.

I might mention that my nickname of 'Brolga' has always been with me. A

Brolga is an Australian crane, one of our biggest birds. It is tall and moves about in a most graceful manner. It is called a native companion and the black fellas call it the Brolga. Anyway, when I was fourteen I was the height I am now, six feet, and they reckoned I resembled a Brolga and the name stuck. Funny thing was that during W.W.II when I was in Brisbane, the officers of No.3 Recruiting Centre, where I was working, was invited to a dinner and someone put my name down as Squadron Leader Brolga Hill. The lady running the show saw this card and said "*Oh, but he's an Aboriginal*". The Air Board down in Melbourne heard of this and looked up my breeding and confirmed that I had a nickname.

On landing in England, the first place I went to was Denham, to learn military law amongst other things, This was 16 miles out of London in Buckinghamshire and I stayed there for 3 months, at the end of which I had to pass examinations. I think we wore white bands around our caps. Xmas came whilst I was there and rumour had it that there was to be no leave but as it turned out we did get it, I got pally with a chap who knew all about pheasants and we decided to nip out and get some from a nearby wood for our Xmas dinner. My friend told me before I went in not to wound one or he'll wake the neighbourhood. We got half a bag of them and then, unfortunately, wounded one and he blew the gaff on us, On our way out we came across this gamekeeper chap, we didn't stop for him and he let us have both barrels from his shotgun. He was a rotten shot, thank goodness. We were determined not to lose our birds although we very nearly did when we ran across the officer of the camp who had spotted us. We made off with him after us, and we came across a big bit of sloping ground covered with ice, so we cut around that but he took a short cut and that was the end of him! We got our pheasants and leave, and we took the birds to London, and at the Diggers Paradise, I don't remember the name of the hotel, they were cooked for us.

From Denham I went up to Oxford to Brasenose College where I was taught the theory of flight, a lot of stuff about engines and things in general about aeroplanes, Incidentally, there is a chap in the Australian Society of Aero Historians who was with me at Denham and Brasenose, He is John Allport who eventually flew R.E.8's and Armstrong Whitworths. After Brasenose we separated and went to different places, I went North to learn to fly. We used the 'Rumpities' the old Maurice Farman Shorthorn. I flew my first solo in 4 hours and remember getting down alright. I had two instructors, one was a Canadian and the other English. In the Rumpity the instructor sat behind me and if I had the English fella I could expect an almighty thump between the shoulder blades if I made a mistake. The instructor would explain what he was going to do after the first few flights, and allowed me to lightly hold the controls so that I could feel what he was doing and how he did it. When the instructors felt that I had got the feel of the aircraft he would let me control it myself and when he was satisfied that I was ok I went on my solo. You didn't fly all the time at this place. The weather had to be just right and there was always a queue of chaps waiting to go up. Much of the time was spent in cleaning the aircraft, wiping the oil and mud off the wires and fabric. These old machines got very oily. From there I went to Cairns, near Marlborough and got onto Avros, the 504. I still claim today that the Avro was one of the most wonderful machines ever built. I did a lot of flying of Avros and enjoyed every minute of it. I did my cross country flight on this machine over to Salisbury Plain. I got there alright but coming back the sky got

blacker and blacker. This thunderstorm had come up and it became very bumpy. The wind was very strong and I was flying with the wind with the thunderstorm boiling up behind me. I got to my landing place in no time at all and rather than swing around into wind and, of course, into the thunderstorm I went straight down and landed downwind at a terrific speed. I touched down nice enough but my landing speed was very high and the Avro ran on and on until it stopped about 6 ft. from a 5. ft. precipice. Anyhow I got the aircraft back alright. I went onto the Bristol Scout and learnt how to manoeuvre, how to spin and loop and various other tricks some of which I had already done on the Avro.

