

KIWIS AT WAR

BRIAN FALKNER

1917

MACHINES OF WAR



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PART ONE

ONE

BLOODY APRIL

Sunday, April 1st, 1917

‘Bloody April’, as it came to be known, began for me with the sound of Gotha Bombers, high and distant, but growing louder and closer by the second.

I was sitting on the hard wooden board they called a seat on a Crossley Tender (a small truck), juddering along the rutted white chalk of the road that led to the aerodrome at La Bellevue.

We drove through a constantly changing rural landscape of dense hedgerows, bubbling streams and grassy

meadows, filled with twitchy-tailed cows or scrawny, recently shorn sheep. It was a cool morning at the brittle edge of summer and the air had that clean fresh smell of damp grass and dung.

I was born on a farm. I grew up on a farm. I felt at home on a farm.

I felt at home here.



I was seventeen years old, and so was the century; the Great War, merely three. The grandiose plans of both the Allies and the Central Powers had ended up as a jagged scar across the face of Europe, stretching from the Belgian Coast to the Swiss Border.

The prime youth of the British and German Empires and their allies cowered in mud-filled trenches, hurling bullets and shells and poisonous gas at each other across a desolate, wasted landscape.

But that war seemed a long way away: another world. My mind was not filled with images of blood, death and destruction, but zooming aeroplanes and chattering machine guns and glory. I was wide-eyed at the idea of

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war and the possibilities it held.

I could barely contain my excitement at my first posting. Admittedly, I was an observer, not a pilot. I would fly in the rear seat of the aircraft manning the Lewis gun, not the front seat flying the plane. But regardless, I would get to fly. I would get to do battle with the demonic hordes in the skies over France and Belgium.

Henry Baker was my companion on the journey to La Bellevue. Like me, he came from a farm, although his family's wheat and barley plantation in Yorkshire was vastly different from our beef and dairy station on the other side of the world in New Zealand.

I had met Henry at the depot at St Omer. I was there for four days, waiting to be posted. He had been there a week.

Henry was a tough, gritty cavalry sergeant from the Seventh Hussars. The kind of chap you'd want alongside you in a scrap. A bullock of a man, short, but wide-shouldered with a shock of thick, black hair that no amount of brilliantine could tame. He was older, wiser, tougher and calmer than me (for, to be honest, in those early days I was little more than an unripe, excitable boy). We were as different as two men could be, so naturally became

the firmest of friends. I was glad we had been posted to the same squadron.

Like me, Henry was an observer, not a pilot. In this war of artillery and trenches, the cavalry was useless and, after months of parading aimlessly behind static front lines, Henry had decided to get into the war another way.

Like me, I think he secretly hoped that a role as an observer would be a stepping-stone to becoming a pilot.

But I had another ambition to keep me warm on that cool April morning: to avenge the death of my brother.

“Do you hear that, Keith?” Henry asked. He moved to the open rear of the tender and looked up.

I did, a strange, throbbing *wom wom wom* sound that rose above the engine of the little truck and the hubbub of its wheels on the cobbles. To me the sound was like the warbling cry of some great undersea creature and it at first intrigued me, then amused me. Later, it would come to terrify me.

I joined him at the rear of the tender and was about to reply when it pitched into a deep pothole. We both grabbed at the railings to avoid being thrown to the floor.

“I hear it,” I said when the tender regained a more or less even keel. “What is it?”

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He shrugged. “I ain’t no idea. Maybe the gods have indigestion.”

I laughed but I could see that his eyes never left the sky.

The sound grew louder and Henry’s eyes narrowed. “Jerry up,” he said, pointing a finger at the sky like a pistol. I followed his aim to see a row of black T’s stamped on the blood-tinted parchment of the early morning sky.

They weren’t scouts or reconnaissance planes, they were far too big for that, their wings were far too long. I hoped for a fleeting moment that they were British, perhaps Handley Pages lost on their way back from Germany – but they lacked the boxy tail.

