

NEW ZEALAND'S AIR ACES

(By "23/762")

MANY of the most thrilling stories of individual heroism during the Great War came from members of the Royal Air Force — not from the airmen themselves, but from fellow aviators, for the flying man is notoriously reticent.

New Zealand played her part in the Royal Air Force of 1914-18, just as she is preparing for the present conflict. Our efforts this time will be intensified, because of the importance of the air branch in modern warfare. The response for recruits has been excellent, but many more men will be required when the organisation is complete. It is almost certain, also, that many of our men will complete their training at the central organisation which is to be set up in Canada.

As in the last war, New Zealand's airmen will be absorbed into the Royal Air Force. Reasons for this are that a separate New Zealand force would be too expensive; there would be considerable overlapping; and the losses would be too severe in any one serious engagement.

It is certain, also, that New Zealand will produce her air aces — just as she did in the last war — men whose bravery and initiative are recorded in the official records of the Royal Air Force. To-day many of those men hold positions with the New Zealand Air Force; others are in civilian occupations, but are ready to join up again if required.

Our Greatest Ace

Our greatest air ace was Major Keith Caldwell, M.C., D.C. and bar, Belgian Croix de Guerre, now farming in the Waikato. No record of British flying is complete without some reference to his personal courage, his initiative, and his famous exploits, for he was renowned as a great fighter and a dashing patrol leader. Colonel Jack Scott said that Major Caldwell would have been the British ace of aces had he been capable of shooting straight. Major "Mick" Mannock, V.C., D.S.O. and two bars, M.C. and bar, the greatest of all airmen, who is credited with bringing down 73

German planes, owed much to Caldwell, who encouraged and schooled him when he was young in the arts of air warfare. It is recorded that when Caldwell was forbidden to take undue risks by flying over the German lines, he used to go out alone and shoot down enemy planes which he never reported. Stories about him are legion, but one must suffice. On one occasion, while attacking an enemy plane, Caldwell collided with a plane from his own squadron, flown by Lieut. S. Carlin, a distinguished airman with



Flight Lieut. D. C. Inglis, D.C.M., of Wellington, who was with Major Mannock, V.C., when that famous airman was killed

a wooden leg and known as "Timber-toes." This happened at 16,000 feet in the air. Carlin fell 8,000 feet before he righted his machine; Caldwell's machine kept on spinning to the earth. He decided that his only chance to get the machine out of the spin was to stand half-in and half-out of the cockpit, with the foot inside the cockpit pressing hard on the rudder, hoping, by standing in this manner, to counteract the spinning and get his machine safely over the British lines. It was a million to one chance, and it succeeded. His machine swept over the trenches, ten feet above the earth, and as it dived into the ground Caldwell jumped, turned a somersault, picked himself up and walked to the infantrymen who had been breathlessly watching him. Men of his squadron never thought to see him again, but he returned that night, to celebrate the occasion in a manner worthy of the adventure.

Fighting Mac

Another New Zealand air ace was Squadron Leader M. C. McGregor, D.F.C., who, after a brilliant war record, was killed at Rongotai Airdrome on February 18, 1936, while landing his machine on a stormy day. He is officially credited with bringing down 14 German

machines during the war, but it might be as well to state here that airmen were credited only with the machines which could accurately be traced at the time. As the majority of the German planes brought down fell behind their own lines, many of our airmen lost the "scalps" which were their due. McGregor "blooded" the famous 85th squadron when he brought down an enemy plane near Armentières. Time and again he expressed his disgust at not being able to get near the Germans, and in one letter he wrote: "The Germans round here take more stalking than an old stag. You cannot get within miles of them." On one memorable occasion McGregor's plane was forced down in No Man's Land and he was forced to creep



S. P. Andrew, photograph of Group Captain L. M. Isitt, who has just been appointed to the rank of Acting Chief of Staff, Royal New Zealand Air Force

In Mannock's Last Battle

Several stories concerning Flight Lieut. D. C. Inglis, D.C.M., are told in "Mac's Memoirs" and the story of Mannock, V.C. Inglis was born at Darfield, Canterbury, but is now in business in Wellington. He was determined to become an airman. He left New Zealand with the Main Body, and served with the infantry through the nightmare of Gallipoli. Eight times he applied for a commission with the air force but he did not succeed until his ninth application. That was the spirit which made our flying men. Inglis was in the same squadron with the famous Mannock and he has the greatest admiration for that superb fighter. They were on the flight together when Mannock was killed. A German plane had been brought down by Inglis at close range. As it fell in flames Mannock followed the enemy down, but, as he neared the earth, his machine was hit and he crashed in flames. While taking the sad news back

to the squadron Inglis almost lost his life. He was flying low; a shot went through his petrol tank, and he was forced down only five yards behind the British lines.

Flight Lieut. Freddie Gordon, who was known in his squadron as "Sweet Freddie," had a reputation as a fighter of distinction, and his exploits are recorded in the history of the Royal Air Force. He also was associated with the famous Major Mannock.

A Fighting Curate

Air Vice-Marshal T. C. McLean, formerly an Auckland curate, now holds a high position with the Royal Air Force in England. Soldiering was in his blood. Before the war he went to England, joined the cavalry and was in the retreat from Mons. Later he joined the R.A.F. Group Captain A. Coningham, D.S.O., M.C., D.F.C., A.F.C., who learned to fly at Walsh's school at Kohimarama, is now on the staff of the Royal Air Force, England. He is a Wellington College old boy, joined the R.A.F. in 1916 and, after a distinguished war record, was appointed to various high executive positions in Iraq, Egypt, Khartoum, and other centres.

Flight Lieut. J. D. Canning, of Hawke's Bay, now attached to Air Headquarters in Wellington, was in France with two famous airmen—Major W. C. Bishop, V.C., the Canadian who is credited with 72 German planes, and Major Mannock, V.C., who had 73 to his name.

According to his fellow airmen, Flight Lieut. Bannerman, now a solicitor in Gore, was one of the most able of New Zealand's many fine airmen. He was with the 19th Squadron in France and had 24 enemy planes to his credit. Bannerman flew a Dolphin machine, which was considered one of the most difficult to handle in the air.

Some Of The Others

There is not sufficient space to tell the whole story of any of these men and only brief reference can be made to others. Group Captain L. M. Isitt, formerly of Christchurch, saw service in Egypt and France with the Rifle Brigade before joining the R.A.F. in 1916. On his return from the war he remained with the New Zealand forces, holding many executive positions. Recently he was appointed Acting Chief of Staff, Royal N.Z. Air Force.

H. D. Williams was one of the first New Zealanders to join the air force, when he was with the Mounted troops in Egypt. Squadron Leader T. W. White was made a prisoner of war when he was forced down behind the German lines. Squadron Leader P. Fowler, Palmerston North, and Ken Hall, of Canterbury, are others who helped to make history for New Zealand in the air.

A word is due to the Walsh school at Kohimarama, Auckland. It no longer exists, but during the war 110 pilots were trained there. Major Caldwell and G. E. Callendar were the first to pass. McGregor was in the second batch, along with Lieuts. J. M. Warnock, E. H. Garland, and G. G. A. Martin. Garland was forced down and became a prisoner of war.