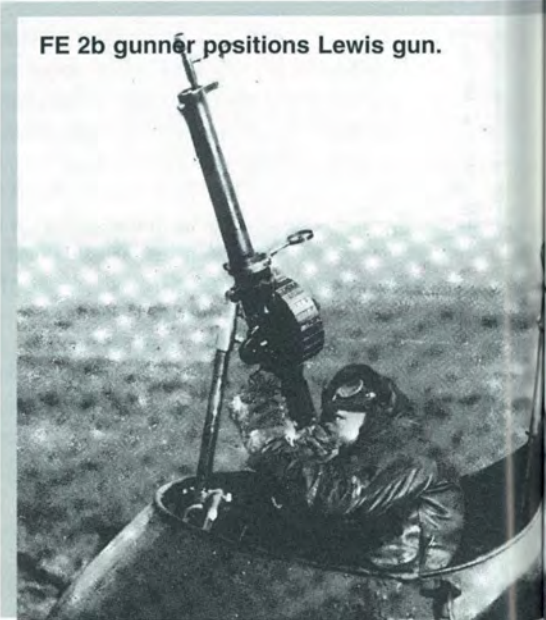




Photo: courtesy of the Trustees of the Imperial War Museum, London

The March

the last battle



FE 2b gunner positions Lewis gun.

**First British prisoners
arrive at a village South
of St Quentin, March 1918**



It is easy to forget that until the middle of 1918 either side was capable of winning the First World War, and that at the beginning of that year the balance of advantage clearly lay with Germany. 1917 had been a bad year for Allies. The French army had mutinied in May and June, the British offensives at Passchendaele and Cambrai had failed, and on the Italian Front the Italians had suffered a catastrophic defeat that necessitated British and French reinforcements being rushed to Italy to shore up their ailing ally. Most importantly, a broken and beaten Russia was now out of the war, and although she had been replaced by the USA, it would be many months before effective US combat troops reached the European battlefield in numbers. Indeed, the British War Cabinet had already accepted that there was no possibility of an Allied victory before 1919¹. There was thus a window of opportunity for the Central Powers and Germany was quick to seize it.

Retreat of 1918

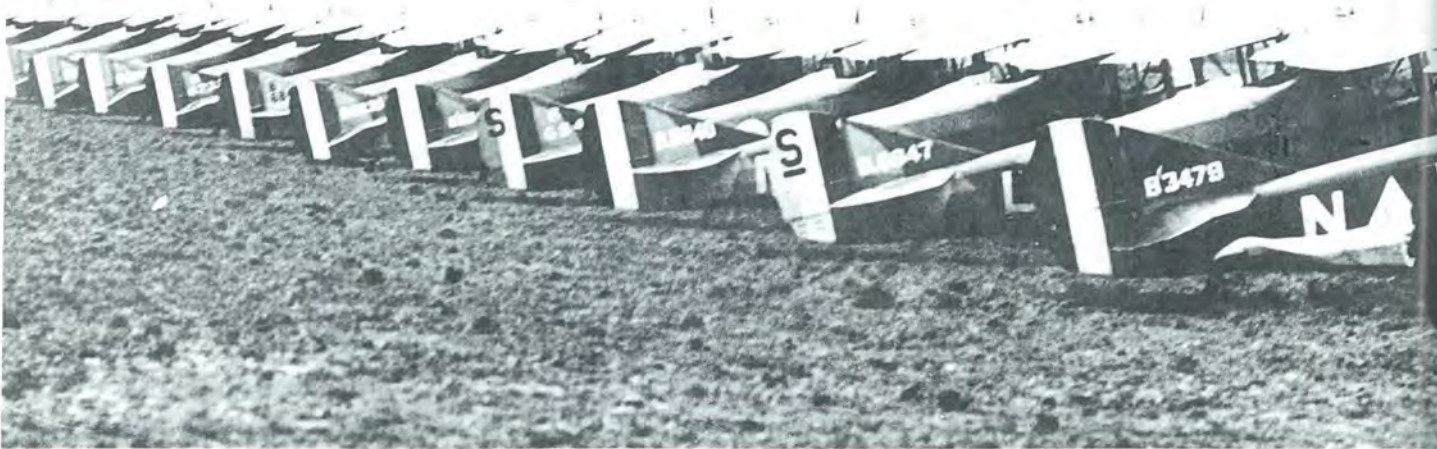
of the Royal Flying Corps

By Wing Commander P J Daybell MBE MA BA RAF

Thus it was that eighty years ago, on 21 March 1918, in the first of a series of offensives, Germany launched the *Kaiserschlacht* or Emperor's Battle, a massive assault against the British in Picardy. Codenamed Operation Michael, and mounted on a truly staggering scale, the battle was compressed into little more than a fortnight of intense fighting. 76 Germany Divisions were eventually engaged along a broad 40 mile front, and the 26 divisions that made up the British Third and Fifth Armies were driven back by up to 40 miles before the front was stabilised and the offensive ground to a halt on 5 April. Initially Operation Michael was spectacularly successful, and it was the battle that came closest to winning the war for Germany.

