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by David Méchin

On the evening of 17 November 1916, the clerk of the prestigious Venetian hotel Daniéli was surprised to see a tall, blond French officer enter his establishment. The officer was wearing red trousers and carrying a machine gun on his shoulder. Placing the weapon against a table, the man asked for a room and enquired about buying a razor and some soap. The officer was Captain Louis Robert de Beauchamp, who had left the French city of Belfort that morning and just completed one of the most daring raids of the war by bombing the city of Munich. This is the story behind his arrival in Italy.

BIRTH OF THE FRENCH AIR BOMBING FORCE

A FEW MONTHS AFTER the declaration of war, the French Aéronautique Militaire dedicated some of its *escadrilles* to bombing duties. In Alsace, during 1915, Germany put a price on the head of Captain Happe, the commanding officer of Escadrille MF 29, which was famous for its attacks on objectives far behind the front line. From the airfield at Malzéville, near Nancy, several *escadrilles* were organized into *groupes de bombardement* (bombing groups) following Major de Goÿs experiment with strategic bombing, which involved the targeting of cities such as Karlsruhe and Ludwigshafen.

Accuracy was poor and the tonnage of bombs dropped was very limited. However, some success was achieved against large industrial targets – the output of the Ludwigshafen chemical complex, for example, was affected on 26 June, 1915, by bombs dropped from Voisin LAS, with the detonations leaving long plumes of coloured smoke. The Germans were not slow to respond and deployed fighting machines on the bombers' known routes. Fokker Eindeckers met with much success, especially because the aircraft types used by the French, pusher Voisin LAS or Farman MF.XI, were unable to defend themselves against attacks from astern. Major daylight strategic raids were halted, with the Voisin bombers only raiding by night.

The situation became critical at the beginning of 1916, the peak of the Fokker scourge. The French command had to react quickly, to remedy the inferior performance of both their bombing and artillery observation machines, which were mainly of Farman design. Since the French industry had nothing to offer in the immediate future, the choice fell on a British aircraft, the Sopwith 1½ Strutter. Its main advantage was that it placed the observer in the rear position, from where he could then handle a gun to defend to the rear. Equipped with a French Clerget rotary engine, the plane was faster than the fighters supposed to intercept it and happened to be an ideal aircraft for reconnaissance. The French immediately ordered examples from the Sopwith Company and made arrangements to produce the type under licence, entrusting production to a dozen French

manufacturers (including Hanriot, Darracq, REP, and Lioré et Olivier) who would produce nearly 4800 airframes, far more than the 1400 manufactured in Britain. French built Sopwiths came in three versions: the IA2 two-seat reconnaissance machine and the 1B1 and 2B2, respectively single-seat and two-seat bombers. It would equip 74 French *escadrilles* during the war and saw front-line use until the beginning of 1918, outliving some of the first generation of aeroplanes designed to replace it. The first Sopwiths were delivered in the spring of 1916 and Escadrille N23, a fighter squadron, but with equipment dedicated for reconnaissance, collected its first machines that April. The type's potential was soon apparent to the squadron commander, Captain Louis Robert de Beauchamp.



A COURAGEOUS CAPTAIN

He was born in 1887, into a family from the military aristocracy. His father was Viscount Maurice Robert Beauchamp (a cavalry officer) and his mother, who had been born Turquet le Boissier, died in 1897, in the tragic fire at the *Bazar de la Charité* in Paris. Enlisted in St-Cyr military school in 1908, Louis Robert was discharged for physical weakness but, in 1911, his passion for aviation led him to re-enlist. This time he was accepted but, to his great disappointment, he was assigned to an infantry regiment. Learning to fly at his own expense, during leaves, he was awarded the civilian brevet No 1083 on 22 October 1912 and this finally forced the hand of the military administration, which allowed him to qualify for the military brevet No 339 on 18 August 1913 and be assigned to the *Aéronautique Militaire*. He joined Escadrille MF2 on 28 September 1914, with the rank of lieutenant and flew a Maurice Farman MF.VII, SFA No.194. The war raged on the ground and he received the tragic news of the death of his brother, Hubert, who fell, at the head of his men, in the Yser battle on 10 January 1915. After flying numerous observation missions, he was appointed

Chevalier of the Legion of Honour on 22 February 1915.

On 9 May, he was transferred to a fighter unit, Escadrille MS37, which had Morane Parasols but converted to the Nieuport 10. His first success arrived quickly. Flying a Nieuport