

**Interview with Lieutenant Ernest R. Jeffree
Formerly of No.4 Sqn., A.F.C.**

I enlisted in the A.I.F. in 1914, and left Australia as a member of the 1st Field Ambulance, Brigade. After Egypt, I saw service at Gallipoli as a stretcher bearer. I was invalided back to Australia, but returned to England in 1916 with a medical draft. I applied for a transfer to the AFC, and was posted to the 68th Sqn at Harlaxton, under the command of Colonel Oswald Watt, working in the equipment office.

When applications were called for Trainee Pilots for the AFC, I applied and was, in due course, one of those selected. We were sent to Queen's College, Oxford to commence our training. All told, there were about 120 of us, and we were to form the nucleus of the AFC. The course was over a period of about 6 weeks and covered Aerodynamics and the rudiments of Service Flying. The Commanding Officer of Queen's College at the time was Major Abdee, an Irishman, who was very popular with the Australians.

Every morning, we were marched down to the barrack square to be drilled by a British Army Sgt-major. Most of the Australians soon became fed up with this sort of thing, and so a number of them put their heads together and decided to do something about it. The following morning when the S/m gave the order to '*Quick March*' the whole Company just slouched along, bush style. So he halted them and gave the order afresh, with exactly the same result. So he asked if there was a spokesman, and called him out to find out the reason for the demonstration. Of course, the spokesman said that these men were here to learn to fly, and were a lot less than keen on all this drill. But if the drill was cut out, he continued, then the men were all prepared to do extra study at night.

The Major was sent for, and a parley followed, at which it was agreed to give us a try. So we were marched back to the College and from that time on had no more parade ground stuff, but did the extra study.

After leaving Oxford, we were posted to various training squadrons throughout England. I was sent to the 68th Training Squadron where I learned to fly on Maurice Farman's – Shorthorns. Thence to No.15 Training Squadron at Tadcaster, where they had the D.H.6, which we called 'the old butter-box', since it looked as though it had been nailed together out of old packing cases.

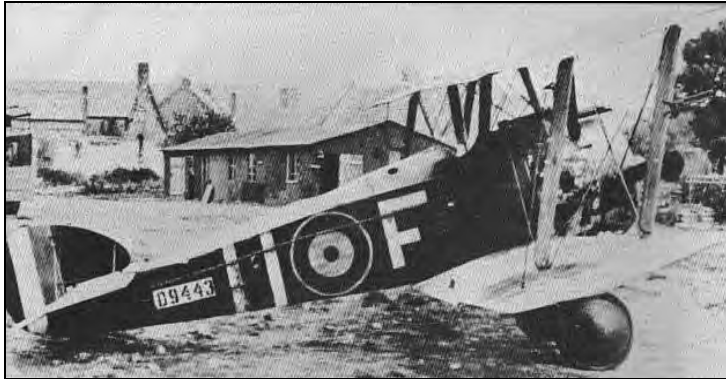
I was then posted to Monroe in Scotland, which was a higher training establishment. While there I flew Avros, Bristol Scouts and Pups. There was a golf course next to the aerodrome, and one day, just after I'd taken off in a Pup, the engine cut out. So I put the nose down over the Course, intending to land along one of the fairways. But the machine lost flying speed, the wheels clipped the edge of a tee and the aircraft went over on her nose. Apart from a broken propeller, there wasn't much damage.

We also practiced ground and aerial gunnery, the latter being carried out by drawing a target across a nearby frozen lake. However, part of the ice was broken away, and one day, a couple of fishermen out on the lake got quite a fright when an aeroplane overhead suddenly dived on them and put a couple of holes in the bottom of their boat. A report came in on it, but no action was taken against the pilot concerned.

One day, just after dusk, Major Griffiths, our Australian-born O.C., came round and asked if I was ready for solo-ing on the Camel. I was inclined to think that it was a bit late in the day, besides which the weather didn't look too good, but decided that I could not very well refuse, so off I went. I took off with the tail well down, made the one circuit of the airfield, and landed again. After that, whenever I went up

again in a Camel, I found the going was easy. After considerable practice flying around Montrose and district, I was posted to Ayr, for advanced instruction and the Aerial Fighting Course. From Ayr I went straight to France.

I joined No.3 Squadron RFC on 23rd Feb., 1918, at Warloy Aerodrome, which was quite near the city of Albert. On the 26th, they put me into action in Camel No.5437, contour chasing and diving. There were 3 patrols that day, and on the afternoon patrol we got into a fight, although I cannot now recall any details of the incident. For the next few days, it was just testing machines and low flying. Then on March 1, it was gunnery practice. I see from my log book that I had 17 hits out of 350 rounds fired.



