

The Roving Squadron

By Robert Sidney Bowen

More planes shot down than in any other unit—more men gone west—that was the record of Eighty Squadron. And the first job they handed young Watson was a tough one—to be carried out “no matter what the cost.”

IT WAS Alec Watson's first night with the squadron on the Front. In addition, it was Thursday night, and the members of 80 Squadron, in keeping with the Thursday night custom in every British mess, had drunk to the King's health, and were now proceeding to forget that the war existed, and that another patrol was scheduled for dawn.

Feeling a bit out of place, Alec sat apart from the others, and merely watched them in awe and admiration. Here he was at last, on the Front, *and with 80 Squadron!* The squadron which for the last three months had been moved all over the Front, and each time to the place where the skies were most filled with German planes. It was a roving squadron, an emergency unit at the beck and call of ground forces about to make a push, or resist a strong counter-attack. As such, its replacements were terrifically high. Of the 18 pilots who made up the original A, B and C flights, only six remained. The rest had found their own fiery grave somewhere between Zeebrugge and the Marne.

80 Squadron! The squadron that held the record for enemy planes shot down. The squadron that boasted of more decorations than any other unit. The squadron that had drunk silent toasts to more men “gone west” than any other unit. The squadron that was the pride of the Flying Corps. And he, Alec Watson, was now one of its members!

In one corner of the room, “Tubby” Collins, one of the “lucky six,” and now leader of A Flight, was pounding out “There Was an Old Monk” on the rickety piano, while seven or eight pilots told the world in not so harmonious tones of the accomplishments of the Old Monk. In another corner, Major Leman, squadron commander, and

four others were playing *vingt-et-un* for francs which might never be spent by the winner. Scattered about the room were other groups, sprawled comfortably in chairs and discussing everything from the last patrol to good numbers to call when next in Paris on leave.

But it was not what they were doing that fascinated Alec the most. It was the expression that seemed to be stamped on every face. Faces that looked years older than the bodies. Faces that were bronzed by sun, yet nipped by propeller wash at high altitudes. Faces with drawn lips that sagged a bit at the corners. And the eyes! They too were all the same. Hard, a bit red-rimmed, with an almost dull look, yet quick to fasten on the slightest movement nearby. Eyes that had seen much, and would see more before their owner's number went up. Eyes that had many wrinkles at the corners. That was it—the wrinkles! They were what made the expression on every face look the same.

And he, Alec Watson, if he were lucky enough to live through it, would soon have a similar expression on his face, too.

“Rather a jolly crowd, what?”

Alec started and glanced up. Captain Windsor, leader of B Flight, was smiling down at him whimsically.

“Yes, sir,” Alec agreed quickly. “They don't seem to mind all this sort of thing at all.”

“All what sort of thing?”

“Oh, I mean the war. Patrols, fights, and all that sort of thing.”

Captain Windsor studied the amber-colored liquid in his glass. “Why, it really makes no difference whether they mind or not,” he said at length. “So they don't that's all.”

"I guess you're right, sir," Alec said. "I hope that I'll be that way, too."

"Good egg. Don't worry, you will. You'll have to, I'm afraid. But you're not scared of it all, are you?"

"Oh no!" Alec made haste to reply. "No, of course not."

The captain raised his eyebrows just a trifle.

"Really? What a lucky fellow. Wish I were like you. I've had the wind up ever since I came out last year. Lucky chap, you, Watson."

ALEC wanted to kick himself, and was on the point of asking Captain Windsor to oblige him, when the door opened and a brigade orderly entered. The man clicked his heels and snapped a gloved hand to the peak of his service cap. At the same time his eyes roved the room until they settled upon Major Leman. Then he marched over to the card table, saluted the commanding officer and gave him a dispatch.

Every man in the room stopped whatever he was doing and looked at the major, who ripped open the sealed envelope and looked at its contents. A moment later he shoved it into his pocket, drained his glass, and got to his feet.

"Another special patrol, gentlemen," he said quietly. "Every plane will take off at four-forty-five. Meet at ten thousand above Avalon, then proceed south to Le Catelet, where you will meet three D.H.s from 209 Squadron. Escort them over to take pictures, and bring them back. The patrol will wash out upon return to Le Catelet."

The major tapped his fingernails against his empty glass.

