

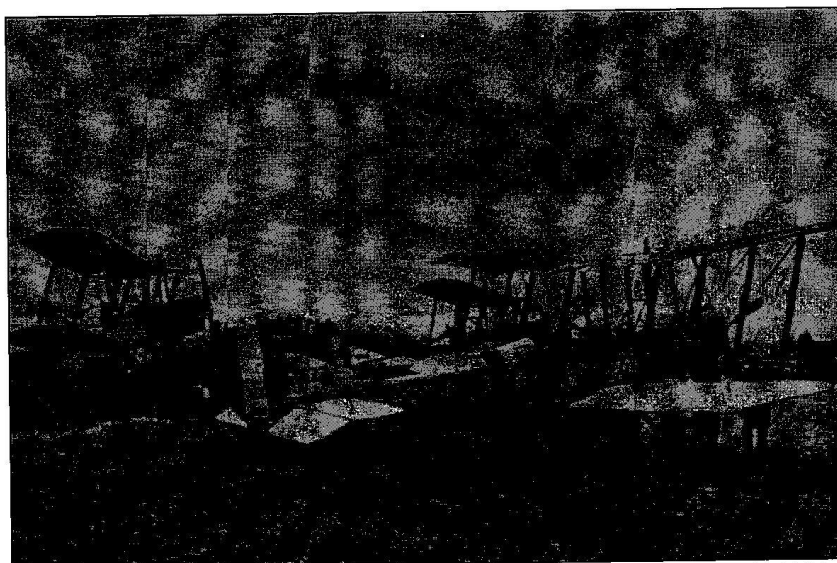
An Interview with Francis S. Briggs.

As conducted by members Colin A. Owers, Fred Clark, and David Coad, early in 1964.

THE NARRATIVE.

I enlisted on August 23rd., 1915, in the Australian Imperial Forces. (A.I.F.). I left Australia on January 11th., 1916, as a signaller in the 13th./3rd. Light Horse Regiment. After the evacuation of Gallipoli I transferred to the 4th. Division Artillery when that Division was formed in Egypt. It was now that I went to France, as a signaller with the 111th. Howitzer Battery. The war in the trenches didn't appeal to me, and when I was asked if I would like to be attached to the R.F.C. I jumped at the chance. The purpose of this was to experience the true value of co-operation between the R.F.C. and the artillery using air to ground wireless, then in its teething stages.

On June 2nd, 1916, I was assigned to No. 16 Squadron R.F.C., at La Gorge aerodrome in France. My first flight in an aeroplane resulted in my first crash. A young Englishman with about 18 hours solo to his credit and who had just been assigned to the Squadron was ordered to cruise about our sector on our side of the lines in order to familiarize himself with the terrain. I was sent along as I had a knowledge of the area picked up in the trenches during forward O.P. (Observation Post) duty. Anyway, on take off he flew into a hedge that separated the aerodrome from a canal which ran alongside, we turned over onto our back and hung upside-down in our seats. However neither of us, or the aircraft, was damaged seriously.



Three 16 Squadron BE2c aircraft at La Gorge aerodrome, France, in mid 1916.

My job with No.16 Squadron was to observe and range for the artillery. These shoots took place as follows. First before take off, we would test and warm our guns. Then our B.E.2c would take us, at the leisurely speed of 75 m.p.h., to our assignment. What with cameras, ammunition, and 4 Cooper bombs, which we dropped haphazardly on the Hun trenches, it would often take us 12-15 minutes to reach 2,500 feet. The shoots would be conducted at about 5,000-7,000 feet and anywhere up to a radius of 5 miles behind the lines. It depended upon the type of gun and target we were ranging.

We usually carried out these shoots alone, but if you were on an especially important one, they would assign a flight of fighters to fly top cover for us. Any other time you would have to look after yourself. The fighters would carry out their own patrols and if you got into trouble would come down and help you. The fighters at this time were mostly Sopwith Pups, Bristol Scouts, D.H. I's and 2's, and the F.E.8. We didn't have the synchronised gun at this time; the Pup had its gun mounted on the top plane, My first flight over the lines took place sometime in June, I cannot remember the exact date. Our, Captain Brown was my pilot, first combat was one of those no decision shows. We were conducting a shoot when we were attacked by an Albatros D.II scout. The Hun had the speed and climb on us, and the synchronised gun. We had two guns; one set at an angle to fire outside the propeller arc, this was operated by the pilot. Mine was mounted on the petrol tank between me and the pilot. (In the B.E.2c the observer sat directly behind the engine.) When I fired I had to aim in an arc between the wing-tip and the tail plane, and then, unless I wanted to cut the pilot in half, I would have to lift it up and drop it down the other side. Captain Brown decided that discretion was the better part of valour, and we scooted for home. He and I gained three probables, but were never able to obtain any confirmed. Before he was shot down and killed, Brown rose to the rank of Major and won the M.C.. The only German aircraft we came up against, if I recall correctly, were the Albatros D.II, the Fokker Biplane, and the Halberstadt.

