

LT FRANCIS PEABODY MAGOUN JR

AN AMERICAN ACE IN THE RFC

by James J. Hudson

Francis Peabody Magoun, Jr, an air ace and winner of the Military Cross while flying with the British during WWI, was born in New York City on 6 January 1895. Because his father, Francis Peabody Magoun, was economically well off and very interested in the cultural development of his son, young Francis was to receive a fine education. He attended St Andrews School in Concord, Massachusetts and the Noble and Greenough School in Boston. After completion of his preparatory school work Magoun attended Harvard University where in 1916 he received the Bachelor of Arts degree. In February of that year he joined the American Ambulance Field Service and sailed for France. He served as a volunteer ambulance driver during the period 3 March 1916 to 3 August 1916. His unit was cited for outstanding work in French Divisional Orders on 15 July 1916.¹ Like many other idealistic crusaders to save western civilization from the imperialist 'Hun', Magoun found service in the mud and gore on the Western Front something less than pleasant. The occasional aerial dogfight he was to witness in skies above the trenches began to intrigue him and he returned to the United States to plan his future role in the war.²

In February 1917 Magoun returned to London and in March enlisted in the Royal Flying Corps. He attended the School of Military Aeronautics at Oxford, England and did his elementary flight training at the Royal Navy Air Service School, Vendôme, France. His advanced training was done at Catterick, Yorks and at the School of Aerial Gunnery, at Turnberry, Scotland. On 4 July 1917 Magoun was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the RFC.³

2Lt Magoun was attached to 1 Squadron, a veteran scout squadron on 14 November 1917.⁴ Bad flying weather prevailed during the last weeks of 1917 and 'the final Christmas of the war was a drab one'. In spite of the effort of the pilots to make the best of it, 'if only to try and forget for a day the static slugging match that had now been in progress for over forty months. But the temporary respite from operations only served to give time for personal feelings of nostalgia, and it was almost with relief that the pilots went forward into the New Year determined to make the most of improving weather and do their best to end the war as soon as possible'.⁵

January 1918 saw the squadron pilots resume their offensive patrol efforts that had been pretty well abandoned in December. However, 1 Sqn was to have some problems in the new year. Capt Tom Hazell, one of the flight commanders and already a 19 victory ace,⁶ was transferred to 24 Sqn and this caused a leadership gap. But an even more serious problem was the fact the Germans were now beginning to equip Jagdgeschwaders I and II, located in the area, with Fokker Dr.I triplanes. It was obvious to 1 Sqn pilots that this highly manoeuvrable fighter would completely outclass their very fragile Nieuport biplanes.⁷

Lt Magoun along with the rest of 1 Sqn fighter pilots, was greatly relieved in late January when it was learned that the unit was to be re-equipped with the SE5a biplane. This aircraft, designed at the Royal Aircraft Factory, was powered by the 200hp water-cooled Wolseley Viper engine and had a top speed of 122mph with a ceiling of 22000ft. Furthermore, because of its broad wing it had good manoeuvrability. In addition, the SE5a had good fire power with a Vickers machine gun mounted on the cowl synchronized to fire through the propeller as well as a Lewis gun situated on the centre section of the top wing. The Lewis could be hauled down by the pilot and reloaded while in flight.⁸ The squadron was removed from the front line in late January



to re-equip with the new machine. After a brief conversion course and a few days of gunnery training, 1 Sqn was moved back into the front lines⁹ and stationed at Bailleul near Armentières.

FIRST VICTORY

The 23 year old Magoun was to score his first aerial victory on 28 February 1918 when he and Capt W.D. Patrick fired 300 rounds into an Albatros scout at 100 yards range. The enemy aircraft 'toppled over and dived straight for the ground. Last seen at 500 feet still diving vertically'. This victory which took place in the Westhoek-Gheluvelt area was listed as a 'decisive' by squadron and wing headquarters.¹⁰

At 07.30 on 10 March Lt Magoun, flying alone, spotted an enemy observation balloon at 3000ft over the Roulers-Menin Road about 15 miles east of the city of Ypres. 'After firing my first burst from very close range', he wrote in his report, 'the observer jumped out. I then fired several bursts from very close range, 500 rounds in all. The balloon went down slowly in a greatly deflated condition'. This action was listed 'decisive' and marked the Harvard man's second 'kill' of the war.¹¹

On 15 March a three ship patrol from 1 Sqn led by Capt W.D. Patrick attacked a DFW Aviatik observation plane being escorted by an Albatros fighter. 2Lt Magoun and 2Lt L.W. Mawbey concentrated on the two-seater. Magoun described the combat as follows: 'opening fire at 150 yards, I fired a long burst up to within 20-30 yards. I fired 150 Vickers and 97 Lewis, and 2Lt Mawbey 50 Vickers. The machine stalled along and then toppled over in a vertical