

BOOK REVIEW

The Nature of World War I Aircraft *Collected Essays by Javier Arango*

Reviewed by John King



“[P]eople communicate most efficiently face to face, in the back-and-forth of conversation. Through conversation one can often get clues that help to differentiate fact from opinion and perhaps to see what bias is at work in a historical narrative. Conversation also has the advantage of completing the narrative; any recorded source is only partial. The writer notes what he thinks is important at the time and leaves out what seems to be common sense. But the base of assumed knowledge changes and even disappears over time, and historians may later find that what was left unsaid was, in fact, the most important part.

In the history of aviation, our sources are already almost exclusively held statically in books. They are plentiful, but we can no longer ask a pilot or an aircraft designer what things were really like. Worse, aviation has changed so significantly that much of what those historical documents assume to be common sense no longer makes sense to us at all.

Those words deserve to be printed and posted beside every aviation historian's computer, in permanent direct sight. They were written by Javier Arango and first published in September 2008 in *Over the Top: A Magazine of the First World War*, and they are repeated in a newly published book, *The Nature of World War I Aircraft*.

Mexican-born in 1962, Javier Arango moved with his family to a ranch near Paso Robles, central California, where with his father the acquisition of a Fokker Dr. I Triplane replica sparked a lifelong passion for aircraft of that era. That developed into the Aeroplane (sic) Collection of two dozen WWI (and a couple of earlier) examples, mostly reproductions powered by original or reproduction engines but also including an original Sopwith Camel and a Blériot XI, the latter built from drawings in Colorado in 1911 by two young brothers and restored to flying condition. The Camel and Blériot are now on display in the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum.



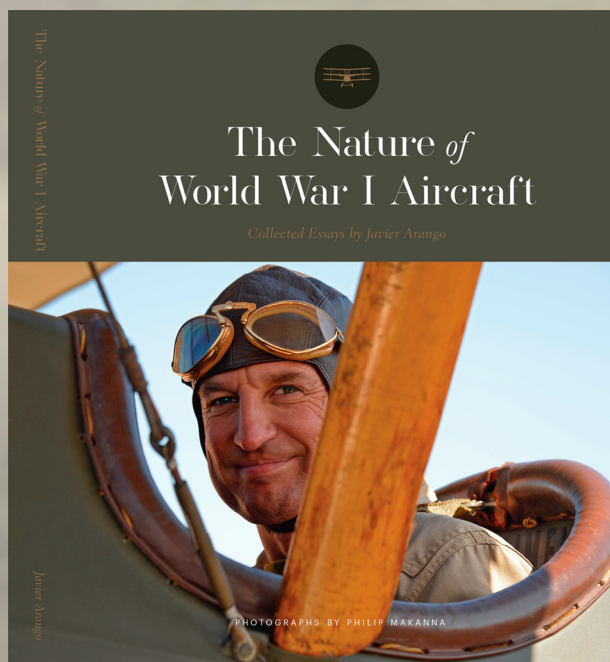
The VanDersart Blériot - Paso Robles



Royal Aircraft Factory S.E.3a - Paso Robles

Arango wanted to build and finish his aeroplanes to be as authentic as possible. That meant not only using original drawings, construction, materials, powerplants and systems as well as travelling to other countries to talk to others in the WWI aircraft community and research original colours and markings, but also trying to understand the technology of the time and reasoning of those original designers and, perhaps to a lesser extent, the pilots who flew their creations. He paid most attention to two of the period's most prolific designers and manufacturers – Anthony Fokker and T.O.M. Sopwith, one on each side of the conflict – and saw how fresh designs were emerging from them even as their previous models were just starting production.

Over the years of this century Arango published articles and lectured on his favourite topic, backed by his expertise as an aerobatic, ATP, multi-engine, commercial jet and glider pilot with instructor's ratings and, on the academic side, training as a historian of science from Harvard University with an MBA and courses in celestial navigation. He published two aviation books with modern photographs by Philip Makanna – himself no stranger to our shores, photographing WWI aeroplanes from Masterton and WWII examples at Wanaka over many years – as *Ghosts of the Great War* and *The VanDersal Blériot*. At the time of his 2017 death, caused by an elevator malfunction on his Nieuport 28 on a calm and clear spring morning, he was working on a third book that would describe and analyse the flying characteristics of each aircraft in his collection. (This book contains his Sopwith Camel analysis.)



Antonieta Monaldi Arango, his widow, has gathered his writings, both published and unpublished, and with the help of many people including Peter Garrison and Phil Makanna produced this lavish and thoroughly professional publication.

These collected essays of Javier Arango contain a wealth of information, both gleaned from the many books written first-hand about the period and also the result of his own analysis and interpretations. He debunks a number of myths about the reasons behind the design and manoeuvring qualities of such scouts as the Sopwith Camel, some 5500 of which were built and, despite killing more than 400 of its pilots in non-combat accidents, became arguably the most successful WWI fighter by shooting down about 1600 enemy aircraft. As a pilot who regularly flew aeroplanes ranging from 1911 to 1918, designed before any standardisation of controls or handling characteristics, he is well placed to offer his own opinions.

For Arango's careful analysis of aircraft construction more than a century ago and his interpretation of aviation history, quite apart from the book's production qualities, *The Nature of World War I Aircraft* is highly recommended.