

# SOME EXPERIENCES OF A 4 SQUADRON OBSERVER

## From the Logbook of 2Lt A.J. Capel

by Paul R. Hare

THE AIR WAR, as it was fought during 1914-15, when lone aeroplanes, often unarmed, carried out every kind of mission, including reconnaissance, photography, artillery observation, bombing and even combat, was so different from the aerial turmoil of just two years later that it is best seen from the viewpoint of someone who experienced it.

Born on 11 December 1894, Arthur John Capel was part of a comfortably well-off family whose home was at Chipstable Manor, Somerset. He was educated, like his father, who was also named Arthur, at Marlborough, and then at Trinity College, Cambridge and at the outbreak of the war, like thousands of his peers, he flocked to the colours, seeking a commission in his local regiment, Prince Albert's Somerset Light Infantry. He was Gazetted as a Second Lieutenant on 11 November 1914 and transferred to the RFC the following day.

14 November saw him on his way from London to the RFC's HQ at St-Omer, travelling by train and boat and making what he described as a *very bad crossing*. He was posted to 4 Squadron, then based at St-Omer, but was immediately assigned to the detachment which, in order to relieve the pressure on 6 Squadron, was temporarily based at Poperinghe, making the short road journey to the aerodrome there on the following day, together with Colonel Robert Brooke-Popham, then the RFC's Deputy Assistant Adjutant but who would be given command of No.3 Wing a few days later.

The detachment at Poperinghe soon re-joined the rest of the squadron at St-Omer, but the whole squadron would move three times during Capel's service with it. On 21 April 1915 it moved from St-Omer to the Town Ground at Bailleul, and from there to Vert Galant (which Capel always referred to by the name of the nearest village of any size, Beauquesne) on 20 July



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1915. However, its stay here was short lived and on 5 August it moved again, this time to Baizieux, to the north east of Amiens. On each occasion, Capel made the journey by road, on the last occasion taking the CO's car and going ahead to help put down tape to mark the site as a landing aid.

Capel's operational career began on 17 November when, in BE2b 635, piloted by Lt H.J.A. Roche (formerly of Royal Munster Fusiliers), three attempts were made to carry out a reconnaissance mission, each attempt being defeated by clouds. The mission was completed the following day in better weather, and Capel flew a number of times with Roche over the next few weeks, usually in BE2b 487.

Often Capel's duties appear to have been far from onerous, with his logging just four or five flights, most of little more than an hour's duration, in any period of seven days. However, when a 'push' was being planned, or an attack expected, the position changed, and he might fly as often as four times a day.

On 30 November 1914, Capel was graded, in the field, as a Qualified Observer, one of only a small number of personnel to be thus qualified, and so allowed to put up the half wing badge.

During his nine months as an observer with 4 Squadron he enjoyed two periods of leave, the first from 8 to 15 February 1915 Capel described with the brief comment *And very nice too* whilst the second, from 12 to 17 June, passed without comment.

Capel flew with at least 18 different pilots including the squadron's Commanding Officer (from 19 January 1915) Major C.A.H. Longcoft), Lt G.W. Mapplebeck, Lt A. St J.M. Warrand, and Lt R.P. Mills (Royal Fusiliers) but he flew most often with Lt W.G.S. Mitchell (Highland Light Infantry), the



*BE2b 487 in which Capel and Lt Roche got lost in fog on Christmas Day 1914 and had to land. Built by the RAF, it joined 4 Squadron on 13 October 1914 and was forced to land behind the lines during a bombing raid on Lille on 11 March 1915. It was taken to Germany for evaluation and is shown, on display, with its air scoop fitted the wrong way around. Its pilot, Lt Mapplebeck managed to evade capture and eventually returned to the squadron.*