

A black and white portrait of a young man with dark hair, looking directly at the camera. He is wearing a military uniform with epaulettes and a pilot's wing badge on his left chest. The background is a dark, textured grey.

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF FIRST WORLD WAR
FIGHTER ACE KEITH CALDWELL

GRID

ADAM CLAASEN

Contents

Foreword	9
Introduction	11
Chapter 1 Very Lucky Still	19
Chapter 2 Favoured Ones	28
Chapter 3 Clear-eyed Young Men	38
Chapter 4 Magnificent	51
Chapter 5 Wings	61
Chapter 6 Flaming Onions	75
Chapter 7 Maniacs	88
Chapter 8 Fire Eaters	101
Chapter 9 Black Crosses	116
Chapter 10 Hot Stuff	131
Chapter 11 Leading Lights	150
Chapter 12 Clever Caldwell	168
Chapter 13 Dentist's Chair	186
Chapter 14 Day of Days	205
Chapter 15 Bravest of the Brave	226
Chapter 16 Immolation	244
Chapter 17 Great Escape	262
Chapter 18 Richthofen's Bed	281
Chapter 19 Tea for Two	300
Chapter 20 Mutiny	317
Chapter 21 Savoy	340
Chapter 22 More Gravy	360
Chapter 23 Straight Bat	381
Keith Caldwell's victories	392
Front lines and airfields, 1918	393
Souvenirs of war	394
Notes	395
Select bibliography	424
Acknowledgements	428
About the author	430
Image credits	431
Index	432

Introduction

In Sally Gordon's inner city villa in Auckland, the central hallway is lined with photographs of four generations of her family. Among them are two striking images: one a studio portrait of a serious air commodore, all braid and ribbons, and the other a Kodak Brownie snapshot of a newly married groom and his bride, all smiles and unrestrained joy. They're photographs of her late grandfather Keith Caldwell, airman extraordinaire and family man.

I'm here to interview Sally's mother — and Keith's only surviving child — Mary Gordon (née Caldwell). Well into her nineties, she is a window into the life and times of one of the First World War's most important airmen and one of New Zealand's most significant contributors to its Second World War effort.

'Grid', as he was universally known on the Western Front, was widely acknowledged to have survived more aerial battles than any other Empire airman, including a heart-pounding tussle against Germany's most accomplished pilot, Werner Voss, and members of Manfred von Richthofen's Flying Circus. Caldwell's miraculous and famous 'leap' from his doomed aeroplane in September 1918, which opens the first chapter of this book, was just one of six crash-landings he survived over an incredible 27 months in a service in which many men's lives were counted in mere days.

His longevity as a pilot, from 1916 to 1918, meant he was one of the few airmen to witness first hand the rapid development of the war's single-seat fighters and

aerial fighting tactics. While flying some of the war's most recognisable biplanes — the rudimentary Maurice Farman, the ubiquitous Royal Aircraft Factory BE2c, the French-designed Nieuport 17, the twitchy Sopwith Camel and the fleet-footed Royal Aircraft Factory SE5a — he served with and befriended a constellation of luminous individuals, including Albert Ball, Robert Smith-Barry, Frank Soden, Robert Chidlaw-Roberts, Henry Meintjes, William Fry, Alan 'Jack' Scott, Spencer Horn, William Molesworth, Sydney Pope, Billy Bishop, Benjamin Roxburgh-Smith, Ira Jones and Edward 'Mick' Mannock. In the final year of the war, aged 22, he was given command of a newly formed fighter formation: 74 'Tiger' Squadron. In France, under his leadership, this became, by many measures, the most successful British squadron and Caldwell one of the war's most effective commanders.

The Tigers accumulated victories in aerial combat more quickly than any other British fighter squadron in the same period: 225 (including 15 balloons) in only 206 days. And all of this was achieved with only 10 killed in action, four in accidents and eight taken as prisoners of war — one of the lowest casualty rates for a fighter squadron on the Western Front. Along the way Caldwell and his men accumulated a clutch of decorations: a Distinguished Service Order (DSO) medal and two bars; a Military Cross (MC); nine Distinguished Flying Crosses (DFC) and three bars; a Military Medal and three Belgian Croix de guerres. The large number of DFCs led at least one unit historian to dub the Tigers the 'DFC Squadron'.¹

Caldwell was central to all of this. 'Major Caldwell had more guts than any other three men,' wrote 74 Squadron pilot Len Richardson. '[He was] without doubt the fairest, squarest and most beloved C.O. of any squadron in France.' Fellow airman Ira Jones was emphatic:

Major Caldwell's success as a C.O. lay in example, both by words and deeds he inspired us to fight to kill. There were no half measures about him. He always led squadron patrols and his fearless leadership invariably took us far over the enemy's lines regardless of opposition. The more the enemy the more he revelled in the attack. Like the German [Oswald] Boelcke he had the rare ability of picking out promising fighters, while not hesitating to get rid of duds; by patience, practice and leadership, he welded together a unit which feared no foe. He possessed that indefinable quality called Personality.²

After taking command of 74 Squadron, Caldwell's modest personal tally in aerial combat rose prodigiously. During 1918, in disregard of general prohibitions against

INTRODUCTION

squadron commanders flying on operations with their men and specific orders he'd received, Caldwell regularly led late-afternoon offensive squadron patrols. Seventeen of his 26 victories in the First World War were at the helm of the Tigers, a remarkable achievement that made him not only his nation's highest scoring pilot of the war but also the fourth-highest in the British air service in victories acquired over the enemy *while* commanding a squadron.³

During the interwar period he helped to develop military and civil aviation, and he played important roles in New Zealand's nascent air force and the Auckland Aero Club before contributing to the Royal New Zealand Air Force's (RNZAF) efforts in the Second World War. As commander at RNZAF stations Woodbourne and Wigram he dispatched more New Zealand-trained air service personnel to Europe and the Pacific than any other antipodean, and in the war's latter stages he went on two important overseas postings. In India, he came to the rescue of forgotten and abandoned countrymen and in Britain he organised and managed the largest repatriation of New Zealanders from service in foreign forces in the nation's history. In the three decades that followed, Caldwell was a prominent figure in the remembrance of those who had served and fallen in both wars and in the global community dedicated to recalling and retelling the stories of the Great War airmen. His life is both a gripping tale and an illuminating study in leadership and resilience across two world wars.

Given all of this, it is surprising Caldwell had never been the subject of a biography, especially when memoirs and biographies of airmen of far lesser stature proliferated after the war and in the decades that followed. Towards the end of his life, surviving airmen of the Great War and air-power enthusiasts, researchers and historians begged Caldwell to give the world of military aviation a memoir. He demurred, citing declining memory, pedestrian typing and the difficulty of reconstructing the story from a hodgepodge of incomplete and scattered documentation.

Despite his protestations, by the 1970s he was one of the few airmen of his stature left who had their wits about them. Some suggested he record his story to cassette tape for later transcription but he was having none of it. Part of this was simply that in his advanced retirement he lacked the motivation for the demanding task. He was also possessed of excessive modesty. Caldwell was far more at ease talking about the brave deeds of his comrades-in-arms than of his own endeavours and, although he championed the publication of books about others, was not about to blow his own trumpet with a Caldwell memoir.

