

FRIENDLY FIRE!

Dieudonné Costes and Walter Bell, 8 July 1917

by Mike Kelsey

The use of the term 'friendly fire', to define the firing of weapons upon forces on the same side as those doing the firing, probably originated during the First World War, although instances of soldiers engaging their own side by mistake can be found practically as far back as the earliest recorded history of warfare. Thucydides describes such an event in 424 BC, during the Battle of Delion in the Peloponnesian War.

To give but one further example; at the Battle of Barnet in 1471, during the

Wars of the Roses, a friendly fire incident developed in foggy conditions when the Lancastrian Earl of Oxford's 'star with rays' emblem was mistaken for the Yorkist King Edward IV's 'sun in splendour' motif. This resulted in a volley of arrows which spread confusion and, most probably, cost the Lancastrians the battle.

The use of aircraft in war brought about a completely new range of friendly fire problems. Despite the use of national recognition markings, aircraft were frequently fired upon by their own troops, while in the air pilots also made mistakes in distinguishing friend from foe.

Within the RFC one of the more notorious incidents took place on 3 July 1917 when 2Lt Tom Littler of 1 Squadron, flying a Nieuport 23, was shot down and killed by Lt Lloyd Fleming of 46 Squadron, flying a Sopwith Pup. Just five days after this event there was another 'friendly fire' episode, although this one took place far away from the Western Front in the skies of Greece. On this occasion, fortunately, there were no casualties, and the incident has lapsed into obscurity. It is, however, worthy of note because, by good fortune, two of the participants (one on each side) have left accounts of it which form a striking comparison.

That such a comparison has not hitherto been made is not surprising. One of the accounts has been published in a French aviation magazine and subsequently in a US aviation journal, while the other is buried in a book which principally concerns elephant hunting in Africa!

Background

In March 1917, in response to raids by the German bombing squadron KG1, representatives from the RFC and the French Aviation Service drew up plans for the aerial defence of the city of Salonika. The French were also prompted to send a few new SPAD VII fighters to Salonika, and these arrived in April. Attempts by the RFC to obtain more modern aircraft were, however, unsuccessful. KG1 left the Balkan front in May 1917, but in June the Germans made a number of reconnaissance flights over Salonika that the RFC was unable to prevent.



Dieudonné Costes



Walter Bell.

:RAeCT 1594

their ceilings at around 15000 - 16000 feet. In a memo of 15 June, Lt Col Dawes wrote that the *record height we have attained with the De Havilland [DH2] in this Country being 16,300 feet....* He therefore had to pin his hopes on four Vickers Bullets due to *arrive within the next few days* as this type was able to *climb higher.*¹

The Vickers Bullets were to be allocated to 47 Squadron, which at that time was a Corps Squadron working with XII Corps of the British Salonika Force. Nonetheless, the Squadron's A Flight was specifically equipped as a scout flight. At the end of June, the flight was based at Hadzi-Junus, about 25 miles North of Salonika, and Captain W.D.M. Bell had just taken over from Captain E.E. Clarke as the Flight Commander.

Meanwhile, back in May the French Escadrille N391, which had been operating from Negocani in the Monastir sector, returned to its usual base at Topcin, not far from Salonika. This Escadrille was henceforth deployed to provide aerial defence for the city, albeit that it also conducted patrols up to the front line in the area of the River Vardar. At this time that river formed the boundary between the French and British ground forces in Macedonia. These arrangements meant that Escadrille N391 and 47 Squadron would potentially be operating in the same airspace.

Dramatis Personae

The first few SPAD VII's to arrive at Salonika were issued, in ones and twos, to Escadrilles N387, N390 and N391, where they were entrusted to the best pilots. The first pilot in Escadrille N391 to receive one of the new SPADs was Adj-Chef Dieudonné Costes. The aircraft in question was S.1083, which Costes flew from 9 May onwards. At this time Costes had one confirmed and one unconfirmed victory to his name. Such victories were hard to come by in the East and the most successful airman of the Escadrille in this respect was actually an observer/gunner, MdL Henri Astor, who had obtained four victories whilst flying with three different pilots.

In 1968 Costes recorded an interview with Jac Remise,