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***Headnote by A. Scott Berg***
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# SHOOTING DOWN A "HUN"

## DECEMBER 1917

## *Charles J. Biddle*

One hundred eighty American fighter pilots would fly with the French during the war, earning credit for the destruction of 199 German aircraft at a cost of fifty-one pilots killed in action. The scion of a long line of wealthy Philadelphians, and a graduate of Princeton and Harvard Law, Charles J. Biddle took leave of his legal practice for the French air service in March 1917. Assigned to Escadrille N. 73 in July, Biddle flew SPAD fighters over Flanders from an airfield at Bergues, six miles south of Dunkirk. In January 1918 he transferred to the recently formed American 103rd Aero Squadron. A major by the end of the war and credited with eight aerial victories, Biddle would publish a memoir, *The Way of the Eagle*. It drew from his wartime correspondence, which included this letter to his family in December 1917 that described his attacking a German reconnaissance plane.

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BERGUES, December 8th, 1917.

You already know that from one cause or another, I have not been able to get out on the lines for some time, and when I finally did get out last Wednesday, it was exactly three weeks since I had last seen them; the same old lines, except a little more blown up, for there had been a great deal of artillery activity in part of the sector. On Wednesday I started out at nine in the morning on a patrol, with two Frenchmen, a lieutenant being the leader. We were on the lines for some time without seeing any Huns except well within their own lines, although once or twice I think I saw where some came on the lines, but the others evidently did not agree with me, and the Boches, if there were any, were too far off to justify my leaving the patrol and going to investigate. After a while however I noticed a two-seater of a type known as an Albatross which was flying up and down in his own lines. He was a long way off, but from the way he acted I thought he was just waiting for a clear path to slip across the lines, take his pictures or make some observa-

tions, and slip back again. I have had several encounters with two-seaters in the same locality at about the same time of day, and at about the same altitude, and accordingly kept my eye on this fellow, to see what he would do. Sometimes he would go way back into his own territory until he was just a speck in the sky, and then again would come just above the lines, evidently see us, and turn back again.

Now a patrol has the duty of protecting a certain sector and cannot go off and leave it, which is one reason why it does not usually offer the same chance to get a shot at the Huns that a voluntary chasse expedition does. If for instance I had been there with another man just looking for Boches and with no sector to protect, the thing to have done would obviously have been to fly deep into our own lines as if we were leaving, then climb up over that Hun's head and hang around with the sun at our backs, in the hope that he would not notice us, and wait for him to come into our territory. If he would not do this, you could go to him, but it is always better to get them in your own lines if possible, for you can then get a better shot without having to spend half the time watching your own rear, and ending up by being forced to retreat by the Boche's comrades coming up in force. Once I left the patrol and started after this Hun, but he evidently saw me at once and dove back into his own lines; I saw that I could not get any kind of a shot at him, so decided to wait a little longer. I rejoined the patrol, and we made a tour of perhaps ten minutes.

When we got back to the same place again, the lieutenant had gone down somewhat so that the Hun who was again just coming to the lines, evidently saw us some 400 metres below him instead of on the same level as before, thought he was safe, and came on into our lines. My companions apparently did not see him, so I turned to one side, flew directly under the Boche, going in the opposite direction, and then put myself below and behind him by doing a renversement. He saw me all the time, but I guess he thought he could do what he wanted, and get out before I could climb up and catch him. I must have followed him at least five minutes, first into our lines, then back above the lines again and then back once more. All the time he was manœuvring to keep me from getting behind his tail, where he could not see me, and doing it

well, for in order to try to stay behind him and to manœuvre so as to give him only a long, hard, right-angle shot, I had to fly further than he did, and accordingly could not catch him quickly. I did get up to his level though (4,700 metres) and when he finally started back for his own lines, I got directly behind his tail and put after him as fast as my bus would travel. When I got within 100 yards I tried to lay my sights on him, but being directly behind him the back draught from his propeller made my machine unsteady so that accurate shooting would have been impossible. I dove down 10 metres so as to get out of this and tried again. After my sad experience with the single-seater, which I wrote you about, and which I think went down, but was not confirmed, I tried my best to shoot most carefully this time.

All the time the Boche had not fired a shot, and from the way he acted I think he must have lost track of me behind his tail. Anyhow, I turned both my machine guns loose and thought I saw my bullets going about right. My left hand gun only fired about a dozen shots and then broke, the Boche at the same time, giving a twist to the right to get me out from under his tail. I kept on plugging away with my other gun, shooting for the place where the pilot sits, and again I thought I saw the bullets going into the right spot. After possibly thirty shots however my right gun also broke, and left me with nothing, and at the same time the Hun started to join in the shooting, firing perhaps twenty shots. By this time we were I suppose about 50 or 60 metres apart and I got under his tail quickly to get out of the way, so that I could not see just where the Boche was shooting, but am sure he came nowhere near me. There never was a truer saying than that there is nothing which upsets a man's accuracy so much as having the other fellow putting them very close to him. That is I think one of the principal reasons why accurate quick shooting is so important, not only for the damage it does but because to come very close is one of the best means of defense, even if you actually do not hit. At all events, with two broken guns, close proximity to a Hun is not a healthy locality, so I turned on my nose and dove out behind my friend, at the same time watching him over my shoulder to try to keep myself protected by his tail.

