

GERMAN CONTACT PATROLS



by Michael Meech

AS ANY STUDENT OF FIRST WORLD WAR HISTORY is aware, 1916 was a year of two major battles of attrition on the Western Front; Verdun and the Somme. Those who have read the article on *The Development of Contact Patrols* in Volume 40/2 of the Journal, will know that these battles led to major developments in the procedures of British (and French) contact patrols. It will also come as no surprise that the Germans also learnt lessons from these battles, including in their own contact patrols.

The German lessons were incorporated in a document *Communication Between Infantry And Aeroplanes Or Captive Balloons* dated 1 January 1917, which was in fact Part 6 of the *Manual of Position Warfare for all Arms*. Luckily for those of us without fluent German, a translated copy of this document is available in the National Archives, AIR 1/2251/209/54/9. This document was captured in 1917, translated and published as a Stationery Service publication S.S.563, dated 25 May 1917, and distributed to Army, Corps and other headquarters by 19 June 1917. This German Document was the equivalent of the British *Provisional Instructions for Contact Patrol Work by Aeroplanes* dated December 1916 (TNA, AIR 1/122/50/40/112). Some details of this British document are contained in the aforementioned Journal article, but mention is also made of it in this article for comparison.

The translated German document has had all metric measurements converted into imperial, which have, in turn, been used for this article. Also the MLRS Books reprint of Major G.P. Neumann's *The German Air Force in the Great War*, hereafter known as GAFGW, of 1920, has been used for various relevant quotes. Of course, the Germans did not use the term contact patrol aircraft – they were *Infanterieflieger* or Infantry co-operation aircraft, and the actual tasks undertaken under these titles varied as the war progressed, e.g. counter-attack patrols was part of the RFC's contact patrol at the end of 1916, but later became a separate task. In 1917 the main aircraft used by the Germans were the DFW C.V and AEG C.IV/J.I, but older types would also have been used at the start of 1917 and newer types were being introduced by the end of the year.

The Problems of 1916

The German Commander, Erich Von Falkenhayn, believed that Germany was in a better position than the enemy to survive a protracted war of attrition in 1916. This led him to decide to attack the Verdun salient so he could cause the French so many casualties as to 'bleed them white'. In reality this Battle of Verdun, although causing around 500,000 casualties to the French, also caused over 400,000 to the German army and resulted in Falkenhayn being replaced.

The battle also gave the German infantry co-operation aircraft problems and for much of the time, according to GAFGW, p.213, their situation was such that:

Unfortunately the infantry contact machines proved to be of

little value, for the infantry did not as yet place sufficient trust in the service.

However, there were problems in the traditional methods of communication, such as carrier pigeons, war dogs and runners, which also did not work consistently. This was compounded by the fact that artillery fire rendered the landscape unrecognisable for much of the time and quite different from the maps the infantry might have, as GAFGW, p.194 puts it:

...so the infantry, incredible though it may sound, frequently did not even know their own position during the first crowded hours of their attack.

This also meant that the German Headquarters did not know where their troops were, so reserves could not be sent where they were needed and their artillery could not give them support when required!

The use of the aeroplane in trying to find out the details of the ground problem was really the only method available, but that was easier said than done. GAFGW, p.195, makes this point:

The first primitive order referring to this scheme ran as follows: 'Fly low, reconnoitre the situation with your own eyes, return and report.' It was as easy to say as it was all but impossible to carry out. From any height which afforded a reasonable field of vision, such as 800 to 1200 feet, there was nothing to be seen. There were no trenches, for the French artillery fire had left no time for construction, and even those that had begun were soon destroyed. The muddy uniforms of our own troops were hardly distinguishable from their background of shell holes.

Going down to lower levels did enable the airmen to pick out individual or small bodies of troops; however, it was only possible on a few occasions to form a general idea of the situation on the ground from the small amounts of information obtained. This led to other problems, GAFGW, p.196, continues:

The higher command became pressing and impatient in their demands, for the situation involved a terrible strain upon their nerves; the result was heavy casualties. If the enemy permitted our airmen to fly low, the machine was soon subjected to concentrated sniping and fire from the ground, particularly from machine guns, unfortunately only too often with disastrous results.

It was clear that there were two major problems at least that had to be dealt with: first was the problem of spotting the infantry on the ground. GAFGW, p.196, suggests that the idea for the infantry to carry strips of cloth that were highly visible with them as they advanced came from Air Force personnel. However, it should be mentioned that the British Army had experimented in the use of strips for this purpose during 1915, for example at the battles of Aubers Ridge and Loos. These strips would need to be displayed when requested by the aeroplane. Page 196 continues by stating:

The signal to display these strips was to be given by a specified machine provided with certain streamers, attached to the wings