R.F.C. casualties were high at this time due to the Hun having sole possession of the synchronising gear, but they were not high when compared with the casualties of the last war. Two or three a week was our average, but you must realise that in those days there were fewer aircraft. No.16 Squadron had four flights of seven aircraft, all B.E.2c's powered by the 90 h.p. R.A.F. factory engine. They had to have them as replacements were required constantly.

After six weeks, during which time I had learnt to love aircraft and flying, I was returned to my unit, my tour of change completed. However I was saved from the trenches by a circular calling for volunteers from the A.I.F. for the R.F.C. I was naturally picked, as they were desperately short of pilots and observers at this time due to the heavy casualties the Hun was causing with the synchronised gun. Of the fellows picked with myself were the late Sir Charles Kingsford Smith and Edgar C. Johnston, (later Controller-General of Civil Aviation in Australia.) In fact quite a number of those that survived did good job of work pioneering Australian commercial

aviation in particular, and Smithy and odd others, world aviation.

We were first sent to a place called Denham for ground training. Despite the fact that we had come straight from the trenches, we had to learn basic parade ground drill over again. This covered the period of November to December, 1916. The New Year saw us at Oxford University for our technical training. We learnt "everything" at Oxford. To our astonishment we were all passed from Oxford; we felt that the R.F.C. must indeed be desperately short of pilots. Our ties with the A.I.F. were now severed and we were made "temporary gentlemen" (2nd Lieutenants), in the R.F.C.

We now went onto actual flight training. I received mine at Thetford a little town in Norfolk. I was able to go solo with less than 3 hours dual. We were trained on the Maurice Farman Shorthorn, or "Rumpty". I suffered terribly from the cold and malaria, so I was ordered to Egypt where I finished my training on B.E.2c's. Instead of being kept in the Middle East I was sent to Stirling in Scotland as an instructor. I hardly knew more than my pupils, (I had then done about 22 hours solo), but somehow I managed to survive training and teach them. The Training Squadron moved to Montrose in the North, and while here I almost got overseas in a Camel squadron. A new squadron, No.80, was being formed at our aerodrome and was commanded by an Australian, a Major Gordon. One day I was flying a D.H.4, when I noticed a Camel using me as a target for practice aerobatics, so I engaged him in mock combat. Then we landed this Major came over and asked me if I was the pilot of the D.H.4 that had just landed, and to my reply in the affirmative, he asked me if I would like to join his squadron. Naturally I said "My oath." Unfortunately R.F.C. H.Q. had me transferred to ORFORDNESS "Test and Experimental Station" before Major Graham's [sic] application could go through.

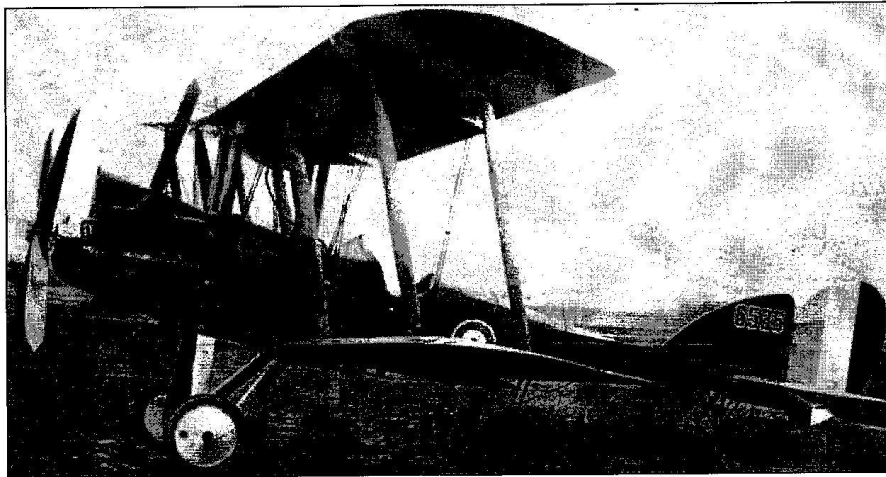
At Orfordness we tested new aircraft types and gadgets, such as rockets, parachutes, etc., all were very primitive and were not used operationally. My primary purpose was to conduct "Cloud Flying" tests. (This is now termed blind flying.) We had no idea of what to do and had to find our way by trial and error. The idea behind it was that so many days in France were rendered unsuitable for flying by fogs and clouds, if we could train our pilots to fly in it, we would be able to attack the Hun at his own bases and he would be incapable of retaliation.

