

Tank Contact Patrols

THE DEVELOPMENT OF AIR AND TANK CO-OPERATION IN 1918

Part 1

by Michael Meech

This article is not about the battles involving Aircraft and Tanks in 1918, although they do appear: it is primarily about the development of the ideas and procedures behind those operations. Indeed in many ways this is about the 'paperwork' involved in the development of Air and Tank co-operation in 1918. These documents are to be found in the AIR 1 files of the National Archives at Kew, the core document being, the then Major, Trafford Leigh-Mallory's 'History of Tank and Aeroplane Co-operation' (AIR 1/1671/204/109/26), written in 1919, hereafter referred to as the History. The other main single source for the air war is of course 'The War in the Air' Volume VI, by H. A. Jones, hereafter referred to as the Official History. Other documents and books have been consulted and when used are referred to in the text.

The history of air support for the 'Tanks' in 1918 is mainly associated with 8 Squadron RAF, commanded by Maj T.L. Leigh-Mallory, prior to which there had been no 'definite' Air/Tank co-operation on operations. However, it should be recalled that other squadrons were involved in early experiments. Like infantry and cavalry support, any co-operation by aircraft with tanks would rely on some method or methods of communication.

Three squadrons were involved early on: 42 Squadron (RE8) made several experiments involving the use of Paine's Smoke Flares and Very Lights, while 22 Squadron (Bristol F2b Fighter) experimented with Wireless Telephony (voice radio). The other squadron involved was 15 Sqn (RE8), which tried out a system of 'black discs' that swung out from the side of the aeroplane. All these ideas were built on by 8 Squadron.

Early Days

In the National Archive documents, AIR 1/1074/204/5/1665, correspondence on this subject starts at the beginning of 1918. The first letter dated 18 January 1918, from Maj-Gen J.M. Salmond, Commander RFC, to Brig-Gen J.F.A. Higgins, Commander 3 Brigade RFC. This contains an outline of discussions held between Salmond and Maj-Gen H.J. Elles, Commander Tank Corps, the night before. The details of this conversation were on how the RFC could help the Tanks in the offensive, especially dealing with anti-tank guns, due to Tank Corps experience at Flesquières, where tanks were engaged by guns at point blank range as they topped a rise. On the point of an aircraft giving a warning to the tank of the presence of anti-tank guns Salmond suggested that:

...a Corps machine which knows the ground intimately and can get a thoroughly good view of it would probably be better than a Scout.

So: an aircraft and crew like those involved in contact or counter-attack patrols. Salmond had also explained to Elles why Scouts were not totally suitable for this task, in that:

...low flying Scouts went out to 'strafe' anything they met with in a good big area, but that Scout pilots are not trained to look for special objects at definite points.

It will be seen that this view of Scouts changed to some extent later in 1918.

A big problem though was how to communicate the information to the tank or tanks involved. It appears Elles



preferred some type of light signal (Very Light etc), although Salmond thought there were problems with this in that:

...if you fire a light signal in front of a line of tanks, you will get all their heads up, as each one will take the warning to himself.

However, Salmond was at a loss to suggest an alternative as he felt that the use of Wireless at that time was impossible. As for the use of aircraft to keep down the fire of the anti-tank gun, Salmond did believe that a low flying Scout would be better for that task using bombs and machine gun fire, which conflicted with his earlier comments. But he had to explain to Elles, who wanted the aircraft to neutralize the guns for about a quarter of an hour, that:

...an aeroplane cannot hover and that to keep down their fire for even an hour would be no easy job if they were a stout-hearted lot.

Salmond thought that the whole tank support task would ... *bristle with difficulties*,... but he hoped that Higgins could work something out with Elles, in conjunction with the large number of tanks that were based at Bray in the 3 Brigade area.

On the 28 February 1918 some experimental tests were carried out by the Tank Corps near Fricourt, to ascertain the effectiveness or otherwise of aircraft attacks against guns, tanks and supporting infantry. Col J.F.C. Fuller in his 1920

A 22 Sqn Bristol F2B, fitted with a generator for its wireless equipment. The squadron was involved in early Wireless Telephony trials with tanks.

