At about nine o'clock on the evening of June 18th, 1916, 2nd-Lt. G. R. McCubbin of No. 25 Squadron, R.F.C., with Cpl. J. H. Waller as his observer, was flying an F.E.2B some 5,000ft above Annay on the first patrol of the day. On sighting three Fokker monoplanes over Lens, McCubbin went to the attack but was unable to prevent the defeat of a companion F.E.2B, manned by Lt. J. R. B. Savage and Ait Mechanic T. Robinson. McCubbin pursued Savage's conqueror, although himself closely followed by the other two Fokkers, and Waller opened fire on the enemy machine just as its pilot realized his danger and began to take evasive action. The Fokker fell out of control, breaking up as it fell. The dead German pilot was Oberleutnant Max Immelmann, a redoubtable foe who, although he fell two weeks before the fury of the Somme was unleashed, had defeated no fewer than 16 Allied aircraft in combat.

Just over six years before this historic event, Mr. (now Sir) Geoffrey de Havilland took up an appointment as test pilot and designer at His Majesty's Balloon Factory (as the Farnborough establishment was then called), and his aeroplane was bought by the War Office for test purposes. It thereupon became the first of the type.

The aircraft he used, and the 40 h.p. flat-four engine which powered it, were both designed and built by him, and the machine was his second design - his first broke up in the air during its first flight in early April, 1910. The second de Havilland aeroplane was completed about the end of May, 1910, and was successfully flown near Litchfield, Hants. At the end of the year Geoffrey de Havilland took upon himself the task of pilot and designer at His Majesty's Balloon Factory (as the Farnborough establishment was then called), and his aeroplane was bought by the War Office for test purposes. It thereupon became the first to be given a "Factory" designation.

It was named the F.E.1, or Farmman Experimental, because in general design it resembled contemporary Farmman biplanes. In the hands of various pilots the F.E.1 did a good deal of flying until it was finally written off by Lieutenant T. J. Ridge, who later lost his life in the crash of the S.E.1. Reconstruction was the order of the day at Farnborough, which was not then officially permitted to design and construct its own aeroplanes, and from the wreckage of the F.E.1 there arose the F.E.2: it first appeared (from what was by then the Army Aircraft Factory) in September, 1911.

The F.E.2 was unique among Factory machines in that it existed in two entirely dissimilar forms. The first F.E.2 was rebuilt from the crashed F.E.1, and the rebuilding was a radical one, for it produced a two-seat aeroplane of nacelle and tail-booms layout, powered by a 50 h.p. Gnome rotary engine. Its performance was rather better than that of the F.E.1, but, most significant of all, it carried a Maxim machine gun on a pillar-type mounting in the front cockpit.

Early in 1913 the F.E.2 was completely redesigned and rebuilt. The machine in its revised form was of more pleasing appearance than the original F.E.2, having a deep, commodious nacelle, and mainplanes identical to those of the F.E.2A. The 70 h.p. Renault vee-eight engine replaced the Gnome. What the rebuilt F.E.2 did not have, however, was enough fin area to balance the side area of the nacelle, and this led to the destruction of the machine, on February 23rd, 1914. Mr. Roland Kemp, the pilot, was unable to regain control in a steep spiral descent and the F.E.2 crashed near Wittering. The passenger, Mr. E. T. Haynes, was killed.

The next F.E. was the F.E.2A, which had the 100 h.p. Green six-cylinder-in-line engine. This was another complete re-design, and was the immediate precursor of the war-time "Fees." The F.E.2A was a three-bay pusher biplane of remarkably sturdy construction, distinguished by an oleo undercarriage which incorporated a small nosed wheel. The Green engine was not an unqualified success, however, and only 12 F.E.2As were built.

The machine was modified to take the 120 h.p. Beardmore engine and was renamed F.E.2B: its other designation of "Fighter Mark I" is now little known and seldom used. Like the early F.E.2As, the first F.E.2Bs had wings of R.A.F.6 section, but later machines had wings of R.A.F.14 section mounted at a larger angle of incidence.

The first F.E.2Bs in France were those which formed part of the equipment of No. 6 Squadron: on September 25th, 1915, that unit had on its strength four F.E.2Bs, eight B.E.2Cs and a single Bristol Scout. The first R.F.C. squadron to go to France equipped throughout with F.E.2s was No. 26, which arrived on January 23rd, 1916. No. 25 Sqn followed on February 20th, No. 23 on March 16th, and No. 22 on April 1st. By the time of the Battle of the Somme, No. 18 Sqn had replaced its Vickers Gun-Buses with F.E.2Bs, and No. 11 Sqn had acquired eight of the type.

Although the F.E.2B did not have a remarkable performance, when it first appeared in France it proved to be a most effective fighting aircraft. The Fokker monoplane was proving to be an extremely painful thorn in the Allied side, and under the fire of its synchronized machine gun B.E.1s, Moranes and Farmans were falling with disconcerting frequency. A measure of the Fokker's influence on contemporary aerial warfare can be assessed from the...