in the end we could fly through ten or twelve thousand feet of fog and still retain a reasonable formation. Orfordness also served as a sort of Home Defence Squadron, in fact a pilot from here had destroyed a Zeppelin a few weeks before I got there.

I had one experience in this respect I shall never forget. On the night of October the 20th., we were sent out to intercept some raiders. I was flying a B.E.12a, powered by a 120 h.p. engine, it was a single-seat fighter version of the B.E.2c, a plane that was never meant to be a fighter. After cruising around for a while I thought I saw a flicker of flame. Then I saw it again. It was the exhaust of a twin engined aircraft. I knew I was onto a "Gotha". Then I realised that he was drawing away from me and no matter

what I did I couldn't catch him. In anger I fired a long range burst at him without any apparent effect, except, perhaps, to make him go faster. I was so disgusted when I landed that I stalked straight to my bunk, and it wasn't till the next day that I discovered I had bent my throttle levers in my attempt to obtain more revs from my engine.

Another job we did was to "proof" bombs. It's not generally known, but out of every 250 bombs sent overseas, 4 were tested by us, and if one was a dud then the whole 250 was scrapped. When we had nothing to do we would go up and drop them on a concrete slab on the beach. One day I decided that I would "proof" some 360 lb. Bombs. I took off in my B.E.12 and came in at 60 feet and dropped one. The next minute a hole appeared in the trailing edge of my bottom wing six inches from where I was sitting, and WHAM!, The machine was knocked almost over onto its back. After that I made 2,000 feet my minimum for bomb dropping.



A BE12a fighter aircraft, a type often used by home defence squadrons. It was in one of these that Frank suffered the frustration of being outpaced by a German Gotha bomber.

Another incident occurred to Lawrence Wackett, a fellow Australian, (designer of the 'Wackett' trainer of World War II, and a pioneer in establishing Australia's home, aircraft industry, for which work he was knighted.) He was proofing four 112 pounders and one became stuck up on his bomb rack. However, he thought that it must have been a dud and came into land. As he approached the field, he hit a very bad air bump and the bomb was shaken free. The blast from that "dud" got under his tail as he touched down. What a surprised Wackett crawled from the wreckage, surprised but unharmed.

In December I was transferred to No.1 School of Aerial Navigation and Bomb

Dropping on the Salisbury Plains at Stonehenge. Near our aerodrome was an Observation Balloon School and as we would treat the balloonists to flights, they invited others and myself over for a free ride in their balloons. Well they got us up to 4,000 feet and the next minute I was put in a parachute harness and was climbing out over the side of the basket.... At first I directed a stream of indecent language at the fellow responsible for my flight but then settled down and enjoyed the most marvellous sensation of hanging in space. I hit the ground fairly hard, and made it a point to keep miles away from any balloon for some time after.

I had made repeated attempts to get posted overseas, and finally I was able to arrange to go before a Medical Board where I complained that English conditions aggravated my malaria. Much to my delight I was instructed to report to Egypt. I had visions of the Palestine front but again I was tricked, as when I arrived in September 1918, I discovered that I was assigned to No.3 School of Aerial Navigation and Bomb Dropping at Helouan. The school was just opening and was having teething troubles and "my experience would be of invaluable assistance."

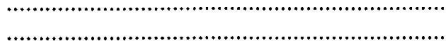
I remained here until after the Turkish Armistice whereupon I was ordered to return to England. I contracted Spanish influenza on the way and arrived feeling very poorly indeed and found that I had been posted to No.2 School of Aerial Navigation and Bomb Dropping, which had been formed shortly after I had left England. This was at Andover. Due to the Armistice, it was a school in name only.

