

Max Holtzem: An "Old Eagle" of the First World War

Part Two: Fighter Pilot

by Walter A. Musciano
and
Nick Hauprich



Note: All photographs are courtesy of Max Holtzem except as noted.

In April 1915, Max Holtzem was ordered to Speyer-am-Rhine as a test pilot for the Pfalz Flugzeugwerke. He is shown here about to enter the cockpit of the Pfalz E.II prior to a test flight. Note the absence of a machine gun on this test model.

When Holtzem joined Jasta 16b as a fighter pilot late in 1917 he was assigned a Pfalz D.IIIa which design he had flight tested at the factory one year earlier. The D.III was the first biplane fighter design produced by Pfalz, the company having previously built the Roland D.I and D.II aircraft under a license agreement.

The 160 hp Mercedes six cylinder engine drove the D.III to a top speed of 103 miles per hour and it required seventeen minutes to reach 10,000 feet. Despite this inferior speed and rate of climb the design performed yeoman service at the front because of its ease of handling and phenomenal strength. The pilots who flew the D.III had no fear of losing wings or fabric unlike their *Albatros* and *Fokker Triplane* flying comrades. The design had excellent dive recovery characteristics and was ideally suited for balloon busting. The loaded weight was 2,056 pounds. Two *Maxim* machine guns were buried in the cowl.

The D.IIIa differed from the original D.III in that it had a 180-hp Mercedes engine and an enlarged stabilizer, plus exter-

nally mounted machine guns for greater accessibility and cooling. These craft were often mixed with *Albatros* scouts in the same unit as was the case with Jasta 16b.

A few days after his arrival at Jasta 16b Vizefeldwebel (Vfw.) (master sergeant) Holtzem was ordered by the C.O., Leutnant Geigl, to take a familiarization flight over the front lines. The weather was clear and yet there was very little activity in the air on that day so Holtzem enjoyed himself at the controls of his *Pfalz*. As he turned for La Folie Ferme, the Jasta 16b airfield, Max spotted a lone *SPAD* in the distance flying directly toward the *Pfalz*; head on. The German immediately prepared for combat as the French fighter loomed in his gun sight. By this time it was quite evident that the Allied pilot did not see the *Pfalz* which was slightly below him. Holtzem was ready to press the firing button but hesitated a moment too long. In the interval the enemy roared over Holtzem's head missing the *Pfalz* by a scant few feet. The *SPAD* pilot was still not aware of the German's presence. Holtzem banked sharply and sped after his quarry. Again the *SPAD* was in his sights



The Jasta 16b airfield at La Folie Farm was a beehive of activity servicing the Albatros D.II fighters in 1916. Gefreiter Georg Sippel, principal aircraft mechanic, stands in center facing camera.

and his finger on the firing button as the French plane droned on. This "sitting duck" would be an easy victory for Holtzem and the members of Jasta 16b would be sure to toast the new arrival on his performance but Holtzem did not fire. He kept telling himself that he must shoot; that it was his duty. Then he reasoned that it would be cowardly murder to kill the French pilot who had not even seen him. Holtzem had always believed in chivalry and now was his chance to put it into practice. He would not shoot. By this time he was dangerously deep into Allied territory and the faster SPAD was far ahead of the Pfalz so Holtzem turned for home with joy in his heart. His conscience was clear; he was not a murderer. Now, another problem. What could he tell his squadron mates? What would be their reaction? Holtzem decided he must be truthful in his report and, when he related the facts to his fellow pilots, there was a brief silence followed by uproarious laughter. Apparently, the pilots of Jasta 16b did not appreciate Holtzem's idea of chivalry. They felt that the enemy you spare today may be the one who will kill you tomorrow.

On December 13, 1917, Vfw. Holtzem and Vfw. Neumaier were ordered to provide cover for Vfw. Schattauer on a balloon busting assignment. Neumaier and Schattauer flew the Albatros D.III while Holtzem flew his comet-marked favorite; the Pfalz D.IIIa. The trio cloud-hopped toward their quarry and, as soon as the French gunners started firing, the Germans began their shallow dive toward the huge gas bag. Schattauer was in the center and at a given signal the escort broke off and climbed while the center plane continued down for the kill. Two French *Paul Schmitt* observation planes were operating near by and they turned toward the Germans when they saw the balloon burst into flames. The two French pilots made one pass and then turned tail and sped for home as Neumaier and Holtzem took up the chase. Neumaier fired a short burst into the nearest *Paul Schmitt* and it tumbled earthward in a ball of flame. Holtzem pursued the remaining Frenchman over trenches, fields and woods; deeper and deeper into Allied territory. After several minutes the German was within range and prepared to fire when he felt the unmistakable thud of machine gun bullets slam into his airframe. Max whirled around just in time to stare into the gun barrels of a half dozen *Nieuport* fighters. It had been a trap. The *Paul Schmitt* pilot purposely led the unwary Holtzem into a sector where he knew the French fighters were patrolling. Max felt like a fool but realized that now he must use every bit of his flying skill to evade his attackers and escape with his life.