But one crucial aspect of the campaign that has not been given the attention it deserves is the important role played by the Royal Flying Corps in securing a strategic British victory. In 1930 Basil Ladle Hart wrote of the Allied air attacks during the battle, that they were "an important factor in stemming the Germany onrush, and one that has been inadequately recognised by military historians".² Almost 70 years on, little has changed, and even today the story of British Air Power in the March offensive is sadly neglected and worth telling in some detail. Set against the backdrop of





Spads of 23 Squadron

a massive British retreat, this article will consider the contribution made by the British air arm, and how air power, even before the formation of the Royal Air Force, played a crucial role in stemming the German advance in Picardy and so made a decisive contribution to the eventual Allied victory.

Organisation of the RFC in France

By 1918, the RFC bore little resemblance to the tiny force that had deployed to France with 4 squadrons in August 1914. In the intervening years it had evolved into a large and sophisticated air force, backed by a complex logistics organisation. By March 1918 the RFC had 63 squadrons and 1,232 aircraft in France. Each of the British Expeditionary Force's four Armies was directly supported by an RFC Brigade comprising a Corps, an Army and a balloon Wing. The Corps Wing provided a dedicated squadron to each corps in the army, and these were equipped with the big two-seater radio-fitted reconnaissance aircraft such as the RE "Harry Tates" or Armstrong Whitworth "Big Acks". Their tasks were artillery observation and photographic reconnaissance, but they also had a secondary bombing role. The Army Wings had rather more general responsibilities and comprised the scout and bomber squadrons. Kite balloon units directed the artillery and observed the enemy line. There was also a strategic bomber wing for special bombing of military targets in Germany, and various specialist squadrons directly controlled by RFC HQ.

Aircraft types in the Army Wings varied enormously, and several different types often operated from the same airfield. The RFC now had good machines that were equal to the German opposition, and were to remain largely unchanged until the end of the war. These included the very successful single-seater Sopwith Camel and SE5A, the two-seat Bristol Fighter, and for bombing the two-seater DH4 by day, and the "pusher" FE2b by night. The operational airfields were usually at least 15 miles behind the front, and beyond them lay the vital logistics infrastructure. This was based around a network of supply depots, the largest of which were the three Aircraft Depots, with their workshop and repair facilities, and the three Aeroplane Supply Depots. In advance of these were six Aircraft Parks that supplied new machines directly to the squadrons.

Figure 1: RFC ORBAT MARCH RETREAT 1918

III BRIGADE SUPPORTING THIRD ARMY

TWELFTH (CORPS) WING

12 Sqn	RE8	
13 Sqn	RE8	
15 Sqn	RE8	
59 Sqn	RE8	Total 183 aircraft

THIRTEENTH (ARMY) WING

3 Sqn	Sopwith Camel	
11 Sqn	Bristol Fighter	
41 Sqn	SE5a	
46 Sqn	Sopwith Camel	
49 Sqn	DH4	
56 Sqn	SE5a	
64 Sqn	SE5a	
70 Sqn	Sopwith Camel	
102 Sqn	FE2b	Total 183 aircraft

V BRIGADE SUPPORTING FIFTH ARMY

FIFTEENTH (CORPS) WING

8 Sqn	Armstrong-Whitworth	
35 Sqn	Armstrong-Whitworth	
52 Sqn	RE8	
53 Sqn	RE8	
82 Sqn	Armstrong-Whitworth	Total 183 aircraft

TWENTY-SECOND (ARMY) WING

6 (Naval) Sqn	DH4	
23 Sqn	Spad	
24 Sqn	Se5a	
48 Sqn	Bristol Fighter	
54 Sqn	Sopwith Camel	
84 Sqn	SE5a	
101 Sqn	FE2b	Total 141 aircraft