"Brigade wants the pictures badly, gentlemen," he went on grimly. "Getting them means much to the success of the push on the twenty-first. The dispatch states that no enemy planes "are to be allowed to interfere with the photographic planes, and that they are to have absolute protection from start to finish, no matter what the cost. Each photographic plane will concentrate on its own objective. All the plates must be delivered to Brigade, no matter what the cost! I'm sure you gentlemen understand."

To Alec it seemed that the major's announcement left the pilots totally unmoved. With no comment, they took up whatever they were doing when the dispatch arrived.

"You see, Watson?" smiled Captain Windsor. "It makes no difference whether they mind or not, so they don't."

Alec nodded, and felt a bit ashamed of the fact that his tongue had become so uncomfortably dry.

"We'll all be turning in shortly," went on the captain. "Wait for me, and I'll walk to the hutments with you. Got one or two things I'd like to tell you about. You're flying in my flight, you know."

Eventually the members of 80 Squadron began to leave the mess-room in small groups. Alec remained where he was. It was not long before Captain Windsor called across the room to him.

"As Captain Windsor has told you, Watson," said the major, "you're going over with his flight. Rather unfortunate that you can't have an easier patrol for your first trip over, but Windsor will keep an eye on you. He'll tell you just what to do. Be sure and do it. Well, good-night, gentlemen. See you all on the tarmac at four-thirty."

"Good-night, sir," said Alec and Captain Windsor together, as the squadron commander turned on his heel.

"As the major said, Watson," began the captain, once they were outside, "it is rather a rotten shame that your first trip over could not be under more cheerful circumstances. However, you'll be flying on my right, and if we get into any trouble, I'll give you the signal to cut loose and go back."

"Go back?"

"Quite right, go back. We'll need you again. You see, Watson, your inexperience would make you so much cold meat for the Huns. You stick close to me and I'll give you the word, or rather the signal, when to break away and go back to the airdrome."

"That doesn't seem cricket," remarked Alec, "leaving you chaps like that."

"Oh, don't worry, it would be a help to us. I couldn't possibly keep my eye on you all of the time when in a dog-fight, you know. However, cheer up, you may not be able to break clear of the formation and go back. One never knows out here, you know. At any rate, don't feel that you are being cheated. The war won't be over tomorrow night."

FOR a few moments the pair walked down the darkened road in silence. Alec glanced to the east from whence came a muffled monotonous rumble. The sky was tinted red and yellow low down on the horizon, and it flickered as though vibrating from the concussion of the roaring guns below. The front lines!

The captain stopped in front of the first of a row of small knocked-together huts.

“Well, here we are, Watson,” he said. “Turn in and try to get some sleep. These dawn patrols are a frightful disturbance to one’s rest, really. Cheerio! I’ll see you on the tarmac. After that, all you’ll have to do will be to stick close to me, and do as I signal.”

Alec hesitated. “I say, Captain Windsor,” he managed to get out. “I know I must be a frightful bore to you. But really, what did Brigade mean by ‘no matter what the cost?’”

“Just that, Watson,” came the quiet answer. “The D.H.s must have safe escort there and back. The picture plate must be delivered to Brigade, regardless. In other words, Watson, no Hun plane must be allowed to get through to take a shot at the D.H.s.”

“But suppose they do get through,” Alec argued. “It seems almost impossible to believe that someone wouldn’t have the chance to take a crack at the D.H.s. How about your guns jamming, for instance?”

Captain Watson fumbled in his tunic pocket and withdrew a well-used briar. He stuck it between his teeth.

“If my guns jammed at such a time,” he said a moment later, “I’d pray like hell for one of the other chaps to come down and finish my job. But if there wasn’t anyone near, why, I suppose that I’d jolly well fly into the beggar. A nasty business, of course, but I hope the guns won’t jam. Well, I must toddle along now. Cheerio, old chap, it really makes no difference whether one minds or not, you know. So just try not minding. It’s a big help, really.”

Sleep came hard to Alec. In thought, he flew the photographic patrol a thousand times. And a thousand times he saw Captain Windsor’s Camel crash into a German Fokker that had broken through the escort and was diving on one of the D.H.s. Again and again he tried to school himself to the fact that, like the other pilots, he didn’t

mind at all. Eventually he fell asleep, only to be awakened early by his batman.

