

‘Casualties Had Been Somewhat Heavy’: Officer Fatalities in the Royal Flying Corps over the Somme, 15 September 1916

An earlier version of this article was published in Cross & Cockade International Vol. 46, No. 1 (2015). It examines the fates of RFC officers killed on the first day of the Battle of Flers-Courcelette, when squadrons made their biggest effort in the war so far.

The Great War was the first three-dimensional war and Air Power played a vital role in the allies’ final victory in 1918. If the firepower of the artillery was the key to victory, the role of the RFC/RAF in maximizing the artillery’s potential should not be underestimated. The basic air strategy that was to bring ultimate success was already in place by the battle of the Somme. Essentially, the doctrine put forward by Major-General Hugh Trenchard, commander of the RFC’s military wing, focused on a permanent air offensive that ‘was aimed at securing and maintaining the [RFC/RAF’s] ability to operate at will across the battlefield while denying the German Air Service the same advantage’.¹ The strategy involved RFC squadrons, some under Corps and some under Army control, undertaking five major tasks: long-range reconnaissance; bombing; assisting the artillery (finding high-value targets and counter-battery work); contact work; and interdiction.

The last task was particularly crucial, as it involved an aggressive approach that forced German aircraft to fight far behind their own lines, thus preventing them from spotting for their artillery and from gaining intelligence on British preparations and activities. Keeping enemy machines away from the front line and harassing their reconnaissance balloons enabled the aircraft acting as the ‘eyes’ of the artillery to do their work unhindered, as well as allowing daily photographing to map the current positions of both friendly and hostile units on the ground. Moreover, squadrons involved in contact patrols—mainly low-level strafing and spying on front-line action, dropping messages back at headquarters when necessary—remained relatively unmolested from the air during ground operations.

The logistical and technical means to fulfil this doctrine consistently in 1916, however, were lacking.² Nevertheless, the RFC’s offensive strategy during the Somme campaign remained fixed on the assumption of local air superiority, if not domination. The air war had been a topsy-turvy affair since 1914, with first one side then the other gaining a temporary ascendancy. Following months of German domination, the superiority of the RFC on the Somme began to emerge a few months before 1 July, with the introduction of several new aeroplanes, the F.E 2b, the D.H.2 and, later, the Sopwith 1½ Strutter, which were a match for the German Fokker Eindecker.³ On 1 July the RFC also had superiority in numbers, as enemy squadrons were concentrated around the Verdun battlefield. By the time that Fourth Army attacked the Germans’ original third defensive line on 15 September, however, many enemy squadrons had been transferred to the Somme region. According to E.R. Hooton’s calculations, the Germans on the Somme had one hundred planes on 24 June; 150 on 10 July;

¹ Peter Dye, ‘The Genesis of Modern Warfare: The Contribution of Aviation Logistics’, in Gary Sheffield and Peter Gray (eds), *Changing War: The British Army, the Hundred Days Campaign and the Birth of the Royal Air Force, 1918* (London 2013), p. 173.

² Christopher Luck, ‘The Smuts Report: Interpreting and Misinterpreting the Promise of Air Power’, in Sheffield and Gray, *Changing War*, p. 152.

³ H.A. Jones, *The War in the Air*, vol. 2 (1928, Uckfield n.d.), pp.160-62; Michael Spick, ‘The Fokker Menace’, in Robert Cowley (ed), *The Great War: Perspectives on the First World War* (London 2004), p. 261. The Sopwith Strutter was the first British aeroplane to have a forward-firing synchronized machine gun like the German Fokker. J.M. Bruce, ‘Historic Military Aircraft: the Sopwith 1½ Strutter’, *Flight Magazine*, 5 October 1956, p. 586.

350 on 2 September, and 490 on 1 October.⁴ As one of the purposes of the Somme campaign was to relieve pressure on the French at Verdun, this forced switch of air resources by the Germans might be termed a victory of sorts. But the battle of Flers-Courcelette was to mark the beginning of yet another swing of the pendulum. As early as 29 September Sir Douglas Haig was warning the Army Council that unless there was a great increase in the number and 'efficiency' of aircraft in France, air supremacy might be lost by the end of the year.⁵

Nevertheless, from 1 July until mid-September Trenchard's strategy was generally effective, as intelligence gained both from enemy prisoners and, later, from senior German sources confirmed.⁶ Very few enemy incursions over the British lines were reported in July and August.⁷ The failure of the German Air Service to engage British squadrons over the front line certainly appeared to have shaken the morale of many German troops.⁸ But the German High Command, particularly once Field-Marshal von Hindenburg had replaced General von Falkenhayn as Chief of Staff on 29 August, was about to hit back.

