

Count Rodolphe 'Dolfo' De Hemricourt de Grunne

The fourth child of Belgian Count Charles de Grunne and French Countess Marie de Montalambert, Rodolphe was born on 18 November 1911 in Etterbeek (a suburb of the Belgian capital, Brussels). When the 1st world war broke out the de Grunne family left for England, and later Paris, where Rodolphe began his schooling. After the armistice, the de Grunne family settled at Aalter (near Ghent). At the age of 18, Rodolphe was sent to Casablanca (French Morocco) to learn agriculture. When he returned to Belgium, he was called in to military service and, being a daredevil, wanted to become a pilot in the Belgian Aéronautique Militaire. Suffering an eye deficiency, he was refused and was forced to enlist in the Régiment des Guides (cavalry) in 1933/1934. In 1935, angry to have learned that Anne (one of his sisters) had become a civilian pilot, he himself obtained his civil flying licence. It was nevertheless his last effort, as indeed the young nobleman soon became a victim of his spleen and the easy life of the Belgian capital. The beginning of the Spanish Civil War woke him up.

By the end of September 1936, Rodolphe had left Brussels by train. As an ardent catholic, he volunteered to join the Nationalist forces fighting "against the Reds". On 7th October, the young Belgian is at Burgos "capital of the insurgents". A few days later, de Grunne joins the Centuria Argentina (an infantry unit mainly constituting Argentinean volunteers). Wounded in action on 23rd November, it seems that he met a Spanish flyer in hospital and, the Spaniard learning that the Belgian was a civilian pilot of noble origin, certainly gave him information and support to join the Nationalist Air Force.

Hastily trained at Tablada (Seville) flying school from December 1936 to February 1937, Rodolphe de Hemricourt was sent to Zaragoza to operate with 3-E-11 Squadron, a reconnaissance unit equipped with the obsolete German Heinkel 46 (given by the Legion Condor). After sixteen war flights, the young Belgian was transferred to 1-E-2 Squadron, which could be compared to a fighter unit, being equipped with Heinkel 51's. These ex-German fighters were bought by (or given to) the Nationalists to improve their Air Force facing the new fighters (as the Polikarpov I-15) sent by USSR to Republicans (and paid for by Spanish gold).

With his new plane, de Grunne was quickly engaged in combat over the Aragon frontline. On 7th April 1937, 1-E-2 fights at Carrascal and on 12th April its He 51's operate over Santa Quiteria. They use the "Cadena" tactic, i.e. an in line strafing attack on Republican positions. Rodolphe (nicknamed by his Spanish comrades: "Rodolfo" or "Harrico"-for Hemricourt!) suffer some ground fire but was too engaged in aerial combat with Polikarpovs. Some of his comrades were shot down; some of them claimed victories, but de Grunne has not yet that luck. He nevertheless came through all those dogfights and became a "survivor", many pilots of his Squadron having been WIA or KIA, if not POW. In June, the young Belgian was engaged with his unit in the Huesca fights. It was the last missions of Rodolfo on the "old" He 51 as on 1st November 1937 the Belgian volunteer was transferred to yet another Squadron based at Zaragoza: the 4-G-12 having inherited Roméo 37's bought from the Italian ally. But Harrico did not remain with that unit for long as he was called back to Tablada to help raise a new fighter unit.

Having received new Fiat CR.32 "Chirri" aircraft, the Nationalist Air Force decided to create a new fighter Squadron, the 3-G-3. Experienced pilots (such as de Hemricourt) were needed and, after hasty training, the ex-recce and ground support pilots called to Seville were "transformed" to fighters. To the surprise of the Nationalist High Command enemy forces attacked at Teruel, and the Belgian with some comrades was hastily transferred to 2-G-3, led by the famous ace Joaquin Garcia Morato.

For his first operations with the Fiat, Rodolphe de Hemricourt had to fight at high altitude in an open cockpit. The temperature fell to -50° (centigrade) and the aerial engagements were fierce. During one such operation, de Grunne's CR.32 was hit by an A.A. round. Rodolfo succeeded in making an emergency landing, saving his life and his machine.

