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MILITARY AND NAVAL AVIATION 1914-1918

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Experiences of an RFC pilot; training in the UK; characteristics of various 'planes; organisation and duties of 92 Squadron at Serny

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DGL Why did you join the Royal Flying Corps in May 1913?

JG The reason was this. I was a pupil with a firm of motor engineers in the Midlands and I saw an advertisement in some paper or other and also a bit of a write-up about the Royal Flying Corps. I imagined that flying was a marvellous thing; something quite new in those days and something I would be interested in. So I applied to join, thinking, of course, that sooner or later I'd be flying. When I got to Aldershot I found that the only thing I was to do was to fly around a square under the direction of Guards NCOs.

DGL Did you have any prior knowledge of flying?

JG None at all. I had a great interest in motoring and speed. That was the thing that attracted me most of all. Flying was in its infancy and it seemed to me a wonderful idea to have a go.

DGL Had you heard of the Royal Flying Corps before you saw the advertisement?

JG No, I hadn't.

DGL Can you remember what kind of qualifications were required by the advertisement for new recruits to the RFC?

JG No, I can't remember a thing about it, except that mechanical knowledge was an advantage.

DGL I see. So you own training as a motor mechanic was highly relevant to what was being asked for?

JG Yes, indeed.

DGL I believe that while you were at Farnborough you did duty at the funeral of the famous Colonel S F Cody. What can you remember about that?

/That's...

JG That's true. I was in the middle of my training - the whole lot of us were in the middle of our training together, all in the same batch - and when Cody killed himself, or was killed, which ever way you like to put it, we were told that we would all take part in the funeral. That is because we had advanced sufficiently in our training to be able to walk like soldiers. Therefore we attended the funeral. Each of us had to carry a wreath. It was a very very ceremonial affair and a great many of the squadrons sent detachments to this funeral and it took about two hours I suppose to get through with it.

DGL It was a big gathering?

JG It was an enormous gathering of civilians and soldiers.

DGL Were any speeches made?

JG No, nothing like that.

DGL What happened to you after you finished the basic training at Farnborough?

JG At the conclusion of the training we passed out in front of the adjutant, who was Lt Barrington Kennet from the Guards. Then we were ppsted to various units. I was sent with three others to Netheravon, where I joined No 3 Squadron; No 3 Squadron and No 4 Squadron were both stationed there. At the time they were living in tents and we stayed in the tents until the manoeuvres, when we all went off. I had, by that time, been allocated to the transport section and I was actually second driver on a Leyland lorry.

DGL Could you tell me what Netheravon was like when you first went there in June 1913, and the way in which it developed during the next ten months?

JG Well in the first place, when I arrived there were only aircraft sheds, station workshops and transport sheds and a guard room. The

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two squadrons were both living out in tents and of course the messing and everything was also done in large tents and marquees. It was all very very interesting. The station was full of life although there were so few buildings there. But the airmens' quarters were in the stage of being built and we could see these were going to be much more comfortable than the type of barrack they had at Farnborough.

DGL Could you tell me a little more about the establishment of No 3 Squadron from the point of view of its equipment first of all?

JG The aircraft were Blériots with seventy horse-power Gnomes. No 4 Squadron had biplanes; I can't quite remember what they were. I think they were Aircraft Establishment aircraft.

DGL You were attached to MT. What was that?

JG The MT section consisted of Leyland lorries, Crossley tenders and Douglas motor cycles.

DGL How many of each were there?

JG There would be about ten lorries I suppose and three cars and about four motorcycles. That's about all there was. The strength of the squadrons was only 120 men-NCOs and men- and the officers would be about sixteen I suppose.

DGL Having joined the RFC to fly, how rosy did the prospects look when you got to Netheravon that there would by any opportunity to do so?

JG In the first place I thought they were quite good because there were a number of NCOs and airmen in the squadron who already had their wings and I discovered that they obtained them by going privately to a school at Larkhill and obtaining their wings for which they'd payed a fee of about £75. Then, when they had qualified, they were able to draw flying pay, but to my astonishment I found that none of them were allowed to fly. This was confined entirely to officers.

/Why...

DGL Why was that, do you think?

JG I don't know. It is difficult to know because I believe some of them were very good pilots. I, as I say myself, had thought that I would like to go to the school. One of the pilots was Sgt McCudden - not the VC, but his elder brother - and he was in charge of the transport section. He was a funny little man, but he was very keen and he was rather inclined to be pompous. His brother, Jimmy, came to the squadron after I had joined - about a month after, I suppose - and he had just come out of detention because, in his keeness for flying, he had at Farnborough started up an aircraft and the engine had pulled him into the side of a hangar and broken it up. He was always a very keen fellow. What I also remember about him was that he had the most wonderful eyesight; with a revolver or a rifle he could always find the target. And I think that this wonderful eyesight of his was one of the factors that added to his success as a fighter pilot.

DGL What were the circumstances under which you were able to observe the quality of his eyesight and his ability as a marksman?