This is the Jasta 16b ground crew in front of an Albatros fighter. Note the cowl and spinner are removed. These men form a very important part of any air fighting unit and were it not for an efficient ground crew, many units would not be able to function at all.

The Nieuport 17 was an extremely agile airplane but lacked the structural strength of the Pfalz D.III. Holtzem was aware of this and used the Pfalz strength to good advantage by performing maneuvers which the French pilots feared to emulate. On the other hand the not too maneuverable Pfalz found it difficult to keep the snappy *Nieuport* in its gun sights long enough to score a decisive hit. The numerical advantage of the Frenchmen made it impossible not to score a hit and both *Lewis* and *Vickers* slugs smashed into the cockpit shattering the few instruments. Some bullets pierced the radiator while still others punched holes in the fuel tank in the upper wing. Hot water and gasoline splashed in Holtzems face and seeped into his mouth and eyes partially blinding the German. The wings were so full of holes that the airstream began shredding the fabric. Max knew that he could not keep up the fight much longer because with no cooling water the engine was running hot and would seize at any moment. He decided upon a ruse as the *Nieuports* rushed in for the "coup de grace." Gathering all his flying skill Holtzem put the crippled Pfalz into a wild, seemingly uncontrollable, spin. Down, down he went hoping that



These were the living quarters of Jasta 16b enlisted men when the unit was based at La Folie Farm, France in late 1917. The Germans apparently confiscated a large farmhouse for their use. Note the truck, staff car, and well near the bottom of the picture.



Leutnant Heinrich Geigl was the commanding officer of Jasta 16b when Holtzem joined the unit. After scoring thirteen victories, Geigl died in a collision with a Sopwith Camel while flying an Albatros D.V on April 4, 1918.

the French pilots would believe that Holtzem was another victory. Apparently the scheme worked because the *Nieuports* reformed and flew away. Holtzem continued his gyrations as long as he dared and, at an altitude of only a few hundred feet, he pulled out of his spin. The wings and struts groaned under the strain but the masterful hand at the controls eased the plane into level flight. Then the engine stopped. Max searched frantically for a clearing but all that met his eyes were the shell holes and mud of no-mans-land. He struggled to keep the badly battered plane in a flat glide as he aimed it at a small clearing ahead and then almost pancaked onto the rough terrain. The landing was perfect and, as the *Pfalz* rumbled to a stop, Holtzem leaped from the cockpit and dived into a shell hole.

The downed flier was lost. He knew that the wind had



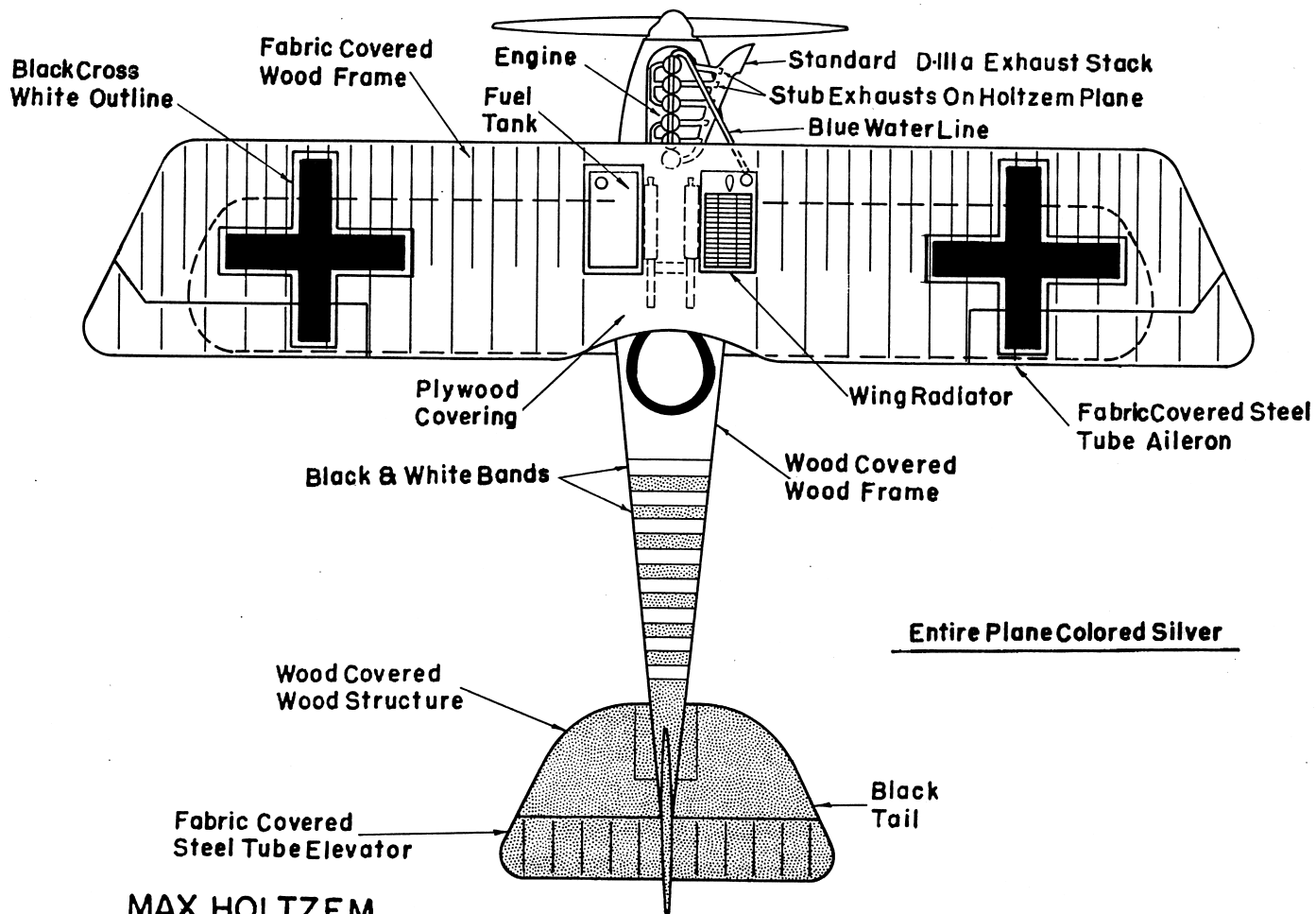
Max Holtzem was called "the Bavarian Comet" by his friends at Jasta 16b by virtue of his unusual flying ability and his personal insignia of a comet.



