

“Artillery Spotting, Air Drops and Ground attack”

By Dr Mark Lax

On the morning of 4 July 1918, the weather over the Hamel sector described as fair – visibility was reasonable although it would soon deteriorate, and cloud was at 2000ft. At 3.40 am, a British RE-8 flown by Lieutenant George Newton with Lieutenant Arthur Reynolds as his observer, flew from their aerodrome of Argenvillers to Villers Bocage in preparation for the day’s assault. They were joined by twelve other RE-8s of their squadron to support Monash’s assault. As soon as they landed they refuelled and loaded boxes of ammunition - not for aerial fighting, but to drop to the front-line troops. This was No. 9 Squadron RAF and to them would go the task of dropping ammunition throughout the day. Why airdrop? Carting the ammunition boxes up to the front was one of the most dangerous jobs. Soldiers crossing the land behind the trenches were easy targets for snipers.

Lieutenant Newton lifted off at 5.45 from the Villers Bocage airfield for a ten-minute flight to the battle front near a small German-held village called Hamel. Monash’s triumph was about to unfold. The aim was to correct a small bulge in the line of Rawlinson’s Fourth Army, for the purpose of assisting future artillery work in the Battle for Amiens. This was Newton’s first of three sorties over the front that day – Reynolds did four. At 6.00 am, Newton pulled the release handle and two heavy wooden crates attached to a 14 ft parachute descended slowly to earth. The boxes landed just where they were needed, thanks to an Australian design.

To assist Monash’s troops with the attack were sixty new Mark V tanks, artillery and air support, there to provide bombing, ground attack and ammunition resupply on a scale never seen before. To cover the noise of the tanks coming up, the RAF flew through the night over the front lines, and as well as disguise the noise, the troops in the trenches were asked to light flares along the line (something they were loath to do) so the airmen could accurately plot the position of the British front line for the morning’s battle.

Although a few stores and some ammunition had been dropped into the besieged town of Kut al Amara by the Australian Half Flight in Mesopotamia in 1916, this was the first time ammunition was dropped in a concerted effort and probably ensured the success of the assault. No 9 Squadron RAF made 51 sorties that day dropping over 100 crates of ammo each weighing 100 lbs. They were supported by No 3 Squadron AFC who provided tactical support to the troops and No 8 Squadron RAF who supported the tanks. Other RAF squadrons patrolled higher to thwart enemy machines sent to disrupt the allied advance. Certainly, the resupply was essential as the Germans were adept at the sudden counter-offensive causing a reverse as had been seen in the past. Not this time. Captain Lawrence Wackett’s invention had saved the day and among other achievements earned him a DFC and £300 (about a year’s salary back then) from a grateful British Government. Such ammunition drops to save the troops would be repeated in a later war at Long Tan, another story.

Meanwhile 3 AFC was busy with counter attack patrols and artillery patrols, even getting the chance to force down a couple of enemy scouts. Typical was the 10 am flight of Lieutenant Gordon Hope and Lieutenant George Gamble who were tasked to conduct an artillery spotting sortie. During their reconnaissance and after seeing flashes, Gamble made a zone call for

counter battery fire and the enemy battery was quote ‘neutralised’. They also reported enemy aircraft activity and strafed the enemy troops. All in the day’s work.

But I must stick to my directive and digress to briefly cover the evolving nature of air power over the western front. By 1917, most of the air roles we recognise today, perhaps with the exception of air-to-air refuelling and the use of drones, were commonplace over the western front. The Allies and Germans were making the most of the rapidly changing advances in aircraft and weapon technology and while the aces and air-to-air combat took the headlines, it was the hard slog of reconnaissance, aerial photography for mapping purposes, and artillery spotting which really assisted the fighting on the ground. It was the enemy artillery barrages that did the most damage to allied lines so finding and countering the guns was key to winning. Protecting the slower more stable machines from enemy attack was the more-nimble fighter’s role. By mid-1918, the massed flying circus tactics had arrived – the sort you see in most of the war movies – so the protagonists put up squadron against squadron, a distraction from picking off the lower observation machines. Their worry was not just a diving enemy fighter, but ‘Archie’ or AAA and infantry small arms fire.

