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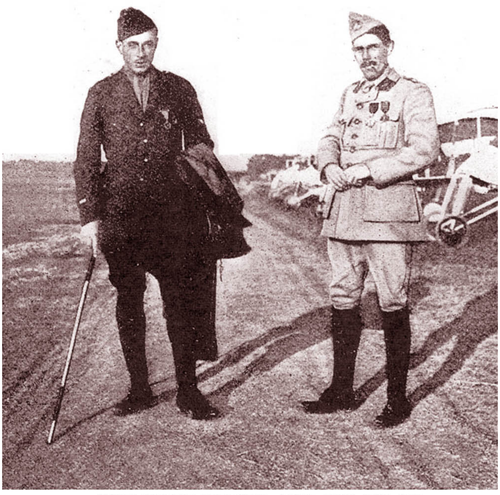
DROPPING BOMBS ON THE BOCHES

The Personal Impressions and Experiences of a French Aviator Bombardier

By Bernard Boutet de Monvel

BERNARD BOUTET DE MONVEL is the son of the noted French artist Maurice Boutet de Monvel, and himself one of the ablest and best known of the younger artists of France. When the war came, he went to the front with his regiment. He was wounded in the Battle of the Marne, and upon recovery was assigned to the transport service. How he hated this kind of work, how he became an aviator, and of his subsequent adventures as a bomb thrower, he has told in frequent letters to his brother, Roger Boutet de Monvel, through whose courtesy Vanity Fair is permitted to reproduce the following extracts from their correspondence. The explanatory and running comment accompanying these extracts has been prepared by Mr. Roger Boutet de Monvel.



THE BOMBARDIER AND HIS PILOT

Bernard Boutet de Monvel (with a cane) and his pilot and superior officer, Captain de Serre, photographed on the aviation field near Châlons, in October, 1915

"I ENTER the Aviation Corps to-morrow as a bombardier. Now for the joy of life! My appointment came a good deal sooner than I had expected. In my squad I find Jacques Richepin, the son of the academician; R. De Losques, the caricaturist, who has been on the job for about a month; and that little beast De Coutras, who in the piping times of peace, as you will remember, spent most of his time pouring champagne down his throat. That confounded automobile service with which I have been connected was simply dishonoring! Indeed such a job as transporting ammunition, giving joy rides to infantrymen who were going up to the trenches to have their heads shot off, certainly could not last. Thank God I am back again in a fighting branch of the army! My orderly, an old Alsatian, who deserted from the Germans to enlist with us, has just brought me a bouquet of flowers, and, with tears in his eyes, has read a little speech in his own particular dialect, wishing me "bon voyage" and complimenting me upon becoming a member of the "Phalanx of the Birds of France." I give you my word that the bouquet, the speech, and the devotion of my old orderly make me feel that it is well worth while to risk one's skin against those fellows over there."

EXCEPT in rare cases there are always two men in an aeroplane—one who navigates the machine and one who drops bombs and works the rapid fire gun or who merely makes observations, noting these upon a map.

But even for this observation work one must have a staunch heart, a cool head and a taste for adventure. Many men have failed to make good as observers, the most common weakness being a violent form of nausea, which makes it impossible for them to accomplish their task properly. The risks both for the pilot and the bombardier are the same, but the pilot particularly needs a companion who can shoot straight and afford moral encouragement in the long and tiresome hours of flight.

Of course my brother was absolutely ignorant of all these things when he entered the aviation corps, and he wondered how he would pull through the first tests. I too wondered about this and about many other things besides. But the profession of aviator has its advantages. In the first place, there are many more opportunities than in other branches of this service for the individual to give proof of initiative and bravery. When he has an opportunity to do something brilliant, his acts rarely pass unnoticed. He is much better off than the poor devil of an infantryman who is only one of a crowd, fighting anonymously, reduced more often than not to having himself killed in some obscure corner of a trench. Also he usually finds a house to sleep in and a real bed. If not quartered in a chateau, the aviator at least has a comfortable tent.