Friday, 15 September 1916 is, of course, primarily remembered for the introduction of a new weapon of war onto the battlefield, the tank. Of less long-term consequence, but nevertheless in the context of the Western front at the mid-point of the war of more immediate significance, was the appearance in the skies of a new enemy aeroplane, which 'as fighters ... outclassed every contemporary British aeroplane opposed to them'.⁹ This was the Albatros and on 15 September only one, a prototype D.I, was in the air, piloted by the brilliant leader and war ace Oswald Boelcke.¹⁰ Following the death of Max Immelmann, shot down on 18 June, Boelcke had become the most celebrated German pilot currently flying. He had been chosen in August to command *Jagdstaffel 2*, a specialist pursuit squadron of twelve to fourteen fighters comprising carefully chosen experienced pilots who were to hunt in large packs and take the attack to the RFC. Boelcke's squadron was to fly the new Albatros D.II, but the first machines did not arrive until 16 September. It was ironic, therefore, that the RFC was to suffer more fatalities (nine, including one NCO) on 15 September than had occurred in the whole of August. This is partly explained by the intensity of the RFC's effort that day. On 15 September 'the officers of the Royal Flying Corps flew more hours and had more fighting than on any day since the war began'.¹¹

The eight RFC officers who were killed or died of wounds as a result of action on 15 September comprised three pilots and five observers. The pilots were Capt. Guy Lindsay Cruikshank, No. 70 Squadron; Capt. Alfred Spencer Mason Summers, No. 60 Squadron; and 2nd Lt Frank Edwin Hollingsworth, No. 11 Squadron. The observers were 2nd Lt Carl John Beatty, Capt. Ferdinand Gonçalves (Jack) Glenday, Lt Rudolph Arthur Preston, Lt William Bell Saint (all No. 70 Squadron) and 2nd Lt Henry Maurice Watkins Wells, No. 11 Squadron.

⁴ Peter Hart, *Somme Success: The Royal Flying Corps and the Battle of the Somme, 1916* (Barnsley 2002), p. 119; E.R. Hooton, *War Over the Trenches: Air Power and the Western Front Campaigns 1916-1918* (Hersham 2010), p. 101.

⁵ Jones, *War in the Air*, p. 297.

⁶ Christopher Duffy, *Through German Eyes: The British and the Somme 1916* (London 2006), pp. 318-19.

⁷ J.Y., 'No. 27 Squadron: A Short History of a Famous Bomber Unit', *Flight Magazine*, 21 January 1955, p. 94.

⁸ William Langford, *Somme Intelligence: Fourth Army HQ 1916* (Barnsley 2013), pp. 109, 115-16, 131; Gerhard Hirschfeld, Gerd Krumeich, Irena Renz, *Scorched Earth: The Germans on the Somme 1914-1918* (Barnsley 2009), p. 90; William Philpott, *Bloody Victory: The Sacrifice on the Somme and the Making of the Twentieth Century* (London 2009), p. 270.

⁹ Jones, *War in the Air*, p. 282.

¹⁰ Johannes Werner, *Knight of Germany: Oswald Boelcke, German Ace* (1933, reprint Newbury 2009), p. 236.

¹¹ Jones, *War in the Air*, p. 272.

As this list attests, the majority of fatalities occurred in one squadron, No. 70, the result of their having met Boelcke's new formation in combat.

