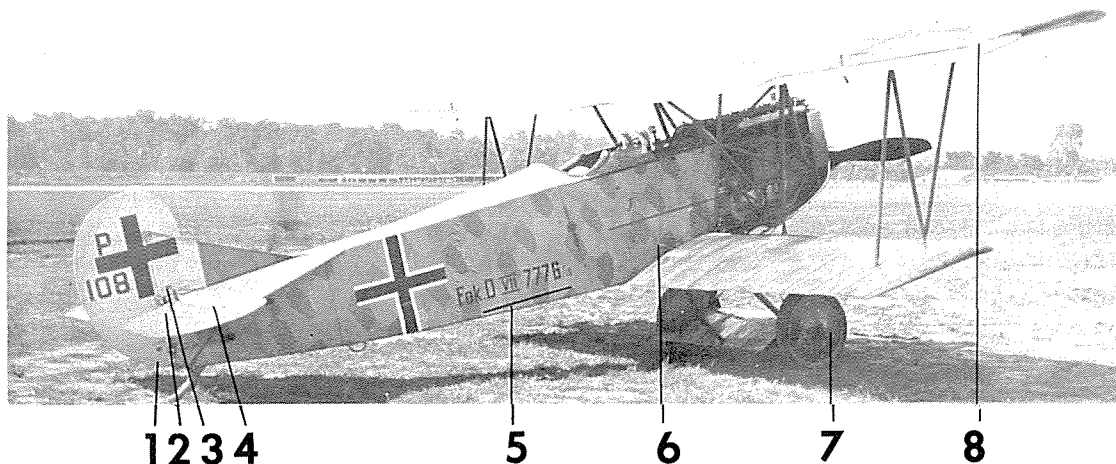


PETER M. BOWERS

WARTIME 卐 卐 卐 卐 卐 SERIAL NUMBERS



In a previous issue of the Journal Member Ross Fern did the model builders a service by clearing up the discrepancies that resulted when several plastic kit manufacturers brought out models of Richthofen's Fokker Triplane with different German military serial numbers. Those in question were the (correct) 425/17 and the erroneous 2009/17. This latter was actually the factory serial number, called c/n or contractor's number by present day researchers. The c.n was correct in itself, but was misapplied as the military number.

How could this situation have come about? A brief study of how the various serial numbers were handled in those days will give a very logical answer. First, take the military serial number, which appears with other lettering as Item 5 in the above photograph of the Fokker D.VII, and is shown enlarged in detail photo "A". Other manufacturers applied this in various locations on the fuselage or empennage, but Fokker Company standardized on the location shown, i.e., on each side of the fuselage between the cockpit and the German Cross. The Cross illustrated is Type "E" (if you use the Handy-Dandy Bowers system of identification for this controversial subject as published in the JOURNAL of April-June 1957, p. 107, and later in AIR PROGRESS, Spring 1958.)

This number appears as FOK.D.VII 7776/18. It identifies the airplane as a Fokker of the D-type (or single-seater fighter biplane, see footnote *) and was the seventh model of the D-type procured from that manufacturer. Further, it is the 7776th D-type airplane purchased during the fiscal year of 1918.

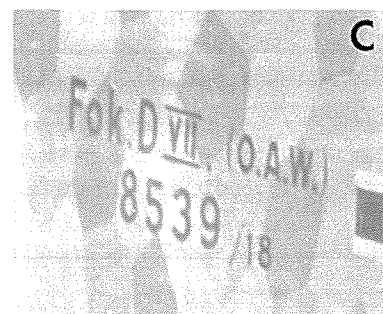
Notice that here the number was painted on fabric and would be the first item, after the insignia, to

be torn off of the fuselage by souvenir hunters. And this is probably what happened to the military numbers of Richthofen's Triplane. With all of the fabric torn off, and the only other logical place for the military number being on the nameplate, (which was attached to the easily removable engine cowl), the remains would be completely devoid of a military serial number.

Now examine the application of the other, the c/n number. Since production tooling during WWI was not what it is today, with 100% interchangeability and tolerances of .001" (that laughter in the background is from the Members who have worked in today's aircraft plants), the components were usually reworked to fit at the assembly line, and more often than not would not fit the next airplane on the production line.

Consequently, the serial number of the completed airplane was put on practically every removable part so that they could all be reassembled into the proper airplane later. It was the German custom to dismantle the planes after factory test flights and to ship them to the Front by train rather than to fly them there.

