

LT. COL. BRIAN P. FLANAGAN
USAF

AN EVENING IN BERLIN

Does the name Robert Thelen mean anything to you? If you are a modeller of WW I A/C (even plastics), or a student of the early days of aviation, it should. Robert Thelen designed one of the world's most famous series of fighter aircraft--the Albatros fighters of World War I. I met him in Berlin one evening last May (1959).

My wife and I had been invited up to Berlin (from Wiesbaden) to Heinz Nowarra's home for a "kaffee klatsch" with some of the members of Germany's Alte Adler club for the night of May 2nd. I was a little leery of the date since May 1st is the traditional day for Communist riots and the Russian threat of war hung heavy over Europe this Spring.

We booked the early morning Pan-Am flight from Frankfurt's Rhein-Main Flughafen into Tempelhof, and flew up the famous "air corridor" where only a few days before Russian MiG's had been buzzing USAFE transports flying at over 10,000 feet. We landed (in the rain, of course) at the unmistakable Tempelhof with its huge long curved hangar and its long approach over the house-tops which we had seen in so many movies of the Berlin airlift.

Berlin is a beautiful city, and an exciting one for the visitor. To the west of the jagged scar that separates East Berlin from West Berlin, there is tremendous activity, life, lights, packed store windows, and crowds of people and cars. Except for the memorial Gedachtnis-Kirche, it almost looks as if there had been no war fifteen years ago. To the east of the scar, the empty desolate streets, the crumbling ruins, look as if the war had ended only a few months ago. Berlin is a fascinating city to visit.

But I went to Berlin to talk about WW I A/C. We took a taxi through a drenching rain to a place which had previously been for me only an address on an envelope--41 Emdenerstrasse, Berlin NW 21. Now it was a spot on a city map, less than a dozen blocks from the Russian zone; and it was a very pleasant second-floor apartment in a residential section in north-central Berlin.

One word about our host and hostess. Heinz Nowarra is a driving, dedicated, extroverted, enthusiastic student of WW I aviation. For over twenty years I have been collecting data on WW I A/C. One look at Heinz's incredible collection of photographs and I have the feeling that I have no collection at all. The day that I arrived, he had just catalogued photo #10,650 of his collection. Frau Nowarra is as gracious, happy, and genial a hostess as ever put a soup-tureen of Schlagsahne (whipped-cream) in front of a rather overweight Flight Surgeon.

The Alte Adler is a society of German pilots of the pre-WW I era. It meets in Berlin under the leadership of Col. Gen. (ret'd) Alfred Keller--the famous "Iron" Keller who, as leader of BOGOHL I, "invented" strategic bombing for the German Flying Corps, in WW I. Through this group Nowarra had met these pioneers of aviation in Berlin, and so around a table loaded with delicious food and relaxing liqueurs, I met Alexander Loepki, Willy Hackenberger, Fridolin Keidel, Robert Thelen, and their charming wives.

Unfortunately my knowledge of conversational German is painfully inadequate for such a conversation (being more of the "Wo ist der Bahnhof?" type) so I had to rely on Nowarra to translate. As a translator Heinz is most competent--unfortunately he becomes so enthusiastic about the story he is translating that he forgets that he is talking English and carries on "full steam" in German! It is a "family joke" that when he was translating for the British publisher, Mr. D. A. Russell (of Harleyford Publications Ltd.) last fall, he spoke English to the Baroness von Richthofen and German to Mr. Russell. However, this evening, (excepting a few lapses) we got along splendidly.

Herr Alexander Loepki, a pleasant friendly person with a grin and a sense of humor I usually associate more with Scots than with Germans, was one of the early pilots of Germany, having flown before 1912 and having served as a naval aviator in the 1914-18 war. He also had been a test pilot in the R-plane department of the Schutte-Lanz factory. Unfortunately for this article, we got into such an interesting discussion of Berlin in the last days of the 1939-45 war and his experiences there, that before we got around to his 1914-18 experiences, it was time for the last train to East Berlin and he had to leave.

