

Les Aviateurs de AZELOT

Independent Force
8th Brigade
41st Wing



Insigne du Royal Flying Corps



Insigne de Pilote



Insigne d'observateur

le 104th Squadron

Ce squadron a été formé à Wyton le 4 septembre 1917. Wyton est situé entre Cambridge et Peterborough. C'est encore une base de la RAF. Ensuite il partit à Andover au nord de Southampton pour rejoindre Azelot le 20 mai 1918 et faire partie de l'IAF.



Alex B RATTRAY : Sous Lieutenant et observateur



LAND Oscar W

le 99th Squadron



Il fut formé à Yatesbury le 15 août 1917. Yatesbury est à l'Est de Bristol. Très grande base aérienne lors de la WW2, elle est fermée de nos jours. Il partit à St Omer le 25 avril 1918 pour arriver à Azelot le 5 juin 1918.



Black S, Stevenson W, West H, Benson D, Doige E, Bell



Marshal, Burn , Taylor



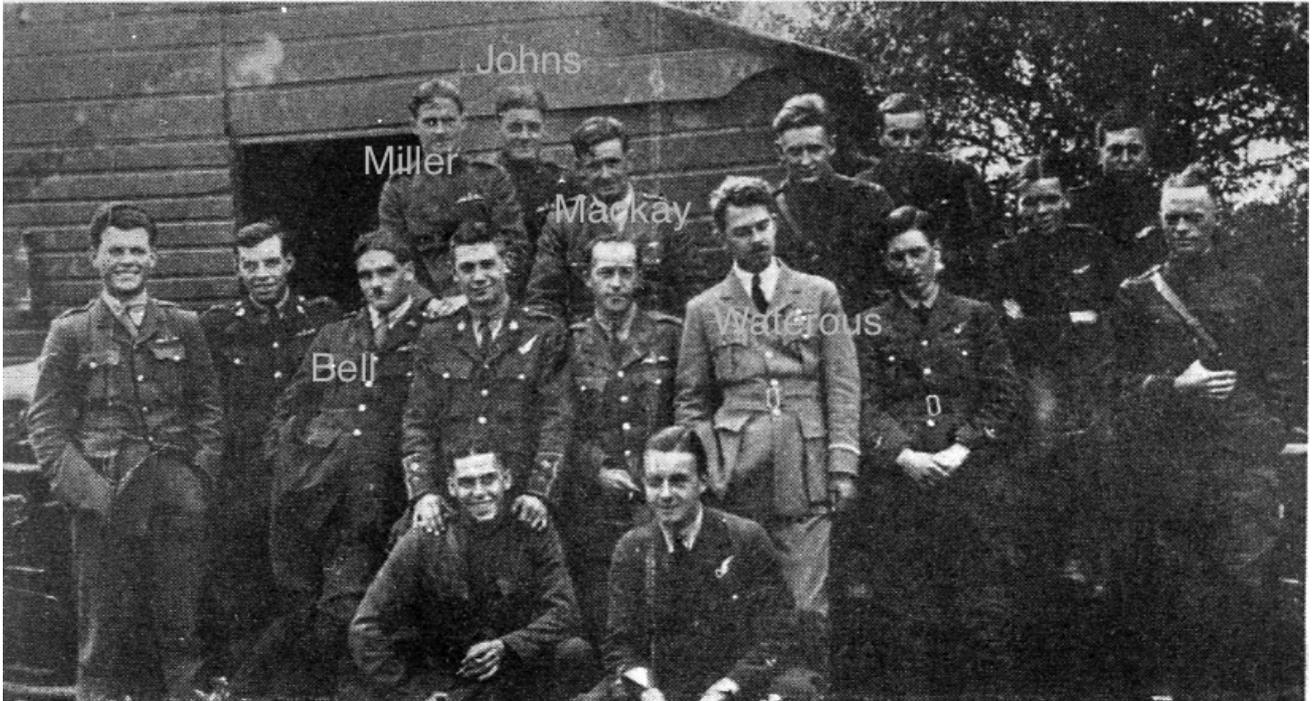
Harper Steward (avec son Glengarry), Jones, Doige, Marshal Keith, Johnson



Brennan, Marshal Keith, Dall (avec son Glengarry)

le 55th Squadron

Il fut formé le 27 avril en 1916 à Castle Bromwich (Banlieue de Birmingham). Il devint un squadron de bombardement avec le tout nouveau Airco DH.4. Le 6 mars 1917 il partit en France et fit sa première mission de bombardement sur la ville de Valenciennes le 23 avril avec le 9th Wing. Ensuite il arriva à Azelot avec la 41th Wing.



