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Memories of J V GASCOYNE, DFC

As told to
Alex Revell



J V Gascoyne photos

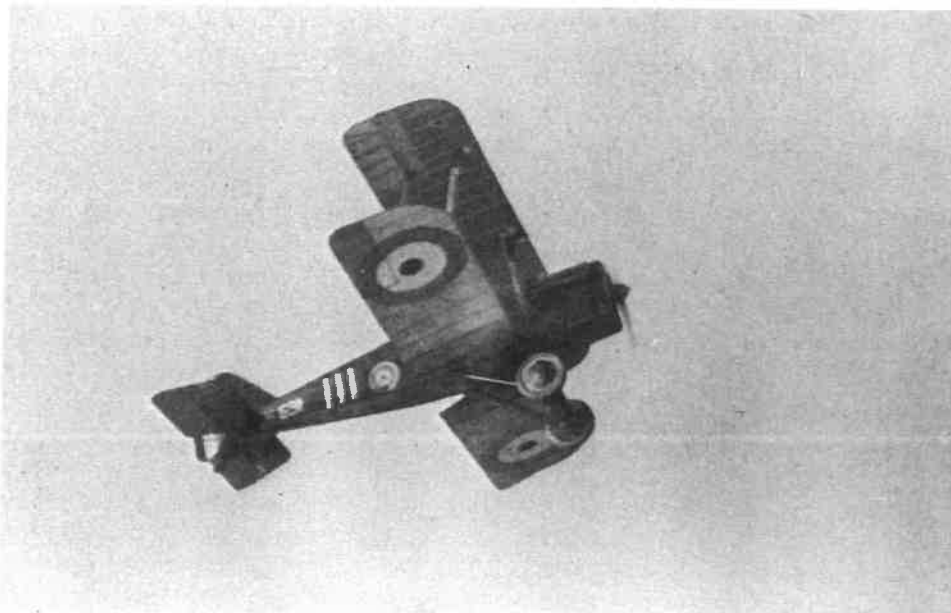
The Royal Flying Corps was formed in April 1912, and in 1913 the Army Council started to appeal for recruits for this new arm, so, shortly after my 21st birthday, I joined up. I was under the impression that I would soon be flying through the air with the greatest of ease; instead I found myself 'flying' round the parade ground at South Farnborough, 'piloted' by an ex-Guards drill instructor. This lasted for about a month, during which time I formed one of the party of RFC personnel attending the funeral of the famous airman, Colonel Cody, who was killed while flying a machine of his own design at South Farnborough. I was then posted to 3 Squadron, which was based with 4 Squadron at Netheravon. At the time of my posting there were no permanent quarters and all ranks lived under canvas pending completion of new and modern quarters. These were moved into in the late autumn and very comfortable they were, far superior to army quarters existing at that time.

All pilots engaged in actual flying were officers who had paid a private flying school for their instruction, which sum was refunded to them on their acceptance for service in the RFC. These officers had previously served in various army units. About 80% of the rank and file were straight from civilian life and were all qualified in some trade or calling, which fitted in with the requirements of the RFC. I had just finished my training with a Midlands firm of car manufacturers in motor engineering. On arrival at Netheravon I was posted to the transport section. The remaining 20% were transfers from army units, mostly the Royal Engineers. Of these, two were the McCudden brothers, the elder of whom was one of four sergeants entitled to wear 'wings'. These had all originally paid for their training as pilots, but had also received a refund from the Army Council. They also received a flying allowance in addition to their normal pay. When the youngest McCudden, Jimmy, joined the squadron he had just been released from detention after becoming too interested in the working of aeroplane engines in the absence of a pilot. This resulted in the aeroplane doing itself a mischief with, of course, the aid of Jimmy. He was nothing if not keen in everything he did. He was a good shot with a Service revolver, with which we were armed, and also had excellent eyesight. Both of these served him in good stead when he became a Service pilot. The CO of 3 Squadron was Major R Brooke-Popham. Another officer who later became famous was Lt P Joubert. Both of these were very much liked by anyone who served under them.

