



A Caproni CEP 2 from CEP 115. The large size of the aircraft is apparent. The first insignia of the escadrille is shown on the nose of the aircraft, two great horned owls sitting on a branch.

# The Caproni in French Service and a history of the re-formed Groupe de Bombardement B2, 1917-18

by Thomas Nilsson

This article sets out to describe the history of the Italian-designed Caproni bomber in the service of the French *Aviation Militaire*, and at the same time, describe the history of the *Groupe de Bombardement 2*. That unit had been dissolved during 1916 and was re-established the following year. Before the main narrative, a few details are provided to describe the background to the operations undertaken, and the equipment used.

## The Aircraft

The Italian designer Count Gianni Caproni had designed multi-engine aircraft in use by the Italian military aviation. During the autumn of 1915, the French accepted an invitation from the Italians to undertake a study of Italian aviation design. A French contest that year had failed to find a suitable heavy bomber, so the offer was accepted. The French team that visited Italy was impressed with the Caproni and the decision was made to arrange for licensed production of the Caproni 1 in France.

French production was put into the hands of Robert Esnault-Pelterie, owner of the REP aircraft factory, and an experienced aircraft designer. The aircraft was designated as CEP 1 B2 and could take a bomb-load of 275kg.

The lack of Italian engines for use in the French aircraft made it necessary to adopt the airframe to French engines. This, however, resulted in a worse performance than that of the original product. Contrary to what has been written in some English-language books, these aircraft were used in operational service.

Later in 1916, the REP factory started to build the

Caproni 3 under license with the designation CEP 2 B2. This design was powered by Italian Isotta-Fraschini engines, could take a bomb-load of 455kg and had a far better performance than its predecessor. The French plant could not, however, deliver the requisite number of aircraft and so, during 1917, the decision was taken to import Italian-built machines. These were flown across the Alps by French crews. The Italian-built machines were designated CAP 2 B2. In 1918, at least 20 aircraft of the latest type, the Caproni 5 (designated CAP 3 BN3 in French service), were collected from Italy, and put into service by Escadrilles 115 and 130. This aircraft could take a bomb-load of 400kg. A small number of Caproni 5s were built by REP under the designation CEP 3 BN3.

The Caproni did not survive long in post-war French service though, and both Escadrilles 115 and 130 soon re-equipped with French-designed bombers.

## Policy of the French Bomber Force in 1917

During 1916, French bombers had been assigned, in addition to objectives relating to tactical support of the ground-forces, a vast and disparate number of targets that comprised mainly railway stations and industries in Germany and territories occupied by the German army.

In order to maximise their bombing potential, the *Direction de l'Aéronautique aux Armées* put forward a proposal to the Minister of War, General Hubert Lyautey, and the War Committee on 20 February 1917. That committee comprised the Minister of War himself, the minister Albert Thomas, the Prime Minister Aristide Briand, Admiral Lacaze and MP Alexandre Ribot. The proposition was agreed on 12 March and read, 'The raids