About this time I was sent to Hendon to give Winston Churchill a flying lesson in an Avro 504K, but when the great man arrived, he took one look at me, another at the weather - very dirty looking, and it was starting to rain - another look at me and about turned and drove off. Later on I used to fly him between Paris and London for the peace talks, he would pose for the Press photographers in front of the D.H.4's propeller, and the next day his picture would appear in the papers with the caption "Winston Churchill Flys Channel."

At this time I was with the First Demonstration Squadron at Hounslow. Here we flew the first displays of the R.A.F.. It was from these displays, so I have been told, that the displays of today grew. The main purpose of the Demonstration Squadron was to keep us busy, and this we did by flying captured enemy aircraft, such as the Fokker D.VII, Albatros, etc., in mock combat against our types, Camels, S.E.5a's, etc.. We did shows for visiting foreign dignitaries to show them "the superiority of the British Aircraft", needless to say, we would cheat a bit. It was here I had the honour of flying in mock combat against Major Baker the Canadian V.C. winner. Although wounded in one arm and just recovering, he only let me get into position for one short burst, and I think he did this in order to save my face with the onlookers.

I had applied to go to Russia, but they sent me to the Communication Squadron which had been formed at Kenley to carry delegates and communications across the channel from London to Paris during the Peace Conference. While with the Squadron I had the

pleasure of flying many dignitaries including Australia's Prime Minister Billy Hughes. I certainly enjoyed myself during this period, one day in London, the next in Paris!.... But all good things come to an end.



Thus ends the World War 1 part of Frank Brigg's narrative. After returning to Australia he pioneered the skyways of this continent. Although extremely interesting and exciting, this story is beyond the scope of this narrative. Here under is a list of some of his record flights, For those who wish to explore this field further I suggest that they obtain a copy of Frank's book "Joysticks and Fiddlesticks."

- 1919 First to fly London-Paris and return in one day.
- 1919 Carried the original draftings of the Peace Treaty from Paris to London and returned them two days later after ratification by Parliament and signed by the King.
- 1920 First Melbourne to Perth via Adelaide and return to Melbourne via Riverina and Sydney.
- 1921 Second Flight Melbourne-Perth.
- 1921 First Brisbane to Melbourne via Sydney in one day.
- 1921 First Adelaide to Alice Springs and return, via Moree, Oodradatta and Charlotta Waters.
- 1921 Flew in first Aerial Derby held in Melbourne. (D.H.4, was second)
- 1924 First air-mail (subsidised) into Sydney from Adelaide. (Hay-Sydney section.)
- 1924 First air-mail (subsidised) from Sydney to Adelaide. (Full distance.)
- 1924 First air-mail (subsidised) from Melbourne and return. (Melbourne-Hay section.)

And many more. All dates and details are available in Frank's Log Books, as certified by his C.O.'s and employers. Frank also has his career well documented on photographs and in scrap books containing cuttings of his more famous flights.



TECHNICAL AND NOT SO TECHNICAL FACTS,
as related by Frank Briggs.

The following items are important because they are ONE mans personal opinion of the men and machines of the first air war; NOT some impersonal magazine article. Rather than detract from the trend of the narrative, they are presented here. Ed.

Q. What was the Sopwith Pup like to fly?

A. Beautiful!

Q. What was the B.E. like to fly?

A. I learned to fly in the damned things. They were a good aircraft for their time, but no good for combat.

Q. What did you think of the Sopwith Camel?

A. A lovely aircraft. Not vicious, but she would catch the unwary.

Q. Did you fly the Pusher types?

A. Yes. The D.H.1 and Vickers Gunbus were two delightful little aircraft to do combat with.

Q. Did you ever fly any of the Nieuport types?

A. Yes. The Baby Nieuport with the 130 h.p. Clerget engine. It didn't carry a gun being used solely for training purposes. They seemed alright I have never heard of any of them losing a wing or breaking up under the strain of manoeuvres, and some of us were pretty ham-fisted pilots.

Q. Did you like the rotary engine arrangement?

A. Yes. As compared with the "great" horse powers we had in those days. They were quite reliable, except sometimes you would get a push-rod through the cowling. Only trouble was you had to overhaul the blasted things every 30-35 hours. They spewed oil everywhere but so did the big Rolls stationary types.