As I watched him he started diving until he was going down

vertically and I could see the silver color of his bottom and of the under sides of his wings, with the black maltese crosses on them. It was a good sized machine, and very pretty, with the shining silver paint underneath to make it less visible against the sky and the sides just by the tail a brilliant red, this last being probably the individual mark of his escadrille, for I have seen the same kind of a machine before, painted in this way. When he got in a vertical nose dive, instead of going on straight down, he kept on turning until from flying toward his own lines right side up he was flying back into ours, upside down, and diving slowly in this position. This is of course a sign that all is not well on board and usually means that the pilot has fallen forward over his control stick, thus forcing the machine into a nose dive and then onto its back. You will read in the Flying Magazines about flying upside down but it is not what it is cracked up to be. One often gets on one's back in certain manœuvres, but only for an instant, and with always sufficient centrifugal force to keep one securely in place. In learning to loop the loop however I have gotten upside down for longer than I intended because the loop was not done properly, and it is not pleasant. You start to fall out and even though your belt holds you pretty tight in your seat, there is a tendency to grab the side of the machine; then whatever dirt is in the bottom of the machine falls over you, the oil, etc., fizzles out of the top of its tank and the motor starts to splutter and wants to stop due to the gasoline not feeding properly. All this and everything being upside down, gives you a queer feeling in your middle, and although in some specially constructed machines I believe it is possible to fly upside down, it is not at all my idea of a good time.

Hence when I saw my friend the Hun flying into our lines with his wheels in the air I thought he must be pretty sick, but after my previous experience, was expecting every minute to see him come to and fly home, while I watched him helpless, with two guns that would not work. I accordingly dove after him, holding my controls, first with one hand, and then the other, and working with first the right and then the left gun, and trying each in the hope of getting one of them going, and taking a few more shots. At the same time, it is necessary to watch your own rear to see that no one is after you, so that

between this and trying to keep close to the Boche I had little time to spare. Pretty soon some English machines came over my head, which relieved my mind very much as to the rear, and allowed me to concentrate on the Boche and my guns. I worked away and incidentally said some things I never learned in Sunday-school, but it is exasperating when you could get a good shot and your gun won't work and you have visions of what should be an easy victim escaping you. There was nothing to do though in this case, for upon returning to the field, I found both my guns not simply jammed but actually broken, one so that it had to be taken off the machine and replaced.

While trying to fix the guns in the air I kept glancing down at the Boche; sometimes he was on his back, sometimes on his nose, and again diving almost normally, which was what made me think he might come to life. The machine was however evidently completely uncontrolled; I chased him down almost 4000 metres, faster than I have ever come down before, so fast that when we reached 1000 metres he was not more than perhaps 400 metres ahead of me. A quick, great change of altitude like this is most unpleasant, as your ears get all stopped up and it gives you a headache, but in a fight you do not at the time notice it, and this time I was very anxious to see just where the Boche fell so as to get him confirmed if he did go down. At a thousand metres however I had to pull up and use my hand pump, for all the pressure had run out of my gas tank, due to the unusually long dive with the motor shut down. I lost sight of the Boche and did not see him hit the ground but after my motor was running nicely again I flew on down to 200 metres over the battle field and searched for him, for he had fallen several kilometres within our lines, so that it was possible to go down low and have a look. Pretty soon I spotted him lying on his back in the mud, his top plane was mashed into the soft ground, but the rest of the machine was apparently remarkably intact when you consider the height from which he had fallen. Probably the machine flopped over flat on its back, or right side up, just before striking, and in this way the force of the fall was broken.

Shortly after I got back to our field, the official confirmation came in from the lines. The pilot and observer were of course both dead. The pilot was I think killed by one of my shots, or

at least completely knocked out, for there was nothing serious the matter with his machine, and it fell only because it was uncontrolled. The machine gunner was however alive after I had stopped shooting for I heard him shoot after I had finished. If he had been any kind of a decent man, or in fact any one but a Hun, one could not but have felt sorry for him in such a situation. Not much fun falling 4,700 metres, especially going down comparatively slowly, knowing all the while what is coming at the end, and with some little time to think it over. Particularly bad I should think with a good machine, which only needs someone to set the controls straight in order to right it. Much better to catch on fire, or have the machine break, and get it over with right away.

Also after having had experience with the same thing oneself, one cannot help thinking of the comrades of these men, standing around the aerodrome, and wondering why they don't come back, and again of the people at home, who after they get the report "Disparu," keep wondering and hoping for months whether perhaps they might not only have been taken prisoner. It is a brutal business at best, but when you stop to think for a moment of what these Huns have done, of the horrors they have committed, of the suffering they have brought on innocent people, and of the millions of men dead before their time, all because of them, you don't feel much sympathy for the individual but rather look forward to the time when you can perhaps bag another.