According to Cecil Lewis, who flew with No. 3 Squadron on 15 September over Flers on contact patrol, 'The R.F.C. attracted the adventurous spirits, the devil-may-care young bloods of England, the fast livers, the furious drivers—men who were not happy unless they were taking risks'. They were thought 'very brave, very daring, very gallant: we belonged to a world apart'.¹² The reckless driving, possibly by Cruikshank, that nearly ended the future VC winner James McCudden's life prematurely in France while en route to their aerodrome in August 1914, supports this view.¹³ But wartime RFC applicants varied in character and motivation and not all were ebullient extroverts. Willie Saint, for instance, was a rather serious young man and strongly religious, who often retired early from the mess to sleep. He had enlisted in the 21st (4th Public Schools) Battalion Royal Fusiliers in September 1914, being posted to the 1/10th Royal Scots on receiving his commission in May 1915. After months kicking his heels guarding the Scottish coastline, frustration at not being sent overseas encouraged him to apply to the RFC. There were to be eighteen months between Saint's enlistment and his arrival in France.¹⁴

Saint's desire to be in action rather than languishing on the periphery of events was a common response among his peers. Carl Beatty was American-born but in 1914 was working in the small town of Quesnel, British Columbia as an engineer. He lived a full life, being secretary of the Hockey Association, member of the Gun Club and of the Conservative Association and a useful billiards player. But he left the town to join up in November 1914.¹⁵ Rudolph Preston returned from Australia after four years on a farm. He had previously hoped for a career in the Royal Navy, but his poor eyesight had resulted in his rejection.¹⁶ In previous eras the cavalry possessed the same cachet as flying was to achieve, but by the end of 1914 it was clear that the horseman's role on the modern battlefield was to be severely truncated. Alfred Summers had been a Regular cavalry officer before the war and went to France with the 19th Hussars as part of the original BEF. He was mentioned in despatches in May 1915, but was attached to the RFC in December. He too wished for greater involvement in the war.¹⁷

Although the group is very small, the social backgrounds of the airmen conformed to the wider British army officer corps' in 1916. Only two, Beatty and Hollingsworth, were not from the socio-economic classes—primarily landed, but also increasingly professional, mercantile and manufacturing—from which the pre-war Army had drawn most of its officers.¹⁸ Beatty's father was a carpenter; Hollingsworth's father was a foreman for a stationery company (and Hollingsworth himself was, in 1911, an assistant in a furniture store). Beatty and Hollingsworth reflected the gradual opening up of the officer corps at a time when the army was expanding so rapidly. The remainder came from families enjoying

¹² Lewis, *Sagittarius Rising*, p. 115.

¹³ James T. B. McCudden, *Flying Fury: Five Years in the Royal Flying Corps* (Folkestone 1973), pp. 24-25. The car just missed being crushed by a train in a race to a level crossing.

¹⁴ [Henry B.S. Saint], *William Bell Saint 1893-1916: A Memoir by his Father, and Letters* (n.p. 1924), pp. 75, 130-33.

¹⁵ *Cariboo Observer*, 14 November 1914; 54th Canadian Infantry Battalion 1915-1919, www.54thbattalioncf.ca/WARPAGES/cenotaph.htm [accessed 18 October 2013].

¹⁶ The National Archives (hereafter TNA) PRO WO339/48962.

¹⁷ TNA PRO WO 339/7240; *Flight Magazine*, 4 January 1917, p. 14; A.L. Scott, *Sixty Squadron RAF: A History of the Squadron from its Formation* (London n.d.), p. 15.

¹⁸ Keith Simpson, 'The Officers', in *A Nation in Arms: The British Army in the First World War*, eds. Ian F.W. Beckett and Keith Simpson (1985: Barnsley 2004, pp. 65-67; Edward M. Spiers, *The Late Victorian Army 1868-1902* (Manchester 1992), p. 94; G.D. Sheffield, *Leadership in the Trenches: Officer-Man Relations, Morale and Discipline in the British Army in the Era of the First World War* (Houndmills 2000), p. 2.

comfortable middle-class lives, although Glenday, his father having died when he was three, had been brought up by his clergyman uncle. All had attended public schools (Wells at Harrow and Summers at Eton) and four had gone up to university. There they had imbibed the gentlemanly ethos on which the British officer class was built.¹⁹ Only one, Saint, whose father was a canned goods merchant, had belonged to an Officers' Training Corps (at Mill Hill School) before the war and only two, Preston and Cruikshank, belonged to families that had links to the military.²⁰

Guy Cruikshank was an anomaly, for there must have been few RFC officers flying in France whose fathers were in gaol. James Cruikshank was a notorious gambler, speculator and swindler. A former officer in the militia who had to resign when he went bankrupt, in 1897 he had been gaoled for eight years for defrauding numerous people, including Winston Churchill's mother and aunt. In 1915 he was again gaoled for fraud and was still in prison when Guy Cruikshank was shot down. James survived all his three sons. One was killed on the Aisne in September 1914 serving with the Wiltshire Regiment; another survived the war but died of typhoid while serving with the RAF in Iraq in 1925. His only daughter was to be killed driving an ambulance during the Blitz in London on 15 September 1940, ironically the twenty-fourth anniversary of Guy's death (and subsequently "Battle of Britain").²¹

