



Night Flying Camels & 'Comic' Conversions

by Mick Davis

THE CAMEL'S EARLY INTRODUCTION to Home Defence was a consequence of the daylight Gotha raids which had begun in May 1917. Despite the BEF's need for the type, to replace the antiquated Sopwith two-seaters of 43 and 45 Squadrons, eighteen machines were allotted to the HD Group by 21 July and at least ten of those had been delivered to Hainault Farm, where they came under the control of 39 (HD) Squadron's C Flight. Those ten were airborne against the early morning raid on the following day. The Camels' attachment to the unit was short-lived; they were intended as the equipment of 44 (HD) Squadron, which reformed at Hainault on the 24th.

The Camels were standard machines, powered by the 130-hp Clerget engine, which drove a Lang 2850 propeller. Several had the initial armament system that employed canvas ammunition belts and, as such, lacked the sideward ejecting chutes for cartridge cases and Prideaux links that characterised later machines. Moisture in canvas ammunition belts froze at altitude, causing gun stoppages, and belts of Prideaux disintegrating links superseded them. Early Camels were then modified to incorporate the necessary ejection chutes.

THE FIRST 'COMICS'

78 (HD) Sqn had started to receive Sopwith 1 1/2 Strutters during August 1917 and one of its more enterprising pilots, Capt F.W. Honnett, had one of them converted to single seat configuration. The pilot's cockpit on a standard 1 1/2 Strutter was directly below the centre-section and, consequently, the field of view, particularly upward, was very limited. Honnett's solution was to move the pilot's cockpit to the observer's position, behind the upper wing trailing edge. The conversion would have necessitated a revision of the controls and moving the fuel tank forward. The only drawback was the fact that the pilot was then distant from the Vickers gun and unable to clear the weapon in the event of a stoppage. It would appear that the initial conversion was made to B762. The machine was passed to the Experimental Station at Martlesham Heath for evaluation and was deemed to be

78 Squadron Sopwith 1 1/2 Strutter B762, unarmed, at Sutton's Farm, shortly after its conversion to 'Comic' configuration. :F. Cheesman



a success. At least 14 further such conversions were then made to 78 Squadron machines which initially had the standard Vickers armament but were later given Lewis guns on over-wing Foster mountings. Within 78 Squadron those conversions were known as 'Comics'.

Top: 78 Squadron's 'Comic' 1 1/2 Strutters' shortcoming was the inaccessibility of the Vickers gun, as shown in this view of A6906, converted from a single-seat bomber. :F. Cheesman

Centre: B762 at Martlesham, armed with a pair of upward-firing Lewis guns ahead of the pilot's cockpit. :CCI Archive

Bottom: A6906 and other 78 Sqn machines were given the revised armament of a Lewis on an over-wing Foster mounting. :F. Cheesman

