

THIS IS a revised edition of the 2011 publication, one of the features of which is the claim that the Royal Flying Corps made a significant contribution to the deployment of the British Expeditionary Force in August 1914. Indeed, the author, Terrence Finnegan, states that, "without ... employing aerial reconnaissance roles, the German advance on Mons and subsequently Paris would have resulted in drastically different outcomes - possibly defeat".

What Terrence Finnegan regards as possibly the most significant day in RFC reconnaissance history was 22 August 1914. British cavalry had been on the move in Belgium since 20 August and had pushed as far as Binche, some sixteen miles east of Mons, without encountering the enemy. The RFC had spotted elements of the German Army heading through Louvain to the south-west of Brussels, but was unable to estimate the strength of the forces as they stretched beyond the visual distance. The next day the weather was unsuitable for the aircraft to operate (there was a ground mist), but they were soon back in the air, as Field Marshal Sir John French's Director for Intelligence recalled: "He [Brigadier-General David Henderson in command of the RFC in the field] consequently sent out a reconnaissance on the 22nd, whether one or more machines I do not remember, but he certainly let me know that day that a long column, correctly estimated at one corps, had been seen moving along the Brussels-Ninove road, which on reaching Ninove had bent south-westwards towards Grammont. Putting two and two together we came to the

conclusion that this was the II Corps and the report showed very clearly that our position on the Mons Canal was likely to be outflanked."

Lieutenant Edward Spears, the British liaison officer at the French V Army headquarters, appreciated just what this meant: "It [the German column] was bound to outflank us. Now we knew. No possible doubt could subsist. The German manoeuvre stood fully revealed."

This critical information was taken to French by Henderson. According to Terrence Finnegan this information was probably the most fruitful of the whole war. It enabled the British forces, Terrence Finnegan argues, "to keep ahead of the German manoeuvres and averted a catastrophe".

This to a degree was confirmed by French, who wrote: "The intelligence reports which constantly arrived, with the results of cavalry and aircraft reconnaissance ... left us in no doubt as to the direction of the German advance ... This was our first practical experience in the use of aircraft for reconnaissance purposes ... The number of our aeroplanes was then limited and their power of observation were not as developed or accurate as they afterward became. Nevertheless, they kept close touch with the enemy, and their reports proved of the greatest value."

Another benefit brought to the BEF from the use of aircraft in reconnaissance, French explained, was that it relieved the cavalry of that function. "There can be no doubt indeed," he wrote, "that, even then [in August 1914] the presence and cooperation of aircraft saved the very frequent use of small cavalry patrols and detached supports. This enabled

the latter arm to save horse flesh and concentrate their power more on actual combat and fighting and to this is greatly due the marked success which attended the operations of the cavalry during the Battle of Mons and the subsequent retreat."

Shooting the Front details how aerial reconnaissance developed over the course of the war. Its effect on each of the major battles is described in chronological order, enabling the reader to follow the course of the war as well as the evolution in the sophistication of aerial reconnaissance and the vital role it played. This included spotting for artillery. The range of artillery had greatly increased and visual observation from the ground had ceased to be highly effective. All that changed with the advent of aerial reconnaissance. Not only did aerial photographs provide artillery commanders with precise targets, the aircraft could also report on the accuracy of the artillery bombardments.

Of course taking photographs is one thing, interpreting the images produced is another altogether, and the author devotes due space to this topic. He also describes the aircraft and the cameras that were used. It was, in fact, the photographic equipment available at the time which limited the effectiveness of aerial reconnaissance.

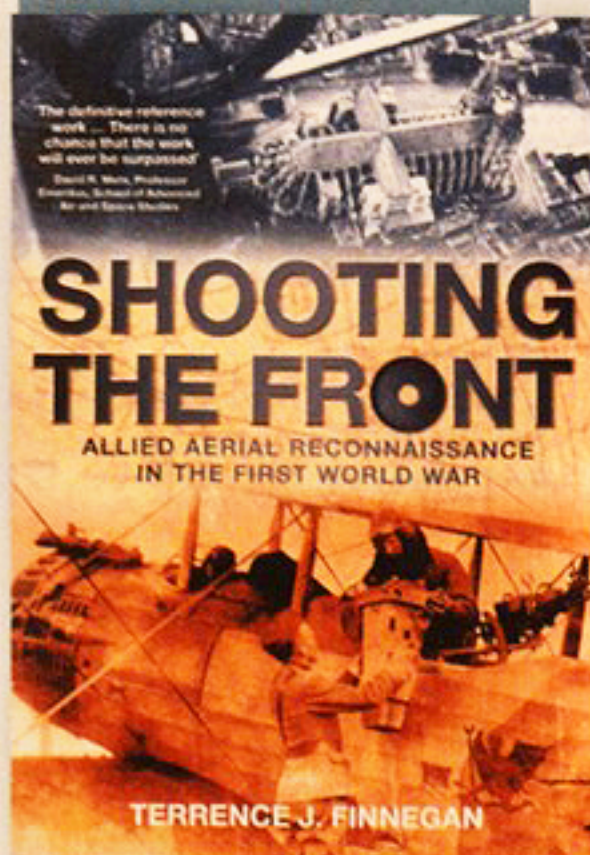
The importance of aerial photography has probably been overlooked amid the graphic accounts of the conditions and the fighting of the First World War. This is no longer the case, thanks to this exceptional book.

REVIEWED BY JOHN GREHAN.

BOOK OF THE MONTH

SHOOTING THE FRONT

Allied Aerial Reconnaissance in the First World War
Terrence J. Finnegan



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