"OUR aviation camp is a lovely place," wrote my brother. "It is quiet, and clean, and all the tools are properly arranged and ready for use. When our work is done we live in our tents or sit out in front of them on rocking chairs. I have a nice little bed, sheets, mattress—in fact everything I need. I might almost think I was in Africa, hunting big game." And finally, when the aviator returns from an expedition (if he does return), he at least has the opportunity to wash up and make himself comfortable. He has his baggage, his razor and his clean linen. This can only be appreciated by a man who has served in the infantry and has slept two weeks in the open air, lying in the mud, with only his cartridge bag for a pillow.

UNFORTUNATELY, however, there is another side to all these advantages. I do not want to make a point of the great number of men whom we have lost in the aviation service, but the figure is high, very high. In addition to accidents which happen to the machinery (and heaven knows these are frequent enough even in times of peace), there are the risks of fighting. While it is true that the fire of rifles and ordinary field artillery can only reach about eighteen hundred yards in the air, special anti-aircraft guns can hit with precision any object three thousand yards above them—and the Germans possess a large number of these effective weapons. The aviator's first painful impression is to find himself alone, five thousand feet in the air, practically defenceless in the midst of a hail of shrapnel. This situation has nothing in common with that of ordinary combat. On the ground, if you are exposed to fire, you can throw yourself flat on the earth, or seek shelter. If need be you can dig a hole. Frequently you can return the enemy's fire, or defend yourself blow for blow. You are excited by the struggle, and you feel that in case of being hit friends are nearby who will carry you to a first aid station, or give you a decent burial if you are killed. Up in an aeroplane, however, there is no such feeling as this. If a shell bursts in the engine there is nothing

Author's Self-Portrait

for it but a deadly fall to earth. If, on the other hand, a piece of shell merely puts the motor out of business, then the pilot must make a clever descent and try at any price to land within his own lines. Should he be unable to do this, and land on enemy territory, he must suffer the mocking looks, the taunting smiles, and the insulting questions of his captors. One cannot help thinking of these dangers at first, but after a while every soldier becomes accustomed to the risks of war. My brother Bernard has returned safely from the raids on Saarbrücken, Dillingen and other places, and I have come to hold the idea that he will return safely from other raids. He, however, has never seemed to be worried about the danger of his profession.

ON the 14th of June, he wrote: "Just a short word to give you my first impressions. I have just been up twice to a height of two thousand meters. It is all very curious and not at all startling. I felt no dizziness. We used a Voisin biplane, which is very stable. My pilot, a former college mate, is Captain de Serre, a (*Continued on page* 100) mighty nice fellow, who got his promotion to a captaincy about two months ago and has already been mentioned in orders four times, and wears the Legion of Honor medal. He won't let me take a fly over the German lines until I have been up four or five times. That will be in three or four days if this good weather continues."

AND here is his account of his first expedition: "This morning I paid my first visit to the Boches. At 7 o'clock my captain came to me and said, 'Lieutenant, you will do well to dress warmly this morning, because when you get up two thousand meters into the sky, going at ninety miles an hour, you may feel cold. Therefore, according to his instructions, I put on a costume which made me look more or less like an eskimo. I wore two pairs of socks, and over these a pair of snow boots. I wore heavy leather trousers and two sweaters, a muffler and a great furcap. In addition, I put on a knit face protector, a leather helmet, goggles and heavy fur gloves. My appearance was certainly comic; but nobody laughs here. Every one is accustomed to this sort of a masquerade, and my captain was disguised about the same way that I was. With all these accoutrements it was rather difficult to climb into the machine, but I finally succeeded, and we were off. We rose rapidly, swaying more or less in the wind, while the motor roared so loudly that it was impossible for me to speak to de Serre. When it became absolutely necessary for us to communicate with each other we fairly had to howl.