Cecil Lewis had joined the RFC straight from school and was shocked by the realities of ground warfare he saw when visiting an artillery unit near Fricourt and Mametz after the early July battles.²² But for many of his fellow RFC officers these were conditions already experienced at first hand. Four of the six officers killed on 15 September who had joined the RFC after the war began had taken part in ground warfare before being attached to the RFC. Beatty had been in France with the 2nd Canadian Divisional Supply Column since September 1915. His commission and posting to the RFC came in April 1916.²³ Two officers, both of whom received the Military Cross, had participated in major battles. Jack Glenday, of the 12th Northumberland Fusiliers, was badly wounded in the face at the battle of Loos in September 1915 while winning his medal. He had been offered a commission in the RFC some months earlier but, having been with his battalion since its formation in 1914, felt it his duty to remain with his company when it left for the Front for the first time just a few days before Loos. Only once he had recovered from his injury, which left him partly deaf, did Glenday join the RFC, in January 1916.²⁴ Preston, serving with the 8th Lincolnshire Regiment, received his Military Cross on 1 July 1916 for repelling 'strong hostile bomb attacks' and for capturing 'some twenty to thirty prisoners' at Fricourt. His award was gazetted a week after his death.²⁵

Cecil Lewis was only eighteen when he fought over the Somme, supporting the common view that the "Knights of the Air" were very young men. The average age of the RFC officers killed on 15 September was, however, twenty-five, a reflection of the RFC's policy of recruiting from the field army rather than through direct enlistment for its great expansion in 1915 and 1916. As already shown, this often meant that RFC officers had considerable experience of warfare, but not necessarily of air warfare. Beatty, for instance, had joined No. 70 Squadron only six days before he was shot down and Hollingsworth, one of only two married men in the group, was attached to No. 11 Squadron from the 9th Argyle and

¹⁹ Spiers, *Late Victorian Army 1868-1902*, p. 103.

²⁰ Preston's uncle had been a Captain in the Rifle Brigade. The Prestons of Ireland, www.suddenlink.net/pages/fpreston/presirel.htm [accessed 31 October 2013]. Saint did not enjoy the annual OTC camps. Saint, *Saint*, p. 73.

²¹ Michael Durey, 'Surviving Family Shame: Three Cruikshank Brothers and the Great War', on this website.

²² Lewis, *Sagittarius Rising*, pp. 11, 108-10.

²³ TNA PRO WO 339/61645.

²⁴ TNA PRO WO 339/20208; *Flight Magazine*, 4 January 1957, p. 26.

²⁵ *London Gazette*, 22 September 1916.

Sutherland Highlanders, a draft-supplying unit, in August 1916.²⁶ Preston, too, only joined No. 70 Squadron in early August.²⁷

The short time spent in the RFC by Beatty, Preston and Hollingsworth appears to support Lewis' comment that 'Pilots, in 1916, were lasting, on average, for three weeks'.²⁸ This is an exaggeration, pardonable, perhaps, because of the lapse of time before he wrote his memoirs and because the rapid replacing of those who failed to return rushed through his mind in a compressed blur (he described his experiences as 'a series of incidents and impressions, all that my mind remembers of the shape of those six years', some of which may be 'inaccurate in detail').²⁹ Cruikshank, apart from a few months back in Blighty from the end of 1915, was in the war zone from the very beginning.³⁰ Wells was attached to the RFC for more than one year before his death, while both Glenday and Saint were attached in January 1916. Both began their active service in the RFC in France in May, at the same time as Summers.³¹ The four months of aerial combat these three survived before being killed may not appear to be long, but for half of this period they were involved in the intense fighting over the Somme. In 1918 their length of service in combat roles would have seen them as suitable candidates for withdrawal from the front line.³²

