

# An interview with Charles Watson

## *'The last of our boyhood heroes'*

by John Barfoot & Ken Feline

The life of ex-Sergeant Charles Alfred William Watson RFC/RAF actually spans three Centuries! He was born at Romsey in Hampshire on 16 November 1899. At the time his father William Watson, a Regular Army man, was en route for South Africa to fight in the Boer War.

As a child Charles attended an Infants School in Devizes and later became a pupil at the County Boys School in Cambridge. On leaving school in 1917 at the age of 18, he volunteered for the Royal Flying Corps, in spite of a warning from his father, then a Captain serving with the Somerset Light Infantry in France. The old soldier feared for his son's safety and warned him he had 'seen our planes shot down like flies'.

During an interview at home on Thursday 14 November 2002, two days before his 103rd birthday. Charles recalled that the physical and mental examinations at the Hotel Cecil in London were very thorough and several of the would-be airmen tested with him that day were rejected.

With the passing of so many years, most of the details of his training period now escape him. We do know that after weeks of army drill and square bashing, there came a welcome posting to Hastings where he was billeted as an RFC Cadet under instruction in a hotel on the sea front.

In 1918 Sgt Charles Watson – now trained in aerial gunnery and photography – joined 11 Squadron based at Remainsnil near Auxi-le-Château on the Western Front as an observer. It was a cold wet day on his arrival, his billet was a leaky tent on the edge of the airfield. He recalled 'being very tired, wet, hungry and homesick'. The next morning however when he was on his first flight along the lines looking down at the devastation below, he decided that 'I was better off in the sky, than down there in the mud and trenches where my father was fighting'.

Equipped with Bristol F2B Fighters, 11 Squadron at



this period of the war were carrying out photographic reconnaissance flights as well as offensive and line patrols. Charles recalled operating the semi automatic camera fitted to the floor inside the observer's cockpit out of the slipstream. On their return to the aerodrome, the exposed plates were always collected with great haste and rushed away to be developed.

Did you see many enemy aircraft Charles? No, he replied 'only the one that shot us down!' This memorable incident took place on Friday 9 August 1918, the day after the Allies had unleashed a massive offensive on the Western Front.

Sgt pilot R.S. Hutt and observer Sgt C.A Watson in Bristol Fighter C931 were one of a flight of 11 Squadron F2Bs escorting DH4s of 57 Squadron who were also based at Le Quesnoy aerodrome. The target for their bombing raid that morning was one of seven important

bridges packed with enemy reinforcements and ammunition being rushed to counter the allies' latest push. The DH4s of 57 Squadron were unable to attack their target, a bridge at Péronne, when their escorting flight of Bristol Fighters were engaged and drawn off by eight or nine Fokker D.VIIIs.

Charles recalled a hail of bullets hitting the engine and fuel tanks of their machine, the escaping petrol fumes temporarily blinding Sgt Hutt. Realising his pilot was in trouble, he unclipped and fitted the spare 'joystick' carried in the observers cockpit for such emergencies. As the engine spluttered and fell silent, Charles nosed the machine into the same bank of clouds the enemy had used as cover for their attack. The Bristol rapidly lost height and with his pilot still not yet able to see, Charles anxiously searched the ground rising to meet them at an alarming rate for a suitable field to land in.

A field of corn ahead suggested they were clear of 'No Man's Land' but on which side of it were they? Having no choice Charles allowed the Bristol glide down to a near perfect

*Above: Charles Watson as a newly qualified Observer, aged 18½.*

*Left: 11 Squadron's aerodrome at Remainsnil, midway between Doullens and Auxi-le-Château. On 6 July 1918 the Squadron moved to Le Quesnoy.*