Q. You mentioned the Handley-Page V/1500, did you know that it crashed on its maiden flight?

A. Yes. It didn't have enough dihedral and in consequence was very nose heavy. And,

instead of the test pilot gradually throttling his engines back, he brought them all back in one fell swoop, and she went straight in. Well that's all we were able to work out. The second machine was no trouble at all. For its size it wasn't heavy on the controls, except when you hit a bad lateral bump.

Q. What German aircraft were present in the Demonstration Squadron?

A. Only three. A Halberstadt two-seater mark two; an Albatros D.VII (?); and the Fokker D.VII.

The Albatros was good but a little heavy. She had come straight to us from the factory, having never reached the front. She was a beauty, except when you approached stalling speed, when she was like a lump of lead, ready to drop out of your hands; the D.VII, on the other hand, still had life in her when she was ready to stall.

Q. Would you say that the D.VII was better than the Snipe?

A. No, I wouldn't say better because she wasn't as strong as a Snipe. Of course given decent materials to put into her and she would have been a better aeroplane. That was what beat the Hun in the air more than anything else; they just couldn't take the strain and broke up too often; whereas one of our pilots could make it back to base, the Hun didn't stand a chance. Their glues, fabrics etc. were not strong enough.

Q. Did you ever stand the D.VII on its prop?

A. Yes, but you could do the same with the S.E.5. It was the only fighter I knew, (the S.E.5.), that you could put into a terminal velocity dive and reach terminal velocity in, say, 2,000 feet, and then zoom straight up again and gain more than the 2,000 feet in the zoom.

Q. What did you think of Triplanes?

A. I flew the Sopwith Triplane, which was bad enough. You just couldn't dive the damned thing. The top wing was always trying to pull you out all the time. You could never get a terminal velocity speed with a triplane. I know, I tried several times. It just wasn't a good aeroplane. I've flown the Fokker Triplane, which wasn't a bad little job, but anything that could dive (stand on its nose), could always get away from it.

Q. Where did you come across the Fokker Triplane?

A. It visited the aerodrome, (Bue, Paris), we didn't have it on strength. One of the boys from an Occupation Squadron would get permission to go on leave and would fly it across and park it on the 'drome while he went out on the town, and we would fly it in the meantime.

Q. What did you think of the German reconnaissance types?

A. The Rumpler was very good. They would fly without escort at 21-24, 000 feet on photographic missions. They used a very primitive form of oxygen equipment, which consisted of the bottle and a tube, the flow being controlled by a clip. Every now and then they would pop the tube into their mouths and take a few mouthfuls. Our De Havilland 4 was a good and better than them. She was built as a bomber, but could fight as well a Bristol Fighter, and she had the climb with the Rolls engine. Communication between the cockpits was by means of a speaking tube which was very primitive and not very successful. That is why they designed the D.H.9 and 9a. Not to get a better aircraft but to get the crew together. In the process they ruined the aircraft. The D.H.9 just couldn't fight for lack of power. It had only a 240 h.p. Puma engine. Put a good pilot in a D.H.4 and he will run rings around a Bristol Fighter. I've had more hours on D.H.4's than any other type, 1500 - 2000 hours I have never heard it called the 'flaming coffin' but the trouble with the American version was the Liberty engine.

Q. Did you meet any British Aces?

A. I suppose I met most of them at one time or other at clubs and parties throughout England. I can only go by their reputation. I did not fly in the same Squadron as them, and only know what I heard about them, so I am in no position to judge who was the "greatest".

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Aircraft Flown By Frank Briggs In The War.

Avro 504.	Handley-Page 0/100 and 0/400
Bristol Fighter.	Handley-Page V/1500
B.E.2. (A, B, and C versions.)	Fokker Dr.1 Triplane

B.E.12, and 12a.

Fokker D.VII

D.H.1, 2, 4, 5, 9 and 9a.

Albatros D.VII (?)

R.E.8.

Halberstadt (Cl.II ?)

S.E.5 and 5a.

F.E.8

Sopwith Pup.

Sopwith Camel

Sopwith Snipe

Sopwith Triplane

Sopwith 1½ Strutter.

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Thanks are due to Bill Toohey and Gordon Laslett for their help in the preparation of this interview.

Colin A. Owers.

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