Being in the MT section, I was able to travel about the country a good deal and I found this very interesting, for not only were there few motor vehicles on the road but the RFC was something new and interesting, so we had a good reception wherever we went. In the summer of 1914 all the squadrons of the Corps assembled at Netheravon for combined training. This gave 2 Squadron quite a thrilling journey all the way from Montrose, which took them about three days to complete. 1 Squadron was still flying airships at Farnborough but was about to change over to aeroplanes.

TO FRANCE

With the outbreak of war, Major Brooke-Popham became Quartermaster General of the RFC and our new CO was Major J Salmond. All squadrons (2, 3, 4 and 5) were in France by August 15, 1914. The



ground staff of 3 Squadron sailed on a boat named the *Dee* from Southampton, landed at Le Havre the following day and, after a rest, started to move up to the Front by road. During this trip we were given an enthusiastic welcome from the people of France and were showered with flowers, fruit and dozens of bottles of wine. I often wonder what those good people thought when, a few days later, they saw us going hell for leather in the opposite direction. But we at least enjoyed their wine when the only rations available to us were bully beef and hard biscuits, which a modern dog would not look at. At Mabeuge, which was our destination, together with 4 Squadron, air reconnaissance started at once, the first being carried out by Lt Joubert. On the second day after our arrival we saw our first enemy aeroplane, a Taube, and lined up with Service rifles to indulge in rapid fire, but this was ignored and the Taube after having a good look round flew off at its leisure.

A few days later the great retreat started and we had a new landing ground practically every day. Sometimes our transport had to be diverted from its direct route to avoid advancing enemy troops spotted by our aircraft, which were able to give valuable information to the army on the movements of the German army. The great retreat finally came to a halt, by which time we were at Senlis, behind Paris, and it was here that I first saw a machine fitted with wheel brakes, a French Voisin.

With the advance in full swing we moved up to the Marne and on the third day at our new landing ground there was a terrific gale-force wind and ALL members of the squadron were out holding the machines down, but even then some damage occurred. These landing grounds always had to be improvised. Anything flat would do, but of course grassland was chosen where possible; but if this was not available at places where we expected to stay for sometime, then arable land was used after ashes from nearby coal mines had been spread over the top. When we moved forward to Hanges, behind Amiens, cinders were used to convert the arable land for we expected to stay there for sometime. It was here that Lt Cholmondley, the first RFC pilot to make a night flight, from Netheravon in April 1913, was killed in a tragic fashion. Bombs were not then in general use so the squadron workshops converted HE (High Explosive) shells by making certain modifications to enable them to be pinned into tubular holders bolted on the side of the machine so that the pilot could release them by putting his arm over the side and extracting the pin. The bombs were fitted with contact fuses and were very dangerous to handle. On this occasion, when the bombs were being loaded, one of them was not properly secured. It passed right through the holders and hit the hard ground, a distance of not more than six feet, exploded on contact and killed both Lt Cholmondley and several airmen working on the machine. The machine was set on fire and destroyed. About this time our Bleriot and Farmans were replaced by Morane 'Parasols'.

At the end of 1915 I returned to England to join 9 Squadron, then forming at Swingate Downs, Dover. The machines in use were BE2cs. The only thing I remember there was the sensation one experienced when flying in a machine as it took off in the direction of the sea over the cliffs. This was sometimes very bumpy and one had the feeling that the machine was about to drop into the sea. I was soon back in France, but I have few recollections of interesting things happening. We were bombed one night when located at Bertry, and at Allonville Captain Egerton took off with Lt Lerwell and in doing so one of his landing wheels came off. A scout pilot took off carrying a wheel that he intended showing to Captain Egerton to indicate that he had lost a wheel. In approaching the BE from behind, the scout pilot got into its slipstream and landed on its tail, causing both machines to fall to the ground from a height of about 200 feet. Fortunately, nobody was killed, although both Egerton and Lerwell were rather badly hurt. At the end of 1916 I was again back in England, having had a slight head wound which for sometime caused me to have dizzy attacks. This time I went to Reading to become a ground instructor at the School of Aeronautics, Reading University, where budding pilots received their initiation into the art of wartime flying.

