



Triplane N.509 (150 h.p. Hispano-Suiza engine) leaving the Sopwith works. Above, N.509 assembled.

## THE SOPWITH TRIPLANE . . .

middle of the following month Naval Ten was attached to the R.F.C. as a reinforcement to the Eleventh Army Wing in the Second Army area; the unit was followed by Naval One on June 1. Both squadrons had 15 Sopwith Triplanes on strength at that time: a shortage of pilots had necessitated the reduction of the units' establishments from 18 to 15 aircraft.

From Arras (which, thanks to the failure of the French offensive on the Aisne, was but a limited success) the war had progressed to the preparations for transferring the main Allied effort to the British front in Flanders. As a preliminary, it was considered essential to capture the hills which formed the Messines-Wytschaete ridge. The moves of R.N.A.S. squadrons Nos. 1 and 10 were part of the British preparations for the Battle of Messines; the main preparatory bombardment began on May 31, 1917, and the battle opened on June 7.

The bombardment inevitably led to intense aerial activity, and the Sopwith Triplanes of Nos. 1 and 10 (Naval) Sqns. were in frequent action. In the morning of June 6 those of Naval One had many successful fights. Thirteen Triplanes of Naval Ten attacked 15 German machines, some of which were two-seaters bound for the British lines, over Ploegsteert Wood. The enemy formation was utterly defeated: five of their number were shot down, two of them Albatros fighters which fell in flames as victims of Flt. Sub-Lt. Raymond Collishaw.

Collishaw was, without doubt, the most brilliant exponent of the Sopwith Triplane. He had come to Naval Ten on April 1, 1917, as commander of "B" Flight; his earlier operational flying had been with No. 3 Wing (with which he shot down three Fokkers) and with No. 3 (Naval) Sqn., in which unit he shot down an Albatros D.III. He had shot down three enemy fighters and a seaplane between April 1 and May 15, 1917, when Naval Ten joined the R.F.C.

A Canadian himself, Collishaw had a Flight which was exclusively Canadian and one of the most formidable fighting units to take the air during the 1914-18 War. Between May and July, 1917, "B" Flight of Naval Ten destroyed a total of 87 enemy aircraft. In a period of 27 days in June 1917, Collishaw himself shot down 16 enemy aircraft, all but three of which were single-seat fighters. The original members of "B" Flight were Flt. Sub-Lts. E. V. Reid, J. E. Sharman, G. E. Nash and W. M. Alexander: their contributions to the Flight's total of 87 enemy aircraft in three months were respectively eighteen, eleven, eight and seven.

Naval Ten's "B" Flight was known as the "Black Flight," for its aircraft bore the names *Black Death*, *Black Maria*, *Black Roger*, *Black Prince* and *Black Sheep*. Popular legend has it that the Triplanes were painted all black, but it seems more probable that the colour was confined to the engine cowlings and the aluminium panels at the noses of the aircraft. It is known that the members of the Black Flight flew the following Triplanes (but it does not follow that each officer flew the specified aircraft exclusively): Collishaw, N.5490 and N.5492; Reid, N.5483; Sharman, N.6307; Alexander, N.5487.

The Black Flight suffered its first casualty on June 26, 1917, when Nash was wounded and forced to land behind the enemy lines. His conqueror was Lieutenant Allmenröder, one of the leading German fighter pilots, who had 30 victories in air combat. Collishaw did not, of course, know the German pilot's identity, but next morning he and his Flight attacked seven enemy fighters over Courtrai, and he recognized one of them as the green-tailed Albatros which had defeated Nash. In the fight which ensued, Collishaw shot down and killed Allmenröder; the Albatros crashed in the outskirts of Lille. Three other enemy fighters fell to the Black Flight in that combat.

Four of Naval Ten's Triplanes played a gallant part in the combat in which Manfred von Richthofen was shot down wounded by 2nd Lt. A. E. Woodbridge, the observer of one of six F.E.2Ds which had been attacked by the German leader and 39 other enemy fighters. The Triplanes went to the rescue of the F.E.s, heedless of the odds; they shot down four of the enemy out of control, but

were unable to save two of the pushers from defeat. Their unhesitating attack on the large enemy formation, which consisted wholly of single-seat fighters, makes an instructive contrast with Richthofen's technique of attacking slower, less manoeuvrable aircraft with a vastly superior force.

The Triplanes gave excellent service in the battles of Ypres, but they began to be withdrawn in the summer of 1917. Camels began to replace the Triplanes of Nos. 8 and 9 (Naval) Sqns. in July, and by August 4, No. 9's re-equipment was complete. Naval Ten began to receive Camels at the end of August, when three of its Triplanes were transferred to No. 1 (Naval) Sqn. to restore that unit's strength to 18 aircraft. Naval One's attachment to the R.F.C. ceased in November 1917, and the unit returned to Dover to be re-equipped with Camels.

The passing of the Triplane was regretted by many of those who had had the good fortune to fly it. As a fighter, it enjoyed the distinction of never having been outclassed. No doubt the real reason for its withdrawal lay in the statement that even minor accidents to a Triplane necessitated a disproportionate amount of repair work. If that were true, maintenance in the field must have been a time-consuming process, and serviceability may have been relatively low. It has also been said that the Triplane was more difficult to rig than contemporary biplanes.

It had the Pup's disadvantage of having only one gun; though even that was overcome. The six machines N.533-N.538 were built with twin guns by Clayton and Shuttleworth; of these at least two, N.533 and N.534, saw operational use with Nos. 10 and 1 (Naval) Sqns. respectively. The batch ordered from Oakley were to have been similarly armed, but the contractor was new to aircraft manufacture and, as noted in Part 1, the third Oakley-built machine was not delivered until October 19, 1917, by which time the Camel had been standardized and only Naval One still had Triplanes. No further Triplanes were completed by the Oakley concern.

Despite the disparaging combat notes on the Triplane issued by the German authorities, there is a good deal of evidence to indicate that the Sopwith caused the enemy a great deal of anxiety. It seems that two of the first Triplanes to go to France shared the same fate as early F.E.2Ds and the Handley Page O/100, for it has been said that their pilots lost their bearings and landed on an enemy aerodrome. The truth of this is hard to establish, but at least one Triplane fell into enemy hands intact, or nearly so, for it was flown in German markings. This particular machine did not have the standard shape of fin: the surface with which it was fitted had the same outline as the fin of the Sopwith 1½-Strutter. It is not known whether the fin was a manufacturer's experiment or a squadron or pilot's modification: as far as is known, it was not

