

WHY WAS THE RED BARON'S FOKKER PAINTED RED?

Decoding the Way Aeroplanes were Painted in the First World War

by A.D. HARVEY

When one turns one's thoughts to the role of aviation in the First World War, it is probable that almost the first image to cross one's mind is of gaily painted biplanes wheeling and soaring in breath-taking dogfights. Red, yellow and harlequin-liveried Fokker and Albatros scouts represent a kind of counter-symbol to the drabness of the mud-caked khaki and field-grey uniforms crowding the trenches below. Inconvenient details, such as the fact that the pilots of the gaily painted aircraft also wore uniforms, and that the practice of painting aircraft in bright colours coincided with the development of aerial tactics that emphasized cooperative action, tend to be overlooked. In any case it is possible that the most interesting feature of the bright paintwork was not its symbolic meaning but the simple fact that it was painted on military equipment.



Examples of early French personal aeroplane markings:
Upper: Voisin LAS, SFA number unknown, of Escadrille 106 and flown by Charles Nungesser:
Lower: Nieuport 12bis 2127 of Escadrille 561, as flown by Cne René Robert.

:both David Méchin



By December 1914 the aviation services of the various combatant nations had all adopted national insignia that were painted on the wings and fuselages of their aircraft in the hope of persuading ground troops not to shoot at their own machines, but for more than a year thereafter the wooden-framed, cloth-covered military aircraft of the time generally bore their national markings on a plain background consisting simply of undyed canvas varnished with a clear dope. Some pilots christened their aircraft and had the name painted fairly discreetly on the fuselage – future French fighter ace Georges Guynemer Escadrille MS3, for example, flew a Maurice Farman with the inscription *Vieux Charles* during the Spring of 1915, and maintained the practice when moved on to flying first Nieuports and then SPADs. The French also identified the aircraft type with a SFA number comprising an initial letter, for the manufacturer, painted in black over the national colours on the rudder. Some pilots went even further: Charles Nungesser of Escadrille VB106 flew a Voisin marked with a

Nungesser's later use of his skull and crossbones on a Nieuport 17.

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