Also, it was the Fokker custom to use the c/n of the airplane on each of the components while other manufacturers preferred to use the model number and serial number on each of the various components. These numbers were applied to the basic structure by methods that made them difficult to remove, such as branding into the wooden parts and die-stamping into metal parts, and were painted on exterior fabric. Small wonder, then, that some technician sorting out the few parts of Richthofen's Triplane which actually

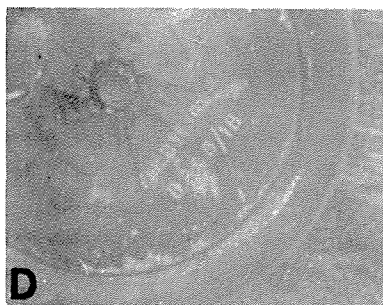


did get shipped back to the intelligence center jumped to the conclusion that the serial number of the erstwhile Triplane was 2009, and wrote it into his report that way. 2009 appeared in a lot more places than did the military number which souvenir hunters had long since "liberated".

To get back to the D.VII markings. The D.VII was also built in two plants of the Albatros Company, and their products were appropriately identified to distinguish them from those built by Fokker. In each case, the identification of the licensee appeared in parentheses after the basic airplane designation, such as Fok. D.VII (Alb) for the main Albatros plant (Photo "B"), and as Fok. D.VII (OAW) for the Ost-deutsch Albatros Werke (Photo "C"). This was standard practice for licensee-built aircraft throughout the German aircraft industry during WWI.

The most interesting thing about the photo of D.VII 7776/18 (Or P-108, to call it by its McCook Field Project Number, used while it was undergoing tests there after the War) is that the c/n's and serial numbers on the various components indicate that not only were parts of several D.VII's used, but also these were built by different manufacturers! The original photographs of this taken at McCook Fd. show this clearly. The fine detail is lost in this half-tone reproduction, but the locations are indicated by numbers and arrows for discussion in the text.

The numbers show that the vertical tail surface and fuselage are Fokker-built. Three black c/n's can be identified; 3604 on the rudder (1); 3626 on the fin (3); and 3628 on the fuselage (6). Late-type OAW identifications, which use the full military designation and serial number painted in white, appear in adjacent locations on elevator and stabilizer (2) and (4), on the wheel disc (7), and the tip of the

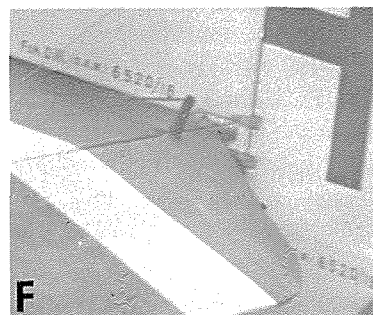


right aileron (8). Because of the flat camera angles, none of the OAW lettering can be read except that on the wheel disc, (Photo "D") as "Fok. D.VII (OAW) 8348/18. No other white lettering is visible on the wings, so they may have been Fokker-built with the appropriate small black c/n's and would not be visible in the photographs.

When OAW first started building Fokker D.VII's, they identified the various components by model and serial number in the established manner, but used



Arabic figures instead of Roman numerals for the model (Photo "E").



Later applications reverted to the standard Roman numerals (Photo "F") and appeared in black when applied to standardized white areas such as fin and rudder.



The Fokker c/n's on the fin and rudder of P-108 are visible in the enlarged detail photo (Photo "G") and along with the white OAW lettering on the stabilizer and elevators.

Footnote: As originally adopted, "D" stood for single seat biplane fighter. The monoplanes were "E"s and the triplanes were "DR's". By the late summer of 1918, the latter two designations were dropped and the Fokker E.V monoplane became the D.VIII. And when the Fokker triplane originally appeared, the designation "F" was applied to the first three airplanes, but this was changed to Dr., for Dreidecker or triplane, by the time the production models entered service. This applied only to fighter-type aircraft, since triplane observation and bomber types operated under the standard "C" and "G" classifications. Richthofen was NOT shot down in Fokker F.I 102/17, which he used for but a short time in 1917. He was killed in Dr.I 425/17, c/n 2009.

FACTORY SERIAL ON RUDDER. (FOKKER)

MILITARY SERIAL ON ELEVATOR. (OAW)

FACTORY SERIAL ON FIN. (FOKKER)

MILITARY SERIAL ON STABILIZER. (OAW)

MILITARY SERIAL ON FUSELAGE. (ALL)

FACTORY SERIAL ON FUSELAGE. (FOKKER)

MILITARY SERIAL ON WHEEL DISC. (OAW)

MILITARY SERIAL ON AILERON. (OAW)