Next, I want to describe the technology used by Nos 3 squadron AFC and 9 Squadron RAF – the RE-8. The RE-8 or ‘Harry Tate’ arrived at the front in November 1916, but inadequate training and an unreliable engine caused many fatal crashes. By mid-1917 these issues had been ironed out and when No 3 AFC arrived in France in September 1917, they found they would be a Corps squadron flying RE-8s. Officially a two-seater reconnaissance aircraft, it was solid, stable in flight and when fitted with a single or sometimes twin Lewis Guns on a Scarf ring, was a formidable machine. Testament to this, 3 AFC claimed 51 enemy aircraft either shot down or sent out of control. RE-8s had a max speed of 98 mph (157 kph) and could climb to a ceiling of 11,000 ft. Most work was done at 1,500 to 2,000 ft at about 90 mph. Captain Wackett as I mentioned had designed a double ammunition box carrier that could be loaded under the aircraft and when a lanyard was pulled, the crates would drop away like a bomb. The simple mechanism had been trialled a few months before and so impressed Rawlinson that he ordered it into production. Its first real trial would be Hamel.

Back to Hamel. The artillery opened up at 3 am followed by a tank and infantry advance behind a creeping barrage. The squadrons undertook their assigned duties and the 93-minute battle as we know was a success. However, it was not without loss - six 9 Squadron aircraft were shot down. Elsewhere, twenty other allied aircraft were shot down over the front on 4 July – just another fateful day in the air.

Now let me turn to the Amiens offensive. In preparation, the planning was to be meticulous. The British Official History states: At daybreak, the night-bomber squadrons were to attack aerodromes on the Fourth Army front, with fighters in support. The fighter squadrons afterwards were to standby ready to operate if enemy aircraft appeared. The day-bomber squadrons were to attack the main railway stations in the area in the evening to prevent reinforcements. The Corps squadrons would continue their ground support work as usual.

The Amiens offensive began with 2,000 guns opening up at 4.20 am. Aircraft were already in the air, but the poor visibility hampered their effectiveness. Like Hamel, moments later, the tanks and infantry began their combined assault along a 20-mile corridor between Morlancourt and La Neuville. Australians and Canadian would make up the main striking force pushing the surprised enemy back by up to eight miles.

For the airmen, the Amiens attack beginning on 8 August would go down as the most important if complex few days of fighting they had ever undertaken. The main role of the air elements was to maintain constant support of the troops and tanks while continuing to direct artillery fire and to keep the air free of enemy harassment. When the visibility cleared after 9 am, and being concentrated in a small area, the airmen became targets for both enemy fighters and ground fire. While the RAF dominated the air throughout the morning, the fluid and fast-moving state of the battle made the Corps work (that is the close liaison with artillery, tanks and troops) more difficult, not helped by high command making moving changes to the plan. Instead of continuing to bomb reinforcements and enemy aerodromes, the bombers were switched to the 11 Somme bridges, all of which survived the onslaught. Consequently, the German fighters made the most of the confusion.

How difficult was this day for the RAF? There is no other day of the war that sustained a greater number of casualties. 97 aircraft were shot down on 8 August including a No 3 AFC RE-8 flown by 32-year-old Lieutenant Ed Bice MC and 23-year-old Second Lieutenant John Chapman. Both were killed when attacked by nine Fokker DVIIIs – they would not have had a chance. German General Ludendorff also called 8 August ‘the black day of the German Army’ for losses they sustained. The Amiens offensive continued unabated until 12 August when warfare again returned to a series of moving offensives. Amiens marked the end of trench warfare and the beginning of the end for Germany.

Changing plans and high losses caused the RAF to lose effectiveness and to many, the promise of air power for Amiens was thus not fulfilled. To quote Trevor Henshaw, the historian of World War I air casualties: ‘As had happened before on the Western Front, to lose focus after success was a stumbling block few had been able to avoid’. This was the trap the RAF fell into, but it was not necessarily of their own making. Despite the downside, the battle was a crushing blow to the Germans and the start of final Allied victory.

As to lessons? Well you might draw some but the use of combined arms in a synchronised attack with each element playing its part must be the main take away. Staying the course might be another. How true for today.

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