Caldwell's concern about his ability to locate, gather and order a sufficient body of materials to reconstruct his life was not misplaced. The biographical attempts of several researchers and historians wanting to tell this story have floundered on these rocks. For international writers, the tyranny of distance in the pre-internet age was a significant impediment to acquiring adequate material from far-flung New Zealand. Letters to his descendants were met with replies that hinted at assistance and possible sources but never bore fruit to bring a project into full focus.

Consequently, all that had been published on Caldwell during his lifetime and after his death in 1980 was a handful of short articles in aviation-related publications, and of course these were narrowly focused on his military exploits. In other words, although Caldwell was an eminent candidate for a rich biography, it was uncertain whether sufficient material existed to produce one that captured the times in which he lived, the forces that shaped him, and the institutions and people on which he had an impact in his public and private life.

My subsequent research involved locating and gathering materials from New Zealand and British archives and members of the Caldwell family. Domestically, the most important source was the Air Force Museum of New Zealand (AFMNZ), which not only holds Caldwell's all-important logbook but also a large collection of his personal photograph albums. Both bear Caldwell's imprint: he overwrote his fading wartime logbook pencil notations in ball-point pen after the Second World War and many of his snapshots are plastered with Dymo Label Maker black tape embossed with relevant information.

Among other important pieces of the Caldwell puzzle was a confidential file, held by the AFMNZ, that he compiled during his postings to Woodbourne and Wigram. The manila folder is surprisingly thick with paperwork and controversy. Crises and conspiracies abound alongside mundane matters. Archives New Zealand Te Rua Mahara o te Kāwanatanga (ANZ) holds Caldwell's 'Base Records' personnel file, which contains sketchy but useful materials on his post-First World War life with the New Zealand air service in its various guises and his involvement in the Second World War RNZAF.

In addition to ANZ's files on the establishment and running of the New Zealand Flying School, where Caldwell first learnt to fly, the Auckland Museum of Transport and Technology's (MOTAT) Walsh Memorial Library had useful material on the local instruction of men like Caldwell before their embarkation to Britain. Whanganui

INTRODUCTION

Collegiate School archives has details of Caldwell's academic and sporting records, photographs and copies of the school's magazine. *The Wanganui Collegian* proved a rich source for Caldwell's formative years. The Auckland War Memorial Museum Tāmaki Paenga Hira, while lacking much in the way of Caldwell documentation, had two objects closely associated with him: his flying suit and a war trophy — a German machine gun extracted from a 'downed' Fokker DVII.

Of the British archives, three London-based repositories were extremely important for Caldwell's First World War service: the Imperial War Museum (IWM), the Royal Air Force Museum and The National Archives (TNA). The latter two institutions were foundational for fleshing out Caldwell's activities in 8 Squadron, 60 Squadron and 74 Squadron. For example, materials at TNA revealed that for all his bravery and leadership skills, Caldwell was never a stickler for personal record keeping. Caldwell's logbook records only a single sortie between 11 September and 11 October 1917, while his squadron officer record book details nearly 40 flights. Conflicting dates over engagements with the enemy and other important matters charted in his logbook required considerable checking against other materials.

Given the large number of individuals with whom Caldwell rubbed shoulders and who fell under his leadership in 74 Squadron, a significant number of War Office personnel files were collected. To put Caldwell's activities in context of the larger air war effort, I gathered the war diaries of relevant wings and battalions under which these respective squadrons operated, as well as the daily 'routine orders' that deal with such matters as personnel departures and arrivals, leave provisions, discipline enforcement and the myriad official strictures covering everything from sexually transmitted diseases and the treatment of French farmers' crops to the use of the squadron's motor pool. These orders have seldom been utilised by researchers and historians and they open a window to the difficulties and demands faced by squadron commanding officers.

Even with thousands of pages of documents, there were still gaps in his military service in both world wars and in his private family life. Mercifully, I discovered that although other writers had made little progress in locating documents from the family, I had a strong ally in Caldwell's granddaughter Sally Gordon. She was able to introduce me not only to her mother but also to other grandchildren, family members and individuals with links to her late grandfather.

It gradually became apparent that 'Werfer', as he was affectionately known among his descendants, had in fact left a considerable collection of personal papers and photographs and that these had been dispersed among his four children (Mary,

Peter, David and Virginia), and subsequently handed on to the next generation. Sally supplied me with a very large trove of long and fulsome letters written by Caldwell that filled in the details of his time in India and London between 1944 and 1946.

When I visited David's son, Andrew Caldwell, on his Glen Murray farm, he regretted that some materials had been lost in flooding on the farm decades earlier, yet he still produced two large suitcases filled with an eclectic range of indispensable documents and items related to his grandfather's civil and military life, including correspondence with family members, solicitors, government officials and First World War airmen; old passports charting world trips; papers associated with membership in the Auckland Aero Club and the Northern Club; and a vast amount of documentation to do with Caldwell's farm at Glen Murray and Papatoetoe.

Virginia's daughter Deborah Stovell was able to answer a question that lingered long into the project: Had Caldwell written letters during the First World War and, if he had, where were they? Deborah produced a cache of over two dozen letters written from the Western Front to his mother and sister when they were living in London in 1918. All this substantial primary material was supplemented by published and unpublished diaries and memoirs from airmen who had flown with Caldwell; extracts from interviews and letters that appeared in the journal dedicated to First World War aviation, the British and international editions of the *Cross and Cockade*; and correspondence between Caldwell and his former squadron members in the last two decades of his life.

I would encourage readers of this biography to set aside misapprehensions and easy tropes about the Great War and early military aviation. The term 'victories' used throughout this book covers a broad range of achievements over the enemy and not simply 'kills', as popularly conceived. During the 1914–1918 war, success against Central Power airmen in aerial combat encompassed a much wider range of possibilities including 'destroyed', 'out of control', 'captured' or 'forced to land'. In other words, a victory did not necessarily entail the death of the enemy airman. Nonetheless, all the proceeding categories were unquestionably 'victories' of one kind or another over the enemy and were seen that way during the war.

When fighting took place high up, between 12,000 and 18,000 feet, it was not always possible to confirm the result of what appeared to be a successful encounter, especially in a continuing dogfight or with low cloud cover. Undoubtedly, on many occasions enemy pilots feigned fatal injuries only to pull out of a death spiral at low

INTRODUCTION

altitude and flee east to fight another day. Moreover, given that the fighting took place for the most part on the German side of the lines, it was often impossible to conclusively verify a pilot's claim.

'The Germans,' wrote Caldwell to an aviation researcher in the 1970s, 'could be much more accurate in their claims because, as most of the air fighting was over their side, they were able to confirm the destruction of Allied aircraft.'⁴ The character qualities of the British air service claimant, the supporting evidence from fellow airmen or observers on the ground all fed into the decision by a squadron's commanding officer to sign off and forward combat claims to higher authorities for addition to an airman's score.

Caldwell's total of 26 victories is chiefly derived from his 'combat in air' reports. Where possible, these were corroborated with other primary documents and compared with Caldwell's tallies that appear in several published works. With a few qualifications regarding dates and locations of claims, the list at the end of this book is close to the number given in the widely respected, if dated, work on the subject: Christopher Shores, Norman Franks and Russell Guest's *Above the Trenches: A complete record of the fighter aces and units of the British Empire air forces, 1915–1920*. Given the gaps in the surviving records and the assertion by several of his contemporaries that Caldwell passed some of his victories on to newly arrived airmen in 74 Squadron, it is entirely possible that his own calculation of '27 enemy machines down' — written in the last few pages of his logbook — is conservative.

