

McCudden flew his last sortie. The famous "ace" left the squadron on the 5th. A former aero engine mechanic, McCudden tinkered with all his aircraft, inducing the best performance from them. On 17 March Irwin crashed on landing; he was issued with B35, the next-to-last SE.5a used by McCudden, and flew it until 1 April when it was retired from operational use, being employed as a practice machine for new pilots.<sup>(3)</sup>

On 21 March 1918 the Germans opened a great offensive, intending to defeat the Allies before American manpower began to reverse the odds. No.56 Squadron was thrown into ground strafing as well as aerial combat. Four days after the battle began the unit abandoned Baizieux in favour of Valheureux airfield. Irwin returned from a patrol that day to find that the landing ground had been evacuated, leaving only a bowser crew to refuel the aircraft and direct them to their new base.

There was a nightmare quality to the next two weeks as the pilots saw cities like Albert and Bray-sur-Somme burning. For a time it appeared that the Third and Fifth Armies were folding up. In these circumstances British fighters were committed to the land battle, conducting many strafing attacks and low-level raids with 25-pound bombs. The enemy soldiers, advancing along roads and through open country, were far more vulnerable to aircraft than they had been in their trench systems, protected by machine guns and anti-aircraft batteries. Irwin remembered years afterwards that the SE.5 pilots were particularly keen to catch German infantrymen who might be detrainning and hence bunched up. He also recalled that a German scout got the jump on him during one such attack, putting holes in his fuel tank. He was lucky that there was no fire; he crash-landed in a shell crater and regained his unit.<sup>(4)</sup>

The German Imperial Air Service outnumbered the British at this point, but enemy aircraft played a less significant part in the battle. Their troops were marching away from the enemy air bases, yet capturing few suitable landing fields as they advanced. Consequently, the German pilots found it more difficult to give adequate air cover and conduct attacks on Allied soldiers. The intensity of air fighting varied greatly from day to day—very hot on 1 April (the birth date of the Royal Air Force), minimal on 4 April, and sporadic on other days. In No.56 Squadron illness and casualties took their toll. By early April the unit had only eleven pilots fit for duty, rather than the normal eighteen. Every healthy pilot was required for each patrol.

The Somme front (Arleux-Moreuil-Chauny) was stabilized by 5 April, which brought relief to the squadrons in that sector. Meanwhile the Germans opened fresh attacks—in Flanders (9-29 April) and then down the Aisne and Marne valleys (27 May-6 June). These met with initial successes before bogging down short of their principal objectives.

Although No.56 Squadron was on a relatively quiet front during much of April, there remained enough action for all. Ken Junor was lost on the 23rd—one month after being awarded the Military Cross. At the time of his death he had been credited with eight victories over enemy aircraft—two crashed, two in flames, and four driven down out of control. "A most brilliant fighting pilot" was how Balcombe-Brown had described him. As if fate were determined to maintain the level of "Canadianization" of No.56, Lieutenant H. A. S. Molyneux of Toronto was posted in, effective 28 April.

On 2 May Lieutenant Irwin lost a friend. Major Balcombe-Brown was shot down in a battle between thirteen SE.5s on one hand and about ten Pfalz scouts and Fokker Dr.I triplanes on the other. No one saw the New Zealander go down. There was some consolation in knowing that three Pfalz aircraft and a Dr.I had been shot down.<sup>(5)</sup>

The next morning the squadron was out in force—ten SE.5a fighters patrolling east of Albert. Lieutenant Trevor Durrant attacked a Rumpler two-seater, killing the observer. Gun jams forced him to break off the action, but Irwin and Captain E. D. Atkinson took up the chase, firing at the diving enemy machine. Irwin followed it down until it crashed at Montauban. At 10.15 a.m. the pattern was repeated on another Rumpler, this one at 16,000 feet over Beaucourt. Durrant took out the observer; Atkinson and Irwin peppered it until it began to descend, smoking and unsteady, yet taking no evasive action. Both victories (one crashed, one out of control) were shared among the three men. Later that day Irwin and Burden crossed the lines to drop message bags, inquiring of the Germans if they knew anything about five pilots of No.56 who had gone missing in the previous week.

