

Fighter Wingman's Tactics

By Sensei

Edited by RAF_Pepe LePeu

Part I - the Primary

OK, the scenario. You and your Flight Lead have been chosen to do an offensive sweep over the front. You are taking the number two slot and following along hoping you don't screw up and get killed. You and the Flight Leader stumble across an idiot flying Lone Wolf and decide to attack. Your Flight Leader has indicated he will engage the enemy and he wants you to watch his 6. Now, the magical question...What the hell does he really want AND need me to do?

In a scenario like this there are two roles. The first is the scout that will engage first sometimes known as the "Primary" or "Engaged Fighter (EF)". The other role is the "Secondary" or "Supporting Fighter (SF)". I have seen in Red Baron terms "Lead" and "Wing" being used in the same context. The actual term doesn't matter so long the two of you agree on what they are! :-)

I will use the terms "Primary" and "Secondary" throughout the rest of these posts. I use these terms because often "Lead" and "Wing" is associated with rank or position. When fighting, rank and position have no place in the air. You are either the pilot doing the shooting or the pilot doing the supporting. It is VERY possible and VERY likely the roles will reverse during a fight. For that reason I am going to outline both areas of responsibility. When and how to switch these roles will be covered in another post.

This first post will outline the role of the "Primary" (otherwise known as the guy doing the shooting). The Primary's job is as follows:

1. Kill the enemy as quickly as possible using his skill, aircraft, and bullets
2. Get out of the way and let the Secondary make the kill if Primary has screwed up

3. Let the Secondary know what his intentions and status are. If you are shot up and are going to RTB it's nice to let your wing know. :-)

First and foremost the Primary's job is to kill the enemy fighter or at the very least deny the free use of the airspace to the enemy. This means putting bullets into them. If the Primary is not in a good solution envelope then he/she must keep the target on the defensive. If the Primary allows a reversal and is suddenly on the defensive he **MUST** call in the Secondary to engage and **PREPARE** to escape the firing solution of his enemy. In many cases he will then move into the Secondary support role.

At all times the Primary and Secondary must communicate. Be it RW, BC, chat, flare signals, whatever -- communication is key. Codes are a big help here especially with chat. Another Huge help is getting to know your wingman and their habits. That can only be accomplished by getting some air time under your butt and flying with them. This ends Part I. Part II will cover the Secondary role.

Part II - the Secondary.

In Part I we covered the basic role of the Primary or Engaged Fighter. This section will cover the role of the Secondary or Support Fighter. The Secondary is by far the more complicated of the two roles. While not a hard and fast rule the more experienced pilot is often the Secondary pilot. I think you will see why.

These are the basic duties of the Secondary:

1. Keep an eye on the fight
2. Let the Primary know where you are
3. Avoid getting into the fight until called
4. Keep Situational Awareness (SA) of the immediate areas. This includes any information additional bandits and/or friendlies
5. Engage additional bandits. Make sure your Primary is aware of your engagement.
6. When the fight is over indicate the egress vector. The Primary's Situational Awareness after a fight is most likely nil.

We will go over each of these points. Another term often used for maintaining Situational Awareness of the area and engaging bandits as they approach is called "sanitizing the area." (Ref: CombatSim.com article).

1. Keep an eye on the fight. The Secondary should never be directly above the fight, directly below the fight or within 500 feet of the fight. Why? Good question. If you are directly above or below the fight you have to use the F3 view to watch it to see if the Primary needs help. If you are looking straight down you aren't looking around elsewhere. Granted, our WWI aircraft are equipped with 'N key' radar, but many times you can spot tracer fire or a dot in the sky farther out than the N key range. Stay 500 feet away so that you don't run the risk of a mid-air collision with the target. A collision is a loss for your team. There are tactics for two aircraft to engage an enemy, but without practice it becomes dangerous. Being below the fight in these aircraft is practically useless as your energy state is too poor to be of much use. If you find yourself below the fight, extend, climb and return. The most common cause for finding yourself as the Secondary is you were just the Primary in another fight, made the kill and your Secondary is now engaged with another aircraft. This is one case of a role reversal and why it pays for your squadron to (as The Rock would say) "Know Your Roles". :-)
2. Let the Primary know where you are. This is important so that the Primary can possibly maneuver the enemy for a shot from you or use you to cover his egress if he has gone defensive. If you are at his high 3 and he breaks hard left and down he has just given the enemy a 6 shot with no chance of you helping.
3. Avoid getting into the fight. What!? Another good question. What I mean by this is never put your aircraft in a position to be shot at by the target. If your busy dodging his bullets then you are not doing the other aspects of your job like maintaining SA. This is one reason to maintain the 500 foot separation. Of course, if the Primary is calling you in for a Lead and Bracket or that he cannot get a shot then it is time to enter. This is also a good reason why to never be directly below a fight. If you are below then you are just a big, fat no energy target for the enemy. Extend and climb. Get away from the fight until you can do something useful.

