

NIGHT BOMBER OBSERVER

Lt James Stedman, 100 Squadron

via Marion Addington

Early volumes of this journal contained numerous first-hand accounts of the first war in the air by survivors who were still with us at the time. Sadly, they have now passed away and the material we publish, excellent as it is, is generally based on research. It was a pleasant surprise to be contacted by Marion, one of James Stedman's daughters, with the offer of her father's unpublished memoirs, which he had written for his children. It was also fortuitous. A team of society members has been working on a book to coincide with the unveiling of the RAF Museum's FE2b and what better way to celebrate that event in the journal than to publish the recollections of a man who flew and fought on the type.

James Stedman enlisted in the army at the beginning of the war, receiving his commission and joining a service battalion at Dover. His unit was down-graded to reserve battalion status and 1915 was spent on training duties. He volunteered to join the RFC at that time, but nothing came of his application. An overseas posting came in January 1916 and he sailed for Egypt on the Olympic, sister ship to the Titanic. The voyage revealed his tendency toward motion sickness. From Egypt, he was sent to Mudros but, as Gallipoli was evacuated, then moved on to Salonika, where he joined a battalion of the Connaught Rangers. Responding to a request for volunteers to join the RFC, he applied again and was accepted, joining 17 Squadron as an observer. His future was called into question on his first flight as he was air sick. Before any decision was made, he came down with malaria and was hospitalised on Malta and then returned to England for further treatment. This article picks up his story at that point.

It was while in hospital in London that I first met a new kind of snobbery. Most of the patients were army types except one, an RFC pilot. He spent a lonely life, not speaking to any of the other chaps. Nor to me, until I told him I too was RFC. With that I became his bosom pal. I, of course, was flattered at being noticed by a real live RFC pilot and we formed a very pleasant partnership. All the same, I decided that, if I ever got my wings, I would be a bit more human.

I had a couple of months' sick leave, feeling very poorly and very sorry for myself. When you have a weak heart you can hardly do anything and you cannot imagine that it will ever get better.

But of course it did, and I was sent to an Observer Training School at Lympne, on the Kent coast. Here I was taught how to use a machine gun (which I knew probably better than the instructors). However I also had to use a machine gun in the air, which was different.

In some ways it was quite a good time as we were quartered and fed in the very large hotel on the sea-shore. In other ways it was not very pleasant, as the machines we were flown in were nasty little pusher machines (that is with the engine behind and the observer way out in front getting the full benefit of any bumps in the air and any movement of the machine). I was not actually sick but often very queasy, but I managed to hold out to the end of the course.

One thing which provided me with a lighter moment was



an occasion when the Hun decided to do some daylight bombing. It was about tea-time and I was up in my room on the 5th floor when the bombing started, quite near us. I looked out of the window to see what was happening and I was highly amused. Down below there was a field full of sheep and next to it were a dozen tennis courts with players and spectators. The sheep were rushing about in all directions (literally) and the people on the tennis courts were behaving in exactly the same way, which I found truly laughable.

In due course I was posted to No 100 Squadron in France. I was given the choice of going to a night bomber squadron or a day flying squadron. I was told that the night flying was very dangerous and if I opted for day flying no-one would think the worse of me. I chose night bombing and was given a nice

pat on the back. I did not think it was necessary to tell them my reason, which was that I believed night air less bumpy and there would be less chance of my being sick. I accepted the pat on the back with due humility (explanations are always tedious). So off I went to France. I was, of course, sick on the boat over but arrived in good shape at my squadron.

On my arrival at the squadron, I was allotted as observer to one of the Flight Commanders – Captain Herbert Harman, hereafter to be referred to as Herb. He promptly took me in hand, explaining that there were already five aerial gunners in the squadron who were no damn use; one might as well carry sandbags for ballast. I, he asserted, would have to earn my