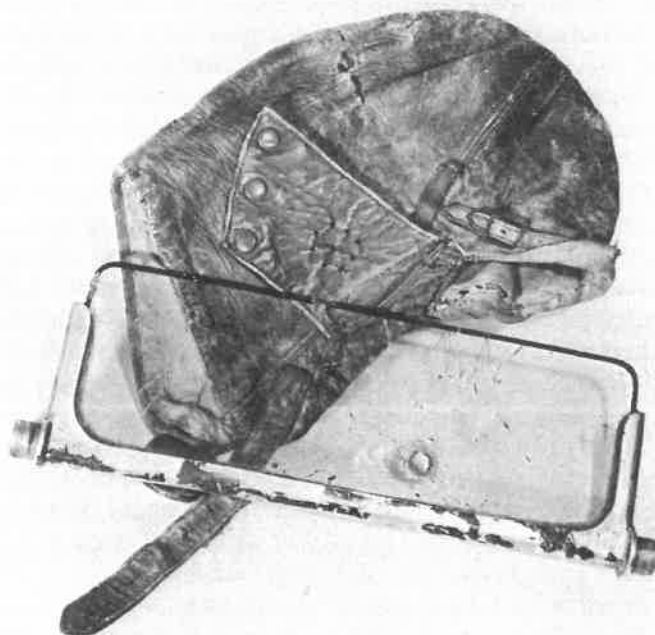
I was at Reading for sometime before I was able to pass a medical for flying training. These examinations were very strict. To be considered fit for flying scouts one required good lungs as it was necessary to be able to fly in an open cockpit without the aid of oxygen to heights up to about 17,000 feet. The test for this was usually for the medical officer to line up two teams of three aside, making them draw in a deep breath and compete to see which side could hold out the longest, and of course timing them. The clever boys whose ambition it was to become fighter pilots had in many cases learnt about this test, so they went through the motions but in fact took in a very small amount of air and then, at the appropriate time, made an explosive release and so qualified. In my own case I did not need this and passed out successfully. Having passed my medical I returned to Reading to go through the full ground course and was then posted to 25 Training Squadron stationed at Thetford, Norfolk and equipped with Maurice Farman's for initial training. These pusher aeroplanes were very slow, but equally easy to fly and I went solo after just under six hours dual instruction, flying round and round, making landings and taking off again. On the day after my first solo I had engine failure but made a good landing in a ploughed field adjacent to the airfield without damage. This did me a lot of good by giving me great confidence in my limited ability.

Three days later I got into the air before a red flag was flown to warn all machines to land because a high wind was coming up. On seeing this I applied the Nelson touch and flew away from the airfield, because I had planned to fly to Wymondham, about 20 miles away, and if possible to land in a field near my parents' home. On reaching my destination I had second thoughts because the wind that had helped to blow me there had considerably increased in volume. So I turned back towards Thetford and flew along the railway at a height of 5,000 feet. To move at all against the wind I had to lose height continuously and I remember that when I got over Harling Road aerodrome, an SE5 came up to look at me, thinking, I expect, that I was caught up on a sky hook, for I was practically standing still in the air! However, I got as far as Roudham Junction, five or six miles from home, when I ran out of petrol, so I had to make a landing without engine on a piece of gorse land running alongside the railway signal box. This was the only time I ever landed a machine going backwards — due to the wind, *not* my cleverness. The signalman kindly 'phoned through to Thetford and one of the instructors came out by car to refuel and fly the machine back, while I returned in the tender. This was my last flight with 25(T) Squadron and off I went to 55(T) Squadron at Lilbourne, near Rugby. This was a small unit, equipped with Avros, Sopwith Pups and SE5s. The CO was Captain King and the only other instructor was Lt Henry. There were about six pupils all told and the instructors worked very hard and efficiently. I owe them a lot for all they taught me.



