

4. THE AIR BATTLE OVER VERDUN



A French Nieuport 17 and German Fokker E.III face off over a reconstituted battlefield
Verdun_0001.jpg © Jean-Marie Mangeot

Aerial combat over the Verdun battlefield can be considered the first real "air battle" in history, since it opposed two fleets of combat aircraft fighting to achieve superiority in a given airspace. It was also the first time that this idea of air superiority was acknowledged and applied by the armed forces of the two adversaries.

Aviation pioneer and visionary Clément Ader had already described the use of combat aircraft for fighter, bomber and tactical reconnaissance missions in his 1911 book, *L'Aviation Militaire*. But even at the start of the war, just about everybody in the military had considered aviation as more of a sport than a potential weapon.

Germans achieve air superiority

The Germans deployed nearly 280 airplanes around Verdun in early 1916 to destroy French observation systems, especially balloons. Against them, France could only muster about 70 planes, hardly enough to contain the German offensive. Because of the qualitative and quantitative superiority of the German fleet, French squadrons could no longer reach the battlefield, and Germany's big guns were destroying their airfields. For the first time in military history, the German forces had achieved "mastery of the air", or air superiority.

The French would riposte however. On February 28, 1916, General Pétain sent a short message to Commander Tricornot de Rose, one that would echo through the years: "*De Rose, I am blind, sweep the skies for me.*" Pétain placed de Rose in full charge of aviation for the Verdun sector. Commander de Rose organized an independent combat group, which would be operational in just two weeks.

These pilots were assigned a very simple mission: their aircraft were organized in patrols, and they were to systematically find, engage and shoot down the enemy.

That triggered the beginning of a merciless air battle between German and French pilots in the skies over Verdun – the first large-scale air battle in history. Whoever could master the sky would have an advantage in winning the battle on the ground.

New tactics, new techniques

While solitary "dogfights" tended to disappear because of this new organization, a number of aces would still emerge at Verdun, including Charles Nungesser, Georges Guynemer, Auguste Le Révérend¹ and Jean Navarre, the "Sentinel of Verdun".

Results were not long in coming: the Germans stopped attacking so they could protect their own airplanes and balloons. While Germany's air force was technically and numerically superior at the beginning of the year, by June 1916 the two forces were more evenly balanced.

All aspects of aviation logged steady technical progress. The "war in the air" was also waged in design departments and factories. Each new machine rolled out of the factory had to be better than the enemy's latest model. Another fierce battle took shape, this time in terms of technical performance, starting with weapons, especially the ability to fire a machine gun through the spinning propeller, and of course in engine power and handling qualities. Marcel Dassault contributed to this effort with his higher-performance Éclair propeller.

1. Auguste le Révérend joined the company Avions Marcel Bloch in the 1930s, and became the company's general manager in 1951 when Marcel Dassault entered the political arena.



Nieuport 17 aircraft equipped with an Eclair propeller
Verdun_0004-1.jpg © Jean-Marie Mangeot

A turning point in French military aviation

The air battle over Verdun would mark a turning point in French military aviation. French armed forces quickly learned their lesson, especially in the use of pursuit planes (subsequently called fighters). A new organization was instituted on May 21, 1916, emphasizing the importance of achieving air superiority.

In fact, everything deployed during the battle of Verdun, including patrol flights of pursuit planes, constant patrols, division into air sectors, etc., had already been developed, in theory, right from the first months of the war. But Verdun, by placing France in extreme danger, encouraged leaders to urgently deploy these innovative arrangements.

The battle of Verdun also clearly reflected the now predominant role played by aviation in war. It was the first land battle that started with a fight for air superiority. As Marshal Pétain would say a few years later: "*Verdun, as has been repeated often since then, was really the 'crucible that forged French aviation.'*"