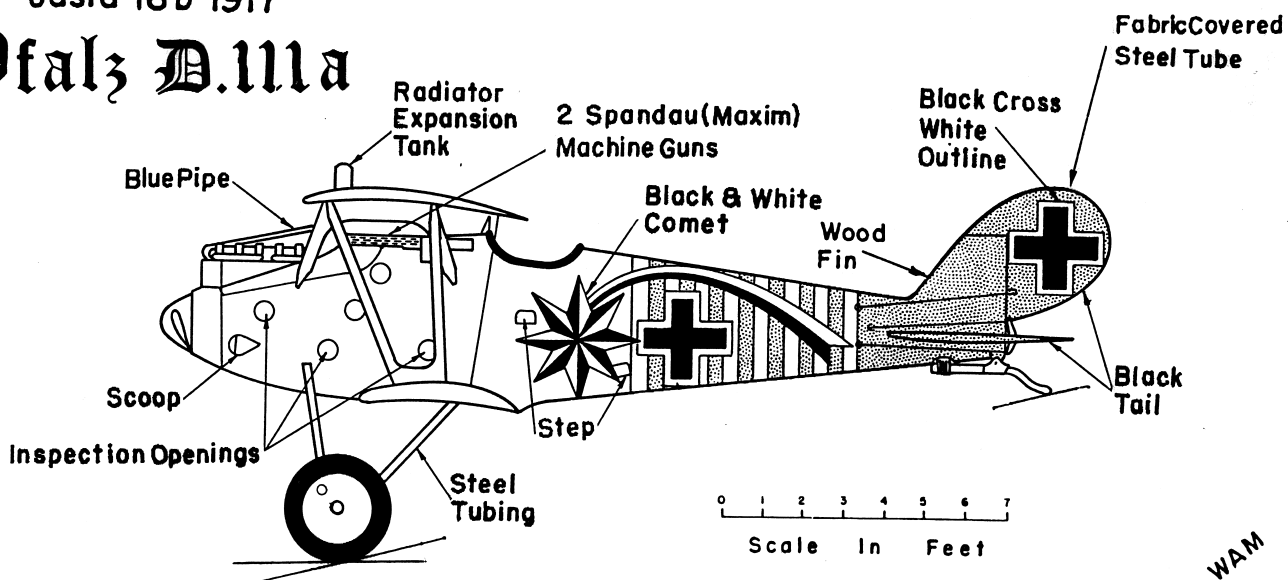
This shot of his Pfalz D.IIIa shows the black and white fuselage bands with the black and white comet streaking through them. The entire tail was black and the basic color of the plane was dull aluminum. Note the radiator with expansion tank above the top wing.

caused the uneven dogfight to drift towards the German trenches but he had no idea on which side of the lines he had landed. Soon he heard the sound of footsteps and muffled voices. These must be French infantrymen coming to investigate the landing. He dared not breathe. Then Holtzem smiled; the voices were German. He jumped up and ran to his comrades who admitted that they too had been fooled by Holtzem's wild spin. Max was tired and, as he unbuttoned his flying jacket to reach for his handkerchief, a bullet fell from his waist. It was a French bullet from the dogfight. It had penetrated his heavy jacket and smashed against his belt buckle. Had the buckle not stopped the slug it could have killed the flier. As Holtzem fingered the bullet he reflected on his outstanding luck that day. He turned toward the wreck for one last look at his beloved airplane and then returned to the Jasta 16b airfield where all welcomed Holtzem back from the dead.

