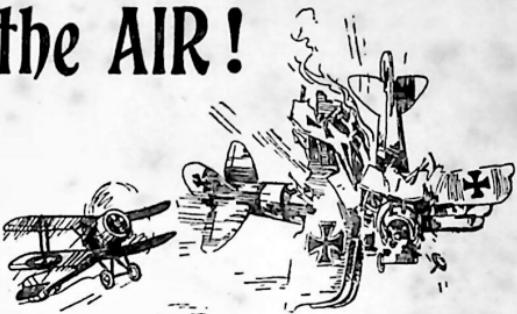


KNIGHTS of the AIR!

During the Great War all sorts of cunning devices for trapping airmen were invented. And woe betide the pilot who didn't learn all the "tricks of the trade"! The "decoy" method, as shown in our colour plate alongside, was a favourite one employed by both sides.



THE old chivalry of battle in the days when men dressed themselves in armour went out of fashion with the passing of that armour. Scrapping became more and more a matter of tricks and cunning. But the pendulum *did* swing back to some sort of chivalry during the Great War so far as the fighting flying men were concerned. Many air pilots of both sides made it a rule not to attack another too furiously until some sort of warning had been given—such as a burst of machine-gun fire past the enemy's propeller or wings. Then they swooped at one another like infuriated eagles.

The Decoy

But many bits of strategy developed as the War went on, and the "decoy" became one of the perfectly legitimate, above-board tricks of the game. It worked in this way. A German plane would be flying rather low, near to the German territory. A British plane, well up, would spot it, and the pilot, licking his lips with glee, would dash to do battle. With eyes only for that lone enemy plane, the British pilot would be blissfully unaware that in the clouds above hovered a bunch of German machines whose pilots were licking *their* lips. The Britisher would swoop down on the lone plane, and then the heavens above would seem to rain planes—all after him. After which, the British pilot's thoughts would be concentrated, not on the decoy, but on his best means of getting swiftly to a less hectic region.

Of course, the decoy trick worked both ways. As often as not the decoy was British,

with British planes above waiting to swoop on the lone enemy who had been "taken in." But generally it worked only once where the taken-in pilot was concerned. Either he crashed under the startling and concentrated attack, or he escaped and vowed never again to be caught napping.

Naturally the newcomer to war in the air couldn't be left to learn *all* the tricks by actual experience, or the learning of his first one might have proved not only the beginning but the end of his tuition. To keep his head, no matter what astounding developments suddenly gathered around him in the sky, was always his first lesson.

Led into Lead!

Wide awake to all the thrilling chances that had to be taken by all war-time flying men, he realised that the "decoy" trick was the simplest of all traps—nearly as simple as that other bright wheeze which centred around an enemy plane suddenly falling, apparently out of control. This dodge led the incautious attacker well into streams of bullets from other planes that a moment before were invisible behind low clouds or in the strong glare of the sun. A number of planes can be quite invisible against the background of the sun—sitting there, as it were, in instant readiness to pounce on the follower of the "falling" decoy.

The solitary attacker couldn't very well take on all that horde of enemy that dropped with paralysing swiftness out of the blinding rays of the sun, so—if he had time—he would turn tail and put into breathless practice the

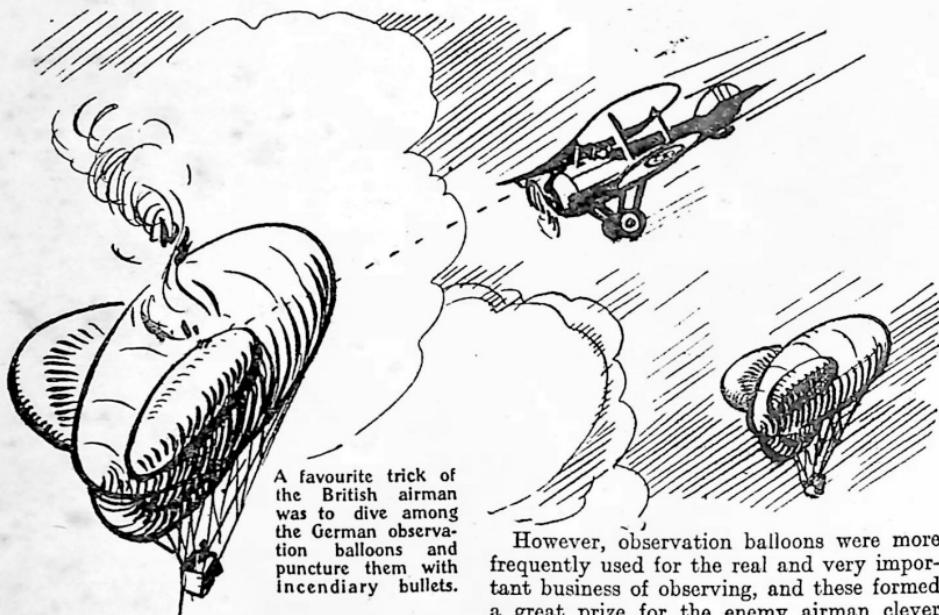


old adage that discretion is the better part of valour. There was always the chance that a pilot, as he gained increasing experience of actual aerial combat, would lose a little bit of his earlier caution. For such a pilot a specially clever trap was set—a big fat enemy balloon, apparently carrying observers.

A Ruse to Trap the Reckless

The scouting plane would spot it, and if it was the pilot's unlucky day he would make a bee-line for the balloon with the intention of filling the great envelope with bullets.

It meant sacrificing the balloon. But the enemy could well spare that so long as the attacking scout was blown to smithereens along with it. A variation of the same trick consisted in filling the basket of an old observation balloon with high explosive, an electric wire trailing therefrom, together with the anchoring rope, to the ground. When an attacking plane edged in close enough to rip the balloon's envelope to shreds with machine-gun fire, his enemy would press a button, and away would go balloon and plane into the emptiness of space.



A favourite trick of the British airman was to dive among the German observation balloons and puncture them with incendiary bullets.

There would be no one in the basket of that specially "planted" balloon, but there would be a number of anti-aircraft guns ("Archies") and concealed machine-guns trained most carefully on the air in its immediate vicinity. A few sighting shots would already have been taken by the concealed guns, and so the stage would be all set for a perfect storm of bullets and shrapnel and shells to be released at the scouting plane as it hurtled to the attack.

However, observation balloons were more frequently used for the real and very important business of observing, and these formed a great prize for the enemy airman clever enough to bring one or more of them down. As the enemy did not wish to lose them, these balloons, with actual crews, were hauled down very swiftly, by means of a winch, when it was that a fighting scout was after them. One of our most intrepid flying men, fired with ambition to "get" some German balloons and knowing all about their hauling-down device, one early morning swooped upwards out of the mist and punctured five before the bunch could be hauled down!