

This remarkably fine photograph of a kite balloon illustrates the author's point clearly when he describes the difficulty experienced in "stepping out" when the basket is swaying in a high wind. Parachutes can be seen on either side. The life line runs from the bottom over the rim of the basket and is then clipped to the observer's belt. The ease with which he could get "caught up," if he stepped out in the wrong place, is apparent.

MY MOST THRILLING FLIGHT

AN EASTER MONDAY OUTING

By CAPTAIN C. M. DOWN (Retired)

FROM the first I mistrusted F.M.I. I examined her when she was issued to my section and thought that her fabric, as well as her construction, seemed flimsy in comparison with the stout Spencer-built balloons we had hitherto used in France. For F.M.I. was "French-made," and from her number was, I assume, the first of her type to be supplied to the British Army.

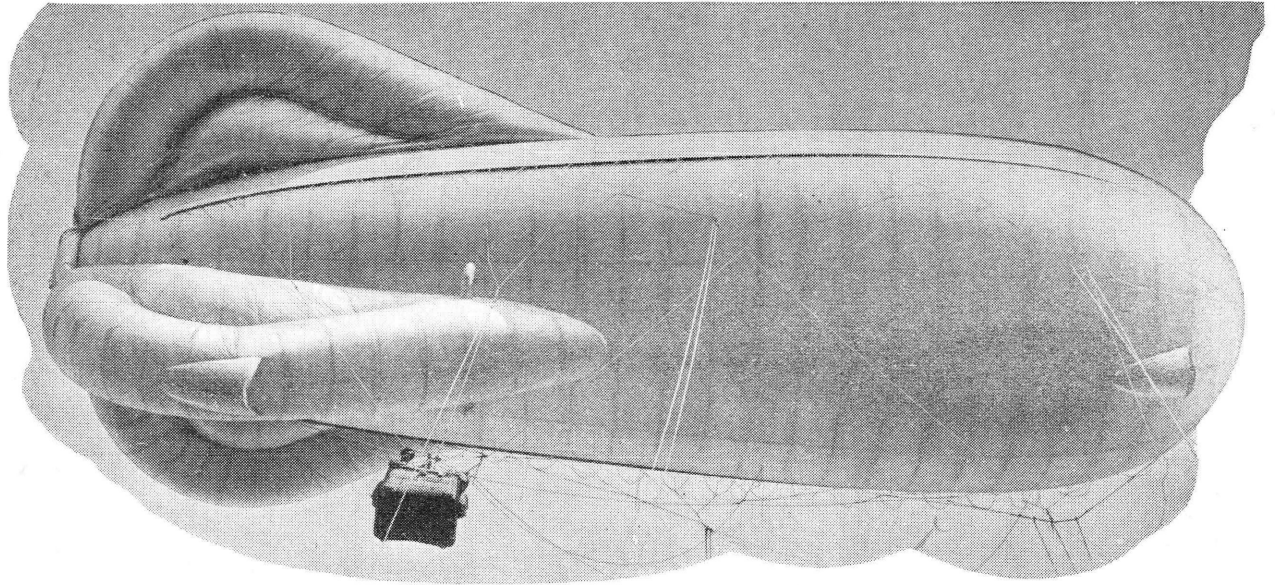
But F.M.I. in her trial flights behaved admirably. She was of the latest Cacquot type, and her graceful streamlined shape, nosing dead into the wind, kept the basket very much steadier than the old type of balloon could do, making possible much more efficient observation.

The morning of April 9th, 1917—Easter Monday—saw F.M.I. bedded down in the advanced position where she had been lurking for some weeks, without once showing herself, against the dawning of this very day. For to-day the Canadian Corps, after months of stealthy preparation, were going to carry by assault the impregnable-looking Vimy Ridge, that natural fortress which had already been the scene of some of the most bitter fighting of the war. The Canadians were a magnificent lot and their performance that day ranks as one of the finest feats of arms of the whole campaign.

After a very early breakfast I went down to the

balloon with Major F. Maude Roxby, commanding No. 2 Balloon Company. The weather was about as unpromising as it could be for balloon observation. It was bitterly cold with a strong westerly wind, bringing flurries of sleet every few minutes, which effectually blotted out the landscape while they lasted. However, it was *der Tag*, and we had been brought down to the Canadian Corps especially for this show. Major Roxby and I, therefore, decided to go up to see if it were possible to give any effectual assistance by observation. F.M.I. was hitched on to the winch with some difficulty owing to the strong wind, and up we went. The wind seemed to get stronger as we ascended, and at about 1,200 feet the Major stopped the winch. The view was very patchy, whole areas being practically invisible owing to cloud, but there were bright patches here and there, and we were soon able to pick up the flashes of some very active hostile batteries, positions of which we duly pin-pointed and phoned down for transmission to the Canadian Counter-Battery Office. The scene was an amazingly impressive one, though we had little leisure to appreciate it. The whole front was in a blaze from Loos in the north to far beyond Arras in the south.