Capt J M Robb (later ACM Sir James) of 92 Squadron adjusting the sights on his SE5A's Lewis gun.

*Gascoyne's flying helmet and shattered
windscreen, as described in text for
November 9, 1918.*



**** Later Air Marshal Sir Arthur
Coningham, who was killed in a
civil flying accident post-1945.**

My first instruction was on Avros, really great machines for instructional purposes, and very soon I had been taught not only to fly them but also to undertake every manoeuvre in the book, the instruction I received making this very easy. I had two hours instruction before going solo on the Avro and did 25 hours before passing on to a Sopwith Pup. This was a very light machine which required rather careful handling after the Avro. I then had 5¼ hours on the SE5 and was off to the School of Aerial Fighting at Marske, where I passed out in 10 days. I then had an attack of 'flu, they forgot all about me and it was not until I was required to attend an officers' selection board that they discovered I was still there.

FRANCE AGAIN — ON SE5As

Having been appointed to a commission, I went to Manston which was mainly a pilots' pool. I got plenty of flying there before going off to France to another 'pool', from which I was posted to 92 Squadron on August 15, 1918. I remember very well Major Coningham** coming personally in his squadron car to fetch Lt Madill and myself. It inspired me to think that my new CO should take the trouble to collect us personally, and all through my service with the squadron he was very kind and considerate to me. The following day he took me over the Lines to give me an idea of the front on which we were fighting. Considerate as always, he decided that we had left it late to return to our own airfield and we might have to land by the light of flares. He landed at 64 Squadron's airfield and left me there for the night. The next day I started my flight back to base, but I got lost and landed at an American base. I then found that my compass was faulty so I borrowed a map and used it to get back.

From then on I flew regularly on patrols, which I found to be most interesting and exciting. We flew in the usual V-formation and, of course, had no direct form of verbal communication with each other; but there were recognised signals which made it necessary to keep a continuous watch on the leader. In doing this one sometimes missed seeing things it would have been better for one to have seen. The leader had great responsibilities and a very difficult task in ensuring the safety of his patrol. In cloudy weather his job was particularly difficult for on entering a cloud the formation got a bit out of shape at times, and now and then one would come out and find the rest of the patrol had disappeared. In such circumstances, if we were well over enemy territory, it was wisest to make a bee-line for home as German squadrons were often waiting high up on the look-out for lone fliers. In cloud there was always the danger of collisions. I remember on one patrol a Flight of Fokkers flew just over the top of us and it seemed that their wheels must touch us, but they didn't even know we were there! In addition to patrol duties, there were always two pilots standing by in case our gunners reported the presence of hostile aircraft spotting for their own guns. On Sept. 16 I was doing stand-by duty with another officer when we received a call out. The engine of the other machine would not start, so I took off alone. On reaching the Lines, I saw the Hun, who appeared to have spotted me, making off for home. I went in pursuit and was so much occupied in trying to catch him that I flew deep into enemy lines where I was heavily fired at by 'Archie'. Suddenly the firing stopped. I realised what it meant and, sure enough, I looked up to see nine Fokkers, in three Flights, at different heights diving down on me. The first Flight I dodged by turning in the direction from which they were coming and to my relief saw a squadron of SEs coming down from the sky and about to engage the top Flight of my attackers. Believe me, I *was* relieved! As I was below the lot, I dived down to ground level and made off home as quickly as possible. The CO of the other squadron afterwards 'phoned my CO, asking what the hell I was doing that far over the Lines on my own. Coningham replied, "Oh, he was just having a look round." Actually, I had not mentioned this event on my return because I did not feel very proud of making a fool of myself. He made the best of it however, and did not let me down.

