

# THE HISTORY OF GROUPE DE BOMBARDEMENT 8 (GB8)

by Thomas Nilsson

**G**roupe de Bombardement 8 was formed on 13 January 1918, from night-bombing units of GB3. GB3 became, from then on, a pure day-bombing Groupe. The three escadrilles making up the new unit were VB109, VB113 and VB125.

VB109 was formed on 7 March 1915. This escadrille had been an original part of GB3 in 1915 and had taken part in the operations undertaken by the parent unit since its formation. In May 1917 an exchange of personnel between Escadrilles 108 and 109 took place, when VB109 became a dedicated night-bombing unit and Escadrille 108 a day-bombing unit. VB109 had been operating in Flanders during 1917, supporting the Franco-British offensive operations during the summer and autumn of 1917. The commanding officer in January 1918 was Capitaine Maurice Fleury, who had been in command since the previous October. The unit had not scored any confirmed victories. The escadrille was equipped with Voisin 8 aircraft.

VB113 was the second escadrille of GB8. This unit had been formed in June 1915 from two smaller units, Sections d'avions-canon 6 and 7, operating gun-carrying Voisin aircraft. VC113, as it was then, co-operated with G3 in 1915 until formally integrated with that Groupe at the end of that year. The commanding officer in January 1918 was Capitaine Pierre Cadaux, who had assumed command in February 1917. The unit had scored three confirmed victories during 1915 and 1916. The escadrille was equipped with Voisin 8 aircraft with a small number of gun-carrying Voisin 8 possibly included.

VB125 had been formed, as PS125, on 20 February 1917, as one of four escadrilles operating the Paul Schmitt PS7 day bomber, and all four had been assigned to GB3 in April 1917. The new bomber soon proved to be of little value and the units using it were later to change to other aircraft. PS125 exchanged aircraft, to the Voisin 10, in January 1918 and name, to VB125, on 24 January 1918. The commanding officer in January 1918 was Capitaine Lionel Glandaz, who had been in command since June 1917. The unit had not been credited with any aerial victories.

All three escadrilles were based at Cramailles, to where the Groupe staff arrived in January 1918.

The commander of GB8 was Jean Laurens. Laurens, who was born on 29 March 1884 and had joined the military as a volunteer in 1904, in the infantry. A number of re-enlistments followed, and he rose through the ranks and was appointed Lieutenant in 1911. He transferred to military aviation in March 1914 and joined the flying school at Reims. Here, he took his civil brevet on 8 May 1914 and his military counterpart on 10 July 1914. Following the declaration of war, he joined escadrille VB21 on 2 August 1914. On 5 April 1915, he was appointed CO of V97 DCA, then on 3 November 1915 as CO of VB101, which he led with distinction. He was nick-named 'the owl' on account of his alleged keen night-vision. He was appointed CO of GB2 on 14 May 1917. Here he was severely injured in a crash on 2 July, in which he broke his right leg and lower jaw, forcing him to a long period in hospital. In 1917 he married Suzanne Polak (born in 1892). When he was deemed fit, he was appointed as CO of Groupe de Bombardement 8 on 13 January 1918. By then, he had been appointed Capitaine.



*Jean Laurens was appointed the first commander of Groupe de Bombardement 8 in January 1918, and later commander of Escadre 14. By the Armistice, he had performed 143 night-bombing and 25 day-bombing missions, among many other flights. He remained in the French air service post-war, but left the service on 29 March 1939. He was recalled to service on 2 September 1939 and appointed CO of the French air forces in the Zone des Alpes, facing the Swiss and Italian borders, on 26 February 1940. After the capitulation, he was retired on 30 July 1940 and went to live in Pau with his wife. He was briefly incarcerated by the Gestapo in 1944, accused of working for the resistance, but was released. He was placed in the reserves after the liberation but did not return to service. He died in 1972. :author's archive*

The aircraft equipping the unit, the Voisin 8, was a two-seat bomber originally intended to be powered by a 300-hp Hispano-Suiza engine, but, due to design-trouble, a Peugeot 8Aa 220-hp engine was substituted. Wingspan was 18m, length 10.35m and height 3.95m. It could carry a bomb-load of 180 kilograms. The Voisin 10, replacing the Voisin 8, was equipped with a Renault 12Fe 280-hp engine. Dimensions were almost the same for the Voisin 10 compared to the aircraft it replaced, just the wing-span being somewhat less, measuring in at 17.90m and could carry 300 kilograms of bombs. The design was already outdated, but the French air-service had not, as yet, adopted a more modern night-bomber.

The first offensive operations undertaken by the Groupe were performed during the night of 30-31 January 1918. Eleven crews from

VB113 attacked a number of railway-stations: Marle, Mortiers, Crécy-sur-Serre and Chalandrey with 70 bombs. A second mission was also performed during the night, when six crews from VB113 assigned to bomb airfields near Clermont-les-Fermes. Due to fog, only three crews completed this mission, but they bombed a lit-up airfield north of Mortiers instead.

The bomb load amounted to 2.025 ton of bombs. It should also be noted that during many nights, picked crews performed reconnaissance as well as bombing-missions. The