

ground was still completely obscured and he had no idea where they were. Spotting a line of observation balloons poking out just above the mist, he decided to follow them north, back towards Bruay.

They were cruising above the balloons when a string of colourful Albatroses and Pfalz emerged, climbing up from the murk below. Cobby rocked his wings to signal 'attack' and dived into the centre of their formation. The German pilots were completely surprised. Cobby picked out a yellow and black Albatros, and with a couple of bursts sent it spinning through the clouds trailing smoke. He then saw one chasing Tab Pflaum and blasted it from 3 metres away: 'He heeled over and went straight down through the mist all "arsey tarsey"'.<sup>43</sup> In the chaotic moments that followed, Pflaum and another Australian each sent a machine spinning down too.

In just two minutes, the sky was strangely empty again. The Camel pilots regrouped and flew home, believing they had just shot down four of Germany's elite fighter pilots. 'They were, beyond any doubt, the famous Circus of Baron von Richthofen, from the gay colours which their machines were variously painted,' wrote Jack Wright.<sup>44</sup> Cobby claimed the same in a letter to the official historian after the war and then in his 1942 memoir. Cutlack reproduced Cobby's letter, word for word, in the official history.<sup>45</sup>

The 'fog of war' was literally clouding the facts, though. German records indicate the enemy unit was actually Jasta 35, which in fact reported no casualties that day.<sup>46</sup> The four Australian claims probably spun through the clouds to escape and then flew home.

By noon the following day, the situation on the Somme was critical. Gaps were opening in Fifth Army's line as units lost contact and retreated independently of each other. The German pilots dominated the battlefield with their numerical superiority, while local RFC units busily evacuated their aerodromes and retreated. RFC Headquarters ordered all scout units north of the battlefront to fly south and get involved in the fight: 'The enemy must at all costs be prevented from operating over our lines.'

No. 2 Squadron's pilots spent the morning waiting for the mist to clear. 'We stood about in excited, nervous groups,' recalled Robert McKenzie. 'Out, somewhere in the haze, drowning out all other sounds could be heard the punching detonation of the tremendous artillery barrage which had commenced before dawn.' He looked around at his fellow pilots, 'some