All pilots in those days had frequent engine troubles and during my first month with 92 I was particularly unfortunate in this respect. I began to fear that by breaking away from the patrol, I would be thought 'yellow', but fortunately there was the evidence of my mechanics to support me. I was very glad, however, when I was given another machine which did not let me down. We had a number of successes and generally speaking we earned ourselves a good name. The pilots I thought to be best in combat were Major Coningham Captain Robb, Lts Horry, Philcox, Shapard and Rose — in that order. It was very seldom, particularly during the time we were making low flying attacks, that one came back without a few bullet holes in some part of the machine. On September 25 I had an oil pipe broken by anti-aircraft fire and was forced to land on what shortly beforehand had been No Man's Land. This was full of huge shell holes, but I got down without breaking a wire. This was pure luck and not due to any skill on my part. The machine had to be dismantled and taken back on a trailer. I was scared stiff when I first touched down. A horde of soldiers in blue uniforms came yelling at me and at first I thought I had boomed and landed behind enemy lines. An English officer then appeared who was in charge of the party, who were Portuguese soldiers doing salvage work. This salvage gang was given the privilege of guarding the machine until the recovery party arrived the next day. There was also a party of Chinese coolies doing salvage work in the area and these gay little fellows enjoyed themselves by picking up hand grenades, of which there were quite a lot about, pulling out the pins and throwing them behind one of their colleagues, just to make them jump! Believe me, I jumped with them, which amused them even more. But as far as I know nobody was hurt at any time. Nevertheless, I was glad to get back to the squadron and a new machine.

In October we moved up to a landing ground at Mons (not *the* Mons), just behind Albert, which had been devastated by gunfire. One day, when I was not flying on patrol, Lt Shapard more or less fell onto the airfield and I rushed over thinking he might be wounded. Instead he explained that the percussion cap of his Vickers gun had come off while he was firing and it had hit his propeller, breaking off one blade completely, and before he could switch off his engine he had seen the engine 'heave'. On examination on the ground we found that it was almost completely free from its bearings. How he had got down safely was a mystery. On another occasion Lt Cole had been out bombing — the SE carried four 25lb Cooper bombs on a rack fixed just below the pilot — and as he landed two bombs dropped off behind him. He had attempted to release them, but for some reason they had remained stuck in the rack. Fortunately they did not explode. If they had he would have been done for. The funny part of all this was that he did not appear to appreciate how lucky he had been and went cap in hand to the CO to apologise for dropping them on the aerodrome.

After about a fortnight we again moved, to our last airfield before the fighting stopped. This had a sharp slope and I landed after the others as I had been out on a mission. As I went in the ground seemed perfectly level but I soon discovered this was not so and, powerless to stop, I went into two machines parked close together, breaking them both up. All the CO said to me was that I should have been told about the slope before I took off on my mission. From this field we did practically nothing else but groundstrafing, for the Germans were on the run. It was the practice to take off singly, carrying four Cooper bombs and fully loaded with ammunition. I found it most exciting to fly over the enemy trenches and batteries, sometimes at a height less than 200 feet. This was not as dangerous as it appears for we were moving very fast (for those days) and so were difficult to hit, particularly as we were firing our own guns most of the time. The danger came from crossfire and field guns using shrapnel. On the top centre-section of the SE, a Lewis gun was carried with a drum containing 97 rounds. To reload this gun one had to pull it down on a slide into the cockpit. The pilot was given a certain amount of protection by a small windscreen, measuring 11½ inches by 3 inches. To fit a new drum was therefore a work of art and very few pilots attempted it. It was not only very difficult but it took quite a time and left you open to attack by an enemy machine. We had no bomb sights but it was astonishing how near one could get to the target after a little practice and experience. My own plan was to decide on a target while flying at low-level and so gain experience as to how far the bomb carried. One had to be careful, however, with the bomb moving forward at the same speed as the aircraft as you both arrived at the target at the same time if the pilot flew in a straight line. It was therefore necessary to turn away from the target before the bomb arrived.