On the afternoon of 14 September Trenchard visited the aerodrome at Fienvillers, south-west of Doullens, where Nos. 19, 27 and 70 Squadrons of 9th Wing were based. He spoke to all the flyers assembled in a hanger. There are two accounts of what Trenchard, an inarticulate man, said.³³ William Chance, of No. 27 Squadron (Morane bombers), remembered him saying 'that a big "push" would shortly take place and that he relied on us to do everything we could to keep the German planes well behind their lines and to go and bomb trains bringing reinforcements and ammunition to their forward positions'.³⁴ In the second account, published in 1917, No. 70 Squadron observer Alan Bott recalled that Trenchard mentioned that the new weapon, the tank, would be used next day and that the role of the RFC would be to ensure that:

No German machines could be allowed near enough to the lines for any observation. We must shoot all Hun machines at sight and give them no break. Our bombers should make life a burden on the enemy lines of communication. Infantry and transport were to be worried, whenever possible, by machine-gun fire from above. Machines would be detailed for contact work with our infantry.

²⁶ *Flight Magazine*, 14 September 1916, p. 783. Hollingsworth only received his Aviator's Certificate on 14 August 1916.

²⁷ TNA PRO AIR 76/411.

²⁸ Lewis, *Sagittarius Rising*, pp. 128-29.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

³⁰ McCudden, *Flying Fury*, pp. 24-25; Walter Raleigh, *The War in the Air*, Vol. 1 (Oxford 1922), p. 290.

³¹ TNA PRO WO 339/20208; TNA PRO WO 374/60075; TNA PRO WO 339/7240.

³² For planning purposes (in 1918), 'the RFC assessed the productive life of a pilot on the Western Front as about three months (depending on role)'. Dye, 'Genesis of Modern Warfare', p. 180. This was not an actuarial calculation on life chances, but an opinion on the length of time a combat pilot would be useful.

³³ Trenchard got on very well with Sir Douglas Haig, another inarticulate man. One of Haig's aides noted 'that they seemed to read one another's thoughts and expressed themselves with gestures and grunts rather than with words'. Hooton, *War Over the Trenches*, p. 92.

³⁴ Sir William Hugh Stobart Chance, C.B.E., http://www.worcestershireregiment.com/wr.php?main+inc/whs_chance_5 [accessed 28 October 2013]. Chance's memory was that the meeting took place a few days before the 15th.

Reconnaissance jobs were to be completed at all costs, if there seemed the slightest chance of bringing back useful information.³⁵

The immediate objectives of the attack, said Trenchard, were not far away, but seizing them would be enormously valuable.

Although it was a guest night, that evening the atmosphere in No. 70 Squadron's mess was sombre and restrained: 'The usual shop chatter prevailed', but 'understanding silences were sandwiched between yarns'.³⁶ One Strutter, piloted by 2/Lt John Gale, had that day failed to return from a reconnaissance mission (it had broken up in the air under attack from Boelcke), while another had returned with a mortally wounded observer.³⁷ An officer with a wry sense of humour set up the gramophone to play *Vesti la Giubba*, the clown's sad song from the opera Pagliacci that focuses on the need for "the show to go on". The guests did not stay long and the flight crews soon retired to sleep. As he wandered off, Guy Cruikshank called out: 'Night, everybody. Meet you at Mossy-Face in the morning'.³⁸

Cruikshank was by September 1916 a very experienced and popular pilot. One aircraft mechanic described him as 'a fine flyer and very clever airman and most popular in the 70th Squadron'.³⁹ Alan Bott regarded him as 'one of the greatest pilots of the war'.⁴⁰ Cruikshank had played a vital reconnaissance role with No. 3 Squadron during the long retreat from Mons. His Flight was attached to II Corps and, according to General Horace Smith-Dorrien, he was one of five pilots who brought back 'quite invaluable, and what always proves to be true, information'.⁴¹ Cruikshank spent more than a year with No. 3 Squadron, during which time he was awarded the Military Cross in the King's Birthday Honours list and a DSO for being the first pilot successfully to land an agent behind enemy lines, a special mission described as 'involving very great risk'.⁴² This was a most unusual operation; much of Cruikshank's time in the air was spent on artillery reconnaissance, the main preoccupation of the RFC in 1915, or on bombing raids.