JG We used to go on the ranges, firing, mostly for revolver practice, but now and again with rifles. Jimmy McCudden later on, when we got to France, he could always spot a German aircraft a long time before anyone else, in the air.

DGL How similar or dissimilar were the two McCuddens?

JG They were both a little bit cocky but they were quite nice fellows. I liked Jimmy very much.

DGL What kind of work were you doing with the MT section of No 3 Squadron?

JG The work was pretty mixed but I suppose you'd say mainly it was carrying aircraft supplies between Farnborough and Netheravon. We used to go up one day and come back the next with stores and things like that. But we also used occasionally to have the unfortunate job of carrying the bodies of officers who had been killed, to their homes.

/This...

DGL This was a not infrequent occurrence?

JG Yes, that would be so. I suppose I myself took about three bodies during the twelve months before the war started.

DGL On the outbreak of war you were posted to France with No 3 Squadron. Can you describe for me the journey from Le Havre, where you landed, to Maubeuge where the squadrons commences operations?

JG We disembarked at Le Havre, where we stayed the night, again in tented accommodation. The next morning we started off for Maubeuge with the whole transport in convoy; that included cars and motor cycles and lorries. I remember two of the officers: Lt Christie was in charge of the transport. There was Lt Christie and Robert Lorraine.

Robert Lorraine was quite a character. He had the most vivid flow of language I have ever heard. Prior to that I had never heard an officer swear. On one occasion we were travelling up - it was the first night I think - when the station workshop, which was heavily loaded, got stuck in the mud at the side of the road. There was quite a todo then; everybody had to turn out to push this thing out and dig it out. We were all covered in mud. Lorraine, well he was helping us on with language, if nothing else. This went on for a long time; practically all the way up we were getting vehicles stuck in the mud. But the French people were absolutely marvellous. They assembled along the road and gave us terrific cheers, which by the way they didn't give us when we came back. And we were loaded up with wine; bottles of wine were everywhere. The lorries had more wine than they had equipment I think, in some cases. As a result of that, in fact, I have never drunk wine since.

On arrival at Maubeuge we found the aircraft already there.

DGL Did you see any signs of German air activity while you were at Maubeuge?

/Very...

JG Very little; they used to fly over occasionally. I remember on one occasion a Taube dropped a very small petrol bomb which - I can't remember the name of the man but all I remember is he took off his tunic and smothered it with his tunic.

During the time we were there German aircraft used to come over at about a thousand feet and we all used to be called out with rifles, perhaps half a dozen of us. We were lined up and we used to shoot at these Germans, but we never had any success, of course. We were all quite hopeless.

DGL I believe there was one episode on a particularly stormy night when you all had to turn out to hold the aircraft down. Could you tell me about that?

JG That was on the occasion when the German retreat started and the British troops advanced to the Marne. We were stationed behind the Marne and the first night we were there all the aircraft - Blériots - were picketted out using only screw pickets and ropes - tied down. There was a terrific gale and rain storm and at about eight o'clock at night the whole squadron was turned out and we stayed there all night, actually holding, hanging on to the wings - five or six people to every aircraft, hanging on to the wings and others holding on to the tailplane, holding it down so it wasn't lifted away. As a result of that, instead of losing all the aircraft we saved the lot and they were able to fly again the next day.

DGL When you were in France on the first trip to what extent did you have to create your own airfields?

JG Generally speaking, you know aircraft in those days did not require a very long run to either take off or land. We usually used ordinary meadows or fields. But there was one airfield at Henges, near Amiens, where when the winter started, somewhere round about October, we found the airfield was getting into such a devil of a mess it was necessary to do something about it. So all the lorries in the squadron went into three or four times a day to Amiens, a coal mine near there, and collect cinders and ashes, anything we

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could and take them back, where French civilians were employed spreading them all over the field to enable the aircraft to be workable.

When we were at Henges I remember one very sad occasion. At that time we were flying Blériot aircraft and using ordinary Army shells, converting them with a fuse cap which exploded on contact with the ground. These bombs were inserted into aluminium tubes made in the station workshops and a pin was pushed through to hold the bomb in position. When the pilot wished to drop the bomb he leaned over the side, pulled the pin out and away went the bomb.

On this particular occasion Lt Cholmondley was in his aircraft, the mechanic was busy putting the bombs in and he tried to put the pin through - thought it was there - instead of which the bomb came down the tube. He, within a foot of the bottom of the tube, put his knee under it to stop the bomb going and the whole thing went up. There were four people killed in that thing including Lt Cholmondley. That's how dangerous bombing used to be - more on the ground than it was in the air.

DGL Were there any characters with No 3 Squadron amongst the pilots you remember?

JG Yes, one was outstanding. That was Gordon Bell who was a civilian pilot who joined the No 3 Squadron and he was flying an aircraft called the Bristol Bullet. Now, the first thing I remember about him, during the retreat, I think it was at St Contagne, he was sent to see the doctor. In those days they were Army medical officers; we had no doctor on the squadron. The doctor said to him, "Now then, Bell, do you smoke very much?" and Bell's reply was - he stuttered very badly - "I-I-I-I d-don't drink and I-I-I don't smoke and I don't f-f-f-find fault with those that do!"

