

JACK OF ALL TRADES

THE BE12 IN MACEDONIA – PART 2

by Mike Kelsey

CHANGE OF SCENE

On 10 August, a number of aircraft from both 17 and 47 Squadrons were assembled at Marian, from whence they flew to the RNAS aerodrome on the island of Thasos. This was as a result of a request from the RNAS for assistance in bombing the enemy seaplane base at Gereviz in western Thrace (then part of Bulgaria but lost by that country as part of the territorial concessions made at the end of the war). Gereviz is now Selino (in Greece). The RFC seems to have been only too happy to respond favourably to this request, in view of the very considerable help it had received from the RNAS in combating KG1 earlier in the year.

The 17 Squadron records covering this deployment are ostensibly complete, but there are inconsistencies which suggest omissions. Four aircraft were used as bombers and these included one BE12 (probably 6600), which was flown by Captain E.A. de Pass of B Flight. In addition, it seems that Lt A.G. Goulding and Captain E.V. Longinotto flew BE12s 6601 and 6677 respectively as escorts.¹ The 47 Squadron contingent numbered five aircraft which included only one BE12 (A4022). This was flown as an escort by 2Lt R.E. Buckingham.

Two raids on Gereviz were mounted from Thasos on 11 August; one in the morning and one in the afternoon. Captain de Pass's aircraft carried two 112-lb bombs on both occasions. The raids were believed to have caused considerable damage and the RFC aircraft returned to the mainland on the evening of the same day, flying this time to Salonika. Any mechanical failures during the flights over the sea would have resulted in a ditching, but fortunately all pilots returned safely. During this deployment, the RFC did not record any aerial combats either, although according to the Wing History an RNAS pilot on the first raid lagged behind the rest of the formation and was slightly wounded when attacked by three Halberstadts.

Shortly afterwards, the RFC undertook another deployment outside of its normal operational area when aircraft were sent to assist the French air service in a programme of bombing raids on the Monastir front. The British machines operated from a French airfield at Negotin in the period from 16 to 20 August. Again, both 17 and 47 Squadrons were involved; the former initially sending three BE12s and the single operational BE12a, A6327, whilst the 47 Squadron contingent included two BE12s. Two further aircraft (one from each squadron) were sent on later; one of these being BE12 6675 of 17 Squadron's B Flight. BE12a A6327 was normally an A Flight aircraft, but it was flown at Negotin by 2Lt A.N. David of B Flight. It was also used by Major Herring for a night bombing mission on 19 August.

The BE12's days as a fighter were not yet over, but the Monastir mission marked another stage in the gradual shift from the fighter to a bomber role. Whereas, as recently as the Gereviz raids, some of BE12s flew as escorts, at Monastir they were all used as bombers. The escorts consisted of two Vickers Bullets from 47 Squadron, plus French machines. The latter included three Nieuports flown by 17 Squadron pilots who were seconded to French escadrilles.

The targets assigned to the RFC during the Monastir deployment were principally a German HQ at Prilep, a munitions dump at Topolcani and the German aerodrome at Kanatlarci. The latter was the home of Jasta 25, which had moved there from Prilep in March 1917, and thus fighter opposition could be expected in greater numbers than normally experienced in the British sector. As it transpired, the Allied fighter escorts were largely able to keep German aircraft at bay until the last day of the mission (20 August). On that day 2Lt J.L. Bamford of 17 Squadron, flying a French Nieuport, was shot down and killed and 47 Squadron's AW12 A1466 was heavily shot up with both the crew badly wounded; one of whom later died. There were no casualties among the BE12 pilots although Captain E.A. de Pass (6675) and Lt A.G. Goulding (6601) each had two combats on 19 August, whilst Lt A. Maxwell (6600) had one combat on 20 August.²

MORE MODIFICATIONS

A number of photographs were taken of the RFC aircraft and personnel during the Monastir mission, and those featuring BE12s represent a significant proportion of the known photographs of BE12s in Macedonia. They are also among the few which can be closely dated. These photographs show that some aircraft had a number of modifications. Three BE12s, most probably the 17 Squadron machines 6600, 6601 and 6677, had an enlarged rear decking and the centre-section covering removed. The same applies to BE12a A6327. One of the modified BE12s was armed with two over-wing Lewis guns. This aircraft was almost certainly 6677, which is shown in combat reports as armed with one Lewis and one Vickers on 14 July, but with two Lewis and one Vickers on 29 August. Photographs indicate that the twin Lewis armament had been

The German seaplane base at Gereviz, which was the target of the joint RFC/RNAS raids on 11 August 1917. :CCI Archive