After the recapture of Teruel by the Nationalists, 2-G-3 moved to Tauste to operate over Aragon. On 9th March 1938, the offensive began and, in a few weeks, Republican territory was cut in two after the victorious advance of the Nationalist force, reaching the sea at Vinaroz, 15th April. From its new airfield of Belchite, 2-G-3 supported the ground forces by strafing and destroying enemy supply columns. De Grunne claimed his first (unofficial) victory on 12th March when shooting down a Polikarpov near Hajar. At that period, Josef Stalin decided to recall all the experienced Soviet pilots operating alongside the Republicans flyers, severely reducing the quality of their Air Force.

Later engaged in the offensive against Valencia, Teniente de Hemricourt claimed his second victory on 31st May and two more followed on 19th June (a Rata and a Chato, the nationalist nicknames for the Polikarpov I-15 and I-16). The Belgian was not only engaged in aerial combat: he also strafed ground forces and troops in trenches, as well as escorting Ju 52 bombers,

While 2-G-3 was on leave at Merida on 24th July, the Spanish Republic launched its last major offensive on the Ebro River. On 14th August, a 5th claim follows by the Belgian (another Polikarpov). It is, in fact, his first "official" victory, the first four ones having not been attributed. On 1st September, Teniente de Grunne shot down a Grumann Delfin (claim today contested by some historians of the Republican Air Force for various reasons...).

Rodolphe's unit was fiercely engaged against the Republican forces in the Ebro area, the situation in Estramadura having been secured. 2-G-3 was very active and de Grunne credited (this time officially) with some new claims:

-22nd September: one I-15 and one I-16;

-2nd October: one I-16;

-3rd October: one I-16;

-2nd November: one "Chato";

-3rd November: another "Chato";

-12th November: one I-16.

On 16th November, the Republican troops retreated to the other bend of the Ebro River. The days of the Spanish Republic are numbered.

After the Ebro fights, Rodolfo and his comrades could have some rest. The Belgian recognizes in a letter that he is seriously tired of the war. Nevertheless, Caudillo Francisco Franco must crush the last resistance pockets and, on 23rd December, the Catalogna offensive begins. The Nationalist Air Force was superior in number and quality to its Republican counter-part (in all the Peninsula and especially, in Northern Spain). On 3rd January 1939, Teniente de Grunne claims his last I-15, his tenth official claim (not including the four other ones unrecognised). Barcelona falls and the Spanish Republic lives its last months. For de Grunne's unit, the end of the Civil War will be only a "walk" to the South. On 31st March 1939, Madrid capitulates. The Nationalists have won. On 15th May 1939, in the great victory parade held at Madrid before the Caudillo, Rodolphe de Grunne (the greatest foreign ace of the Nationalist Air Force) is one of the pilots whose plane forms the name "Franco" in the skies of the Spanish capital.

In the beginning of June 1939, Rodolphe de Hemricourt de Grunne returned to his homeland, which he had left nearly three years before. Speaking fluent Spanish, he was well integrated in the Nationalist Air Force and had no opportunity to come back and visit his family. His father had died in April 1937 but the young volunteer was informed too late...

What to do in a peaceful country? de Grunne hoped to become a test pilot and believed that later on he could find a job in Spain after the reconstruction of that desolated land. But the second world war is approaching, and in September 1939, after the German invasion of Poland, Rodolphe is called into the Belgian Army ... in a bicycle company, as part of an Infantry Division! He protested vigorously and was transferred to Deurne (Antwerp), one of the Aéronautique Militaire's flying schools. Indeed, the ex-ace of the Spanish Civil War still has only a civilian pilot licence.