With the high spur of Notre Dame de Lorette on our left, and the church of Ablain St. Nazaire almost directly beneath us, we looked over the ruins of the village of



This picture shows the "scoop" into which the air pours to fill the fin and stabilisers. The port leading from fin to elevator can be seen at extreme tail. These devices cause the K.B. to ride and remain balanced head to wind. Without them . . . but read the story.

Souchez right into the monstrous honeycomb of earthworks and trenches which was the deadly Ridge. Shell smoke practically blotted out all view of the immediate battle-line, and our attention was concentrated on the enemy's back areas, where the rapidly winking points of light denoted intense activity of his heavy batteries.

Observation, however, proved extremely difficult. Apart from poor visibility, the balloon was bumping about so badly in the high wind, that it was almost impossible to use glasses at all. For possibly twenty minutes the Major and I did our best to pick up and pass on observations that might be useful, when there was a sudden rending crack, as the stabilising fin on the starboard side of the balloon ripped up like tissue paper under pressure of the wind. Things then began to happen with great rapidity.

I should perhaps explain that a Cacquot balloon is kept steady in the air by large fins which resemble bolsters. These are filled out with air by the wind when the balloon is in flight, and the effect of one of them ripping up is to upset entirely the equilibrium of the balloon.

F.M.I. began by making a swooping nose-dive from 1,200 to about 200 feet. The Major yelled "Hold on!" and I held on; as I told him afterwards, I was going to, anyway! Plunging like a mad thing, she swooped up to the limit of her cable again and then dived again, just as I have seen a kite do on a windy day. Our winch, which was mounted on a heavy lorry chassis, was located in a field, screened from enemy observation by a thick wood. F.M.I. dived on to this wood, where she rolled over so that the balloon basket, for a short moment, was actually balanced on the top of the balloon! I remember vividly looking over the side of the basket, into the rigging of which I had wound my arms, and seeing the greeny-grey belly of the balloon *below* me with the tops of the trees just below that, and beyond the winch and a crowd of men with upturned faces. The wire cable, in great coils, seemed to be lying all over the place.

How many times the balloon dived almost to earth

and then plunged up again like a shying horse, I cannot remember. She rolled and somersaulted so that the basket seemed to be upside down more often than not. The fabric ripped still further and the rigging began to give way. I felt that this sort of thing could not last, but what would happen I did not try to guess! I merely concentrated on holding on. It was impossible to do anything, anyway. But something had to go. Eventually it was the cable that went. At the top of one of the balloon's upward plunges, during which she pulled the winch-lorry, weighing some ten tons, half the length of the field, the cable snapped, and away we went. The blessed relief when, like magic, the balloon stopped her mad antics, and went sailing away on a perfectly even keel. Free ballooning is a delightful sensation at any time, the smoothest, most silent and peaceful mode of travel known; but after the bucketing we had had, it was heavenly!

The only snag was that we were proceeding towards Hunland on the wings of a gale!

I had a free balloon pilot's "ticket," and had the wind been blowing the other way, I might have been tempted to stay with and ultimately to try to land F.M.I. But the prospect of landing in German-held country did not appeal to either of us. We therefore had to act quickly. Overboard went everything likely to be of any military value. Then I had a look over the side to see if the parachutes were still there. We carried three, hanging outside the basket in their cases, looking like huge acorns. One had gone altogether, but luckily the other two were still there, but so wrapped about with rope that it took quite a while to free them. I worked feverishly on one, while Major Roxby freed the other, and we clipped on.

I remember I ran my hands very carefully along the rope which led from the waist of my parachute harness to the parachute. The great thing was to avoid getting hung up in one of the many ropes of the basket suspension rigging—a thing that I have seen happen to more than one luckless observer.

In a moment I was sitting on the edge of the basket. Then—"Good luck, sir!" and I pushed off and dropped feet first into the blue.

I remember having an entirely detached feeling at that moment, rather as if I were a mere spectator of what was happening. After what seemed rather a long drop, the chute opened with a tremendous jerk, which caused me to somersault in the air. Almost at the same moment I saw Major Roxby's chute come out of its case and open, and the sight was a very cheering one. Quick as we had been in getting out, the balloon had got up to nearly 5,000 feet before we left her. Swinging like a pendulum in mid-air, as I now was, I cocked an eye at F.M.I., which was shooting up very fast, with every anti-aircraft battery on both sides shooting at her. She was sailing along Hunwards with Archie bursting on all sides, apparently without any effect on her buoyancy.

