

FOURTEEN MONTHS AT THE FRONT

An American Boy's Baptism of Fire

By WILLIAM J. ROBINSON

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The most graphic account of the great war that has yet been written comes from the pen of a twenty-two-year-old Boston boy, who has just returned from France, where as dragoon guardman, dispatch rider and motor-car driver he served fourteen months under the British flag. Out of thirty-one motorcycle dispatch riders he was one of four survivors.

There certainly was some terrible fighting, and if all we were supposed to do was to keep the Germans interested on our front we were very successful. Several things in this engagement deserve mention, and among the first is the famous charge of the London Irish.

They had not been heard of very much up to this time, but I don't think there are many who don't know of them now. They received orders to take certain trenches at a certain time, and on the face of it the thing looked impossible. The odds were all against them, and they knew it, but there was nothing for it but to obey their orders.

Nearly all the regiments have footballs with which they amuse themselves while in rest camp, and when they go into action these footballs are taken right along with them. When the whistle blew for the London Irish to charge they threw their footballs over the parapet and made their charge dribbling the footballs in front of them.

It was the most reckless, daredevil thing I ever saw, and it accomplished the impossible for them. As I said, by all rights the entire regiment should have been wiped out, as the odds were against them and they were running right into a death trap. The fact that they went at it in such a devil may care way as to joke and play with footballs in the very face of certain death broke the Germans' nerve, and they gave way with practically no resistance at all. Instead of the regiment being wiped out, as it should have been, the men took the trenches with losses of under 100. It was wonderful.

I have referred to the work of our aeroplanes in various parts of this story, but I think that noncombatants sometimes fail to realize what an important and effective part the Royal Flying Corps is playing in this war. Aeroplanes themselves are still pretty dangerous modes of locomotion, and when it comes to running other risks for the sake of gaining information or doing material damage it needs a man who does not know what the slightest quail of fear is and who is cool and ready for action in the case of emergency to make a good military aviator.

We have several aviators in our squadrons who have made big names for themselves. Among them are Captain Strange, D. S. O.; Lieutenant Hawker, V. C., D. S. O., M. C., and also Robert Lorraine, the popular ac-

ters which were of great importance to the Germans. In each case he employed the same methods. He flew over the point he was aiming for, stopped his engine, did a nose dive to within a few hundred feet of the place, dropped his bomb and got away safely. Each time he came back with the planes of his machine riddled with bullets. It takes an awful lot of nerve to do a thing like that.

Lieutenant Hawker was the terror of the "Avatiks" and taubes, and he has been known to fight three of these big machines single handed, destroying two and putting the other one to flight. Mr. Hawker longed for a chance to get mixed up with a Zeppelin, and on one occasion he nearly realized his wish.

It was a bright moonlight night last summer when everything was as quiet and peaceful as one could wish it to be. A scattering rifle fire could be heard from the trenches, but there was really nothing doing at all. About 9 or 10 o'clock we heard the hum of an engine away above us, and we thought, of course, it was an aeroplane. As it came nearer we realized that no aeroplane engine could make so much noise as that, and very soon word was passed around that there was a Zeppelin above us.

Very few of us had ever seen a Zeppelin, and we were more than straining our eyes to catch a glimpse of this one. Judging from the noise of the engine, it seemed as though the thing kept circling around over our encampment; but, try as hard as we could, we were unable to catch sight of it.

It had not been over us so very long before we heard a motor engine start up at the flying grounds, and word came around that Lieutenant Hawker was going up after it. Soon we saw an aeroplane shoot up over the tree tops and commence to circle around, gaining altitude every moment. It was quickly lost to view, though, and soon the engines of the Zeppelin could be heard no longer, so we concluded that it had made off. Lieutenant Hawker flew until daylight; but, much to his disappointment, he failed to find the Zeppelin.

Another aviator who became famous was Commander Sampson of the Royal Naval Air Service. At the beginning of the war he did so much damage with his aeroplane that a price was put upon his head by the German authorities. We heard that the sum of £1,000 was offered for Commander Sampson, dead or alive. This did not make any difference to him so far as his work was concerned, and he did just as much damage after the fact became known as he did before.

Nor was his activity confined to air work. He had an armored car that he used to go out in, and the exciting event of the day used to be to watch Commander Sampson's return. He seldom failed to bring back prisoners, and the damage he did to the Germans with the machine gun was fearful.

Last spring we had a new type of aeroplane come out, and it was a beauty. It became known as the "British Scout," and it was in this type of machine that Lieutenant Hawker defeated three big German battle planes. It has a very high powered, high speed engine and can pull right away from any other type of machine that flies. It carries one man only, who runs the machine and works the gun too, so he has his work cut out for him.

Before I ever saw a bomb dropping aeroplane in action I used to imagine that the bombs were dropped by hand.

cussion cap. As the bomb falls through the air this little propeller whirrs at a tremendous speed and makes the weirdest whistling noise one could imagine.

During the summer months a great many air raids were made on moonlight nights. The machines are practically invisible when they reach any great height, and they can get back home and make their landing without very great danger.

When aeroplanes are late coming in it is very interesting to watch the rockets being sent up to guide them to their landing grounds. These rockets are of different colors and are sent up at regular intervals until the machine is either safely back or is given up for lost. When the machine is sighted and is circling down toward the ground big fares are lighted, so as to enable the aviator to pick his spot for landing. The whole thing is scientifically arranged, and there are not many accidents in this part of the work.

