

Flying Corps' first days in village 60 years ago

by David Collyer

By mid-June, 1917, the civilian population of Kent had suffered two daylight raids by the twin-engined German Gotha bombers flying from their bases in Belgium.

Folkestone had been bombed on May 25 with nearly 100 casualties, and on June 5, Sheerness was raided, although not so severely.

The authorities were worried that these bombers could fly over Kent almost without opposition and deduced that their next target would be London.

Although things were not going well for the Royal Flying Corps on the Western Front, it was decided to bring back one of the crack fighter squadrons to defend the capital against the enemy. Therefore, No 56 Sqd had just suffered a shattering blow when the seemingly invincible Capt Albert Ball had been lost a month earlier, and it was probably partly as a morale booster that this squadron was the one chosen to return to England.

The coast

It was decided to base them at the small aerodrome alongside the SE & Chatham Railway line just south of Bokesbourne, and in a direct line between London and the coast.

The squadron arrived on June 21, the aircraft — SE.5 fighters designed by the Royal Aircraft Factory at Farnborough — were flown in by their pilots, while the ground crews and baggage arrived by sea via Dover.

The CO was Major Bloomfield, and among the well-known pilots was Flt Cmdr Prothero, who had taken over A Flight from Ball, Lt Jeffs and 2nd Lt Rhys-Davies. B Flight was

with what they had had to put up with previously.

Major Bloomfield had picked his ground crews very carefully. All the mechanics throughout the RFC, who were musicians, found themselves posted to the squadron, and so No 56 had the finest orchestra one could assemble to play at functions in the mess.

Canvas tents were erected to house the men, and various small huts put up for the squadron office, duty crewroom and guardroom. The aircraft were deployed in the existing wooden hanger, attended by the mechanics, and the squadron settled down to await the Gothas.

However, one important task which was soon completed was the laying of a wooden dance floor in the mess tent, and all was soon ready for a party to celebrate the squadron's arrival.

Invitations were sent out to local people, especially eligible young women, and a splendid dinner and dance was laid on for the people of Canterbury and neighbouring towns. The squadron cook was instructed to lay on a sumptuous meal, including bottles of French wine, which the squadron had brought with it, and of course there was the squadron orchestra. Candelabras were on the tables, and before dinner an impromptu flying display was laid on for the guests.

Capt James B. McCudden, the leading ace of World War I, and a native of Gillingham, knew several of the officers of the squadron. He was home on leave with No 63 Training Sqd at Joyce Green, near Dartford. He lost no time in flying down to see his old friends, calling twice in the first week after their arrival.

He found them "as keen as mustard to get at the

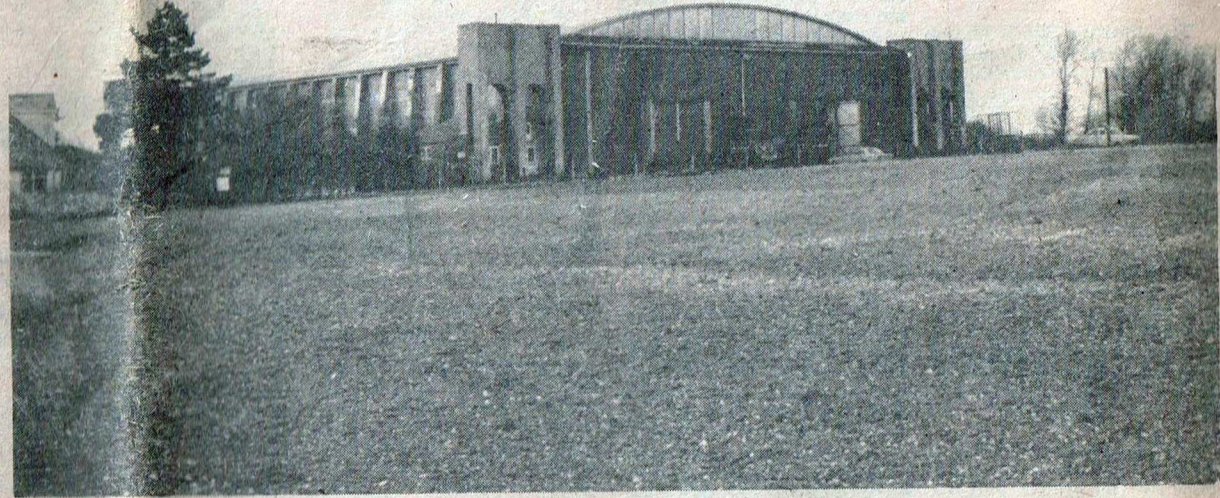
Reluctantly, the squadron packed its bags and baggage on July 5 and the ground crews were sent by Crossley tender to Dover. The next afternoon the pilots climbed into their aircraft, engines were started and they took off, disappearing in a haze of blue exhaust smoke in the direction of France. The next day the Gothas came again in force to raid London and Kent.