“Bombers,” I said, unnecessarily.

“Heading for La Bellevue,” Henry said. I couldn’t see how he knew that, but had no doubt that he was right. Men like Henry had a sixth sense about such things.

He slid back along the wooden seat to the front of the tender and called to the driver through the small window, “Quick as you like, son.”

“Perhaps we should stop,” I said. “Let them pass over. Otherwise we might arrive just as they do.”

“Do you hear a siren?” he asked.

I shook my head.

“Then those drowsy gits at the aerodrome ain’t heard the Huns yet,” he said. “We gotta warn them.”

I grabbed the side of the tender again as we picked up speed, bouncing and sliding across the ruts and the potholes. Why was there no alarm siren?

It was only as we turned a final corner and came out of a stand of trees that I realised why.

Ahead of us lay the aerodrome, and idling on the central field in the early morning light were three B.E.2e’s preparing for a patrol. The combined noise of their engines was more than enough to drown out the sound of the bombers approaching overhead.

A sentry was waving us to a halt, but I was on my feet, leaning around the rear end of the tender, as was Henry, yelling and pointing at the sky.

“Jerry up!” Henry shouted.

The sentry’s face went white. He ran for his sentry box and a moment later we heard the shrill and discordant sound of a triple horn klaxon.

The sentry returned and opened a gate, waving us through without a glance at our papers. His eyes were fixed to the sky. As soon as we’d passed, he slammed the gate shut and leapt into a sandbagged trench by the sentry box.

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Before our eyes the sleepy fields of the aerodrome transformed into a scurrying ants' nest.

Anti-aircraft gunners ran to their guns, set on low trucks around the perimeter of the camp. Vickers gunners raced to their water-cooled machine guns on tall poles.

The guns opened up almost immediately and the air filled with the constant *woof woof* of the 2-pounder anti-aircraft guns.

The machine guns began to fire also, adding long streaks of tracer to the thunder and lightning show. Smoke and the smell of cordite drifted across the fields.

The B.E.s took off, their tails lifting, their wings quivering, racing down the airfield. They had no chance of attacking the bombers. By the time they reached that height, the bombers would be long gone. They were just trying to get their aircraft out of the path of danger.

The tender slid to a halt and the driver yelled to us to take cover as he dived out of his seat. I froze, unsure which way to run, and that would have been the death of me but I felt Henry's hand on my collar and he all but dragged me over the tailgate of the tender, then we were both sprinting for our lives.

The sound of the Gotha's lay over the airfield like a

blanket, punctured by the barking of the AA guns. The first of the bombers was already overhead. The relative safety of the trench was about twenty yards away, then fifteen, then ten.

I looked up with interest, almost detachment, as the dark shapes of the bombs began to fall. I followed the first one with my eyes as it dropped towards the centre of the field.

Five yards to safety.

Any sense of interest or detachment vanished. A shocking blast of heat and air, mixed with dirt and angry spiralling splinters of metal, knocked me off my feet. I landed heavily in a ditch on the far side of the road, amazed to find myself still alive and conscious. Henry had disappeared, and in the shock of the explosion I could only think that he must have made it to the trench without me. That was when I realised that I had lost my uniform cap.

I should probably have stayed where I was, covered my head and sought shelter in the narrow depression of the ditch, but the explosion had scrambled my brain. I found myself lurching back out on the field, looking for my lost cap. Another blast of sheer sound and heat and I

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was lying on my back on the ground watching in horror as a body flew over the top of me.

I rolled over and pushed myself upright, staggering like a madman. Death fell from the sky to the left and the right of me, to the front and the rear, each time punching me with huge fists of heat and smoke. Debris and shrapnel fizzed through the air around me, miraculously leaving me untouched.

Through a gap in the smoke I saw one of the BE's in the trees on the far side of the airfield, shattered, a tangled mess of canvas, wood and wire.

I heard the other two planes climbing overhead.