On another occasion, two days later, we landed at an airfield - a field we were using for the aircraft to land during the retreat - and he landed in a cabbage field, as a result of which the Bristol Bullet turned up on its nose with its tail sticking up in the air. He was coming along the road, making for Popham who was then a Quarter-Master

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General, I think. He came along and he saw Bell and he said, "Oh, Bell, where's your machine?" To my surprise Bell turned round, pointed across the field and said, "Over in that b-b-b-blasted field, in that f-f-f-fucking field of cabbages."

Another story about Bell was that he went back to England very shortly afterwards. I don't think he cared a lot about observation flying under war conditions.

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Another story I can remember about Bell - and this took place at Brooklands - it is hearsay but I believe it to be true. Gordon Bell was a great man for acrobatic stunts in the air and he'd made a habit of flying through the open hangars at Brooklands. These hangars had doors at each end and one day Bell was doing his usual stunts round the airfield and again tried to fly through a hangar. By some means or other someone had half closed the doors at one end, leaving just enough room for his fuselage to go through. Bell goes in at the open and goes through and suddenly finds that the doors are half closed. He hits the doors and the aircraft collapses on the ground; everybody tears up expecting to find him dead. There's Bell sitting up in the wreckage and he was saying, "I knew this would b-bloody well happen one of these b-b-bloody days."

The only outstanding recollection I have of my service with No 9 Squadron is this. I was still in transport and of course we used to be located on the airfield all the time, doing anything we could, which wasn't very much. One day Captain Egerton took off with an observer by the name of Lerwell on a BE2c and as he took off one of his landing wheels fell away. In those days, of course, landing wheels were not retractable. Then a pilot, whose name I don't remember, took off in a Sopwith Pup and with a wheel which he tried to hold up as he flew over the top of Egerton's aircraft. Unfortunately, he couldn't attract his attention, or that is what it appears like, and he flew lower still over the top of him and on this occasion, instead of getting over the top of him, he hit his tailplane and the two aircraft became locked together and they fell from a height of about two hundred feet and hit the ground, but miraculously neither of them were killed. Both were very badly injured but they both survived to fly again.

DGL It is amazing how many pilots did walk away from crashes like that.

JG It is indeed, yes.

DGL In the Autumn of 1916 you were posted back to England again to Reading.

JG Well Reading was the university - most of the university - which was taken over by the Royal Flying Corps for the training of pilots and observers - ground training, that is, such as morse code, engines, everything in general and they used to have talks by people on flying in France and what experience they had, what you had to avoid and what you had to do, what you had to remember and all that kind of thing you see. It was a most interesting place.

I went there as an instructor but instead of flying people I dealt with equipment officers in training. We had to teach them the elements of motor engineering and aircraft engines. As a matter of fact I wrote the books on the Crossley and Leyland lorry. They were all very simple engineering problems which said what each part was, what it did and all the rest of it. During that time I applied on a number of occasions to transfer to flying, I think, prompted mainly by the actions of Jimmy McCudden; He was doing so well I thought I would like to have a go at this game myself. So I had a good try and for some reason or other my papers used to get lost and they never came to fruition till some eight or nine months afterwards.

DGL That was by January 1918, was it?

JG No the end of November when I was told I had been accepted. I had just then been promoted to the rank of Flight Sergeant so I had to relinquish that rank at once and go back to sergeant. Then I took the pilot's course at Reading which took me on until the end of the year. Having passed out there - that included morse signalling and all that kind of thing - I was then posted to Thetford in Norfolk to training school there where they had Maurice Farmans.

DGL What do you remember about the sort of training you got at Thetford?

JG Thetford training was all very simple. These aircraft used to do about eighty miles an hour and I remember my first instructor was a Captain Orton. He used to fly me around and tell me how clumsy I was - too heavy-footed, too heavy-handed and that sort of thing. But eventually he allowed me to go solo after about twelve or fifteen hours and my first flight I had the misfortune to have an engine conk out and as I took off I just got up in the air and I had to turn round and land in a ploughed field.

Now you may think that would frighten one, but it didn't. It gave me confidence in the world because I landed without breaking anything and we got the engine right and I took it off again. Then, after doing a fair amount of solo - in those days these aircraft were so slow they'd only do about seventy miles an hour and when the wind got up - a strong wind - they used to put a red flag up and you were supposed to land.

I was wanting to fly as far as a place called Wymondham, where my people lived, and I was going to land there and show myself off a bit then fly back. Well when I got to Wymondham I decided that the wind was so strong - I went down there in record time; I must have been doing 100 or 120 miles an hour, which was terrific in those days - I thought I had better turn back. So I turned back and I struggled along. I remember I sat over Harlingwold airfield so long that they sent an SE5 up to see what was the matter with me; they thought I had got caught on a skyhook or something. Anyway, I made further progress; I shoved her nose down and I got to Roundham Junction, which is about seven or eight miles from Thetford, and I ran out of petrol. So I decided there was nothing to do but to land down in the firs and bracken alongside the railway. This I did but to my amaze-

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ment - with my engine shut off and no petrol - when I landed instead of running forward I ran back. I think that satisfied the people at Thetford that I was qualified and the next day I got my posting for higher training and I went to Lilbourne.

