

# Dawn Patrol

I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and peered out through the sodden flap of my tent. Mist enveloped the airfield, imbuing the two lines of Sopwith Camels with a ghost-like quality. The riggers looked like phantoms as they tinkered with the Bentley BR1 rotary engines, armed the twin Vickers machine guns, patched bullet holes in the fuselage, or adjusted the bi-plane's rigging. I was glad to see that the three machines of my flight were the focus of much attention since today, I was to lead the now regular dawn patrol.

The Boche had recently increased the number of photo-reconnaissance flights by Rumplers and the newer Albatross C.X. Still, these two-seaters were no match for our Camels, and the patrols gave us the chance to shoot them down before they could provide Hun planners with information about Allied ground preparations.

I pulled on my flying boots and greeted Algy and Carruthers, who had emerged from their tents simultaneously. Sure enough, a message chalked onto the blackboard outside the mess told us that our flight was to scout the area to the South East, between Arras and Cambrai.

As we jogged out to our waiting machines, we gulped down cups of tepid tea from tin mugs and grabbed biscuits to fend off hunger until we returned for breakfast. In the three weeks since the new machines had been delivered to us early in July, the Camels had become a firm favourite with most of us in No. 70 Squadron. They weren't as fast or as robust as No 56 Squadron's S.E.5s, but they were inherently more agile and could turn on a sixpence once we had learned to deal with their alarming ability to flick into a spin at low altitude.

The fitters were waiting for us, planes fueled and armed, ready for the patrol. I climbed into the cockpit, checked the controls, pushed the throttle open, switched on the magneto, and gave Bertie, my rigger, the thumbs-up to swing the twin-bladed propellor. The engine coughed loudly, belched out a cloud of oily smoke, and started the first time. I looked left and right, saw that both my two pals' machines had also fired up, and glanced at the windsock in the field corner to check the wind direction.

Dawn was breaking as I waved Bertie away, opened the throttle wide, and led the three aircraft in vee formation bouncing across the field into the headwind. Once airborne, we circled to gain height, and when the altimeters indicated ten thousand feet, headed off towards Cambrai, crossing the front line near Arras.

Even from this height, no man's land looked like the stuff of nightmares: an impression heightened when the first puffs of Archie began to appear below us from behind the boche front lines. I scanned the sky above for single-seater Hun scouts, but saw nothing untoward. They often provided cover for the slower-moving aircraft on observation duty. But when my eyes ranged over the battleground below, I saw a flash of movement: a blue-painted Rumpier C.IV seven thousand feet below, sporting the black cross and heading for the Allied lines.

Feeling the familiar cocktail of excitement and fear that inevitably preceded aerial combat, I waggled the Camel's wings to get my colleagues' attention, leaned out of the cockpit, and signalled Carruthers to dive down and engage the marauding Hun. I led Algy in a fast climb, suspecting that sooner or later, cover would appear in the form of tripehounds or Pfalz.

Carruthers gathered speed in a screaming dive and closed quickly on the Hun, keeping the morning sun directly behind him and giving the rear-facing gunner no chance to spot him until it was too late. A line of tracer streamed from his machine guns, and smoke started to billow from the Rumpler's fuselage. Flames appeared, and the stricken plane crashed into the mud and wire of no man's land. I saw no sign of movement from the pilot or rear gunner.

Waving Algy to follow me, I pushed the joystick well forward, and dived after Carruthers, who was now streaking towards our front line and the safety of home. As I did so, the sun flashed off the shiny red-painted surface of a flight of Fokker Triplanes, diving rapidly to catch Carruthers unaware. Before we could come to our pal's aid, we saw that the Hun's bullets had struck his plane. In a flash, we were upon them, and I had a Fokker in my sights. I fired off a quick burst of tracer, but he pulled into a steep, climbing turn and disappeared from my view. I tried everything I knew to get on his tail, turning this way and that, climbing in tight half-loops and rolling out at the top - each of us trying to get the other into our sights for long enough to get a long burst.

As our dogfight drifted towards the front line, Allied anti-aircraft gunners tried to help out by firing whenever they got a clear shot at the tri-plane. Suddenly both Algy's and my opponent broke off the action and set off homeward in a shallow dive, joined by the bounder who had shot Carruthers down. I waved to Algy to let them go, and headed homewards to look for our stricken pal.

A few miles northwest of Arras, we saw the damaged Camel, nose downward in a field of cows, smoke still curling up from the fuselage. Carruthers was doing his best to put the fire out and waved to us as we circled his position. We waved back and tried to make him understand that we would return for him later that morning before we headed back to the airfield.

On our return, after breakfast in the officers' mess, I wrote up my pilot's log and debriefed the squadron's intelligence officer, who credited Carruthers with a kill. The downed Rumpler had already been verified from the front by field telegraph.

By this time, the weather had closed in, and it had started to rain. It looked as if there would be no more flying that day, so I persuaded the CO to let us borrow the Squadron's Staff car, picked up Algy, and headed off to rescue Carruthers. A truck would follow later to recover the damaged Camel.

Terry Cooke-Davies