Herr Willy Hackenberger is German in the way Americans think of a German. He is heavy, solid, sits deeply in his chair, and his statements seem to issue from somewhere deep inside of him. He makes a rather forbidding initial impression, but deep behind his stolid facade is a sense of humor. Hackenberger was the only visitor that night who lives in West Berlin! Hackenberger was the chief of the Albatros production-office from 1911 to 1919 and is loaded with data on Albatros, the history of the firm, and its aircraft. From this information he and Nowarra are projecting a book on the rise and fall of the mighty Albatros Gesellschaft fur Flugzeugunternehmungen m.b.H. Heinz has some 400 photographs of Albatros aircraft, and Hackenberger has, as Heinz puts it, a "pack-donkey load" of factory drawings and specifications on Albatros aircraft. More important--Hackenberger was there when!

It was interesting to note the pride that the Albatros people took in their products. According to Hackenberger, their aircraft showed better craftsmanship than their competitors'. (This was safe to say this night since almost all the old-timers there had worked for Albatros.) Even the Fokker D-7's that Albatros was assigned to produce after Fokker won the 1918 competition, were better (according to Hackenberger) than the Fokker-produced D-7's. This was because the workmanship of the Albatros factory was cleaner and each plane was "trued up" more carefully at Berlin/Johannisthal than at Schwerin. Nowarra added the comment that he had heard the same comment from pilots who had flown and fought in the D-7's, (such as Vfw. Richard Scholz, Uffz. Klamt of Jasta 10 and Vfw. Gabriel of Jasta 11).

Since the merits of Fokker as a designer were at this time a subject of interest, ("Aeromodeler" had just finished a rather tart battle on the subject in its "Letters" department), I was interested to hear what his competitors thought of him. In general they thought that he was a good businessman and a good mechanic in the technical sense, but did not "work clean." He also knew how to pick the best parts out of other people's ideas and incorporate them into his own designs. They point out that his famous E-series of fighters were actually taken from the Hanuschke monoplane, and that after the war he lost a patent-fight in the courts to Franz Schneider who in 1914 had patented an interrupter gear for aircraft machine guns. (See Volume II of Das Buch der Deutschen Fluggeschichte by Peter Supf, page 505 ff for details). As Heinze put it, "Fokker had the name, but the work was done by his men: Platz as designer; Lubbe for armament; and especially Seekatz for the selling of airplanes." They also pointed out the frequency of crashes due to structural weaknesses and blamed them on a lack of conscientiousness in design and construction. "Bei Fokker wurde zu sehr über den Daumen gepeilt" --at Fokker's too many measurements were made with the thumb.

Hackenberger left Albatros in 1919 when it began to collapse. Later he became a high ranking official in the Nazi Party (in the health section), and when that too collapsed he retired. He is now secretary of the Alte Adler and is working on collecting all the data he can on the pioneers of German aviation and the pilots of the 1914-18 era. For years he has been begging and pleading for his old comrades to lend him their material so he would have data for his book and for a permanent "museum" of German aviation which he is projecting. Finally he decided that he had waited long enough, so he started writing and putting all his material into final form. No sooner had he "finalized" his data and had it ready for publication than he was suddenly flooded with new material that made all his previous work useless.

Orville Wright taught Fridolin Keidel how to fly--in a German built Wright Flyer in 1910. Keidel holds pilot's license #5 in Germany, dated April 27, 1910. He had been a mechanic on the Parseval airships and when the Wright Flugmaschin G.m.b.H. was formed to produce the Wright biplane in Germany, he was in the first class of students to learn to fly the monster. This was the original type with skids instead of wheels, a catapult take-off, elevators in front and rudders behind, etc. Orville Wright was the teacher of the first class. The first pupil was a Capt. Engelhardt. Keidel was at this time his chauffeur and mechanic. When on September 25, 1910, Capt. Engelhardt was killed in a crash, Keidel took over Engelhardt's work to train the other students, and went on to become instructor on Wright machines. Later he went on to other aircraft and set several records in the very early days in Germany. During the 1914-18 war he was a flying instructor at the Albatros flying school at Schneidemühl. He was, and still is, a very tall man, and though much bothered by a severe cardiac asthma, does not look his 77 years.