4. Keep Situational Awareness. This is perhaps the number one most important duty of the Secondary. If neither the Primary nor the Secondary are maintaining SA then your survival is relying strictly on luck. Ever gone into a fight 2 on 1 or maybe 2 on 2 and the next thing you know there is a furball around you? How many times were you able to leave that furball alive? See my point? The Secondary has to maintain SA because the Primary is concerned with getting his kill.
5. Engage newly arriving bandits. Hopefully, your SA was good enough that you saw them coming. If they outnumber you then your role is to inform the Primary and help him egress the area. You may be able to make a few passes at either the original target or at the closest enemy in order to delay them and effect an escape. Contrary to the popular practice, one should not "Fight to the Death" at every encounter. If it is just one additional enemy then the Secondary is to tell the Primary of the engagement and then engage the bandit. At this point there is a high probability of a role reversal.
6. Vector the Primary on egress vector. Chances are the Primary will be at a lower altitude than the Secondary in MMP and he will also have no SA left. This isn't always the case but it is the most common. In either case, the Secondary is responsible for telling the Primary which way to head out.

Part III - Role Reversals

This post will try and address the question of when does the Secondary transition into the Primary and vice versa. We already covered one scenario where the Secondary has had to engage a new fighter in the area and the Primary finished his kill. In that case the roles reversed because the scenario changed and it is a pretty obvious transition. In our initial scenario we had the 2 ship formation engaging an enemy target. The Primary starts the fight and the Secondary sets up a nice position at least 500 feet out, slightly higher and the fight at either your 10 or 2 o'clock position.

(Slightly higher is relative to the aircraft. You want to be close enough to engage the enemy within 30-45 seconds maximum. Monos would obviously be closer than D7s or N28s.)

Ok, so when does the Secondary get in on the action? Here are the most common reasons:

1. The Primary calls you in because he can't make the kill in a reasonable time
2. Primary's Energy State is too low to convert to a killing shot. Typically occurs when you fight one of the no-energy bleed planes or you have stalled.
3. The Secondary sees the Primary going defensive.
4. The Primary calls for a 2 aircraft tactic

In current doctrine, the Secondary can also enter the fight if he feels he has the better shot and calls off the Primary. This is RB3D, which has little to do with current doctrine and almost less to do with historical accuracy. :-) In current fighters every one has a potential one shot kill with missile. Rockets notwithstanding we don't have that in RB3D. A one-pass kill is too rare (especially in the EM2 FM/DM) for a Secondary to assume he can make that call. In MMP world if the Primary is someone you don't know (i.e. you came up on a 1v1 fight and assumed the role of Secondary) and you engage you run the risk of being thought a "kill stealer". Let's cover each point in detail.

1. The Primary calls you in. This one is easy. He is asking for help. Maybe his other phone rang, maybe his/her spouse is on their 6, maybe their hand is tired, maybe they just don't feel in the groove for the kill-whatever the reason they want you in so you go in. In this first point assume the Primary is breaking from the fight. I would venture a guess that bingo ammo (Winchester) is the main reason. It is now the Secondary's job to finish the kill. What about the Primary's role? Well, assuming he doesn't have to leave the game he should begin taking on the Secondary responsibilities. First and foremost is to establish Situational Awareness (SA). Even if you are bingo ammo you can still keep an eye out for bandits.

2. Primary's Energy State is too low to make the kill. Most likely he has stalled out his aircraft or made a mistake to take him to a co-energy state with the enemy. In this case, the Secondary should engage and assume the Primary role and the Primary assumes the Secondary role while rebuilding his energy. Another common scenario is the Primary is facing one of the no-energy-bleed climbers and they have spiraled climbed out of the fight. The Secondary should have placed themselves in such a position as to anticipate this and be able to engage them.
3. The Secondary sees the Primary going defensive. This is the reason why the Secondary needs to constantly monitor the fight. The Primary in all reality is too busy to try and chat or ask for help. If the target has the Primary's 6 then the Secondary must engage. He will transition to the Primary role until the original Primary can egress the target's killing zone. He should then assume the role of Secondary and allow his wingman to finish the kill.
4. Primary calls for a 2 aircraft attack. There are a variety of techniques for 2 aircraft to attack a single target. Describing these tactics is beyond the scope of these posts. There are several references around the web and in books describing these various tactics. The key to any of them is practice, practice, practice. The only note here is that every body lining up on the target's 6, hosing away with bullets, and praying that Friendly Fire is turned off is most definitely NOT good offensive wingman tactics.

