

# THE WAR IN THE AIR

In 1914 the aeroplane was a very new idea. It was only 11 years since the **Wright brothers** had successfully flown the first plane in the USA and only 5 since Louis Bleriot had managed to fly across the Channel. Although by 1914 all the main armies had planes, the military did not see much use for them beyond sending them out on reconnaissance. A British spotter plane detected the approaching German army at the Battle of Mons, for example.



*Early bombing technique*

Soon, though, the pilots began to experiment with ways of attacking the enemy. At first they dropped missiles such as darts and bricks, or simple hand held bombs on the enemy below; or they used pistols to shoot at each other. Then they tried fitting machine guns to their planes. There was a problem though. It was difficult in a moving plane to shoot at anything, except straight ahead – and that ran the risk of damaging your own propeller.

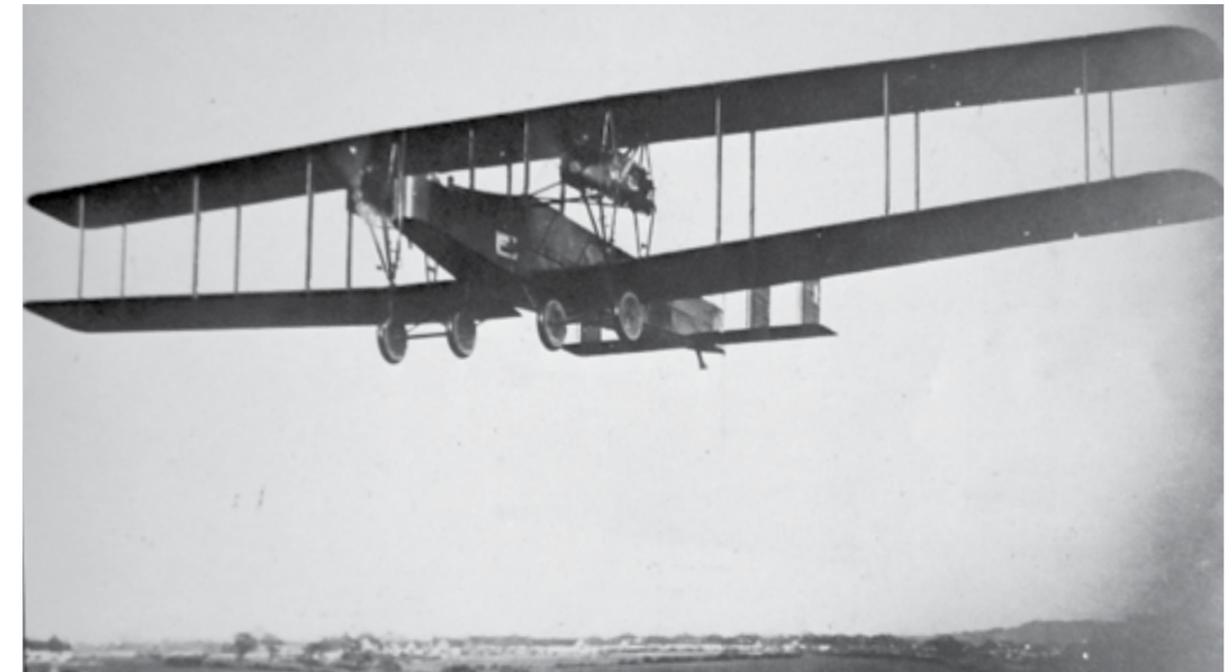
Various ideas were tried, but it was the Germans who first came up with the answer, thanks to a Dutch engineer called **Fokker**. The **interrupter gear** allowed pilots to shoot straight ahead without shooting their own propellers off. For a few months in 1915-16 the Germans ruled the skies over the Western Front, until a Fokker plane was shot down and its secret discovered.

Planes developed very rapidly during the war. In 1914 they were frail constructions of wood, wire and canvas with dodgy engines and no means of communicating with each other. By the end of the war planes were fast and well armed, equipped with radios and navigation devices and capable of much longer flights. Some were developed as **bombers**



*Billy Bishop and his Nieuport plane*

with a range of several hundred miles, and used to attack enemy towns and industries on both sides. Others were adapted for **use at sea with the navy**; some were fitted with **cameras to photo enemy positions**. The pilots who flew the planes, particularly the fighters, became heroes. Unlike the grind of trench warfare, the war in the air offered stories of individual bravery. **Air aces**, those who had more than 5 confirmed “kills”, became heroes in the newspapers, men such as Mick Mannock and the Canadian Billy Bishop, the Frenchman Guynemer and the German von Richthofen [the Red Baron].



*Handley-Page bomber*

Another aspect of the war in the air was the use of **Airships** or **Zeppelins**. The Germans had made great progress in developing airships thanks to the work of Count Zeppelin and from 1915 they used them in air raids over Britain. Because they flew very high, they were difficult to shoot down and caused considerable damage and alarm. However, as air defences improved with searchlights and anti-aircraft guns, they began to suffer more losses. They were also vulnerable to the weather; in October 1917 in a storm, eleven Zeppelins were destroyed by the wind, either crash landed or disappeared. That was the last big raid. The British also used Airships, particularly for spotting German submarines in the channel and the North Sea.