

Shooting the Front: Allied Aerial Reconnaissance and Photographic Interpretation on the Western Front—World War I

Col. Terrence J. Finnegan, USAF (Ret.). Washington, DC: National Defense Intelligence College, 2006. 508 pages, footnotes, illustrations, bibliography, index. Foreword by Gen. George A. Joulwan.

Reviewed by Thomas Boghardt

World War I gave birth to modern intelligence. Before 1914, nations like Great Britain, France and the United States possessed only minuscule intelligence gathering capabilities. By 1918, their various secret services had matured into permanent, large-scale organizations that conducted a variety of sophisticated intelligence operations. Code-breaking, espionage and covert action in World War I have attracted scholarly attention, but the subject of aerial reconnaissance has remained a gap in historical research—until now.

Terrence Finnegan's *Shooting the Front* is a massive, expertly written and richly illustrated history of British, French and American aerial surveillance on the Western Front. The book's findings are based on meticulous archival research, especially in the National Archives in College Park, Maryland, for the American side, and London's National Archives for the British. Finnegan's prose is precise and clear, and he provides the necessary historical context to make his work accessible to expert and layman alike. The photographs of the battlefield, surveillance aircraft, and deception devices—as well as maps, line



Passchendaele, 16th of June 1917



Passchendaele, 5th of December 1917

The products of WW I reconnaissance, these comparative images of Passchendaele, Belgium, and the disposition map (original in color) on the following page, for example, may look familiar today....

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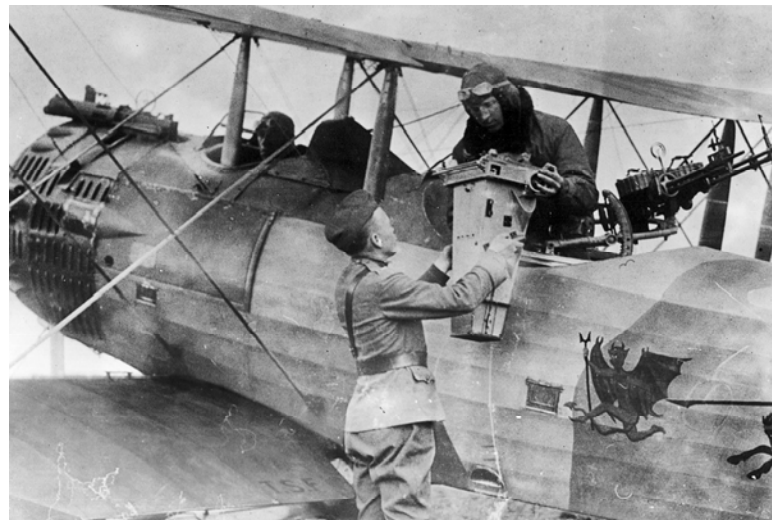
drawings and other items—form an integral part of the book and complement the text perfectly.

Shooting the Front is divided into four parts: the first part chronologically describes the evolution of aerial surveillance during the Great War. Part two details how Allied intelligence matured in conjunction with aerial photography, with a particular focus on photographic interpretation. The third part addresses the challenges aerial reconnaissance faced on the battlefield. And part four outlines its professional legacy. As aerial surveillance evolved and was refined throughout the war, it became a critical tool for all combatants in the mostly static battlefield of the Western Front.

Indeed, photographic images provided crucial intelligence to prepare artillery barrages and validate damage in the wake of an attack. Finnegan also points out that intelligence cooperation was critical for the Allies, but contrary to popular notions, the Americans actually worked more closely with the French than with the British (thus mirroring the intimate US-French relationship on the battlefield). Last but not least, Allied intelligence officers could be extremely inventive when faced with a particular challenge; in order to confuse German aviators, the Allies formed camouflage units to disguise



...but the human and technological dimensions seem distant. (Here an officer receives a camera and its photographic prize to be processed in the field and its pieces assembled painstakingly, by hand, into a (hopefully) revealing mosaic (next page).



emplacements and create dummy devices, such as wooden tanks, to convey the presence of armor where there was none. The French enlisted Cubist artists who put their expertise in abstract art to good use in camouflage and appropriately chose a chameleon as their insignia. Allied intelligence also became skilled at counterdeception, for instance, by generating three-dimensional portrayals of the terrain through dual optics, which would endow the interpreter with perspective and depth, a technique that could occasionally penetrate German camouflage efforts.



Finnegan concludes that, for all its horrors, trench warfare on the Western Front begot “one of the most important sources of military information in the 20th century.” While technology and military strategy caused aerial reconnaissance to undergo many changes after 1918, its underlying principles remained basically the same—reconnoitering defense and infrastructure installations within enemy borders. The strategies developed in World War I were most recently applied during the Gulf War of 1991 when the US-led coalition succeeded in outflanking the Iraqi positions, thanks to intelligence provided by space-borne imagery. The legacy of World War I aerial reconnaissance is by no means negligible.



(Photos from *Shooting the Front*, courtesy of the National Defense Intelligence College.)