ADDITIONAL UNITS INVOLVED

NINTH (DAY) WING, MOVED UP TO SUPPORT FIFTH ARMY BY 9 MARCH

25 Sqn	DH4	
27 Sqn	DH4	
62 Sqn	Bristol Fighter	
73 Sqn	Sopwith Camel	
79 Sqn	Sopwith Camel	
80 Sqn	Sopwith Dolphin	Total 114 aircraft

TENTH ARMY WING, POSITIONED BEHIND FIRST ARMY FLEW MANY MISSIONS SOUTH IN SUPPORT OF THIRD ARMY

2 Sqn	SE5a (Australian Flying Corps)	
3 (Naval) Sqn	Sopwith Camel	
4 Sqn	DH4	
22 Sqn	Bristol Fighter	
40 Sqn	SE5a	
43 Sqn	Sopwith Camel	Total 141 aircraft

Various other British and French squadrons took part in air operations in support of the Third and Fifth Armies of the British Expeditionary Force during the March Retreat

German plan and British counterplan

General Ludendorff and the German General Staff took considerable trouble over Operation Michael, and a great deal of internal reorganisation was carried out in the divisions to be deployed, utilising troops redeployed from the Eastern Front. Units were brought up to strength, rested, and the aged and infirm stripped out of them. Storm troop units were created with the specific purpose of combat assault, and the emphasis in training was on speed, infiltration, local initiative, the reinforcement of success, and the by-passing of centres of resistance. The objective was the destruction of the British Expeditionary Force. Regarding air organisation, much greater emphasis was now placed on close air support, and the specialist German ground attack squadrons were increased in number and renamed *Schlachtstaffeln* or battle flights. These were intended to operate under local army control delivering close support as the infantry assault went in. The air build up was also covered by a careful deception plan, for although the Germans were to concentrate their air assets to achieve local air superiority, this was only done in the days immediately preceding the assault.

Of course, the British knew that they were coming, and in December 1917 the British Commander in Chief, Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, told his army commanders:

"We must be prepared to meet a strong and sustained enemy offensive. It is therefore of first importance that army commanders should give their immediate and personal attention to the organisation of the zones for defence and to the rest and training of their troops".⁴

There followed a total and rapid reorganisation of the BEF on the ground, as an army that had for most of the war been on the offensive geared up for the expected Germany attacks. German defence in depth had frustrated the British during 1917, and so the British now attempted to replicate that successful formula. The old front line was to be turned into a lightly held "Forward Zone" that was designed to slow down the enemy and cause maximum casualties, before the defenders withdrew to the main line of defences, the "Battle Zone". This would be two or three miles behind the "Forward Zone", and would be a thick layer of defences with redoubts, machine-gun nests, and artillery pieces sited against tanks. It was here that it was planned for the main battle to take place. Behind this was to be a third line of defences, the "Corps Line". Each of these zones was not to be a single line of trenches, but rather a deep belt of interlocking and mutually supporting defensive positions. The plan was for an elastic defence, with enemy successes being matched by local counter-attacks. The reality though was rather different. Time and an acute shortage of labour, wire, and timber had prevented the completion of the defences in the south, where the weak Fifth Army had taken over poor positions from the French, and had been afforded the least priority in resources. Here the "Battle Zone" was not properly completed, and the "Corps Line" had hardly even been begun.⁵

Haig had assured the Prime Minister that he could withstand any German assault for at least 18 days, by which time additional reinforcement could have crossed from England.⁶ He had formulated his plans carefully, and deliberately chosen to make his strongest dispositions in the north. His reasons for this were that close behind his left wing lay the channel ports of Boulogne, Calais and Dunkirk, and in their hinterland much of the supporting infrastructure of the BEF. Thus any loss of



Pilots and Observers studying maps beside an Armstrong Whitworth FK8 in April, 1918.

ground would encroach on these strategically vital areas, and could prove decisive. In the south, however, there was room for greater flexibility, and the British had the space to withdraw without such serious consequences. Arrangements had in any case been made with the French to provide an immediate reinforcement of six divisions in the event of a serious attack.⁷ Thus it was that in the extreme south, General Sir Hubert Gough, commanding the Fifth Army, had 42 miles of line to cover with only 12 infantry and three cavalry divisions;⁸ it was the weakest concentration of forces in the BEF, and the target for Operation Michael.

