

# UNCOMPROMISING & EFFICIENT

CAPTAIN HAROLD ANTHONY OAKS DFC, A FLT 48 SQN RAF

PART 2

by Stewart K. Taylor

**A**N ADVERSE 'HANGOVER' from Major Park's criticism was very prevalent. Drummond was 'fed up' and wanted out, Captain Steele was non-committal but he never forgave Oaks for disobeying his warning not to 'dogfight' and C Flight was about to crown its fourth flight commander in as many months.

Much to the amusement of some, but not to himself or the 'borrowed' C Flight observer 2Lt B. Rider, Oaks flew straight into a British balloon cable on his way home from his third OP since his return. The leading edge of the lower right wing was partially severed. Nevertheless the F2B F6094, the new 3, remained aerodynamically sound and he had no trouble bringing aircraft and occupants safely back to the aerodrome. With a new lower plane in place Oaks took F6094 and led two other F2Bs down the front line south of Amiens in a wet 23 July afternoon, to have a closer look at some intense German artillery shell fire directed against Moreuil Wood. Ground to air ballistics fired from the German side could not be ignored. Damage inflicted from this source kept the riggers employed most of the evening so that all the aircraft of A Flight could be ready to carry out an OP called for a 06.45 on 24 July. Captains Oaks and Drummond wanted to operate as they had while Steele was on leave. When the major decided otherwise, Oaks with his patrol of five left alone. With him was 2Lt C.W. Davies, formerly the last C Flight leader's observer.

One of the most pronounced changes in German fighter aircraft disposition on the St Quentin front was in effect from 12 July, when JGII moved further south to the German Third Army front. This left the German Eighteenth Army with just Jagdgruppe 12 (Jastas 24, 42, 44, 77b) and Jagdgruppe 2 (Jastas 5, 46) to look after the German Second Army matters. Jasta 5 converted from the Fokker Dr.I Triplane to the Fokker D.VII in the middle of June, and Cappy aerodrome, which Jasta 5 and

46 occupied, was photographed by the French on 20 July, when the accommodation was thirteen hangars. This aerodrome and the one at Foucaourt, four miles directly south, which housed Jasta 37's D.VIIs, were the two most vulnerable on the Villers Bretonneux section of the Front. While fuel rationing was in effect, each one of these Jastas was ready to respond to any threat from the 22nd Wing on a cloudy, windblown 24 July evening.

Captain Oaks cut across the line at Montdidier and headed north to Albert. Cumulus at 18000ft covered much of the sky, therefore he kept the formation just underneath that cloud layer so not to impede vertical vision. Over Jasta 37's Foucaourt aerodrome the five F2Bs found they were confronted by a formation of ten D.VIIs flying in a large vee 1000ft higher than they were. The D.VIIs neatly swung around and seven of them in line abreast dived on the F2Bs. Three passed below them. Oaks recounted what then happened: *One got into the middle of our formation and proceeded to make a nuisance of itself. I started sitting on his tail but owing to rotten shooting he got away. Later I engaged another and sent him spinning down to earth. One of them got on Waddy's tail just about this time and his machine went up in flames. I then got on the Hun's tail and shot him down. Five more of them stayed above us ready to dive but didn't .... Just like Huns!*

This obviously biased synopsis of the two part fight from Oaks' perspective did not elaborate on the difficulty Oaks had in his attempt to ward off the attack by a pugnacious D.VII pilot. He had to bank tightly in order to aim straight at the D.VII at the same time as this opponent did a climbing turn the German hoped would take him onto the tail of Oaks' F2B. By stalling slightly, Oaks elevated the aircraft's angle sufficiently to give 2Lt C.W. Davies an ideal perch from which he could fire at the D.VII from 20 yards or less with thirty rounds. Thereupon, the EA twisted on its back and started to swing. While upside down, this D.VII looked like a 'falling leaf' and further down one of Oaks' fellow pilots saw the same EA spin crazily into a layer of lower cloud at 3000ft which put an end to any further observations of the EA's last moments.

Phase two of the German attack began when one of the EA picked out the rear F2B on the left side of the formation. This daring German pilot had enough nerve to cut the distance between his D.VII and the F2Bs very closely. Converging fire from the observer's guns in two F2Bs, plus a steady stream of lead fired in his direction by the sergeant observer, W.J. Shuker, in F2B D7902, the aircraft under attack, made no impression. The D.VII pilot, Lt n dR George Meyer, Staffelführer of Jasta 37, only gave up when the F2B burst into flames and in one great act of defiance after his success swooped down right across the nose of Oaks' machine. Angered by this Oaks reacted. At full revs he took after Meyer, the F2B's speed was equal to that of the D.VII's, allowing him to stay on the EA's

Some extracts from Oaks' diary that cover June and July 1918:

12th June 1918. Flew the Pfalz Scout this morning.

13th June 1918. On LP this evening and had some fun dodging in and out of the clouds. The Hun Archie didn't have a chance. We saw a balloon on the ground and I gave it 200 of the best. Led the formation this morning after Steele's engine went dud.

5th July 1918. On leave. Evening boat from Bologne.

24th July 1918. (See quotation opposite)

26th July 1917. Did dawn show this morning. It was cloudy so we flew just over them to Bapaume, having occasional looks through gaps, then came home. Later Davies and I went to Le Treport but rain rather spoilt the day there.

27th July 1918. Escorting DH4s (205 Sqn) to Omnicourt dump getting to a height of 19,500 ft. It was misty with a thin layer of cloud at about 9,000 ft. We were losing height on the lines when we saw a Hun two seater. Went after it and shot it up from various positions, hitting the observer but failing to crash it.