

# H-Net Reviews

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**Peter Kilduff.** *Black Fokke Leader: Carl Degelow – The First World War’s Last Airfighter Knight.* London: Grub Street, 2009. 192 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-906502-28-7.

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey

World War I, the “war to end all wars,” brought about massive technological advances in warfare. The tank was introduced and utilized by Allies and Central Powers alike, and Germany used submarines in unrestricted warfare to assist in defeating Allied naval blockades and remove the chokehold it was putting on its war-fighting abilities. Arguably one of the most important technological advances came over the western front as both sides took to the skies to provide detailed reconnaissance of enemy troop formations and build-ups, provide forward artillery observation, as well as bomb enemy strongholds in an attempt to soften the lines for the eventual ground pushes to follow. Mastery of the skies in World War I became an increasingly important element to modernized war. Still in its infancy, air power continued to expand even past its initial tasks, evolving into bombardment with escort flights, and culminating in what is now termed “air superiority,” more commonly known as dog-fighting. In the early years of World War I, no formal schools existed that captured and passed on doctrine for successful aerial combat. Instead, following initial pilot training, governments focused on making airworthy pilots and observers, along with their long-suffering ground crews, manage and care for the clumsy machines. Much of the art and science of aerial combat was learned through engaging the enemy in the skies, trying out principles taught at the squadron level, or through personal experience. Even as the war approached its final year, little formal doctrine existed for the Central Powers even though they had arguably the most widely known and well-respected pilot of the war, Manfred Albrecht Freiherr von Richthofen, more commonly known as the Red Baron. Another well-known German fighter pilot and recipient of the Pour le Mérite (imperial Germany’s highest honor), Hauptman Oswald Boelcke, had authored the “Dicta Boelcke” on aerial tactics, but no formal institution existed for passing on those critical ideals to the new pilots. In their wake came yet another ace and imperial Germany’s last

Orden Pour le Merite recipient, Leutnant der Reserve Carl Degelow. In his work *Black Fokke Leader: Carl Degelow–The First World War’s Last Airfighter Knight*, author Peter Kilduff uses extensive research, combined with first-person narratives from Degelow himself, to paint a uniquely complete picture of evolving aerial combat through Degelow’s eyes.

Kilduff and Degelow together paint an extremely detailed picture of World War I aerial combat. Through the use of substantial first-person narratives and correspondence with Degelow, Kilduff balances Degelow’s words with detailed research from both Allied and imperial German records concerning troop movements, concentrations, and most importantly, combat sortie flight records and after-action reports. As the book develops, Kilduff continues to provide insight into Degelow’s evolution as an aviator, and links it to the ebb and flow of the Luftstreitkräfte, or Imperial German Air Service, during World War I. Beginning with a glimpse into his pre-service years, he explains, using excerpts from personal interviews, why Degelow chose the Air Service over the Infantry following his initial enlistment and combat as a ground troop. Like many of their Allied compatriots, German pilots were both fierce and chivalrous at the same time, and Degelow was no exception. Even amongst pilots, there was a kind of class division between reconnaissance and fighter pilots. Fighter pilots had an extra bit of tenacity that formed an even smaller group and stronger bond amongst the men. In one section, Kilduff captures this ideal by quoting Degelow’s words, “Aerial combat during World War I is often compared to the tournaments of the Middle Ages, in which one knightly contestant was pitted against another and thereby locked in individual conflict. There is some truth to this” (p. 19). Degelow spent only a short time as a reconnaissance pilot due to his desire to engage the enemy instead of conducting patrols designed to assist in forward artillery control and photographic reconnaissance; Kilduff chronicles his experiences in fighter pilot

training and his various Jagdstaffel, or fighter squadron, assignments. Upon his transfer to fighter pilot school, Degelow lived by the maxim taught at the course, one of the eight principles of the Dicta Boelcke, "Open fire only at close range and then only when your opponent is right in your sights" (p. 50). This principle guided him both as a pilot and later as a Jagdstaffel 40 commander when training his new pilots, even when utilizing technically inferior aircraft. Following his own aerial rules of engagement, Degelow progressed as an aviator, finally becoming the commander of Jagdstaffel 40, a 30-victory ace, and the last recipient of the coveted Pour le Mérite, the imperial German equivalent of the United States Medal of Honor. Kilduff, throughout his work, continuously shows how Degelow and his men, even in light of waning resources, imperial German aircraft numerical inferiority, and constant withdrawal, stood by both their principles and training. From early 1917 through the end of the war in November 1918, Degelow candidly discussed the highs and lows of aerial combat on the western front, and every detail contributed to Kilduff's conclusion that by the end of the war, "Germany was outfought, outgunned and worn down" (p. 169).

