

A Pilot's Experiences of the March & April Retreats 1918

By Major W.F.J. Harvey – pilot, 22 Squadron

William Frederick James Harvey (8th January 1897 to 21st July 1972) was a British pilot, unusually credited with twenty-six victories. This is because he did not fly in a single-seater fighter squadron, but for 22 Squadron flying Bristol F.2b two seaters, albeit a formidable weapon in the right hands. He was the first recipient of the Distinguished Flying Cross & Bar and was also awarded the Military Cross.

Harvey served with the Signal Company of the Royal Engineers until he transferred to the Royal flying Corps in December 1916. After flight training and qualifying as a pilot, In December 1917 he was posted as a pilot to No. 22 Squadron. His first air victory, a downed Pfalz D.III, was recorded 16th March 1918, followed by an Albatros D.V on the 18th.

With three more kills in March Harvey established himself as an ace. In May 1918 he was promoted to Captain, and commanded 'B' Flight. In the last week of May, Harvey, flying with Lt. George Thomson as his observe/gunner, shot down or drove down two observation balloons and four German airplanes; on 20th June he downed three aeroplanes in a single day. Shortly after this success Thomson was replaced with Captain Dennis Waight, who remained Harvey's observer until the end of campaign. The crew between them scored 9 confirmed kills during the Battle of Amiens in August 1918.

Of his twenty-six victories (comprising 3 balloons, 12 and 2 shared destroyed, and 9 'out of control') credited to Harvey, eighteen were achieved utilising his front gun, a synchronised Vickers firing through the propeller.

After the war, Harvey served as an instructor with 33 TD Squadron, part of the Army of the Rhine (army of occupation). When the war ended, he retired to Kent, writing many aviation-related articles and the history of his old RAF Squadron, No. 22, entitled 'Pi in the Sky'.

Harvey married Mary Gurdon, sister of his squadron colleague in 1920, and during the Second World War he was awarded the MBE for his service.

Below is an article in full recounted by Harvey and published in Air Pictorial in April 1968, for whom he was a regular contributor.

'In narrating some incidents of the two retreats I have called on memory permanently impressed by the alarming events of those four weeks, controlled by letters, diary and logbook of the time. During these days of chaos, and before ground control, R/T or even inter-com, each flying officer conducted his individual war unseen except by the enemy for most of the time, and so it follows that my account must be personal.

My squadron, No. 22, stationed in the north, had the dubious honour of being in the forefront of the retreat of a million front-line men of the B.E.F. when, for some obscure Teutonic reason, shells from a railway gun at Meurchin 25 miles away began falling on us at Treizannes, and at St. Pol nearby, in the early hours of 21st March 1918, ninety minutes before zero hour in the south. The gunnery was good, the spread of bursts being less, perhaps, than 300 yards. The big shells penetrated the soft Flanders soil deeply before exploding, sending up tall, narrow columns of earth.

At very first light in the mist we flew away in whatever direction we happened to be pointing, and next day went to Vert Galant Farm on the Amiens/ Doullens road, still ignorant of the German breakthrough. Landing in the haze at an R.F.C. aerodrome on the Somme to ask direction, I was surprised to find it deserted, save for a brisk battle going on beyond its eastern perimeter.

That evening some of us stood on the roadside outside the hangers, absorbing the sour yet stimulating smell of disaster. There was a glare of fire reflected from the low cloud for miles along the eastern horizon, shot through by the flickerings of incessant gunfire; and a trail of French refugees with their possessions moved slowly towards Doullens. One old lady pushed two over-flowing wheelbarrows, leap-frogging one after another every hundred yards or so. A displaced squadron of A.W.s (Armstrong-Whitworth F.K.8s) drifted past at low altitude in the dusk looking for refuge on our already over-crowded landing ground. Wild rumour flew; the Fifth Army stood- or ran; German officers in British uniform drove through back areas spreading alarm and despondency; a farmhouse in the locality was a nest of spies.

The squadron transport arrived the next day, having been shot up on the road to the indignation of Herring, my elderly batman, who strongly objected to his officer's kit- on which he was sitting- being perforated by ignorant foreigners. Flying low that day beyond the River Somme, it was clear that the band of steel which had divided "their side" from "ours" for 3 ½ years no longer existed; "No-mans-land" had become "Any-mans" and we were back to the open warfare of the legendary days of August 1914. The squadron was fortunate in being freelance during those March days, free to search the upper air for enemy formations, or go low along the ruler-straight roads between Arras, Amiens and St. Quentin, where sometimes dense columns of German reinforcements were seen marching as though ignorant of menace from the air. And there was unreality about flying in freedom a few yards above one's countrymen making last stands against great odds.

All in it together

But for those in the air it was something to feel and see that we were all in it together., a change from the more remote assistance given normally to the earth-bound by art-obs. and contact patrol machines, and their protective fighters in the upper air. After all, most of us had transferred from ground units, and some pilots and most observers/rear gunners had spent months in the line. This was a combined operation and for once we could see it to be so.

