



# Te Matataua

The Scouting Party of Air Power

**RNZAF Air Power Development Centre Bulletin**

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## 'Bloody April', 1917

**The month where success also proved to be failure**

**World War One** is currently being remembered through a series of 100 year anniversary

commemorations, which are mostly centered around specific land battles such as those at Gallipoli, the Somme and Passchendaele because of their historical importance. But what may not be as well remembered is the war in the air. Air power, even though still in its infancy, had a significant part to play during World War One and April 1917 was a month that proved how vital it had become to the conduct of land operations. It was also a month that demonstrated how fragile it could be.

**By 1917, the war on the Western Front was relatively static.** The German offensive at Verdun in February 1916 and the subsequent British push at the Somme from July of that year had both failed. Much had been lost by both sides for no strategic gain on the battlefield but many lessons had been learnt, including use of air capabilities.

The Battle of the Somme marked the point where the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) came of age as a fighting service. For the first time it had to perform its tasks in the face of a skillful, well equipped and determined opposition, and it was the first time that a deliberate air campaign was planned and executed to support ground operations. Air superiority was achieved during the course of the battle and new roles and techniques such as ground attack and contact patrols were pioneered. The bombing of strategically significant targets such as rail junctions, camps and dumps were made in order to disrupt the flow of reinforcements and supplies. Of most value to land



***The 'Red Baron' destroyed 20 aircraft during 'Bloody April'***

commanders though were the already-established roles of aerial reconnaissance and observation, and it quickly became very clear that the effectiveness of artillery was heavily reliant on the presence and quality of the air asset(s) acting in direct support.

No offensive on the Western Front could succeed without the destructive power of artillery. It was the only

means at that time truly capable of preparing the battlefield, supporting the offensive and preventing counter-attack. Artillery was accurate, but accuracy could only be achieved through knowing where the target was and knowing where the shots were falling. The RFC was therefore the 'eyes' of the guns, existing primarily to serve them by photographing targets and spotting the fall of shot. The Germans also recognised the importance of army cooperation work, together with the vital need to stop the enemy doing the same.

By the end of 1916, the Germans had introduced fighter aircraft that were considerably superior to those of the British and had changed tactics. Rather than using small numbers of aircraft in piecemeal actions, the Germans began to favour larger formations that could apply concentrated force on chosen targets. The balance of power in the air shifted towards the Germans and the British were not in a position to do anything about it. New aircraft that could potentially match or better those of the Germans were not expected before the summer of 1917.

### **On 9 April 1917, the Battle of Arras commenced.**

Launched by the British as a diversionary assault to coincide with France's Nivelle Offensive, the combined actions were hoped to bring the war to an end within 48 days. To support the land battle, the RFC deployed 25 squadrons, totaling 385 aircraft, of which about two-thirds were artillery spotters, photo-reconnaissance machines or bombers. In contrast the Germans initially had only 50 fighters in 5 squadrons. Even though their aircraft were now mostly obsolete, the British believed that numerical superiority would be enough to succeed.

Both sides knew the vital importance of what they had to do and, more importantly, why it needed to be done. The British maintained an offensive posture throughout the battle with the majority of their operations being above or over the German lines. The Germans fought a purely defensive battle, rarely venturing over the lines and concentrating effort on destroying the British ground support aircraft. The Germans were better trained, had better aircraft, could choose when and how to engage in combat, and would not lose downed pilots to capture. The result was that the British suffered the worst ratio of air losses that it ever would.

During the course of April 1917, 245 British aircraft were lost, 211 aircrew were posted killed or missing and 108 became prisoners of war. This amounted to over two-thirds of their strength (as at the commencement of the battle) and their losses were over three times greater than those of the Germans. The life expectancy of a British pilot during this month was 17½ flying hours and replacement pilots were rushed into action with inadequate training, some with no more than 10 hours solo time in their logbooks. Amongst those lost were three New Zealanders – John Cock, George Masters and Melville White.

**If statistics are the measure, then the Germans 'won' the air battle over Arras.** They shot down far more aircraft than the British. As such, it could be said

that the Germans maintained air superiority over their lines as the British did not have the capability to prohibitively interfere with their fighter operations. But in the event, the Germans actually 'lost'. At no time were they able to achieve their aim of stopping British ground-support operations. They just did not have enough aircraft. Even though suffering heavy losses, the British continued to perform the vital tasks of artillery spotting and reconnaissance. In doing so, British air power enabled the land battle to succeed in its local aims, even though the overall allied offensive failed.

'Bloody April', as this period became known, is signified by the determined use of air power to either support or hinder ground operations; primarily artillery support in this case. The foundations of air/land Joint operations had been laid over the Somme and now reinforced over Arras. Most importantly, in this period of remembering sacrifices made 100 years ago, it should never be forgotten that the young pilots and observers of the RFC (and Royal Naval Air Service) willingly flew obsolete aircraft over the lines, fully aware of the risks they were taking, in order to 'carry out their duty to the much larger numbers of men at risk on the ground' (Peter Hart). We will remember them.



#### **Key Points**

- **Air power has been a component of Joint operations for over 100 years**
- **Success cannot be measured by statistics alone**
- **Knowing why a task needs to be done is just as important as knowing what needs to be done**

#### **Primary References and Recommended Reading**

1. 'Bloody April: Slaughter in the Skies Over Arras, 1917' by Peter Hart
2. 'Bloody April', by Alan Morris
3. 'Somme Success: The Royal Flying Corps and the Battle of the Somme, 1916', by Peter Hart
4. 'War in the Air: 1914 – 1945', by Williamson Murray

### ***APDC Update***

**Correction:** In the March edition it was stated that the RNZAF's Boeing 757 aircraft were re-designated as 757-2K2 aircraft after they were upgraded in 2007. This is incorrect, the -2K2 suffix was already the designated suffix on purchase and did not change after upgrade.

APDC is on-track to publish the RNZAF Journal, Part B, in April 2017. This journal contains a collection of air power papers, essays, articles and a book review.

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