

PETER CARTER'S DIARY.

We are publishing some extracts from Flying Officer Peter Carter's diary, which was found among his belongings after his tragic death.

Describing his first aerial encounter with the enemy, Peter writes : " I knew quite a lot about the theory of fighting in the air, but I was not sure how I would react to a dog-fight. I soon found out. Ten of us were patrolling at 15,000 feet when we saw about forty M.E. 110's approaching from the opposite direction, and it was with mixed feelings that I saw them draw nearer.

" When we could see their black and white crosses we positioned ourselves for attack. The M.E.'s, when attacked, always form one big circle, and when they have been round once they half roll, dive full throttle absolutely vertically, and come up on the other side.

" I was amazed to find that I had no feelings of fear. I eventually got one and was just getting another when I realised that bullets and cannon shells were whizzing past my wing.

" I at once broke off, and then they started to hit my machine. I sat quite still and watched them, too fascinated to attempt to get out of the way. I saw three bullets pass between my legs and hundreds passing through my wings. How

long I should have been content to sit there and watch is a matter of conjecture.

"It was not fear that kept me rooted, but an uncanny kind of interest which may seem extraordinary, but is nevertheless true. My luck lasted out and I was not hit. After putting two bullets through my radiator he left me—very fortunate for me.

"I did a very realistic dive away. I had an idea, somehow, that I was on fire and almost baled out, but I found I was mistaken. Though the machine was badly shot, I found I could pull her out—and did so.

"Suddenly I realised I was over German territory, so headed south. The instruments were enveloped in steam (as I was), so I steered by the sun. After a few minutes I looked for a field on which to land, and found a beauty.

"However, instead of landing with my wheels up, I decided to put them down—a very rash thing to do. I made a good approach and a fair landing, but then my troubles started as I hit a soft spot. Suddenly the tail rose, and I watched my 'prop' chip itself off in the ground. I still felt myself rising, but with a sickening crash she went over on her back, and I literally bit the dust.

"Again I was lucky, as the softness of the ground—which was the cause of the trouble—allowed me to bury my head three inches in the soil without breaking my neck.

"I now felt a very real sense of fear as there was a highly inflammable machine on top of me. I struggled frantically to free my head, and just managed to unearth it before my breath gave out.

"Had I been knocked out by the crash—as by all laws I should have been—I should not be writing this now.

"I slipped out of parachute and harness and propped myself up on one shoulder. Having spat as much earth as I could out of my mouth, I began shouting 'Secours, Secours, Je suis aviateur Anglais.' I soon found that it helped my breathing and hearing. What troubled me most was the petrol and glycol which poured in a steady stream into my eyes.

"Help was at hand, however, and some farm labourers rushed to the rescue and hauled me to safety. With the greatest relief I learned that I was behind the lines and

practically unscathed. My eyes, however, were giving me trouble and smarted in the extreme, my face being suffused with copious tears, which made my disreputable appearance even more so.

"A great deal of fiction has been written about rescued airmen, in which a girl is mixed up somehow, and they either get married or he leaves her with a broken heart. I was always sceptical about those episodes, but imagine my surprise and delight at seeing a very fair specimen of the opposite sex standing a few feet away from me.

"According to the fiction writer she should have been weeping and wringing her hands, but actually she was giving me a very sweet and welcome smile. Here I must disappoint you, as I did not promptly fall madly in love with her, but it certainly was nice to see her there, resembling a ray of sunshine.

"Together we inspected the ruins of my Hurricane, and to this day I wonder at my escape. We counted 120 bullet holes and then gave it up as a bad job.

"Three cannon holes were in evidence in my wings and fuselage. We then looked in the cockpit and were surprised to see that the control column was but an inch off the ground. To those who are conversant with Hurricanes it may seem impossible for that to be the case and the occupant to survive. Believe me, impossible as it may seem, that is exactly what happened."

He was fêted by the French villagers, and ultimately returned to his unit.

