

HEROIC AIRMEN ARE KEY TO VICTORY

Picture: 2ND LT D MCLELLAN/IWM VIA GETTY IMAGES

COMMENTARY

By H. G. Wells

IT IS a fact of experience that wars do end. Heaven forbid that I should enrage the readers of The Daily Mail by suggesting again that it is well we should know the peace we want in order to be sure that we get it.

What I have to write about here is not peace at all but a factor that may contribute very powerfully to end the war. It is a factor I have not seen nor heard discussed as decisive, and so probably it is one that may be new to a number of people. It is the factor of what one might call first-class airman power.

What I want to do here is merely to set out certain considerations which the reader may judge for himself. The first of these is that though anybody who can ride a motor-bicycle can probably learn to fly a fairly safe type of aeroplane by daylight in good weather, only a very exceptional sort of young man is any good as an air fighter.

QUIET AND DEADLY

The other day I had the pleasure of meeting one of our most brilliant airmen. He was a very quiet, fair young man in his early 20s, a little apologetic in his manner, and it was only by the happy chances of the conversation that it came out that he had been in over 150 air fights, that he had certainly killed 40-odd German airmen in single combat, and that there were perhaps another dozen

whom he had sent down. It was suddenly borne in upon me just how supremely important high personal quality is in air fighting. Von Richthofen, the Red Baron, claimed to have killed 60 Allied aviators.

Good air fighting must be a very rare art and it can be very little good to put up second-class men to fight against first-class men.

My aviator told me some particulars of the air fighting that is going on today. A really first-class air fighter is capable of the most amazing tricks. Looping the loop is but the beginning of his collection of stunts and devices.

He will spin over sideways; he will fly upside down; he will sideslip, drop and dodge and double in a fashion that no one would have dared to dream of in 1914.

The side that can go on producing this very rare product, the first-class air fighter, longest and most abundantly, is going to chase the other side out of the air.

I am told on the best authority, and I believe firmly, that the side that can dominate the air can dominate the artillery conflict and the whole ground battle.

It follows that to beat the other side in producing air fighters is a certain way to win the war.

It is no good for either side to produce hundreds of thousands of common aviators, if the other side has a surplus of these special fighters who can put down machines by the score. That would be only sending up pigeons to be shot at. On the other hand,



A rare breed: Officers of No 1 Squadron, RAF with SE5a biplanes at Clamarais aerodrome, near Ypres, July 1918

if either side does possess that air superiority, then it can send its common, ordinary aviators by the hundred, properly protected by fighters, to raid, bomb and destroy with impunity.

I may be blinded by patriotic prejudice, but I have a strong belief that Great Britain, North France and North Italy can all of them produce a larger proportion of this rare sort of young man than Germany.

Our airmen are naturally very chary of under-estimating the enemy, but they do agree in telling me that in the case of certain rather difficult turns and manoeuvres our fighting men can all do as a matter of course things which the German fighter regards as

exceptional accomplishments. We have reckoned upon all sorts of shortages as possible factors in the overthrow of German imperialism. Have we reckoned fully upon this possibility of a shortage of air fighters?

FIGHTERS ARE THE KEY

Is it not possible to press the air war so hard, so to concentrate on the air attack, as to bring the German air arm to breaking point?

It is possible that people's minds are sometimes over-exercised by the thought of air raids and counter-raids.

Only the side that attains a supremacy in air fighting will ever be able to abolish enemy raids and do what it

likes in the way of raiding. Although such visitors may distress nervous Londoners, the more men and energy the Germans put into Gothas and other bombing machines rather than into actual fighting aeroplanes, the better it will be in the long run for us.

If we press the fighting side — which is the vital side — if, that is to say, we ransack our vast reserves of young men

throughout the world to find and train and use every one who has the rare and peculiar gifts that make a first-class air fighter, irrespective of social position or any other secondary issue, then it seems to me that a victorious end to this war must come.

It will come sooner or later according to the energy and expedition with which we and our allies set about this task.

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