Major Roxby, who was 6 ft. 5 ins. tall and broad in proportion, was dropping much faster than I, who was very light. I waved to him vigorously and saw him wave back. I now began to wonder where I should land; my chute was blowing along at a great pace towards the line, and the battle was getting nearer every moment. The noise of the bombardment was terrific, and I felt quite unpleasantly conspicuous, suspended between heaven and earth, "like a tea-tray in the sky!" As an infantryman, I had many times been under fire before, but had never occupied such an exposed position in a battle! I visualised large numbers of unpleasant German gentlemen laughing heartily as they lined up their sights on my gently swinging body; but fortunately, I had no need to worry. The fighting Canadians were keeping the aforesaid German gentlemen far too busy to worry about me, and the amount of laughter indulged in by the defenders of Vimy Ridge that day must have been negligible. As I got nearer to the ground I realised how fast I was travelling. I managed to fish a penknife out of my breeches pocket and opened it, with the fond idea of cutting myself free the moment I hit the ground, but when the bump came the knife flew out of my hand. The trouble was that the chute did not stop for a moment but blew along at a good twenty miles an hour, dragging me, of course, with it. It was exactly like being dragged by a runaway horse. I was quite helpless to stop it, as there was ten to twelve feet of rope between me and the rigging of the chute, and I was quite unable to get

on my feet. Off I went across country on my tummy, hanging on to the chute rope for dear life. The terrain was mostly shell-holes and wire, and I had an unhappy passage. I was just about done when the remains of a hedge

loomed up ahead—a hedge practically obliterated by shell fire, but with one blasted tree about five feet high sticking up like a lone sentinel—and my chute blew straight on to that tree and stopped! I just had strength to unhook myself before passing out, and the next thing I knew I was in a dug-out in the support trench line, receiving first aid from the officers of a famous line regiment. I felt a wreck and looked it. My clothes were literally in ribbons, and I was barefooted, having lost both my flying boots, also helmet, gloves and glasses in my high-speed, cross-country journey on my tummy. I was badly scratched and bruised black and blue pretty well all over—but, almost miraculously, nothing was broken. Eventually I was dumped on a truck and pushed along a trolley line to a dressing-station. There I reposed for about five minutes, when my Wing-Commander arrived—Colonel P. K. Wise—since famous as an International polo player. He

had arrived at the balloon-winch just as F.M.I. had started her exhibition, and had been an interested spectator of our adventures. He had followed up in his car as far as possible, and now turned up at the dressing-station in time to yank me out of the clutches of the M.O. in charge. This was apparently an irregular proceeding, and there were winged words over my body, but the Wing-Commander prevailed. Later I heard that Major Roxby, as stout-hearted a man as ever lived, had landed in a roofless house in Ablain, and damaged his head

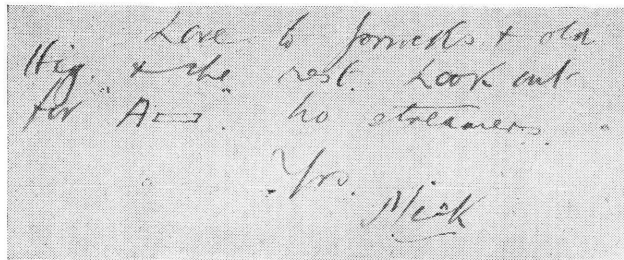
rather badly, subsequently having to be invalidated. A couple of riggers were sent up to the line to retrieve my parachute, but for a long time could hear no news of it. Subsequently they discovered it beneath the bed in a subaltern's dug-out, whose idea apparently was that its thirty-odd pounds' worth of pure silk would make several pairs of pyjamas—and other garments for his lady-love.

The last heard of F.M.I. was from an R.E.8 crew, who reported sighting her well over the German lines at 11,000 feet—and still going strong!

I have often wondered if the Germans got her intact. For me, they were welcome to the old cow!



Capt. C. M. Down at the time of the incident. The mark on the top part of the photograph is not the fault of the block-makers, but was caused by a piece of shrapnel which struck the leather-bound Aeronaut's Certificate of which the photo was a part, and from which our block was made.



The author was a close friend of the late Major "Mick" Mannock, V.C., with whom he often co-operated, sometimes sending up an empty balloon as a bait to entice enthusiastic E.A. balloon straffers to the line. Here we reproduce the end of one of Major Mannock's letters, kindly lent to us by Capt. Down, because it is of historical interest in that it describes how Mannock's machine could be identified. The letter is typical of "Mick." It is headed 74 Sqdn., dated 2/6/18, and reads:—

"You will be pleased to hear that the official total is now 47. . . . By the way, they gave me a bar to the D.S.O. a week ago. I feel absolutely ashamed of myself on this account, as the credit should be given to the other boys, who back me up wonderfully. They think I can do no wrong, with the result that I always have a strong following in a scrap. . . . The boy who took you up is gone—poor devil. He got nine Huns in eight days. A star turn."