Fridolin Keidel taught Robert Thelen to fly. I saw Thelen's pilot's license-- #9 for Germany, dated 5 November 1910. Thelen also learned to fly on the original Wright Flyer type machine. He then went on to establish many records and win many prizes on both Wright and Albatros machines. He won his first big success in the Berliner Flugwoche of August, 1910, when he won first prizes for altitude, heaviest pay-load, and shortest take-off, and the Royal Prussian Prize of Honor. In the years before the war he won a multitude of prizes in many countries of Europe, including the Kopenhagener Tageblatt prize for an overwater flight around Denmark in a land machine! Besides winning prizes

however, he was also demonstrating the increasing safety and dependability of aircraft. This was a bit rough on his charming Norwegian wife, however, (whom we also met that night) who never knew when Thelen took off, when--or if--he would come back. On 11 February 1914 he set the world's altitude record for an aircraft with four passengers--2850 meters--in an Albatros military biplane.

In 1911 he had started at Albatros as a test pilot, and by 1914 he had become their chief designer. In 1916 he became technical director. He and his staff were responsible for the entire D-series of Albatros fighters from the D I to the D XII, including the famous D III and D V. He designed not only these, but also the C-series from C III to the C XIII, and the G II and G III bombers. But more remarkable than this, right up to the end of the war he tested every plane himself. Thelen was famous for his lack of unnecessary conversation. Hans Grade (one of Germany's first) made the statement that if Thelen opened his mouth it was only to put a cigarette in it. His old method of testing a plane was to silently walk around the plane, climb into the cockpit, and take her off. After the test flight he would climb out and, if the plane was satisfactory, he would report "Gut." If it was unsatisfactory, "Scheisse." That was his technical report! Richard Scholtz, a later test pilot at Albatros tells a story on himself. It was his first test flight for Albatros and he was flying a brand new C VII. Knowing that Thelen, then technical advisor, was watching, he decided to put on a show for him, so he "wrung-out" the C VII putting it through the paces as he had done with the D-planes at the front. But this work-horse was no fighter and couldn't take it, and Scholtz, as he put it, "put a pretty crash on the field." Scholtz managed to escape the wreckage unhurt, but the first man he saw on emerging was Thelen. Without the slightest change of expression Thelen commented, "You did a good job on that" ("Das haben Sie fein hingekriegt."), and disappeared. Scholtz' next test flight was more successful and he never again tried to fly a C-plane like a D-plane.

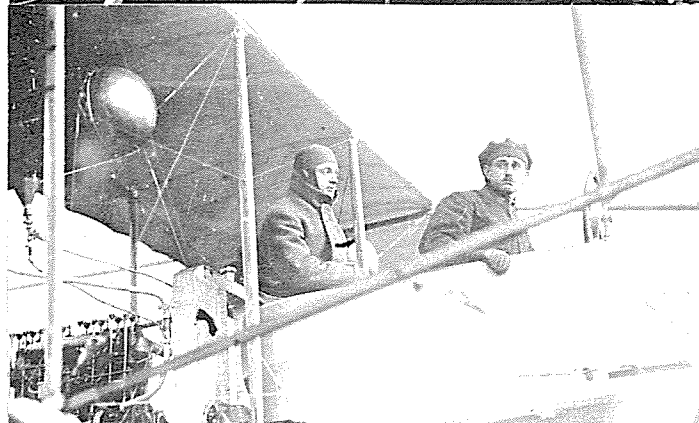
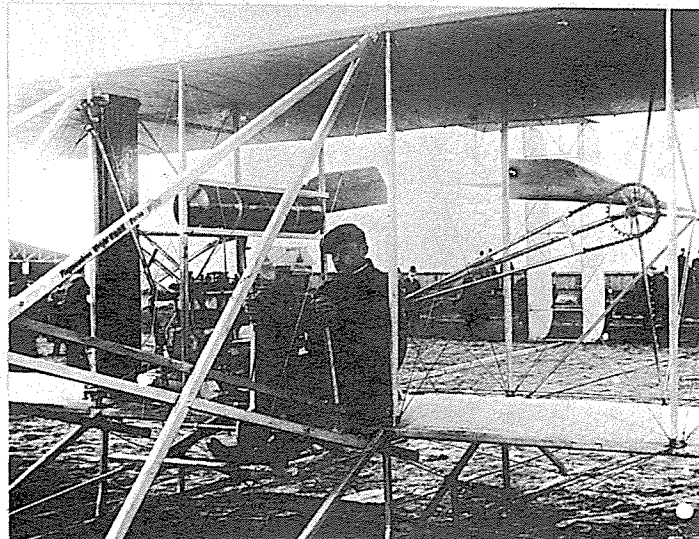
Thelen today is a thin trim erect man, and apparently his 75 years rest lightly upon him. (I originally guessed his age at about 56.) He speaks seldom--but authoritatively when he does. The comments that he made on his colleagues and competitors (like Heinkel and Fokker) were always factual and never critical. Only once did he lapse into a tale. We were looking through Nowarra's fantastic collection of photos of Albatros aircraft and a photo of an Albatros B I flipped past. Thelen commented that that reminded him of one of his crashes. They had tried fitting a Farman airfoil onto a B II and Thelen took it off to test it. Hardly was he off the ground than one wing began to drop. He gave it opposite aileron but the wing dropped more. He shoved the stick way over and the wing dropped more. By this time the low wing had dug itself into the ground and the plane spun around into a crash. Thelen fortunately escaped with only minor injuries. Investigation revealed that an inept workman had hooked the aileron control wires backwards.

