

LETHAL COMPANY

Lt William Mackenzie Thomson MC DFC

2Lt Harold Leslie Edwards MM DFC

20 Squadron RAF

Part 2



by Stewart K. Taylor

ACTING AS A B FLIGHT SUB LEADER on 9 June 1918 and with Ralph minding the rear cockpit's Lewis, Thomson 'crashed' one EA, a Pfalz D.III, near Messines, and during the afternoon of 17 June they were involved in a succession of scraps over the Menin-Comines sector, when another EA, identified as a Fokker D.VII, was brought down.

Even more casualty free than May, June had only one disturbing day with two Bristol Fighters downed without a single EA claim. Each of the ten F2Bs that departed at 04.25 was carrying a single 112lb bomb and the two flights were flying at 14000ft and 16000ft respectively, when Jasta 52 attacked over Armentières, the target they had orders to bomb. One F2B, C817, was flown periodically by 2Lt Edwin Albert McGee (born 23 September 1893 Kearny, Manitoba) a C Flight member since 30 April 1918 and before that with 11 Squadron until a 11 April 1918 collision, 100ft up, with a machine behind and above – the formation closed up to 50ft between aircraft – sent him and his observer Lt Craig, to hospital for a week.

Almost considered a veteran, McGee had participated in 37 missions up to the morning of 5 June 1918 and he explained to me in September 1966 while we talked in the home of his son: *I was flying in No. 2 position on the left side of the leader, Capt Latimer, when tracer bullets went into the fuel tank – there was no fire. In the fighting my engine stopped. Crash landed in a German re-training area. Neither of us was hurt.*

With him on that mission was probationary 2Lt R.J. Gregory. The same pilot and observer were on their third operation together, having been part of an escort for the Camels of 4 Sqn AFC on a 3 June HKB hunt, and a repeat effort the morning of 5 June. The other lost Bristol Fighter, from the same formation, and flown by Lt J.E.W. Sudgen, had in the rear cockpit Sgt W. O'Neill. He and McGee were together as a crew on nine previous missions going back to 27 May when, on a morning raid to Armentières, one EA, when attacked by the entire 20 Squadron formation, put several rounds into the wings of BF C817, the same aircraft McGee was flying when they encountered Jasta 52. Both missing C Flight Bristols were credited to Vzfw Hermann Johnke and Paul Reimann, who the Germans recorded as having fallen in flames at 18.50 over Aubers, after a collision with one of 20 Squadron's F2Bs.

If one believes all the claims made in good faith by the 20 Squadron crews, who kept the proud tradition of this two seater fighter squadron in the forefront of combat

accomplishment, then it would seem that the Jastas (as many as 23) facing them were tempting elimination in their own numbers so steep they would be unable to keep up with the demand for replacement aircraft and aircrews. Nothing could be further from the truth.

In one of those moments of deep reflection 'Puss' Thomson mulled over such a tantalizing topic and wondered in his more mature years why, as a young man, he never really came to any rewarding conclusion about what all those squadron claims were actually accomplishing. As for him and nearly all, if not every one of his flying mates – they were simply knocking them down – that was all there was to it!

The ongoing march towards claiming fame would, for Lt W.M. Thomson, be delayed at the end of June when he went on leave, one he used to visit aunts, uncles and a grandfather living in Aberdeen, Scotland, home of the MacKenzies.

On 4 June 1918, 25 year old Lt Bryce Thomas Davidson joined the squadron, although he would not cross the lines for another fortnight. A graduate of the Osgood Hall class of 1916, an only son, with a young wife and infant son of his own, he was secretary of Mimico Presbyterian church and a Sunday school superintendent (following the example of his father, secretary of the world famous Toronto Hospital for Sick Children). He joined the RFC, trained at Deseronto and Camp Borden after completion of Ground Course No 3; completed his flight training in England and Scotland and, although 'washed out' on Camels, switched to Bristol Fighters and displayed sufficient progress to warrant a France posting. As a practising Christian he never included himself in the more rowdy evening sessions at Boisdinghem and looked askance at many pilots and observers, including Canadians like Thomson, McGee, Lloyd Price, even 'Met' Purcell, a standoffish pilot with a judgemental nature that also kept him aloof from the regular revellers.

From 29 June to 8 July, in Thomson's absence, 20 Squadron's air war affected the lives of more than one young aviator from both sides. Twenty two EA claims were accepted as a matter of fact by a more than grateful CO, but, on 24 July, the squadron's casualties continued to mount. Another pair of Bristol Fighters was lost in combat to a combined assault by Jastas 16b and 56, all within fifteen minutes above the desolate landscape of Wervicq-Zandvoorde and Ypres. With a sergeant observer encircled by the Scarff mounting of BF C850, Lt Bryce Davidson could not extricate himself, nor could Southend-on-Sea born Lt Harry Charles McCreary,