DGL Did you regard learning to fly as a particularly difficult task?

JG No. I found it very easy.

DGL How easy? How would you compare it with learning to drive a motorcar today, say?

JG It is better than driving a motor car today because you had plenty of room up in the air. There was nothing in it at all. It was only a question of whether or not you felt sufficiently capable of doing a job and I think I always did. And I will tell you this much: when one is learning to fly, or flying at any time, you are so busy doing the job you haven't got time to get frightened. That was my experience, anyhow.

DGL In more recent times flying an aeroplane is looked upon with some element of mystique and is regarded as technically highly skilful and extremely difficult and one is selected with very stringent tests for aptitude and things like that. But your experience in those days was rather different wasn't it?

JG My experience - mind you, I don't say everybody felt the same - but I was keen on flying - I always was keen on flying and when I took off I got a feeling of exhilaration and nothing else. I had some wonderful instructors when I was at Lilbourne. They told me to do everything under the sun from Immelmann turns to looping, rolling, side-slipping and everything.

I made up my mind that what I had seen in France before with other pilots, that the safest way to live through a war flying was to know every trick in the trade and learn to do things which were not normally done. For example, a pilot always turned left, one always flew around in circles on the left because your propeller was pulling you that way. Sometimes, on occasions when I got into scraps, I used to turn the other way and that used to confuse everybody, including my own people. But I found that the element of surprise was the thing that took you through.

DGL I am sorry to interrupt you. You mentioned a number of manoeuvres like Immelmann turns and loops and so on. Could you describe each of these for me in turn, exactly what they were and how they were carried out.

JG For an Immelmann turn you got up a hell of a lot of engine speed for a dive, then you suddenly took your aircraft up and then did a half-roll at the top and fell straight down again on to the aircraft below, you see.

A loop in my days comprised just racing your engine, opening your engine full out, putting it into a slight dive to get full speed, then all you do is to pull back the joystick, right back into your stomach, and the machine goes up, over and then drops and as it drops you switch off your engine and come smoothly out of it in a glide. That's the loop. They are usually done at a height of a thousand feet or more to give you time to recover in case you lose too much engine speed and the machine comes straight down.

A roll - you are flying straight and level - there again, with as much speed as you can get - and then all you do is to pull your joystick back into your stomach again and put on your left hand - I always used my left hand or foot because I am left-handed I suppose - put on your left hand rudder. That causes the aircraft to do a complete turn in the air. That is to say you go upside down and you go right round and straighten up again. As soon as you've got straight again you pull rudder back to neutral and put your joystick back to neutral. That's completed your roll.

DGL Were there any other manoeuvres?

JG A spin. A spin is easy; you're just flying along, you shut off your engine, pull the nose up and the nose then drops with the weight of the engine and you pull your joystick back and that starts to turn you round. Now to come out of that all you have to do is to centralise the joystick, put your engine on and you're out. All very single movements. Another move I employed in actual fighting - and I think it was employed generally - was that when you were being shot at by anti-aircraft guns they'd more or less got your height and they'd see the direction in which you were flying. Now I used to confuse them by putting on - not moving; the plane went on flying evenly to all intents and purposes - but you put on rudder. The result was the machine used to drift across the sky and you'd find the Germans were firing about a quarter of a mile away from you in no time before they realised what was happening. As soon as they got on to you again you did the same thing; perhaps you'd go in the other direction this time. That was a very easy movement and very deceptive.

Another thing I can remember. I myself have never done it but I have known of pilots. In those days flying wires on all aircraft - as you know they were all biplanes - the bracing wires braced the two wings together on struts. These wires used to run across the aircraft. Now they were tapered to avoid air resistance and a lot of people, when they were bombing on the ground or near the ground, they used to turn these wires flat. The result was when you dived you got a terrific whistling noise going through and they reckon that used to scare the Hun. But that is something I didn't employ myself.

DGL It was a bit like the Stuka tactics of the Second World War almost.

JG Yes, very much the same. I went on from Thetford to higher training. I went to Lilbourne. There we had three types of aircraft. We had the Avro, the Sopwith Pup and the SE5. The Avro was an absolutely magnificent machine; you couldn't go wrong with it if you tried. It had a Gnome engine and you could do every stunt in the world in it without any difficulty whatsoever. I always persuaded my instructors to let me do all the stunting I could because I realised that it is a safety valve when you are flying in the face of the enemy; any little trick like that you can get up to and have confidence in then you've got a jolly good chance of surviving.

