

23 Squadron SPADs

From the Arthur W. Keen Collection

© the Dent Family, via Syd Buxton

Syd and his colleague Norman Rhodes are researching the life and career of Major Arthur William Keen MC. That pilot initially flew operations with 70 Sqn during 1916, on Sopwith 1½ Strutters. He was with 40 Squadron in 1917, acting as a Flight Commander in that Nieuport unit and achieving eleven combat successes to add to the single one achieved on Sopwiths. After a spell on Home Establishment, he returned to 40 Squadron as its CO, to replace Major R.S. Dallas, killed on 1 June 1918. Keen achieved two further combat successes but was fatally injured in a flying accident on 15 August, succumbing to his injuries a month later. Syd and Norman have access to Keen's material, which is held by the Dent family.

The Dent brothers are grandsons of Margaret Honor Dent (née Keen), favourite sister of Arthur Keen. Margaret was referred to by her brother Arthur as 'Tim', for whatever reason, and in all the extant letters, he always opens them 'Dear Tim'. It was 'Tim' who collected and kept the little archive of letters, photos and other documents after her brother died in France in 1918.

Among the Keen photos was this small selection showing SPAD S.VIIs of 23 Squadron. Any previously unpublished photograph of a WWI aeroplane deserves reproduction in this journal but these are also warranted because they clearly show two modifications made to the basic SPAD S.VII airframe – one obviously made at unit level, the other probably at the factory.



Above: Three 23 Sqn SPAD S.VIIs, probably photographed at Bruay. All appear to have been standard machines and the second and third carried the striped marking on their radiator shells that appears to have been a flight marking.

Below: Early SPADs had a tendency to shed wing fabric in steep dives, a consequence of the fabric 'ballooning'. This was alleviated through the introduction of two modifications: the covering of the leading edges, as far aft as the front spars, with plywood and stitching, rather than tacking, the fabric to the wing ribs. These two photographs, below, suggest that the stitching was to alternate ribs in each mainplane. The rib tapes appear to have been much wider than those usually seen on machines in British service. The machine in the rear view carried a flight (or deputy flight) leader's streamer on its rudder and appears to have been fitted with a rear view mirror.

The frontal view (left) again shows the striped radiator shell, the centrally mounted ring sight and French wheels that were fitted with treaded tyres, as well as the rib tapes under the mainplanes.

