

## BOOK REVIEW:

# *Knight of Germany: Oswald Boelcke – German ace*

by Johannes Werner; translated by Claud W. Sykes

Casemate Publishers: Havertown, Pennsylvania; 2020; 284 pp.; ISBN 9781612000435  
(softcover); RRP \$21.99



*Knight of Germany* is a biography of one of Germany's true heroes, Oswald Boelcke. In World War I, Boelcke was the top-scoring scout pilot in the German air forces with 40 victories at the time of his death. Boelcke's true genius was his ability to foresee the value of the role of the scout force beyond defending Germany's army from attack by aircraft of the Royal Flying Corps and the French *Armée de l'Air*. This was at a time when Germany's own air service was limited to artillery observation in support of its army.

This is not a new book. It was written in German by Professor Johannes Werner and first published in English in 1933 after translation into English by Claud W. Sykes. It has since been reprinted several times, most recently in January 2020.

The substance of the book is taken from letters from Boelcke to his parents starting when he first joined the German army. They were detailed, informative and expressed his personal viewpoint. He was humble and self-effacing and the letters were written to assure his parents that he was being well cared for at the front and that he was successful in the air. He believed that he would not fall to his enemy – he was right. Being drawn from letters written for his family, not the general public, there is an element of familial discourse; however, the author has expertly combined both the familial and war experiences.

Boelcke joined the German army on leaving school in 1911 as an aspirant for a commission in the telegraphy component of the force. Shortly after commissioning, Boelcke transferred to the emerging aviation service.

He excelled at athletics, at one time preparing to compete for entry into the Olympic Games, and his natural ability to mix with colleagues highlighted his leadership skills. These skills came to the fore in the air service. Boelcke grasped the significant impact that air power would make on and over the battlefield, well before most others.

From the beginning of the Great War, Boelcke rapidly came to the attention of the German high command, aristocracy and the public as his tally of kills mounted. He was wined and dined by royalty and feted by the public. While Boelcke enjoyed the encounters with the leaders of the country, he was uncomfortable with the public adoration.

His letters trace his exploits and the early development of aerial warfare, from artillery spotting to

single encounters with enemy aircraft. His skills and the superior performance of German aircraft at that stage of the war saw his aerial victories steadily increase. His success also was due to his aggressiveness in the air, seeking out enemy aircraft rather than taking a defensive stance. He was dubbed a *Jagdfleiger*, a term which gave rise to the tag, fighter pilot.

A personal relationship with the commander-in-chief of the German air forces resulted in Boelcke sending him his thoughts on the way aerial warfare should be developed. He addressed aircraft performance, the configuration of armament mounted on scout aircraft and the grouping of aircraft to overwhelm the enemy force, although to be fair, this was in part a response to the French grouping of their aircraft. Boelcke was given an independent command of a special *staffel* of advanced Fokker aircraft which later led to the formation of *Jagdstaffels*, or hunting teams.

Two of his students were Max Immelmann and Manfred von Richthofen. Richthofen went on to become the leader one of the most effective *staffels* and the most well-known and successful scout pilot in World War I.

The principles of air combat developed by Boelcke became a compendium for all fighter tactics well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

On 26 October 1916, Boelcke achieved his 40<sup>th</sup> victory in the air. On a sortie later that day, while avoiding an enemy aircraft he was attacking, he collided with a colleague's aircraft and crashed. In death, Boelcke was mourned by the entire German nation, while the Royal Flying Corps sent a formal condolence: *....[to] our brave and chivalrous opponent. From the English Royal Flying Corps.*

Boelcke was highly decorated and, along with other decorations, was awarded the *Pour le Mérite* (later known as the Blue Max), the Royal House Order of Hohenzollern and Knight's Cross with Swords.

*Knight of Germany* is well written, easy to read and readily holds the reader's attention. It captures the essence of aerial combat, its dangers and rewards. It traces the early development of air warfare and many of the principles developed flowed into the airborne arena of the Second World War. A backdrop to the story of Boelcke is the rich tapestry of German life before the First World War.

I recommend *Knight of Germany* to all interested in the history of military aviation.

**Bob Treloar**