

NIGHT FIGHTER PILOT

Lt James Stedman, 50 Squadron

via Marion Addington

James Stedman's earlier experiences, temporarily with 17 Squadron in Salonika and then with 100 Squadron as a night bomber observer, written for his family, were covered in CCI 40/2. The editing of these recollections of pilot training and service with 50 Squadron includes the addition of some endnotes which, hopefully, can expand on some of his observations.

I WAS POSTED TO A FLYING TRAINING SCHOOL at Rochford,¹ near Southend. This was rather like going to a new school. There is only one lower form of life than a new pupil at a flying training school and that is a new pupil at an observers' training school.

However, by this time I had some 18 months seniority in the RFC and six months experience in France (and was wearing my Observer's wing), so I was entitled to rather more respect than some (The Observer's Wing, I should explain, was an O with one wing, and was only awarded for service overseas). The training was in Avros,² lovely machines with no tricks.

The squadrons in France were howling for pilots and the training schools were being urged to push people through as fast as possible. As a result I had 1¼ hours dual instruction, ¼ hour test and, 'Up you go. One circuit of the aerodrome, then land.'

As I opened the throttle this was one of my most thrilling moments. Instead of one circuit I did two, and having landed took off again and did two more.

After that, one grabbed a machine when one could and went up for, what was called, practice flying. After a while this became rather dull, because there was a very strict rule that pupils should stay within gliding distance of the aerodrome. I had discovered, about eight miles away, a stretch of railway line running along a fairly high embankment. If you got there at the right moment, you could go down and fly alongside a train and wave to the guard. This was rather more amusing than Practice Flying.

On one occasion I had found a convenient train, flew alongside waving to the guard, the passengers and the driver. I had turned away and climbed to about 1000 feet when there was a loud bang, everything started shaking violently; there was a hole in my top plane. I could easily have landed where I was, as the ground was quite flat and open. But – it was a very big but – I was not within gliding distance of the aerodrome; I was due for weekend leave and this would have been cancelled. So I had to keep going, holding onto the stick with both hands and watching the flapping wings with some anxiety. Eight miles to go and only a thousand feet to play with.

I got there, switched off and glided in and landed at the far corner of the aerodrome. I walked solemnly the mile or so round the aerodrome and explained that I had had a forced landing on the far side. I was patted on the back for having been within gliding distance. It seemed to me that a full explanation (like all explanations) would have been tedious so I accepted the congratulations with due humility.

The trouble, it turned out, was that a cylinder head had blown off and as this was a rotary engine (that is all the cylinders spinning around like a top) you can see that the loss of one cylinder head would throw the thing badly out of balance.

One thing my instructor was very keen on was forced landing procedure. He would take me up for an hour at a time; I would fly around at about a thousand feet and he would, without warning, switch off the engine. My job then

Rochford aerodrome, photographed from the south east during 1918. 198 NTS occupied the two permanent GS sheds on the southern boundary, while the resident Home Defence unit, 61 Sqn, used the two pairs of coupled wooden sheds and the Bessonneau hangars on the western boundary.

:CCI Archive