While the book is filled with important primary source perspective on aerial combat over the western front in World War I, some of the most significant work comes from the firsthand accounts of technological challenges the Luftstreitkräfte faced in regards to the development of aircraft by the Central Powers, and more importantly how pilots created ways to overcome these problems. Having flown six different airframes since becoming a pilot, Degelow's candid assessment of each aircraft's strengths and shortfalls provides a unique insight into the challenges German pilots faced, especially in regards to developing tactics that addressed the weaknesses of their own aircraft. Starting with the Albatross CV two-seat reconnaissance plane, Degelow piloted other Albatross airframes, as well as the Pfalz D.III single-seat pursuit plane. In a monumental turn of events, Degelow and Kilduff discuss the impact that the January 1918 Adlerhorst Fighter Pilot Competition had on future airframe selection. Degelow notes that this was the first time that frontline fighter pilots were selected to test, evaluate, and vote on the next generation imperial German fighter—the Fokker D.VII. Although the Fokker D.VII was chosen by consensus, Degelow and other forward units would have to wait for delivery until mid-1918, forcing them to continue flying technologically inferior aircraft such as the Fokker Dr. I triplane and modified Pfalz D.III's. Unlike the Pfalz D.III's, which Degelow and many other pilots complained was too slow and unmaneuverable, the Fokker D.VII proved to be one of the most

successful aircraft employed during World War I because of its speed, gunning capabilities, and maneuverability. It was considered the equal of Allied aircraft such as the Sopwith Camel, although there was little time to perfect and fully implement solid tactics as the first shipments would not arrive to forward-fighting units until mid-1918. Distinctively marked with a white tail, black fuselage, and a leaping white stag, Degelow's Fokker D.VII inspired a sense of pride amongst his pilots, who in turn similarly marked their aircraft with special symbols, even in the face of continued withdrawal and eventual surrender.

While Kilduff covers the strengths and challenges Degelow faced throughout the war, one area could have been expanded—Degelow's role concerning Jewish pilots following World War I. In one instance, some considerable effort is put forth explaining the importance of Lieutenant Willy Rosenstein, a Jewish pilot and important figure in the prewar commercial and later military aircraft industries. As an ace, Rosenstein was exposed to the early anti-Semitic ways of his former squadron commander, Oberleutnant Hermann Goering. Although Rosenstein received a favorable final performance report from Goering prior to his transfer to Jasta 40, Kilduff only briefly discusses this situation. In the final chapter of the work, Kilduff lightly touches on the important role Degelow had in securing safe escape for three former World War I Jewish pilots, of which Rosenstein was one. Degelow used his position as a member of the Orden Pour le Merite to have influential members of the Nazi Luftwaffe and political hierarchy, including now Field Marshal Goering himself, provide safe passage to these individuals. This introduction of events so late in the book only provides cursory insight into the complex situation of World War I aviation bonds, and should be developed further.

World War I witnessed untold carnage as both sides sought to overcome the stalemate of trench warfare. Nowhere was this more apparent than on the western front, where untold miles of trenches housed Allied and Central Powers ground soldiers alike. In their attempt to gain the advantage on the ground, both sides took to the air to deal the decisive blow to the enemy. Peter Kilduff has provided an extremely detailed examination of aerial combat on the western front through the eyes of Lieutenant des Reserves Carl Degelow. Filled with honest and detailed accounts from Degelow himself, this work is an important source for historians looking objectively at the highs and lows of German aeronautic development during World War I and offers an objective insight into both the successes and failures of the Luftstreitkräfte.

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