In conclusion, here are some key things to remember about Role Reversals.

- They can happen at anytime!
- They can happen more than once in a fight!
- If you truly want to be a good wingman leave the ego back at the drome! Don't press for the kill if you don't have it. Be ready to be the Primary or Secondary by knowing what you are supposed to do!

Part IV - Entering the Fight

In the last section we covered the potential role reversals of the Primary and the Secondary. Let's take the situation where you have set yourself up in a nice position about 500 feet up and out of the fight and the fight is at your 10 or 2 o'clock position. First, you should never let the target extend past your 3-9 line (The imaginary line extending from your 3 o'clock to your 9 o'clock position). Since your energy is superior this should not be difficult. If you find the target is extending past your 3-9 line and a hard break is called for then break TOWARDS the fight. This will help to corral the enemy and he might get stupid and try to pull up for a snap shot at you giving the Primary a good kill shot opportunity. One reason for not letting them get past your 3-9 line is to keep from having to use a heavy loaded BFM in order to reorient yourself. Energy spent just turning to face the enemy is energy not spent in trying to kill him. Besides letting him get past there puts him somewhere near your 6 -- not a good spot!

At this point you've done your role as the Secondary and suddenly you notice the Primary is going defensive or maybe he is calling you in because he can't get a good shot. At this point you have two choices on entry. You can go in via the vertical or from BFMs outside of the enemy's turn circle (TC). The TC is defined as the enemy aircraft's BFM maneuvering circle at cornering speed. It varies with each aircraft. This is where it pays to know the enemy aircraft. In WWI aircraft it is preferable to enter the fight using the vertical. Ideally, you have already positioned yourself so that you were higher than the fight in the first place.

When I say using the vertical I mean diving into the fight in general. While technically, one can enter a fight from a lower altitude this is not a good idea for WWI aircraft because of their relatively poor climbing ability. The Alb DIII and Alb DVa are the only aircraft in the corporate FM I would even think of doing this in. In the FGMOF EM2 FM the DrI can make an excellent vertical move for a short period as can the D7 and the Spads. In most of the other planes an aggressive vertical move up into a fight will usually result in you being slow, fat and soon dead.

BFM's from outside the TC of the target are normally used because you are co-alt with the fight. If you have kept the fight at your 10-2 position then you should be able to stay behind the target's 3-9 line and take your shots.

Exactly how you enter the fight from outside the TC depends on which direction you are heading relative to the fight. If you are moving in the same general direction as the flow of the fight (called Co-flow-reference combatsim.com article) then getting behind the 3-9 line should be relatively easy. In a co-flow entry your superior energy state should be a huge advantage for BFMing the target to a kill. If you are maneuvering against the flow of the fight (Counter flow, same ref) then remember you will get many more snap shot opportunities, but fewer and faster bursts. Expect the enemy to cross your nose often. Be wary of the collision.

Some things to remember while you are setting up-

1. Never point your nose toward the fight until you are ready to take a shot or assume the Primary role.
2. As you are watching for potential entry points should you be called remember to keep SA, and finally
3. Remember counter-flow entries are the most common outside TC entries so practice those snap shots.

Why keep your nose pointed away from the fight? Good question. Here's the answer- because if it is pointed towards the fight it means you are flying into the fight and not keeping your distance. As you close distance you close the energy difference between you and the target. One should always strive to enter a fight with a positive energy state.

I also received a question from someone asking what to do if a target suddenly turns on the Secondary and attempts to engage. Well, if you are far enough away and high enough up it shouldn't happen, but hey we make mistakes. :-). In this case use your superior energy state to deny him a clean shot. If you can dodge him a few seconds you will give the Primary and excellent opportunity to saddle up and kill the target. Don't make the mistake of joining into the fight unless the Primary is obviously out of it and a role reversal is called for.

Another question--Sensei, its too hard to keep an eye out for SA, watch the fight to see if Primary needs help, anticipate fight entries, plan potential egress vectors, plan my BFMs, watch the enemy's energy state and all the other things. Answer: What's your point? I said in the beginning the senior pilot is usually the Secondary for this very reason. Not every pilot can do this very well. Those that can't don't keep their wingmen alive and don't stay alive very long either. Those that can do stay alive. I never said this was easy. There is no "secret" maneuver or "trick" to this. It is hard work and takes practice. Those that master it will live--those that don't will die.

Fortunately, we have a Start New Life button. I often hear and see boasts from some pilots on how many kills they get. I always counter by asking how many times they died getting them. 3 kills with no deaths is immensely more impressive than a 1000 kills with 1000 deaths. The Total Kill counts on the server are meaningless numbers. I'm more impressed by someone's Kills per Death ratio.