Azelot 1918

Captain Duncan Robert Gordon MACKAY

« Captain Jock »
mort le 11 novembre 1918

DRG Mackay :

- né le 30 sept. 1895 ou 1893 à Inverness
- Educated at Cheltenham College 1909-1914.
- Enlisted 1914 19th Bn. Royal Fusiliers. Commissioned Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders.
- 2nd Lieutenant upon appointment as a flying officer on 5 January 1917;
- Lieutenant 1 July 1917
- Flight Commander au 55th Squadron
- 55 Sqn RAF (3 claims)
 - le 12 aout 18 avec un DH4 sur un Pfalz D III dans les Vosges
 - le 14 aout sur un Albatros D V sur Offenburg
 - le 3 nov 1918 sur un Fokker D VII
- POW 10 November 1918
- DOW 11 November 1918
- DFC per London Gazette dated 3 December 1918;
- mentioned in despatches per London Gazette of 11 July 1919

Mackay a été incorporé dans le Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders Regiment : c'est le régiment écossais célèbre par son Glengarry (bonnet noir à pompon rouge, comporte un liseré à damiers blanc et rouge symbolisant la "*Thin Red Line*").

Mackay a été abattu le 10 novembre 1918 durant un bombardement sur Thionville-Metz et est mort de ses blessures le lendemain. Son équipier était le 2 Lt Harry Christopher Travers Gompertz qui a pu poser l'avion dans les lignes ennemies.

Having served with the Royal Field Artillery, Harry Christopher Travers Gompertz was seconded to the Royal Flying Corps in August 1917. An observer ace with 55 Squadron in 1918, he was wounded in action on 30 August and was captured on 10 November when his **D.H.4** was shot down during a raid on Thionville.



Sa tombe à Joeuf

Major Donald Jayne WATEROUSE

Capitaine pilote US

Né le 2 juillet 1896 à Chicago Cook County Illinois, USA, mort le 20 juillet 1958 à Manhattan New York County (Manhattan)

Donald was a pilot during WWI for the RAF, joining in Canada, sailing from there 19 November 1917, serving Lieutenant then as Captain, with the 8th Brigade. He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for "consistent determination, gallantry and skill on long distance day raids, notably on the following occasion: Frankfurt-on-Main, Germany 12 August 1918". He participated in 26 long-distance bombing raids.

He was a Major in the Army AF during WWII.

He was a stock and bond salesman and member of the NY Stock Exchange.

Lt D J **Waterous** flew DH 4s with No 55 Sqn in the Independent Force, RAF, the strategic bombing formation based behind the French sector of the Front. He was involved in many raids, including that on Strasbourg on 14 August 1918 in DH 4 F5703, with 2Lt C L Rayment as observer, when they were credited with sending down an enemy aeroplane out of control (what would be called a 'probable' victory in later conflicts).

On 7 September 1918 he flew DH 4 A7942, again with 2Lt Rayment, on a reconnaissance mission to Sarrebourg they were attacked by three Fokker D.VIIs and a Hannover two-seater. One Fokker was sent down out of control but the DH 4 was very badly shot up in a running fight, especially after 2Lt Rayment had exhausted his ammunition. The aeroplane made it back to the Allied lines and both airmen were awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, gazetted on 29 October 1918.



Au Canada, à droite

Captain JR BELL

Flight Commander au 55th Squadron

William Earl JOHNS

Lieutenant Pilote

1873-1968

On a de nombreux récits de ce pilote du 55th Squadron sur Azelot. Jusqu'en Aout 1918 il fut pilote instructeur et il partit ensuite sur le front à Azelot. Son avion fut abbatu le 16 septembre 1918 lors d'un vol sur Mannheim. Son observateur le Sous Lnt Afred Amey fut tué et Johns prisonnier.

Il eut une seconde carrière en tant qu'écrivain sous la plume de Captain WE Johns avec des livres sur l'aviation et avec son héros , le pilote Biggles. Son héros a travers éles 2 guerres. Il écrit plus de 160 livres.

Ci joint un texte écrit par Johns sur son arrivée en France et son affectation à Azelot.

The RAF squadron which 2/Lt William Earl Johns entered at about the end of July was No 55, a day bombing unit equipped with Rolls-Royce engined De Havilland 4 biplanes. It was stationed at the new base at Azelot, a village a few miles south of Nancy in the southern region of the Western Front.

55 Squadron had been relocated from its previous Flanders base at Boisdingham. Now, at Azelot, its orders were more daunting; most of the names on its list of targets were anything from 70 to 170 miles from base. From a 1993 standpoint these mileages look trivial, but in 1918 they meant a mission of perhaps five hours flying time. During this they could be locked into very long running fights with defending German fighters whose numbers were now increasing rapidly.

