



DFW C.V (Av.)

# A German Prisoner-of-War

by Geoff Ruddock

The Public Record Office at Kew, London, is a treasure-trove of fascinating documents for the military historian, This official report, made by (unidentified) RFC Intelligence Officers after their interrogation of a captured German aviator, is typical of the material to be found there:-

PRO AIR/1/1/4/26/1

## **EXAMINATION OF A GERMAN AVIATOR PRISONER (CORPORAL -) BROUGHT DOWN AT TRESCAULT ON 20th MAY, 1917.**

The prisoner was flying a two-seater AVIATIK machine with a six-cylinder BENZ engine. He was sent out on a Trench Reconnaissance in the neighbourhood of ARRAS. His passenger was a Lieutenant, whose name he did not know, owing to the fact that he was not his usual passenger. He lost his way, and then flew East, but his compass must have been wrong, and eventually, after flying for some time, he sighted some British fighting machines, upon which his passenger became very excited and began thumping him in the back, and pointing in the opposite direction, which caused him to lose his way still further. He was attacked by one of our scouts, and shot in the leg in two places. In order to get away he dived vertically with the engine full on, and he stated that it was showing over 1,650 revolutions, which is very high for this type. When he was about 200 feet from the ground, he flattened out very suddenly, and thinks his passenger must have been thrown out of the machine.

Owing to the wounds in his leg, he landed with a drift and the machine was wrecked.

### **1. Antecedents**

Prisoner is 25 years of age and appears to be fairly well educated. He has been flying since the beginning of 1915 and has flown every type of two-seater. He has never flown a scout. He was engaged in instruction in Germany for a considerable time, was then sent to the Russian Front, where he was flying only quite recently.

He arrived on the ARRAS front only about a week ago so that his information about local events is not of much value.

## **2. Passenger**

His passenger had for a long time been the same German officer, with whom he got on very well, but on the day he was captured he had been told to take up another officer, who was very excitable in the air, and caused him to lose his way by giving him contradictory orders. He did not know definitely what had happened to his passenger, and when he was informed that he had jumped from the machine and been killed when it was still about 200 feet from the ground, he seemed very much upset, and said that it must have been due to his flattening out too suddenly.

## **3. Unit**

Prisoner belonged to the 26th Flight, which was used principally for photography, reconnaissance and what he called infantry reconnaissance, which appears to be an attempt at contact patrol, but carried out generally to locate enemy re-inforcements. (*sic*)

## **4. Photography**

This was being carried out more and more, and Prisoner stated that the German Flying Corps, when it sent out a machine on reconnaissance, relied almost entirely on the information to be gained from photographs and not on the observer's report, owing to the fact that for the sake of safety reconnaissance machines almost invariably flew at between 12,000 and 16,000 feet, from which height it was impossible to see much.

## **5. Contact Patrol**

Prisoner had been carrying out contact patrol on the Russian front, and he stated that there it was very much easier as the ground was not so cut up. He stated that he had several times carried out contact patrol by moonlight, friendly troops signalling their presence with lamps.

## **6. Fighting in the Air**

The struggle for the mastery of the air was much discussed in the German Army and prisoner made the usual flattering remarks about the bravery of British pilots, but he said that it was generally thought that because we fought over the enemy's lines our losses were greater than those of the German Flying Corps, and it was hoped by the German Army that we could not keep up the supply of pilots.

Von Richthofen had brought down nearly 50 Allied machines, and his brother, who was now flying, had brought down 24. They were at present flying on the Western front and von Richthofen's Flight was the most famous fighting flight in the German Army. Von Richthofen himself flew the latest type of ALBATROSS (*sic*) SCOUT the nacelle being painted black and the tail of the machine striped black and white.

## **7. Markings of German Machines**

Prisoner denied that many German machines were painted with Allied markings, but he explained the circles seen on German machines by stating that each flight had its own distinctive marking, and it was quite possible that one flight had adopted a circular

marking round the black cross, although he thought that if attention was drawn to the fact that those circles could be mistaken for Allied markings they would be withdrawn.

## **8. Petrol Supply**

A considerable number of pupils were killed in learning to fly; this was due to the fact that at flying schools in Germany petrol was no longer used owing to shortage of supply, and benzol was being used as a substitute when flying home at home (*sic*). This was not satisfactory and often caused engine trouble.

## **9. German Flying Corps**

Flying on the Russian front was considered more interesting and much safer, but quite recently the majority of German machines had been withdrawn from the Russian front and sent to the Western front.

## **10. Counter Battery Work**

Prisoner had carried out a considerable amount of counter-battery work in Russia, but had not yet done any over here. He said that our counter-battery work was considered very successful, especially last year during the SOMME battle, and that the German artillery did not like being ranged upon by aeroplanes.

## **11. Concealment of Battery Positions**

He thought that this was not of much value, as battery positions always showed up in photographs, however well concealed.

## **12. Opinions of the War**

He thought that the War would end in stale-mate, and this was the general opinion now in Germany. He was a Saxon, and said that he thought the Prussians were "running the war" and that when the war was over, they (the Prussians) would get a disagreeable surprise in Saxony, where they were not very popular.