The thoughts of the night returned to him immediately, and pondering upon them, he pulled on his service uniform, climbed into his Sidcot suit, picked up his helmet, goggles and gloves, and then plodded up to the mess room to gulp down a cup of scalding hot tea and munch on a couple of biscuits. A small portion of brandy was set before him, and he picked it up and tried to drink it. The tea had gone down with an effort but the brandy would not go down. With a great effort, he succeeded in forcing one mouthful down. The burning effect seemed to shoot all through him, yet his hands felt cold and clammy. He glanced sideways at the others who, unspeaking, were drinking their tea and munching their biscuits, before tossing off the shot of brandy. Alec wondered if away down they felt as he did—scared to the very core—possessed with a great sense of fear of the unknown, the mystic future, that actually made his chest ache. Then he remembered the captain’s words, “It doesn’t make any difference; whether they mind or not, so they don’t.”

CLINGING desperately to that thought, he made his way out of the mess room and across a stretch of soggy marsh to a little level spot, upon one side of which sat three weather-torn hangars. Lined up on the tarmac in front were eighteen Bentley-powered Camels in groups of six.

For a moment Alec paused. It was an impressive sight. Every propeller was turning over, and in the semi-light of the early dawn, the flames from the exhausts appeared to be making a crimson-tinted circle about each engine. The metallic sound of working parts seemed to blend in as, an echo of the rumbling over the eastern horizon that was gradually changing from a deep red to a dirty yellow.

The dawn patrol! The sight of the waiting planes thrilled Alec just a bit, yet made little quivers of fear ripple up his back. He shook himself in ashamed annoyance and walked over to the second group.

Captain Windsor was already in his plane and industriously engaged in polishing the glass of his telescopic gun sight. He turned as Alec approached.

“Ah, there you are, Watson. Greetings, and all that sort of thing. That’s your bus right next to this. Brand new and tested. Sorry you can’t make a test flight first, but she’s in fine fettle. Had her up myself only yesterday. Wish she were mine. Sergeant Paxton will fasten your straps and things. Take off right after me and stick close, and go back home when I signal. Right-o, my lad, away with you.”

Finally Alec was settled in his plane. Everything was in order. Throttling down, he watched Captain Windsor taxi out a ways, turn tight and head into the wind and toward the lines. A roar, a cloud of dust, and the captain’s streamered Camel was racing down the plot of level ground.

A minute or two later, and Alec was roaring after him.

When ten thousand feet had been reached, Alec was hugging the captain’s right wing as the pair flew in wide circles. One by one, the four other members of B flight dropped into place and then the entire flight took up its position a few hundred feet above, a bit to the left, and behind A flight that was now heading toward Le Catelet. Above, a bit to the right, and behind B flight, C flight took up its position. In that V of V’s formation, 80 Squadron winged its way to a rendezvous with the photographic D.H.s.

Up to that point, Alec had not dared to take his eye off the captain’s plane, lest he fall out of position. But as the entire squadron sailed straight onward, he looked over the side of the cockpit.

Between him and the earth floated the dawn-touched banks of cloud. To his left the dawn was fast becoming the day. The sun, as seen from that altitude, was well above the horizon, and as its rays struck the plane, little shafts of colored light shot out in all directions.

In time, the cloud banks drifted aside to leave the ground completely revealed in all of its ugly brown appearance. Roads, distinguished only by fine yellowish-brown lines, all ran in a general easterly direction. Here and there a river, made silver by the sun piercing a slight ground mist, wound its way along. At intervals, patches of ground were seen to belch forth tiny puffs of dirty smoke—German shells seeking out British lines of communication. The front lines were still too far to the left to be clearly spotted, although a pall

of low-hanging smoke and mist gave indication as to their approximate location.

A left turn by A Flight brought Alec’s attention back to the task at hand. Captain Windsor was dipping his left wing. That meant that B Flight was to turn left also, which it did a moment later. Presently the squadron was heading straight for the front lines. Alec noticed though that the leaders of B and C Flights had drawn their respective units away from A Flight so that now the squadron was patrolling a greater area in the sky. He also noticed something else that made his tightly pressed lips twitch and his heart pound.

Some three thousand feet below, three D.H. photographic planes winged their way along. The meeting had taken place and now the important mission was under way. Alec Watson and 80 Squadron were going over!