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I flew these Avros for a long time. Another thing I learned was to sideslip them into airfields. All you had to do there was to put your joystick over to one side and just put on a little rudder and you'd slip sideways almost stationary over the airfield, not moving forward. You can get into any little old field with that. You can get into a field a hundred yards long quite easily. In fact, when I joined 92 Squadron it all too often used to by my job, if an aircraft had a forced landing, Maori Coningham used to send me out to pick these things up because he knew it was one of my favourite stunts.

Going back to my training - I went from the Avro, which I kidded myself I was very proficient in and I was told that I was - I went on to Sopwith Pups. Sopwith Pups are very light and I have great difficulty in landing them because they are so light that if you pull the joystick back when you landed and slowed down, as the aircraft lost its flying speed it dropped down and you had to pull your joystick back to bring your tail down on the ground. I found, when I first tried to fly those, instead of getting my tail on the ground, I got my nose up in the air, which is not very good for the aircraft. But I soon got over that. Personally, I didn't like the Sopwith Pup very much. They were very nice but a little bit too light.

Them from that I went on to the SE5. The SE5 was the machine so far as I was concerned. You could do just anything you liked. It was as strong as an ox and you felt that you were more or less armour-plated right through, although you weren't. That was fitted, of course, with a Vicker's gun, firing through the propeller with its Constantinescou gear. On the top of the centre section you had a Lewis gun. To get it down to reload it you had to pull it down on a rail, take a drum out of the side and bang it on, then push it back. This was all supposed to be very easy but I only tried it once because I found that with only a very small windscreen the wind used to catch this thing as you turned it to put it on and if you weren't careful it shot out of your hand, although it had a strap. I lost one and I saw it go back behind my tail and it very nearly hit it and I decided after that I'd never use use it again. These drums carried a hundred (rounds).

/Now ...

DGL Now in July 1918, when your training as a fighter pilot had been completed, you were posted to France. Can you tell me what happened to you immediately on your posting to France.

JG We went over in a boat, of course, then went up to the pool of pilots, which was just outside St Omer, if I remember rightly. And I should say there would be about anything from forty to a hundred pilots and observers there, all of whom were being held to fill up vacancies caused by casualties in other squadrons. I was there for just a fortnight.

DGL What did you do while you were there; can you remember?

JG We did nothing at all; we just lounged around, walked around. I myself went to visit several squadrons nearby where I knew people. Apart from that we did absolutely nothing. We looked at the orders every morning. People were being posted every day. Well, I was there nearly a fortnight before I left.

DGL This was a daily routine, was it - checking on the notice-board......

JG A daily routine, yes. Then one day I discovered I was to go to 92 Squadron. I didn't know anything about 92 Squadron except that they were an SE5 fighter squadron.

DGL Tell me about this posting to 92 Squadron. What happened first of all when you arrived with 92 Squadron?

JG The first thing that happened was that on the same evening Major Coningham - that's Maori Coningham - came up with his car personally to fetch me. He fetched two of us, in fact, to replace casualties they had had in the squadron. He took me straight back to the station.

DGL Do you know how he acquired the nickname "Maori"?

JG Yes, Maori.

/He...

DGL He was a New Zealander? I see. What was 92 Squadron headquarters like?

JG It was just an ordinary overseas airfield. We had wooden Nissen huts to sleep in. We had a Nissen hut for a mess and we had ordinary hangars, portable hangars, for the aircraft. Nothing very spectacular.

DGL Was it a fairly comfortable kind of place?

JG Oh quite comfortable. Very comfortable indeed, yes. We used to have to sleep two pilots to a hut and it was a very mixed squadron. It included Americans, Canadians, New Zealanders, South Africans, one or two common English and an Irishman or two; so we were a very mixed crowd indeed and a very very happy lot.

DGL What was the state of morale at 92 Squadron?

JG To start with, obviously, the CO was a very liked man. He talked to everyone and did everything he could to help you. The fact that he came to pick us up shows the kind of man he was. Every pilot in the squadron was right on his toes and morale was very high indeed. You felt you had joined something worth joining.

DGL You had not flown operationally yet as a fighter pilot?

JG No.

DGL How were you first introduced to it?

JG I was introduced again by Maori Coningham. Next evening after my arrival he took me out over the line. He flew me around. During that time, strangely enough, my compass went wrong and I didn't know it and I was flying away from him and he sort of came after me and fetched me. We decided to come back and the result was that we were quite late. We had a forced landing. I can't remember the squadron either, but I know it was a Bristol fighter squadron. We landed there at night just as it was getting dusk. Rather than risk me going back to our airfield he left me with the squadron and told me to fly home the next morning and he went off and landed by flares that same night.

The next morning I got up and started to fly back on what I thought was a compass course and I found myself miles away, back behind the line where there was an American airfield. I landed there and then discovered that my compass was wrong. They very kindly lent me maps and I flew myself home by following the rivers and railways and trees and things. That was my first experience of flying with 92 Squadron.

DGL In your experience were these mixed squadrons with aircrew with various nationalities unusual or were there a good number of them around?

JG No, I don't think there were many; not to my knowledge, but they were a wonderful crowd. You had every confidence in practically every man you flew with.

DGL Together do you think they had anything that, say, the average British squadron wouldn't have?