The RFC in defence

Major General Sir Hugh Trenchard, commanding the RFC in the field, prepared his own detailed plans for the RFC in defence. This was one of his last tasks before handing over to Major General John Salmond, and returning to London in mid January to become the first Chief of the Air Staff upon the foundation of the Royal Air Force on 1 April. A short secret document published in

January 1918 set out the likely stages of an enemy offensive, and detailed the activities of the RFC at every stage. It was to be the blueprint for the coming battle. It began:

The first and most important of the duties of the Royal Flying Corps in connexion (sic) with defence is to watch for symptoms of attack, and to use the endeavours to obtain and transmit at once all information which may assist responsible commanders to determine beforehand when and where an attack is coming and by what force.⁹

Particular attention was to be directed to enemy railways and sidings, roads, dumps, aerodromes, camps and gun positions, all of which were to be regularly photographed. Once it became clear that an offensive was imminent, then every effort was to be made to interfere with the preparations. Artillery cooperation work was to be increased, bombing attacks were to be intensified, and an extensive offensive waged against enemy air. When the German attack began then the first priority was to direct artillery on to the advancing enemy, and thereafter aircraft were to make low level attacks against enemy rear areas and harass the advancing troops.

Throughout the document the importance of reconnaissance and intelligence gathering is stressed, and subsequent sections go on to cover support for counter attacks, and the need for detailed reinforcement plans to be drawn up so that air assets could be switched quickly to any threatened area. Finally, and typical of the aggressive Trenchard, there is a reminder of the fundamental nature of air power and the importance of the counter-air campaign that is worth quoting in full:

"The successful performance of the role of the Royal Flying Corps in defence, as outlined above, must primarily depend on its ability to gain and maintain ascendancy in the air. This can only be done by attacking and defeating the enemy's air forces. The action of the Royal Flying Corps must, therefore, always remain essentially offensive, even when the Army, during a period of preparation for offensive operations is standing on the defensive".¹⁰

Build up to battle

Of course it was not immediately clear where the German attack would fall, or indeed how many attacks there would be. On 19 February RFC HQ issued plans for the concentration of air assets against any two of the four British armies; that is the Second and First in the north, the First and Third in the middle, or the Third and Fifth in the south. However, General Gough was already convinced that the German attack would fall on his section of the line, and his views were strongly influenced by the reports of air observers, and in particular aerial photographs. General Sir Julian Byng, commanding the adjacent Third Army, believed that his line was also threatened. Indeed, opposite Third and Fifth Armies new German dumps, railway sidings and hospitals had been spotted, and, by the end of January, 14 new airfields had been discovered facing the right of Fifth Army.¹¹ On 24 February Salmond told his Brigade Commanders that everything now pointed to a German attack against Third and Fifth Armies, and by 9 March he had executed his concentration plans, placing 9 (Day) Wing behind Fifth Army with an additional 3 Scout squadrons, a squadron of Bristol Fighters and two of day bombers.

Intelligence of all sorts continued to flood in, and particularly noticeable was the daily extension of the network of light railways behind the enemy lines, an increasing concentration of German air



OC15 Squadron with aircrew - March 1918 during the German offensive.

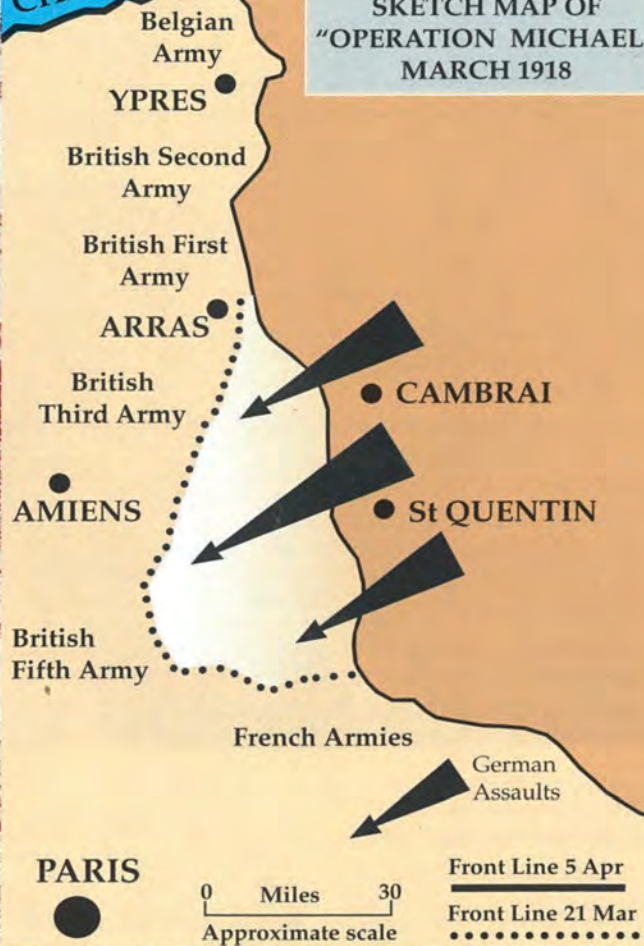
units, and an abnormal number of lights in the German back areas reported by night flying pilots. The RFC, while continuing to collect intelligence, moved into the next stage of Trenchard's blueprint, and began to harass the enemy. Bombing raids by both day and night had been routinely carried out against the enemy rear areas, but these were now stepped up. For example on 9 March V Brigade launched a coordinated series of attacks against 3 enemy airfields at Busigny, Bertry and Escaufort. This raid had been planned for some time and 53 aircraft of Nos 23, 24, 48 and 54 Sqns made their attacks in the early afternoon while the enemy were still on the ground before the afternoon patrols. Cover was provided by the SE5As of Sholto Douglas' 84 Sqn, and they circled above as the Bristol Fighters and camels hit Busigny and Escaufort. He later recalled:

"They had been practising for just such an attack, and I watched them as they scored direct hits on the hangars and other buildings, all the time keeping a weather eye open for enemy fighters that might come on the scene".¹²

Similar large scale attacks were mounted on 17 and 18 March, although on these occasions the object was to force the enemy into the air where they could be attacked by waiting fighters, and as a result several large air engagements ensued. It was now clear that the offensive was imminent. Overall the British had 31 squadrons deployed in support of Third and Fifth Armies, totalling 579 aircraft, of which 261 were single seater fighters. The German concentration was also complete giving them a numerical advantage, for ranged against the RFC were 730 German aircraft, of which 326 were fighters. This made a total of more than 1300 aircraft in the battle area.¹³

CHANNEL

SKETCH MAP OF
"OPERATION MICHAEL"
MARCH 1918



The first day

The German attack began suddenly at 4.40 am on 21 March, with a devastating artillery barrage that lasted for five hours, and it was the entire frontage of Gough's Fifth Army, and most of Byng's adjacent Third Army that was attacked. It was the greatest concentration of artillery ever gathered together, and 10,000 guns and mortars opened fire simultaneously along a 43 mile front, with long range guns penetrating to a depth of 20 miles. Altogether 1,160,000 shells were expended, a high proportion of which were gas. It was the most intense bombardment of the war. Divisional headquarters, telephone exchanges, railway stations, and forward airfields, as well as defended locations, were among the carefully chosen targets. At 09.40 the German infantry advanced in silence "without hurrahs",¹⁴ led by specially trained storm troopers, and following behind a creeping barrage. The assault was extraordinarily successful, and was aided by dense fog that covered the battlefield in the first part of the morning, and was particularly thick in the southern part of the line. Thus in many places the Germans loomed out of the mist and carried front line positions before the defenders really knew what had hit them. By mid morning the assault troops had overwhelmed the British "Forward Zone", and were moving on against the "Battle Zone". Very significantly large numbers of British troops had found themselves cut off and were either fighting on in isolated pockets or had surrendered. Indeed a staggering 47 battalions were lost in those first few hours; a cruel blow for a defence already desperately short of infantry.¹⁵

Detailed plans had been drawn up for the use of the RFC, and maps and instructions, continually updated were displayed in the observer huts on each squadron. The Corps aircraft were to continue to support the infantry through artillery observation and reconnaissance, but were to also engage in night bombing if time allowed. The Army squadrons also had prioritised lists of responsibilities, with the Camels providing close escort to Corps machines, the SE5s patrolling against hostile formations, and the Bristol Fighters attacking enemy forces on the ground. In the event all squadrons maximised their efforts and were in almost constant action, and this brief narrative can only attempt to impart a flavour of the rapidly moving battle. In the north, despite the weather, Corps aircraft were able to operate normally, with a succession of 7 RE8s of 59 Sqn keeping their section of line under close surveillance from 6.15 am until 7 pm. Initially watching the German bombardment they reported heavy damage to both the line and wire. By the afternoon they were also reporting that a "deep bite" had been made by the enemy into the Third Army front. The RE8s repeatedly tried to call down counter battery fire, and direct British guns onto the enemy troop concentrations that they could clearly see pouring down the roads towards the front. There was no response, and this was one of the first instances of what was to be a major failing of the carefully planned defensive air campaign.

