

Capt Douglas Urchart McGregor, MC 2Lt George Ivan Douglas Marks

23 Squadron, RFC

Not Quite 'Birds of a Feather': Part 2

by Stewart K. Taylor



Almost 75% of 23 Squadron's eighteen SPAD VII's representing 'A' and 'C' flights were caught by the camera on La Lovie aerodrome under a hazy August 1917 sun. In the background are hangars housing the RE8s of 21 Squadron RFC. The original of this very rare print belonged to Ivan Marks' widow. She thought he flew the aircraft fifth from the left in the closest row. :Mrs Dorothy Marks via S.K. Taylor

When Mac returned from England the Third Battle of Ypres had already begun. Low flying attacks carried out by 23 Squadron on the opening day were successful and 2Lt Marks happened to be one pilot cited for exceptional work that afternoon. The heavens drenched Flanders the first week of August and not until the 7th was strafing resumed. This kind of game McGregor had yet to play. There were also other changes in 'C' Flight. A flight commander from England had taken command and 2Lt O'Grady was again relegated to deputy leader. Drinking on the job suspected, for the moment Mac flew as a regular pilot until attrition, expected to be heavy, would allow him to lead or take command of a different flight.

While 'A' and 'B' Flights had the job of going after 7 August ground targets, 'C' Flight managed two operations. In the early evening they were out in mist and low clouds, the same miserable weather that began the day, when the patrol sighted seven Albatros in the soupy conditions making for Dadizeele. McGregor was closest to the EA, only 1000ft above the topmost. He peeled away from the other SPADs and had approached to within seventy-five yards when this Albatros banked east. He followed firing some 170 rounds right into the EA, but in his zeal plunged right into the middle of the others, which surrounded him when he finished his dive. However Mac caught a glimpse of the one he attacked falling on its back and out of control. Fortunately for him he was not left in the lurch by the rest of the SPADs. They descended on the Albatros and drove them off.

The Third Battle of Ypres

In a light rain under an umbrella of low clouds, troops of General Sir Hubert Gough's Fifth Army left their trenches at dawn on 31 July 1917 to launch phase two of the British strategic plan for Flanders known as the 'Third Battle of Ypres'. Following this inaugural ground assault a week of almost constant wet weather forced a lull in the air war. If Mac was not happy about his loss of temporary status as a deputy 'C' Flight leader he did

not speak about it to Ivan Marks, his closest confidant. Hostilities in the air resumed on a minor scale after dinner on 7 August. That was the combined 'A' and 'C' flight operation when Mac dived right into the Albatros formation and required a rescue operation by the rest of his patrol to set him free.

There was no rain on 9 August although the overcast remained. Shortly after 06.00 German fighter formations were in evidence at 21000ft, cluttering the sky above Roulers. One group of ten in pristine 'vee' formation south of the town made no move to retaliate against four 10 Naval 'A' Flight triplanes who tried to climb to the EA's height and do a little disturbing. These 'showmanship' Albatros were likely from the 'Richthofen circus' out for a morning constitutional just to strengthen their wings after days of inactivity. With more sinister ambitions was a 'kette' from Jasta 28 led by Ltn Ernst Hess. He had already nipped across the British Second Army lines southwest of Messines and forced one 45 Sqn 1½ Strutter to land. However it was on Hess' second patrol in the Ypres area that his 'kette' became embroiled with four 23 Sqn 'C' Flt SPADs which left La Lovie at 08.14. Marks had the company of a recently-joined flight member and could do nothing to assist his mate after the novice dived on an Albatros flown by Ltn Karl Bolle at the height of 2500 meters and in turn was downed and afterwards taken POW north west of Zonnebeke. He only fired ten shots at the 23 Sqn SPAD B3519 before each of his guns jammed.

Twenty four hours later almost to the minute 23 Sqn and Jasta 28 would clash again. Some light rain continued to fall as two formations, a total of eight SPADs passed between a couple of cloud layers at 9000ft to relieve triplanes of 1 Naval and 10 Naval who had been over the lines since 06.20. This had already been a profitable day for the squadron. The 05.00 eight machine operation had disrupted a formation of five DFWs, closely escorted by ten Albatros, sending down one of the two-seaters 'flopping crazily' and what had been an intent to destroy HKBs resulted instead in the destruction of the