Modern readers tend to place a lot of importance on the 'ace' status (five or more victories) and leaderboards of the war's top pilots, but Caldwell always emphasised that the total 'score of victories to this or that airman in the air lists of books . . . should not be regarded as the "be all" or "end all" of an airman's worth'.⁵ On a number of occasions after the war he expressed his frustration with aviation buffs whose narrow focus on such matters ignored the greater body of men (air and ground crew) who made *any* victories possible and argued that an individual's contribution to a squadron could not be measured in such a crude manner. The ability to knock the enemy from the sky was extremely important but it was not the defining or sole quality of a good airman in Caldwell's eyes.

Moreover, the war was neither Rupert Brooke *nor* Wilfred Owen — idealism and glory versus cruelty and horror. As readers will discover, there is considerable truth to W. E. John's portrayal of the wondrously adventurous life on the Western Front of the airman he dubbed Biggles, but there was also an unequivocal ruthlessness to killing the enemy. Death and grief were as close as the next patrol. Through all of this,

bonds were formed that would last a lifetime. For many, including Caldwell, the war proved to be the pivotal event of their lives, simultaneously marring and surprisingly enriching.

Likewise, it is fashionable to see the First World War aeroplanes as rickety wood, wire and fabric death-traps. Although there is considerable truth to the impression that early in the war great numbers of poorly trained airmen flying unreliable and unstable machines were quickly dispatched both at home and over the Western Front, and that throughout the war, fire was an ever-present danger in a service in which parachutes were inexplicably absent, it is also true that by mid-war the aeroplanes were extremely robust and purposeful in their lethality.

Stronger airframes, more powerful engines and increased weaponry meant Caldwell's SE5a of 1918 bore only a passing resemblance to the machines he learnt to fly in 1915. In preparation for writing this book I was fortunate to be offered the opportunity to fly in a First World War two-seat BE2c from Sir Peter Jackson's collection at Hood Aerodrome, Masterton. Unbeknown to me, my pilot, Dave Horrell, had arranged for us to be 'jumped' by an SE5a and Fokker DVII from The Vintage Aviator Limited's large aeroplane inventory. The rapidity and aggressiveness of the two single-seat fighters as they mercilessly swooped in behind us and peeled away at speed was as frightening as it was exhilarating. Make no mistake, these were the premier machines of their era and not the stuff of *Those Magnificent Men in their Flying Machines* and popular imagination. Think of them as the Supermarine Spitfire of the Second World War or the Lockheed Martin F-35 Lightning II of our own time.

The war was far from sepia-toned, and in the air even less so. The surviving photographs of the First World War mislead us. The multi-coloured fields and green forests of northwestern France fought with the riotous yellows, blues and reds of the German machines for the attention of the British air service pilots. As the inclusion of photographs of machines from The Vintage Aviator collection in the colour section of this book demonstrates, the air war was as colourful as its participants.

Little did I realise when I finished my interview with Mary Gordon that four years of research and writing lay ahead of me. I had planned to place the published copy of this book in her hands but, sadly, as the completion of the manuscript drew near, Sally told me that her mother had died, aged 98. It is my hope that this book will bring the story of Mary's father to life for a new generation.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Day of Days

As Caldwell walked out onto the aerodrome on 12 April 1918, the sky above was clear and inviting.¹ The men of C Flight, having downed a cup of tea and munched a handful of biscuits, were listening as Cairnes gave the pre-flight briefing: they would cross the lines near Merville and work up towards Ypres over the growing German salient. Mannock and Coverdale stood next to Caldwell, watching the men protectively. Despite the gravity of the situation, the pilots were keen, 'each thinking of the Hun he was going to down and no one of the possibility of death or, worse, a breakfast of black bread and sausages in the enemy's lines'.²

Caldwell offered words of encouragement and Mannock light-heartedly asked them 'not to disturb the Huns', lest there be none when his turn came. The New Zealander counted them out, pleased that it was a punctual 6 a.m. departure, but mindful of what lay ahead.

C Flight encountered flak at 6000 feet as they crossed the lines; the SE5s were bouncing all over the place, in a slightly drunk V formation. In the distance, a large fleet of machines was spotted 2000 feet above and 2 miles away, but closing fast. Jones was at the rear:

Were they Huns? I couldn't make up my mind. But as they came on fast, the black Maltese Crosses on their wings soon settled the question. It was months



since I had seen any. How pretty they looked! And what pretty machines! They were all colours. Black, red, bright blue, grey, yellow — all the colours of the rainbow. It never struck me that they were aeroplanes flown by men, possibly crack pilots of the German air force. Men whom I knew as Huns; death-dealing gentlemen, possibly smothered in Iron Crosses and Orders *pour la Merite* [Pour le Mérite]. They looked more like a rather beautiful flock of birds. But I was soon awakened from my reverie.³

A riot of bullets and tracer fire preceded the arrival of the enemy machines. Cairnes took evasive action, swinging the formation away sharply, but Jones was separated from the rest. The leading German in a triplane latched onto the Welshman, while the others prevented the intervention of the rest of C Flight and waited to cut Jones off, should he attempt to run for it. Jones followed Mannock's advice and held the stick to his belly with the throttle wide open, and prayed very hard. He was in a vertical bank with strings of bullets falling behind him in the steep turn. Other German machines attempted brief forays against him but to little effect. Seconds seemed like years.

Ira Jones was repeating to himself, 'Keep cool, Van Ira, he can't hit you. His bullets are going behind', all the while shouting obscenities at the top of his lungs at the grinning German with the pug nose and shock of black hair.⁴ When the triplane manoeuvred to get a better position, Jones took his chance and fell into a spin and then into a counter-spin, barging through a dozen German machines 'as I had done through a rugger scrum when cornered'.⁵

He scampered west with the enemy in hot pursuit, kicking his rudder left and right. Bullets whizzed past, but none struck home. The SE5's superior speed came into play and the furious noise of the Spandau machine guns faded. Jones chanced a look over his shoulder: the enemy were falling behind. Having slipped the net, he rejoined the waiting C Flight. As adrenaline seeped from his bloodstream, his bravado momentarily wavered. Was he a coward? Would he be able to face the enemy again? 'I was simply terrified of another flight over the lines.'

In a few minutes, however, flying in formation, he regained his emotional equilibrium. Caldwell was waiting at the aerodrome to count the formation in. As the men dismounted, he patted them on the back, offering words of encouragement.

Above: A staged photograph of three pilots of 1 Squadron studying maps before a sortie, Clairmarais South, France.

Below: B Flight, 74 Squadron. Standing, from left: Wilfred Young, Clive Glynn, Andrew Kiddie, Philip Stuart-Smith. Kneeling: Gerald Savage, Robert Piggott.

Jones told him that, despite no success, he now had confidence in the machine and his own ability to handle the Germans. 'Of course, you're better than those sods, the Hunnerinoes,' said Caldwell, 'but don't get overconfident. It's the first month, not day, that counts, Taffy.'⁶

Mannock, pleased that Cairnes' flight had failed to bag an enemy machine, took off at 8.25 a.m. His men found the air was still full of hostiles. Positioning A Flight between a flock of glistening silver Albatros fighters and their base, Mannock led a blistering attack at 13,000 feet.⁷ Henry 'Bilo' Dolan fired two bursts from above and behind as he closed to within 50 yards. The Albatros turned over and plummeted down, out of control. When the dogfight was over, there were two crumpled enemy machines on the ground: both Mannock and Dolan had secured a victory.

Back at the aerodrome, they began firing off Very lights of all colours. It had been a good operation, drawing first blood for the squadron.⁸ The men were fizzing as they climbed out of their SE5s. A grinning Mannock greeted the onlookers with his catchphrase: 'Always above, seldom on the same level, never beneath.' For Dolan, a former Royal Field Artillery officer with an MC, this was his first victory.

Caldwell, eager to enter the fray, slotted himself into Young's B Flight. It was the last operation of the morning and would be the New Zealander's first sortie since leaving 60 Squadron the previous year. The SE5a was now a familiar mount with its more powerful — and, thankfully, reliable — engine. As Jones had just discovered, the advanced 200 horsepower Wolseley Viper V8 — a British-built derivative of the well-regarded Spanish Hispano Suiza engine — offered superior speed and altitude: 138 miles per hour and 19,500 feet. Caldwell walked the pre-flight inspection, looking over the wood and cloth airframe and wings, running his fingers along the flying wires before checking the fuel tank and engine. He grabbed a centre strut on the port side of the machine, placed his left foot on the lower wing and swung himself into the cockpit.

Like most airmen in 1918, he had discarded his long flying jacket for a newly issued one-piece garment, known as the Sidcot suit. This forerunner of the aviator's jumpsuit was made of tan-coloured waterproofed cotton, with a rubberised cotton interlining and fur lining. A large button-down flap crossed over the chest. The wrists and ankles were snugly sealed with further buttons. Maps and small items could be stuffed into the large open pockets on the knees. It offered better warmth and less bulk in the confines of the tight airframe.⁹ Caldwell's shoulders kissed the sides of the cockpit as he lowered himself into the seat.

The Aldis gunsight ran along the nose, with the Vickers machine gun close by its

side. Above him was the wing-mounted Lewis machine gun. Caldwell was indifferent to both. As he said, many pilots disregarded the gunsight, preferring to 'watch their tracers and so avoid being denied any side vision. Personally, I, and many others, would have preferred an open ring sight.'¹⁰ The Lewis was still prone to jamming and reloading was dangerous in a dogfight; Caldwell would rather have discarded it altogether. But these were minor niggles. The SE5 was a wonder to fly and, even when he was firing only the Vickers, more than a match for the current crop of German machines.

The khaki-coloured SE5s taxied out herring-bone style, turning side to side, criss-crossing over the path of the leading machine for better visibility past the long-nosed engine. They were like large predatory cats, shoulder blades climbing and falling as they made for the end of the small aerodrome. Caldwell opened the throttle and took off, the controls marvellously light and responsive in his hands. In the air, the flight gathered around Caldwell and Young and made for the British lines. No man's land stretched before them as they entered the field of battle.

The flight was at 17,000 feet south-east of Deûlémont, at the confluence of the Deûle and Lys rivers, when Caldwell spotted a lone Albatros DV fighter sporting a 'yellow fuselage, green wings with red and yellow checks'.¹¹ He pushed the stick forward, dropping the nose; the altimeter fell as the rev-counter rose. At 14,000 feet, he swooped on the Albatros, its chequered wings filling his vision before he fired a burst of five rounds right into the cockpit. The tracers, like bright meteors, stabbed holes in the fuselage. It was quick and decisive: the German machine stumbled and fell.

Caldwell followed, firing at intervals to ensure the enemy was not faking his death plunge. At 1000 feet, he pulled away as the Albatros struck the ground near a large balloon. The dark ploughed earth enveloped the bright and twisted bird. It was Caldwell's tenth victim and the first as commanding officer. The swiftness and the clinical nature of the dispatch was testament to the training and honing of his skills over the winter in Britain. This was a different Caldwell.

It was a bruising first day of operations for the squadron and the RAF. It was also the most important day of the offensive; Caldwell's men were just one element in the vast assault on the enemy. 'The result was that more hours were flown, more bombs dropped, and more photographs taken than on any day since the war began.'¹² Contact patrols provided the most accurate pictures yet of the German advance, and artillery cooperation flights ranged the big guns on the surging enemy lines. Most of the effort,

though, was against the ground forces by low-flying RAF machines dropping bombs and peppering the German troops moving forward.

Over a 24-hour period, more than 4600 bombs were dropped, 3300 photographs taken and 110,000 rounds fired.¹³ Caldwell's II Brigade comrades concentrated on blunting the Hazebrouck threat. It was a brutal and frenzied assault on massed infantry, communications centres, headquarters, clogged roads and railway junctions. The air fighting was unrelenting; German formations of 15 to 20 machines roamed the blue arena in search of RAF machines. In the afternoon, Caldwell's flights went out on six more patrols.

In the last operation of the day, Mannock nabbed another, though he insisted that the other members of the flight 'should share in the credit of this enemy aircraft'.¹⁴ For Benjamin Roxburgh-Smith, Percy Howe and Harris Clements it was their first aerial combat triumph. The squadron's five official victories were spread over six individuals.

It was a 'day of days' for 74 Squadron and one seldom equalled in the British air service of the First World War.¹⁵ That all the men survived the baptism was even more gratifying to Caldwell. Many were exhausted and chose an early night. When Jones told Mannock about his sudden physiological distress that morning, Mannock replied, 'Most pilots have this reaction at some time or other. It is just a question of fighting resolutely against the desire to give in. This is the test of a MAN — whether he be a fighter or a coward.'¹⁶ Caldwell led the celebration that evening in the mess, encouraging his men, in a brief speech, to remain undeterred in their duty to defeat the enemy at all costs: it was the Allies or the Germans.¹⁷

The achievements of Caldwell's men did not go unnoticed. The next day, when the weather turned against aerial operations, the squadron was visited by van Ryneveld, who was well known for his participation in the Second Anglo-Boer War as a boy.¹⁸ He was immensely popular. He had a knack for getting alongside the men with an encouraging word or two and was renowned for flying his own Camel over the lines to assess for himself the situation in the sky. During a particularly testing time later in the year, Mannock confessed to Jones that 'If it were not for Van Ryneveld and Grid, I would ask for a month's rest. My nerves are beginning to fray.'¹⁹

The South African praised Caldwell and the squadron for their achievements under such demanding conditions. As a later historian noted, the unit was well on its way to becoming 'famous for its fighting prowess'.²⁰

On 13 April, Caldwell summarised the events of the past two days in a letter to Mary Caldwell:

My Dear Mother,

Just a scribble to let you know everything is OK. Yesterday the squadron did its first day's work on its new front where the activity is great and did very well indeed. We crashed 5 Huns during the day, many of them being on this side of the lines and lost no one although several pilots had their grids hit. Cpt. Mannock got one and Bilo another in the first scrap. I got one with C Flight which crashed the other side. A Flight got another scout between the lot of them in the afternoon which crashed the other side and Capt. Young B Flight brought one down this side in the evening. The Wing Commander was very bucked [up] and came down to see us last night.