So, direct from WEJ we have this, "No 55 Squadron was a bomber squadron, not a fighter squadron, but that did not mean that it did not fight. On the contrary, towards the end of 1918 it was engaged more than once in combats that might hold the record for duration, if not for ferocity... " WEJ writes several times of the great distances over the lines which the squadron reached when it had to fight. Perhaps he was making a deliberate comparison with the better known lot of the fighter pilots when, in his fictional *The Rescue Flight* he has Biggles observing to a novice Camel pilot "Few people, even old hands, care to go more than ten miles over."

Prior to Johns' arrival, the unit had reached Cologne, Coblenz, Mannheim, Landau, Oberndorf and Rottweil, all over 100 miles from home, as well as a lot of less distant targets. The hilly and varied terrain of the French-German border areas - still pleasantly rural and not devastated by war - seemed to attract very mixed weather, much of it unreliable for long distance flying: but 55 Sqn was run by very determined men, who made use of every favourable day. More of these men later.

Johns' own account of 'how he posted himself to 55 Sqn' originally appeared in *Popular Flying* magazine in the 1930s. This is pure comedy and no following author can succeed, using his own words, in bettering the effect. Briefly, Johns arrived at Lympne in Kent with orders to pick up a DH4 for ferrying to France. No DH4, nor his papers, appeared. Having hung about to no avail for three days, playing financially disastrous games of poker, he accepted, on impulse, a lift in a Handley-Page to cross the Channel. This began a succession of aerial lifts that - motivated by an earnest desire to find the Pilots' Pool at St Omer - he freely accepted, but

which involved him in nocturnal adventures in Paris, two crashes, and the steady loss of his money and kit. Finally, in this deprived state, he arrived in front of Major Alex Gray MC, CO of 55 Sqn at Azelot - 250 miles from St Omer. Gray, a Scot given to brief and to-the-point speech, said "Ah. I have just lost five machines. I can do with some DH4 pilots". It occurred to Johns that perhaps he had taken the wrong turning.

Azelot was a rapidly developing complex of hangars, workshops, and personnel camps, with nearby Archie defences, plus two French airfields of Manoncourt and Burthecourt within two or three miles. 55's officers' camp was in a pleasant orchard, pictured in several shots in Journal Vol 22, No 2. Johns wrote with feeling of this... "A white dusty road, with little mirabelle trees rambling along the sides... fat, shuffling figures in great clumsy boots... the smell of sheepskin... engines idling, tickeratock, tickeratock, like reapers hurrying in a cornfield... " Thus the airmen of 55 went to war. Johns' flight commanders were a tough and seasoned lot. Capt D.R.G. Mackay (Jock), Capt B.J. Silly MC, Capt Frederick Williams MC, and Capt J.R. Bell together had a wealth of knowledge of penetrating the expanding German defensive network. Mackay was the son of a Scot in the Indian Civil Service; Silly was English, a product of Tonbridge School; Williams, only twenty, was Australian born; and Bell, a rather dark, morose man, had been an officer in the Dorset Regiment.

Among the pilots and observers were brave and capable men, many of whose names Johns has highlighted in his writings and who were to notch up 30 or 40 raids with 55 Sqn, men of whom Alex Gray was to write, years later, "They were all like that. I didn't have to 'run' the squadron, it ran itself". S.L. Dowswell (pilot), J.R. Pace (pilot), E.R. Stewart (observer) and D. W. Stewart (observer) were Canadians; other stalwarts were H.S.P. Walmsley, W.R. Patey, C.A. Bridgland, J. Cunliffe and R.P. Ward. C.L. (Pip) Rayment, like Johns, came from Hertford. H.C.T. Gompertz, an observer, aged 20, was a great character; he had, not long before, been an outstanding student at Winchester College, but now was on his way to be 55's 'ace' with a final score of 5 kills and 2 driven down. Johns' logbook is not available to the authors of these articles, nor any record of his unscheduled advent at No 55. His official taken on strength date was not until 21 August and, as will be seen, his first recorded operation date, 2 September. This apparently long time scale might be explained by a need to first establish his credentials, via sources in the UK, and to give him a thorough training in the quite difficult close formation flying that was so vital in 55's daylight operations. Periods of poor weather may have hindered this. Also, he spent a period in the hospital in late August. He wrote that he made 23 flights in the war area. Johns' arrival at Azelot may have coincided with the period of generally unfavourable weather between 23 July and 7 August, but 55 made good use of a break in this from 30 July to 1 August, with long distance raids on each day. The first, to the Offenburger railways, 80 miles distant, was led by 'Billy' Williams and involved a great battle against fifteen EA on the homeward leg. Earle Stewart, the young Canadian, drove one down out of control. Two DH4 observers, Beesley and Barker, were wounded. Next day Capt Silly made one of the squadron's many attempts to reach Cologne (Williams had succeeded once, in May 1918) but had to settle for Coblenz due to excessive cloud formations. This was an example of a daylight raid where choices of target, and of routes out and back, were cleverly made by an experienced leader who took his men and machines over the whole course without loss. Much the same applied to the 1 August operation - another attempt on Cologne led by Williams. Düren was the victim instead, and one of 55's most distant at 155 miles.

