



TALES OF TWO AIR WARS

NORMAN MACMILLAN

Tales of Two Air Wars

by NORMAN MACMILLAN

LONDON

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NORMAN MACMILLAN

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I said: 'Praise be to God! We too are a fighting race.' And if you had listened to that song you would know that the finest thing in the world is to go out and kill your enemy.

From *The Letters of Gertrude Bell*, Vol. 1, p. 191,
in a letter written on February 16, 1905, when
in the country of the Druze Arabs.

by the same author

GREAT AIRMEN

GREAT AIRCRAFT

from the same publishers

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Introduction

A NOVEL has a theme and a plot. This book is not a novel, so it needs no plot. Its theme is the variety of adventure of flyers in the two world wars.

During its preparation, research exposed some factual errors made or repeated by many writers (even in official histories). A few books were wildly wrong. Gaps left vacuum in most; with so much to tell how can it all be told? Yet most writers have been content to produce variations on the already best-known themes.

In *Tales of Two Air Wars* factual errors discovered have been corrected; wrongs righted; some vacuum pressured; themes already well-clothed in words ignored. No attempt is made to glorify war or bestow praise or blame. National and international politics, policies, finance and industry play no part in tales concerning the men actively engaged in combat warfare. What did these men know—or care—about such business?

Cross-checks were made on British, French, German, Italian, Austrian, Hungarian, American and Japanese sources to discover or verify dates, names and facts. But the tale of the mystery of the death of a famous Hungarian pilot shows how differences in opponents' reports cannot always be reconciled, because the war prevented combined investigation into them from being made at the time and now it is too late to do so.

It is hard to gather original First World War information. Sources decline in number yearly as more veterans die. In those who are still alive memory becomes dimmer; to confirm hazy recollections of dates, times and places and to revivify authentic mental pictures of events they often must recover long-packed, half-forgotten papers or logbooks frequently stored in inaccessible places.

If I have pressed to the point of inconvenience some who thus aided me I ask them to forgive my importunities and to appreciate that by responding they have helped to contribute something to accurate air history which should live and have value long after their generation has vanished from among men.

Often one clue led to another and Sherlock Holmes' methods had to be used to track each to source before conflicting

information was resolved, missing detail discovered, truth transplanted on error, buried jewels of stories found.

I was privileged to read personal diaries of men still living or alas! now dead, personal notes and logbook extracts. To all who made these available I extend my grateful thanks. They have enriched my narrative.

I feel there ought to be formed a national library for such authentic treasures, to which their owners or heirs could donate them.

Not all sources contacted proved fruitful and there were lost trails leading to the sea of ignorance or the desert of doubt. But these were more than counterbalanced by tracks that led me to the treasure-houses of knowledge.

I particularly wish to mention Wing Commander W. R. Read, M.C., D.F.C., A.F.C.**, R.A.F. (Retd); Lieutenant-Colonel (formerly Wing Commander) A. C. E. Marsh, R.A. (Retd.); Air Marshal Sir John T. Tremayne, K.C.B., C.B.E., D.S.O. (formerly John Tremayne Babington), R.A.F. (Retd.); Air Marshal Sir W. E. Philip Wigglesworth, K.B.E., C.B., D.S.C., R.A.F. (Retd); Air Vice-Marshal S. W. R. Hughes, C.B.E., A.F.C, R.A.F.; Captain G. H. Easton, BOAC; Wing Commander A. D. Jillings, R.A.F.; Captain Frank T. Courtney; L. A. Jackets, Esq., Head of the Air Historical Branch, Air Ministry, and his staff; F. H. Smith, Esq., Librarian, the Royal Aeronautical Society; Captain Joseph A. Skiera, USAF, Magazine & Book Branch, Office of Information, Department of the Air Force, Washington; Miss Margaret Haferd, Librarian, American Library, United States Information Office, London; Mr. Melvin R. Wise, Director, Bureau of Vital Statistics, Arizona State Department of Health, Phoenix; Mrs. Marguerite B. Cooley, Director, Department of Arizona State Library and Archives, Phoenix; Mr. William E. R. Murray, Assistant City Clerk, Everett, Massachusetts; Colonel Rougevin-Baville, Conservateur du Musée de l'Air, Paris; Lieutenant-Colonel Hayez, Service Historique de l'Armée de l'Air, Versailles; Mons. J. Noetinger, Union Syndicale des Industries Aéronautiques, Paris; Mr. H. H. Russell and Mr. Julius R. Gaal, students and collectors of First World War air information.

