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THE SOPWITH TRIPLANE

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THE Sopwith Triplane became operational in time to participate in the Battle of Arras, which opened on April 9, 1917. No. 1 (Naval) Sqn. had spent several weeks in gunnery practice and formation flying on their new mounts, and made their first offensive patrol early in April. That patrol was uneventful, but on the following day Flt. Cdr. R. S. Dallas shot down an Albatros, and next day he, F/L. Clayton and Flt. Sub-Lt. T. G. Culling each shot down an enemy aircraft.

Naval Eight also proved the Triplane's quality at the beginning of April 1917, a month which was to witness aerial fighting of a new intensity: during that "Bloody April," the R.F.C. suffered its heaviest casualties of the war. F/L. R. A. Little had quickly found confidence in the Triplane, for on April 7 he fought a magnificent action which is best described in the words of eye-witnesses in the 3rd Army's Anti-Aircraft Artillery Group:

"At 6.45 p.m. on April 7th, 1917, a Sopwith Triplane, working alone, attacked eleven hostile machines, almost all Albatros Scouts, N.E. of Arras. He completely outclassed the whole patrol of hostile machines, diving through them and climbing above them. One Albatros Scout, painted red, which had been particularly noticed by this section, dived on to him and passed him. The Sopwith dived on him and then easily climbed again above the whole patrol, drawing them all the time towards the anti-aircraft guns. As soon as they were in range, the anti-aircraft guns opened fire on the patrol, which turned eastward, and the Sopwith returned safely. The officers who witnessed the combat report that the manoeuvring of the Sopwith Triplane completely outclassed that of the Albatros Scout."

The Germans did not altogether agree with that opinion, for their official notes on the Triplane aver that it was slower in the dive than corresponding German types but superior in climbing ability, especially at altitude, and that it was comparable to the Pfalz D.III and Albatros Scout in terms of manoeuvrability. The German combat notes may have been designed to maintain the morale of their pilots, for they stated that the Triplane was liable to break up if subjected to violent manoeuvres and avoided dog-



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fighting, depending on its remarkable climbing ability to extricate itself easily from any battle of turns. The notes conclude with the splendid platitude: "If it dives away it can be shot down with ease."

The R.N.A.S. pilots could hardly have known of the official German opinion of the Triplane, but they lost no opportunity to demonstrate its superiority in combat, and must have made many an enemy pilot question the accuracy of his combat notes. So far from avoiding combat, the Naval Triplanes soon established themselves as formidable and dreaded opponents—in Vol. III (page 364) of *The War in the Air*, H. A. Jones recorded this tribute to the Triplanes' work in the Battle of Arras:

"The three Naval squadrons, Nos. 1, 3 and 8, were continuously engaged, but were given few opportunities to drive home their attacks. The sight of a Sopwith Triplane formation, in particular, induced the enemy pilots to dive out of range."

On April 21, 1917, two Triplanes of No. 1 (Naval) Sqn. fought one of the war's great aerial actions. The aircraft were flown by Flt. Cdr. R. S. Dallas and Flt. Sub-Lt. T. G. Culling who, after inconclusive brushes with enemy two-seaters, attacked a German formation of fourteen two-seaters and single-seat fighters which were flying towards the lines at 16,000ft, obviously bound on an important mission. Their task was never accomplished, for the two Triplanes harried them for 45 minutes, broke up their formation, shot three of them down, and finally drove the remainder ignominiously downwards and eastwards. In this combat the Triplanes' excellent climbing ability gave them an immense tactical advantage.

Eight days later, six Triplanes of Naval One were too late to save Maj. H. D. Harvey-Kelly and two of his pilots who, flying Spads of No. 19 Sqn., R.F.C., had unhesitatingly attacked a formation of 11 Albatros D.III's led by Manfred von Richthofen. The three Spads fell just before the Triplanes arrived and engaged the enemy fighters, of which they sent three down out of control. That combat is of interest, in view of the historical link between the R.F.C. Spads and the R.N.A.S. Triplanes.

In nine days between April 22 and May 5, 1917, No. 1 (Naval) Sqn. mounted 95 offensive patrols, in the course of which 175 enemy aircraft were engaged. Four of these were destroyed and twelve others sent down out of control.

These actions could not have been fought by men who lacked confidence in the structural strength of their aircraft, nor could they have been so pugnaciously undertaken by aircraft which "... avoids, as far as possible, any excessive demands upon itself, for it breaks up easily ... and, after an unsuccessful attack, generally avoids a battle of turns."*

No. 10 (Naval) Sqn. had flown its Sopwith Triplanes on escort duties from St. Pol, and was moved to Furnes in April 1917. In the

*From the German official report.

In the heading picture is N.5912, the sole remaining Triplane. On the left is a Triplane with twin Vickers guns.