From 24th to 28th March the vast battlefield was alive with ground-strafting aircraft, some German but mostly R.F.C., the enemy low-flying effort over our back areas tailing off after the first three days. Once, in passing, I caught a glimpse of a ramshackle R.E.8 doing such things as to make one's hair stand on end; and far into enemy territory and beyond any other friendly eye, saw a solitary S.E.5 diving repeatedly to ground level at some enemy target. Opposing aircraft sometimes passed one without possibility of engagement at such low level; and the extraordinary situation in the air is highlighted by a note in the Official History that on the most critical day of the 26th, the only fighting in the air between Arras and the Somme took place between a patrol of my squadron and a formation of Pfalz, although about 1.500 machines of both sides were operating. For several days Vert Galant was crowded with refugee aircraft, and what a target for any German with nerve! The air at nights throbbed with the comings and goings of rival bombers, the Germans now limiting most bombing activities to the dark, particularly around the Amiens area; the jolt of bursts disturbing much-needed sleep, already broken by Chinese labourers nearby, digging to a weird chant a "last ditch" by the light of flares.

Three days after the onset, No. 2 Aircraft Depot at Candas, which served the southern squadrons, packed its spare engines and most valuable stores and retreated to the Channel coast, throwing open the remainder to loot- a quartermaster's dream of heaven. I can still feel the bumping of the springs of my overloaded tender as it crossed the railway lines outside the depot. On the 26th British and French staff cars scurried past Vert Galant on their way to Doullens, where two frightened governments conferred, guarded by tanks; but better guarded by the tattered remains of the Fifth Army 16 miles away. My notes mention only two calls on us during those exciting and significant days, and none by the Intelligence people. One morning General Trenchard stopped his car in passing and administered a short pep talk to a group of us just returning from beating up the enemy. Our Wing Commander called once and dined (save the mark), and was thrown out of the window- as custom dictated.

Leaning Virgin

Logbook and diary entries become sketchy about this time, but noted having circled the half-ruined spire of Albert Cathedral to see whether the surmounting gilt Virgin and Child, which hung horizontal by one stay, had fallen; a fall which was said to herald the war's end. The Virgin was there, but so were the German machine-gunners who had taken the town during the night. Events thereafter became rather dreamlike, but a letter home on the 30th was quite concise, "Everyone is very cheerful especially in the R.F.C. as we know the Hun is whacked in the air."

Seven days after the first break the final issue of the war was at fine balance. The Germans had reached Villiers Bretonneaux, last village before Amiens, and were nearing the vital north/south railway. The gap between the British and French the armies was widening. Returning alone that afternoon at 100ft I saw two men. In front of a wood near that village was a half battery of our field guns, perfectly spaced and aligned. Circling, I saw that three guns were silent, men and horses lying nearby; and as I left, my last view was of two small figures busily engaged round fourth gun. A day or two later there was an absurd scene over this fateful village when, presumably under orders, at least forty of us- Bristols, S.E.s, Camels- were crowded between ground and cloud base at 800ft, bumped by passing shells and avoiding imminent collision. Villers Bretonneaux below was held, lost and retaken by several weak British battalions, aided by Canadians, Australians and a scraped-up body of clerks, cooks, leave men, stragglers, etc. With them were 500 men of the U.S. Railway Engineers who had been swept, unprepared, into the maelstrom, and who were the first Americans to be in action on the Western Front. All were ordered to hold on to the last. The fighting was too close for effective low-flying action, but at least we denied the immediate air to the enemy. Four Fokker Tripes lurked in the cloud to the east, snapping up anyone foolish enough to stray far from the eddying circus, in the very midst of which at one time appeared a Hannoveraner- very bold, or very lost, who can say? - but apparently bullet-proof like so many of its type. In two adjoining fields south-west of the village lay eight crashed aircraft, two French and six British. This insignificant place with the flowery name was to be the high-water mark of the greatest battle, and around it the tide ebbed and flowed for another three weeks.

The official establishment of the Royal Air Force on 1st April 1918 passed almost unnoticed, except for a rumour that we were to get a step up in rank and pay. Army photographers appeared that morning and took what they said were the first R.A.F. pictures. As we now know the March retreat was nearly over, and the R.F.C. (with its attached Naval squadrons) in France had made its swansong. Fighters and day bombers were returning to the upper air, and the following day a squadron patrol met ten red nosed Albatri and Tripes at 17,000 ft over the St. Quentin road. In the course of the fight a Bristol dissolved into a ball of flame; from its midst emerged two of the photographed group, their smouldering clothing glowing bright with the draught of their 120-m.p.h. long fall to earth.

Our eighteen days over the Somme ended on 9th April, when the German attack in the North started. Although officially part of the Third Army, the air has no boundaries and we had spent as least as much flying time over the Fifth. As the years slowly disclosed the true facts of its fighting retreat, it became still more a matter of pride to have been associated with that band of the undefeated.