The aerodrome at Bokesbourne had been in existence as a landing ground before World War I. The first reported landing was by Lt Spencer-Grey, of the Royal Naval Air Service, at Eastchurch in 1912 when he was forced down with engine trouble, and had to park overnight for repairs. On Sunday, March 15, 1913, a Cuadron biplane, on delivery to the RNAS was forced to alight, again through a faulty engine. The pilot, M. Marty, and his passenger, Mr A. Ramsey, had previously had to land at Adisham where the local constable "took their particulars" before allowing them to continue their journey.

At the start of World War I the airfield was designated an emergency landing ground and various Avro 504 trainers landed their en-route for Dover for refuelling or with engine trouble, the rotary engines of those days not being entirely reliable.

Machine gun

On June 15, 1915, No 50 Sqd was formed at Dover as a home defence squadron to aid the RNAS in the defence of the UK, and its fighters were based around East Kent airfields, including Bokesbourne. Equipment was the Royal Aircraft Factory designed BE 2C, really a reconnaissance aircraft, but with a machine gun attached for



The hangar at Bokesbourne, photographed in 1968.

crashes when landing, especially at night, were frequent. During this time Lt Sowery is reported to have been stationed at Bokesbourne. He was to become famous for shooting down the Zeppelin L.31 at Billericay, Essex, on the night of September 23 and 24, 1916.

Accommodation for the crews was either under canvas or in wooden huts, and after the brief stay of No 56 Sqd, No 50 returned to be re-equipped with the more up-to-date Sopwith Pup fighter carrying two machine guns.

A Zeppelin dropped a bomb about half-a-mile south of the aerodrome, and another bomb landed

and a crew of seven, with machine guns mounted on top of the upper wing and in the engine nacelles, as well as the usual nose and tail positions.

Raids by daylight had been too costly in aircraft for the Germans, so at the end of August operations on moonlight nights were started, and London, as well as East Kent, suffered its first blitz.

By early 1918 the organisation of night fighter defences had been improved, with searchlights and anti-aircraft guns stationed around London and in Kent. Those at Bokesbourne were manned by VDC crews, and formed part of the belt of guns be-



nder the command of Flt Cdr G. H. "Beery" Bowman, and included Lt Gardiner, Maybury and Hoige. The Squadron Recording Officer was "Papa" Masor.

The thoughts of the personnel were mixed. They were glad to be out of the firing lines, but considered the task of defending London as a joyride compared

to the time a wonderful spirit existed in the squadron, entirely different from anything he had come into contact with up till then."

There were two alarms while No 56 was at Bekesbourne, both false ones. On June 27 and on July 4 the aircraft took off the flew patrols without seeing anything, although on the latter occasion there was a raid on Harwich.

the machine, a wooden fighter, was also based at Bekesbourne during this period, and a wooden hangar was built to the rear of the present one.