From there I was sent up to Turnberry in Scotland, the aerial gunner school, and that was a most wonderful experience. We flew in what I think is an F.E. type of machine, with a nacelle out in the front. You had a pillar which you tied yourself to and you were flown over a target anchored in a lake where you'd let go with the Lewis. You could see where your bullets went by the splashes and could rip the target to bits being right out in front with the gun. Then we got onto the camera gun, what a difference - you'd go up time and time again shooting this thing at a target towed by another aircraft and you'd come down with a film showing no target or a bit of one. Nothing was explained why we'd got poor results in this type of shooting.

I returned to Cairns and was no sooner there when I was ordered off to France to a pilots' pool. I was there for 3 or 4 days and flew another wonderful type of machine. It was so light on the controls that thought alone would fly it. This was the little Sopwith Pup. I met a very charming girl whilst there and asked the C. O. if I could have time off to see her and he said that I could providing I came back in time to do some flying. Well, I went out with this girl and instead of meeting her people, there was just me and the girl and bottles of every type of grog you could think of, which I partook freely. I had a lovely time and when I got back to the pool I was more than 'half shot'. I kept my promise and got into a Pup. It flew magnificently, suddenly I look down and spot a man waving his arms around in the middle of the aerodrome. I wondered if I had dropped something or something was wrong but everything seemed alright. Then the booze put the devil in me. I put my nose down and went at him, he went flat on the ground and I almost ran the wheels on his back. Up I went, split-arsed round and down again, He was running and I laid him down again. On my third dive I heard a terrible noise up front and the cowling came off. They were in two parts and fortunately it didn't hit anything as it came off, I put her down gently and taxied up to the hangers. I was feeling pretty good but the moment the engine stopped and I was in still air again I began to feel rotten. I got out of the Pup felt giddy and fell over. All I remember was someone shouting "*Throw him out, throw him out, he's a danger to humanity*". He was an English bloke with red hair, and after the war I was up where I was born, 400 miles west of Sydney at Warren having something done to my car and a mechanic came up and said something to the man I was talking to who was the owner, and then went off again. I felt I had seen this bloke somewhere before, but couldn't think where it was. I asked the garage owner about him and he said that I might know him as he was in the R.F.C.. Then I remembered, "*Fetch him here*" I said, and when the red haired mechanic came up I said "*Do you remember the danger to humanity? Well we meet again, only this time we're meeting where I was born, so you'd better behave yourself!*" We had a good yarn. Fancy meeting him again halfway around the world.

Back at the Pool my name was called and I found that I had been posted to No.29 Squadron out at Poperinghe. When I got there I was given a scout I'd never seen before with a gun on the top wing, and this absolutely disgusted me - the gun on top I mean. This Scout was the Nieuport 17, quite a nice aeroplane and easy to fly. First I had to group and familiarise myself with the aircraft, get my bearings and on no account go near the lines. Well I did this and the aerodrome was a tiny little paddock with telephone lines strung out on posts on the approach. The Squadron hadn't been there long and these telephone lines caused no end of accidents as pilots tried to avoid hitting them on landing. Well, the Nieuport 17 was a nice enough aeroplane I found but that gun on the top wing! I just couldn't get used to the thing up there. It was so unnatural. I was used to looking along the barrel of a rifle or machine gun. Even at the gunnery school they gave us a Lewis gun to play with using its sights in the proper manner. When I get to France I get a machine with a gun way up there on the top wing. The drum only held a few shots. To change drums you had to fly level - in combat mind you - with the stick between your knees, reach up and pull the gun down. It was hinged at the rear of the wing. You grab hold of the drum, give it a half turn, then the 100 miles an hour wind catches the drum and you nearly break your arm getting the thing into the cockpit. You put it in a special bag on the left side, pick up a loaded drum from the right, heave it up through this 100 m.p.h. wind, clip it on, push the gun back into position and you're back in business.

