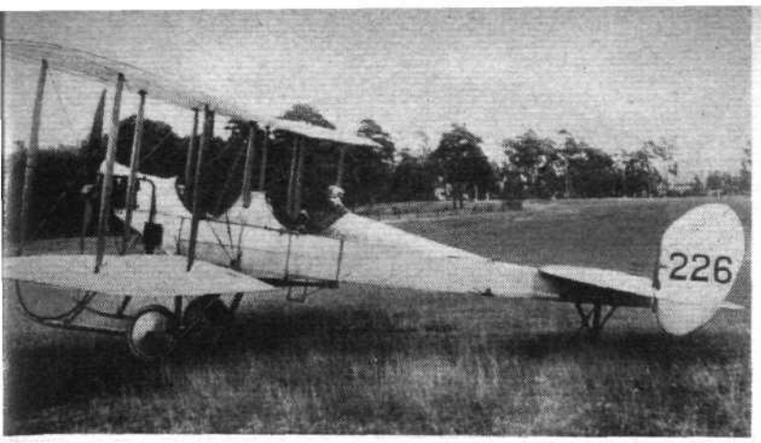

A serial of 1913-14, on a B.E.2a of No. 3 Sqn., Royal Flying Corps.

A 1912-1955 History

By R. C. STURTIVANT

British Military Serial Numbers

THE first practical use of military aircraft in this country was in 1912 by the British Army at Farnborough and Salisbury Plain, and by the Naval School at Eastchurch. As a means of identification, these machines carried letter/number markings on their rudders. Those built at the Royal Aircraft Factory bore markings such as B.E.1, F.E.2, and S.E.1, whilst privately constructed aircraft carried such markings as B.3, F.4, and T.4. The Factory-type markings indicated the type of aircraft; B.E. was Bleriot Experimental; F.E., Farman Experimental; and S.E., Santos Dumont Experimental. These markings later formed the basis of the Factory system of type numbering.

The exact significance of the B and F serials is unknown, but the following examples have been traced: B.2, B.3 (Bréguet biplane), B.4 (Nieuport monoplane), B.6 (two-seater monoplane), F.1, F.4 (biplane), F.5 (biplane), F.7 (Bristol biplane), and F.8 (Bristol biplane). The T series appears to have been used only by the Naval School at Eastchurch, and included T.1 (biplane), T.2 (biplane), T.3 (Short triple twin), T.4 (Short triple tractor) and T.5 (Short tractor hydro-aeroplane).

In the summer of 1912, the Military Aeroplane Trials were held at Larkhill, and each of the 32 competing aircraft carried its competition entry number. This straightforward numbering system was found to be more satisfactory, and on September 1st, 1912, a similar method was adopted by the Royal Flying Corps, as the military air services had become by then. Serial numbers, to be painted on the rudder, were allotted to all military aircraft by a central authority. Under the first allocation, the Naval Wing (later known as the Royal Naval Air Service) received for its use numbers 1-200, the Military Wing numbers 201-400, and the Central Flying School at Upavon numbers 401-500. It was possible, therefore, for a prototype to have a higher serial number than a production model that went to a different branch of the Services. Production B.E.2as, for instance, included 47, 49, 50, 51 and 52, although the prototype B.E.2 was number 202.

The advent of war meant a much greater turnover of new serials, and this was at first met by allocating larger blocks to each Service. The number 10,000 was soon reached, however, this being allocated to a Blackburn-built B.E.2c, one of a batch numbered 9951-10,000 inclusive. This was the only serial ever issued containing more than four digits. Later blocks allotted for Naval use were 801-2,000, 3,001-3,999 and 8,001-10,000.

At this stage it was decided that future serials would be issued under two classifications. First, the main series—to be used on both prototypes and production aircraft of the Royal Flying Corps—was the contemporary type of serial with the addition of a prefix letter. A1-A9999 inclusive was followed by B1-B9999, then C1-C9999, etc. Secondly, there was a Naval series with N prefixed, this being further sub-divided as follows:—

N1-499: Prototype seaplanes, flying-boats, and shipboard aircraft.
N500-999: Prototype landplanes.
N1000-2999: Production seaplanes and small flying-boats.
N3000-3999: Production landplanes.
N4000-4999: Production large flying-boats.
N5000-8999: Production landplanes.
N9000-9499: Production seaplanes.
N9500-9999: Post-war production aircraft, all categories.