When there was an air raid warning, either for bombers or Zepps, aircraft would hurriedly take off and patrol to look for the raiders. Interception was rather haphazard and

the enemy knew all about Bekesbourne.

As an emergency landing ground, different types of aircraft could be seen arriving at the aerodrome. DeHavilland DH.4 bombers, RAF RE.8 reconnaissance-types, Avro trainers, and once a French Morane parasol fighter. Not all the aircraft landed accidentally, however, as on June 10, 1918, when Wing Cdr J. A. Shaw flew in from Manston to visit his old friend Capt Chisholm for tea. Of course, such social visits could not be entered in the official log book, so Shaw wrote "Forced to land due to engine trouble."

The list

The description of the aerodrome on the list of ELGs within 40 miles of Manston RNAS station is quite graphic: "Surface good. The ground slopes to the E and has a dip in the middle. Borders — low hedges or fences. Good landings may be effected in either direction day or night. Obstacles — hangar W, a windmill 700 yds S."

Another home defence squadron was itself formed at Bekesbourne when B Flight of No 50 Sqd became No 112 Sqd on July 30, 1917, remaining at the airfield until September before moving to Throwley Wood, near Faversham. This squadron was equipped with Sopwith Pups and used mainly for night fighting.

Towards the end of 1917, No 50 Sqd received SE.5A fighters, with a 200 hp Wolsley Viper engine, and with a top speed of 140 mph it was more than a match for any lumbering Gotha. One of the members of the squadron at this time was Lt G. S. M. Install, VC, whose SE.5 was marked with coloured stripes painted around the rear fuselage and on the wings, a practice usually frowned upon when serving on the Western Front.

By now, the Gothas had been joined in their raids by the Giant or R class aircraft. These monsters having up to six engines

may Marsh to trap the unwary raider on his way home.

Scenes reminiscent of the Battle of Britain would occur at the airfield every time there was an alert. A hooter was mounted on the roof of the crew duty hut and when a report of a raid was received by telephone, a morse key was depressed to sound the alarm.

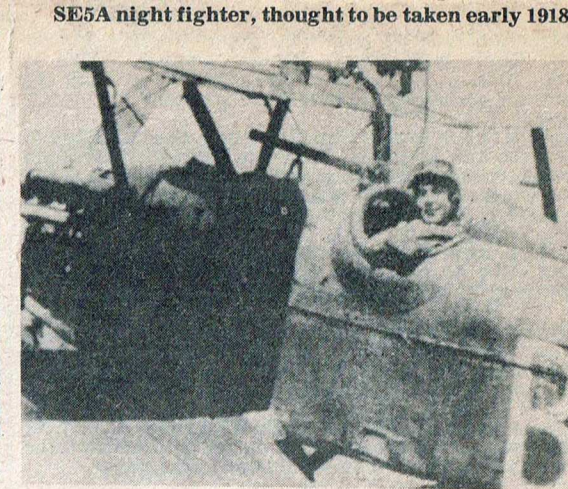
Pilots who had been sitting in the duty hut playing cards, reading or listening to the gramophone sprang into action and poured out of the door. The engines of the fighters were warmed up by the mechanics and the aircraft took off hurriedly to search for the enemy.

One problem was the lack of communication once the aircraft were in the air, and a system was developed for daylight using large, white panels in "dots and dashes" to be laid on the aerodrome to indicate the position of the enemy.

Major McCudden made use of this system when he was flying from Dover on July 13, 1917, and passed over Bekesbourne where the Ingram System showing on the ground told him that the Gothas were still over London.

However, this type of signal proved cumbersome to lay out and change quickly, so a simplified method of indicating the enemy's position was introduced. This consisted of a large arrow, visible from 17,000ft, which indicated the position of the enemy when last reported.