There was no combat on the 8th when operations resumed with Silly getting eleven machines to Rombach in a hazy, cloudy, atmosphere. The enemy were more successful on the 11th however, when Bell and Mackay led two formations towards Mannheim. Near Saarburg, nine fighters piled in and Bell's petrol tank was holed; because of escaping vapour, he dared not fire the usual green 'washout' Very light so, when he turned for home, two others followed. Mackay attempted to gather the remaining ones into his own flight, but all were now too scattered, so he led everyone home with the bombs still on. Bell's men got nowhere near Mannheim and bombed the new fighter aerodrome at Buhl. Survival, when over hostile territory for long periods at a time was, Johns wrote later, a matter of close and strict formation flying. "Discipline... is essential". "The formation sits pat, as tight as possible... leaving the shooting to the gunners". "Once a pilot loses his position, the hostile aircraft will concentrate on him like a cloud of wasps" "... I have sat still for three hours or more, eyes glued on my leader for any signal he might make..." "Don't look at the ground; you are so high up that you do not appear to be moving". "It is fascinating to watch the gunner in the machine on your right, pumping out lead or working like the dickens to repair a jam." "Tactics, in a true sense of

the word, hardly enter into it". And, most tellingly; "In long-distance operations a scout escort is impossible, so the lives of the bomber pilots are therefore in their own hands or in the hands of their leader." In these conditions, the sudden loss of a comrade who had been flying alongside was a uniquely cruel shock "...a DH4 silhouetted against an unbroken background of blue sky. It is flying level, quite close, perhaps thirty feet away. From it, a long trail of jet black smoke swirls away aft in a dead straight line. The pilot was a friend of mine; I had taught him to fly. I was flying number 3 in the formation and he was flying 5. I looked across at him, as I had done a hundred times, and saw the smoke. He was, in that instant, unaware of the fate that had already claimed him, and was even now overtaking his gunner. He saw me staring. I pointed. He looked. His nose went down and he was gone. We were at twenty thousand. For half an hour or more I could see the smoke trail to the ground." The two formation failures of the 11 August raids may well have irked Major Gray and the occasion may have moved Johns to write "The CO told me... things in a short crisp lecture, and during the following month they were tattooed on my memory with Spandau bullets". 12 August saw Silly and Mackay lead a successful long raid to Frankfurt with twelve DH4s. The objective was reached in the face of attacks by enemy fighters both en route and on the return, at least 35 being present at one time. 2/Lt Clutson and Patey each got a 'flamer' and Gompertz and Sgt Allen each an 'out of control'. But Earle Stewart, popular in the squadron - and so young at 18 but a veteran of over 40 operations - received fatal wounds. This was perhaps 55's most impressive performance ever, when against odds. Here we must touch on the elusive nature of some of Johns' written recollections. He wrote of this raid, "I was on that show and it was one to be remembered, believe me". Records do not reveal him as a participant, although he may have been a reserve pilot.

Elusive too is the source of his vividly-written account of the other kind of mission flown by 55 at that time - the photo-reconnaissance well beyond the lines, which was done on all fine days and for which the fast high-flying DH4 was so finely suited. In *The Day's Work*, written in about 1932, Johns describes a photographic tour of German aerodromes "37, 11, 46, 78" with take-off at 5.15am and return at 9.55. Several German fighters were engaged or evaded; with maximum altitude and speed capabilities of 21000ft and 136mph, the 'Four' could look after itself with a competent crew. And Johns' word-picture of the panorama, as he reached his en-route altitude, is memorable.

"Below me the hangars of the aerodrome I had just left nestled cosily beside the village ... little summer clouds, pink-flecked, and soon to be dispersed by the rising sun, floated by me, and to my far right glittered the icy minarets of the Swiss Alps".

No reconnaissances by Johns are mentioned in the Squadron History; but other records could exist which would pinpoint the one he describes so vividly. The summer weather was now involving the squadron in a sequence of raids, most of them fiercely contested by German pilots. August 1918 was to be a focus for any historical account of the early days of the unit. On the 13th, Buhl aerodrome was attacked in place of Mannheim; six EA contested passage, one becoming a flamer and one out of control. But Sgt S.E. Lewis was killed. The 14th saw yet another try for Cologne, or Coblenz, with Mackay as leader. He had to settle for Offenburg, itself a distant objective. Along the way home, about 30 EA arrived. Two of these were destroyed and two driven down out of control by the observers. A little light relief was afforded after 2/Lt Dunn's machine received damage to its cooling system and the pilot had to 'dump' it in a field at La Matacuelle, just inside the French lines. The German victor, not recognising this, landed alongside to claim his prisoner, but ran into a hedge and broke his ribs. "He was taken prisoner, and was so sick with himself that he refused to eat, drink or speak. I expect he has by now though" quipped Johns in 1935.

