

Notes on Udet's Fokker D.VII F

by Dave Roberts

Ernst Udet received his first BMW-engined D.VII from a batch of 22 delivered to *Jagdgeschwader I* around the 21st-22nd June, 1918. It is possible that it had already been given a coat of red on the fuselage by *Jasta 11*'s painters. Besides substantially re-equipping *Jasta 11*, D.VII F's were presumably supplied to the leaders of the other component *Staffeln* and their deputies, who occasionally led sorties by the whole *Geschwader*. Udet evaluated and adjusted the new machine over a week, before taking it into action on 30th June, the day after his famous (but still unidentified) striped-wing D.VII was shot from under him in combat with a Breguet near Cutry.

At the height of Summer, with long daylight hours and plenty of activity, this is the Udet machine we should expect to see most photographed. Indeed, just such a D.VII F appears in several shots, some alongside examples of *Jasta 4*'s ageing fleet of OAW-built D.VIIs, which, with their relatively low-compression Mercedes D.IIIa engines, were well overdue for replacement by August.

Now, writers had always tended to assume that the machine often photographed with Udet was 4253/18, simply because of his documented association with that aircraft. Additionally, many moons ago Alex Imrie showed me a photo of the same machine from starboard three-quarter rear, with a *Werke Nummer* visible on the fin. The last two digits appeared to be 54, which would agree with 4253/18, W/N 2954. Sadly, the essential second digit was not clear enough for a positive identification.

The structural and heraldic evidence actually points to an earlier airframe. It was in use about a month too soon to be 4253/18, which did not reach the *Geschwader* until late in July and was initially flown by Hermann Göring. He was photographed standing by that machine's sparkling new cockpit, complete with metal quarter windshields and modified opening to allow the injured Göring to enter and exit more easily. He had previously flown D.VII F 294/18, probably one of the same batch as Udet's first VII F I am aware of no documentary mention of Udet flying 4253/18 before September.

4253/18, a machine from early in the second production batch, had (probably) an Axial airscrew and louvred top cowl panels covering most of its high-level single exhaust pipe. Its crosses were of, or close to, the final standard of 8:1 black bars at full depth or chord, with an open-ended white border one quarter of the bar width. I don't know of a confirmed photograph of it in Udet's markings, but those are the cross proportions shown in published paintings of actions in which he was flying this machine.

The machine in the photographs had a Heine airscrew, a double low-exit exhaust, and no top cowls at all, these having been removed to assist cooling. Its national markings were typical of aircraft completed in late May to early June 1918: unequal 5:4 crosses on the lower wing, fuselage cross modified from fully bordered by widening and extension of the black arms. This was done in at least two stages, as some pictures show the border wider than others. The wingtip *Hier anheben* instructions appear to be on the black oval patches introduced at some point in the late 400s. Everything points to an aircraft completed between the

factory-photographed D.VII F 461/18 (with an earlier wing cross style) and 526/18, the last of the first batch. It was probably delivered looking much like 507/18, another well photographed BMW Fokker.

D.VII F 467/18, W/N 2554, fills the bill. It must have been one of the first to have the unequal wing crosses and tip patches, and was accepted in the first week of June, nicely in time to be part of JG I's consignment. We cannot guarantee this identification, but it seems to us to be more consistent with the photographic evidence than does 4253/18, for which it was possibly kept into the Autumn as a reserve.

Dan San Abbott's indispensable research into Schwerin factory markings has identified trends and approximate dates or serials by which changes were noted, though it must not be assumed that wings and fuselages were matched up and painted in exact chronological order of airframe completion. Fuselages, built on site, would have up-to-date markings applied more or less in W/N order, but with wings

it was less simple. These were built at the Gebrüder Perzina Factory at Schwerin and brought by rail to the Fokker works for covering and marking. It appears that the paint shop worked on whatever was ready and to hand – a batch of wings one day, some fuselages the next, undercarriage wings another (these seem to have got far ahead of fuselage production), and small components such as cowling panels and doors on an *ad hoc* basis. The mismatching of the latter

(bare doors in painted cowls and *vice versa*) is well documented photographically.

So, it was possible for an airframe wheeled out in a time of transition to have a mixture of cross styles, sometimes even out of sequence with *Idflieg*'s specification changes. It all depended on the date on which each component had been painted and stored; if the first unequal crosses were applied to wings soon after 13th May, the date of the revision order, those wings must then have been in storage for a week or more to appear on D.VIs and D.VIIs accepted in early June. The local *Idflieg* inspectors were apparently happy with this arrangement. Stencilling of the W/N on wings, struts and ailerons would take place after final assembly of the aircraft.

Though the similarity of the W/N does seem remarkably coincidental, there may be an explanation that makes it less so. Like many airmen, Udet is said to have been a bit superstitious, insisting on continuity in markings and the like. If this also extended to supposedly lucky numbers, it is conceivable that, given a choice, he would go for an aircraft bearing a number combination that had served him well. Now, *Jasta 4* probably also had D.VII (OAW) 2067/18, but that's as far as I'm prepared to go...!

The OAW upper wing for Richard's drawing was reconstructed with reference to other OAW-built D.VIIs in *Jasta 4*, embodying that unit's progressive cross modifications. I satisfied myself that the cross under the port lower wing was indeed 5:4 by computer copying such a cross from a D.VI photographed from a similar angle and superimposing it, with corrected perspective, onto Udet's aircraft. They matched exactly.

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