

A PILOT ON THE MACEDONIAN FRONT

Captain Gerald Ernest Gibbs, 17 and 150 Squadrons

by A.D. Harvey

HAVING SHOT DOWN FIVE GERMAN AIRCRAFT plus five shared, Gerald Ernest Gibbs (1896–1992) was one of the most successful British fighter pilots operating on the Macedonian Front in the First World War.¹ At the time he was posted to 17 Squadron Royal Flying Corps in the spring of 1917 there were seven British, six French, six Serbian, one Italian and three Greek divisions in Macedonia but operations there were, till just before the very end, essentially a sideshow. For much of the campaign both British and German aircraft were deployed in general-purpose squadrons, with a mixture of aircraft types. The Royal Flying Corps' 17 and 47 Squadrons were equipped mainly with the BE2, plus a few aircraft like the Bristol MIC and the Vickers FB19 that had been rejected for service on the Western Front, SPAD VIIs and Nieuport XVIIIs borrowed from the French, and eventually enough SE5a fighters to equip a flight of each squadron. During the spring of 1917 the Germans briefly deployed a twin-engined bomber unit, Kagohl 1, in Macedonia and the British responded by bringing in a Royal Naval Air Service unit, E Flight of 2 Wing, comprising a single Sopwith Triplane (which was almost immediately crashed by Flight Sub-Lieutenant John Alcock, the man who later piloted the first aeroplane to make a non-stop crossing of the Atlantic) and four Sopwith 1½ Strutters, but otherwise there was no British specialist fighter squadron in the theatre till the SE5a flights of 17 and 47 Squadrons were amalgamated to form 150 Squadron in April 1918.² The Germans organized a fighter unit, Jasta 25, on the Macedonian Front at the end of 1916, and a second one, Jasta 38, in June 1917 but their then leading fighter ace in the theatre, Rudolf von Eschwege, remained assigned to the general-purpose Fliegerabteilung 30 right up till his death in action (as described by Gibbs in the following account) on 21 November 1917.

Gerald Gibbs had enlisted in the East Surrey Regiment during the first weeks of the war and served in the ranks in India and on the North-West Frontier before being commissioned in the Wiltshire Regiment and sent with its 7th Battalion to Salonika. After the war, like many Royal Flying Corps/Royal Air Force officers he opted to remain in the service and was ADC to Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Trenchard 1927–28, served in the planning section of the Air Staff under Charles Portal and Arthur Harris during the early 1930s, was Senior Air Staff Officer of II Group under Air Vice-Marshal Keith Park in the Battle of Britain (during which his weight dropped from thirteen-and-a-half stone to eleven-and-a-half stone), Director of Overseas Operations 1942–43 and Commander-in-Chief and Chief of Air Staff of the Indian Air Force 1951–54.³ He retired as Air Marshal and Knight Commander of the British Empire in 1954.

Anecdotes of Gibbs' combat experience in Macedonia appear in his memoirs, *Survivor's Story* (London, 1956). The following more professional account was written three decades earlier as a prescribed essay while at the Royal Air Force Staff College in the 1920s. The opening passages of the essay, describing his time in the East Surrey and Wiltshire Regiments up to

his first arrival on the Macedonian Front, and his account of his experiences in the immediate post-war period have been omitted: his spelling of names and punctuation has been retained.⁴

We saw little active service during this period ... and I felt that the war was slipping by. So when Major P.R.C. Groves suggested to me a transfer to the R.F.C. I jumped at the chance and was posted to Aboukir [*in Egypt*] in July 1916.⁵

At Aboukir two reserve squadrons were in process of formation. Only one instructor was available – 2nd Lt. S.G. [Shirly Geoffrey] Kingsley – and he had only 20 hours solo to his credit.⁶ Never the less he was the very complete airman to us newcomers and at this early stage steeply banked turns carried out by him were enough to attract the attention of the whole station.

I found myself very dissatisfied with Aboukir – a state of affairs largely due to the intolerance, ignorance and idealism of extreme youth I suppose. The Orderly Officer was the only officer to appear regularly upon parade. Dress was not an important matter; discipline was slack; and a routine lacking in close order drill had produced a type unworthy of the name of officer or N.C.O., and badly trained for command either on or off parade.

I did not realize then how many years must pass before tradition could hold this new service together, nor did I realize the difficulties of a technical service and the necessity for a measure of centralization. Even now it is hard to visualize a system in the R.A.F. under which the spirit of the smallest formations can be so well fostered as in a decentralized Army unit.

In the infantry one had always heard life in the R.F.C. was one of great ease varied by moments of intense fear. I found this to be correct in the main. I had one hour and thirteen minutes dual on a Morris Farman and was launched in the air solo – to experience immediately moments of intense fear.⁷

I was in the first batch of about twelve officers who learnt to fly in Egypt. So soon as we attained a measure of proficiency we all became flying instructors (with a few exceptions). I had only fourteen hours solo when I took up my first pupil – and I do not think this was an exceptionally small number of hours at the time. I sent two of my pupils off solo before gaining my wings. In these days when a flying instructor is a very experienced pilot, and a pupil does nearly a hundred hours flying before he can earn the flying badge, it is well to remember what can be done in the way of expansion in war time.

Within three months from the time when Shirley Kingsley with his decrepit Morris Farman commenced instruction to his first pupils, Aboukir was turning out each month 50 pilots all considered proficient on Avros and B.E.'s.

Varied by one or two fatal crashes and a little ferrying to No. 14 Squadron on the Palestine front, life proceeded smoothly at Aboukir. I remember the deep impression that the first fatal crash had upon us. In an instinctive attempt to remove