The raid on the 16th was very hard. Ten machines reached Darmstadt, 140 miles from base. In flight, Silly made a change of course for Mannheim owing to thick cloud, but reverted to the original target when it became evident that the en-route speed - around 90 mph with the loaded DH4 - was satisfactory. The enemy was almost ever-present; first 'several' then 'fifteen'; then, when well on the way to home, at Saverne, a notorious trouble-spot, some eight really skilful enemy pilots attacked and brought down three DH4s. Five crew were killed and one made PoW, and two observers wounded and one injured when a further DH4 was forced to land on the home side. An expensive raid for '55' - and not for the last time. Fortunately, poor weather allowed the squadron to ease off during the next days, with just the solo reconnaissance efforts continuing. Bombing resumed on the 22nd and 23rd, which meant

more endeavours to get to Cologne. Cloud and wind again stopped these. Bell had to settle for Coblenz on the 22nd, but thankfully there were no combats. The next day Treves (now Trier) (85 miles), the alternative, was bombed. Five EA came in near Conflans, but it was a lacklustre effort.

24, 25, 26 and 27 August again brought weather that was not much use to the squadron, but they did raids, nevertheless, on the second and fourth of these days. On the 25th, Lt W.J. Pace led a small group, fragmented by engine problems to Morhange aerodrome, while Bell, never favoured to reach Cologne, reached Luxembourg instead. 2/Lt J.A. Lee and Sgt A.S. Allan, observer lost their lives at the hands of 15 attacking EA. On the 27th, Mackay got no further than Conflans. 30 August was another grim day for 55 Squadron, Bell again had the task of reaching Cologne. Thionville was as far as he got, while Lt E.J. Whyte bombed Conflans. Johns' account (1935) tallies well with the records, and, of course, has tremendous colour. "The previous evening I was one of a poker school of six. By lunch time the next day I was the only survivor, and that because I wasn't on the show. Bell took a formation of six machines over and came back alone after fighting twenty-seven EA for the best part of an hour. Dowsell brought his machine back over the lines, but force-landed at Pont St Vincent. Gompertz was his gunner. He got two EA, but what a mess he was in when the tender brought him home! This was due to the fact that Dowsell had an aileron shot off and could only fly dead straight. Gompertz's Sidcot hung on him in ribbons; it had literally been shot off his back... one bullet only hit him - in the shoulder. He didn't seem in the least upset. He just sat in the door of his hut, with the rags still hanging on him, and laughed." When Bell climbed from his solitary and shattered DH4 back at Azelot, he faced Major Gray. It was a grim exchange between two men of few words'. "Where are the others?" "They are all gone."

Bell had a bullet score across the top of his flying helmet. The little top button had vanished. Whyte's formation had also been fighting, and had downed one of the nine fighters that had attacked. 55 Squadron's casualty list had eleven names on this day. R.A. Hickes, T.H. Laing, T.F.L. Myring and C.E. Thorpe, KIA; P.J. Cunningham and J.C. Quinton KIC; A.J.C. Gormley, A.S. Papworth, H.H. Doehler (US) and W. W. Tanney (US) PoW: and H.C.T. Gompertz, WIA, who, after treatment, returned to the squadron to continue his energetic career as an observer.

At about 9pm the same evening, 'Fritz' was continuing his torment. A parachute flare heralded a well aimed line of bombs which fell near 55's and 104's camps and on the 'Archie' battery on the slope west of Azelot village. "I remember seeing the corrugated-iron latrines take flight" wrote Johns. "One bomb fell right beside the Mess... luckily it was a dud. The next morning somebody - Don Waterous, I believe - dug it out and unloaded it. Some fool put a match to the explosive to see what would happen. It didn't explode, but it caught fire, and you couldn't see a yard for black smoke. It poured into the dining room where the CO was having his breakfast; he came cursing."