Economical Richthofen

My flight of five flew north under a high leaden sky to our original home, doing an offensive patrol on the way. Acting as sub-leader, I was falling behind with a failing engine near Douai when I noticed a flock of about 30 enemy aircraft 1,000 ft. higher at my rear. About 500 yards behind and above me was a single machine which I was horrified to see was coloured red. With our rear gun chattering madly, I stuffed down my nose and sought refuge under our formation- an action for which I was severely reproved by my Flight Commander, later. On this, the German crown turned and went elsewhere, a fascinating (in retrospect) glimpse of von Richthofen's economical tactics.

In the north the German objective through a widening breach of only 30 miles this time was the northern end of the same strategic railway, and again they reached to less than 5 miles of it at Vieux Berquin, outside Hazebrouck, where a battalion of Grenadiers sacrificed itself as it stood in the way, only one man of the King's Company returning. I happened to be flying low over the area of this action and was severely shot up at about 50 yards during a duel with a nest of machine-guns, an uncertain contribution to the defence of Hazebrouck. Quite a different one was the loan of a squadron lorry to rescue the furniture of the mayor of that town, who presented the Mess with two ancient bottles of what must have been the original fire water, with which we used to ply unsuspecting guests.

Ground-attack occupied us from the 9th to the 12th, the only really fine day of the month, when it was combined with fighting at all levels from dawn to dusk. The squadron was reduced to 13 pilots and some did three jobs that day, with up to six hours in the air. I wrote home that night: "The air Hun is not such hot stuff up here as he was down south, and a good job too.... I could see England while we were being 'Archied' at 8,000ft.... the flashes of the guns, the villages, dumps and stores burning all along the front and the sunset all combined to make the most wonderful picture I've ever seen."

As in the south, the elaborate network of army land-line communications was soon destroyed, and with the closing down of the weather after the 12th there came fervent requests from High Command for information about points of enemy advance. The squadron pilots who undertook the task (notably F.G.C. Weare and J.E. Gurdon) carried it out by flying low east until meeting A.A. small arms fire, noting that point, then retiring west and again flying east in a different direction. And so on. The nature of these proceedings could be judged not only by the peppered condition of the aircraft on return, but also by diary notes between the 13th and the 22nd of the weather conditions in which they were performed: "Low cloud, mist"; "Mist, rain, snow under low cloud"; "Wind, hail, snow". This form of low reconnaissance is referred to by the official historian as "novel" when describing its use six months later.

There was little opportunity for ground-strafting after the hectic day of the 12th and the German advance was slowed and finally held by the British soldier's traditional bloody-minded tenacity, aided by the close nature of the River Lys country.

Waved to an Albatros

A letter of the 14th which said "the mist was only 100ft. up so I lost the way back for an hour" referred to an unusual encounter. When the mist was nearing the tree tops my guardian angel led

me safely to 3,200ft. and the dazzling sun. Here I met an Albatros, and for a minute or two we flew near one another, comrades in distress; then, with a wave of the hand for luck, turned away. Thirty-five minutes later, I went down a small rift in the cloud until seeing a plough shed ahead where I landed without more ado, being kindly entertained by thee few surviving officers of a Labour Battalion from the Somme, all more than old enough to be my father. I still wonder about the Albatros. A final summary of those two weeks over Flanders ran, "It has been very dirty weather sometimes lately for flying, clouds and mist at 100ft. up sometimes and my poor old machine is all patches where nasty Huns have been firing from the ground."

We were all amateurs, but no amateurs were more skilled, and be the end of the month we were more at home in our medium- but far less graceful- than any seagull. Particularly at low level, machines were yanked about in a manner which would have had the C.F.S. reaching for its smelling salts; and an inexplicable feature of my squadron's activities during this extraordinary month was the absence of the usual flying accidents, although the strain of long hours in the air, increased, perhaps, by a monotonous diet often of bully beef sandwiches with tea (on one day-nothing, not even water), produced some curious physical and mental aberrations. People began to take off in a sloppy fashion, and on return were apt almost to drop rather than land their machines on the ground. And I shall never know whether the S.L. airship I encountered floating mysteriously in the late dusk over Lille, with its two aggressive top-platform machine-guns, was halucinatory or not. At least, it won for me the line-shooting medal of the month.

When I think of that month, I remember well the wild March cloudscares; the sudden, unpredictable encounters among the cumulus; the columns of small figures scattering off the Roman roads, and their overturned transport; the meandering waters of the Ancre and Somme- strangely peaceful looking amidst furious war. Of groping through the dank, clinging mists of April, and the holes which appeared by magic in wings and fuselage from the sullen Flanders mud below. The down curving half-turn of a following Bristol, shot down at 200ft. by our own infantry; the spire of Merville village church collapsing in ruin as one flew alongside. And of how impressed we were by a neighbour squadron who, with nil visibility and the enemy at the gate, piled and burnt all their aircraft. That, indeed, brought the war home to one.

Above all, I remember the Lone S.E. and the last two gunners faithfully serving the last weapon. Theirs and their like was the final victory.

W.F.J. Harvey

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