

14 SQUADRON

A FIRST WAR HISTORY: PART 3

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Operations in Judea

THE APPALLING WEATHER of December 1917 continued into the beginning of 1918. Heavy rain and low cloud over the Judean Hills limited flying operations throughout January and February, frequently making flying impossible. When flying was possible 14 Squadron typically mounted two tactical reconnaissance sorties and a similar number of artillery co-operation sorties each day. Reconnaissance aircraft were always armed with bombs which they used to attack targets of opportunity. On one such attack on 3 January, Capt Sclanders and Lt E.C. Booker¹ in BE2c 4437 achieved a direct hit on a dugout on the Jericho Road. On the same day Capt Hanmer, Lts E.S. Sawtell and D. Colyer² from the Squadron joined another three from 113 Squadron for a raid on the aerodrome at El Fule, each dropping six twenty-pound bombs from 5,000 feet.

This was Hanmer's and Lt J.L. Benvenisti's³ first operational flight in the new RE8, and all did not go smoothly for them. Firstly they were delayed when it took longer than usual to haul the heavy RE8 up the hill at Junction Station and secondly the engine refused to start at first. Eventually they set off some distance behind the rest of the formation, which they eventually caught up as the latter was returning from the target.

There were still one or two of our machines hovering about in the direction of Arfuleh – another ten miles on – so [we] pushed on towards them and getting over the junction let the bombs go. To my intense annoyance I saw no explosions and immediately after had a very good idea of what had happened – the safety pin had in all probability not been taken out. There was nothing to be done then but to make for home. I came up with another RE8

on the way and together we proceeded.

At this stage Hanmer suggested that Benvenisti should test his gun, which he did, only to have it jam. Thinking *him to be a good gunner*, recorded Hanmer, *I did not worry at first but when the gun did not start up again after several minutes delay I looked round and there was my perfectly good observer in a muck sweat at the bottom of his cockpit with his gun in little bits and himself quite incompetent to get it together again!*

Luckily no enemy aeroplane found them. The following day another three aircraft bombed the camp at El Tayiben and transport at Silet Ed Dahr. Throughout the first few months of the year, a number of joint operations with 113 Squadron were flown against enemy camps, including a raid on Ramin by two 14 Squadron aircraft (out of a total of four) on 18 January, on Miskeh by one aeroplane (of a total of six aircraft) on 3 February and by three out of eight aircraft on the same target the following day and on Shumit Nimrin by five out of eight aircraft on 5 March.

The poor weather also affected enemy air operations and as a result there were only a small number of attacks on British aircraft during the early part of 1918. The first of these was just after midday on 18 January when an Albatros attacked Lts Beer and Graham in RE8 A3812 as they returned from the bombing raid on Ramin. Graham fired a drum at the Albatros but his gun then jammed with a broken extractor. Beer was able to dive and extend away from the Albatros as Graham struggled to change the bolt on his gun, and generated enough distance to turn back and engage the enemy aircraft with his front Vickers gun, at which the Albatros withdrew northwards.

Flying amongst clouds, in hilly terrain, brought a new challenge to pilots. When the clouds lay on the hills it was no



Two future Air Marshals, Maj Charles Medhurst and Lt Douglas Colyer, enjoy their pipes outside a tent in early 1918.

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