

Tank Contact Patrols

THE DEVELOPMENT OF AIR AND TANK CO-OPERATION IN 1918

by Michael Meech

Part 2

Battle of Amiens

ACCORDING TO LEIGH-MALLORY in the *History* (p.3), the Battle of Amiens could be considered to have come too early as:

...the period of preparation was a great deal too short, to admit of special apparatus, such as smoke bombs, being prepared.

Although, during July, pilots and observers of 8 Squadron had engaged in much liaison work with officers of the tank units they were to work with. In this the aircrew learnt a lot about the limitations and the possibilities of the use of tanks, the tank officers learnt the same about aeroplanes. This sort of liaison was important in contact patrol work with whether it was infantry, cavalry or tanks. Indeed during that month, according to the *Weekly Report*, 29 aircrew had travelled in tanks, while 36 tank officers had flown in aircraft, giving each direct experience of some of their respective problems. The *Official History* (Volume VI, p.465) states that the July tests and trials were too late, despite some success with wireless telegraphy:

...to perfect the organization, equipment, and methods of liaison, by which advantage could be taken of this success.

Reliance was mainly placed upon methods of disk signalling

Despite the ongoing problems many of the ideas and procedures that had been discussed, or had been undergoing trials, were used to some extent during the Battle of Amiens. The procedures involved in 'communicating' with the tanks and keeping their commanders informed as to their progress are described in the *History* (p.3) by:

...dropping messages at the Tank Brigades, Battalions, and rallying points. For this purpose, all the Brigades had a Brigade Dropping Station, with a special sign, laid out in white American cloth (if this was deficient, old maps

made an excellent substitute), and the Battalions used the Brigade sign with a letter after it, the letters without any curves in being chosen for convenience. Throughout all the battles the machines indicated to the dropping stations that they were going to drop a message, by firing green lights when they were low and directly overhead.

This was basically as had been developed and practiced in July and would now undergo the real test of battle.

It should be recalled that this was a big tank operation for 8 Squadron to support. The then Wing Commander J.C. Slessor in his 1936 book *Air Power and Armies* (p.152) states that:

...ten battalions of heavy tanks (Mark V and V*) were allotted, the 2nd, 8th, 13th, and 17th to the Australian Corps, the 1st, 4th, 5th, and 14th to the Canadians, the 10th to the IIIrd Corps, and the 9th to Army Reserve, making a total of 360 heavy tanks.

As well as the heavy tanks there were 96 'Whippet' medium tanks of the 3rd and 6th Tank Battalions, these were allotted to support the cavalry.

To support these tanks 8 Squadron had C Flight to work with the 5th Tank Brigade, B Flight would support 4th Brigade with A Flight reinforcing both until the planned later stage of the battle when it would support the 5th Brigade and its 'Whippets'. All planning was done in utmost secrecy, with the squadron not concentrating at Vignacourt until 5 August and all aircraft were marked with a black band painted on the underside of the empennage to indicate that they were Tank co-operation machines. However, no more than two aircraft were allowed on the front line at any one time and the aircrew were not given any instructions as to the detail of the battle until the afternoon before it started. So, as the *History* (p.4) states, it was on the afternoon of the 7th that:

Armstrong Whitworth's final FK8, F4270, which went on to serve with 8 Sqn. Pictured at the same time as that shown on p.262 of Vol 40/4, this includes some works personnel posing with the machine on Gosforth Town Moor.

: via M. Davis