"As we rose to four hundred, eight hundred, and a thousand meters, we sped constantly northward in the direction of the trenches. At first I could hardly recognize them. They presented such a strange sight, two thousand meters below. Gradually, however, I recognized the two sinuous lines, with their thousands of ramifications, communicating trenches, listening posts and approaches. They looked like two huge reptiles with thousands of feet squirming along the ground, side by side. The whole countryside looked dead; no moving thing could be seen. The ground was covered with shell holes, making it look like an upturned pock-marked face. But suddenly my contemplation of the scene was interrupted. Above the noise of the motor I heard a loud detonation just behind me. I glanced at my pilot and he shook his head from side to side, as if to say that it didn't matter. He did not even look back, but kept his eyes fixed in front of him to maintain his direction. I could not help looking around, and leaning slightly out of the car I saw about two hundred meters back of us a huge floating ball of yellowish smoke. At the same moment I heard three more explosions, much louder than the first, and three shells burst quite close to us—not more than a hundred meters away. Frankly, I admit that I should have preferred to be somewhere else. This time the captain looked around, but he shook his head again and shouted, 'No danger! Those are from mortars; they cannot fire higher than eighteen hundred meters.'"

The anti-aircraft guns carry three thousand meters. They are mounted on automobiles and are arranged in batteries of six guns, which are drawn up at a right angle to the path of the machine to be attacked, and each gun fires in turn at an interval of about one second.

Other dangers that the French aviators have to contend with are the Aviaticks and the Taubes. These frequently come up at most unexpected moments. Here is what happened to Bernard:

"I HAVE just undergone one of the most thrilling emotions of my life," he wrote me in June of last year. "About three o'clock this afternoon Captain de Serre and I started off to bombard the Boches, and very foolishly forgot to take our rapid-fire gun along. We came over their trenches safely, and I bombarded conscientiously, and after my last bomb had been dropped we turned about to go home.

We were glad to do so, as the German batteries were beginning to make it hot for us. Hardly had we started back, however, when I casually looked up into the air and was staggered to perceive a huge Aviatick right overhead. How we had failed to notice it before is a mystery, as the monster was not more than fifty meters away. Evidently the men in it had noticed that we were not armed. Suddenly the Aviatick made a dive, and as it passed within a few yards of us fired a broadside, then passed rapidly beneath us and turned about. I seized my carbine, loaded it, and began to fire, but to little purpose, I am afraid. If I only had had my quick-firer I might have been able to do something—I might have been able to bring down an Aviatick! The most disheartening part of the whole business was that such a chance does not often come.

"However, this is the way it all ended. Just as the Aviatick passed under us our motor went dead, and we only just were able to volplane down to our lines. After landing, we found that we had nine bullet holes, six in the car and three in the motor. That was a narrow squeak for us."

FOLLOWING the raid on Saarbrücken came the raid on Dillingen, the 25th of August. My brother wrote: "I have just this moment gotten back from the raid on the factories at Dillingen near Saarlouis. As a matter of fact, I am only one of it all by the skin of my teeth—and without really accomplishing very much. When we were twenty-nine kilometers beyond the German lines our motor went dead. We had to decide at once whether to land where we were, and resign ourselves to eat black bread in some German prison camp for the rest of the war, or take the very slight chance of getting back to our own lines by volplaning. Even with the wind at our backs, and from a height of 2,700 meters, twenty-nine kilometers is some distance to slide. Nevertheless, we decided to try it after having made futile attempts to start our motor. We ended by landing—I don't know how—less than a kilometer inside of our own lines, having passed only four hundred meters above the German trenches in the midst of the most beautiful cannonade that I ever heard. Our own fellows, who were watching our adventure anxiously from our side, counted sixty-eight shells that were fired at us by the Germans. And with all this shooting, only two little shrapnel bullets hit us! Decidedly, those Germans shot like boobies that day! Nevertheless, I am quite willing to confess that I thought I was surely gone this time, but as all is well that ends well, I now hope, as a result of this little adventure, I may get a citation in orders, or, perhaps, even the war cross."

INDEED, only a few days later, Bernard returned to Paris on leave and he wore, on the breast of his rather gay uniform, the coveted medal. Two months later he left for Saloniki with the allied expedition to Greece, and since then I have had no news of him.