"My arrival was a triumphal entry, as I was presumed killed." Particularly touching was the incredulous delight of his friend Ian. They went to France together; they flew together, they fought together. 'A great deal has been said—and will be said—about friendship,' he writes. "Suffice it for me to say that Ian and I were inseparable. We had known each other but a few weeks prior to France, but we clung together until separated by the Will of God."

He records an unusual and startling experience. "Life once more took on its old course, but very soon my eye began to give trouble. It had been bruised in the crash and it was while flying to the base hospital for attention that my next excitement occurred.

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"It happened like this. Ian and I took off in a Magister on the two hours' journey, and we arranged for each of us to fly the 'plane for 15 minutes at a time. In addition to the length of the flight in a small aircraft, it was very 'bumpy.' At the end of the first 15 minutes I turned round (I was flying in the front cockpit) and raised my hands, which was the signal agreed on for change of control, and took my feet off the rudder, sitting back to enjoy myself. The next thing I realised was that the aircraft was nose-diving to earth steeply and, thinking that Ian was just letting off steam or had seen a pretty girl in the village below, I just sat tight. As we drew nearer to the ground he made no effort to pull out, and I got a bit worried. At the last moment my sense of self-preservation overcame me, and I pulled back the 'stick,' which was very stiff, and we missed a roof by a matter of inches.

"Now began one of the most hectic periods of my life, quite unequalled by any dog-fight with a Hun. Ian seemed to be trying to break my nerve, and he almost succeeded. I had never been in an aircraft that flew so low, dived so steeply, or missed houses, trees, the ground, and everything else by so little.

"After one particularly violent dive I turned round and shouted, waving my fists in an endeavour to get Ian to stop his larks; but in reply the 'plane careered in an even more dangerous fashion, and I saw a man in a village fall flat on his face in sheer terror.

"Mothers were running into houses with squalling children in their arms. After that I gave up hope. Ian seemed bent on killing both of us, and I almost went into a coma. I managed, however, to keep my nerve sufficiently to pull out of the bottom of dives. Just to make matters worse than bad, I was flying in a battle bowler (technical name for a tin hat), which had an annoying habit of falling to the back of my head and nearly throttling me with the chin strap.

"As a variation from shoot-ups, Ian decided to go in for a spot of flying over a forest, almost skimming the trees. By this time I was so miserable that I did not care a hoot what happened to me. I just put my head inside the cock-pit and stayed there. At last, Ian flew back to the aerodrome and straight away began his approach.

"He made a bad landing, bouncing several times. The wind was too strong for such a small craft to taxi in without assistance, so I got out, full of silent prayers, and pulled on one wing.

"On arriving at dispersal point I was too weary, too disappointed in Ian, too miserable to question him as to the reason for such dangerous flying. I could only assume he had been testing my nerve after my recent crash, and, as far as I was concerned, he had done it.

"At last I summoned up enough strength to ask a very grim-faced Ian what the h—— he meant by it. To which he replied that in all his born days he had never been flown so dangerously; and, if he had his way, I would be kicked out of the Service.

"This unexpected outburst left me speechless. He accusing me of dangerous flying? When I told him I had not touched the damned controls except to get him out of difficulties, he was as amazed as I had been. All the time that aircraft had been flying itself, and only my split seconds of interference had prevented us both from being killed.

"My joyful reaction was that, after all, I had not lost the affection of my pal.

"Together we inspected the 'plane and found that the two bolts holding up the rear seat had sheared, and the entire weight of Ian's body had been resting on the elevator and aileron control rods, which would, of course, be the cause of their stiffening and inability to be moved very far.

"At the time of my handing over to Ian we hit a particularly severe 'bump' which must have caused the shearing and, in addition to this, Ian had not noticed that I had given him the controls. Had the bolts not sheared we should both have realised the fact that the other was not flying. As it was, when either of us felt the controls they were stiff, and we had every reason to believe the other to be in control.