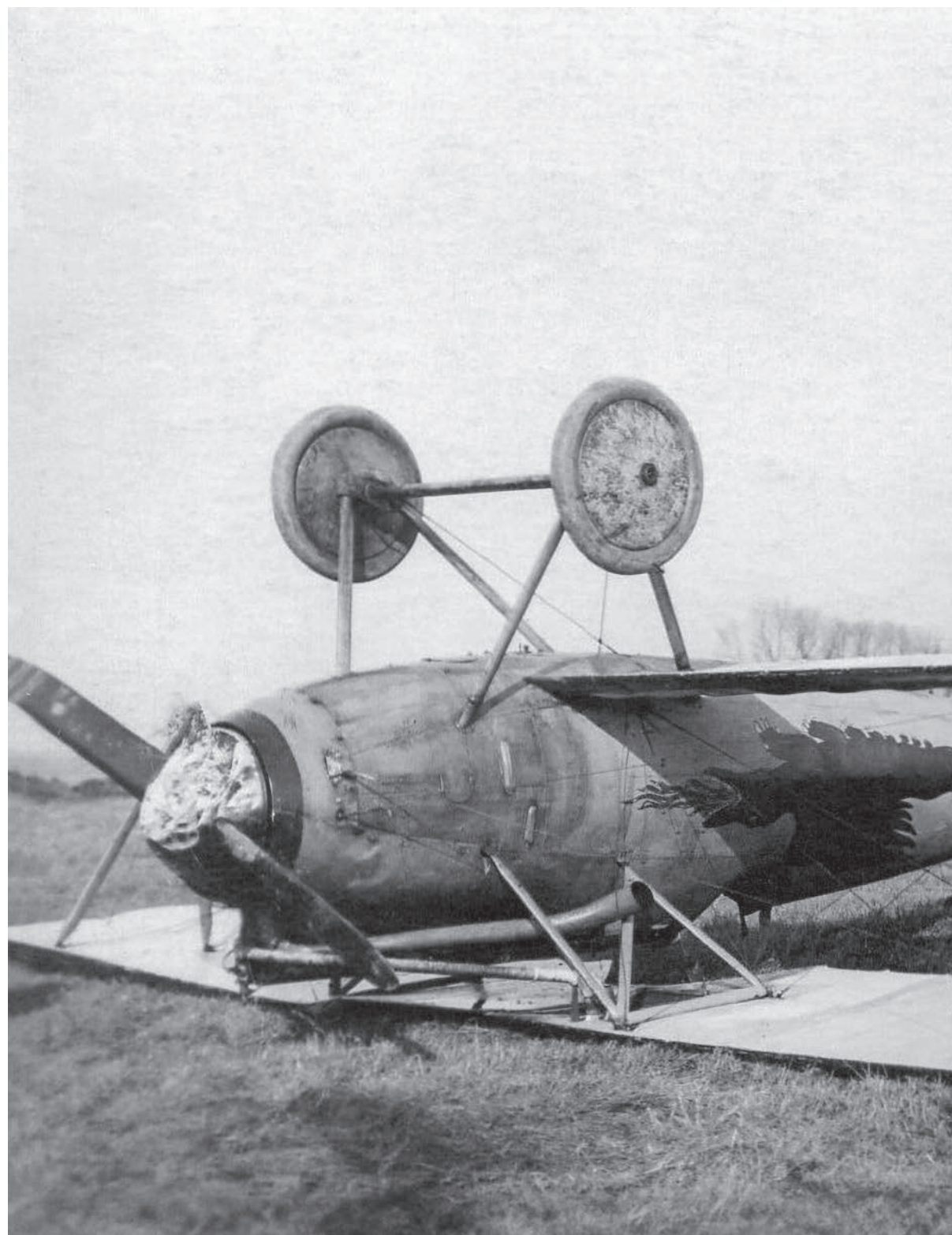
The war is very strenuous still and all sorts of movements are taking place, we will probably make another move very soon. The place we are at now is pretty awful, but some squadrons are worse off than we are I believe.

The weather is completely dud at present, and we are taking advantage of it by getting as much sleep as possible. Each pilot had three patrols yesterday. Last night the Hun dropped bombs quite close by . . .

Cheery 'oh
Your loving son
Keith

The following days were beset by mist, fog, low cloud and periodic rain. The ferocious battle on the ground continued, but the air component was kept on the sidelines. The men used the opportunity to settle into their new accommodation — a series of wooden huts, each home to two officers. The mess was a fair-sized wooden building and there were eight large, corrugated iron-roofed hangars. As temperatures fell, Caldwell directed the men to stay active. Both he and Maxwell saw the usefulness of sports to maintain fitness and burn off tension. A series of rugby games was arranged with their neighbouring 54 Squadron.²¹ Of course, 74 Squadron was blessed in such tussles with its former English international and a Wanganui Collegiate star. 'These games were played in the spirit that the game demands — very hard, almost fierce, but absolutely clean,' wrote Jones in his diary.

Overleaf: Keith Caldwell's first victim at the helm of 74 Squadron was an Albatros DV. This example was flown by Richard Flashar of Jasta 5 and has lost part of a lower wing.





On our side, Coverdale and Caldwell were irresistible, and played with scintillating brilliance. These games were the first of eighteen victories which the Squadron won during its period in France. No match was lost. Thirteen out of twenty-one officers played these games. The spirit of determination and teamwork which is so essential for success in Rugby is the same spirit necessary in a squadron of successful air fighters. Mannock played rugby with the same determination and almost with the same fierceness as he fought in the air! The next best thing to shooting down a Hun, he contended, was 'a low, hard, flying tackle!'²²

In the evening, the men played cards and read books and eagerly awaited mail.²³ When Jones's birthday arrived, Caldwell encouraged an evening of entertainment. Richardson mixed the cocktails. Caldwell dubbed one beverage the official drink of the squadron, nicknaming it the '#74 Viper', or simply 'the Viper'. The mess rang with rowdy renditions of 'I Can Dance with Everyone but My Wife' by the married Philip Stuart-Smith and Richardson's poor attempt at 'The Cobbler's Song' from the popular London show *Chu Chin Chow*. For his rotten exhibition Caldwell briefly called Richardson 'the Bootmaker'.²⁴

But the war was on everyone's minds. On the evening of their first outing, RAF machines fleeing abandoned airfields attempted to land at Clairmarais. Some crashed and others had to be diverted because the aerodrome was simply too small to accommodate them. Day and night, reinforcing French troops passed by on their way to the front. And then there was the odd inaccurate bombing of the aerodrome by German machines and the earth-shaking sound of shells being lobbed by giant guns. At night, the eastern horizon glowed.

Five days later, as he told his mother, Caldwell had an 'exciting fight over Hunland at about 600 feet' but was fearful about the fate of one his men: 'Dolan and I went over together and got thoroughly lost, crashing all over the place trying to get back. My grid was shot through . . . badly, but no sign of Dolan yet, he's been out 5 hours now and it looks rather bad. I hope he is OK as he is one of our best fellows.' Dolan turned up late in the evening — his machine's engine had been shot through.

