

WIRELESS INTERRUPTION

by Captain Maurice Newnham DFC CdeG

via Norman Franks

Maurice Newnham, seen here at the beginning of his RFC training, wrote this article in 1919 but it was never published. In the Great War, he was a Camel pilot with 65 Squadron, ending that conflict with 18 victories. While it is not of significant historical value as such, it does depict what an interception patrol was like, and Newnham did take part in several of these.

The first streaks of dawn are just beginning to appear in the east when a sudden pandemonium arouses the airfield. Several klaxon horns are sending their piercing notes over the countryside, each vainly endeavouring to drown out the others. A few seconds later the deep-throated roar of aero engines is heard. A curiously garbed figure dashes into a wooden hut and just as hurriedly makes his exit, running as though life itself demanded. Within the incredibly short period of 60 seconds from the first disturbance the man and two companions have disappeared and the camp has resumed its usual morning stillness. Had you been an amazed spectator of this apparent insanity and had enquired its reason, you would have received the somewhat vague reply that it was 'wireless interruption'.

Among the multifarious duties of the RAF, the work of 'wireless interruption' holds an important place. A squadron of scouts, usually with rotary engines for quick starting, is detailed for the work on each Army Front. A special wireless station established on or near the aerodrome intercepts messages sent from hostile machines and immediately informs the squadron by telephone. Exploding 'Archie' supplies the height at which the Hun is flying. Immediately the message is received the squadron Recording Officer sounds the klaxons, the mechanics start the engines, the leader of the formation obtains from the Orderly Room the whereabouts of the enemy aeroplane then rushes to his machine. No heed is given to the wind on these occasions, for every second delay may mean the loss of valuable lives and materials. Once in the air the two following machines quickly close up with the leader and the trio head directly to the spot where the German aeroplane is reported to be working, gaining height on the way.

The sun is now beginning to gain strength and the early morning mists assume a rosy hue. A river glistens below and the little peaceful villages and churches behind the lines appear like an enchanted country in this generous atmosphere. Very soon, however, the trenches appear in sight, winding tortuously to right and left as far as the eye can see. The flashes from concealed gun emplacements are wonderfully distinct in this curious half-light and an



occasional puff of smoke denotes the burst of a shell. It is now time to look out for the machine with the hated black crosses, resentment being not a little increased by reason of such an early rising from a comfortable camp bed.

The little formation is now flying at about 6,000 feet while the reported height of the enemy was given as 3,000. A hasty glance round reveals nothing but a string of kite balloons, their unsightly bodies looking phantom-like in the general haze. Suddenly an object shows up black, passing over a sheet of water. It is undoubtedly the quarry and a warm tingle passes through each pilot whilst gun triggers are fingered lovingly. However, it is too far over at present to attempt an attack as the Hun pilot would simply go down and land rather than face the combined assault of three determined scouts.

An involuntary exclamation rises to the lips of the leader as he watches the larger machine begin a turn towards the lines. The eagerness with which a fight is looked forward to, can only be compared with the love of the huntsman for the chase. The primitive instinct to hunt and to kill takes possession of the three men as they sit and strain their eyes for a favourable opportunity to engage.

The sun has now risen to such an extent that it is impossible to look directly towards the east. How many of the Hun's wily scouts are there sitting up-sun, invisible to the untrained eye? The leader flashes a quick look round but all seems clear. The enemy two-seater is now practically on the line and will soon begin its deadly work, so the signal is given for the attack. Almost simultaneously three white puffs of smoke appear in the form of an arrow pointing towards the German machine. It is our own 'archie's' method of indicating enemy aircraft. Forward go three joy-sticks. The wires of the machines hum, pleasing music to the pilots' ears. Faster and faster drop the machines, but now the German black 'archie' has opened up to give warning to the occupants of the artillery machine. Round and down goes its nose, the German pilot intent on seeking the protection of machine gun fire from the ground. The three scouts are still overhauling their quarry but not nearly so quickly. Only 300 yards now separate pursuers and pursued. A stream of tracer bullets from the observer's cockpit testifies to the fact that he is beginning to feel uneasy. The pilot in the leading scout holds steadily on, refusing to lose speed by zig-zagging although now the bullets are zipping uncomfortably close. At 100 yards range he fires a quick burst at the gaudily painted machine in front. The desired effect is obtained and the huge black crosses show up plainly as the two-seater makes a sharp turn to avoid the dreaded stream of lead.