Cruikshank managed to survive the period of German air superiority in 1915 and at the end of the year he was sent back to England both for a well-earned rest and to assist in the programme to develop an aeroplane that would counter the enemy's air superiority. For three months he was officer in charge of the Experimental Flight programme at the Central Flying School at Upavon. In March 1916 he joined the newly formed No. 70 Squadron and returned to combat flying when A Flight was sent to France at the end of May. On 7 July, during a railway reconnaissance flight over Cambrai, Cruikshank was involved in a fight with three Fokkers. Although he forced down one of the enemy planes, his machine was badly damaged and his observer, eighteen year-old Andrew Cruickshank (no relation), mortally wounded. In a desperate, risky but vain attempt to save his colleague, Cruikshank flew his ailing plane directly to a hospital in St Omer.⁴³

On 15 September Cruikshank led No. 70 Squadron's first offensive patrol of the day, taking off at 5am. They crossed the trenches south of Bapaume and at 12,000 feet were fired upon

³⁵ "Contact" [Alan Bott], *An Airman's Outings* (Edinburgh 1917), pp. 33-34.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

³⁷ <http://www.militarian.com/threads/sapper-jeffrey-mcvicar-strathy-royal-canadian-flying-corps.8511/> [accessed 30 October 2013]; Bott, *Airman's Outings*, pp. 52-53; *Flight Magazine*, 28 September 1916, p. 840; Werner, *Boelcke*, p. 239.

³⁸ Bott, *Airman's Outings*, p. 35. Mossy-Face was a (possibly vulgar) nickname for Havrincourt Wood.

³⁹ Statement by Aircraft Mechanic G. Brown, 5 October 1916, TNA PRO WO 339/8950.

⁴⁰ Bott, *Airman's Outings*, p. 51.

⁴¹ Quoted in *Flight Magazine*, 17 March 1949, pp. 314-15.

⁴² *London Gazette*, 22 June 1915, 2 November 1915.

⁴³ *The Times*, 11 February 1919; Saint, *Saint*, p. 157; Trevor Henshaw, *The Sky Their Battlefield 2nd* ed. (London 2014), p. 43.

by “Archie”, which Cruikshank believed ‘should never be dodged’. Bott, who was with the patrol, later stated that Cruikshank’s ambition was to fight Boelcke, so it was no surprise that Cruikshank flew to Havrincourt Wood, near where the German ace was stationed. There indeed they spied eight enemy machines, ‘ranged one above the other, like rungs of a Venetian blind’, three thousand feet below. Cruikshank immediately dived on them, taking two of the flight with him. The remainder, suddenly attacked from above, found themselves in a separate fight. Thus Bott never saw Cruikshank’s fate.⁴⁴

The experienced aviator had got his wish, but Boelcke was to be the victor. According to the Official History, Cruikshank saw a German fighter below and dived to attack. His antagonist was, unknown to him, Boelcke who, ‘after a brilliant duel, shot down the British aeroplane, to fall to pieces in Havrincourt Wood’.⁴⁵ This is probably the origin of the legend that the Cruikshank-Boelcke fight was one of the longest in the history of the war, lasting for as much as thirty minutes. Boelcke’s own account is somewhat more prosaic and triumphalist and does not confirm the view of an exceptional struggle:

No. 25 [victory] had to give best to me A squadron of seven English Sopwith Biplanes flew over our aerodrome on their way home. I took off at once and chased them. I came up with them near Hervilly, eastward of Peronne, but could do nothing for the moment because I was flying below them. The fellows took advantage of this to attack me. Impudence! I soon turned the tables on them and got one in my sights. I came nicely up to him and gave him about fifty rounds from close range—about twenty to forty metres. Then, having had enough, he went down—after Lieut von Richthofen had also given him a few superfluous rounds—into a wood near Hesbecourt and crashed.⁴⁶

Half an hour later Boelcke had his second victim of the day, when he shot down another Strutter, which crashed behind British lines. He saw an enemy squadron dispersing northward of Peronne and flew there quickly with Richthofen.

