

TALE of a TWENTY

by Kevin Kelly



AN AIRCRAFT PHOTOGRAPH that shows a serial is nothing but an open invitation to do some digging and discover what research can add to the picture. Such was the case when I came across the photograph reproduced at the end of this article, even if the research snowballed.

The subject matter is a Nieuport 20 with a group of RFC ground crew in attendance. With the serial A292, this French-built machine was one of a fairly rare type, as only 24 such airframes ever served with the RFC, a handful with 1 & 45 Squadrons but most in 46 Squadron.

The RFC made use of the Nieuport 12, receiving 40 Beardmore-built machines, of which less than half served operationally. The Type 20, used only by the RFC, was an improved version of the Type 12, with the 110hp Le Rhone 9J replacing the 110hp Clerget 9Z of the earlier type. The first machine, A154, had short triangular flank panels that faired the horseshoe engine cowling into the flat fuselage sides. It also had its Vickers gun offset to port. Most, but not all, subsequent Type 20s had extended flank panels, the Vickers mounted on the centre-line and a Scarff ring for the observer's Lewis gun. The Type 20's performance was only a slight improvement on that of the earlier type.

Little has been written about the RFC's Nieuport two-seaters, compared with their single-seat cousins, and so it is perhaps of interest to record A292's operational career by reference to the Daily Records of 46 Squadron.

Delivered to 1 Aircraft Depot at St-Omer on 16 October 1916, A292 was eventually issued to 46 Sqn as its third Type 20; it had been preceded by A285 and A314. On 22 December, Captain E.P. Plenty and 2Lt C.B. Catnach went to St-Omer in order to ferry the new aeroplane to the unit's base at Droglandt.

After having been given the once-over by the squadron's mechanics, the new arrival was up for its first sortie at 09.25 on Christmas Eve. Captain Plenty, with Lt S.C. Tinne as his observer, went over the lines for an Artillery Shoot with the 24th Heavy Artillery Group. The shoot was delayed by the presence of a Hostile Aircraft (HA), which didn't bother the Nieuport, as such, but may have spotted the artillery position had it not cleared the area. One OK hit was reported when the guns eventually commenced firing. The Nieuport crew also report some train movements in the German rear area before they landed after more than two and a half hours in the air.

Plenty and Tinne were back in the air at 13.45, to continue their work, but the terminal of a spark plug came adrift and

they were back on the ground after only 10 minutes, in order to have the problem rectified. That was done within a quarter hour and then they were up again, reporting many 'OKs' on a hostile battery, with three gun-pits hit.

Unsurprisingly, there was no flying on Xmas Day but on Boxing Day Plenty and Tinne had another appointment with the 24th HAG. Conditions were too poor for a Shoot and the job was cancelled after just 20 minutes aloft. Elsewhere, one of the squadron's Nieuport 12s, A3294, ran into trouble over Railway Wood. Capt J.W.W. Nason and Lt C.A. Felix-Brown were shot down and killed by Vzfw A. Ulmer of Jasta 8, the first combat casualties suffered by 46 Squadron.

Plenty and Tinne went on another mission on the 27th but engine failure entailed another quick return to base. Plenty, with Air Mechanic Holland in the back seat, took A292 aloft the following day, to check that repair work was satisfactory. He was happy enough with it after half an hour and scheduled a Shoot for that afternoon. With Tinne again the observer, A292 took off but ran into mist at 500 feet which didn't clear over the lines and so the sortie was abandoned after 30 minutes.

The 30th saw another attempt, this time with Lt H.G.W. Debenham in the observer's seat. After 35 minutes of trying to see through a cloud layer at 1500 feet, Plenty once again washed out the sortie. They tried again at 15.00, in a clearing sky, and managed to obtain two 'OKs' on the target, with two gun-pits believed hit, despite still poor visibility.

In these reports, 46 Squadron's Nieuports are listed either as 'Npt' or 'French'. The 'Npts' were the Beardmore-built Type 12s, whereas the 'French' were just that, Nieuport 20s built by the parent company.

The second day of 1917 was seen in by A292 with another Spotting Flight; the crew was Plenty and Tinne. The machine suffered another mechanical fault; this time the petrol gauge burst and, with fuel leaking into the cockpit, Plenty returned to base after 28 minutes. After spending an hour and a half on the ground, the crew tried again but clouds over the Salient made observation impossible and the flight only lasted an hour.

4 January saw three more Type 20s join the unit; they were A154, A156 and A291 and all were handed over from 1 Squadron, which was re-equipping with Nieuport scouts. Meanwhile, A292 attempted another mission, with Lt Catnach as observer to Plenty. With a take-off time of 13.05, A292 was back on the ground after 20 minutes with a faulty engine. An