ALEC tried hard to really believe “that it didn’t make any difference.” It was extremely difficult even to consider that thought now that he was nearing enemy territory. He really did mind, and so did the other members of the squadron, regardless of their length of time on the Front. Something made him feel sure of that. Something else, too, made him feel sure that they would stick it out, even though the same sickening fear was eating into their hearts as was eating into his own. He’d stick it out, too! Damn Captain Windsor! Had he seen that fear in his heart showing on his face, and therefore instructed him to go back when things were likely to get hot? No, the captain would not be like that.

A glance at his altimeter showed that B Flight had come down to seven thousand feet. A Flight was a good two thousand feet lower, and an equal distance above was C Flight. The three D.H.s, now well apart from each other, were flying due east a thousand feet below A Flight.

Minutes passed and then the entire aerial cavalcade was directly over the front-line trenches.

The sharp staccato of an aerial machine gun made Alec start in his seat, and put his nerves on edge., A second later, though, he got control when he saw that it was only Captain Windsor firing a short burst to keep the oil in his guns from becoming congealed, for the air was biting at that hour of dawn.

A nod from the captain, and Alec followed suit, a thrill quivering through him as his shots sped forward to come to earth eventually in German territory. One by one, the rest of the members of B Flight warmed their guns as they flew deeper into the realms of the enemy.

The terror that had gripped Alec at the sharp reports of machine-gun fire was doubled when a great gob of oily black smoke suddenly appeared off his right wing, accompanied by a sound similar to the bark of a big dog.

So close seemed the smoke ball that for a second Alec thought that his plane had been hit. He was receiving his baptism of fire! German anti-aircraft guns were peppering the invading planes. Oily smoke clouds began to dot the sky all around, and as each "dog-bark" struck upon his eardrums, Alec's heart missed a beat.

As soon as the first archie burst had made itself known, Captain Windsor proceeded to lead his flight clear. Eventually the squadron cleared the archie area, and reached a position well behind the German lines. For well over an hour the squadron patrolled the photographic area. In that time Alec succeeded in beating down his fear somewhat and was actually beginning to enjoy his aerial occupation.

Then hell broke loose!

From out of the sun came the rattle of aerial machine-gun fire. Immediately a red Very light arced up from the pistol in Captain Windsor's hand. Still holding it above his head, he waved it frantically in Alec's direction, and then motioned toward the front lines.

It was the captain's signal to turn back, but for the moment Alec was powerless to move a muscle. In rigid position he watched the rest of the flight spread out. Up zoomed Captain Windsor's Camel toward the leader of some thirty planes now clearly silhouetted against the sky. His guns spat red tongues of flame, and the diving enemy Fokker veered off to the left, turned over and went plunging straight down, leaving a wing with its iron cross markings fluttering in midair.

With a terrible effort Alec broke himself loose from the power that held him motionless. He banked sharply off to the right, and just in time, for as he went up on wing tip, a burst of shots from above tore their way through his instrument

board. The altimeter and compass virtually disintegrated before his eyes.

The air was now full of twisting and turning planes. The diving attack had been broken up. One Fokker got past, but he continued straight on down, on fire as the result of a well placed burst from Tubby Collins' guns. And now the entire lot were milling around at a furious rate.

ALEC had not fired a single shot. He dared not, for whenever an iron cross marking got in his gun sights, it was almost immediately replaced by a British colored bull's-eye. His brain and muscles refused to function together, and his guns stayed silent. He felt sick at the pit of his stomach, and when he saw Tubby Collins' plane lock wings with a diving Fokker, he felt that he could not hang on to himself any longer. He was flying on ragged nerves alone, and trying in a dazed sort of way to get clear of the dogfight area.

He had just reached the edge of the ring when suddenly holes began to appear in the fabric of his wings, and bits of wood to leap off the struts. He looked up and his heart stood still as he saw the business end of a Fokker D VII bearing down on him. Something tugged at the leg of his Sidcot suit and the joystick quivered in his grasp. A cold sweat covered his face and misted the glass of his goggles. Half-blind, he jerked the plane into a half-roll, and as he went over, he caught sight of a blue shadow tearing through the air.

