

THE AERIAL DIVISION IN COMBAT, 1918

by David Méchin

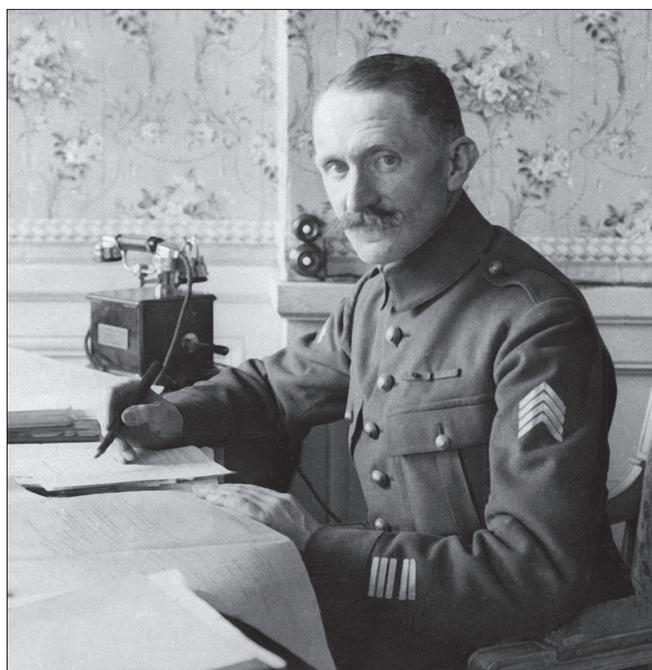
The history of this aerial armada begins with the history of its creator, Général Maurice Duval. Born to a military doctor and a middle-class mother, he was a product of the military caste, gaining, after his baccalauréat, entry in 1888 and at the age of 19 to the competitive military academy of Saint-Cyr. The young officer would demonstrate his brilliance and great intellectual curiosity by completing a two-year training programme, from 1907 to 1909, with the Japanese army. This earned him ministerial congratulations in addition to those which he had already received for his work at the French military academy.

In 1914, he was Chef de Battalion and rapidly promoted to Lieutenant-Colonel upon being appointed as Deputy Chief of Staff of one of the two French armies fighting in the Battle of Champagne during September 1915. Not hesitating to take himself to the front lines to observe his men, he was wounded. The Mention in Despatches that he received in a Military Order dated 20 September 1915 bears witness to this: *In recognition of his constant presence at the front in the deepest trenches, [he] gave particularly brilliant service with a real understanding of situations, untiring action, a communicative spirit and a remarkable sense of initiative.*

After convalescence, he resumed his career as a Staff Officer and, in 1917, upon being made Colonel, became Chief of Staff of the Groupe d'Armées Centre, direct subordinate to Général Fayolle. The dismissal of Général Nivelle, head of the Grand Quartier Général, who had organised the disastrous offensive at Chemin Des Dames, would radically change Duval's career: for, the director of the aeronautical division at the heart of the GQG would share Nivelle's disgrace and be returned to the infantry. Général Pétain, the new head of the GQG, had noticed Maurice Duval's qualities and appointed him to the post on 3 August 1917.

Officially, the director of the aviation division at GQG was responsible for the military deployment of the aerial assets made available to the armed forces by civil government. The person responsible for aeronautical production was the Under-Secretary of State for military and maritime aeronautics, who happened to be the MP Jacques-Louis Dumesnil, appointed to the post during the Painlevé government on 12 September 1917 and retained by Georges Clemenceau after his rise to power the following 16 November. In fact, that would change thanks to Duval's qualities, who, although not an aviator, would soon grasp the measure of the situation.

From the end of August 1917, Russia was plunged into utter chaos following the failure of the offensive launched by the Kerenski government the previous month. Informed observers understood that the country would soon cease



Taken on 9 September 1917 in his office at the Grand Quartier Général In Compiègne, Colonel Maurice Duval, newly appointed by Général Pétain, head of the Aeronautical Division.

hostilities – something made official on 7 November 1917 after the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks – and that Germany would consequently have major reserves of troops available to re-assign to its Eastern front. As winter would not be suitable for an offensive, it was undoubtedly in the spring of 1918 that Germany, with guaranteed superiority in numbers, would attack. At the end of autumn 1917, be it in government circles or in public opinion, everybody was expecting a violent clash and Général Pétain organised his troops to contain it, firstly by requesting that the English extend their front line, then by withdrawing an army – the 3rd – from the front line, to be held as general reserves. Finally, he re-ordered the organisation of the deepest French defence lines: in case of attack, leave

only minimal troops sufficient to slow enemy progress and stop progress with a second line to which most troops had been withdrawn and from where they could be ready for combat out of the range of enemy artillery.

THE REORGANISATION OF AERIAL PRODUCTION

Duval's task would be to prepare French aviation for this future battle. He discovered that they had several advantages in the summer of 1917. French manufacturing was the best in the world, both in terms of aircraft and engines, and this gave French aviation a slight advantage in numbers over German aviation. Equally, within the units, he found the best combat aircraft: the SPAD XIII with the Hispano-Suiza 8B 200-hp engine, then the fastest fighter in the conflict, and the Breguet 14 bomber with the Renault 12F 300-hp engine, which could

One of the better types in service as Duval began his re-organisation, the Breguet 14 B2. This particular machine was flown by Capitaine Hubert de Geffrier, CO of Escadrille BR 107 in 1918. As well completing 116 bombing missions, this pilot also had a confirmed kill.

:Greg vanWyngarden