When returning from flying I would taxi up to my hangar and the mechanics would take over after I had switched off my engine. The mechanics would help you when you're taxiing by holding onto the wing struts and steering you. They would never taxi it themselves, when they wanted to move the machine they would lift the tail and put it on a trolley, then wheel the whole thing around. My mechanics were very good and would do anything for me. When I had finished they would clean the oil off the aeroplane and make sure it was in good working order, in particular the engine. Due to my good time in England I put on a stone in weight and was now 12 stone. This was a bit much for the poor old Le Rhone. Well, I got used to the area around the aerodrome, practiced landings and formation flying, and then went out with my flight on offensive patrols. The flight flew in a vee formation, with the rear of the vee higher than the front. Being new, my position was at the rear and I was supposed to keep a lookout behind. But I was too heavy and couldn't keep up with the flight. When I lagged behind I would dive down to pick up speed and rejoin the flight, but I am too low so I climb a little, gradually slowing down and fall back again. When the flight returns the leader lands first and the others wait their turn, usually I was last.

The aerodrome at Poperinghe was small enough but having tall poplar trees along one edge by the side of a road, and those telephone lines strung across the approach made it even smaller. There was a high percentage of new blokes in the squadron but I don't remember ever feeling that my life span was in any great danger of being shortened. Even whilst I was there, blokes came and went all the time. As I said before I put my spare time in flying practice and learning what I was supposed to do. I remember that once there was a discussion on how to attack a balloon and it seemed to me at the time to be almost suicidal. We used to shoot at a target from the air and practice changing drums etc. I also made a trip over to No.1 Aircraft Depot to pick up a replacement aircraft with another pilot.

I found that there were two types of patrol. One was the inner patrol where we flew roughly in line of, but behind, the trenches ready to catch any Hun sneaking over and this gave the new blokes practice in patrol work. We flew at various heights but usually between 10 and 14000 ft, and all the patrols lasted about 1½ hours. As I was usually at the rear I had a good view of the whole flight of 5 aeroplanes that appeared to hang there in the sky, our positions hardly altering at all except for slight rising and falling of individual aircraft. We would all be searching the sky around us for Huns and I could see the pilots heads turning round and looking up and down, they were never still. I was doing the same, of course, and it surprised me to find what little I saw compared to one who had more experience than myself. I flew with Lt. Hawgood quite often and my other companions were usually Lt. Collier, Lt. Campbell and Sergeant Harvey-Bathurst. I don't know what happened to Collier but Campbell was shot down and killed 4 days after I went down and Hawgood and Harvey-Bathurst were both wounded a week or so later, so none of us lasted very long.

The other type of patrol was the offensive patrol and the flight was usually strengthened with other pilots, on one occasion there were 11 of us and we'd go right out into Hunland looking for trouble at any height up to 17000 feet. It was really a case of follow the leader and we just went where the flight leader led us. I went on two offensive patrols and both times I saw several groups of Huns but they were usually too far away to engage. It seems strange to me at the time to see enemy aircraft whilst over their territory and we'd go for them and they would turn away instead of facing us, perhaps they knew that when the R.F.C. went over to their side they meant business. I was only there for 9 days and during that time I had 7 practice flights, including 2 attacks on imaginary balloons for training. My actual war flying was used up in 7 inner patrols and 2 offensive patrols, a total of about 14 hours, so in 9 days I had 16 flights.