Jasta 16b moved to Flanders in early 1918 and was assigned to an airfield in Aartryke near the Channel Coast. This area was plagued by heavy fog which greatly impaired the activities of the unit. On the morning of February 21 the troublesome fog rolled in from the west but the commanding officer insisted that every plane be in the air on patrol. As the planes became airborne it was obvious that the fog was getting worse. Holtzem realized that in a few minutes the field would be completely blanketed and the Jasta would not be able to land. He quickly dived into position alongside the C.O. and signalled the suggestions that they all turn back. When this was refused Holtzem

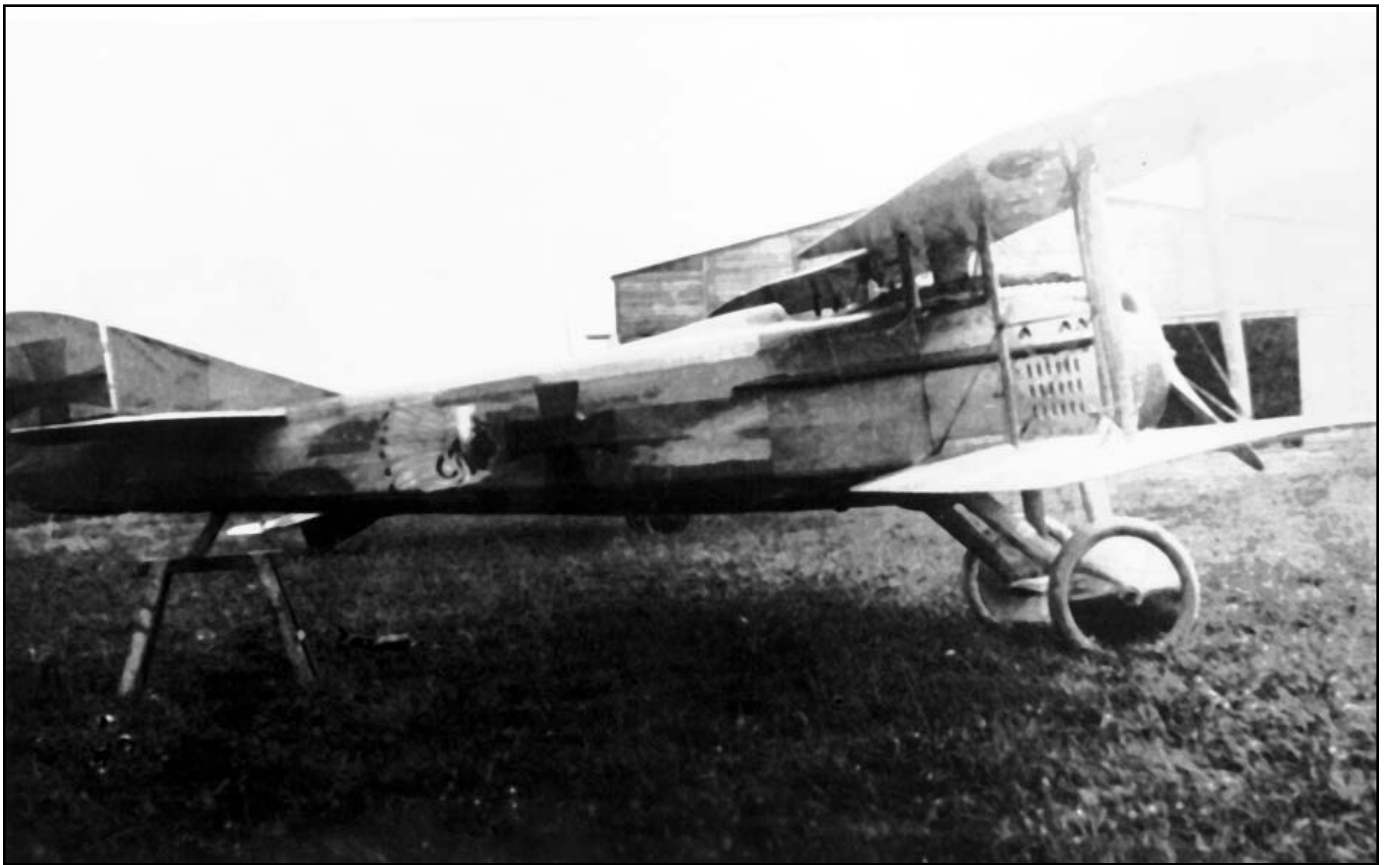


MAX HOLTZEM
Jasta 16b 1917
Pfalz D.IIIa



WAM

A side and top view drawing of Max Holtzem's Pfalz D. IIIa of Jasta 16b in 1917. (Drawing by Walter A. Musciano)