A 3 Squadron, RFC Sopwith Camel at Warloy aerodrome in France.

About this time, they apparently discovered that I should have been posted to No.4 Squadron, AFC, and so I was sent to Bruay, where No.4 was then stationed, and attached to Capt. G.F. Malley's flight. Captain N.L. Petchler was acting O.C., in the absence of Major W.A. McCloughry.

After the initial settling in period, I was taken for a tour of the lines, and spent a few days in practising – looking at the lines & so on. Then I went out on patrols, which proved interesting, as well as quite exciting. We covered the area around Arras, Albert, Lille, Bapaume and La Basse Canal, which was the southern portion of our lines. We were on Offensive Patrols, which entailed low flying & ground strafing, while the British Army were falling back before the big German push. I remember that when we had finished our patrols, we would get the green light from our Flight Commander, to return to the airfield. I used to fly along the lines, buzzing the troops and startling the horses with the noise of the engine.

On 23rd March, at 3.40 pm, we took off on an Offensive Patrol. Low flying on German troops mobilised at Valux-Vraucourt, we engaged 6 enemy scouts, and drove 3 of them down, one in flames.

On the 24th, we continued our Offensive Patrols, firing on German troops massing on the Bapaume-Cambrai road. I attacked an Albatros Scout without visible effect.

On 25th, Offensive Patrol, Contact Patrol, low flying and bomb drops on the Albert-Bapaume-Arras roads. Dropped 4 bombs, attacked an Albatros Scout, fired 1,050 rounds into troops on the roads.

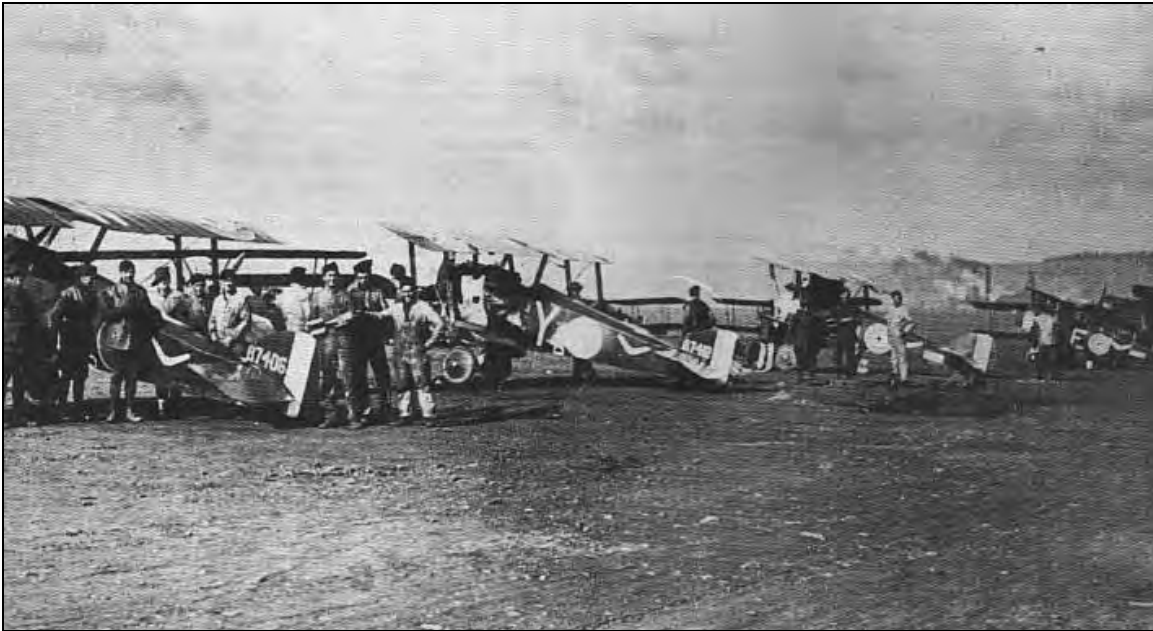
On 26th, low strafing and bombing. At this time we were doing 2 or 3 patrols every day – very nerve-racking work at these heights. In the afternoon, bombed troops at Ligny.

On 27th, low-level bombing and firing on enemy troops in the vicinity of Albert. When we finished our patrol, I was having a look round the lines, and sighted 5 or 6 enemy triplanes beneath me, engaged in strafing our troops along the road.

I could hardly believe my eyes - they looked such easy marks. I put the nose of the Camel down and dived onto one of them, & fired a burst of about 20 rounds into it. Thereupon the triplane rolled over on its back, went into a spin, and I was able to watch it all the way down till it crashed. So I decided then to have a go at another one. I dived down again and fired off a burst of about 40 rounds, and saw it also go into a spin and finally crash. Then I thought it was about time to call it a day, so I got off home while the going was good. If my memory serves me right, these triplanes were decorated with black and white checks.