Daylight raids having been abandoned by the enemy due to the strength of the defences, night fighters were introduced. These were essentially day fighters but roughly adapted with exhaust dampers to reduce glare, and with twin machineguns mounted above the top wing. All squadron and national markings had the white portions painted over to prevent any reflection in searchlights, and an overall dark green colour scheme introduced in place of the more usual khaki



Second-Lieut Rhys-Davids at Bekesbourne with No 50 Squadron in June, 1917.

upper surfaces and clear doped ones below.

No 50 Sqd found that their SE.5A's were not suitable for night-fighting as they took too long to warm up the engines, and the narrow under-carriage caused problems on landing. They were replaced with the Sopwith Camel in October, 1918.

The squadrons all were allocated a call sign as in 1940, and that of No 50 was "Dingo" while at Bekesbourne. One enterprising pilot whose nickname was Smiler painted two leaping red dingos (Australian wild dogs) on the sides of his Camel. This sign was adopted as an unofficial squadron badge, even being painted on the tails of the Avro Vulcan jet bombers of the latest No 50 Sqd as recently as 1976.

At the end of the war, many squadrons were disbanded and airfields closed and by 1919 Bekesbourne was no longer designated an RAF aerodrome. However, it was to continue in use for another 20 years as a civil aerodrome.

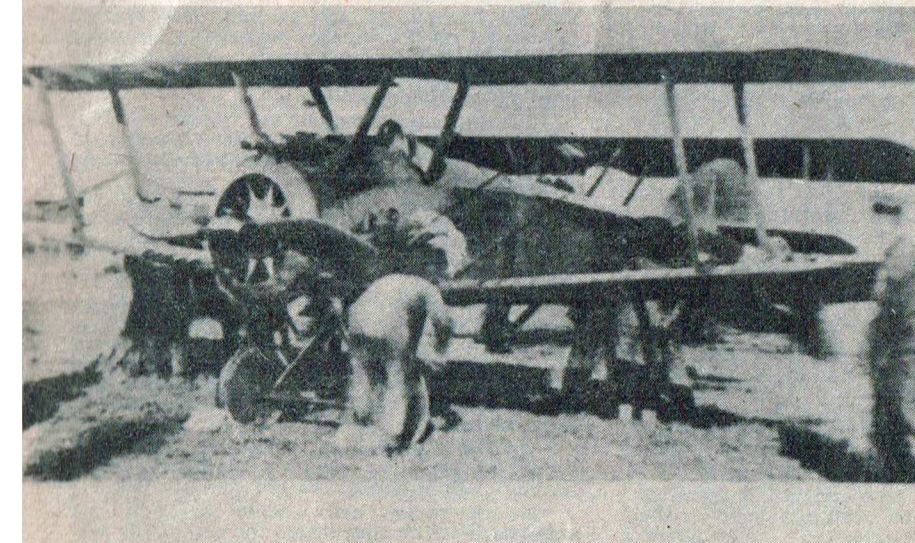
(To be continued)

Acknowledgements to: Aeroplane Monthly, Air Britain Digest; Squadrons of RAF, Owen Thetford; The First Battle of Britain, Raymond F. Fredette; Mr N. Jarvis; Flight Magazine.

Photos: Imperial War Museum; Mr Roy Green.



Sgt Vousden standing by a 56 Squadron aircraft at Bekesbourne in July, 1917.



"Smiler" Sopwith Camel with the two leaping dingos painted on the side at Bekesbourne in October, 1918.

Gift hits right note

Canterbury Youth Band's rehearsal proved more eventful than usual on Saturday, when the vice-president of Herne Bay and Whitstable Lions' club presented the band with 30 music stands.

The Deputy Mayor, Cllr George Hodges, received the stands on behalf of the Mayor, Cllr Mrs Margaret Scott-Knight, who is the band's president.

Thanking the Lions on behalf of the band, Mr Leon Bartholomew said it was the first rehearsal where players had not had to use chairs to support their music.

TO ALL THOSE WITH STEERING WHEELS
please turn your attention to others on the road