We are seeing how the men of 55 Squadron - and their brother squadrons - were subjected to a test to destruction on each operation they flew. There had to be compensations. The explosives incident was one. Riotous nights out in Nancy were another. Johns describes the scene in the Liegeois restaurant. "The Liegeois, in Nancy, presented a gay spectacle in the roaring days of 1918. Tenders from 55, 99 and 104 day bomber squadrons and 100 and 216 night bomber squadrons disgorged their enthusiastic cargoes to mingle with dapper and bemedalled French officers, 'pilots de chasse' as they loved to call themselves. Their long CdeG ribbons, sometimes over a foot long, festooned with bananas, each bunch representing a vanquished enemy, interested us immensely... In and around this happy throng fluttered ladies of considerable charm and persuasion. Change the uniforms into sombreros and chaps and it might have been a cowboy saloon of the last century." "Everyone was happy. The proprietor would cash cheques for any reasonable amount, and Cox's was far away" "A meal was a boisterous affair. Officers announced their arrival in diverse fashions. One (I wonder what he would say now if he saw a junior officer do it) usually teed up a wine glass on the counter and drove it down the room with his cane. The damage was always paid for, so what did it matter? We had to have a safety valve somewhere. If, during the daily trip through hell and back, we earned our pay, then we spent it royally at night."

So August 1918 ended. German defence activity had increased dangerously, but 55 Squadron

had not reduced its aspirations. The first week or so of September brought cloudy conditions, and other circumstances, which caused the operations to be mainly short range. 'Other circumstances' on 2nd consisted of two all-out daylight attacks on the fighter airfield at Buhl by all three De Havilland squadrons - 55, 99 and 104. There was a morning and afternoon armada. Mackay led 55's contribution; Johns, with his usual observer, F.N. Coxhill, flew No 4. Both forays resulted in damage, though not heavy at Buhl; the airship shed was hit. In both operations, Johns experienced a heart-stopping incident. In the first, Waterous, flying immediately over Johns, allowed his wheels to momentarily nudge Johns' top plane, but without damage or loss of position to either machine. And, on leaving Buhl on the afternoon show, Johns realised with horror that one of his 112lb bombs was still wedged in its rack. His vow that his landing at Azelot was going to be a featherbed one was ruined by an upcurrent he encountered as he let down over 99's hangars. The landing was heavy and the bomb hurtled away over the grass - but didn't explode. On the 4th, Buhl was attacked again by Bell; but only because a high wind prevented his reaching Karlsruhe. More days of useless weather followed, until on the 7th, Mackay, with six machines, tried for Cologne, but settled for the railway junction at Ehrang. During this time, the squadron had, of course, done its job in the photo-reconnaissance department. Points reached had included Strasbourg, Karlsruhe, the Seer Valley and the ever-developing defence airfields. 55 Squadron's reconnaissance specialist, Frederick Williams, MC, DFC, who flew 17 such shows, had returned to the UK in mid August. The high and fast 'Four' normally evaded the fighters but, on 7 September, Waterous and Rayment only just escaped from seven of them which attacked near Saarburg, and then tailed them back over the lines. Fokker DVIIIs were among them - still a relatively new type in the IAF area. There were now rumours of newer and more potent German types, such as the Siemens Schuckert DIV with its fine high altitude performance. During Johns' time in the squadron so far about twenty-five photographic shows had been done without loss. On a misty 6 September, at about mid-day, the RAF at Azelot were alerted by the racket of fire from their local Archie battery. A German Hanoveraner two-seater was circling the field at very low altitude. Rounds from the Lewis guns in the ground pits arced up, but soon ceased when four SPADS were seen rising rapidly from the adjoining French field. These hunters, and the hunted, dodged in and out of drifting clouds. The leading SPAD made a headlong dive on to the Hanover's tail but then seemed to thread itself on to a stream of fire from the observer, and it crashed violently beyond the aerodrome boundary. The pilot had been shot through the head. The other SPADS chased the German ten miles south where they disabled its engine and forced it down; the German pilot had mistaken the field for a friendly one. The French later exhibited the machine in Stanislas Square, Nancy. About this time, some nocturnal watchers spotted a car driving at high speed, headlights blazing, along an old track that ran across the airfield; this had been immediately followed by German air activity overhead. The next night a number of armed enthusiasts lay in wait in case the car should reappear - which it did. Amid a lot of frenzied yelling and the row of a Lewis gun turned on to it, it raced off unscathed. It never reappeared. By now, the American First Army's large-scale offensive against the St Mihiel Salient (about 40 miles from Azelot) was imminent and the Independent Force squadrons were required to contribute by reconnaissances and the bombing of the enemy back area railway junctions and the defence aerodromes. The lead-in period and the first two days of the offensive, which began on 12 September were marked by a heavy rain and atrocious visibility which made daylight forays all but impossible. Instead of the 13000 to 20000 feet altitudes at which they could so ably practice their skills, they were forced to fly at 2000 feet or lower, and so, in cloud, this brought the great dangers of collision with friendly aircraft or with the many hills in the district, and even attacking the wrong targets. 99 Squadron, particularly, suffered from this. 55 Squadron carried out these difficult reconnaissances on 8, 9, and 14 September, crews being Welcuman/ Patey, Welcuman/Clere, Pace/Barlow, Dowswell/Howard and Waterous/Patey. There were no aerial combats or mishaps. On the last of these days, Mackay took twelve machines to bomb the railways at Ehrang, using mainly the heavier 230lb bomb, with success. Johns, with 2/Lt A.E. Amey as observer was on the show. On the morning of 15 September the squadron was able to recommence the long distance operating. Nine machines, with Silly leading, reached Stuttgart at 09.40am. Johns was there, in Silly's formation (the other was Pace's) and he had the individual responsibility of dropping his two 112lb bombs on the Bosch magneto works, two miles further on than the main target. He didn't quite reach it for, at the critical moment he saw several EA diving into the space between his machine and the others. "They floated in", he wrote. "Maybe you know that funny way they seemed to float, so lazily, with the props slowly turning the wrong way... I went though them like a partridge along a line of guns". On the way home, fifteen fighters tried to climb up out of Boblingen to attack - several others came up south-east of Strasbourg and made an engagement. Atwood shot one down into a wood, while Silly himself got another with