A hangar on the far side of the airfield exploded, and shattered shards of wood and pieces of aeroplane sprayed out in a balloon of flames. A row of tents completely disappeared in a whirlwind of noise and smoke. A near-miss on a latrine block collapsed one of the walls and set it on fire.

The sky lit up with the sudden glow of a second sun, and there was an enormous clap of thunder. A glance up and I saw debris from a plane, but hardly recognisable, falling from the sky. One of the AA gunners must have scored a direct hit and, from the size of the explosion, the

Hun had still been carrying its bombs. A burning piece of the tail crashed down not ten yards from me, the black Maltese cross still visible ... but not for long, as it was eaten away by fire.

More bombs, more explosions, random, indiscriminate, but the gods were still watching over me because I remained unscathed. One bomb fell into a small pond by the armoury. For a moment I thought it was a dud, then the pond erupted and moments later began to rain foul-smelling mud and water.

And then the bombers were gone; the strange, undulating sound fading away, the black shapes vanishing towards the early morning sun.

I found myself on my feet, stumbling towards the devastation, dazed, not even sure if I had survived, thinking only to find my uniform cap.

I stumbled across the latrine block. A pair of feet stuck out from beneath a jumble of flaming timbers. I tore at the rubble, finding strength I didn't know I had, to wrench a burning beam off the top of a collapsed wall. I shoved boards out of the way and grabbed at the feet of the man, hauling him out of the burning debris.

He seemed to be dead and I wasn't sure what I should

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do, but then he coughed, rolled over and sat up, staring at me in shock and confusion.

Blood was running into my eyes and I wiped it away with the back of my sleeve, which only succeeded in mixing it with soot and muck and smearing it over my face.

“You! Come here! Quickly, man!” The voice came from behind me. A posh voice, like that of an aristocrat, or royalty.

A man in the uniform of a pilot, tall and thin with a pencil moustache, was waving frantically at me from beside a burning hangar. Part of the wreckage of the Gotha had landed on the roof and the hangar was well aflame.

I ran inside with him. Four Bristol Fighters looked undamaged, but were in clear danger from the burning roof.

“Give me a hand,” the man shouted, running to the first of the planes. He picked up the tail by one of the elevators. I grabbed the other and together we pulled the aircraft out into the safety of the field.

He was already dashing back inside and I followed, helping him haul out a second plane, then back for the third and the fourth.

Only then did he stop for a moment, wiping sweat from his face with the back of his hand.

“Fully loaded,” he said, sucking in deep breaths. “Petrol and ammunition. Would have been a dashed bad show if they had gone up.”

Then he was gone, running off in the direction of somebody screaming.

I looked around, unsure what to do. Men were everywhere, helping the wounded, putting out fires. A spiral of smoke was rising from behind the armoury and I ran towards it. It didn't occur to me that if the armoury was on fire, the best place to run would be in the opposite direction.

It was not on fire, but it was close. Some burning debris had landed on a pile of boxes. Flames were licking at the wall of the armoury so I kicked the debris away before a fire could take hold.

The boxes below were already smouldering, but it was only after I kicked away the remains of the debris that I saw they held 20-pound Cooper bombs.

I almost turned to run then, but realised that if even one of these boxes exploded, the armoury would go up – and the consequences of that were unimaginable.

I grabbed the rope handle on the side of one of the boxes and began to drag it. It was heavy, way heavier than I could have imagined, and it was blackened and

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smoking, small yellow flames beginning to eat into the top and sides. The pond, half emptied of water, appeared in front of me and I dragged the box into the mud at the edge, then splashed water on and around it until the flames disappeared.

I managed the second box too, but by the third, my muscles seemed to have turned to jelly. I managed to haul it a yard. Then another half a yard. Then an inch, and then, like an angel, the tall pilot was there, grabbing the other handle and together we slid the box the rest of the way into the pond.

I washed the mud from my hands as the man raced off to some new emergency.

It was then that the pain hit me.