

AN AIRCRAFT DESTROYED IN BELGIUM

A UNIQUE CASE?

by Luc Vanacker



ON 21 APRIL 1918, the day on which von Richthofen was shot down on the Somme Front, Canadian pilot Lieutenant Charles Hickey succeeded in forcing a German Rumpler reconnaissance aeroplane to land at Wulpen, near Veurne, in the unoccupied part of north-western Belgium. Before surrendering to a Belgian officer, the German pilot and his observer activated a time bomb in the rear of their aircraft. Charles Hickey, who had meanwhile landed close by in Camel B6350, shouted at the Belgian soldiers to run away from the machine, but it was too late. The bomb went off killing eight Belgian soldiers. Hickey himself was wounded. This was a seldom recorded instance of the use of a German device for the destruction of a downed machine, the so-called *Flugzeugzerstörer*.

At the entrance of the Delanghe Farm, alongside the canal Veurne-Nieuwpoort, stands a chapel to thank God there were no casualties or any damage during the Second World War. The buildings were piled up with about a thousand tons of heavy artillery shells, related Julien Delanghe (b.1934) who grew up at this farm. The Koksijde airfield was nearby. At the end of the war Julien's father, Albert Delanghe (b.1907), was afraid he would have to deliver his last horse to the Germans as they had already taken one before. He therefore hid it in a room where the farm-hands used to sleep and cleaned it every day to eliminate the smell. One day, however, two Germans entered the house and stayed for a while in an adjacent room. But the horse remained silent and it did not even – as horses use to do – grind its teeth. It was not discovered. Who still dares to question 'intelligence' of animals?

The present day inhabitants of the farm, the fifth generation Delanghes, did not know that, during the First World War, there was an anti-aircraft battery close to the farm, a Belgian

battery this time, because this was in that small corner of Belgium which was not occupied. On a photograph, held in the Belgian Royal Army Museum collection, the farm was labelled as 'Maison Ollevier', although the Delanghes had rented the farm since 1868, after Louis Ollevier.

The incident at Wulpen makes it clear that the quiet Belgian sector behind the inundated plains of the river IJzer was not that quiet after all. Incidents occurred regularly. This was mainly due to the presence of heavy artillery. The German Tirpitz battery, near Oostende, could reach the port of Nieuwpoort and caused severe damage. The 380mm long range guns at Predikboom and Leugenboom could reach the port of Dunkirk, a distance of more than 40km in about a minute and a half. This, however, gave the defenders the opportunity to alert the authorities at Dunkirk, by telephone, that a heavy shell was on its way and so the people could be evacuated to the shelters.

The French and the British, too, placed heavy artillery in this sector. Sir Reginald Bacon was pleased that a 303mm gun of the Dominion Battery of his Dover Patrol remained undetected by the Germans for three weeks and that he could finally reply the firing by the 'Tirpitz Battery' (also called Hamilton Battery). In support of these guns there were units of aeroplanes to direct the artillery, to intercept enemy aircraft or to escort reconnaissance machines.

In June 1916 the French sent their only squadron of fighter planes at Dunkerque to the heavily-attacked sector near Verdun. The air defence of Dunkerque was left to the RNAS (Royal Naval Air Service). The first unit to arrive was 10 Sqn RNAS with 20 machines and 12 pilots based at Koksijde aerodrome (alongside the road to Veurne).¹ Hickey's unit, 4 Sqn RNAS, and also 11 Sqn RNAS operated from the

aerodrome near the French village of Bray Dunes, close to the Belgian border, from April 1917 onward. Later on it was stationed at Teteghem, closer to Dunkerque.

In the reports of the incident at Wulpen it is often stated that the engine exploded, but it is clear that the explosion was that of a device that was especially designed for landings in enemy territory. As stated in a report by the headquarters of the Second Belgian Army Division.

Immediately after the landing the two pilots started working at the destruction of the aircraft, between the rear seat and the tail. A few moments later, they surrendered to a Belgian officer at about 50 metres from the aircraft... The English (sic) officer who had forced the German aircraft to land, had landed at about 20 metres from the German aeroplane.

