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Sopwith Camel



Successful and Versatile British Fighter of WWI

By [Stephen Sherman](#), Aug. 2001. Updated April 16, 2012.

It had wicked torque and killed a lot of novice British pilots, but the Sopwith Camel (5,490 produced) shot down more German aircraft (1,294) than any other Allied plane.

Its name derived from the slight hump forward of the cockpit. Its twin 30 caliber Vickers machine guns enabled it to destroy its (by WW2 or modern standards) flimsy opponents.

Development

The Camel grew out of the Sopwith Pup, a little fighter introduced in 1916, but which was soon outclassed by the German Albatroses and Halberstadts. Sopwith's chief designer, Herbert Smith, began work on the Pup's successor in late 1916, and by December, the prototype "F.1" was ready to fly. Sopwith built several prototypes:

- F.1 - powered by 110-hp (82-kW) Clerget 9Z rotary engine, first flown by Harry Hawker at Brooklands
- F.1/1 - tapered wings and broad interplane struts
- F.1/2 - uncertain
- F.1/3 - powered by 130-hp (97-kW) Clerget 9B, test-flown at Martlesham Heath in March, 1917
- N517 - ordered by the Admiralty
- N518 - powered by new AR.1 150hp (112kW) rotary. In production, this engine became the BR.1 (Bentley Rotary) and powered the Camels delivered to the Navy.

In appearance and design, the plane was not revolutionary. A biplane combining a distinct dihedral in the lower wing with a flat upper wing, it did have a distinctive

"tapered gap." The fuselage was a wooden, box-like structure, covered with aluminum up front, plywood-covered around the cockpit, and then fabric-covered back to the tail.

With its center of gravity very far forward (the engine, fuel tank, guns, and pilot were all in the front third of the plane), the aircraft was tricky to fly, but very maneuverable for a skilled pilot. While 413 Camel pilots were shot down in combat, 385 were lost in non-combat related situations, many due to the Camel's difficult handling

Specifications of the F.1 Camel:

- Engine: 130hp Clerget 9-cylinder rotary engine
- Max. Speed: 117 MPH at sea level
- Ceiling: 19,000 feet
- Climb Rate: 10 minutes to reach 10,000 feet
- Weight: 929 lb. empty, 1,453 lb. fully loaded
- Wingspan: 28 feet
- Length: 18 ft 9 in
- Height: 8 ft 6 in
- Wing area: 231 sq ft
- Guns: Two synchronized .303 inch Vickers machine guns. The Camel was the first British fighter to mount twin forward-firing machine guns side-by-side, a natural arrangement that became standard for the RAF.
- Bombs: Four 20-lb. Cooper bombs

Firms that Produced the Sopwith Camel

- Sopwith Aviation Company,
- Ruston Proctor Co. (*a tractor manufacturer that built over 1,000 Camels*),
- Portholme Aerodrome Ltd. (*a short-lived company, located in Huntingdon, site of Portholme - the largest meadow in England, site of many airshows in the early days of aviation*),
- Boulton & Paul Ltd. (*a maker of prefabricated wooden buildings, including the huts for Scott's Antarctic expedition*),
- British Caudron Co. Ltd.,
- Clayton & Shuttleworth Ltd. (*known for steam rollers and traction engines*),
- Hooper & Co. Ltd.,
- March, Jones & Cribb Ltd.,
- Nieuport & General Aircraft Ltd.,

- Wm Beardmore & Co. Ltd. (*a naval shipbuilder of Dalmuir, Glasgow*),
- Fairey Aviation Co. Ltd., and
- Pegler & Co. Ltd..

Camel Units

No. 3, 4, 6, 8, and 9 Naval Squadrons were among the first to receive Camels. On July 4, 1917, Camels of No. 4 Squadron attacked a flight of German Gotha bombers over Ostend, destroying at least one - the Sopwith Camel's first aerial victories.

That same month, No. 70 Squadron of the RFC also received Camels, soon followed by No. 45 and No. 43 Squadrons.

Camel Squadrons - Autumn 1918			
Squadron No.	Front	Airfield	Comments
3	France	Lechelle	-
46	France	Busigny	-
54	France	Merchin	-
65	France	Bissegham	-
70	France	Droglandt	-
73	France	Malencourt	-
80	France	Bertry	-
151	France	Bancourt	-
152	France	Carvin	-
201	France	La Targette	former No. 1 Naval
203	France	Bruille	former No. 3 Naval
204	France	Heule	former No. 4 Naval
209	France	Bruille	former No. 9 Naval, Roy Brown
210	France	Boussieres	former No. 10 Naval
213	France	Bergues	former No. 13 Naval, Ray Collishaw
43 - IAF	France	Bettancourt	-
28	Italy	Treviso	-

66	Italy	San Pietro	Billy Barker
150	Greece	Salonica	-
222	Greece	Thasos	-
44	England	Hainault Farm	-
50	England	Bekesbourne	-
51	England	Marham	-
78	England	Sutton's Farm	-
112	England	Throwley	-
143	England	Detling	-