

arrival of Wessex reinforcements from the north, cut short by 18½ hours. The Mercians had not yet engaged the Wessex forces and pinned them to a line. It was still open to General Godley to retreat again to his final position along the Avon, and had he done so General Chetwode would not have come up with him again before the cease fire was sounded. There would, in fact, have been no final battle at all, manoeuvres would have fizzled out in the tamest fashion, and Mr. Thomas Atkins would have been justifiably fed up. But General Godley evidently believed that he could hold the Chute-Grateley line till 17.30 hours on the 24th, so he offered battle there.

I thought it would probably be most interesting to see the Mercian cavalry and tanks attempt to turn the Wessex right flank, so motored down the Andover-Salisbury road. Soon I passed detachments of the Black Watch holding the hedges along the road, which showed that the 3rd Infantry Brigade of the 1st Division were up there. About 5 miles south-west of Andover, over the fields and lanes to the right of the road, I caught sight of No. 56 Squadron worrying some Mercian troops like hawks attacking a wounded wolf. The red Grebes circled and dived without mercy until the Coldstream Guards (I met them afterwards and talked about it with their air umpire) must have suffered very heavy casualties indeed. At the village of Over Wallop I found what I had been looking for—troopers of the 13th/18th Hussars and a cyclist of the 10th Hussars. So General Chetwode was using his cavalry to turn the Wessex right. But where were the Mercian tanks? So far they had not been in action at all. I wanted to see how General Godley was meeting this threat to his flank, so I went up a lane to Grateley where the Coldstreams were resting after their ordeal. In front—that is, to the west—was the considerable eminence of Quarley Hill, with a thick copse on top. It dominates this part of the country, and lay almost in the centre of the Wessex line. On the summit all the foreign attachés were congregated, watching the battle. The two lines were close together here, and I had not long left the helmeted Coldstreams before I found myself among the men in caps. At a corner where four lanes crossed just 1¼ miles west of Cholderton I found four Wessex tanks. One was out of action flying a red and yellow flag. The others had crashed their way into a very dense little coppice by the roadside, and were firing their machine guns in the direction where I guessed the Mercian cavalry must be moving up. It was interesting to notice how completely the monsters had concealed themselves, and they had left the minimum of track marks in the lane. I wondered whether those marks were visible from above. The hedges were thick, and I could not see the enemy, so I went on towards Cholderton. An officer advised me to pull in to the side, and hardly had I done so when five Mercian tanks rumbled up the steep lane, all out of action and prisoners. When they had passed I went into the village and heard the story. The headquarters of the Wessex 3rd Division were there, and these five tanks, who recognise no lines and no no-man's-land, had raided it. For a time the G.O.C. and his staff were in grave danger. "Disorganised" was how the official Wessex narrative described the situation; but I fancy the G.O.C. and his staff were all under the tables at their H.Q. in the village inn. But Wessex tanks were at hand, and they hurried to the rescue. A lively dog-fight occurred in the tiny village, in which the Wessex tanks, though a bit mauled, had the best of it and took the raiders prisoner. I sat on the village bridge a while and chatted to an A.P.M. of the Air Force. Still I could not tarry long, as I had to learn the further fortunes of General Chetwode's turning movement. He had used tanks and had met with serious losses, and I knew his cavalry brigade were in it. I knew also that General Godley had met the movement with tanks, and I wanted to see what his cavalry was doing. I did not at that moment know the full extent of the Mercian losses in tanks. I learned later that five of them emerged from cover near Cholderton and proceeded in line ahead (which leaves only one track mark) to attack a wood held by Wessex cavalry. They showed in the open for only five minutes, but they did not escape the Wessex aircraft. Two flights of No. 56 were on them at once, and bombed them so thoroughly that all five tanks were put out of action by the umpires. I think I saw that incident from a distance. At any rate I saw six red Grebes attacking a target far away from where the Mercian cavalry were.