One of the most daring parts of the air work is the dropping of spies behind the enemy's lines. I believe this goes on on both sides and in many cases is successful. The second time I was going on leave to England I had made arrangements to go with one of our fellows from the flying corps. We were to start on a Monday morning, and on the Friday before he told me that he was going to make his last flight before going to England on the following morning, Saturday.

He started out at 4 o'clock Saturday morning with a man and a crate of carrier pigeons in his machine, and he had orders to drop both behind the German lines and return to his headquarters as quickly as possible.

As I said, he started out at 4, and so far as I know he is not back yet. He may have been shot down, he may have had an accident and been forced to land behind the German lines, or any one of a hundred things may have happened. All we know is that he failed to return.

The anti-aircraft gun was practically unknown before the beginning of this war, and there is an enormous chance for improvement in this branch of aerial warfare. It is very interesting to watch an anti-aircraft gun in action, for one can see the gun fired and then see the shell burst a few seconds later.

So far as I know there is no accurate way of finding the range of an aeroplane in motion. The popular way of shooting at a flying machine seems to be that of firing shells in a large circle, using the machine as the center, and then closing in until the aeroplane is dead in line. There is the uncertainty, however, of knowing when to time the shell to burst, and, so far as I can see, it seems to be pretty much a matter of luck. I heard an average quoted on the number of hits to the number of shells fired, and the figures were one hit out of every 3,000 shells. I cannot vouch for the accuracy of this statement, but I do know that the number of hits is surprisingly small.

The falling of the shrapnel from these shells which burst in the air is rather dangerous, as I can show by narrating an incident which happened to us. We were out in a car near a village called Brandhook, and we noticed as we came along that a German aeroplane was coming directly toward us and that it appeared to be following the road. Our anti-aircraft guns were playing on it, and the shells seemed to be bursting mighty close to it.

Before it attained a point above us it turned at right angles and made off toward the German lines. We continued on our way, and a little farther on we came to where an empty auto was standing in the middle of the road. We stopped and looked around for signs of the occupants, but could find none. When we had been there about five minutes an officer and the driver of the car showed up and said they had been forced to take refuge in a dugout on account of the falling shrapnel.

Holes where pieces of shrapnel had entered the ground were to be seen all

around, and we tried to dig some of the pieces up. We dug down ten inches and had not reached them, so we gave it up as a bad job and went on to camp. This will show that these pieces of shrapnel are not to be sneered at as being harmless.

Another favorite stunt with aeroplanes is the dropping of hundreds of steel darts on bodies of moving troops or even on towns or the men in the trenches. These darts are four or five inches in length and have a sort of four pointed tail. They are extremely sharp and are heavier at the point than they are at the tail. This causes them to fall point down.

It has been proved that one of these darts dropped from a great height would, if it struck a man on horseback square on the top of the head, pass through the length of a man's body, through the saddle, through the horse's body and disappear into the ground. I have seen darts that have been dropped, but I have never been where they were falling, and I had no desire to be either.

There was a German who pulled the greatest little game of bluff on us. We were at a village called Rheninghelst when this fellow came over, and everybody remarked at how low he was flying. Our anti-aircraft guns were letting him have it from all directions, and suddenly his engine stopped and the machine began to fall. The guns let up, thinking that he was winged. He fell to within two or three hundred feet of the earth, when suddenly the machine righted itself, and he skimmed over us toward the German lines. He had the audacity to wave his hand at us as he went by.

It was one of the nerviest things I ever saw. He saved himself by the chance of running through our fire, for when he was so low he was out of range of the anti-aircraft guns.

Air raids do not always prove as

dangerous as they sound. About three or four days before I left the front we had a flock of twenty-three German aeroplanes over our camp, and they dropped bombs for nearly fifteen minutes. Everybody got under cover, and the total loss of life caused by the raid was one mule. If this were always the case the Zeppelins and Avatiks would have to go out of business.

There was very little of interest after Loos. Every day it was the same old routine—up to the firing line in the morning and back down again at night. Once in awhile we would let ourselves in for a young bombardment or would have rather a hot session in the trenches when we would happen to get there at the right time, but as far as any important happenings there was none.

I will never forget the last day I spent at the front. It seemed to me that the Germans must have put up a job on me, and just at the moment I was sure that I was coming out of it all right and that the war was over for me they were trying to get me.

I was ordered to report with my car to one of our new officers. I did so, and we left for the firing line. When we reached the divisional signal office we left the car and mounted our horses to finish the journey. We got to a place called Krustadt and stayed there about half an hour. I hitched my horse to the gate of an old deserted house and went over to one of our ammunition columns to see if I could get some hot tea. When I came back about fifteen minutes later I found my poor horse down with his front leg gone. A shell had exploded in the yard of this house and had blown his leg clear off. There was nothing for me to do but to shoot him and put the poor beast out of his misery.

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MONMOUTH, ORE.



The King Mounted the Beautiful Horse That Was Waiting For Him. tor. who is commonly known as the "actor-airman."

These three in particular have distinguished themselves on our little front. Captain Strange has a lame foot, but he has done some of the finest work of the war. In three days he destroyed three stations or big rail cen-



The Regiments Have Foot Balls With Which to Amuse Themselves While in Rest Camp.

I was much surprised to find that such is not the case. The bombs are hung on little clips under the body of the machine and are released by a foot pedal arrangement. It is a much quicker and less dangerous method.

The bombs dropped from the machines vary in size and weight, and they run all the way from ten pounds to one hundred pounds. Each bomb has a little propeller at the tail of it. This keeps the bomb nose down in falling and insures its landing on the per-

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