Trained in a few days, Rodolphe entered service in Squadron 2/I/2 "Les Chardons", the most modern one of all the Belgian Military Air Force, equipped with British Hurricanes. Being commissioned in February 1940, Lieutenant de Grunne took part in the patrols in the neutral Belgian sky. On 12 March 1940, he intercepted and attacked a recce Do 17, but his machine guns jammed and the German twin-engined bomber escaped unhurt.

On 12 May 1940, Rodolphe, wounded in a car crash in April, was not with his unit when the Wehrmacht entered Belgium. He rejoined 2/I/2 the following day at Le Culot airfield to learn that nearly all the Hurricanes were destroyed on the ground by bombing on the 10th. That day he was nevertheless designated for a patrol (as the most experienced fighter pilot of the Squadron) but a few minutes before boarding the planes, all remaining aircraft were strafed and destroyed by Bf 109's

The men of 2/I/2 then evacuated to Southern France to wait for new planes. They never arrived, and pilots and ground personnel lived a relatively pleasant life under

the sun until the French capitulation in June. Rodolphe did not want to return to an occupied Belgium. With some comrades, he decided to desert from the Aéronautique Militaire and go to Great Britain. On 19th June (the day of the end of the war in France), two military cars loaded with seven Belgian pilots (including de Grunne) left Fréjorques to Port-Vendres. In that harbour, the Belgians boarded the SS Apapa. After many adventures, they landed at Liverpool on 7th July 1940.

The RAF urgently needed men to counter the Luftwaffe and a possible invasion. Rodolphe and his fellow countrymen (being mainly experienced pilots) were retrained at Hawarden (7 OTU). On 4th August 1940, P/O de Grunne is sent to 32 Squadron. This unit, based at Biggin Hill, is equipped with Hurricanes, the same type of plane (but more modern) flown by de Hemricourt in Aéronautique Militaire. Rodolphe was quickly sent into battle and claimed a handful of victories. Officially he is credited with one Bf 109 destroyed, another damaged and a Do 17 shared destroyed. But, on 18th August 1940, in a dog fight with a Messerschmitt Bf 109 of III./JG 26, he was himself shot down over Ruckinge and suffered severe burns.

Rodolphe remained in hospital for weeks, his face having to be "recreated". At the end of 1940, he was sent to Portugal, apparently to recover from his wounds. In fact, the Belgian Government in exile in London tried to push him to become an agent in Spain. But Rodolphe felt himself to be a flyer and not a spy; he hated treachery and refused to play the role of a secret agent acting against the Spaniards, not willing to lie to his ex-brothers-in-arms.

Coming back to Great Britain, Rodolphe joined the famed 609 Squadron on 29th April 1941 meeting there some other Belgian pilots (including a few comrades which arrived in England with him on SS Apapa). After a few combats, de Hemricourt was engaged on 21st May 1941 in Circus N°10 over Northern France. Over the Channel, Rodolphe was surprised by a Bf 109 (flown by Oberleutnant Willy Stange, Kapitän of 8./JG 3) and shot down. His Spitfire MKII "Yellow 2" (P7436) was seen diving into the sea, and de Grunne did not get out.

de HEMRICOURT de GRUNNE, Le Comte Rodolphe, a Belgian, went to Spain in 1936 to fly with the Nationalists, and served in the 3rd Escadra, the famous 'Blue Group', led by the top Spanish ace, Garcia Morato. Flying Fiat CR32's and later, Bf109's of early vintage, he destroyed 14 Republican aircraft. He returned to Belgium after the end of the Civil War in 1939, and the following year when the Germans attacked his country, escaped to England. Here he joined 32 Squadron, and on 16th August 1940 he shot down a Bf109 and probably destroyed a Bf109 and a Do17. He destroyed another next day, and on the 18th shot down a Do17, and was then shot down and fairly badly burnt. After some while in hospital he was sent on an intelligence mission to Portugal, where his Civil War background enabled him to mix with Nazi agents. He returned to Britain and was posted to 609 Squadron, but on 21st May 1941, on a sweep over France, was shot down and killed. His score at the time of his death was 17, 3 with the RAF.