During an August 18, 1917, Allied bomber raid over Dun-sur-Meuse, France, Jasta 16b intercepted the escorting Lafayette Escadrille and damaged Harold Willis' SPAD. As Willis dead-sticked into an open field, Max Holtzem circled until he witnessed the American's capture by German troops. Holtzem then returned to the Jasta 16b airfield. Max collected his mechanics and drove to the SPAD, made the necessary repairs, and flew the plane to the Jasta airfield. Those German aviators who flew the SPAD disliked the plane and preferred their Albatros and Pfalz fighters. The SPAD came to ignominious end when Max Holtzem crashed into a marsh. Note the black crosses painted on the fuselage and rudder; also the Lafayette Escadrille Indian Head Insignia.



Escadrille Lafayette aviator Sargent Harold Willis was forced to land his SPAD, Damaged by Jasta 16b aviators in German held territory. Max Holtzem had the plane repaired and flew it to the Jasta 16b airfield. (Author's collection)

signalled that he was going to land and he returned to the field without waiting for permission. A few moments after Max touched down the fog closed in but the Jasta adjutant ignored this fact and severely reprimanded the pilot for leaving the patrol. Then both waited impatiently for the sound of Mercedes engines.

After fifteen minutes, which seemed like an eternity, engines were heard in the distance. A large fire was lit in the center of the field to guide the members of Jasta 16b home and to dissipate the fog. The engines came closer and closer but the planes were not visible; then came the shock. As the engines throttled down the sound of tearing fabric and plywood and snapping timber filled the air as, one after the other, the *Albatros* fighters smashed into the ground. Some just tore a wingtip, some collapsed the landing gear, while others nosed over or ground looped. One plane, piloted by Unteroffizier Foertig, flew into a ridge at the edge of the field and burst into flame, killing the pilot. The landing operation lasted several minutes and when the fog finally cleared it was discovered that the only airplane in Jasta 16b that was in flying condition belonged to Max Holtzem. All agreed that the wisest among them was the youngster who knew when not to fly. The early spring of 1918 was a time of feverish activity for the German Air Service which was preparing for its important role in the big offensive. Many units were regrouped under centralized command for more effective operation. Jastas 16b and 34 became Jagdgruppe X under the command of Robert Ritter von Greim. This unit in turn, was placed under the command of Baron Manfred von Richthofen who led twelve Jastas during this offensive. Jasta



The "Kamaraderie" of the Jasta 16b members is illustrated by this photograph taken during the unit's first anniversary celebration on October 31, 1917, at Erlon, France. The men are from left to right - Top row; messman, Vfw. Neumaier, Lt. Poesch, Vfw. Karl Schattauer, messman. Bottom row; Vfw. Holtzem, Lt. Zahler, Lt. Van Dorp, Lt. Dyke, Lt. Baier, Lt. Schulz.

16b moved to the Somme sector and it was here, during one of the briefing sessions, that Max met the famous Ace, Ernst Udet. Each man knew of the other's outstanding flying ability and the meeting was most cordial.

On March 18, 1918, an enormous battle developed over Le Cateau with about 150 British and German aircraft taking part. Holtzem engaged a lone *S.E.5* and, after skillful parrying by both pilots, the German got the upper hand; above and behind. The *S.E.5* tried in vain to shake off the *Pfalz* but Max hung on like glue. The Englishman was squarely in his sights and it could have been over in a split second but, again, Holtzem hesitated. Instead of firing into the cockpit he applied slight rudder and peppered the wings and engine with a short burst that started the Hisso engine smoking. The Englishman understood Holtzem's intention and waved his arm in a sign of surrender. Holtzem followed the *S.E.5* down and forced the pilot to land on the German side of the lines. He circled until he made certain that the enemy pilot was captured and then Max sped for his airfield. Guided by his insatiable desire for flying Holtzem bundled his mechanics into a truck and they drove toward the downed *S.E.5*. The mechanics repaired the damage quickly which placed the British fighter in flying condition. After an uneventful takeoff from the rough ground Max circled the area a few times and then headed for the Jasta 16b airfield.