The next day, more top brass appeared. General John Salmond complimented Caldwell and his charges, reiterating that the five machines on the first day was a 'record'. The only downside to all this attention was that 11 Wing discovered Caldwell was a regular participant in operations and told him that he was 'doing too much

flying'. 'This is rather bitter,' Caldwell told his mother, 'as the Huns at this point are pretty dud and quite easy to kill.' He would fly as often as he thought he could get away with.

On 21 April, the weather cleared sufficiently for more regular operations. The Germans had made important gains in Flanders, recovering territory lost in the previous autumn. It seemed impossible, but Passchendaele was about to be lost to the Germans. In the same pattern used nine days earlier, each flight would endure three patrols a piece. Under a heavy workload, Dolan, who was fast becoming an accomplished airman, accounted for a Fokker Dr.I. Cairnes' flight flew the last operation of the day, when the sky 'was lousy with Huns'.

In the first attack, Cairnes and Charles Skedden sent down a machine. The flight, which included the Londoner Sydney Begbie, soon spotted four lone Albatros fighters. While they were tackling these, another 10 arrived. It was six against 14, the squadron's first big dogfight, with only a brief time in which to fire and scoot away. 'We were waltzing around one another in a vicious circle,' wrote Jones, 'with machine guns spitting fire for all they were worth.'

Suddenly there was a blaze in the sky nearby. I looked. It was Begbie's SE. A sudden feeling of sickness, of vomiting, overcame me. Poor old Begbie, I thought. How terrible! The kak-kak-kak of a machine gun a few yards behind me warned me of my own danger . . . I had another peep at him as I flew near. A Hun was still at him, pouring bullets into his machine. He was making sure of him, the dirty dog. While he pursued his victim, an SE — it was [Wilfred 'Twist'] Giles — dived on his tail. There was a kak-kak-kak! and the Hun dived away, not to be seen again. I hope he was killed, too. One by one the Huns left the fight. Giles and I flew towards Begbie's machine, which was floating enveloped in flames. It was a terrible sight.²⁵

The flight returned with news of the victories but one man short. 'We had our first casualty the day before yesterday. Lt Begbie, down in flames,' wrote Caldwell.²⁶ The badly burnt 21-year-old died the following day in a German hospital.

Horrific though Begbie's loss had been, Caldwell could not allow the men to dwell on it. The squadron would not be brought to a halt; pausing meant endangering further lives. Maxwell in 54 Squadron was dealing with the same situation: he had just lost two pilots.²⁷ Caldwell invited the men of 54 over for a lively dinner. To keep their spirits up, the men were encouraged to play games, including the dangerous hi-

cockalorum, a mess rugby game that involved two teams jumping on each other and pulling people off as the scrum nosily crabbed its way around the room, thumping against the walls, knocking over chairs and tables. When a few stood back, slightly shocked, Caldwell stopped the *mêlée*. 'The death of anyone amongst us must never be allowed to affect our morale. We will have a "full out" guest night whenever anyone is killed; that's an order.'²⁸ Then Mannock stepped forward into the centre of the assembly: 'Gentlemen, raise your glasses to Lieutenant Begbie and to Baron von Richthofen . . . in the hope that the bastard also went down in flames.' The Red Baron had indeed also been killed that day.

Mannock smashed his glass to the ground and then turned to Lieutenant 'Swazi' Howe, who was the smallest man in the Squadron. Taking the small South African by the shoulder, he smiled. 'Now my fine young fella, it appears that we have lost our ball during this brief break in the play. I take pleasure in announcing that you are now "it."' Picking up the protesting Howe, Mannock threw him into the waiting crowd and then jumped on top of the men himself to send them all crashing to the floor.²⁹

When Caldwell wrote to Sydney Begbie's family, he did not say how he died.

The death of von Richthofen, the greatest German ace, at the hands of a Camel pilot or Australian ground fire, was greeted with mixed emotions. Caldwell told his mother as an afterthought: 'P.S. Von Richthofen down this side, killed day before yesterday.'³⁰ The leader of the Flying Circus, with 80 official combat victories to his name, was admired as much as he was feared. As one pilot put it, 'A feeling of happiness as regards the fact that the Circus was broken, but it wasn't a feeling of hate. It was a feeling that a very good man had gone. That was true — he was a good fighter, a clever fighter. He used every move that he was taught and more. He was instinctive. To be a good pilot you have to become part of the aeroplane that you're flying.'³¹ Many of the airmen in 74 Squadron were 'secretly sorry that he was dead'. Mannock, though, was having none of it: 'I hope he roasted all the way down.'³²

Being wreathed in flames in a falling aeroplane was the deepest fear of all airmen. A wooden-framed machine with its engine and fuel tank encased in doped fabric was a potential flying torch. It was the stuff of nightmares for those who had witnessed a man thrashing around in fire. Others saw men jump from their machines to escape, twisting and turning as they fell thousands of feet to their death.

Mannock bluntly stated that he hoped Begbie had blown his brains out rather

than suffer the hell of a fiery death. Mannock and many men flew with a service revolver for this very purpose. Richardson once heard a pilot ask Caldwell why they carried the bulky Webley revolver, to which Grid suggested he use his 'bloody imagination'. The Canadian elaborated in his diary: 'Since we don't have parachutes and perhaps it would be quite hot coming down in flame, we have the revolver to shoot ourselves in case we can't stand the heat.'³³

Ira Jones asked why they had no parachutes.³⁴ After all, balloonists had been using them since before the war. The answer was none too clear. Some argued that providing a means of escape would have diminished fighting spirit and encouraged men to evacuate machines that might otherwise have been saved in a forced landing. This, however, was never confirmed, nor any individual held culpable for such a calculating and cruel assessment. The RFC had undertaken test flights with parachutes in 1917, but these had involved bulky tethered devices tucked under the fuselage of a machine rather than being worn by the pilot.³⁵ The weight and size of parachutes were certainly determining factors, but their absence remained a galling mystery to RAF airmen, who saw small numbers of German pilots escaping the flames in 1918.

Under such circumstances, grim humour prevailed. Caldwell and Mannock 'pulled one another's leg unmercifully; occasionally . . . Mick would faithfully volunteer to describe Grid's descent in flames to his mother, not sparing any detail.' Caldwell bet Mannock that he would be the first to 'sizzle' and gave an animated demonstration of 'the noises that would emanate from Mannock's machine as it floated a burning mass to earth!'³⁶

The German tide was still coming in, rolling slowly towards Amiens, as evidenced by regular visits by the Luftstreitkräfte bombers. 'The last ten nights the Huns have been very active bombing,' Caldwell told his mother. 'The French house I am sleeping in nearly falls down every time a bomb drops, and the [five] ladies of the house get awfully excited. Mick Mannock always dashes out and tries to calm them with "Restez-tranquil" or something of that sort . . . what they don't know about flying and the RFC isn't worth knowing. Mannock tells them they are spies which always rouses their wrath.'³⁷

Despite these raids, the squadron settled into a rhythm of operations: three two-hour patrols of two flights each per day. Typically, A and B flights patrolled in the early morning, A and C at noon and B and C in the late afternoon. Occasionally, Caldwell would do a final full squadron 'show' in the evening.³⁸

On 25 April, Kemmel Hill became the focal point for the enemy. It offered the Germans a significant vantage point and weakened the British hold on Ypres. Orders for 74 Squadron came from van Ryneveld.

