

# IN GOOD COMPANY - PART 2

Lieutenant James Archibald McGinnis:  
Observer, 27 Squadron RFC/RAF and his Canadian colleagues

BY STEWART K. TAYLOR

RAIN ON 19 MARCH LIMITED 27 SQUADRON to just a single raid. McGinnis sat this one out as he would also be doing the 20th. On the 21st, all hell broke loose once German infantry appeared out of the fog and mist at 04.45, their purpose to overwhelm British Third and Fifth Army defenders. Dense fog crippled any retaliatory action from 9th Wing squadrons until 13.00. Near pandemonium could best be used to describe what took place at Villers Bretonneux. *It was like a disturbed hill of ants*, McGinnis remembered, *but I must say the ground crews, a fine bunch they were, reacted with sufficient decorum to get everyone ready*. The order came at 13.30, to leave the ground fully loaded; six A Flight machines were to lead the procession. Half the DH4s never made it to the front lines. Only just back from the Biggin Hill course, Wait had to call it quits when almost within sight of the aerodrome; his being the initial return. Using another machine, he continued on. 2Lt Johnstone had his temperature gauge skyrocket, as did 2Lt Hill, but 2Lt Hewson stayed with the bombers and reached Le Cateau station – the target.

Another scramble, dictated by the almost unrestricted speed of the German advance – then eight miles directly to the east of Villers Bretonneux, was again hampered by the 22nd March morning fog. 27 Squadron's DH4s, all 14 serviceable machines in two separate groups, were not in the air until 14.20. Four DH4s, crippled by an assortment of breakdowns, were missing from those that again unloaded on Le Cateau. Cunningham and McGinnis were able to release all eight 25-lb bombs from 1000ft. Only they knew – all the crews agreed – these strategic bombing operations were not going to make any difference in halting the German attempt at a breakthrough. Among themselves their reactions were muted but resolved. *Who knew what the CO or flight commanders were thinking*, Jimmy Gray admitted in 1966. *They all said very little*.

Fifteen DH4s were assembled for an 08.10 and 08.15 23rd March raid. This time McGinnis would fly with Wait. Jimmy Gray reported back the previous evening. All he could accomplish was a sixty-minute test flight in DH4 B2093, one he had not quite completed before the bombers returned. But he would be available for the second raid of the day, a 13.45 departure consisting of eight machines. Together again, Gray and McGinnis were only away for a quarter of an hour. They, and two other DH4s returned prematurely. Complaints were unanimous – faulty air pressure the reason. Using one of the veteran DH4s the Gray/McGinnis twosome completed their duties together with Johnstone. Each of the two machines was a good ten minutes behind the main bombing force. They reached Le Cateau singly. In order to do so Johnstone needed to provide some of his own extra 'elbow grease' and energy.

Flying DH4 B2108, coded *F*, only an 11 March 1918 squadron replacement to the aircraft roster but already recognised as a 'lemon' – several were considered 'fit' for such a category, he had to hand pump constantly just to maintain close to proper pressure. On previous raids in the same *F*, he was faced with conrod trouble and a burst oil pipe.

In his memoirs Johnstone provided some background into why this came about: *On 21st March, the Germans attacked the British lines along our sector and aerial activity markedly increased. Around this date Flight Commander Tremlett's machine [DH4 B9460] was being overhauled and my plane [DH4 B2101] was to be transferred to him. Tremlett was a Frenchman who was raised in England, but still retained much of the gallic temperament. He always flew with his engine at full throttle with the result his motor was often in the machine shops.*

Once German infantry – in all some 64 divisions from the 17th, 2nd and 18th Armies under Generals Von Bülow, Von der Marwitz and Von Hutier – had crossed the various natural obstacles, the Somme for example, and in 27 Squadron's case the Bridge at Brie bringing the vanguard within 20 miles of Villers Bretonneux, soon to be subjected to artillery fire from the capable 15cm heavy field pieces which equipped almost half the German mobile batteries. 9th Wing ordered the aerodrome vacated. This came as no surprise. For the last few days, after the first alert was spread, the squadron began to ready for such an emergency. Pilots, observers and ground crew had to make do with fewer comforts, not the most

*2Lt Johnstone surveying the local scene at Villers Bretonneux from in front of one of the squadron's huts during March 1918. The folding chair appeared quite flimsy under his substantial weight. Standing beside him, hand in pocket, was Capt M.H. Turner, OC B Flt. :Dr B.I. Johnstone via SKT*