The German found the stable *S.E.5* very comfortable to fly and hedgehopped in an eastward direction. All was bliss until Holtzem heard rifle and machine gun fire. There were no planes in sight but the German ground troops were firing at him with unrelentless fury. A little zig-zagging here and there avoided the German bullets and soon he landed on the Jasta airfield. As he emerged from the cockpit Max glanced at the fuselage side and gasped. Holtzem and the mechanics had forgotten to overpaint the red, white and blue British cockades with the German black cross. Little wonder that his own troops were firing at him. This flight could have been his last had a German Jasta been patrolling that area.

This was not the first time that Holtzem had flown one of the enemy's planes. His desire to fly everything and anything with wings often brought Holtzem very close to disaster. When he was based at La Folie Ferme, Max helped to force a *SPAD* to land and surrender on August 18, 1917. After black crosses were hastily painted over the French cocardes Holtzem flew to

the Jasta 16b airfield in the *SPAD* that had been flown by Sgt. Harold Willis of the Escadrille Lafayette. Although he did not like the way it handled Holtzem flew the *SPAD* on several occasions. One day as he gained speed for a takeoff the engine refused to deliver full power. Max was heading directly toward the hangars but had gained too much speed to stop so he pulled back on the stick and hoped the nose would rise. It did; but just enough to clear the hangars. The *SPAD* then dropped and stalled into a swamp which bordered the field. Max emerged uninjured but that was the end of the *SPAD*. In a sense he was glad the *SPAD* was gone because he considered it to be a dangerous airplane to fly.

The power of the German spring offensive of 1918 forced the Allied troops to retreat but it proved costly to many German units, especially Jasta 16b. By the end of April only Lt. Eck and Vfw. Holtzem survived the tremendous aerial activity that Jasta 16b witnessed during this period. On April 4, Holtzem was assigned to fly ahead and below the Jasta patrol to act as a decoy to attract British fighters. Near Amiens the plan worked because a Sopwith *Camel* dived out of the overhead clouds and fired point blank at the lone *Pfalz*. Although the *Camel* was far more maneuverable than the *Pfalz*, Max was able to evade the twin *Vickers* guns until the patrol intervened. The C.O., Lt.



Vizefeldwebel Max Holtzem relaxes on leave when he was a member of Jasta 16b. This unit was Bavarian and although Max was a Rhinelander, his association with the *Pfalz* Werke and Schleissheim eventually classified him as a Bavarian hence his assignment to this unit.

Geigl, was the first on the scene and as the *Camel* climbed into the clouds, Geigl followed. A split second later flaming wreckage fell from the cloud. It was not one plane, but two, interlocked in a death plunge. The *Albatros* and *Camel* had collided and both pilots died in the crash.

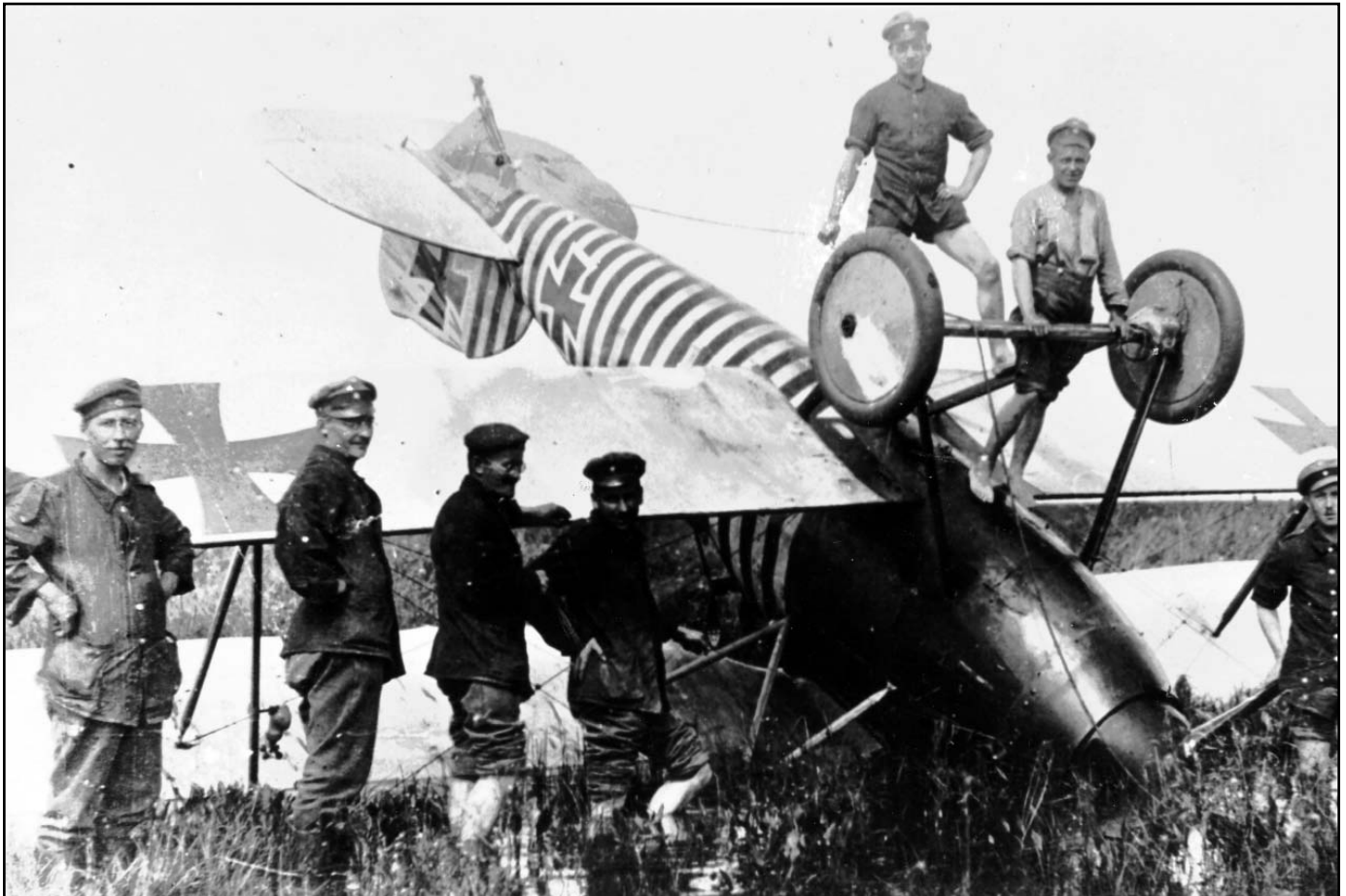
Lt. Fritz Roeth, the famous German Ace and balloon buster, became the new commanding officer of Jasta 16b.