Not all these serials were actually used. The first block progressed only to N255 (a Parnall Peto), and the second block probably never passed N546 (the Wight Quadruplane). The series N3000-3999 seems to have been little used, the only known examples being N3004 and N3010, both Henri Farmans. Later, a series beginning the X.1 was introduced for experimental R.F.C. types. Little is known of this series, which probably never passed X25 (the Boulton and Paul P.6).

When the war ended, serials in the main series had been allocated as far as the mid-Js. Prefix letter I was not used, and letter G was used only for a special series started late in the war for captured German aircraft. This progressed to around the G150 mark. Many of the Hs and most of the Js up to J6900 were never actually used, owing to cancellation of contracts at the cessation of hostilities.

The re-birth of civil aviation, during Easter 1919, necessitated some form of identification marking, and this was first met by allocating R.A.F.-type serial numbers commencing at K.100. By the time the system was changed under international agreement to the present type of civil registration marking, serials had been allocated up to K.175. In view of this, the next series of R.A.F. numbers began, in 1927, with K1000, and no subsequent serial has ever been issued with either more or less than five symbols.

The Naval series, which was continued even after the Royal Naval Air Service and the Royal Flying Corps had combined on April 1st, 1918, to form the Royal Air Force, reached N9999 about 1925, and was succeeded by the S series, commencing at S1000. This series was abandoned in 1932 at S.1859, and all British military serials since that date have been issued in the main series.

The economies of the 1920s and early 1930s resulted in the rebuilding of many aircraft which would normally have been scrapped. These retained their original serial numbers, but a letter R was added to the prefix letter. Two examples of this were Fairey IIIFs SR1171 and SR1174 of No. 45 Squadron. Coded N2 and N1 respectively, they were originally built for Naval use. The demand for serial numbers in the post-war period was very small. The J series was not depleted until 1927, and the K series was in use for a further eight years. The rearmament drive, however, resulted in a big increase in turnover, and in the last four years of peace the L, N and P serials were exhausted. The Munich crisis also resulted in another innovation. It was realized from past experience that an enemy could keep a check on our aircraft production figures if he obtained a sufficient number of serials from aircraft shot down, and by other means. It was decided, therefore, that not all serial numbers would be used. Various systems of blocking out were at first tried. At one time, every fourth or fifth serial was omitted. Later, blocks of about a dozen serials were separated by about half a dozen unused ones. Finally, however, a system was adopted whereby production batches of aircraft were given blocks of between 40 and 50 serials, each block being separated from the previous one by between 10 and 15 unused serials. Typical of this system was a batch of Spitfire 22s serialled PK312-356, 369-412, 426-468, 481-525, 539-582 and 594-635. Different production batches were separated by blocking out a dozen or more serials, but prototypes were given odd serials in the middle of such blockings-out.

Serial Z9999 was reached soon after the outbreak of war, and it was decided to continue with a similar system which, employing two letters and three numbers, began at AA100. In order to avoid confusion, the letters C, G, I, O, Q, U and Y were not used. Exceptions were that the letter G was used as a second letter, and that the combination NC was employed. In the normal series of allocations the combinations DA, DB, EA, HA, HT, JE, JH, JJ, MR, NZ, SV, TN, TR, VE and VJ were not used.

Pre-war civil aircraft impressed for the R.A.F. seem to have been allotted serials in blocks on the same lines as production batches, blocking-out being used where necessary. The main impressment blocks were, approximately, as follows: W5740-79, W6418-64, W7940-84, W9325-89, X5051-5133, X9297-9450, Z7253-61, AV952-AW183, AX659-904, BB661-706, BB721-69, BB788-819, BB851-68, BD142-71, BK828-73, BS803-15, DG450-667, DR607-28, ES914-60, HK820-993, HM494-581 and NF747-73. Captured enemy aircraft were very often included in these blocks, as were prototypes, and early war-time purchases from America. The only exceptions to the blocking-out system were Lease-Lend aircraft and machines built in the Dominions. Reserved for these were serials ET100-HD776, JS469-KT999 and SA100-SK999. In fact, these serials were not all required, the last to be used being KP328.

The appearance of radar and other secret devices necessitated