



It is not easy to assess the contribution made by Australians to the Allied (Entente) air effort in the main theatre of operations the Western Front, in World War One, largely because so many of them served, not in the Australian Flying Corps, but mostly anonymously in the Royal Flying Corps or the Royal Naval Air Service (later combined into the Royal Air Force). Names coming readily to mind include fighter aces Little, Dallas, Hepburn, Booker, Minifie and Pentland; Squadron and Wing Commanders Longmore, Blomfield, Brearley, the Bell brothers, Goble, de Crespigny and Conran; and in the fields of design and development, the three Harrys,- Hawker, Busteed and Kauper. These are only a small sample and although some are well known as Australians, most lost their national identity within their adopted British service. For this reason, it is not easy to identify, let alone quantify, their share in the air war. It remains as a task for an historian to remedy one of the deficiencies in the Official History, by recording and perhaps attempting to assess the undoubtedly substantial contribution made by those Australians who were engaged in the British air services.

It is less difficult to assess the assistance rendered by the Australian Flying Corps, at least quantitatively. Three of the four A.F.C. operational squadrons served on the Western Front, all three arriving in France in the second half of 1917, to serve under the Command of the R.F.C./R.A.F. until the Armistice. The third squadron,- No.3 A.F.C., flying two-seater RE8 observation and reconnaissance aeroplanes was the first to arrive on 9th.September and the second,- No.2 A.F.C., equipped with DH5 single-seater lighting scouts (and later SE5s) followed twelve days later.

At this time, the R.F.C. in France comprised fifty-one squadrons including four R.N.A.S. squadrons under R.F.C. control, in all totalling some 876 aeroplanes. On 18th.December 1917, the fourth squadron,- No.4 A.F.C., arrived with its Sopwith Camel single-seater fighting scouts and the A.F.C. in France then comprised three out of some fifty-eight squadrons on total R.F.C.

strength. At the Armistice, the R.A.F. in France and Belgium totalled ninety-nine squadrons, including the Independent Force and 5th. Group, with 1,799 aeroplanes.

Qualitatively, it is not easy to place the A.F.C. within this total force. The work of all three squadrons was highly commended from time to time by their British Commanders and even allowing for the fact that it is military courtesy to praise the efforts of ones allies (or in this case, fellow members of The Commonwealth) if that can be done without distorting the facts too much, it does appear that the Australians did very well indeed. One would think that it should be possible to produce comparisons between A.F.C. and R.F.C./ R.A.F. squadrons of like type and role, by reference to figures such as enemy aircraft destroyed, hours flown, bombs dropped, photographic plates exposed and so on but the writer is not aware that this has been seriously attempted. The results of any such comparisons are, however, bound to be inconclusive, since the conditions under which each squadron operated varied from those of others, to a greater or lesser degree.

Enemy aircraft destroyed might be a popular yardstick to apply but is hardly applicable to No.3 Squadron A.F.C. whose task was not to seek out enemy aircraft but rather to engage them only if forced to do so in carrying out its primary role of Corps Reconnaissance. Even so, the Squadron destroyed sixteen, in addition to another thirty-five driven down out of control or driven down damaged on landing elsewhere than an aerodrome, as against losing only eleven of its own machines totally destroyed over enemy lines and a number damaged but able to return to their aerodrome.¹

Other criteria must be found in attempting to judge No.3 A.F.C. against other Corps Squadrons of the R.F.C./R.A.F.. War flying hours, numbers of artillery rangings carried out, bombs dropped, rounds fired, photographs taken or area of territory photographed, all suggest themselves. But the proportions within squadrons would all be different and present the problem of how to weigh these various elements so as to reach comparative figures. It just cannot be done. If however it were feasible and one were comparing No.3 A.F.C. with, say, No.52 Squadron R.F.C./R.A.F., then how would one allow for the fact that whereas No.3 A.F.C. changed aerodromes nine times during its thirteen months of war operations, No.52 had no less than twenty-five moves in twenty-four months? Since the achievement of full operational efficiency for a corps squadron largely depended upon becoming familiar with the ground flown over, the adverse effect on efficiency of frequent Loves to cover new territory can be imagined, although it can hardly be quantified.

Fighter Squadron comparisons are perhaps a little simpler but still not conclusive. Their primary role was air fighting but they frequently became involved in bombing and ground attack. Using as the yardstick enemy aircraft shot down, the two A.F.C. fighting scout Squadrons, Nos.2 and 4 were high scorers, particularly No.4 with its Clerget engined Sopwith Camels and later with the Bentley powered Sopwith Snipes. The two squadrons, together constituting, on average, about five percent of British Fighter strength, shot down about nine percent, or approximately four hundred out of the four thousand, three hundred and sixty-eight² enemy aircraft shot down by R.A.F. squadrons of all descriptions, on the Western Front between 1st.January and 2nd.November 1918.

As indicated above, No.4 A.F.C. was regarded as particularly successful. The writer has not examined respective unit scores but No.4 Squadron A.F.C. may have been the most successful Camel squadron of all the nineteen such squadrons operating in France and Belgium. Indeed, its performance was considered by Brigadier-General Ludlow-Hewitt, commanding 10th. Brigade R.A.F., to be so outstanding as to merit priority in re-equipment with the latest British fighting scout, the Sopwith Snipe. His recommendation to this effect, in late September 1918, was immediately agreed to by R.A.F. H.Q. in the field and No.4 A.F.C. commenced taking delivery of the Snipes on 3rd.October. It was only the second squadron to be so equipped. Squadrons operating Clerget Camels had specific priority for such re-equipment.

The foregoing appears to establish No.4 Squadron A.F.C. among the top scout squadrons. The Camel was however regarded as a most useful ground attack machine and was much used in that role when the tactical situation demanded it. No.4 A.F.C. was often called upon for this work but some Camel squadrons did more of it than others;- No.80 Squadron R.A.F. for instance, was very heavily engaged in low level attacks. This was extremely dangerous work and No.80 Squadron paid heavily, with sixty-one pilot casualties³, - killed, wounded and missing, - in the period from 21st.March to 11th.November 1918. Its victory score is not known to the writer but it is certainly much lower than that of No.4 A.F.C. and most probably lower than that of many other Camel units. In the same period, the Australian Squadron suffered only forty-three³ pilot casualties.

Although the primary task of fighting scouts was to protect their own aeroplanes carrying out artillery observation, reconnaissance and bombing and to destroy or drive off enemy machines similarly engaged, determined attacks by aircraft against ground targets was valuable work. This was particularly so

when major ground operations were under way, disrupting the movements of troops and supplies and inflicting damage on material and installations and casualties to personnel. According to some assessments it was indeed at times critically important; for instance, during the German offensive on the Somme in March 1918. Some authorities however, considered such activity to be misuse of highly-trained aerial fighting capacity. Misuse or not, pending the introduction of specialist machines such as the Sopwith Salamander, armoured trench-strafer, promised for early 1919, ground attack remained a significant task for scout aeroplanes, particularly for the highly manoeuvrable Camels.

So, returning to No.4 Squadron A.F.C. and No.80 R.A.F. and the discussion as to which was the better, or rather which was the more valuable to the war effort? That, as they say, is a good question.

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NOTES

1. H.N. Wrigley "The Battle Below!" Knox, Sydney. 1935.
2. Public Records Office (London) File Air 1/109/15/15.
3. Figures compiled by the R.A.F. and quoted in Public Records Office file Air 1/686/21/13/2252. The casualties shown for No.4 Squadron A.F.C. do not agree with Australian records but are close and might be accepted for purposes of comparison with No.80 R.A.F..