Major E. J. L. W. Gilchrist MC arrived to take command of the

squadron on 5 May. Another new face was Captain W. O. Boger of Winnipeg who reported to the unit on 24 May.

Not all sorties were as exciting or conclusive as that of 3 May. On many occasions it seemed as though the German air service was on vacation. At other times enemy machines were seen but not engaged, or combats were inconclusive. An example of this occurred on 10 June when Irwin, Burden, and two others tried to shoot down a Dr.I. The Fokker pilot outmaneuvered them all. Finally the SE.5s had to break off the action to escape from hostile ground fire.

It was not all work and no play. On days when the weather was "dud" the officers and other ranks built a swimming pool. For water they dug small channels from shell holes to the pool. The result was a pleasant, if somewhat muddy, form of recreation.<sup>(6)</sup>

On 28 June Irwin clashed dramatically and conclusively with the enemy. His combat report recounts the action in terse, dry, yet vivid fashion:

"On patrol led by Captain Maxwell at 8.10 p.m. met a large formation of E.A. (enemy aircraft) south of Suzanne under bank of cloud at 12,000 feet. I got on one Phalz (sic) tail and fired a short burst. He turned under me and two Albatross Scouts got on my tail and drove me down. At 2,000 feet I got on one E.A.'s tail and fired a drum of Lewis and about 200 rounds of Vickers. E.A. went into a vertical dive with full engine and crashed beside a wood near Dompierre. I recrossed the lines at 200 feet chased by other E.A."

From time to time Irwin had led patrols, but on July 5 he was formally given command of "C" Flight; the next day this was changed to "B" Flight, Major Crowe having left to take up duties elsewhere. Promotion to captain followed on the 16th, the day after Hank Burden was designated "C" Flight commander. That meant that all three flight commanders were now Canadians, Bill Boger having been handed "A" Flight on 1 July. Irwin and Burden in particular maintained a lively, friendly rivalry. For as long as possible "Sambo" lorded his seniority over Hank. Later, when Burden received his first decoration, he pointedly reminded Irwin just which of them was a "hero".<sup>(7)</sup>

Yet there was bad news as well. On 10 July almost all the officers travelled to Auxi-le-Chateau to attend the funeral of "Mac" McCudden. The great British pilot—victor in more than 50 combats—had been killed during a routine take-off the previous evening.

It was a perilous business, and the hazards were not restricted to enemy aircraft. On 17 July Irwin was on a patrol which had to return to base in a thunderstorm. They were just getting their aircraft into the hangars when hail began pelting down. On the evening of the 24th he participated in another patrol over the lines which was jumped by Pfalz scouts. Bill Boger shot down two, but the hard part was getting home. The SE.5s had to descend through more than 10,000 feet of thunderclouds, with rain hammering away at them. They landed after dark; several pilots had resorted to their emergency fuel tanks before reaching Valheureux.<sup>(8)</sup>

The RAF undertook a major attack on Epinoy airfield in the early afternoon of 1 August. Nos. 3 and 56 Squadrons (Camels and SE.5s), escorted by Nos. 11, 60, and 87 Squadrons (Bristol F.2b, SE.5, and Dolphin aircraft) had been preparing for days for this operation, with specific targets allocated to each pilot in the raiding force. A total of 65 aircraft participated, and 104 twenty-five pound bombs were dropped. Everything in sight was strafed mercilessly. The RAF communique covering the raid reported that six hangars had been set alight, two more hit directly with bombs, sixteen aircraft set on fire, and one blown to bits. Smoke from the burning buildings ascended to 10,000 feet. For his own part Irwin hit two sheds with his bombs, then strafed hangars and men. On the homeward flight he attacked a truck on the Cambri-Arras road and machine-gunned enemy trenches east of Arras. In all it was a most successful operation.<sup>(9)</sup>

The Allied armies, having halted the German spring and summer offensives, and even regained some ground, were now ready to attack in their turn. New equipment, new tactics, and the growing flow of American manpower now combined to give Generalissimo Foch the edge over his opponents. Enemy morale had not yet broken, but once it became apparent that time was on the Allies' side, the Germans would crack, particularly at the General Staff level.

The Battle of Amiens—the first in a series of Allied offensives—opened in the early morning mist of 8 August, the assault being