As previously mentioned the aerial losses were high for all belligerents and it was important that all aerial wreckage be



Lt. Ludwig Hanstein was a pupil of Max Holtzem and became commanding officer of Jasta 16b from November 1916 to February 1918. He then became commanding officer of Jasta 35 and after scoring 16 official victories, he was killed in action on March 21, 1918.

located to rescue friendly crews and capture enemy crews who survived the crash. On occasion one member of a patrol was assigned the task of spotting fallen planes. This was Holtzem's turn. He soon found that, in his zeal, he had consumed too much fuel and could not make it back to his field. As Max flew over an abandoned British airfield near Viller Brettonneux he saw a German artillery spotting plane on the field that was camouflaged with branches. He only needed a few gallons of gasoline and hoped he could borrow this from the crew. Holtzem landed, dodging a shell hole here and there, and taxied toward the crew. To his surprise the men gestured for him to leave in no uncertain terms. Max cut the engine and then heard the pilot and observer shout that now the British would find out about the "Operation" because the silver *Pfalz* would certainly attract attention. Max looked at them quizzically; what was the "Operation"? He then learned that the field was being used as a forward aerial observation outpost. In addition to the plane crew a full observation balloon or "*Drachen*" crew was working feverishly at one end of the field trying to inflate the huge gas bag. A few of the balloon handlers had meanwhile rushed to the *Pfalz* and begged Holtzem to fly protective cover for the helpless "*Drachen*." Max replied that this was contrary to his orders and, besides, he had no fuel. He was amazed when they showed Holtzem a cache of gasoline that could sustain an entire Jasta for many patrols. Soon the balloon was up and the comet-marked *Pfalz* flew protective cover during most of that afternoon using the British gasoline that the balloon crew had discovered on the field. Toward dusk a Jasta 16b patrol flew past and Holtzem joined them for the flight home. No one ever asked the independent pilot how he managed to remain in the air for so long without returning to base for fuel.



This is Lt. Ludwig Hanstein's Albatros D.V which was borrowed by Lt. Rumpel for a sortie and overturned during the landing on the rough field on August 13, 1917. Fuselage is black and white and wing undersurfaces are light gray.

From the Somme, Jasta 16b moved to the Ypres sector and was based near St. Marguerite where the unit was issued the new Fokker D.VII fighter. Max had his plane marked with a striped tail and the familiar comet on the fuselage. By late summer of 1918 Germany had shot her bolt and her multiple offensives were in vain. Soldiers began to desert, the fleet mutinied, and the population rioted in the streets. Soon an armistice was arranged on November 11, 1918.

Fritz von Roeth was very despondent because of his country's defeat. Holtzem, who had meanwhile been promoted to the rank of Leutnant, tried to cheer his commanding officer. The C.O. had been wounded in his foot but wanted a last look at the front before the ceasefire so Holtzem piloted the incapacitated von Roeth on a flight over the front on the morning of November 11, 1918. Meanwhile, roving bands of Communist-inspired "Soldiers Councils" began to take over many towns and all German officers were in danger. Chaos reigned in Germany at this time and law and order held on by a thread.