The Official Historian offers the following explanation:

The chief causes of failure were the severance of telephonic communication and the breakdown of the artillery wireless organisation; batteries were continually on the move; much telephone and wireless equipment was lost or damaged; and when batteries halted they did not always erect their wireless masts..... The majority of zone calls sent down from the air during the first of the battle were not answered whilst the air observers were waiting to observe the fire effect.¹⁶

The system of zone calls was designed to enable an air observer to direct an immediate shoot onto a particular main square and the failure of the system at this time was highly significant. The artillery's failure thus denied the British their most potential weapon at this critical time.



Photo: courtesy of the Trustees of the Imperial War Museum, London

RE8s lined up by the roadside near Albert, 25 March 1918.

In the south the fog severely hampered air operations, No 8 Sqn's Record Book recording "thick ground mist all day", but they still managed 10 hours and 45 minutes flying by a total of 8 pilots.¹⁷ Certainly Corps Squadrons were by the afternoon delivering crucial reports of the extent of the German advance, and the scouts of Nos 23 (Spads), 24 and 84 (SE5s) Squadrons carried out low level attacks on targets of opportunity with machine guns and 25lb bombs. But German successes were causing other difficulties because the forward airfields were increasingly under artillery fire, and were already threatened by the advancing enemy. The first to be forced out were the DH4 day bombers of No 5 (Naval) Sqn¹⁸ which were shelled out of their airfield at Mons-en-Chausee in the morning, and redeployed to Champien, burning the hangars and buildings before they went. Despite this, later that afternoon, they were still able to deliver two raids against the bridges over the St Quentin Canal, and the German troops pouring across them. Overall 36 Squadrons of the RFC had engaged the enemy. But while the RFC had emerged from the first day of heavy fighting in reasonable shape, this was certainly not the case on the ground. The stark facts were that almost 100 square miles of territory had fallen to the Germans and the British had lost 7,512 dead, 10,000 wounded, and a staggering 21,000 prisoners. But the British had inflicted even greater losses on the enemy, with 10,851 dead, 28,778 wounded and 300 prisoners. It was the costliest day of the war, with a total of more than 78,000 casualties.¹⁹

Retreat

As if to underscore the seriousness of the situation on 22 March the RFC pulled back from its threatened airfields destroying buildings and any equipment that could not be evacuated as it went. All 17 squadrons in support of Fifth Army and 5 of those in support of Third Army retired to the west, and within hours German infantry was occupying the first of their abandoned airfields. These were only the first of a series of hurried moves that saw RFC units constantly on the move during the battle. As an Australian pilot recorded:

So quickly did these evacuation orders come, that many British pilots who flew out on a patrol in the morning would return a few hours later to find the whole of their squadron's personnel gone to some unknown destination - in some cases without their stores and equipment - and the aerodrome being shelled by the enemy.²⁰

On the ground the British were slowly pressed back, and Fifth Army, which bore the brunt of the attack, began to buckle as units lost touch with their flanks, and the promised French

Photo: courtesy of the Trustees of the Imperial War Museum, London



reinforcements failed to materialise. By 23 March Ludendorff believed the British were beaten, and moved his armies into the next phase of the battle, to exploit the breakthrough, and breakout. On 21 March Haig had asked the French for 3 divisions; now on 23 March he asked for 20,²¹ and on the following day, Palm Sunday, he issued a special order of the day to all ranks: "We are again at a crisis in the war. The enemy has collected on this front every available division and is aiming at the destruction of the British Army.....".²² The position was perilous.

On the 25th, as Gough fell back again, Byng began to pivot his army on Arras, swinging back to stay in touch with Fifth Army. It was a

French and British Infantry shoulder to shoulder in rifle pits, attempt to hold the German advance, 25 March 1918

critical moment as the British line bulged, and briefly looked as if it would break, and, to compound the difficulties further south a gap threatened to open between the British and French. The British feared a precipitous French withdrawal to protect Paris, which was already under long range artillery fire, and the French feared that the British would break contact and fall back on the channel ports. So serious was the situation that the two major RFC depots in the south, No 2 Aeroplane and Supply Depot at Fienvillers and No 2 Aircraft Depot at Candas began to evacuate, and over 170 aircraft as well as stores and other equipment were moved back to safety. Then in response to a severe threat to Third Army Salmond sent detailed orders to 9 Wg RFC, concluding with famous instructions. "These squadrons will bomb and shoot up everything they can see on the enemy side of this line. Very low flying is essential. All risks to be taken.