On November 9 I had a rather amusing experience. I was engaged in low flying attacks on troops and transport when I observed a big, fat German Staff officer riding across a rather muddy ploughed field. On seeing me he dismounted and, still holding the reins, attempted to hide under the horse! This intrigued me but I did not want to harm the horse so I dived down, fired a few rounds from my guns to make a noise and then with engine going at full throttle zoomed over the horse, which immediately went off in a mad gallop with the German still clinging to the reins. He soon released them but he looked a sorry mess, covered with rich mud. The same day I had my narrowest escape of the war. Flying down a village street at just about rooftop height, looking for suitable targets, I was silly enough to fly straight and level for a little too long. At the end of the road was the village church and a German sniper, in total disregard of any religious scruples he may have had, had taken up a position in the tower with his machine gun and he behaved rather unkindly to me by firing this dangerous weapon at my machine. One bullet passed through my windscreen and several others hit various parts of the SE. One in fact hit my engine switch but fortunately did not affect its function. However, the same bullet which passed through the windscreen carried on and actually went through my close-fitting helmet. Fortunately, the flight of the missile was in line with my goggles on my helmet and by hitting the adjusting slide was deflected outwards again. The result was a hard bang on the

side of my head and a part of the metal slide was embedded in it. This was removed later by a doctor at a field hospital. Had I not been left-handed, and thereby looking over the left side of my machine, I would probably have caught the bullet right in the middle of my forehead.

My machine was so badly shot up that it was no longer serviceable, so for the last patrol of the war Major Coningham lent me his machine. We were in the air from 0900 to 1050 but saw no enemy aircraft and were not fired on once. During this flight we passed over and inspected Mabeuge airfield on which the German airship sheds had been erected. I must have been one of the few who finished the war flying over the spot from where the RFC had first operated. My DFC award took me completely by surprise, for I walked into the Mess one day for lunch and found a note on my plate which read as follows, "Lt Gascoyne DFC. Congratulations. A Coningham." That was typical of 'Mary' Coningham. Just after midnight on the night of November 10, 1918, when most of us were asleep, Major Coningham and Captain Robb came into our billet and wakened us with the question, "Have you got a job to go to?". This was my first intimation that the war had come to its end. I do not think any one of us had any idea it was so near.

Aerial Victories scored by Lt J V Gascoyne while serving with 92 Squadron:

October 7, 1918	Hannover CL III	FTL	SE5A, C1136
October 27	DFW C	Crashed	Shared with Lts Horry and J Daniel
October 28	"Ea"	Shared with Capt O J Rose	SE5A, C1136

COMBAT REPORT, OCTOBER 7, 1918.

Location: East of Malincourt. SE5A, C1136
 Enemy Aircraft: Hannoveraner. Brown camouflaged wings, yellow fuselage.

While on patrol at 11,000 feet just east of Malincourt at 1130. I followed Capt Rose down to attack the above-mentioned EA which was flying at about 4,000 feet. We both fired bursts without effect. We then flew west and cleared stoppages. The EA resumed his work. Capt Rose again attacked at 1,500 feet and I followed him and fired from close range from behind and last saw EA going down about 300 feet from the ground. The observer did not fire after Capt Rose's second attack and was apparently hit, as I saw no one in the observer's cockpit.

Lt J V Gascoyne

As my guns were giving me some trouble I pulled out and Lt Gascoyne closed in at about 75 yards. I watched the machine glide into Hunland and lost sight of him very low.

Capt O J Rose

CITATION

Distinguished Flying Cross. Lt J V Gascoyne 92 Squadron.

'During the months of October and November 1918 this officer destroyed five enemy aircraft and took a prominent part in the destruction of seven others. On November 9th although wounded early in the attack, he showed great skill in bombing an enemy convoy, scoring three direct hits. Lt Gascoyne continued to harass the enemy by machine gun fire until his ammunition was exhausted, after which he returned to his base and successfully landed his badly damaged aircraft.'

F/Note: A short history of No 92 Squadron RFC/RAF appeared in the USA Cross & Cockade Society Journal, Spring 1966.



92 Squadron personnel on November 14, 1918.

Seated L-R are: Lt T S Horry; Capt J M Robb; Maj A Coningham (CO); Capt W E Reed and the American Capt O J Rose.