his front gun (his reactions must have been rapid indeed, chance with the front gun was rare in these combats). This victim then roared up in a climb, fell over in an uncontrolled dive and went straight down through Silly's formation, where the pilots skidded wildly in all directions. But all of the formation landed safely at Azelot.

The next day 16 September, brought a raid on Mannheim. In DH4 F5712, Johns, with Amey, who came from Wimbleton, was on the show and it was to be their last. After take-off at 12.20hr, Mackay's six machines got their height. They crossed the lines at Raon L'Etape but Capt Fox's accompanying six failed to formate, and returned to base. Five of Mackay's reached Mannheim OK. But not Johns and Amey. Just past Saverne (that consistently unlucky spot) a stray fragment from a desultory Archie burst punctured their main fuel tank and his cockpit was soon awash, and the rear of the aeroplane splashed with petrol. Amey riskily, fired the green Very light to inform Mackay that they had to leave the formation. Johns had already seen a number of Fokker DVII's trailing him and rapidly climbing. He now found his reserve fuel tank empty, all he could do was to jettison his two bombs, set his compensator control for maximum economy, and start a run for home, sixty miles away. All too soon the Fokkers were on him and Amey was in action with his gun. Then Johns was grazed by bullets, his cockpit was shattered, and Amey collapsed, fatally wounded. Johns tried tearing round in a vertical bank, but of course had to break out in a bolt for home. As the pursuing Fokkers put in more crippling bursts of fire he tried to handle the big DH4 like a fighter, skidding and weaving. Finally his engine went dead and he sideslipped away most of his 6000ft to obviate an engine fire. Through blooded eyes he could scarcely discern the approaching ground and, anyway, the joystick now waggled loose. The movement of the machine in the air became a series of huge hops uncontrolled by him. Fortuitously the machine crashed with its nose slightly up and Johns' life was saved. Amey was dead. Whilst Johns had been attempting to escape the Fokkers, he had seen in the distance a lone British DH9 (or so he thought) fighting a losing battle very similar to his own. This machine went down in flames. It is possible that this was really a 110 Sqn DH9a, crewed by two sergeants, A. Haigh and J. West, also on a Mannheim raid. So Johns ended his time with 55 Squadron and went into captivity. That certainly began unpleasantly. He had the misfortune to crash near the village of Ettendorf - between Saverne and Haguenau, where British bombs had caused some havoc among civilians not so long before. His captors locked him in a room in Ettendorf schoolhouse and Amey's body was dumped on the floor with him for him to contemplate. His adventures as a PoW - including two escape attempts - are not part of this account. It is sufficient to say that he was given medical treatment and then a series of clever interrogations of the usual type faced by Allied PoWs. Johns gave nothing away. Then came a transfer to Strasbourg prison, then Karlsruhe, then Landshut and, finally, the 'severe' camp known as 'Fort Ten' near Ingolstadt. When the Armistice finally changed all this, Johns joined a convoy of officers who were taken, via Strasbourg, to the lines near Nancy. Defriefing, then a very rough channel crossing on 23 December brought him to Blighty's shores. "After crossing the Channel in a terrific gale, I arrived home [Little Dunham, near Swaffham, Norfolk] on Christmas day causing a small sensation, for although I did not know it, I had simply been reported 'missing' and given up for dead. When I walked in at the back door dressed in odd bits of French uniform, the parlour maid who first saw me let out a yell, dropped the saucepan of potatoes she was just lifting off the range, and flopped down in a faint. I must have looked an odd sort of ghost, if that's what she took me for. Anyway, having been nearly starved to death for months, I certainly tucked away some pudding that day." Our story of WEJ in 55 Squadron ends there. We have not attempted to report or assess the 'business' aspects of this effective bomber squadron, such as the weight of bombs dropped or damage done to targets; or even to write of just who were their opponents in the air. Our story is about a group of young men from all over the English-speaking world, and of how they fared during this hazardous time.