Urgent".²³ In addition aircraft from 10 Squadrons of I Brigade operating further north were diverted south to join the air offensive, and a further 2 squadrons from the beleaguered V Brigade also flew north to support Third Army with low flying attacks. Altogether some 250 British aircraft from 27 squadrons machine gunned and bombed the advancing German columns in front of Third Army, with the loss of 50 of their aircraft.²⁴

On 26 March at Doullens, with enemy artillery landing close by, the Allies convened an emergency meeting chaired by France's President Poincare. The French were rattled, with the Commander in Chief General Petain telling Prime Minister Clemenceau "The



Photo: courtesy of the Trustees of the Imperial War Museum, London

*Marvellous
Targets".
German
Reserves
moving
forward,
March 1918.*

Germans will beat the British in the open country, and after that they'll beat us".²⁵ Haig wrote of Petain that morning "He had the appearance of a commander who was in a funk and had lost his nerve".²⁶ But despite the tension common sense prevailed and Marshal Foch was appointed as the supreme Allied commander, charged with coordinating the Allied armies on the Western Front. It was a decisive moment as the Allies rallied, for already the German offensive was running out of steam, and when a fresh attack further north against Vimy Ridge failed on 28 March, the offensive ground to a halt and was finally abandoned on 5 April. They had not split the British and the French, they had not rolled up the BEF and driven the British into the sea; and despite a ferocious final effort they had not even taken the key communications centre of Amiens. Ironically, just as the British managed to stabilise their front, on 28 March, General Gough was sacked at the insistence of Prime Minister Lloyd-George who wanted a scapegoat, and consideration was even briefly given to the removal of Haig.²⁷

Analysing the air battle

Although the land battle had come perilously close to total disaster, the air campaign had proved to be significantly more successful. The RFC had provided a continuous stream of high grade intelligence to the Army commanders during the German build up, and once it was plain where the enemy attack would fall had harassed their final preparations. The greatest failure to the defensive plan was the breakdown of communications between the Corps squadrons and the batteries, that denied the British their most valuable assault breaking weapon, air directed artillery. But the fault for this lay with the artillery on the ground, who in the confusion of retreat failed to erect their aerials, rather than with the airmen. The carefully laid schemes for defence also largely went by the board for much of the battle, for although the fighters patrolled and engaged enemy fighters up to 25 March, at that point the situation became so serious that the emphasis switched to low flying bomb and machine gun attacks by all available aircraft against enemy troop concentrations. French aircraft too began to play their part at this stage of the battle.

On 22 March Haig described the German columns in his diary as "marvellous targets". Dryly, Sholto Douglas records "There is nothing marvellous about slaughter. For the first time we were presented with what it would be better to refer to as near perfect ground targets".²⁸ And testimony as to the effectiveness of these low flying attacks is recorded in numerous German personal papers and

regimental histories of the battle, one of the most graphic being this account from a bugler of the 8th Grenadiers:

....there suddenly appeared before us some twenty British aeroplanes which dived to a height of about 100 to 200 metres, and then continuing to within 2-3 metres of the ground, attacked us with their machine guns. At first we thought that they intended to land; but we speedily saw the danger and opened a vigorous fire upon them. Several Tommies flew so low that the wheels of their aeroplanes touched the ground. My Company Commander, Lieutenant Nocke, had to fling himself to the ground, but for all that he was struck on the back by a machine, thus being literally run over.²⁹

The Australian Official Historian recorded events from the other side, describing scenes on the Baupaume - Cambrai road, one of the major arteries to supply the battlefield:

Pilot after pilot recorded that his bombs burst in the middle of troops or transport, and so thick was the traffic that any block in it must be proved serious. The airmen blew craters in the road-surface with their bombs, and then concentrated their attack on the traffic, which became bunched at such craters in their effort to make the narrow passage round them. With machine-gun fire the airmen ditched motor lorries, blocked the road with broken wagons and maimed horses, set field-gun teams into panic-gallops away from their route, and played all possible havoc with the German rear-services.³⁰

Most British aircraft thus remained at low level until 31 March, which saw a return to more conventional tactics, when the fighters returned to the upper air. But by this time the offensive had really ground to a halt, with the utterly exhausted Germans incapable of pushing any further. The RFC had flown more hours in March 1918 than in any other month thus far in the war, and the total of 245 aircrew dead or missing was only exceeded by the 316 lost in "Bloody April" 1917.³¹