JG No. I think that when you were talking together you had so many different nationalities it was most interesting to learn what they were doing and how people behaved in other countries. But in a fighting sense were all people - except for one or two - you felt everyone you were flying with you could really trust and if you got into a scrap you would go to their aid or they would come to yours - there would be no running away.

DGL What were your main flying duties while you were with 92 Squadron?

JG The main duty was two-hour patrols in which you went normally in a flight of five aircraft. You patrolled at any old height - 5,000, 10,000 ft. Your purpose was to attack any German aircraft doing observation over your own troops, directing artillery fire, and that kind of thing and then, if you came across a fighter squadron over the line - because we always flew on their side of the line - I don't ever remember meeting a German over our side. You would engage these people and fight it out. When the fighting had finished you would each go home.

DGL Could you tell me some more about the actual tactics of air fighting. When you came across an enemy fighter unit what was your approach in tackling it?

JG In the first place I'd like to make it clear we had no means of direct communication between each other. It was all done by signals. If the Germans were below us and the flight leader - usually a captain - waggles his wings that signified that he was going down. Then you prepared to to down; you went down and joined in his scrap and it was everyone for themselves. As soon as your leader wanted to break it off he did so, again by a wing waggle, and off you all went together. If anyone was shot down there was nothing you could do about it.

DGL It is a bit difficult just to break it off like that though, isn't it - if you have a German aeroplane on your tail?

JG Well, I am talking about breaking off. Supposing, for example, you see a big German squadron coming towards you - say ten or fifteen aircraft - and you are only five; you obviously break it off rather than be shot down, which would be bound to happen to you. I had one occasion - on this occasion I was flying alone. As I told you, we used to stand by two aircraft to chase off any German observation machine over our lines. On this particular evening we took off. The other fellow who was coming with me his engine failed and I took off alone. I spotted him and I chased him. I was so keen on the chase that I went about fifteen miles over the line entirely on my own. Then anti-aircraft shells were bursting up all round me and suddenly it stopped. It occurred to me that there was something wrong and I looked up and there were nine German aircraft in layers of three.

The first lot came down at me, went through and I managed to evade them. The second lot came down and just then I heard shots and I looked up and it was one of our squadrons doing a full squadron patrol - twelve aircraft - and they'd seen this thing going on and came over to see what it was all in aid of. So I promptly dived straight down, got down as low to the earth as I could - spinning down - and they attacked these Germans and shot two of them down.

DGL Were these air combats you got into in any sense individual?

JG No, not in any sense. You got into a fight and if you saw an aircraft - a German - in front of you - and you had to make sure it wasn't andEnglishman - you'd try and get on his tail and shoot him down. He'd break off. He'd probably see you or hear you and he'd break off, then you would go for the next nearest one you could find, or perhaps you'd find somebody on your tail and you had to take evasive action. So there was no choice in the matter. You had to act according to what was happening in the air. It was all going along so quickly you just didn't know who you were shooting at.

DGL I believe that formation flying was the in vogue thing by this stage of the war in the air. Could you explain for me what formation flying skills were all about?

JG If you were flying as a squadron you'd fly in echelon in three flights; the first of five aircraft, the second of five aircraft and the third of five aircraft. We used to fly with one in front and one on either side - that was the general method. But when you got into a fight of course it all broke up and became disturbed.

DGL There were, of course, bigger units for formation flying which could involve several squadrons flying as a wing. Could you tell me about the circumstances under which wings were flown?

JG Yes, this was on the occasions when the Army administration had picked out a particular German combination they wanted to attack - ground targets - and they used to send over people with bombs to attack them and our job was to see they were not pounced upon by the

Germans and therefore we each had our positions allocated. One would be over the top, one on either side and sometimes one well over the top, ready to come down in the event of a big scrap.

DGL How big were those wings, or how big could they be?

JG Oh I've seen as many - the Germans used to come up in the same formation - as fifty or sixty aircraft together in the air, all spinning around each other and making a lot of noise, tracer bullets flying all over the place. It was all very confusing.

DGL Do you remember any particular wing flights of this kind?

JG No, I don't.

DGL Could you tell me from your own experience what your impressions was of the relative merits of German and British aircraft and pilots?

JG Well, at the time - my time of the war - previous to that then at one time the British were on top and then the Germans were on top from the point of aircraft efficiency. At my time I should say we were about equal. The only advantage was that they fought over their side of the line all the time, leaving us to do the attacking.

DGL What was the advantage of that?

JG Well, for example, if an aircraft got hit and the engine stopped, or the pilot got wounded, or anything, their pilot could go straight down and land on familiar ground and if they didn't, they landed within their own territory and they'd live to fight again; whereas if we were shot down we were prisoners of war. And I've had some experience of that. I remember once having my engine shot down - shot up rather - and we were about ten miles behind the line, flying somewhere between 15,000 and 17,000 feet, and I just shut my engine off and planed down and I landed behind our line where I was very lucky in that respect. But if we'd been flying about seven thousand I should've been a prisoner of war.

