

Fok.Dr.I 2009/18

by

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To all enthusiasts and students of World War I aviation the date April 21, 1918 is quite familiar for on that particular day the German Air Service lost one of its most valuable assets, Baron Manfred von Richthofen, victor in eighty aerial combats. "The Red Knight of Germany" flying a pure red Fokker Triplane was pursuing his intended 81st victim, Lieutenant W. R. "Wop" May, when the final curtain was brought down on his colorful career in the air. Today the final circumstances surrounding his death are still shrouded in controversy, and there is sufficient evidence to substantiate the claims of the Canadian pilot, Captain A. Roy Brown, 209th Squadron, or Sergeant C. B. Popkin of the 24th Australian Machine Gun Company. After thirty-nine years, therefore, it seems highly unlikely that any further attempts in research will bring to light sufficient data to acknowledge a clear-cut credit to either man, but continued investigation does establish one significant fact of importance - reports concerning the red Triplane flown by Richthofen are in error!

Yes, strange as it may seem, the information recorded for history relating to the Fokker Dr.I in which the Baron flew to his death has been accepted, restated and assumed correct for these many years. Why this was taken for granted is, of course, obvious since it was based on reports taken at the time of the incident, but apparently no one bothered to question the validity of such information and the error was accepted. The inaccuracy in question concerns the serial number of the aircraft, which has been given always as Fok. Dr.I 2009/17 or Fok.Dr.I 2009/18; the latter being more prevalent. Both are incorrect!

While leading the famed Jagdgeschwader 1 and his own personal Jagdstaffel 11, Richthofen flew several types of aircraft in combat, but in the case of the famous three-winged Fokker only two were specifically issued to him. From the first series of three such planes manufactured by the Fokker Flugzeugwerke at Schwerin he received Fok.FI 102/17. The maneuverability of this newly conceived aircraft was quite outstanding and he was quick to use his advantage and recorded many victories in this ship. Improvements, however, were being made by the designer, and when a more advanced model was constructed Richthofen received it. The older Triplane was given to Oberleutnant Kurt Wolff in which he met his death on September 15, 1917. The new one was of the latest concept, but was a completely standard version as were all planes that he flew. This is the aircraft commonly, but incorrectly, referred to as Fok.Dr.I 2009/18. In reality it bore the marking Fok.Dr.I 425/17.

As issued, the factory construction number was 2009, which would account for the erroneous and often misquoted serial number. The engine construction number was 2478. The plane was equiped with a Thulin-built 100hp "Beute" motor. Just prior to his death Richthofen was seen training on the now famous Fokker D.VII and undoubtedly would have made the change in a matter of days. Thus, Fok.Dr.I 425/17 might have become a museum attraction for the German nation, but as history records it carried Rittmeister Manfred von Richthofen, "The Red Knight of Germany" to his final combat and death on that spring morning of 1918.