

OVER FLANDERS FIELDS

AMONG THE PILOTS FLYING MORANE PARASOLS OVER FLANDERS WITH 1 SQUADRON DURING 1915 WAS SIDNEY PARKER WHOSE RECOLLECTIONS HAVE BEEN EDITED BY ANDREW THOMAS

THE DAY CAME WHEN I WAS posted overseas to France and went up to London to get my orders. There I met a bunch of pilots who were in London having a good time. After doing the rounds we took a suite of rooms in a hotel for the night as I had to catch the 0900 train to Newhaven. Once on the boat I met Harvey-Kelly (the first RFC pilot to land in France in 1914)¹ who was going back for his second tour and with him I proceeded from Boulogne to St-Omer where we spent the night at RFC Headquarters. Next morning the great General Trenchard asked me at breakfast if I thought I could fly a Morane and not having seen one of these machines I said, 'Yes I could.' At the Aircraft Park there were no Moranes; there was, however, a little single seater monoplane called a Grahame-White Morane, but this had no resemblance whatsoever to the Parasol Morane I was expected to fly in operations. One morning, after several days of waiting about, I was taken up in the Grahame-White by Lt McCall. I sat behind him on the same seat and put my arms around his body as one would ride a horse behind the rider. We took a spin around the aerodrome just before the workday was over. I could not take the machine up right away and had to wait until the next morning. The flight with Lt McCall was a familiarization flight but I had had sufficient flying experience to give me confidence in any machine.

Next morning, I took the Grahame-White off the ground and at 200ft the engine failed. I went down and landed safely in a field. After a few minutes mechanics came on the scene to pick up the pieces, but I was all in one piece. We started up the engine and it appeared to run alright so I took off, but at 200ft the engine failed again, and I landed in another field. Again, the mechanics came on the scene and again the engine appeared to run alright, so off I went again. At about 200ft the engine began to die away, and I thought it was not getting sufficient petrol, so I put my hand over the air intake to increase suction on petrol feed and turned the machine back over the aerodrome and landed safely. After two forced landings I was considered a competent Morane pilot and was passed out ready for posting to No.1 Squadron at Bailleul. The cause of the engine failure was interesting. It seems that the previous evening someone broke the little glass dome on top of the petrol tank covering a site feed arrangement and the pieces of broken glass fell into the tank. When the machine was tail-up in flying position, pieces of glass covered the tank outlet and prevented the engine from getting enough petrol. This



On a beautiful Sunday afternoon in June 1915, having spent six months in the infantry, 2Lt Sidney Parker, a Canadian infantryman, reported for duty at Farnborough on secondment to the Royal Flying Corps for training as a pilot. He is shown here in a photograph dating from that time. On successful completion of his training he was initially retained as an instructor before being posted to an operational unit in France. Over forty years later he was to record his memories of those pioneering days and these extracts of his time serving with 1 Squadron over the Western Front are from this manuscript.

situation could have been the death of me and no one would have been any the wiser had I crashed the aeroplane to pieces on one of the forced landings.

I spent some time hanging around in St-Omer in a house with some other pilots waiting for posting. We felt more like orphans than members of an active service force and I was excitedly glad when my posting to No.1 Squadron finally came through.

BAILLEUL

Bailleul was one of those old north of France towns and in the outskirts on the road to Ypres was an insane asylum for women, surrounded by a high brick wall. The fields on the other side of this wall were used as an aerodrome for No.1 Squadron and the aircraft were accommodated in sheds formed by fixing canvas to the top of the wall stretching it out and downwards so as to make a sloping roof to protect the aircraft from the rain and weather. The asylum had its advantages for there we took our weekly baths, in the largest bathroom I have ever seen. I was billeted in the town in a typical French house built high on the street, without a garden;

the bedroom assigned to me was very comfortable, but I found it difficult to get used to the feather mattress and large bag of feathers that served as a covering. I was surrounded by feathers, but it was cosy and warm. Near the aerodrome, mess tents for each of the three flights were erected and here we ate our not-too-well-cooked meals and washed them down with liberal portions of wine and champagne.

The aeroplanes at No.1 Squadron were high-wing Morane Monoplanes which were similar in appearance to the Fokker. I think the fact that the Morane and Fokker looked somewhat alike probably spared us many attacks that otherwise we would have suffered, but it did not assure us immunity by any means. The 80hp rotary Le Rhone engine with which the Morane was equipped was a remarkable piece of equipment for it would haul a pilot observer with wireless equipment, machine-gun, ammunition and Verey [sic] pistol, etc, to 10,000 feet altitude. It did this even after the centre section panel was removed to make room for a machine-gun that pointed upwards at an angle of 30° from the horizontal.

I was taken up by an observer who had flown over the line before, to get a look at the front and see where the line was located. This was done in the evening just before dusk and the general direction of the line was delineated by the flashes of gunfire on the ground. These flashes of light revealed the positions of batteries which were carefully marked on a map