



Bulgaria's Nieuport Scouts

by Mitko Mitkov

The world knows little about the history of the Bulgarian Air Force, but much can be written on the subject. It is necessary, before discussing the French Nieuport, to provide a little clarity about the combat use of aircraft by the Bulgarians. According to surviving documents, the birth of Bulgarian Aviation was on 23 February 1906, when the Aviation Department was established. Initially, it had an old French balloon and, during 1911, a second French Godard balloon was delivered. In 1912, with materials supplied by Russia, the first Bulgarian balloon Sofia-1 was constructed. At the same time, the innovations and trends in the development of aviation as well as the experience of the major European countries did not go unnoticed by the command of the Bulgarian Army, with special attention being paid to the use of aircraft in the Tripolitan War. Based on the reports of the observers sent there, a decision was made at the end of 1911 to establish the Bulgarian Military Aviation, and its practical implementation was begun with the purchase of aircraft and the training of aviators and mechanics. The training took place at the factories from which the machines were purchased. A total of 13 aviators, six mechanics and two balloonists were sent to France, Germany, England and Russia for training. Thus, in 1912, Bulgaria entered the Balkan War with 29 aeroplanes divided into three Aeroplanno Otdelenia (Aeroplane Sections, hereafter abbreviated to AO). At the end of that war, Bulgaria had only eight aeroplanes, eight pilots and two observers. The Inter-Allied War that broke out immediately afterwards and the subsequent loss to Bulgaria had a catastrophic effect on Bulgarian aviation as well – the country was left with only one aeroplane capable of flying. The outbreak of the First World War found the Bulgarians with one Aeroplanna Rota (Aeroplane Company) and five aeroplanes – a single Bleriot XI-bis dating from 1912, two two-seater Bleriot XI-2s bought from France and two captured Albatros B.Is, intended for the Ottoman Empire but landed by mistake on Bulgarian territory. On entering the war, the Bulgarian government did everything possible to catch up from the country's retarded development in aviation, the result of the economic catastrophe caused by the two previous wars. Thus, from an Aeroplanna Rota before the First World War, gradually and in accordance with the needs of the front, the structure of Bulgarian aviation managed to develop into an Air Force, with the following composition, which remained unchanged until the end of the war:

1 An aeroplane group with two AO at the front (1AO based at Belitsa aerodrome near the present-day town of

Sandanski, with its scout aircraft later detached to Levunovo aerodrome. 2AO was based near Xanthi and later near Udovo, today in northern Macedonia.

- 2 An aeroplane depot at Sofia aerodrome.
- 3 An aeroplane school at Bozhurishte aerodrome.
- 4 Aeroplane workshops at Bozhurishte aerodrome.
- 5 A balloon group with three Balonni Otdelenia (Balloon Sections) and one Gazodobivni Otdelenia (Gas Production Section).

The Bulgarian state relied on the supply of aeroplanes and spare parts from its ally, Germany, whose industry was barely able to produce the necessary equipment for its own needs on the Western Front. As a result, some of the Bulgarian orders were not fulfilled and deliveries were in insufficient quantities. Given that the Macedonian Front was of secondary importance to Germany, the aeroplanes sold to Bulgaria were practically unusable in the skies over the Western Front, due to their poorer performance compared to enemy aircraft.

But it turned out that in the skies over the Balkans, the enemy had the upper hand in both the quantity and the quality of its aircraft. The situation thus created, with the failures of the Bulgarian government to negotiate the supply of more modern machines, required an unusual decision by the Air Force command, namely the use of captured enemy aircraft against their former owners.

This was a solution that carries a lot of risks, both from piloting and technical support of unknown machines, and from 'friendly fire' from the ground. However, of the 17 enemy planes captured during the war, Bulgarian aviators actively used five of them in combat operations against the enemy. This brings us to the topic of the article: the Nieuport 24/24bis in the hands of Bulgarians.

The Nieuport 24

As a development of the Nieuport 17bis, the Type 24 was an attempt by designer Gustav Delage to create a competitor to the SPAD fighter, which was becoming increasingly popular with French aviators. The newly created Nieuport 24 incorporated a number of innovations, the most distinctive being the new shape of the tail surfaces. The wing was reinforced with improved aerodynamics. Despite the efforts of the design team, the end result was not particularly impressive; the machine was difficult to control, with a performance inferior to the latest enemy scouts and so was unpopular with its pilots. In terms of combat use of the Nieuport 24, the most use occurred on the Western Front – the destruction of Zeppelins L49 and L50