

THE ORIGIN OF THE SOPWITH CAMEL DUAL-CONTROL TRAINER



by Philip Jarrett

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BEARING IN MIND the numerous major flying accidents suffered by tyro Sopwith Camel pilots at UK training establishments during the latter years of the First World War, it should come as no surprise that a means was sought of mitigating this serious problem.

It has often occurred to me that the number of fatal and non-fatal accidents attributed to the notoriously tricky behaviour of this dangerously sensitive little fighter ought to be set against the much-vaunted claim that it accounted for more enemy aeroplanes than any other single aircraft type of that war.¹ This would probably show this *alarmingly mettlesome aircraft*, as the late Jack Bruce described it,² in a somewhat different light. Did it kill as many Allied pilots as German ones?

Captain Norman Macmillan wrote: *when spinning accidents began to receive special attention during 1918, the Camel was found to be the worst offender. There were 27 Camel fatal spinning accidents in May 1918, 14 more just outside that month. Nineteen were from 500ft or less; 22 from height; seven were double spins, usually in reverse directions.*³

The two sad accompanying illustrations graphically encapsulate the problem. Second Lieutenant D.R. Glen lost his life when he spun F1 Camel B5654 into the ground from 1500ft on 12 February 1918, while he was at the War School at Manston in Kent. At the same location on 6 March 1918, only some three weeks later, Flight Sub-Lieutenant W.N. Cross was killed in the crash of Camel B5734.⁴

In an effort to reduce these avoidable casualties, a number of Camels were converted to two-seat trainer configuration.

The results of the two crashes given as examples, above. Both machines were built by Clayton & Shuttleworth at Lincoln. Left: the wreckage of Sopwith F1 Camel B5654 after 2Lt D.R. Glen spun into the ground from 1500ft at the RNAS War School, Manston in Kent, 12 February 1918. Right: the remains of F1 Camel B5734 after FSL W.N. Cross's fatal accident, also at the War School, on 6 March 1918. Top: B3801, the first conversion.

:P. Jarrett

The origin of this modification has, up to now, been somewhat obscure, though a number of writers have endeavoured to identify the source over the last several decades.

Both Jack Bruce⁵ and John W.R. Taylor⁶ have referred to a statement in *Recollections of an Airman* by Lieutenant-Colonel Louis Arbon Strange, who commanded the 23rd Training Wing at South Carlton, Lincolnshire, and served as Assistant Commandant of the Central Flying School (CFS) at Upavon, Wiltshire, from April 1917 to March 1918. Strange writes:

*We had our daily number of major and minor crashes, of course [i.e. at the CFS]. In spite of all the care we took, Camels continually spun down out of control when flown by pupils out on their first solos. At length, with the assistance of Lieut. Morgan, who managed our workshops, I took the main tank out of several Camels and replaced it with a smaller one, which enabled us to fit in dual control. When the first of these adapted machines was ready, Morgan was my passenger on its first flight.*⁷

In 1955 Jack Bruce wrote that: *One of the first dual Camels was made about the middle of 1918 in the Aeroplane Repair Section of the 23rd Training Wing at South Carlton. It was converted from a standard single-seat aircraft by Capt. W.R. Roche-Kelly and was flying in the summer of 1918.*⁸ Chaz Bowyer states that Strange authorised his Repair Section Officer, Captain Roche-Kelly and a Captain O'Grady to convert a standard Camel to two-seat trainer configuration.⁹

However, in an article in the modelling magazine *PAM News*, Rodney Gerrard attributes the design to Wing Commander T.E. Guttery, later of the Shuttleworth Collection. He asserts