Cadgwith
January 1963

NORMAN MACMILLAN

BOOK ONE

First World War

Forth Rides the Red Horse

FEW of the pilots had ever flown outside Britain when the War Office ordered the aeroplanes of the mobilized Royal Flying Corps to fly to France. From Montrose, Netheravon, Eastchurch and Gosport they came winging in their frail aeroplanes and landed on the cropped grass surface of a rounded chalk hill near Dover Castle. There 'C' flight of No. 4 Squadron was ordered to remain to patrol the Strait with its four Maurice Farman biplanes.

Flying then was an unpredictable risk. Engines failed frequently and suddenly and often when taking off, the most dangerous moment of flight. Controls of aeroplanes then designed by eye were often feeble and sometimes bad, especially at slow speed. No scientific analysis of flying had ever been made. Most pilots' experience of flying was too brief for them to have acquired great skill. Riding and flying were thought of as similar skills. 'Good horsemen make the best pilots,' said pundits, spurring the popular conception of the R.F.C. as the 'cavalry of the clouds'. But full many a pilot rode better than he flew.

Because two officers were not allowed to fly across country in one aeroplane mechanics flew with the pilots and the officers and men of the R.F.C. who died together on the way to the front were among the war's first British casualties.

When Skene crashed and died taking off from Netheravon on August 12, 1914, his mechanic Barlow was killed. Four days later Parfitt was killed with Perry near Amiens when their BE8 caught fire soon after take off. On the same day Geard was killed at Péronne. From these three crashes only

Geard's pilot, Smith-Barry, survived, with both legs broken in the wreckage of his 'Bloater'.

Each pilot took off alone. None flew in formation. From the chalk cliffs of Dover each steered by compass above the undocumented water to the corresponding cliffs of France. Thence, in a long, loose line, like a broken string of pearls, they balanced in flight, map in hand, checking the way over the groundscape of roads, rail tracks, canals, rivers, forests, towns, villages and even churches, toward the appointed destination, Amiens, each pilot his own map-reading navigator, his mechanic purely a passenger.

One Henry Farman took 170 minutes to fly the 120 miles from Dover. But on the evening of August 13 about forty-nine aeroplanes were parked out in the open on the aviation ground, where there were only two small sheds. The pilots—all officers—were billeted in the Hôtel de l'Universe. Ground transport came two and three days later, that of No. 2 Squadron from Montrose, shipped from Glasgow to Boulogne, being the last to arrive.

The squadrons were ordered to fly to Maubeuge on August 16. A low ceiling of heavy clouds delayed departure until 1300 hours. No. 2 Squadron started first, each machine leaving at two minute intervals. No. 4 Squadron moved next, then No. 3. Their aeroplanes had no national marking. Each displayed only its serial number in black Arabic numerals on both sides of the rudder.

Aircraft identification by shape was an unknown subject. No British soldier, no French *poilu*, could tell if we were kin of one, ally of the other, or enemy. With our linen surfaced wings, tautened with transparent dope, we were as visible as white swans in flight. Near Maubeuge French troops fired at some of us with machine-guns, believing we were Germans. They hit nothing and were afterwards frankly apologetic. But wherever we went on the ground the people gave us flowers and were most friendly.

Next morning we overhauled the aeroplanes and greased the wires and changed propellers which had warped. At 1600 came a report of a Zeppelin crossing Belgium's frontier with France. A Henry Farman was detailed to stand by to attack



I. WESTERN EUROPE, 1914-1918

it as soon as seen. The Farman was given three bombs to drop on the Zeppelin and the pilot and observer each a revolver for defence against enemy aeroplanes. But no Zeppelin appeared.

In the night of August 20 a French Clement-Bayard airship flew from Maubeuge on reconnaissance and dropped a bomb over the German forces. It returned at midnight, sounding a siren loudly as evidence of its nationality. Two days later the French shot one of their own airships down by ground fire.

Troops regarded each aeroplane and airship as a sporting target, to be fired at dispassionately. On August 21 several of our aeroplanes were hit by French bullets. A few days later British or French riflemen slightly wounded Gordon Bell in one knee and hit the engine of his Bristol Scout.

On August 22 Waterfall and Bayly of 5 Squadron were ordered to fly a deep reconnaissance over the enemy. They flew low above a column of German infantry whose position,