The fact that the British were able to carry out their low level operations with such success was to a great extent due to the operational difficulties being experienced by the Germans. The German Battle Flights, although highly trained ground attack specialists, confined themselves to attacks against the front line, and the German Air Service largely left alone the British rear areas with their congested and highly vulnerable lines of communication. The effect of this was twofold; first it meant that the Germans failed to capitalise on the major targets available to them, and, secondly, that the RFC commanders did not have to divert aircraft from their own low level attacks to protect the rear areas. The Germans also suffered heavy casualties in the early stages of the campaign, and unlike the British, lacked the reserves of aircraft, crews and spares to rapidly replace them. In addition the cooperation between the air elements and the infantry gradually began to break down as the infantry stormed forward, leaving the supporting airmen further and further behind. General von Hoepfner, commanding the German Air Service summed it up, writing:

"...their operations were not coordinated, either as to the time or the place, with the march of events on the ground. It therefore happened that the infantry were deprived at the decisive times and places, of the help of the fighting pilots. The fault of the higher commands in not issuing timely orders to the fighting formations appeared to the troops as a failure on the part of the air service".³²

All of this was in marked contrast to the British, whose air organisation stood up remarkably well to the unprecedented strains of the retreat. In the autumn of 1917 a proportion of the vehicles

supporting the operational squadrons had been withdrawn and pooled in Reserve Lorry Parks within each brigade. These were intended to support the movement of up to half the squadrons at any one time, and in February Major General Salmond arranged a 50% increase in their strength. Emergency arrangements were also rapidly established for the survey and establishment of new airfields with OC 6 Sqn, whose unit was pulled back in reserve, being tasked daily by RFC HQ to find aerodromes in particular areas for withdrawing squadrons. Arriving by fast car before dawn, he would review the area and report back by phone, enabling the selected areas to be cleared and marked and stores prepositioned. By the end of the two week battle 45 new RFC airfields had been constructed in this way. Again, in contrast to the Germans, the logistics organisation, masterminded by Brigadier-General Brooke-Popham responded well, aided by two flying columns of vehicles, one loaded with bombs and ammunition, and the other with spares, ready to move at 5 minutes readiness to relieve acute shortages and supplement the regular deliveries. Remarkably, despite heavy losses, and the burning of many damaged aircraft as units pulled back, all RFC squadrons were kept well up to strength throughout the battle.³³

Conclusion

This was a battle on an extraordinary scale and at the decisive point in the war. The initial successes of some one million German troops who took part in the offensive almost paralysed the Anglo-French alliance, sent shock waves through the governments in London and Paris, and came within a whisker of splitting the British and French Armies apart. British losses totalled some 177,000 of which 72,000 were prisoners, and the total French losses were a further 77,000. The Germans, with some 239,00 casualties, had also lost heavily and these were men that she could not replace. In the end the German Army was simply exhausted, and Ludendorff noted in his memoirs that "The enemy resistance was beyond our powers".³⁴ Although the Germans were able to come again with further offensives in April, May and June 1918, these were less powerful, less successful, and increasingly desperate, until, exhausted in both men and materiel, the fighting heart of the German Army was finally broken, and their faltering forces were driven back by the Allied counter-offensives of the last 100 days that were finally to win the war.

The *Kaiserschlacht* was thus both the high water mark of German success, and the beginning of the end for Germany. Despite huge advances they failed to achieve any of their strategic objectives, whereas the British achieved their aim, for the expected German offensive was held in the end. The Australian Official War Historian F M Cutlack succinctly summarised the situation:

"...while it was the heroic infantry of outnumbered British and French divisions which held up the enemy advance.....it was principally the untiring exertions of the airmen in delaying, damaging, and disheartening the enemy's reserves, and throwing his whole transport system out of gear, which enabled the Allied infantry to succeed".³⁵

Trenchard's defensive blueprint was skilfully and flexibly executed by Salmond, despite the unprecedented difficulties of the retreat. In March 1918 it was the air war that made the difference between success and failure and won the battle for Britain. The squadrons of the RFC had concentrated to control the skies and prosecute a relentless anti-surface force campaign that played a decisive part in the battle, and clearly demonstrated that air power had come of age, even before the birth of the Royal Air Force.

Notes.

- 1 David R Woodward, *Lloyd George and the Generals*, (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1983), p 234.
- 2 B H Liddell Hart, *History of the First World War*, (London: Book Club Associates, 1973), p 460.
- 3 H A Jones, *The War in the Air, Vol 4*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934), p 451.
- 4 Martin Middlebrook, *The Kaiser's Battle*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1983), p 65.
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- 6 Woodward, *Generals*, p 290.
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