Machines will be employed in attacking detraining points, debussing centres, transports on roads, and troops being brought forward to press home the attack. It will be more important to do this a mile, or two miles behind the front line, than it would be to attack the enemy in the front line itself, because aeroplanes should be employed with a view to preventing the enemy pressing home the full weight of his attack by delaying the advance of his reinforcements, and not with a view to stopping the initial rush.³⁹

Caldwell's men would combine with their Clairmarais North roommates, the Camels of 54 Squadron and the SE5s of 1 Squadron at Clairmarais South. The SE5s of 74 Squadron were newly fitted with bomb racks. Among the newbies in these strafing sorties was Richardson, who was replacing Begbie. Caldwell had ensured that the Canadian was given ample time with the SE5a, but nothing could prepare him for his first low-level sortie a few days later. As he explained to his mother, when he was 'over the lines on another fellow's machine on a bombing stunt . . . we got lost indirectly and got about 20 miles over the lines and on our way back I got my first taste of "Archie" anti-aircraft gun'.

We were only 4,000 feet and Archie is very effective at so low a height. We immediately dropped our bombs and started split-arsing about for all we were worth, banks, dives, climbs and all sorts of stunts; that's the way we dodge Archie. Then we got machine gun bullets; tracers and field pieces have at us. Believe me I sure had [the] 'wind up' but we got through alright. Flying low, bombing and strafing is a rotten game . . . Well, I'm getting used to the game, but believe me, I sure didn't feel at home the first few times.⁴⁰

The aerial operations were insufficient to stem the tide, and by noon the hill was surrounded and the British position at Ypres was on a knife edge.⁴¹ Over the next three days, the weather prohibited further aerial operations but on 29 April the air battle was renewed with vigour and there was a changing of the guard at Clairmarais North.

Maxwell's 54 Squadron was withdrawn from frontline duties; the unit was bruised and fatigued, having sustained considerable losses since the beginning of the Spring

Offensive.⁴² Caldwell was disappointed to see his friend go but found 54's replacement, 4 Squadron Australian Flying Corps (AFC), 'a very decent crowd'.⁴³ Australia was the only dominion to create its own independent flying force. The first of the AFC's four squadrons saw action in the Middle East, while the remainder flew over the Western Front. The Australians at Clairmarais were flying Camels under the command of a 'good straight chap, Wilfred McCloughry'.⁴⁴ The unit's slow start was remedied by a visit from Mannock and some handy instruction. As a result, the Australians became veritable 'Camel merchants', acquiring many scalps in the following months. Among their ranks was Arthur Cobby, a Prahran Victorian who, over less than a year of active service, would become Australia's greatest ace of the war.

On the day of their arrival, Caldwell invited 4 Squadron over for dinner and drinks. 'If they can fight as well as they can knock back cocktails,' wrote Ira Jones, 'the Hun is in for a fine time. Richardson, Toronto's cocktail wizard, mixes up what Grid has named the "74 Viper". By all accounts it's the goods. A couple are guaranteed to blow your head off. These Aussies make them appear to be made of milk and water.'⁴⁵

In low-level bombing and aerial combat, A and C flights dropped 30 bombs and 74 Squadron's total air combat victories rose to 15.⁴⁶ After a two-seater was downed 2 miles on their side of the lines, Caldwell dispatched a crew to 'bring it back for souvenir purposes'. The squadron was slowly accumulating both trophies and a reputation with the enemy.⁴⁷

In the last week of April the German attack on Flanders reached its height; the British lines held and the assault ground to a halt. But it had come at a high cost. Since 9 April, the British had suffered terrible losses: 330,000 casualties, including 80,000 prisoners of war caught in the German tide. The RFC had lost 1032 machines and 200 men had been killed.⁴⁸ The German fighter squadrons accounted for nearly half of these. That Caldwell had lost only a single airman was a minor miracle. As one of his officers noted, 'This is good arithmetic!'⁴⁹ It could not last.

The first sign that 8 May might turn nasty was when the dawn patrol came back without a machine: 19-year-old Englishman John Piggott was missing. As the early sun chased away the morning mists, the second offensive patrol prepared to take off. It was Cairnes' C Flight of Giles, Richardson, Andrew Kiddie, Ronald Bright and Philip Stuart-Smith. Engine problems on the ground, however, forced Cairnes, Giles and Richardson out of the sortie and Young stepped in to lead a reduced, four-strong formation. At 8.30 a.m., 40 miles east of Clairmarais, they encountered 10

triplanes over Zillebeke. It was to be a bloodbath. Young made the fatal mistake of attacking head on and from below. Richardson described what happened.

Kiddie gets 3 Huns on his tail and after shaking them arrives at the drome with his bus looking like a sieve. Young gets his motor shot up and manages to land at Marie Capelle, our side of the lines. Stuart-Smith goes west; down in smoke and then flames. Bright follows him the same way . . . Skedden flies over the drome preparatory to landing, we are all watching when suddenly his wings let go and he dives into the drome and goes up in flames. We rush out with fire extinguishers, but they are not worth a damn. Such a terrible sight. We pick up his remains in a bushel basket . . . He was . . . a damn swell boy.⁵⁰

It was a grim morning. As Mannock loudly berated Young for attacking from below, the latter replied that he had been a captain in 'the British Army and wasn't going to run away from any Huns'. As Richardson noted, 'no one would accuse Young of not having guts, just bad judgment'. It was a costly and powerful lesson. Caldwell asked his men to 'liven up . . . [their] comrades who were gone would not wish for them to mope, but go and knock hell out of the sods, the Hunnerinoes'.⁵¹

Ira Jones took Caldwell's injunction to heart, and after packing up his roommate Skedden's effects, took off for a late-afternoon sortie. He found his consolation, a lone German two-seater.

I got up to point-blank range before firing. Then I let him have it. Almost at once he commenced smoking. There was a faint glow. Then a lovely bonfire as he went earthwards. I followed him down to the ground firing all my bullets at him. I then flew round him as he burned fiercely on the ground near Nieppe. I knew the enemy in the vicinity were firing hard at me. I didn't care. My soul was satisfied. It was a grand sight to see that Hun burning. I had had my revenge. Flying over our trenches, I could see our troops waving frantically. I waved back joyfully. They were not half as happy as I. I had destroyed my first Hun, in revenge for my pals, and it was a great feeling.⁵²

After the Welshman landed, he passed the tender in which Skedden's body lay. 'I peeped in. All I could see was an old army blanket, but it was enough for me.' In accordance with Caldwell's orders, the squadron had a big evening, with some of the Australians as guests. Caldwell offered a toast to the 'four empty chairs and to their

future'. He told his mother only that there had been 'quite a lot of war lately . . . we had a rather long day'.⁵³

Piggott, though, was alive. He had become lost in the morning mist and crash-landed close to the enemy trenches. German artillery ranged in on the wounded SE5a, but Piggott set fire to the machine and crawled to safety. His nerves shattered, the young man was sent back to England on Home Establishment in early July.⁵⁴

The casualties continued. On 12 May, orders came through for a squadron-strength evening patrol. With Caldwell away, Mannock led the sortie. After spotting a 10-strong intruder formation north of Armentières, he wheeled the squadron south and east and gained height for an interception. With a good 1000-foot height advantage, they struck. Mannock 'closed on the rearmost machine, firing at right angles to it. The German panicked and ploughed into a neighbouring aeroplane. Mannock then pounced on a Pfalz, loosing bullets from both his Lewis and Vickers in turn.'⁵⁵

