

# LT JOHN STEPHEN COOPER

## UNKNOWN HERO

by Bill Vandersteen

### No 1912 Corporal John McCormack, Queen Victoria Rifles

A friend of mine sent me the following remarkable extract from this Corporal's diary, asking if I could investigate an aerial combat described by him, which took place on 25 March 1917:

*... To Achicourt. From here we went into the trenches. Now just a word about our quick move. We marched for eight consecutive days covering about 190 miles. This is a record Brigade march since Mons. Thus we have made 1 Territorial record and 1 Army record since we have been out here.*

*Now this place Achicourt is the suburb of Arras. It has been a very pretty place. When we reached it, it was absolutely deserted as, owing to our rapid advance, no British troops had been billeted there. Our second day here was one of great excitement.*

*At 10.30 am on the morning of 25th March 1917 a German Fokker spotted one of our scouts and gave chase. Now a scout stands no chance against a Fokker but our scout, nevertheless, turned for the fight. The way both machines turned and twisted about was a sight worth seeing. At last the German opened fire and the bullet went through the neck of our observer and killed him. Thus, when the pilot of our machine did get in a suitable position to fire, it was useless as the observer who works the machine gun was dead.*

*One explosive bullet fired from the Fokker penetrated the petrol tank of our machine and following that came a great length of*

*flame. Our machine was on fire but still the pilot fought. Three times he tried to ram the enemy machine but failed. He kept beautiful control of the machine and just managed to clear the village when the man who had been wounded dropped to earth in pieces, burnt up. Then one of the wings dropped off alight and then the engine stopped and the machine plunged to earth.*

*Help soon reached the spot but, needless to say, the pilot had been burned to death. It was a sight I shall never forget.*

The German aircraft described as a Fokker was probably an Albatros or a Halberstadt and the reference to it being a Fokker is 'Tommy Atkins' generic description of any German fighter, in the same way that Londoners referred to the Gothas over London as 'Taubes'. John McCormack also would not have appreciated that the pilot in a Sopwith 1½ Strutter had a front gun.

The action described was very similar to that of Flt Lt James Nicolson in August 1940 over Southampton, when he stayed in his burning Hurricane to shoot down a Messerschmitt 110 before baling out badly burned and for which he was awarded the VC.

I wasn't hopeful of throwing any light on what was a very brave act, but decided to see what could be discovered. The casualty report for March 1917 indicated that eight aircraft had been lost on 25 March, five of them Sopwith 1½ Strutters, all from 70 Squadron and all on the same reconnaissance flight. These were:

