

31 AUGUST 1918

MULTINATIONAL AERIAL COMBAT and its Czech Connections

by Jiří Rajlich

THE MENTION OF RAF AND CZECH PILOTS would lead most people to recollect that they fought alongside each other during WWII, with the RAF operating Czechoslovakian Squadrons 310-313. That was not always the case. Only a quarter of a century earlier, during 1917-18, Czechs fought against pilots from Britain and its Empire in the skies over northern Italy.¹

The air battle of 31 August 1918 was just a small episode in the history of the RAF; there were larger air battles, both before and after that date on the Western Front; battles with greater losses on both sides. On the Italian Front, however, where combats between larger numbers of aeroplanes were rare occurrences, it was a major event. Combats in that theatre were usually between small formations of 3-6 machines and if two were shot down during an action it was regarded as a large loss. If four machines were lost, particularly to a smaller enemy force, it was catastrophic. With this in mind, it is not surprising that the episode which forms the subject of this article is one that most works covering aerial operations in the Italian theatre feature.² The events of that fateful morning were recently, in 2004, summarised by the Polish historian Andrzej Zareba, who wrote:

Early in the early morning of 31 August 1918, six fighters took off from the Romagnano aerodrome and, over Pergine, Stec saw a lonely British Bristol F2B. The English plane was easy prey and two experienced pilots [Oblts Stec and Navratil] demonstrated a copybook shooting down to their watching colleagues. Fully engaged in the fight, they did not notice that their subordinates disappeared in the endless sky. The junior pilots had slower planes, could not keep up with their superior and became lost.

But the escort of the Bristol spotted them. It was 09.35 when the pilots of 45 Squadron C Flight appeared behind the tails of their enemies' Oeffags. The English were experienced pilots. 2Lts J. Cottle and M.R. James ended the war with a combined total of 24 credited combat successes; the third pilot, R.G.H. Davis, was a debutant. They flew the legendary Sopwith F.1 Camel, the most manoeuvrable of all allied aeroplanes. The pilots of Flik 3J accepted the fight with the bravery of desperate men. Unfortunately, determination and bravery were not enough. There was a lack of airmanship and experience. After

a few minutes, Cottle shot down Second Lieutenant Pürer and Company Sergeant Major Forster, while James shot down Second Lieutenants Kubelik and Stanislaw Tomicki.

Navratil suffered a complete breakdown after this catastrophe. Soon after this event, he had a horrific plane accident, the result of making a really basic mistake in handling his plane. All personnel of Flik 3J were losing spirit and just waiting for the end of the war ...³

Generally, except in some small details, all known descriptions of this episode agree with each other. Despite the main fact that the heavy loss of four Flik 3J pilots in one combat is unquestionable, it is clear that, even after more than ninety years, it is possible to find some surprising and more accurate information.

Flik 3J was operating with the Austro-Hungarian 10th Army and the six Albatros D.III (Oef) had left Romagnano, 8km SW of Trento) for a defensive patrol in the area between Etschtal and Arsiero. They were led by Oblt Feldpilot Friedrich Navratil in 253.06, the experienced commander of Flik 3J and one of most famous pilots in the k.u.k. Luftfahrtruppen, with nine confirmed victories to his account. Accompanying him were Oblt in der Reserve Feldpilot Stephan Stec (possibly in 253.08), Oblt in der Reserve Flugzeugführer Josef Pürer (in 153.234), Lt n idR Feldpilot Jaroslaus Kubelik (in 153.271), Lt n idR Flugzeugführer Stanislaus Maria Tomicki von Tomice (in 153.173) and Stabsfeldwebel Feldpilot Otto Förster (in 253.03). The names are given here in the German form here, as they were in the official Austrian documents.⁴

Only two of the six were German, or, more precisely, Austrian; Otto Förster and Josef Pürer (although he was born in Brno, Moravia – now the Czech Republic). Unlike these, the formation commander, Friedrich Navratil, just turned twenty five and the son of a Czech office worker and Croatian mother, was born in Sarajevo in Bosnia; his birth certificate carried the christian name Miroslav and he had Croatian nationality. Stephan Stec (Stefan Stec) was born in Lwow and was pure Polish, as was Stanislaw Maria Tomicki, from Lodzia-Tomice (the Polish version of this pilot's name). Jaroslaus Kubelik (Jaroslav Kubelík) was pure Czech, born in Prague. Their origins did not have any influence on the fact that all of them were 'Austrians', because their planes carried the black cross on the wings.

Sopwith F1 Camels from 45 Squadron RAF's A Flight, were responsible for the crushing defeat of Flik 3J on 31 August 1918. Some of that flight's Camels are shown on the Italian aerodrome at Istrana, west from Treviso, during early 1918. RAF squadrons, by then, had a nominal establishment of 18 machines, the same as Austro-Hungarian Flik Js. Although rated at only 130hp, its Clerget engine gave the Camel a top speed that was equivalent to that of the 153 series Albatros D.III (Oef) with the 200hp Austro-Daimler engine and only 9mph slower than the 253 series D.IIIs with the 225hp engine. The Camel was, of course, markedly more manoeuvrable.