This photograph of members of Jasta 16b was taken during the Somme offensive in early 1918. From left to right the pilots are: Vzfw. Andreas Triebswetter (K.I.A.); Ltn. Schafer (P.O.W.); Ltn. Franz Riedle (Killed by German pilots while flying a captured British S.E.5); Ltn. Haendl (P.O.W.); Commanding Officer Ltn. Heinrich Geigl (K.I.A.); Ltn. Eck (one of the few survivors of the offensive); Vzfw. Jehle; and Vzfw. Max Holtzem.



At times the losses of Jasta 16b were very high. This is the funeral of Unteroffizier Foertig on January 27, 1918, at Mercy le Haut, France. The Jasta band precedes the casket while Jasta personnel walk behind their fallen comrade. Note the bombed-out buildings in the background; mute testimony to the horror of war.



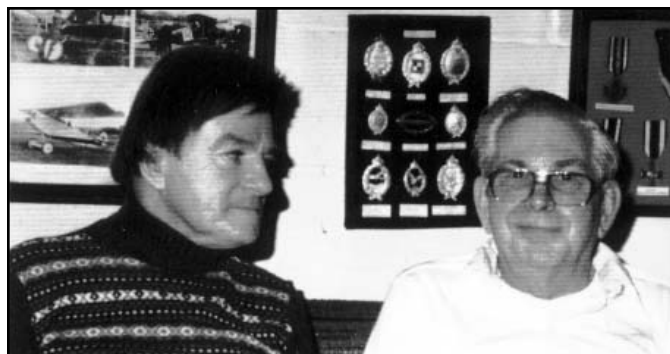
Leutnant Fritz von Roeth, Germany's balloon buster, was commanding officer of Jasta 16b from May 1918 until the Armistice. Holtzem piloted his leader on a farewell flight over the front on November 11, 1918. Roeth was so despondent over Germany's surrender that he killed himself six weeks later. (Author's collection)

Biographical Data for Nick Hauprich

World renowned aviation historical scholar who has shared the results of his studies with aviation history authors, researchers and other scholars for more than six decades.

This Aeronautical University of Chicago graduate aeronautical engineer worked on the design of the bent wing Corsair of World War II and the Korean war; and other famous aircraft. He is currently in semi-retirement in Akron, Ohio, devoting himself to aviation history full-time.

The authors: Walter A. Musciano on the left and Nick Hauprich on the right. (Photo from Walter Musciano)



THOUGHTS ON HEROISM, CHIVALRY AND ACES

The myth of chivalry was not often found with the great aces. Some flyers have a dim view of “Knights of the Air” when some of the writers put the most ruthless killers into this category. The development of the “ace-system” is responsible for that. Manfred von Richthofen and others were demanding of their pilots not only that they unchivalrously kill their opponents even when they were defenseless as their controls were shot away or gun-trouble developed, even when they were on the ground.

For some of these “Aces” were their competitive ego and success measured as skill, and they had their greatness measured by the amount of kills they had made. They went sometimes out of their way “to make sure” even when a motorless plane was trying to land behind the enemy lines.

The whole secret for success was the tactic of sneaking from behind under the tail of some victim which had not even seen him.

Where is the chivalry? The real courage is in taking on any opponent, if you have to fight him and fight it out by masterly flying. If you can outmanouver the enemy and fly him to the ground, you were in my opinion the true knight; but that takes real skill and more courage as shooting him up before he sees you; but it did not help to become a great ace.

But as your editor says: people want the colorful and very different face of aerial warfare.

cont.

The desires for “legal victories” became so aroused in some pilots that they not only finished off cripples but took rightful victories from their fellow pilots.

I ask you, does it take more courage to take on any bully than shooting down a defenseless or unsuspecting victim sometimes fresh out of school and on his first frontflight?

The way-up “rear-end-Charlie” who had the role to watch over the whole echelon was constantly in danger to be sniped off; he had the dubious honour not to be aggressive but the more skill requiring virtue to stay alive and let others live and he better was the more experienced, older pilot. He was considered and accepted to do just that and not to try to become the ace flying at the head of the formation well protected by his wingmen. I have seen such well trained flights pushing down on a single astray victim, he fell almost out of fear before shooting actually had started; I mean the ones who froze at the controls, and not the experienced ones who simulated to be falling out of control. It always looked to me as not much heroic.

You may pass on to your editor this view from an experienced fighter-pilot who flew for 15 months with a very active Jagdataffel, which had 3 commanding officers decorated with the “Pour le Merite” Lts. Kissenberth, Odebrett, and Roeth.

There are aces without “legal victories” too. I’m proud to be an “ALTE ADLER”. Lt. Hanstein, Vfw. Festner, Lt. Kirmaier and Obltn. Dostler had been my pupils.

Max Holtzem, Jasta 16, WW-1
Sept. 23rd, 1966