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DGL One of the features of air operations in the last month or so of the war, during the general Allied offensive, was ground strafing. Could you tell me what the techniques of ground strafing were, how you approached that from a tactical point of view?

JG That was for the individual to do his own ground strafing. The object was that you went out singly or in pairs and you went over the line, in the direction which the German troops were reported to be moving, then you just attacked them with anything you'd got. We used to carry four twenty pound Cooper bombs in the under-carriage. Then we had your machine guns - two machine guns - and just went over the line and looked for anything to shoot up. If you could shoot up transport and block the road that was a fine thing; you stopped the whole lot. Sp personally I used to try and attack them from the front, not from the back. That is to say, from the direction to which they were proceeding. If you could manage to shoot up a couple of transport waggons the whole road was blocked for some time, then there was just cold meat. You just went along the twenty pound Cooper bombs and, apart from being shot at from the ground, that was all that happened.

DGL How effective were these Cooper bombs?

JG Oh they were very effective.

DGL Were they?

JG Oh yes.

DGL What kind of bombs were they? Were they HE or were they incendiary?

JG Oh no, they were ordinary HE and they weighed about twenty pounds each and you carried four on a rack. You just pulled a plug and away they went.

DGL Could you hit what you were aiming at?

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JG Oh they were pretty good because after you had been experienced flying for some time you knew roughly at what speed you were flying and just how far you had to be away to release your bomb. But they were really only a great success when you had a line of transport or a block of stuff. If you tried to bomb a motor-cyclist for example you wouldn't stand a chance in hell of getting him.

DGL The targets were, at this stage, becoming so big?

JG They were becoming quite big, yes.

DGL But you always had a fighting chance?

JG Yes. If you could get transport in line on a road you'd probably got a hundred or two hundred yards. You could hit something somewhere.

DGL Do any of these ground strafing operations stand out in your mind?

JG Not in any serious way, but you used to get a lot of fun. I remember on one occasion I discovered a line of infantry behind a hedge. I don't know how many troops there were there but riding towards them was a big fat German on a horse and he was going across a ploughed field walking - the horse was walking - there was plenty of mud and dirt about. It suddenly appealed to me to see what I could do about it. So I didn't want to hurt the horse so I dived down and flew very close over the top of the horse and started him off. Before I got down there he saw me coming down; he jumped off the horse and got underneath its neck, holding the reins. Well, I frightened this poor horse so much that he started to gallop across the field and the fat German hung on to the reins for ten or fifteen yards you see and dragged him all through this mud and mire and he looked a proper sight before I had finished with him. The horse had disappeared and I left him in the middle of the field.

DGL It interests me that, whilst you would have no inhibitions about shooting up Germans, you were quite benevolent as far as the horse was concerned.

JG Yes, I always felt that. The Germans used a great deal of horse transport and I have seen transport drivers driving along near the line, but I would never shoot at them; I would never shoot the horse.

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JG Coming back to the end of the war - that was an absolute surprise to me although about a month before the end of the war we started doing ground strafing; we used to go out singly or in pairs. We used to go out with twenty pound Cooper bombs and a load of ammunition. The idea was that we should fly down close to the ground and take anything we could find. I personally preferred to go out on my own.

We'd no idea - I had no idea anyhow - that the war was about to end and two days before the Armistice I was out ground strafing. I came across a village where the German troops were retreating. A whole line of transport was [in] a very straight street and at the bottom of the street was a church tower. Now, I was so intent on getting - having a go at this transport - I was not flying more than about two hundred feet or less - so I started to fly down the street. I was going to fly down the street and take a look at it, then I was going to turn round and have a go at it. As I was going along I foolishly went absolutely straight down this village street. Suddenly there was a burst of machine gun right into my own machine. One bullet came through the windscreen, hit my helmet, made a hole in it, made a little hole, a mark on my head - it felt just like being hit with a brick. I put my hand up and I found there was blood on it. That didn't worry me very much because I stuck my head over the side and I regained consciousness very quickly.

Then - I went back to have a second run - I discovered where the firing was coming from. It was from a church tower at the bottom end of the village. He was round about the height as I was flying, straight into him. That was how I finished the war off. I got back, saw the doc, and on the eleventh I went up with our last squadron patrol - on the eleventh of November - and by a strange coincidence Captain Robb was leading the thing, we went over Morvaus aerodrome where there was a Zeppelin shed at the time. So I virtually finished up the war in exactly the same place as I started it.

DGL Can we talk about some of these people you have been mentioning to me. For example, Captain Robb, who later on I believe became an Air Marshal. Tell me what he was like.

JG Captain Robb was a very quiet man, very gentle and an absolute gentleman. There was no doubt about that. He was an absolute favourite in the whole squadron. He took part in anything from playing rugby to any old games we got up to. He was a really grand fellow. He was a man I loved flying with because he knew it all; he knew exactly what to do and when to do it and he never let you down.

DGL He was a good pilot, was he?

JG He was a wonderful pilot.

DGL Tell me a little about your CO with 92 Squadron, Maori Coningham.

