

MEMORIAL TO No. 39 (H.D.) SQUADRON

A MEMORIAL to the first Home Defence squadron to be formed during war (No. 39) was unveiled on May 15 by Air Commodore T. C. R. Higgins, C.B., C.M.G., at North Weald Aerodrome, Essex. The memorial is in the form of a bronze tablet bearing the inscription: "No. 39 (H.D.) Squadron, R.F.C. and R.A.F., North Weald, 1916-1919. To the memory of those members of the squadron who gave their lives for their King and Country during the Great War." The memorial was dedicated by the Chaplain of the Station.

No. 39 is now a bomber squadron, equipped with the "Hart," belongs to No. 2 (Indian) Wing, and is stationed at Risalpur in the North-West Frontier Province. The squadron was formed at Hounslow on April 15, 1916, with Maj. T. C. R. Higgins as its first commanding officer. The machines were of the B.E.2.C., B.E.2.E. and B.E.12 types. The object of the squadron's formation was defence of London against raids by Zeppelins. The squadron met with its first success on the night of September 2/3, 1916, when 16 German airships raided England. Lt. Leefe Robinson, of No. 39 Squadron, was one of the pilots who went up that night in defence. He took off from Sutton's Farm about 11 p.m. with orders to patrol between there and Joyce Green. He climbed his B.E.2.C. to 12,000 ft., and at 2.5 a.m. he saw an airship caught in beams in the north-east of London. Sacrificing height to speed, he dived towards the ship, and closed with it, despite heavy anti-aircraft fire from the ground. In his report he wrote: "I flew about 800 ft. below it from bow to stern and distributed one drum along it (alternate New Brock and Pomeroy). It seemed to have no effect. I therefore moved to one side and gave it another drum distributed along its side—without apparent effect. I then got behind it (by this time I was very close—500 ft. or less below) and concentrated one drum on one part (underneath rear). I was then at a height of 11,500 ft. when attacking Zeppelin. I hardly finished the drum before I saw the part fired at glow. In a few seconds the whole rear part was blazing. When the third drum was fired there were no searchlights on the Zeppelin and no anti-aircraft was firing. I quickly got out of the way of the falling blazing Zeppelin, and, being very excited, fired off a few red Very's lights and dropped a parachute flare. Having very little oil and petrol left I returned to Sutton's Farm, landing at 2.45 a.m. On landing I found I had shot away the machine-gun wire guard, the rear part of the centre section, and had pierced the rear main spar several times." The blazing S.L. II fell at Cuffley, and burnt for two hours on the ground. Leefe Robinson was awarded the V.C.

On the afternoon of September 23, 1916, 11 Zeppelins set out for England, but only the three newest, L31, L32 and L33, approached the London area. L33, commanded

by Böcker, was on her maiden voyage. He bombed Bromley-by-Bow, Bow, and Stratford, doing considerable damage and killing 11 and injuring 26 people. But he was fired at and one shell passed through the ship, another damaged a propeller, and splinters pierced her gas bags. Böcker turned for home, losing gas fast, but near Chelmsford he was met by 2nd Lt. A. de B. Brandon, of No. 39 Squadron, who fired at L33 for 20 minutes. The Zeppelin landed at Little Wigborough and the crew set her alight. The airship was not wholly destroyed, and served as a model from which we built R.33. L32, under Com. Peterson, had worse fortune. Peterson was heavily fired at by the guns, and tried to escape, but over Essex he was caught by some searchlights and they brought 2nd Lt. F. Sowrey, of No. 39 Squadron, to the attack. At 12.45 a.m. he found her and his third drum set her aflame. She fell at Billericay and burned for 45 minutes.

On October 1, 1916, No. 39 Squadron had its fourth success. This time the hero was 2nd Lt. W. Tempest, who rose from North Weald Bassett Aerodrome at 10 p.m. The victim that night was Mathy, the ablest and most resolute of all the Zeppelin commanders. He brought the L31 in over Lowestoft, but could not penetrate the defences of London. He manoeuvred about to the north west, and dropped most of his bombs at Cheshunt, where one woman was injured. He could not shake off the searchlights. Temple was over south-west London when he saw the pyramid of searchlights in the north west, and at once flew towards them. She was at 11,500 ft., and Tempest was at 15,000. He gradually overhauled her, but his mechanical pressure pump went wrong, and he had to use his hand pump to keep up pressure in his petrol tank. He was slightly faster than the airship, but L31 was climbing "like a rocket." So he gave a tremendous pump to the tank and dived straight at her, firing a burst into her as he came. He gave another burst as he passed underneath, and then sat under her tail, and, flying along underneath her, pumped lead into her for all he was worth. He saw her begin to go red inside like an enormous Chinese lantern, and then a flame shot out of the front part of her. Tempest put his machine into a spin, and just managed to corkscrew out of the way as she shot past roaring like a furnace. He watched her hit the ground at Potter's Bar. The German airship service never recovered from the loss of Heinrich Mathy. No. 39 Squadron had done its work, and it never again got a chance of bringing down a German airship in the London area.

In October, 1918, No. 39 was re-equipped with "Bristol Fighters" and sent to France. Five days after the Armistice it was disbanded. On July 1, 1919, it was re-formed as No. 39 (Bomber) Squadron, and, as stated above, it is now stationed in India.



AT THE ATHENS AERO SHOW: The de Havilland "Gipsy Moth" which was one of the British exhibits at the recent International Aero Show at Athens.