On 28th attacked a triplane, which seemed to glide down East. Later on the same day attacked an Albatros without result. This went on day after day. You would run into enemy formations, and engage them, either successfully or otherwise. Mostly they would probably go their way & break off the fight. Unless it was an "all-in" dogfight, it was very hard to catch up with the old Hun. He usually took good care to keep well out of sight.

Also on 28th, when out on patrol, I noticed that Lieut. C. Feez was going down behind enemy lines with engine trouble. A Hun machine got onto his tail so I set out after it. But I soon got so low that I was forced to break off, and Feez landed. I had to climb for height quickly but noticed that a stream of tracers had suddenly appeared passing through the wing bays, just outside the struts. I thought that if I kept on, the gunner who had the bead on me would keep it there. But if I were to swerve, he might really hit me. So, being scared stiff, I did not take evasive action, and sure enough the tracers stayed in position till I had gained enough height, and I made it home safely.



A line-up of No.4 Squadron AFC Sopwith Camels at Bruay in March 1918.

The offensive patrols, low bombing, attacking of railway stations and other work went on over the Lys area for some time. We were doing up to 4 patrols a day by now.

I remember on 12th April near Laventie, we were ground strafing low down in the haze and smoke. There were German troops everywhere. I dropped 2 bombs onto massed troops in the woods, and cut up horse transport on the road, observing casualties, We had broken formation & each picked his own target. We were diving down to about 15-20 feet from the ground when I saw Lieut. Love go down. I chased

after him but his aircraft hit a hedge and turned over. I thought of landing to try to get him but the ground fire was too severe, and my machine had already been hit in a number of places; I could see the flying wires on one side had all been shot away. I learned later that Love had been taken prisoner.

On 2 May, when out on patrol, I saw an Albatros Scout over Bailleul, and left the patrol to dive down on it & open fire. I chased it down to about 500 feet, saw it side-slip, and finally crash into a hill. It was confirmed by another pilot of the patrol. Next morning I saw yet another Albatros Scout, dived on it and opened up an accurate burst at quite close range. I pulled up, dived and fired again, and saw it crash also. Both had been lone machines harassing our ground troops.

Soon after the strain of flying up to 4 patrols a day finally caught up and I was sent off and admitted to hospital in a state of exhaustion.

I remember that at least one of the Camels I flew had a novel arrangement for firing the twin guns. There was a moveable cross-bar fitted across under the guns, with two short arms used to trip the triggers, and fire both guns together, I personally found this a very satisfactory arrangement, as the left hand could be rested on the cock-coaming, and, the guns fired as required simply by a thumb movement. This gave excellent control whenever using the Aldis sight, and seemed much better to me than the joy-stick type of controls. We carried a supply of about 1,500 rounds of ammunition when on strafing patrols.

Prior to embarkation for overseas, every pilot had been issued with a linen map of Germany and Holland showing escape routes that were open in the event of capture and escape. This was supposed to be folded and ironed into a package small enough to be concealed under a star on the shoulder or other similar place the enemy was unlikely to look. I was unable to get it small enough however, and so took no action regarding the map. We were also given a cheque book on the Commonwealth Bank, & were informed that if we were taken prisoner, we could draw £10 per month. How much truth there was in this state of affairs I never found out personally. However, pilot's who suffered capture should be able to verify it or otherwise.

One day, while flying towards the lines, things were fairly quiet & we were taking things easy. I was shocked to suddenly realise that the aircraft alongside was drifting in on me, and before I could do anything about it, the leading edge of his starboard wing bumped into the outer struts on my port wing. It was rather a terrifying situation, with a lot of grimaces and snarling at one another. Fortunately everything turned out OK, as we both had the presence of mind to pull away in opposite directions with a kick on the rudder. We continued the flight and had a look at the damage when we returned to the drome. His wing was damaged along the leading edge, and I recall that my strut was chipped. I do not remember the result of the incident, but as the poor fellow has now passed on, I think we can leave it to Squadron Records.

I notice that the pilots of the last war refer to their duty flying as 'sorties', I might mention that, according to my log book, I carried out 96 sorties during my sojourn with the A.F.C.

It also seems to me, considering the time I spent in France, that the action of my C.O. in transferring me to the Infantry was rather drastic, and remains something that should be explained, even after all these years. After all, I still had service behind me with the Squadron, and I can see after looking through all the records that my time was certainly equal to, and a lot better than, the majority of the other personnel in the Squadron. However, one of these days, the slur may be removed.