



What were they like to fly?

THE BOULTON PAUL DEFIANT

By Squadron Leader D. H. Clarke, D.F.C., A.F.C.

THERE were two rear-gun fighters in World War II: the Blackburn Roc and the Boulton Paul Defiant. They were both armed with the same Boulton Paul turret which fired four .303 Brownings, and rotated through 360° (they automatically cut out in the appropriate places so that the gunner could not shoot off the prop, tail or rudder!), and which was so accurate that the makers' expert could insert a pencil in one of the muzzles and sign his name on a piece of board held in front of the guns.

There was only one snag. Whoever invented the rear-gun fighter completely forgot to invent how it could *attack* anything! You just couldn't attack unless you ran away—and if you ran away how could you possibly call the thing a *fighter*?

From the pilot's point of view the Defiant was a reasonable enough aircraft. Heavy perhaps, with a very definite relationship towards the Hawker Hurricane—so much so that the one outstanding victory achieved by Defiants was when a gaggle of 109's jumped twelve of them from out of the sun and ran into the concentrated fire of forty-eight .303's—but without inheriting the rather poor top speed of that over-praised fighter and most certainly without approaching its

manoeuvrability. The Defiant handled more like a bomber than a fighter.

The cockpit was roomy enough and as well equipped as most British wartime fighters: in other words the pilot soon realised that "things had been added", and nine times out of ten they had been put in the worst possible place. Still, the visibility forward was better than average for an inline engine, and it was no doubt assumed that the rear gunner would warn the pilot about the E/A coming up astern.

The rear gunner was really the most important person on board, and if the Defiant had made the grade there is no doubt that Gunners would have re-created the importance they justly deserved in World War I. But apart from that one glorious massacre, they did not have a chance and the Defiant, rather like the Hurricane, became a Jack of all Trades: night training, target towing, photo and recy and all the usual secret, semi-secret and stooge side lines. But ops? No!—apart from a vague attempt to turn her into a night fighter. But how can you *attack*, even at night, if you've got to run away?

But I did have the chance to attack—just once—in a Defiant.

I was C.F.I. of Abu Sueir near the Suez Canal at the time. A rather flamboyant

(and perfumed) character in a magnificent uniform introduced himself one day in 1944 as "Aide de Camp to Général (unspellable and unpronounceable—apparently a Polish General of a particularly tough gang of Polish tanks). The Général would be most happy if the Squadron Leader would plis make the attacks by air against his tanks". The usual beat up? "Yes plis, Squadron Leader, the usual beat-up. You will attack with bombs too? Yes?" It was some time before I realised that he meant it—what was more he somewhat condescendingly allowed that, "— the Général will make the rigid order that the tanks must not try to shoot down the attacking aircraft".

In the end we compromised: I would do my very best to scare the tanks by low-flying and the "Général" would fly with me,—to assist with the judgment. Oh yes, and we would use flour bombs (one pound sausage-like paper bags, reduced to concrete hardness through many years in R.A.F. stores!).

On the day, the General (a remarkably small but stocky and fit-looking person with a less colourful uniform than his Aide) shook hands and rattled out a clutter of Polish. "The Général asks if I can come too," the Aide asked, and he did not look pleased, "to translate".

Oh yes! We could manage that; the turret had been removed and there was plenty of room. The Aide gave me a dirty look, but the General looked pleased.

It was a great shame that the Defiant had been cursed with a rear-gun turret from birth! If only she had been fitted with 2×40 mm. cannons (firing forward—and she was big enough and seemingly strong enough to take them) and a couple of 250 lb. armour-piercing bombs, I think she would have achieved a lot of success as a ground attack aircraft. She was as solid as a rock in a dive—a wonderful front gun platform; she built up a lot of reserve speed (through her weight); she was nice near the ground (so many lighter aircraft were

liable to "drop you in"—especially in the peculiar heat conditions of the desert).

I put all my skill into that beat up. I thundered into the attack from 5,000 feet with 450 m.p.h. on the clock. I skated through the middle of the zig-zagging tanks—through, not over!—raising a vast dust cloud with my slipstream. I zoomed up to 2,500 feet, stall turned and slammed down again. I yelled over the intercom, "BOMB! NOW! and NOW! and NOW!" and hoped that the Aide had time to translate. I saw some troops and roared at them with such determination that they had to prostrate themselves or be beheaded. They ducked! For fifteen minutes I worked the heavy, but responsive controls until my bush shirt, shorts, socks and sand shoes were wringing wet. Then I returned to Base, landed, taxied in and switched off. A low groan broke the sudden silence. Crikey! I thought, if that General has passed out . . . I had visions of Courts Martials . . .

But no! The General bounced out of the rear cockpit before I had stretched myself out of the front; he seized my hand as I clambered sweatily to the ground and pumped it happily, gabbling what was obviously Polish joy. All I could say was "Tac! Tac!" and hope that the Aide was alive.

Then his green face appeared over the rim of the rear cockpit. "The Général," he gurgled miserably, "the Général invites you to a party for his appreciations. He says he has destroyed four bloody tanks. He says *you* have destroyed many bloody tanks. He says this aeroplane is a bloody good tank destroyer. He says this . . . aeroplane . . . is . . . bloody—". He could translate no more. He was very very sick again. But the General continued the epitaph of the Defiant.

"Bloody!" he chorused, "Bloody! Bloody!" In a way he was right.

Defiants in Fighter Command camouflage at the time of Dunkirk.

