

A FEAR OF SNIPES

by Tony Mellor-Ellis

Anthony Weatherby Beauchamp Proctor was one of the few WWI VC winners to survive the war. He was an ace with 52 aerial victories to his credit. He stayed in the RAF after the war and might have risen to a high rank had he not been killed in what now seems to have been an unnecessary flying accident. The following is the last letter he wrote, and it contains some interesting comments concerning the type of aircraft in which he had his fatal accident.

ALL PHOTOGRAPHS ARE FROM OR VIA THE MELLOR-ELLIS ARCHIVES UNLESS STATED OTHERWISE

June 20 1921
Central Flying School,
Upavon

Dear Bobbie,

Sorry to have taken such an age to reply and God knows where you are; still I hope your renowned club will forward this effort. I am going up to town this week end and hope to see something of Phil and with luck something of you. The club (RAF) will find me.

On the 2nd July I am going to shoot down the ruddy balloon in the pageant, after much local opposition. At present I am flying scouts a fair amount on the perishing Snipe. I wish it was an SE5. These ruddy Snipes are quite nice but frightfully soggy in a dive near the ground; so much so that today, in a dive, I nearly scraped my undercarriage off.

I cannot sell my side-car, so our tour will be in it and not a cosy little two seater. At any rate you will be a damned site more comfy in the side-car than you will be in most two-seaters. Jove, Bobbie, at times I can nearly smile at my sojourn out in South Africa. I expect it is all part of the phase called life.

Loud cheers hope you are having a real wonderful time and, should you write home, please convey my love to your mother and regards to your Governor.

Yrs
Procie.

THIS LETTER was written to and received by ex Lt E.F. Van Der Riet DFC, who was a fellow South African and served with 55 Squadron during WWI. He included a photographic copy of the letter in his unpublished autobiography *Favoured by Fortune*. The original letter has probably long been lost.

The letter reveals Proctor's worry concerning flying the Snipe. He also mentions his preference for the SE5a. This aircraft had an inline engine and unlike the Snipe there was no problem with torque from the engine affecting control of the aircraft. The Sopwith Snipe was a rotary-engined aircraft. This type of engine generated its power by having a circular arrangement of cylinders rotating round a central drive shaft, which meant that the rotating mass of metal produced forces tending to make the aircraft move in the same direction as the rotation of the engine. A pilot always had to be alert to this problem and take steps to compensate for it. This usually meant applying a lot of opposite rudder.

None of these problems were associated with inline engined aircraft such as the SE5a. The configuration of its engine did not give rise to control problems. Proctor had flown the SE5a successfully during the war and changing to a rotary engined aircraft was obviously difficult. Some pilots found they could not make the change.

Proctor also mentions that the aircraft was 'soggy'. Here, he is referring to the controls. Sogginess is the term pilots often use to describe the situation where, when they do something with the aircraft's controls, there is a delay between what is done and the aircraft's response. He gives as an example his almost fatal dive. He pulled back on the control column but the aircraft continued to dive before responding. The consequence was nearly a disaster. Proctor's fear of Snipes was all too soon to be realised.

Pageants, displays and shows were the stuff of peace time flying. It was the way in which the RAF showed itself to the public and justified its existence. A pilot could be called upon at any time to appear in one of these events. If a scout (fighter) pilot, as Proctor was, he could be required to fly any type of fighter. Little attention was paid to experience on the type to be flown. The assumption was made that, as they were all the same class of aircraft, there should be no problems. As a consequence, Proctor was put in the position of having to fly the Snipe, with which he was relatively unfamiliar, and in which he felt uncomfortable. The stage was therefore set for tragedy. He was a man ordered to fly a type of aircraft he did not want to fly and in which he had no confidence. His letter makes it quite clear that his heart was not in the job.

It was time to get ready for the pageant. On 21 June 1921, Proctor climbed into Sopwith Snipe E8220. He was going to put in some practice for the pageant. The take-off was all right. He then started to make a loop. The Snipe climbed up towards the top of the loop but, as it turned upside down at the top, it broke to one side. It immediately went into an inverted spin. At this point it should have been possible to