They are remarkable men, these pioneers, remembering events of a half century ago as though they had occurred yesterday, and as alive today as they were 47 years ago when they risked their lives on flimsy wings of wood and linen.

Too soon the time came when the visitors had to leave and catch the last S-Bahn back to East Berlin. Over a bottle of Rhein wine the Flanagans and the Nowarras finished off the evening and then bidding adieu to our host and hostess, Kay and I drove through the cool clear air of the pre-dawn to our hotel, ending a delightful evening in Berlin.



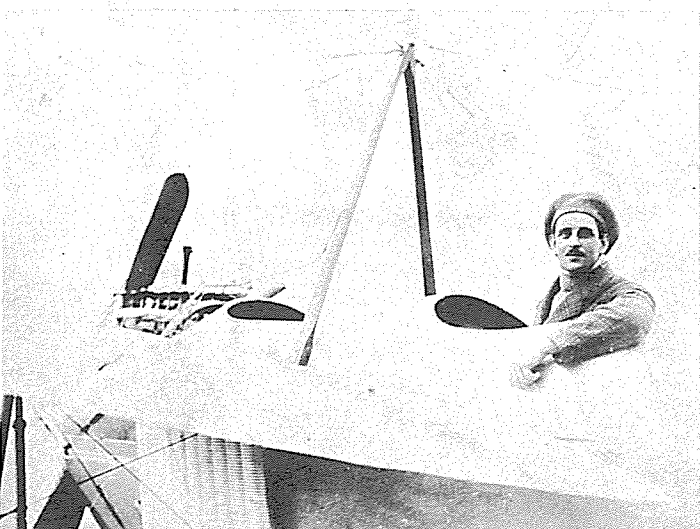
Robert THELEN seated in a Wright biplane of 1910 design. He later became chief design engineer for the Albatros Works.



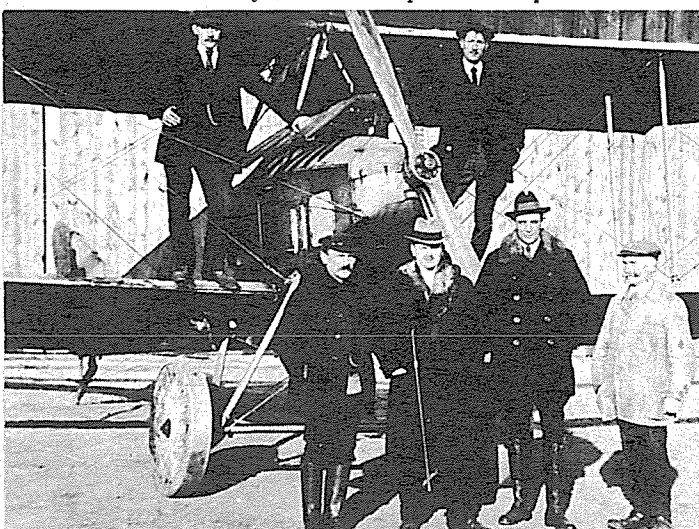
the Albatros Works. At right are THELEN and WERNER on an early Albatros pusher biplane.



THELEN (center) as pilot of an Albatros G.II. Others are Dir. Nax and Gen'l. Dir. Selzer of



KEIDEL seated in, probably, a Jeanine "Taube" (1914). At right, Firdolin KEIDEL (tall one)



at the Albatros Flying School at Schneidemuhl in 1917, before an Albatros B.II.

All photos courtesy of Heinz Nowarra