Mannock's three victories were supplemented by a host of claims from Young, Giles and the old man of the squadron, Roxburgh-Smith. It was his fourth victory. It was one of the squadron's most successful days, but it did not feel like it. Caldwell returned to find that 22-year-old Bilo Dolan was missing and Mannock grief-stricken.⁵⁶ The two men were close. Before departing for France, Mannock had flown on at least two occasions with Dolan to his hometown of Wellingborough, where the pair had entranced the locals with aerobatics.⁵⁷

Over the Western Front, Mannock had nurtured his young charge in the ways of aggressive fighter pilots, with startling results. 'Dolan is developing into a corker,' recorded one airman. 'He has no fear. He goes, like Grid, bald-headed for every Hun he sees. If he doesn't meet with any bad luck, he will soon be one of our aces.'⁵⁸ By the second week of May, Dolan had six victories to his credit. The sudden death of his friend momentarily undid Mannock and he retired to his hut. His sobbing could be heard by those close by. When Caldwell called the men together for the obligatory post-loss festivities, Mannock managed to join in.⁵⁹

Ira Jones's new roommate, 'Twist' Giles, formally of the Somerset Light Infantry, acknowledged the harsh reality of the situation.

We had a job to do and we did it. We had no time to think about the human consequences, about the fact that it was another man probably with a wife and family back home in Germany that you were pursuing. The moment you held back on compassionate grounds it was odds-on that you were the one that



would be spinning to your death. There was really no room for the chivalry of the air concept that is talked so much about, except on occasions when we were on our side of the lines and there was no chance of the enemy escaping. Kill or be killed is a stark and clinical statement of truth when applied to the Western Front in 1918.

He acknowledged that the pilot's attitude could smack 'of callousness, of revelling in the horror of war when you consider the pranks we used to get up to, the way we collected "trophies" and so on. But if you didn't look after your own skin and if you didn't treat the whole affair in a decidedly eccentric way then you were heading for trouble.'⁶⁰

Mannock's obsession with shooting down Germans continued unabated. Nearly two weeks before Dolan's death, as Caldwell recalled, he and Mannock had been flying together on the British side of the lines just outside Ypres.

They spotted a Hun two-seater beetling back towards the lines, and got down just in time to prevent this. The Hun crashed, but not badly, and most people would have been content with this — but not Mick Mannock, who dived half a dozen times at the machine, spraying bullets at the pilot and the observer, who were still showing signs of life. I witnessed this business, and flew alongside of Mick, yelling at the top of my voice (which was rather useless), and warning him to stop. On being questioned as to his wild behaviour after we had landed, he heatedly replied, 'The swines are better dead — no prisoners for me!'⁶¹

'The loss of Dolan is a severe blow to us,' wrote Jones.

He was a very full-out guy, and very popular. . . He was a bosom pal of Grid and Mick, so I expect to see some Hun feathers flying about to-morrow, if they can find any. This fight was the most successful the Squadron has had so far. Mick bagged three; Young, Giles and Roxburgh[-Smith] one each. This is Giles's first victory. He is very bucked about it. When we were getting ready for the patrol, he told me that he was feeling a little bloodthirsty and wanted to avenge Skedden. There is no doubt that the spirit of revenge should be cultivated

The loss of the likable Henry Dolan hit 74 Squadron hard. 'Got 7 Huns in 3 Weeks' Keith Caldwell wrote next to this image of Dolan in his photo album.

during a war. It helps the fighter to put a little more ginger into his fighting. 'Kill or be killed' is a good motto. I hate half-measures . . .⁶²

Losses meant the need for replacements. Eighteen-year-old Leigh Nixon, who joined the squadron on 1 May, was desperate to acquit himself in the air.⁶³ Caldwell set the Englishman daily non-operational flights so that he could familiarise himself with his machine and with the surrounding countryside. On the ground, Nixon observed and learnt from men returning from patrols. It was 74 Squadron's standard 'working up' procedure. In the mess, the men continually emphasised the lessons absorbed from Caldwell and Mannock and their own daily dances with death, particularly that, though it might feel natural, a pilot should never dive away from an enemy machine when under attack. The trick was to immediately set the SE5a into a steep turn and jockey for a better position — or, in Nixon's case, wait for help to arrive.

On 17 May, William Cairnes slotted Nixon into an 8.30 a.m. patrol and volunteered Jones as chaperon. The latter reiterated to Nixon the lessons of the past fortnight, but 'promised to try to get the Hun away from him'.⁶⁴ Forty-five minutes later, they encountered enemy fighters. Jones picked out an isolated light-green machine, a perfect introduction for Nixon. Jones attacked and expected to find his wingman following, but he was nowhere to be seen. He had become separated from Jones who, to his horror, watched Nixon diving away from a German who was pumping lead into him. The SE5a caught fire and became a swirling torch.

Nixon's first and last action was detailed in the magazine of the St Paul's Cathedral choir, in which he had sung as a boy: 'He was one of a patrol of eight and fell in with an enemy patrol of 10. He singled out his particular enemy, and followed him down far out of the fight, and was just going to finish him off, when two other Hun machines dropped on his tail, and he was seen to fall to the ground in flames.' Caldwell wrote to Nixon's family: 'Although he was with us such a very short time, I never saw a keener or more ambitious officer, and the whole squadron deeply regret his loss.'⁶⁵

It was the first of two such letters Caldwell wrote that day. Nineteen-year-old Lambert Francis Barton was killed when his machine was struck by anti-aircraft fire at 7000 feet.⁶⁶ The freakish direct hit undid the machine, and both the flaming wreckage and Barton tumbled from the sky. He and Nixon had arrived with 74 Squadron on the same day and both were killed on 17 May.⁶⁷

That evening, Canadian Sydney Russell, a former army officer who had also recently

joined the unit, was hospitalised after he was badly injured when he crash-landed.⁶⁸

These were not Caldwell's only losses. Hidden among the turnover of pilots were others who never even made it into operations. When they saw limping shrapnel- and bullet-riddled machines returning from battle, and the all too common near-death accidents, some novice airmen succumbed to the cold embrace of fear and refused to fly. At 74 Squadron, Mannock's tactic of regaling newcomers with stories of burning machines and fiery deaths did not help. The men who daily suppressed their fears in the face of imminent death were often disdainful of the timorous.

'Sometime today,' wrote Jones, 'one of the new members, who has been with the squadron only three days, turned yellow. He has been sent back to England. Why he wasn't sent to the trenches or shot I don't know. He went sobbing to Grid that he couldn't do the job. That he had nerves. And he has not even been over the lines! He'll now become an instructor or a staff officer and get promoted, I suppose.'⁶⁹

Mannock had the man's wings ripped off. 'Many couldn't cope with the situation,' recalled Giles. 'You could understand the reasons why, but somehow we were scornful of their mental state. There was no place for the pilot who couldn't do what he had to do, because you would never be able to trust him.' Every month, a handful of men appeared on the list of fresh arrivals to the squadron who only days later were struck off its inventory, having seen little or no action at all.⁷⁰ To Caldwell's mind, it was a harsh necessity that served to lengthen the lives of those who remained *and* those who departed.