

BE2 Pilot at the Somme: André Walser in 1916

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After returning from Gallipoli, where he had flown an observer (as recounted in a Staff College essay published in *Air Ministry Air Publication No. 1097*, reprinted in *Cross & Cockade International's Winter 2014 issue*) André Walser trained as a pilot and joined 4 Squadron RFC in France, in time for the Battle of the Somme. As well as his essay on Gallipoli Walser, like other students on the 1923-4 course at the R.A.F Staff College, wrote a paper on his war experiences generally. In this he referred only briefly to his time in Gallipoli; the most interesting part of his typescript dealt with his experiences during the following year. His account of his war experiences is at The National Archives at Kew, AIR 1/2386/228/11/23. I have added some explanatory footnotes to the following long extract. For further personal details see CCI 45/4.

THE WORK OF THE SQUADRON consisted of the usual miscellaneous duties performed by Corps Squadrons: observation of artillery fire, photography, contact patrol, close reconnaissance and bombing of German Kite Balloons.

It took me some time to get accustomed to the differences in the methods of signalling and in the changed appearance of the ground. Flying conditions in France appeared, in some ways, pleasanter than they had been in Gallipoli. We rarely went more than 10 miles over the lines and it was often possible to carry out artillery observation within gliding distance of friendly territory. Our engines were more reliable and life, generally, in the Squadron was more comfortable.

During May and June 1916, we seldom came to close quarters with German aeroplanes; but at the beginning of July when the Somme offensive started, a great change took place and we began losing machines pretty regularly.

Looking back at the time I spent in No 4 Squadron (April – December 1916), it seems to be one of the pleasantest periods of my life.

An extraordinary good spirit prevailed in the squadron and everyone seemed very 'keen'.

During the Somme offensive, the squadron had 55 casualties in about five months which was a fairly high average for a Corps Squadron in those days; but as new pilots and observers arrived, they very quickly seemed to settle down to carry on the traditions of their predecessors.

We used to fly an average of three hours per diem all the week, sometimes getting a day off and sometimes flying twice a day. I managed fortunately to obtain the permanent loan of a couple of ponies from a battery and as we already had two in the squadron we were able to get a ride every day. We also constructed a Tennis Court of mud, and used to go for runs before breakfast. I am sure that exercise in some form or other should be encouraged in squadrons.¹

Our chief recreation consisted of dinner parties at Amiens and Heilly. At the latter place, there was a small inn kept by a retired French officer and his three daughters, and here we spent many a pleasant evening.

During the month of June, I was in charge of my flight as my Flight Commander was acting Squadron Commander.

On 1 July the Somme offensive started. It was an extraordinary sight to see our men go over the top. At first the attack seemed to be a success; but we could see that Thiepvaal [sic] was causing a lot of trouble and that our men were being subjected to a great deal of artillery fire. In the afternoon, we had a scrap with three Roland scouts near Bapaume and very nearly got into serious difficulties.²

From 1 July, onwards there were a great many more German aeroplanes on the Somme front.

On 7 July, I was up on artillery patrol at the same time as my Flight Commander Burney. We were observing for different batteries and he was flying some way below me. Suddenly I

looked for him and found he had disappeared entirely. On my return to the aerodrome I heard that Burney's machine had been hit and almost cut in half by one of our 8in shells, and both he and his observer had fallen into Thiepvaal wood.

To my great disappointment, I did not get command of my flight, a pilot being posted from another squadron.

A few days later I went up to the line to visit my brother who was in High Wood and then spent a day and night in the trenches near Fricourt. After this I returned to the squadron satisfied with my lot as a flying officer.

Among some of the more amusing incidents that occurred in the squadron about this time, I remember a case of two pilots, Prothero on a Bristol Scout and Cave on a BE, colliding in a cloud near the line. Prothero crashed in a field, with his fuselage practically broken in two but without hurting himself, and returned to the aerodrome saying he had been hit in mid-air by an A.A. shell. Cave returned to the aerodrome with half his front upper plane missing and said he had run into a balloon cable!

About the middle of July, we received the first instalment of Linthunes phosphorus bombs.³ These were supposed to be very deadly, and even the fumes, so we were told, would give pleurisy to anyone who inhaled them.

Unfortunately, the unenvied position of bombing officer was allotted to me and I was made responsible for bombing

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