JG My CO was one of the greatest men I have ever met. He instilled confidence in everybody. As I told you before, when I was posted to the squadron he came and fetched me, took me back to the camp and talked to me. The next day he took me out and showed me the line and the various parts of the line. He helped me in every possible way he could; he advised me on everything that was likely to happen in the war in the air and the whole squadron just loved him. He was really a wonderful man.

DGL What was he like as an organiser: How did he handle the squadron? What was his management technique?

JG He handled the squadron beautifully because he never condemned you, but if you did anything good he always complimented you on it, although he knew the people who could fly and who couldn't and the people who were doing their jobs.

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I remember once I landed on an airfield - a new airfield we were going to - and it was downhill and I didn't know that. I landed and I came sown on the airfield - came down the runway, rather - and I ran into two aircraft parked at the other end between the two of them. He came to say, "Why couldn't you manage to hit just one?" I said, "Yes, but the engines were a bit hard". And he laughed and that was that.

On the occasion when I was wounded I had a patch put over my helmet and he called me in and said, "Look, take that patch off. In a few year's time you will be rather proud of that." So that patch was taken off. That was the kind of man he was. He was always thinking of other people.

DGL He sounds a fine man.

JG A grand chap.

DGL When you were flying in France in 1918 did the fighter aircraft you were flying - in your case SE5s, wasn't it?

JG That's right.

DGL Did they stand up to the rigorous kind of treatment they received under active service?

JG Well, yes, generally they did. But there was always a dud aircraft about somewhere or other, usually with engine trouble. I remember when I first went to the squadron I was given an aircraft. I have told you how, the first time I went over the line with Mary Coningham, the compass went wrong. Then when I started to fly in formation with the squadron on the first three occasions I went over the line I had to come back because my oil pressure went dud. That worried me no end because I had heard it said before in other squadrons about people coming back. They always gave you the credit for having got the wind up - coming back to avoid going over the line. This worried me quite a lot. So I said to my flight sergeant - we were always very friendly the aircrew and I - I told him what my fears were. One night I went out to chase a German observation aircraft. I came back after it was getting dark and they had flares there for me. When I landed I hit the ground rather hard and broke a stay. The flight sergeant said, "Well, here's a good chance to get rid of this aircraft". So the aircrew just promptly jumped on it, broke it up and I got a new one and after that I had no more trouble.

DGL They literally jumped up and down on the aircraft and broke up the airframe?

JG Yes. I was very pleased; it did me the world of good.

DGL On this question of relations between aircrew and their ground crews could you say a bit more about that. What were they like and how did you relate to each other?

JG As far as I was concerned we used to get together and chat and I used to tell them what had happened over the line and they would always be very interested. If I had any troubles I told the flight sergeant what they were and he'd have a look at them. If it was anything to do with guns or anything the armourers would have a look at it. Generally speaking, we were all very close together.

DGL So it was not a question of officers and gentlemen on one side?

JG No. In the early stages of the war very much so. But later on it became very much more friendly.

DGL Do you think the fact that you yourself had been an NCO created in your case a different kind of relationship?

JG Oh yes, I think it did. You were on equal terms. Although some of these Yankees and people were pretty crude in the way they expressed themselves, you wouldn't know whether they were officers or anything else.

DGL One knows, certainly at the beginning of the war, that flying was very much an activity for officers and gentlemen. You yourself had come up from the ranks, had been an NCO and were finally commissioned as a pilot. What were your relations like with officers who were from a different social background to yourself?

JG You couldn't tell the difference. The position at that time was that we had so many colonials and other people coming in you just couldn't tell what conditions these people lived in before they joined the services. The NCOs and the officers were all equal. Your ground crews also came from civilian life and we were all on a par then. There was no officer - well no NCO and no airman; everybody worked together. There was a great deal of good discipline but there was no class distinction at all.

DGL So you never felt thatnkind of thing in any form?

JG No, never; not from the time the war started. It was totally different.

DGL Did the RFC, at any stage, either before the war or after it, begin to develop any kind of identity that was expressed with songs or rude stories, or anything like that?

JG Oh, no rude stories from flying gentlemen!

DGL There were some songs, were there?

JG There were some songs. There was one song No 3 Squadron used to sing in their mess - the officers used to sing in their mess at Netheravon. It went something like this: [sings]

Wrap me up in my old flying jacket
And say a poor airman lies low.
Then six stalwart airmen shall carry me
With steps that are mournful and slow.

Take the crankshaft from out of my body;
Take the piston from out of my brain;
Then the workshop with all its mechanics
Will make it to fly once again.

Then there's another song which was written at the very beginning of the war, when the pilots were experiencing being shot at from the ground and also from the air. That was written to the tune of Tipperary. That went something like this: [sings]

It's a long way to seven thousand,
It's a long way to roam.
It's a long way to seven thousand,
On a fifty horse-power Gnome.
With Fokkers buzzing round you
And the Uhlans down below
It's a long long way to seven thousand,
But the safest place I know.

Thank you.