

‘IT WAS A TERRIFIC DAY IN THE AIR’

Officer Fatalities in the RFC on 15 September 1916 the First Day of the Battle of Flers-Courcelette on the Somme

by Michael Durey

THE GREAT WAR was the first three-dimensional war and Air Power played a vital role in the allies’ final victory in 1918. If the firepower of the artillery was the key to victory, the role of the RFC/RAF in maximizing the artillery’s potential should not be underestimated. The basic air strategy that was to bring ultimate success was already in place by the battle of the Somme.

Essentially, the doctrine put forward by Major-General Hugh Trenchard, commander of the RFC’s military wing, focused on a permanent air offensive that ‘was aimed at securing and maintaining the [RFC/RAF’s] ability to operate at will across the battlefield while denying the German Air Service the same advantage.’¹ The strategy involved RFC squadrons, some under Corps and some under Army control, undertaking five major tasks: long-range reconnaissance; bombing; assisting the artillery (finding high-value targets and counter-battery work); contact work; and interdiction.

The last task was particularly crucial, as it involved an aggressive approach that forced German aircraft to fight far behind their own lines, thus preventing them from spotting for their artillery and from gaining intelligence on British preparations and activities. Keeping enemy machines away from the front line and harassing their reconnaissance balloons enabled the aircraft acting as the ‘eyes’ of the artillery to do their work unhindered, as well as allowing daily photographing to map the current positions of both friendly and hostile units on the ground. Moreover, squadrons involved in contact patrols – mainly low-level strafing and spying on

front-line action, dropping messages back at headquarters when necessary – remained relatively unmolested from the air during ground operations.

The logistical and technical means to fulfil this doctrine consistently in 1916, however, were lacking.² Nevertheless, the RFC’s offensive strategy during the Somme campaign remained fixed on the assumption of local air superiority. The air war had been a topsy-turvy affair since 1914, with first one side then the other gaining a temporary ascendancy. Following months of German domination, the superiority of the RFC on the Somme began to emerge a few months before 1 July, with the introduction of several new aeroplanes, the FE2b, the DH2 and, later, the Sopwith 1½ Strutter, which were a match for the German Fokker Eindecker.³

On 1 July, the RFC also had superiority in numbers, as enemy squadrons were concentrated around the Verdun battlefield. By the time that Fourth Army attacked the Germans’ third defensive line on 15 September, however, many enemy squadrons had been transferred to the Somme region.⁴ As one of the purposes of the Somme campaign was to relieve pressure on the French at Verdun, this might be termed a victory of sorts, but the battle of Flers-Courcelette was to mark the beginning of yet another swing of the pendulum. As early as 29 September Sir Douglas Haig was warning the Army Council that unless there was a great increase in the number and ‘efficiency’ of aircraft in France, air supremacy might be lost by the end of the year.⁵

Nevertheless, from 1 July until mid-September, Trenchard’s strategy was generally effective, as intelligence gained both from enemy prisoners and, later, from senior German sources confirmed.⁶ Very few enemy incursions over the British lines were reported in July and August.⁷ The failure of the German Air Service to engage British squadrons over the front line certainly appeared to have shaken the morale of many German troops.⁸ But the German High Command, particularly once Field-Marshal von Hindenburg had replaced General von Falkenhayn as Chief of Staff on 29 August, was about to hit back.

Friday, 15 September 1916 is, of course, primarily remembered for the introduction of a new weapon of war onto the battlefield, the tank. Of less long-term consequence, but nevertheless in the context of the Western front at the mid-point of the war of more immediate significance, was the appearance in the skies of a new enemy aeroplane, which *as fighters ... outclassed every contemporary British aeroplane opposed to them.*⁹ This was the Albatros and on 15 September only one, a prototype D.I, was in the air, piloted by the brilliant leader and war ace Oswald Boelcke.¹⁰ Following the death of Max Immelmann, shot down on 18 June, Boelcke had become the most celebrated German pilot currently flying. He had been chosen, in August, to command *Jagdstaffel 2*, a specialist pursuit squadron of twelve to fourteen fighters comprising carefully chosen experienced pilots who were to hunt in large packs and take the attack to the RFC. Boelcke’s staffel was to fly the new Albatros D.II, but the first machines did not arrive until 16 September. It was ironic, therefore, that the RFC was to suffer more fatalities (nine, including one NCO) on 15 September than had occurred in the whole of August. This is partly explained by the intensity of the RFC’s effort that day. On 15 September *the officers of the Royal Flying Corps flew*

Oswald Boelcke, whose *Jasta 2* was responsible for most of the British losses on 15 September 1916. :Sanke