Jerking his head around, he was just in time to see Captain Windsor's Camel zoom over the Fokker, snap around and come straight down. The Fokker pilot could not get clear and took the full load of the captain's burst. Seconds later the German plane was a falling mass of flames.

As soon as the Fokker flamed up, Captain Windsor pulled out of his dive, roared by Alec and pointed at the front lines. Then he banked off and was gone. Dully Alec realized that he was out of the dogfight area with nothing but clear air between him and home. Almost automatically he banked in that direction and put his nose down a bit to get the extra speed.

A few minutes of straight nose-down flying, and then he turned his head to take a last look at the fight. It was now well above him and to the left. As he looked, another plane went sliding down with the tell-tale stream of oily smoke

sticking out behind. From that distance he could not tell whether the plane was British or German.

Then he glanced down in the direction of the three photographic planes. They were still circling above their objectives as though the pilots and observers were oblivious to the death fight above them. The sight of them carrying on with their jobs, when almost any moment death might come down with a rush, jolted Alec's conscience. Hardly realizing it, he banked around and headed toward them. Then he remembered the captain's explicit order to get clear and go home. He tried to think it out, and then suddenly he saw something that made up his mind.

A lone Fokker had broken through the escort and was going down on the nearest photographic plane. Not a single British plane outside of Alec's was within diving distance.

At that second the Brigade order flashed through Alec's brain—"No matter what the cost!" He really didn't know just what he was doing, but actually he was pushing the stick all the way forward and piling down after the Fokker with both his guns chattering away, although he was still away out of range.

Once started, he fought with himself to keep on going. This was not the triumph of courage. He had not stilled that gnawing in his heart. He was still afraid. But he kept on going down.

What the hell did it matter, anyway? There was a job to be done!

THE pilot of the "spotted" D.H. was trying desperately to shake off the diving Fokker that was bent on getting by to zoom up underneath in a blind spot. A left split-arc, a half-roll, a zoom and a couple of stall turns found the Fokker still close after its meat. To try and out-dive the Fokker and get to the lines would be fatal. The D.H. observer had long since dropped his photographic task and was pumping lead at the Fokker.

Just as Alec got within range, the German got his position beneath the D.H. Up came the Fokker's nose and its guns raked the photographic ship from propeller to tailskid. But as the Fokker fell off the top of the stall, it slid right down into the fire area of Alec's guns. The pilot probably never knew what hit him. Down he went with one wing completely folded back against the fuselage. Down, to stay down, for keeps!

Before Alec got the whole picture, he was five hundred feet below the D. H., still diving, and both guns still hammering away. It was instinct alone that made him take his thumbs off the trigger releases, and to pull out of the dive. Turning back, he searched the air for the D.H. It seemed to have vanished in thin air.

Then he spotted it off to his right and apparently in a long flat glide. He looked for the two other photographic planes, and finally made them out heading nose down for the British lines. A glance overhead showed the dogfight still in progress, but fast becoming hidden by a cloud layer.

A queer feeling of emptiness gripped Alec as he headed for the gliding D. H. He could see the observer hanging head down over the side of his cockpit. It did not require a second look to tell that the man was dead. At that point of approach the pilot was hidden beneath the wing, but when Alec got alongside, he took a look. One was enough. There, slumped against the side of the cockpit, was the pilot, face to the sky and mouth sagging open. Alec shuddered as he was able to make out the dark marks on the man's cheek—little streams of blood that had their beginning from beneath the pilot's helmet.

Wildly Alec gazed about the sky for the gladdening sight of a British plane coming down to join him. But not a single spot silhouetted itself against the now overcast heavens.

The situation was one which left him blank. He had no idea what to do. There was one of the photographic planes with its pilot and observer dead, gliding down through the air. But it was not gliding toward the British lines, its nose was pointed into German territory. Death had probably overtaken the pilot before he could turn the plane toward home.

Perhaps it was the ghastliness of it all that left Alec powerless to turn back. Perhaps it was hope that the pilot was not really dead and would most any moment come to life, and perhaps it was a sense of loyalty to the dead. Alec could not tell. He was just faintly conscious of the fact that he had throttled his engine and was following the D.H. down, making wide circles above it.