When I attacked one—they were Sopwith Biplanes too—he promptly put his nose down and tried to escape me in a steep dive. As he was as fast as I was, I did not manage to get close to him, but hung on about one hundred and fifty metres away. We whizzed along as far as the lines in this fashion; I was behind him all the time, putting in a shot every now and then. As we were only about two metres up from the front, I gave him one good final burst and then broke away. He crashed about five hundred metres behind the enemy’s lines.⁴⁷

Trevor Henshaw, in his monumental study of air casualties during the Great War, has suggested that this second victory for Boelcke was 2nd Lt Frederick Bowyer’s Strutter, A1910.⁴⁸ But this plane crashed behind enemy lines, not behind British lines. Moreover, there is good evidence that *Flieger Leutnant* Frankl and two others of *Jasta 2* had attacked Bowyer’s aircraft, forcing it to land just to the north of Havrincourt Wood. Bowyer survived, with a bullet in his ankle, but Saint died of his wounds. From a prisoner of war camp Bowyer wrote to Saint’s parents that their son’s machine gun had jammed while under attack from three aircraft:

⁴⁴ Bott, *Airman’s Outings*, p. 42. In a private letter to Cruikshank’s mother dated July 1917, however, Bott wrote that he saw Cruikshank’s ‘machine going down surrounded by Germans, with smoke pouring out behind it’. Saint, *Saint*, p. 235.

⁴⁵ Jones, *War in the Air*, p. 280.

⁴⁶ Werner, *Boelcke*, pp. 239-240.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

⁴⁸ Henshaw, *Sky Their Battlefield*, p. 52.

I think two [bullets] penetrated his chest. The place where we landed was good ground, and your son's first thoughts were to burn the machine, but it was in his attempts to do so that he collapsed. There was a dressing station about half a mile away, and I got some German soldiers to carry him there. After the first dressing station we were carried on stretchers to a place . . . where we had to wait for a horse ambulance We had to wait some time, and it was there your son died. His last request to me was, "Write to my people and tell them that I am all right".⁴⁹

Frankl, who was to be killed in April 1917, visited Bowyer in hospital and expressed his regrets at causing Saint's death and promised to ensure that he had a proper funeral. After the war Saint's father contacted Frankl's brother and they consoled each other, with the latter hoping that 'never a war will come over us again and that England and Germany will find themselves over the bodies of their brave boys'.⁵⁰

This seems to confirm that Frankl took responsibility for downing Bowyer and killing Saint. If so, who was Boelcke's second victim on the 15th? The most likely candidate is Lt Kemsley's Strutter, which was shot up and forced to land behind the British lines. Kemsley survived, but his observer, Beatty, was killed.⁵¹

Although they were to claim six victories, it was not a good day for No. 70 Squadron, especially the observers. As well as Saint and Beatty, Preston (with Cruikshank) and "Uncle" Glenday were killed. According to Bott:

A bullet entered the large artery of [Glenday's] thigh. He bled profusely and lost consciousness in the middle of a fight with two Huns. When he came to, a few minutes later, he grabbed his gun and opened fire on an enemy. After about forty shots the chatter of the gun ceased, and through the speaking-tube a faint voice told the pilot to look round. The pilot did so, and saw a Maltese-crossed biplane falling in flames. But Uncle had faded into unconsciousness again, and he never came back. It is more than possible that if he had put a tourniquet round his thigh, instead of continuing the fight, he might have lived.⁵²

Cruikshank had deliberately led his squadron to Havrincourt Wood, 'the chief centre of the Boche Flying Corps on the Somme Front', and had paid a heavy price.⁵³ Elsewhere, the opposition was less intense, as squadrons of bombers and fighters filled the air over and well beyond the battlefield. Bombers targeted numerous railway stations, communication centres and military headquarters, with some spectacular successes.⁵⁴ Old Etonian William Chance, of 27 Squadron, bombed a train near Gouzeaucourt, causing forty casualties.⁵⁵ No. 11 Squadron, flying F.E.2bs as escorts for No. 12 Squadron over Bapaume, was involved in several dogfights and also, later, dropped bombs on Vélou aerodrome.⁵⁶ One NCO observer, Sergeant David Brown Walker, was mortally wounded and Hollingsworth's machine, with Wells as the observer, was reported missing north-east of Frise 'after an aerial offensive

⁴⁹ *De Ruvigny's Roll of Honour 1914-1918*, Part 2, pp. 267-68.

⁵⁰ *Saint, Saint*, pp. 232-33.

⁵¹ Henshaw, *Sky Their Battlefield*, p. 52.

⁵² Bott, *Airman's Outings*, p. 52; TNA PRO AIR 76/184.

⁵³ Bott, *Airman's Outings*, p. 63.

⁵⁴ *Daily Mail*, 18 September 1916.

