

# Morane Saulnier Aircraft of the RFC on the Western Front 1914-1917

by Trevor Henshaw

This examination to accompany the recent serial listing in the Journal deals with a 'marque' of aircraft rather than tracing the story of a particular type. It is about a diverse group of machines produced by the French manufacturer Morane Saulnier, which both the Royal Flying Corps and the Royal Naval Air Service drew into vital use in the first three years of the war. What follows is an examination of when and how these various aircraft were deployed in action by the RFC on the Western Front. It also looks at some of the individuals who flew the types, who patrolled and fought in them, and tells the story of the fifty or more British men who were killed flying Moranes in the service of their country.

It is easy to overlook the contribution of the Moranes to the first air war in general as they are widely associated with the earlier phases of that struggle, when types were still evolving from what were essentially pre-war civilian racing or experimental military types into that new creation – an aerial weapon. And at the time they were most in use, which was as the Somme battles opened in the summer of 1916, they still only constituted around ten per cent of the RFC force, with around forty-six Moranes of various types serving across just three squadrons.

The Moranes, at first glance, feel almost peripheral to the story of how the air weapon was forged into something that undoubtedly became a vital part of waging war. The era of huge dog fights, vast aerial support for armies and their guns, around-the-clock attritional bombing – all these hallmarks of what we think of as the Great War in the air were only coming into full focus just as the era of the Moranes was fading. Yet in early 1915 it was on a Morane L-type, in French service, that a machine-gun was first fixed to fire through the arc of the propeller, in the axis of flight, to thus create the world's first 'fighter aircraft'. On the same Morane type, FSL R.A.J. Warneford of 1 Squadron RNAS shot down the first Zeppelin airship, the LZ37, in June of that year, and earned a Victoria Cross and a nation's admiration. And it will be seen that it was in Morane single-seater scouts that several notable British aces first honed their skills in aerial combat. That virtually all the types considered here were also confoundingly difficult to fly because of their high wing loading and absence of any actual tail planes (just a pair of 'balanced' elevators), leaves one in admiration of the airmen who put in thousands of hours over battles like the Somme, directing fire, gathering intelligence, and defending their comrades in these aircraft. The story of the British Moranes is not exactly one of an illustrious aircraft family, so much as, as that great air historian Jack Bruce aptly reminds us, one that nevertheless deserves an honoured place in WWI aviation history.<sup>1</sup>

Seven main types of Morane Saulnier served with the Royal Flying Corps on the Western Front: four types of two-seater, and three related single-seater scouts.<sup>2</sup> All were monoplanes, apart from the Morane BB biplane two-seater. All six monoplane types had distinctive pyramidal kingpost forms raised over the cockpit to provide the required bracing to the mainplane. The three single-seater scouts, namely Morane Types N, I and V, all shared a characteristic shoulder wing configuration. Just as distinctive, on the Morane two-seater monoplanes, Types L, LA and P, was the position of the mainplane: they were described as 'Parasol Monoplanes', for

the wing was set suspended almost two feet above the cockpit and fuselage, and as such it afforded the pilot a superb view downwards, forwards and to the sides. As a platform for co-operation work with an army below it was unequalled at the time. All seven were powered by rotary engines, and so along with the distinctive 'M' shaped undercarriage and minimal tail construction afforded by the balanced elevators, all the Morane types do indeed fit together visually as a distinct family of aircraft. In fact, telling them apart can be the difficult bit.

As this article is fundamentally about the operational life and the airmen of the Western Front RFC Moranes it is not setting out to also describe in depth the technical development and detail of each type. Such information is comprehensively covered in books and Datafiles penned, for example, by Jack Bruce, and details of these and other articles on Moranes are provided in the footnotes. Some description of each of the seven main types is essential, however.



*What the well-dressed Morane pilot was wearing during the winter of 1914-15.*  
:CCI Archive

## **Beginnings: The Morane Type L with 1 and 3 Squadrons**

As noted above, there were four two-seater Morane types eventually drawn into the Royal Flying Corps from the French authorities to meet shortfalls of adequate and proven operational aircraft. Just as in 1914 the British were sourcing additional Blériots and Maurice Farman's to make up losses and swell squadron establishments from the earliest weeks of the war, so too they sought to buy some of the Morane Saulnier Parasol two-seaters for reconnaissance and artillery work. All these aircraft were obtained through the British Aviation Supplies Department (BASD) in Paris, and the very earliest Moranes were examples of the L-Type. This aircraft was powered by an 80hp Le Rhône engine, and was normally armed with a Lewis machine-gun mounted for the observer. Besides the distinctive configuration of its mainplane, and its utilization of wing-warping, its 'slab-sided' fuselage is its best characteristic for identification. Later L-Types would also use a triangular tail fin.

The first machine to arrive with an operational British unit was 1829, flown from Paris to 3 Squadron on 2 December 1914. It lasted just a week before it was wrecked. Two further Morane Ls came on strength with the unit before Christmas, and then from early January 1915 onwards a steady stream of