THREE times he saw the D.H. start to slide off on wingtip. But each time it righted itself, as

though even in death the pilot was at the stick. It was getting very low and heading for a large plot of farm land. Almost every minute Alec expected to see troops on the ground rushing toward the spot where the D.H. would eventually hit. Mechanically he got his guns ready. But not a single figure could he see below them, not even a civilian. Alec felt a wild desire to shriek at the dead airman to pull out of the glide. His heart pounded against his ribs, and the weirdness of it all seemed to press in on him from all sides. But he still stuck to the death plane.

Finally it struck. Wheels buried themselves in soft sod and the under-carriage crumpled like match wood. A wing tip dug itself in and the plane teetered on its nose before it fell over on its back like a broken bird—a broken bird of war, its last flight done.

As the plane struck, something seemed to snap in Alec's head. Cursing at the top of his voice, he yanked back his throttle and circled into position to land. He settled fifty yards away from the crumpled D.H., and scrambling out, started on a dead run for it. By the time he reached the plane, his head was reeling like a top and his lungs were ready to burst. But he hardly felt it, and grabbing a bit of wing, he wrenched it aside to make an opening to the upturned cockpit. Then he crawled beneath and fumbled with the safety belt buckled on the pilot. A jagged edge ripped his hands, and they were covered with blood when finally, panting for air, he dragged the pilot clear of the wreckage and stretched him out on the sod.

Back he went for the observer. Eventually he too was on the ground clear of the wreckage. With tears half blinding him, Alec opened the front of their flying suits and in turn pressed his ear against the chest of each man. Trembling, he got to his feet, and got his hand to the edge of his flying helmet—the only tribute possible to the gallant dead.

A moment later he was beneath the wrecked plane again, madly trying to tear the photo-plate box loose from its fuselage fastening. He got it out and set it down. The camera itself was half buried in the sod but Alec was able to remove the one plate that was in the camera.

Staggering to his feet, he picked up the box of photo plates, put the extra one in it and then went

reeling off to his own plane that was waiting with propeller ticking over.

His whole body was half numb when he finally got into the cockpit. Without bothering to fasten his safety straps, he lodged the photo-plate box on his lap and opened up the throttle. The plane lunged forward, its wheels sinking in the soft sod, but Alec finally got clear. And when once clear, he headed for the front lines.

WHEN he neared the lines, he became dimly conscious that troops on the ground were spraying him with rifle fire. But he did not turn to right or left, roaring straight ahead with eyes fixed on the British side of No-Man's-Land.

He had just about made it when his engine coughed a bit, sputtered and died out. Frantically he tried to make his glide as flat as possible. It was a hundred-to-one chance that he could clear No-Man's-Land and reach the British trenches. The ground fire was now concentrated on him with telling effect. Bullets ripped and tore their way through wood and fabric on all sides. Suddenly his right leg lost all feeling.

He was but twenty feet up and still some distance to go. The plane seemed to stand still in the air. He knew he was going to crash, but he fought to make that crash in the British trenches and not in No-Man's-Land.

He got one arm around the box of plates and made a last effort. Back came the stick to get the extra inch of altitude. The plane went sluggishly up a bit and then the nose dropped and plunged down. But in that second Alec saw the upturned faces of British soldiers below him. He had made it.

Then he crashed into a shell hole. A giant hand seemed to lift him clear of the crumpling plane and fling him into the mud—but clear. He felt that his lungs had been pressed flat, but with his last bit of strength he staggered to his feet, his bloody hands still clutching the photo-plate box.

Dimly he saw uniforms about him and heard voices. It seemed that the ground was coming up to slam him in the face. He put out a trembling hand as he started to sway forward. Strong arms grabbed him, and he opened his mouth.

"Photo plates—42nd Brigade—quick—important," he gurgled.

Then a black sea enveloped him.

When he opened his eyes again, he was between white sheets. A face was floating above him. He recognized the features of Captain Windsor.

The man was speaking. "Greetings, old man. How goes it?"

Alec smiled weakly. "Oh, quite all right, sir," he said. "I don't mind at all now, really."

The captain patted his shoulder.

"Don't worry, old chap, I understand. But that was a damn fine bit of work, even if you did come back against orders. I saw you but could not get down. Three very nasty Jerries on my tail. Our balloons spotted you after that, and reported to Brigade. Looks like decorations and Paris leave for you. Lucky fellow, I must—"

The captain stopped. Alec was catching up on lost sleep.