

THE VICKERS ARE COMING!

The ubiquitous Vickers Mk I machine-gun

Continuing our series on the history and development of some of Britain's most historically significant aerial weapons, using technical illustrations by **IAN BOTT**, armament specialist **MARK RUSSELL** gets to grips with the steadfast Vickers Mk I machine-gun and its descendants, which equipped the RAF's fighters from the First World War through to the beginning of the Second

THE VICKERS Mk I machine-gun was the main armament first for the fighters of the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) and then, after its creation on April 1, 1918, the RAF. One of the most familiar images of these fighters, perhaps in a masterly painting by "Biggles" illustrator Howard Leigh, is that of the pilot peering over a pair of these guns on top of his engine cowling as they spit lead at the dastardly Hun. But why these guns? Why were they used for so long and what modifications were made to them?

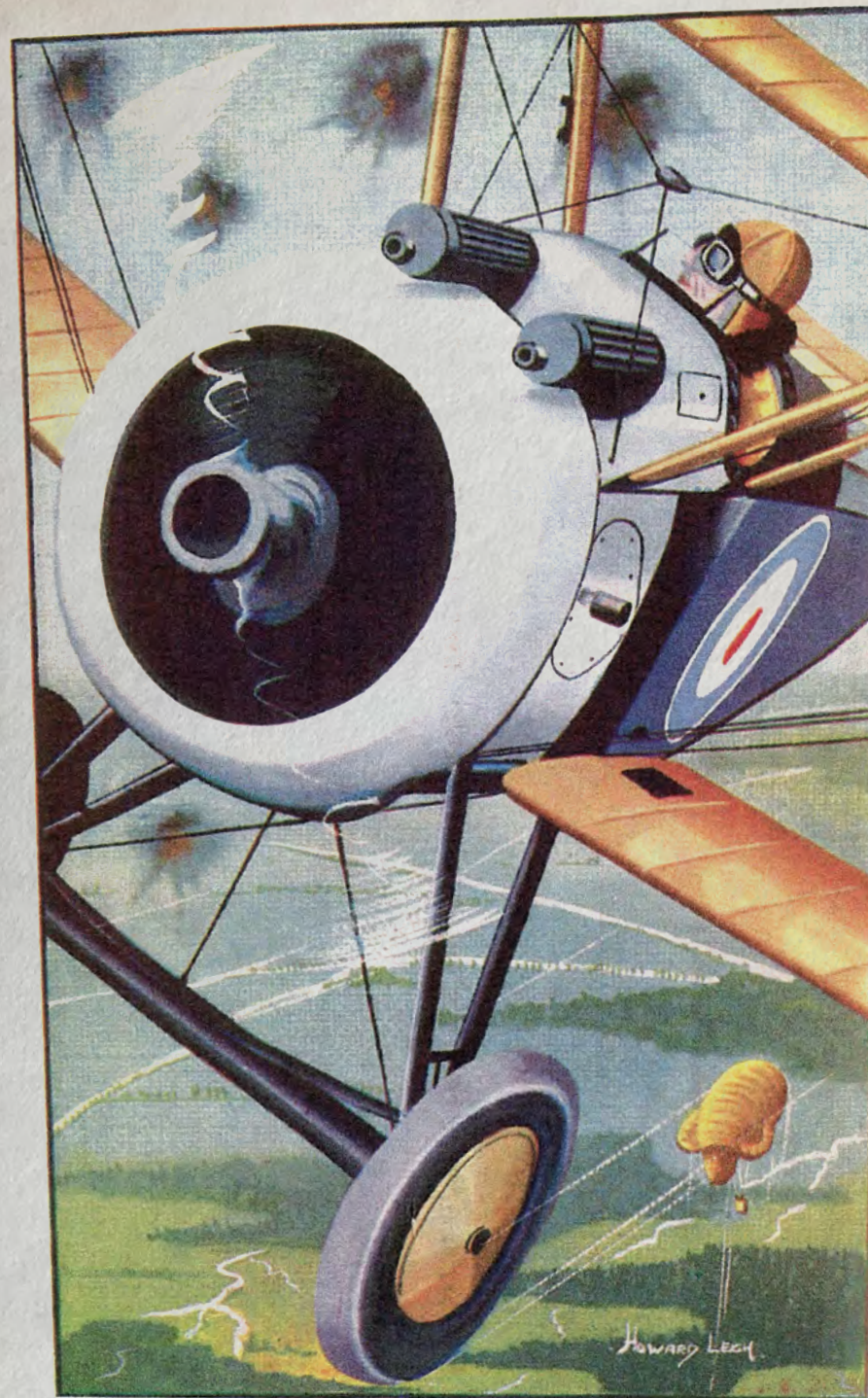
Standardisation

The RFC began using the Vickers Mk I machine-gun essentially because, being part of the Army, it was expected to use the same standard weapons used by the latter. The Vickers gun was dependable, and using the same weapon (essentially) as the Army — and importantly, firing the same 0.303in-calibre ammunition

— certainly made sense from a logistics perspective. Vickers displayed an aircraft of its own design, the E.F.B.1 (Experimental Fighting Biplane No 1), or *Destroyer* as it was named, at the Olympia Aero Show in February 1913, the aircraft including a Vickers machine-gun as part of its armament.¹

Unfortunately, commissioned by the Admiralty, the E.F.B.1 crashed on its first test flight, possibly being overly nose-heavy owing to its armament. The fact that it was built at all, however, does show that even before the outbreak of the First World War, arming aircraft with machine-guns was being considered, and a handful of "pusher" aircraft (i.e. with an aft-mounted engine) were carrying Vickers guns by August 1914.²

The problem for the RFC was that the Vickers Mk I was heavy; the standard infantry version, with tripod, weighed up to 80lb (36kg), which, for the underpowered aircraft of 1915 and



OPPOSITE PAGE Howard Leigh's wonderfully evocative painting of a First World War pilot behind the twin barrels of the Vickers machine-guns mounted in his Sopwith Camel. This artwork was used as the frontispiece for Capt W.E. Johns's 1934 novel *Biggles of the Camel Squadron*.

WITHOUT WARNING A FURIOUS BOMBARDMENT OF ARCHIE BROKE OUT AROUND HIM.