

## ONE AIRMAN'S WAR: AIRCRAFT MECHANIC JOE BULL'S PERSONAL DIARIES 1916-1919

edited by Mark Lax

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Despite the fact that the First World War ended 80 years ago, the volume of available literature on the first great air war is surprisingly small. The six-volume official history, *The War in the Air*, despite being somewhat uneven in its coverage, does at least provide a context for other histories but has been out of print for decades. At the other end of the spectrum are autobiographical works by those who took part in the air war. However, for quite natural reasons, the majority of these tend to have been written by pilots, fighter pilots to be more accurate. Whilst the journals of Bishop, McCudden and the like are valuable historical records, they can give an unbalanced view of the air war. It is therefore a great pleasure to see in print a book which gives a completely different view of this historic formative period in the history of air power.

*One Airman's War* is the diary of Aircraft Mechanic Joe Bull who served with No 1 Squadron, Australian Flying Corps in the Middle East theatre from December 1916 to the end of the war. It is fortunate indeed that Joe Bull kept a detailed and comprehensive diary: more so that this document should survive the author's death and find its way to the Royal Australian Air Force Museum where Group Captain Mark Lax recognised its historical value. What makes this publication even more significant is that it covers the Middle East theatre of war which tends to get short shrift as most histories concentrate on the air war over the Western Front.

The resulting book gives a fascinating insight into the life of an operational squadron as it took part in a gruelling campaign against the German and Turkish air services over Egypt and Palestine. There must have been considerable communication between aircrew and groundcrew as air engagements are reported in some detail. Certainly Bull was in an ideal position to conform some of the accounts as he frequently had to repair the resulting damage to the Australian BE2s, RE8s and Bristol Fighters. But it is

not just the accounts of air fighting which holds the reader's interest in this book. There is frequent mention of the daily domestic life of the Squadron which is so often missing from other accounts of the air war. Service in the Middle East was just as difficult and as dangerous as that on the Western Front and the hardships of day-to-day living were probably even worse. The great Christmas storm of 1917 which wrecked several of the Squadron's aircraft, is mentioned as is the tragic death of Lieutenant HM Matheson who became lost and died from exposure during the same night that he was returning from a visit to a nearby airfield. Joe Bull himself spent almost a month in various hospitals and rest camps in 1918 suffering from facial blistering which was diagnosed as "herpetic trophic isuphorthe". As Bull himself states, "I am none the wiser!" but at least the ointment seemed to work!

The text of Joe Bull's diary is amplified by unobtrusive editorial notes which give background information on some of the personnel and aircraft mentioned. The editor also includes further information on some of the events mentioned, particularly in respect of the German Air Service of which Joe Bull could not have been aware. Group Captain Lax also includes several useful appendices which give details of No 1 Squadron's personnel, bases, aircraft and combat record, making the book *inter alia* as comprehensive a history of this Australian squadron as has yet been published.

*One Airman's War* is an excellent read and a valuable addition to the literature of the war in the air during the First World War. The reader will not find any new insight into the theory and practice of air power from this book. However, the study of air power and its history should be wide enough to include the subjective, human experience as well as the more objective, academic approach to the subject. Theory is all well and good but without direct reporting of experiences by people who were involved there is little to test the theory against. First hand accounts such as this put flesh on the bare, dry bones of history and also makes for an entertaining read. Joe Bull's part in the air war might have been a small one, but it is no less significant for that and his story is well worth investing the time and money to read it.

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