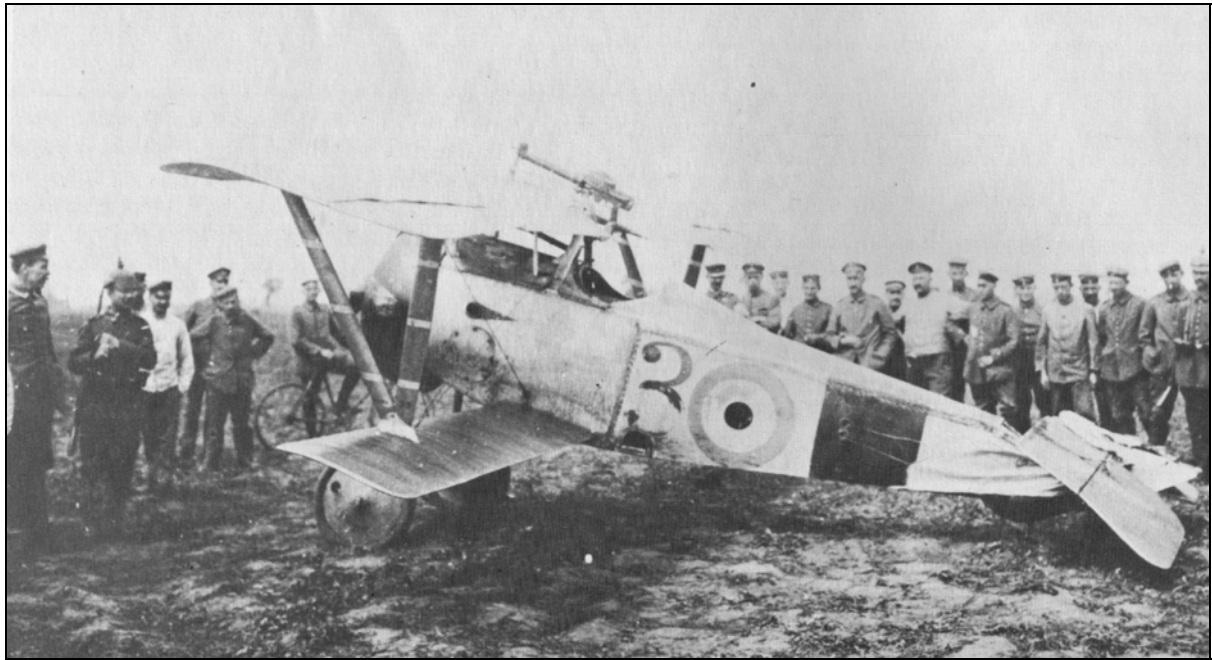
On the 24th July, a date I'll never forget, I went off with the others on an early morning patrol but I was back in 2. minutes because my engine was not giving sufficient revs. 5 minutes later I'm off again in somebody else's machine and go over the lines hoping to catch up to my flight. I was some way over when I thought I saw them in the distance. As I got closer I discovered them to be Huns. I was about to creep away when they saw me and came down after me. The only thing that saved me was a large cloud which I went straight into. When I came out they were gone. I headed for Lake Zillebeke and hung around on my own and, by mistake, whilst cruising around the lake using it as a marker, I was drifting westwards. I could see the lake but didn't realise I was 4 miles over. I spotted a Hun two seater way down below me, I think it was a Halberstadt. I put my nose down and went at him, and gave him a damn long burst. As I came down he must have seen me and turned and his gunner fired at me. Then I heard a sound like a cracker going off and my engine stopped, he either drove a bullet into the engine or the engine conked, anyway if stopped, I was low and didn't have sufficient height to get over the lines. Coming down I thought "*Good God, what am I going to do?*", then I spotted this lovely little paddock. As I got closer I saw that it was full of crops of some sort, I did a low level turn, tipping the stuff with my blooming wing and landed the darn thing as nice as you please. I've never crashed an aeroplane, perhaps I should have this time, Anyway this area was inhabited, I looked for my phosphorous stick but it wasn't



there. It was normally carried under the instrument panel on the right side, but this was somebody else's machine, and I was trying to remove the gun to blow the machine up when the Huns suddenly appeared and grabbed me. This was at 6 a.m.

I spent the rest of that war as a 'prisoner of the Germans', but more of this trying time later. I'll just say that if it wasn't for my sense of humour I would have returned to England as a mental case as many did. I volunteered to fight in this war and generally speaking I had an interesting time and saw many things but the highlight of this period in my life was learning to fly and being part of something new.

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A 29 Squadron Nieuport 23, A6675, piloted by 2Lt F. Barrie. He was shot down on 2 June 1917 by M. Flakzug 2 and made a prisoner.