

# GERMAN AERIAL PHOTOGRAPHY IN WW1

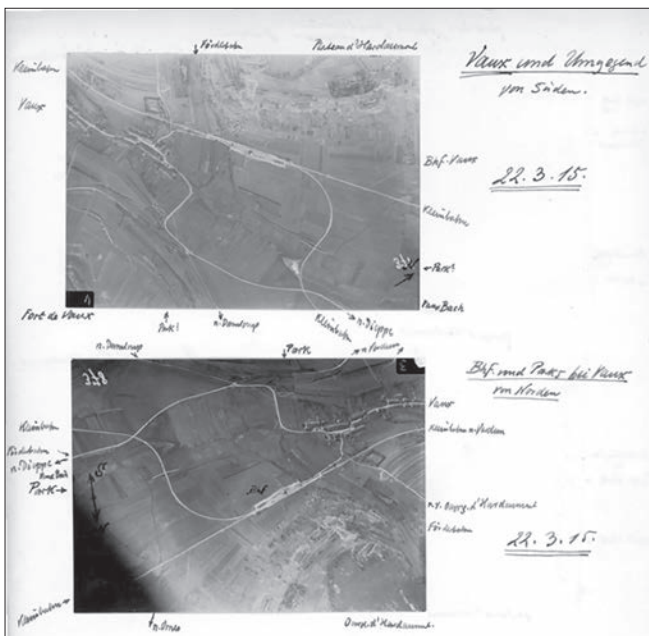
## THE TOOLS OF THEIR TRADE

by Peter Dye

The First World War witnessed rapid and far-reaching advances in aircraft technology and systems. Nowhere was this more evident than in the field of photography. By 1917, all the major powers had developed sophisticated arrangements for taking, processing, handling and interpreting aerial photographs. The German Air Service alone is estimated to have created over 1.5 million individual images; the number of prints produced from these images was considerably larger. Kommandeur der Flieger 14, based on the Isonzo Front in 1917, recorded each aerial photograph taken by subordinate units in a weekly report that detailed the date, location, number of prints and recipient. Between four and seven prints were produced from every plate for the use of corps, divisions and brigades.<sup>1</sup> Assuming that this pattern was repeated across all fronts, and time periods, the German Air Service produced somewhere between nine and ten million prints during the course of the war. As the intensity of the fighting on the Western Front was substantially higher than in Italy and noting that the British produced just over five million prints on the Western Front in nine months of 1918, it seems likely that the number of prints produced by the German Air Service exceeded 10 million.

Although the German aviators conducted aerial photography from the earliest weeks of the war, this was unplanned, infrequent and took place on an opportunity

*These two oblique images (numbered '371' and '378') are among the earliest German photographs of the French defences around Verdun. Taken by FFA 44 in March 1915, they show the railway station and sidings at Hardaumont, north of Fort Vaux.*



basis. Each Feldfliegerabteilung (FFA) had been issued with a pair of handheld cameras, but it was not until the frontlines settled down, in the autumn of 1914, that photographic reconnaissance became an important activity in the effort to identify the enemy's defence lines and key strongpoints. The early prints were not annotated in any way, but simply attached to a sheet of paper with hand-written interpretation on the surrounding edges, drawing attention to specific points of interest. In the Verdun area, this work was carried out primarily by two flying sections, FFA 25 and FFA 44, on behalf of No 3 Fortress Mapping Section. By February 1915, these two units had started to identify individual photographs by adding a handwritten number on the original glass plate

*One of the earliest (dated) aerial photographs was taken by FFA 1 on 11 February 1915. It was numbered '191', suggesting that the unit may have started numbering images as early as January 1915.*