I turned west to Amesbury, and soon found that the battle had not yet got so far west. On the way I sighted Boscombe on the plain, where No. 56 had been encamped the night before, though I had been informed that they had moved farther back. But while I was in Amesbury their transport went

through the town in a great hurry, travelling in the direction of Tillshead. One dismantled Grebe hitched to the tail of a lorry made a rather forlorn sight, but I admired the way in which the Hucks starter trundled along among the other vehicles. I gathered that they had been shot up at Boscombe, but I did not hear the details of the story. Certainly the column gave a good impression of the mobility of the Royal Air Force.

Coming back towards Andover, I found the Wessex force still standing on the same line, while Mercian infantry opposite were still affording quarries to the restless Grebes of No. 56. Near Amport Wood I saw two flights each circling over and diving on to two separate targets, so close together that the circumferences of the circles seemed to touch. That morning No. 25 Squadron was active up in the northern sector, which was why I did not see it. Near Tidworth Down two flights attacked a Wessex anti-aircraft gun position, and with the loss of one Grebe (not an actual loss) put the guns out of action. The railway stations at Salisbury, Westbury and Devizes were bombed by No. 207, while the Mercian Bristols photographed the whole of the Wessex line early in the morning. Of course, the Bristols on both sides continued their untiring reconnaissance until the end of the battle.

As I drove from Weyhill to Andover the road was stiff with a brigade of the 4th division marching out to the fray, followed by artillery; and there a Wessex Bristol departed from its usual custom so far as to dive and attack them. It was then past 15.00 hours, and obviously there would be no time for Mercia to overwhelm Wessex by 17.30 hours. The former took the village of Chute and also Quarley Hill, but the Wessex Territorials were about to launch a counter-attack when the stand-fast was sounded.

Some Reflections

I think everyone who studied the air work during those three days must have been profoundly impressed. In the first place, the Army Co-operation squadrons showed that they could reconnoitre and send in reports in very vile weather. Their patrol work was unceasing, and I do not think it could have been more effective in any way. I repeat that the aircraft never failed to report any movement of importance on either side. The W/T and R/T worked well. One could see that by observing the promptitude with which the Grebes always answered the calls of the Bristols. Both sides attempted to intercept the other's messages, and met with a certain amount of success, especially on the first day. After that some form of code was used.

A considerable number of machines were put out of action by the umpires as the result of ground fire. In the final narrative compiled up to 17.00 hours on the 24th, the Mercian side stated that during the three days' operations their air force sustained losses to the extent of five Bristols, four Grebes, and six bombers. This, however, must be an error, for I know as a fact that on the 24th alone 17 Mercian machines were judged to be shot down or destroyed by attacks on their aerodromes, to say nothing of the air raids on Odiham aerodrome. It is open to anyone to doubt whether the losses from ground fire would be actually so great in real war.

But I should like to ask, if air combats had been permitted what chance would the Bristols, who mostly worked on a lone hand, have had against the Grebes who were always in flight and often in squadrons? It is certainly time that army co-operation squadrons should be equipped with a more modern machine.

As for the smartness of the Royal Air Force, my colleague saw No. 25 Squadron waiting for orders on its aerodrome one morning, the machines out ready and the pilots in their flying clothes even to their gloves. The orders came, and in exactly eight minutes the three flights were in the air. Smart work that!

But the main thing which struck me was that the army is appallingly short of aircraft on which it can count to work with it when the next war breaks out. Sir John Salmond's air defence force is still too small, though it is growing. It would be absolutely impossible for the C. in C. Air Defences to lend the army two squadrons of fighters and two of bombers in war time. The army would have to do the best it could with its four squadrons, and perhaps one special flight. When only four army divisions took the field that air force had to be temporarily doubled. What would happen if the whole British Army were mobilised, and the borrowing of squadrons suddenly became an impossibility? The prospect is appalling to contemplate. The Admiralty has done the wise thing by insisting on so many flights and paying for them. The sooner the War Office follows that example, the sooner we shall all be able to sleep in our beds o' nights.