

Mission to Monastir

by Michael Kelsey

IN JUNE 1917, the RFC in Macedonia was fortunate enough to receive a Spad S.VII fighter from the French. This was evidently a reciprocal gesture after the RFC had made a BE12 available for the French aviation service earlier in the year. The Spad (S1073) was one of the first of the type to arrive in this theatre and the French themselves did not have very many Spads available for the Salonika front. Consequently, there was no realistic prospect of any more of them being passed on to the British in that part of the world. Nonetheless, the RFC would naturally be keen to explore the possibility of obtaining other French aeroplanes, especially as it was short of modern machines in Macedonia.

Not long afterwards, the commanders of the French and British air services in the Balkans, Commandant V. Denain and Lt Colonel G.W.P. Dawes respectively, entered into correspondence on the subject of training some British pilots to fly French aeroplanes. Also under discussion was a proposal for a concentration of French, British and Serbian machines for a few days in the Monastir area, in the French sector of the front.

Monastir was then a city in southern Serbia (today it is Bitola in the Republic of Macedonia). The Serbs had taken it from the Ottomans during the First Balkan War and had remained in control, even though Monastir was allocated to Bulgaria under the pre-war agreement between Serbia and Bulgaria. The principal reason why Bulgaria had joined the Central Powers in 1915 was the ambition to realise its claims in Macedonia, including Monastir. The city fell to the Bulgarians in December 1915, but was retaken by the allies in November 1916. The latter event was the culmination of an offensive conducted by French, Serbian and Russian troops, with Italian and British forces in support. In 1917, a renewed allied offensive was largely unsuccessful and the front was now static.

The RFC's solitary Spad S.VII in Macedonia, S1073, undergoing examination by ground crew. Just visible is the muzzle of its second Vickers machine gun, which was mounted to port of the centre line. The machine retained the characteristic stencilling on its rudder but its underwing national markings appear to have been converted to British ones, with a blue outermost ring to the cockade. :CCI Archive



A JOINT ACTION AT MONASTIR

The proposed concentration of aircraft in the Monastir area came to fruition in August 1917. In the National Archives there is a file of correspondence which all relates to this event and which is headed 'Co-operation with the French at Monastir'.¹ The contents of the file are clearly incomplete, but nonetheless there is enough information to provide a broad outline of events.

The first document in the file is a communication from Commandant Denain (written in English) to Lt Colonel Dawes, dated 22 July 1917. The suggestion that British pilots be trained on French aeroplanes was evidently a British initiative, as Denain began by saying: *You have been good enough to suggest that a certain number of your young pilots should be trained on Nieuport or Sopwith machines, to be subsequently attached to the French Squadrons of the Monastir area.* He went on to express his agreement with this proposal and suggested that three or four pilots, to begin with, could commence training at the Centre d'Entrainement located at Sedes (near Salonika). The mention of Sopwiths may appear strange, but in fact the French operated some Sopwith 1½ Strutters in Macedonia, whereas the RFC did not. Denain continued with a mention of the proposed *large concentration of machines* in the Monastir district, with a view to a joint action, the advantages of which he had called to the attention of General Sarrail, the Commander in Chief of the allied forces on the Salonika front.

Lt Colonel Dawes' evident desire to have some of his pilots fly Nieuport scouts is readily explained by the shortage of up-to-date fighting machines available to him, as mentioned earlier. He commanded the 16th Wing, which was part of the RFC's Middle East Brigade. At the beginning of June 1917, the only scouts in the Wing were DH2s and BE12s, both of which were