⁵⁵ Sir William Hugh Stobart Chance, 'Raids on Gouzeaucourt and Valenciennes (September 1916)', http://www.worcestershireregiment.com/wr.php?main=inc/whs_chance_5 (accessed 28 October 2013).

⁵⁶ Jones, *War in the Air*, pp. 278-79.

patrol against twenty enemy machines over the German lines'.⁵⁷ Neither was heard of again and in June 1917 they were officially declared dead.⁵⁸

The only other RFC fatality that day was Summers, in a Nieuport 17 scout leading a flight from No. 60 Squadron. Early in the morning Trenchard had made an unexpected visit to the squadron's mess at Izel-les-Hameau. He was seeking volunteers to attack three German balloons that threatened to expose the new tanks as they rumbled up to the battlefield start line. The squadron's planes were the only ones fitted with Le Prieur incendiary rockets capable of destroying balloons. Three volunteers were swiftly found, who succeeded in their mission, although all machines returned badly damaged.⁵⁹

The legendary Albert Ball flew with the squadron on 15 September and shot down one plane with his machine guns, while another pilot made history by destroying a plane with his rockets. Ball's laconic report was:

3pm. 15 September 1916. Albatross (sic) seen going south over Bapaume. Nieuport dived and fired one drum within fifty yards after which the gun of the Nieuport came down and hit me on the head preventing me from following the E[nemy] A[ircraft] down.⁶⁰

Neither Ball nor his companion saw a balloon to attack, but a flight from No. 3 Squadron reported a Nieuport destroying a balloon near Thillooy. This was possibly a victory for Summers. In the action, however, or soon afterwards, he was shot down and killed. Like Cruikshank's, his was a serious loss, for he was described as an excellent commander and team player.⁶¹

Maurice Baring, Trenchard's A.D.C. and amanuensis, wrote that 15 September 'was a terrific day in the air', although the Official History noted that 'casualties had been somewhat heavy', with six planes destroyed and others damaged.⁶² RFC pilots claimed sixteen enemy aircraft shot down and, as well as the successful bombing missions hindering the movement of German reserves, there were no reports that German aircraft had disrupted any operation on the battlefield.⁶³ Cecil Lewis, on contact patrol with the tanks, had a perfect view as some were hit by artillery shells, but this was direct, not indirect fire. 'There was a little white terrier, a mascot I suppose', he wrote in his logbook, 'following one of the Tanks. Apparently the little chap was not hit, for we saw him running round barking at his Tank on the afternoon patrol'.⁶⁴ On the ground near Lesboeuifs, one young officer in the Welsh Guards thought that 'Our aeroplanes are magnificent all day and every day. . . . Any Bosch plane that puts its nose out of port is jolly soon chased back again'.⁶⁵

Lewis' conclusion was that the battle was 'a partial success; but from programme a failure'.⁶⁶ This was an accurate summation of the day's events, but the RFC had done its job. In the

⁵⁷ 'H.M.W. Wells', *Harrow Memorials of the Great War*; Henshaw, *Sky Their Battlefield*, p. 52.

⁵⁸ TNA PRO WO 339/73000.

⁵⁹ Andrew Boyle, *Trenchard* (London 1962), pp. 199-200.

⁶⁰ Quoted in Denis Winter, *The First of the Few: Fighter Pilots of the First World War* (Harmondsworth 1983), pp. 107-8.

⁶¹ Jones, *War in the Air*, p. 277; *Flight Magazine*, 4 January 1917, p. 14; Scott, *Sixty Squadron*, p. 73.

⁶² Maurice Baring, *Flying Corps Headquarters, 1914-1918*, quoted in Saint, *Saint*, p. 207; Jones, *War in the Air*, p. 280.

⁶³ The German field artillery certainly had no help from their air force. See, for example, Jack Sheldon, *The German Army on the Somme 1914-1916* (Barnsley 2005), pp. 291-93.

⁶⁴ Lewis, *Sagittarius Rising*, p. 120.

⁶⁵ Private Papers of Capt. A. Gibbs, 22 September 1916, Imperial War Museum, Documents 12199.

⁶⁶ Lewis, *Sagittarius Rising*, p. 120.

evening of the 15th, as the survivors of No. 70 Squadron sat down in the mess surrounded by many empty chairs, 'a very able general' sent a message to say that their work had been 'dom (sic) good'.⁶⁷

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⁶⁷ Bott, *Airman's Outings*, p. 57.