

Daily Life in

ESCADRILLE M·F 29

by Steve Suddaby

THIS IS NOT A NORMAL SQUADRON HISTORY. Most focus on the operations of a squadron: air combats, bombing raids, reconnaissance missions. Aviation historians write them using squadron war diaries and other records to recount the operational events of a unit over the course of its life. This article, instead, will use a war diary from a two-week period in September 1915 to provide insights into daily life in MF29, an early Farman bombing *escadrille*. The reader may recall that there is already an excellent squadron history for *Escadrille MF29*: Frank W. Bailey and Peter Kilduff's *The Bombers of Belfort*, published in *Over the Front* in 2010. There will necessarily be some overlap, but this piece will focus on the work of a squadron **between** the bombing raids.

I chose this *escadrille* to write about because there was so much detail in the war diary that surprised me; despite twenty years of researching WWI aerial bombing. It is enlightening because relatively little is written about aviation in 1915 compared to 1917 or 1918, when operations were more numerous and complex. Also, little is written elsewhere about flying the prehistoric-looking Maurice Farman M.F.II in combat, about squadron leadership, about airmen continually practicing the necessary skills of shooting and dropping bombs, or about normal day-to-day communications (just how **did** early French *escadrilles* notify families that their loved ones were killed or missing?). The war diary that makes up the bulk of this article, the MF29 *Journal des marches et opérations*, is a primary-source, daily record that describes all of these topics.

MF29 conducted only three raids during the 13 days covered by this excerpt from its war diary. In that sense, the period 10–22 September 1915 is pretty typical of events on the quieter Vosges Mountains front for the latter half of 1915 and into 1916. During this time, however, the *escadrille* experienced its first major crisis. The crisis and the leadership shown in response to it by the commander, *Capitaine Maurice Happe*, are an important part of this story. The eloquence of his funeral oration is still striking almost a century later and was the hardest section to translate in a way that did it justice.

Capt Happe,¹ one of France's most important bombardment commanders, dominates this narrative even when he is not explicitly mentioned. He drove his men hard but drove himself even harder. According to the historian René Martel, their tedious and exhausting schedule of bombing and machine gun practice was because of his recognition of the need for damaging the German rail system and the realization that the Farman M.F.II could barely defend itself from aerial attack.² He was an innovator who, on 24 August 1915, may have been the first in any country to use the V formation for squadron-level bombing.³ Happe's reputation is that of a strict disciplinarian, but the war diary presents a more nuanced picture of him. He was a squadron commander who led from the front on many missions. While he did deal harshly with those who could not face combat, he continually rewarded those who did with medals and citations—even posthumously. He immediately gave leave to one soldier, whose father-in-law died, and arranged convalescent care for one pilot who had been released from the hospital but remained in poor health. Happe took care of his people.

Some background is necessary for understanding another aspect of daily life in MF29—the intelligence reports they used to evaluate the effects of their bombing raids. These came from sources behind German lines or in Switzerland, generally newspapers but also travellers, POWs, and official German announcements. According to René Martel, the Germans were conducting a disinformation campaign to make it appear that French bombing was not accomplishing anything militarily useful but was killing innocent women and children.⁴ In the war diary, for example, you'll read reports on an MF29 attack on a train. Typically, a German-language Swiss newspaper that was quoted said one child was killed; in contrast, a French paper quoting Swiss sources said many German soldiers were killed.

This is the most well-known photo of Capitaine Maurice Happe (1882-1930), one of France's most innovative bombing pioneers. He commanded Groupe de Bombardement 4 as well as Escadrille 29. One of his biographers described Happe in this way:

His tall silhouette, all sinew and muscles, in a black artillery uniform without officer's boards or decoration, stood out against the blue of the Vosges Mountains... He [was] obsessed with one concern: accomplishing everything that was his duty. His gaze softened or turned dark depending on his mood. He was subject to mood swings; there was something of the street Arab in his personality. But when he laughed, his brilliant white teeth reminded one of a wolf's teeth. (Martel, p.84)

:La Guerre Aérienne Illustrée (LGA)

