



RESOURCES FOR MODELERS

MODEL REVIEW

Sopwith Triplane, Eduards, 1:48 scale

By Nat Richards

The Sopwith Triplane has always fascinated me, more so than its more famous stablemates the Camel and the Pup even if it does look like a self-propelled Venetian Blind. That is why I was thrilled when Eduard added a 'Tripe to their growing list of 1/48 scale kits.

The Sopwith Triplane was designed in 1916, immediately after the Pup went into production. The general idea was to build a fighter with a better rate of climb, higher maneuverability, and better view from the cockpit, particularly downward. The resulting design featured a 110 horsepower engine (To put that in perspective, my Honda has 120 hp) which was 30 more than the Pup. Though the wing span of the 'Tripe was the same as the Pup, it actually had a little less wing area despite having 50% more wings. Fuselage construction was similar to the Pup, and the same horizontal stab was used (more about this later.)

The prototype Triplane's (serial # N500) first flight was in June 1916. Early trials were so successful that later that same month it crossed the channel to Dunkerque to join A Squadron Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS) for operational testing. The RNAS was separate from the Royal Flying Corp - which did not become the RAF until April 1918) and answered the Admiralty. Less than a week after its first flight an order was placed for 50 machines for the RFC and another 115 for the RNAS (these machines were serial numbered N 5350 - N5389 and N5420 - N5494) and later another 20 (N6290 - N6309) and further still (N533 - N538~. An agreement was reached that the RFC would turn over its Triplane order in exchange for the SPAD VII's that the RNAS was about to take delivery of from France. Interestingly, after these orders were placed, there was a second prototype built (N 504).

By November 1916 there were four Triplanes on strength at A Sqn (N500, N504, N5420 and N5422). At some point in December 1917, A Squadron was renamed I Squadron. Operationally, the bulk of the Triplanes to see service were with four RNAS Squadrons: 1, 8, 10 and 12 - also called Naval 1, Naval 8, Naval 10 and Naval 12. The Triplane entered service with Naval 1 and 8 in February; 1917, with 10 in May, and 12 in June. One machine was sent to Russia for evaluation while another 1, or 18 (the sources don't agree on this) were delivered to the French Navy which also operated a 'Tripe squadron at Dunkerque.

During this time the engine was changed from the 110 Clerget to the 130 hp model providing a further boost in performance, particularly rate of climb. This combined with the change to a smaller horizontal stab and elevators to improve diving performance and control response. The impressive performance of this design inspired the Imperial German Air Force to examine a captured machine and have many of its features incorporated into a new design - the Fokker DR I. Most 'Tripes were armed with a single Vickers machine gun, while the last 30 (N6290 - N6309) carried two guns, some additional aircraft were retro-fitted in the field to this standard.

How did the Tripe perform? The following is quoted from the book "Naval Eight" - "At 6:45 pm on April 7, 1917, a Sopwith Triplane, working alone attacked eleven hostile machines, almost all Albatross Scouts, NE or Arras. He completely outclassed the whole patrol of hostile machines, diving through them and climbing above them.. The officers who witnessed the combat report that the maneuvering of the Sopwith Triplane completely outclassed that of the Albatross Scout." This pilot was Fl. Lt. Robert Little who spoke glowingly of the handling of the aircraft.

Perhaps the most famous triplanes were those of C flight - also known as "The Black Flight" of Naval 10. Under the command of Fl. Lt. Raymond Collishaw this all Canadian flight of four pilots (though there were at least seven different machines used) destroyed at least 87 German aircraft between the time they went operational in May and July. The Sopwith Triplane was not invincible by any stretch of the imagination, at least 50 machines were lost in combat.

By mid-summer 1917. the RNAS began to receive newer and higher performing aircraft, and the Triplane began to be replaced. By November, 1917 it had disappeared from all front line units and soldiered on in training and other auxiliary roles.

Today there are only two original Sopwith Triplanes still in existence. N5912 is on display at the RAF museum at Hendon. And N5486, the machine sent to Russia for evaluation is on display there. Another factor that has helped the image of the Sopwith Triplane endure is that there are a large number of replicas around, some flying, some static. One of the more recent replicas is that built by Northern Aeroplane Workshops from 1973 to 1989. Now part of the Shuttleworth Trust; this aircraft is flyable, and takes short flights during the various flying days at this 'Living Museum'. Jokingly referred to as an "exceptionally late production model" this aircraft is accurate in all respects to the original. They also enjoyed the support and assistance of Sir Thomas Sopwith himself, prior to his death at age 104.

The Model

To the best of my knowledge there have only been three previous models of the Tripe. Revell's effort from the 1960's in 1/72 scale is a generally accurate, and pleasing model that is definitely worth the build. In 1/48 scale the Aurora (and later K&B) kit was has not been available for nearly 30 years, and was not exceptionally accurate in shape or size. Koster's 1/48 scale vacuformed kit is exquisite, accurate, and rather hard to build.

Eduards offering is magnificent! Crisply molded and free of flash. Actually, there have been two releases of this kit, the first was kit # 8014 while the newer release is kit # 8020. Besides offering different markings, the newer release also offers a fret of 6 resin parts including a copy of the later (smaller) horizontal stab, and two Vickers guns... this allows you to make one of the last production lot (N6290 - N6309) while the earlier kit (8014) only represented the "Standard" machines. There are 37 plastic parts and 40 photo-etched brass.

Assembly is easy enough. though the instruction sheet will be of little help. Examine the fit carefully before assembly, it is not as easy as it looks at first. First thing I would recommend is spend some time carefully drilling out the location holes for the wing struts and wire rigging. When you assemble the model it is critical that the stagger between the top and middle wings is identical to that of the middle-bottom wing. There is a wire that connects the ailerons on all three wings. If the stagger is off, this wire will not be straight. Also it is important to note that the middle wings do not attach directly to the fuselage but there is a stub fitting attached to the inboard strut and the wing root attaches to that.

From the latter kit (8020) you can build either the early or later production models. The difference being the horizontal stab. By using a Aeroclub 110 hp engine. you can also model the two prototypes.

The markings for the kit include two of the "Black Flight" machines, Collishaws "Black Maria" and "Black Prince." The decals are rather thin, and the set that came with my kit has the roundels out of register. but that is easy to replace. A coat of clear over the other decals helped them.

The question now turns to color. Most Triplanes were painted in PC 10 which is a reddish-brown (about the color of a Hershey bar), this color did vary significantly as it was mixed locally, so there is no hard, fast reference color. The problem is that, despite the fact that the box art show the aircraft in the Brown PC 10. the instructions tell you to paint the upper surfaces green! Some Tripes were painted PC 12 (Green) but this was generally later. Certainly, the "Black Flight" machines were PC 10. with clear doped undersurfaces and a gloss black cowl, forward decking, wheels and undercart. Collishaw's machines also carried a black tail fin to identify him as a flight leader.

I spent about 15 hours in the construction and about another 5 in rigging - remember, it is important to plan the rigging before you build the model! I used 1/4 lb fishing line for the rigging. Using one end as an anchor, and drawing it through a hole drilled all the way through the wings and cementing it with superglue. The superglue fills the rest of the hole, and you touch up the paint.

All in all. a very enjoyable model! A hardy well done to both Sir Thomas for his Triplane and to Mr. Eduard for the model.