## **13. Explosive Bullets**

He acknowledged that explosive bullets were used, but made the usual remark that he had never used them as they were only used by observers, and not fired through the front gun.

## **14. Bombing**

He said that his aerodrome had been bombed by the British and also gave particulars of a successful bomb raid near DOUAI in which several people were killed, but could not remember the exact date.

On being asked whether he would like to send any information to his Squadron, he wrote the following letter, which has been forwarded to Army Intelligence:-

To Flight 26. On the 20th May, I was wounded in an aerial battle. I was compelled to land, and the observer probably wounded as well, must have been thrown out of the machine when I flattened out. He is dead. I could not reach our aerodrome, and so landed in English territory. I had two bullets holes in my left leg, and one of the bullets is still in the left leg, and will have to be removed this afternoon. I am being well treated here, and everything has gone well with me up to the present.

Sergeant Major - I would ask you to send my clothes and personal belongings to my parents, and also to inform them of my fate. I salute all my comrades and hope they will have better luck than I. Greetings.

(Sd) Comrade Muller

P.S. Forgive this writing. I have nothing to write upon except a letter which has been given me by a gentleman who is a Major in the English Flying Corps.

Prisoner was talkative, and apparently reliable, but owing to the fact that he was wounded and awaiting operation could not be examined for long. He was most anxious to know whether he had been brought down by a famous airman, and asked this question more than once.

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According to research, carried out by W. R. Puglisi and published in the *Cross & Cockade (USA) Journal* in 1969, the German machine involved in this incident was, in fact, a DFW C.V machine (5872/16), forced down by Captain Pither and Lieutenant Isles of No.3 Squadron, RFC. Presumably they were flying a Morane Saulnier Type L 'Parasol', with which 3RFC was equipped at that time.

According to Cecil Lewis, who served with No.3 Squadron, the 'Parasol' was the most difficult of all RFC/RAF aircraft to fly. He would have been well qualified to make such a judgement, because he claimed to have eventually flown every type of machine used by the RFC/RAF during the First World War.

The Intelligence Officer's error in describing the downed German aircraft as an Aviatik is indicative of the confusion that existed concerning the precise designation of DFW C.V machines. This occurred mainly because the Aviatik Company built considerable numbers of them under licence, and applied their own AV C.VI designation marking instead of the more correct DFW C.V (Av.) marking.

Puglisi's research also disclosed that the machine was flown by Vzfw. Max Muller, and the unfortunate observer was Lt. Joseph Figulla of *Fl.Abt. 26*. Contrary to the opinion of some witnesses to the action, who thought that he had jumped, Figulla was thrown from the cockpit of the aircraft when Muller suddenly flattened out from a fast, steep dive.

At the time of this incident, 3RFC was based at Lavieville, a small village about three miles south-west of Albert. According to RFC records, the German machine was forced down near Bois d'Havrincourt, which separates the villages of Havrincourt and Trescault. This would have been approximately 23 miles (or about 15 minutes flying time) from No.3 Squadron's airfield. The German aviators would have been about 18 miles from Arras, from which vicinity they had been sent to carry out their trench reconnaissance.

Some readers may raise their eyebrows at Muller's expansive responses to his interrogator's questions; bearing in mind that a POW is duty-bound to reveal nothing to his captors, other than his name, rank and number. With the hindsight of almost 80 years, and from the comfort of an easy chair, it is perhaps, easy to criticise his actions in revealing so much information. One should remember, however, that he was a man who had just been through a most traumatic experience. Even though he was quite an experienced pilot, he was unfamiliar with the Arras sector and had lost his bearings - perhaps because of a faulty compass. His regular observer officer was not with him and, in his place, was the excitable (and, I suspect, slightly comical) *Lt. Figulla*, who seems to have been more of a hindrance than a help, and only succeeded in making Muller even more confused about their location.

Having come under attack by the British machine, Muller received two painful leg wounds, but somehow managed to evade his attackers and put the aircraft down without sustaining any further injury himself, but wrecking his machine in the process. He was then told, by his captors, that his observer was dead; apparently killed as a result of the violent evasive actions that he (Muller) had taken.

It is not difficult to imagine Muller's emotional state at the time of his interrogation, which would, no doubt, have been exacerbated by the pain of his wounds. He would have felt immense relief at having survived his close brush with death but, at the same time, been greatly upset by his sense of responsibility for the observer's violent death. Given his emotional and physical condition, coupled with a sense of gratitude for the fact that his captors were treating him in a humane manner, it is not really surprising that he talked so openly. Taking all of these factors into consideration, it seems rather harsh to criticise Muller's behaviour in the prevailing circumstances.

It appears that Captain Pither later served in the Middle East and died on 11 June 1918, as a result of injuries sustained in an accident. Records show a Captain Sidney Edward Pither, 1/2 KOSB & RAF, being buried or commemorated in the Suez War Memorial Cemetery. Presumably his erstwhile observer, Lt. Isles, survived the war.

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#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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