In this, the year of the disbandment of 55 Squadron, we have looked at the few weeks in 1918, centred on August, that were probably this fine squadron's finest hour.



MEMORIES OF "55"

By W. E. JOHNS

(By request)

This has been written from memory, so spelling of names may be incorrect. Dates are probably right, as they have been checked with log-book.

NO. 55 Squadron was a bomber squadron, not a fighter Squadron, but that does not mean that it did not fight. On the contrary, towards the end of 1918 it was engaged more than once in combats that might hold the record for duration, if not for ferocity, although it should be said that nearly all the actual shooting was done by the lads in the back seats. It is worth noting, too, that different from clashes between single-seaters, there was no question of breaking off a fight. We started, and whatever turned up, we went on, with the E.A. hanging on to our flanks and rear. I cannot remember a formation breaking up or turning back on account of E.A.; I don't think it ever happened. Memories! Curious thing, memory. With one or two exceptions, the things that stand out most clearly in my mind are not major operations as a whole, the details of which are more than half forgotten, but fleeting impressions of incidents that occurred in a second or two of time, sometimes on the ground, sometimes in the air. I can see these pictures just as clearly now as I saw them then. Just why some things should focus so clearly and persist, while others, really more outstanding, become blurred with the mists of time, is hard to explain. Two regular scenes can never be forgotten: the dimly lit dining-room at dawn, with the stars still in the sky, and silent heavily clad figures of the fellows on the show drinking coffee round the tables, and, the sing-song round the piano after dinner.

One of the most vivid pictures I see is a D.H. 4 silhouetted against an unbroken background of blue sky. It is flying level, quite close, perhaps thirty feet away. From it, a long trail of jet black smoke swirls away aft in a dead straight line. The pilot was a friend of mine; I had taught him to fly. I was flying number 3 in the formation and he was flying 5. I looked across at him, as I had done a hundred times, and saw the smoke. He was, at that instant, unaware of the fate that had already claimed him, and was even now overtaking his gunner. He saw me staring. I pointed. He looked. His nose went down and he was gone. We were at twenty thousand. For half an hour or more I could see the smoke trail to the ground.

The next picture is of an Albatros, nose down, so close that by reaching out I could almost touch the yellow shark-shaped belly that was turned towards me. Silly* got him. He said afterwards that he thought the fellow was doing an altitude test. My own opinion is that he was looking for us, but couldn't see the wood for trees. I didn't see him until he was falling. We were homeward bound. Fifteen E.A. came in over Bobbigen, but we fought them off. Some more came up S.E. of Strasbourg,

* Now Spt. Lieut. B. J. SSB, M.C., D.F.C., R.A.F.



W. E. J.
France,
1918.

but soon faded away after Atwood had got one of them. For the moment all seemed clear. I had my eyes glued on Silly, who was leading, for we were sitting desperately close. Suddenly, I saw his nose creeping up. This was unusual, and I couldn't think what he was at. The leading edge of my centre-section would have prevented me from seeing above, even if I had looked, which I don't think I did. Then I saw his nose jerk up; the tracer jumped for an instant, and then his nose came down again. He had not moved five feet from his original position. Then I saw the Albatros for the first time. It was about thirty feet in front and above us. I saw it as it shot up over the leading edge of my top plane. As it went up it turned, as if the pilot had dragged the stick back into his right thigh without rudder. The movement held, became a tight, crazy loop, and then the machine roared straight down on to us out of control. I knew it must hit one of us—we were six—for we were too close together for it to go through—or so it seemed. Everyone skidded, and the Albatros went straight through the middle of the formation on its back. When I could get my breath I looked down. It was spinning, and never came out. We were at nineteen thousand. I didn't see the end, but the gunners said he crashed in a wood. I can still see that gentleman falling on me.

The third incident is rather confused. We were bombing Stuttgart. I had a target all to myself—the magneto works. The formation began to turn up-wind to do the dirty work, but I had to go on for perhaps two miles. I never got there. Half way the archie faded, and I looked round with my heart in my mouth. Huns were falling out of the sky between me and the formation. Slinging my two 112 pounders clear, I turned, and saw that I could never reach the formation, which was now about three miles away and making for home. Then, to my right, I saw our second formation just arriving. I went for them like a drowning man making for the proverbial straw, but the Huns cut across and stopped the gap. They floated in—maybe you know that funny way they seemed to float, so

