

# MARKINGS WORN BY RFC/RAF CONTACT PATROL AND ASSOCIATED MISSION AEROPLANES



by Mike Meech

## INTRODUCTION

In the introduction to my article on *The Development of Contact Patrols* (CCI 40/2, Summer 2009), I suggested that photographs of 'marked up' aircraft engaged in Contact Patrols were rare. However, it now appears they were not as rare as I thought, and with the help of others, particularly Andrew Renwick, Andrew Cormack and Julian Hale of the RAF Museum, and Stuart Leslie, quite a few have come to light, some being in retrospect quite 'obvious'. This article is based on the photographs, now identified, and various documents that mention contact patrol and other markings.

## MARKINGS

THE IDENTIFICATION MARKINGS worn by RFC and RAF aeroplanes in the First World War, when engaged in Contact Patrols, or associated missions such as Counter Attack Patrols, Supply Drops or Cavalry and Tank Support, were all temporary; that is, they were only applied to aeroplanes just before battle and the ground troops informed of these markings in their operational orders. These markings consisted of cloth streamers, flags, banners, plywood boards or painted markings used individually or in combination. Temporary markings were not a wartime invention; in the 6 September 1913 edition of *Flight* (page 987), there is a mention, in reference to the Army manoeuvres in England, that 3 Squadron aeroplanes, supporting the 'Brown Side', were marked with black and white stripes on the under surface of the lower plane [*Michael Turner's atmospheric painting on the cover of this issue shows these on a Blériot and at least one photograph shows a HF E.20 with them - Ed*]. Obviously these would be removed after the manoeuvres, so the paint must have been relatively easy to get off, or was just left to fade away - which may also be the case during World War One. However, when used during the war, this must appear to mean that there is relatively little photographic evidence of these markings in their complete state.

This article is an attempt to put together the available information on this subject at the present time. The terminology used during the war can be quite interchangeable and a bit confusing; banner, flag and streamer can mean the same type of 'cloth' item (of various sizes) although the term 'streamer' is also sometimes applied to a plywood board! Broadly, for Contact Patrols, it appears that cloth devices were used more during 1916-17 and plywood boards during 1917-18, but that is not a hard and fast rule. Painted markings were used throughout the period either in conjunction with the previous or independently.

## 1916

It is of interest to note that A.J. Insall, in his book *Observer* (p.87-88, William Kimber and Co Ltd, 1970), mentions that while on 11 Squadron (Vickers FB5) at Bertangles (probably between October 1915 and April 1916) he spotted a BE2 circling round a German airfield after apparently taking off from there, so presumably captured. He reported this and it appears that as a result: *A few days later a general instruction was issued for all British aeroplanes operating on the line to be given a face-lift. A special issue of black soap-paint was made to squadrons, and with this all wing-tips were anointed to a depth of about three feet on completion of flying on a prearranged date. When flying began on the following morning pilots and observers had orders to open fire upon any aircraft encountered that bore no marking. If I recollect rightly, the scheme remained in force for two days, and no unadorned British machines were seen anywhere.*

So it appears 'temporary' paint was available in some quantity to apply to all of the aeroplanes, even if this was for 'identification' purposes rather than a particular mission. The 'soap-paint' may be the same as the temporary paint mentioned in an article *British Aircraft Colours of World War 1* by Geoff Thomas in *Scale Aviation Modeller* (May 1995, Volume 1, Issue 5). That author stated that: *From April 1916, squadron identification markings were applied to the BE2c Corps squadrons of the RFC on the Western Front, soon to be 12 in number, so that ground observation posts could recognise the aircraft with which they were to operate. These markings, consisting of black stripes and bands, were to be painted on the top, bottom and both sides of the fuselage in easily removed temporary paint made from lamp black mixed with turpentine, gelatine or glue.*

While these were 'squadron' markings, they had been put on so ground units could identify 'their' support aeroplanes. In this the RFC were following French practice as a report on French air activities over Verdun in March 1916 (TNA, AIR 1/1283/204/11/4), from Captain R.A. Cooper, this stated that: *It has been found extremely useful for every machine to have a distinctive mark, i.e. each squadron has its own distinctive mark all of the same form or shape, but each machine differing individually.*

This is what has probably caused the confusion with the later 'operational' markings with 'squadron' markings, quite understandably as originally in 1916 they were the same thing. The official RFC letter, dated 23 April 1916 (TNA, AIR1/867/204/5/523) and signed by Philip Game (Lieutenant-Colonel, General Staff), that relates to early squadron markings for the BE2c aircraft stated: *Herewith a copy of*