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"I was billeted with Ian in quarters over a shop owned by a very charming old couple and two small daughters," his diary notes continue. "At least, I say I was billeted with Ian, but to this day I have not seen him since I left him. I will not attempt to say anything about my loss. All I know is that from the last patrol we

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were on he did not come back, nor had anything been heard of him. But having been shot down myself, I was full of hope that he would turn up before very long.

"I spent a very lonely night that night, and indeed, during the nights that followed. As day followed day, my hopes began to diminish of ever seeing Ian again. I got into touch with every hospital near, but they knew nothing about him.

"Things without Ian did not seem the same. I lacked his constant companionship, his merry and loud laughter, and our daily conferences. But France did not permit me to mope. No matter what happened, the task we had in hand had to go on, and I had to play my part as effectively as the other lads.

"It was a very unpleasant task to make an inventory of Ian's kit which, I am afraid, never reached these shores, being lost at our evacuation."

LAST DAYS IN FRANCE.

"Our work now lost its former flavour, as we were up at dawn (about 3 o'clock) and were kept at it till dark (about 10 o'clock). I will give you some idea of a typical day—they were all the same: Up at dawn and a tramp through dew-soaked grass to dispersal. An hour and a half's patrol before breakfast, which we had at 8.30, and which consisted of a cup of coffee and bread and butter at a nearby inn. Another patrol in the morning, and yet another at about mid-day. Lunch we took at about 2.30, which was made up of anything we could get, but was usually not too bad.

"More patrols in the afternoon and evening, with a cup of tea at about 5 p.m.—if we were lucky. Altogether we did about five to seven hours flying each day, and it consisted solely of patrolling, controlling the evacuation from—.

"Even flying lost its flavour amid such sameness. We had our food at a nearby café, and by the time we had packed up for the night it was hardly worth waiting for supper before going to bed. As a rule, I procured a tin of sausages and cooked them myself, and then went to bed for about four hours' sleep.

"It was gruelling work, and I wonder that we lasted the time. Had it lasted for more than a week not many of us would have been able to stand the pace. One sergeant failed to make the grade and fainted away very gamely. He

just said one evening, 'Sorry, boys, can't make it,' and then fainted from exhaustion and went back to England by sea.

"Our position grew daily worse until one day the Station Commander gathered us together and told us the gravity of the situation. At any moment, he told us, we might expect the enemy, and warned us to make a very careful survey of the aerodrome before landing from patrol; and if we saw signs of the enemy in possession we were to make for England straight away.

"We posted a look-out ten miles north of the 'drome, and just sat back and waited for fate to take its course. We were to stay on and cover the retreat of the Army, which we did, and were the last of the B.E.F. to leave France.

"Early next afternoon we were ordered on patrol, but I refused to let my aircraft fly as it was using over a gallon of glycol an hour, and I wanted to keep it serviceable long enough to take me back to England.

"About an hour after that the look-out 'phoned us that the so-and-so Huns were coming, and he was off! The rest of us were in the mess and we were ordered off to England at once. The pilots who were in the air had just time enough to land and re-fuel before the aerodrome was taken over by the Boche.

"That flight back to England was the most welcome flight I have ever done, and I greet these shores more than I had ever thought possible. England and Beauty were in sight."

HIS LAST ENTRY.

Peter was obviously still feeling the loss of his friend Ian, and the last note in Peter's diary before he met his death in a flying accident in England reads: "That you may judge to what depths I had sunk, I will give you the effort of the evening of my return:

Those who live, what lies before them?
Poverty, perhaps, and woe.
Though their loved ones still adore them,
Their dreams are shattered by the foe.
Yet their spirits still unshattered,
And before the impulse cools,
They start to mend their castles, battered,
With all that's left of broken tools.
Remember, in the Peace that's after,
The price we paid to win the Quest;
Forget not midst rejoicing laughter,
The thousands in Eternal Rest.