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THE ACES®

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Greg VanWyngarden

ACES OF *JAGDGESCHWADER Nr III*



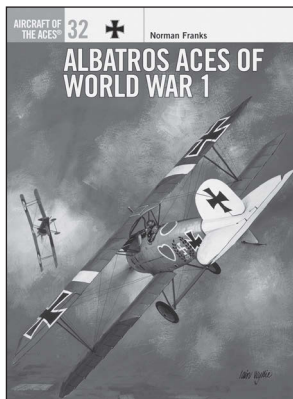
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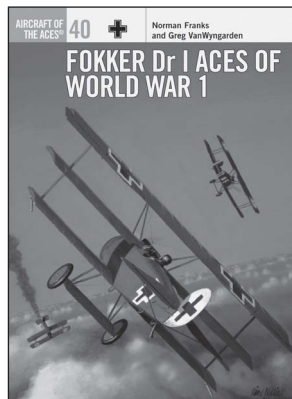
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Harry Dempsey has been passionate about World War 1 aviation for more than 30 years, having produced some of the most technically accurate colour artwork on the subject. He has illustrated nearly all of Osprey's World War 1 aviation titles since 1998.

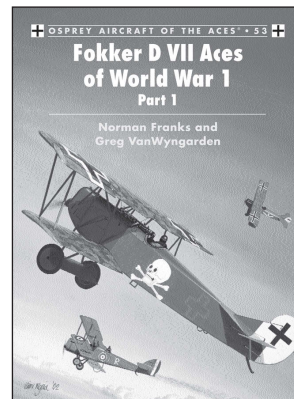
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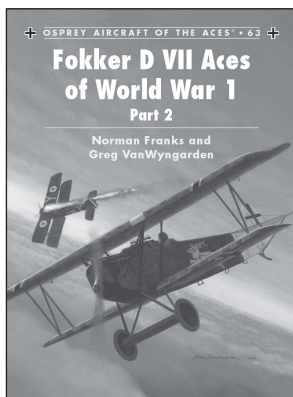
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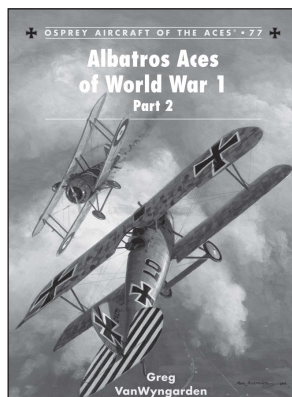
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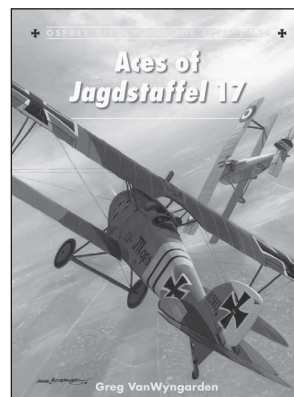
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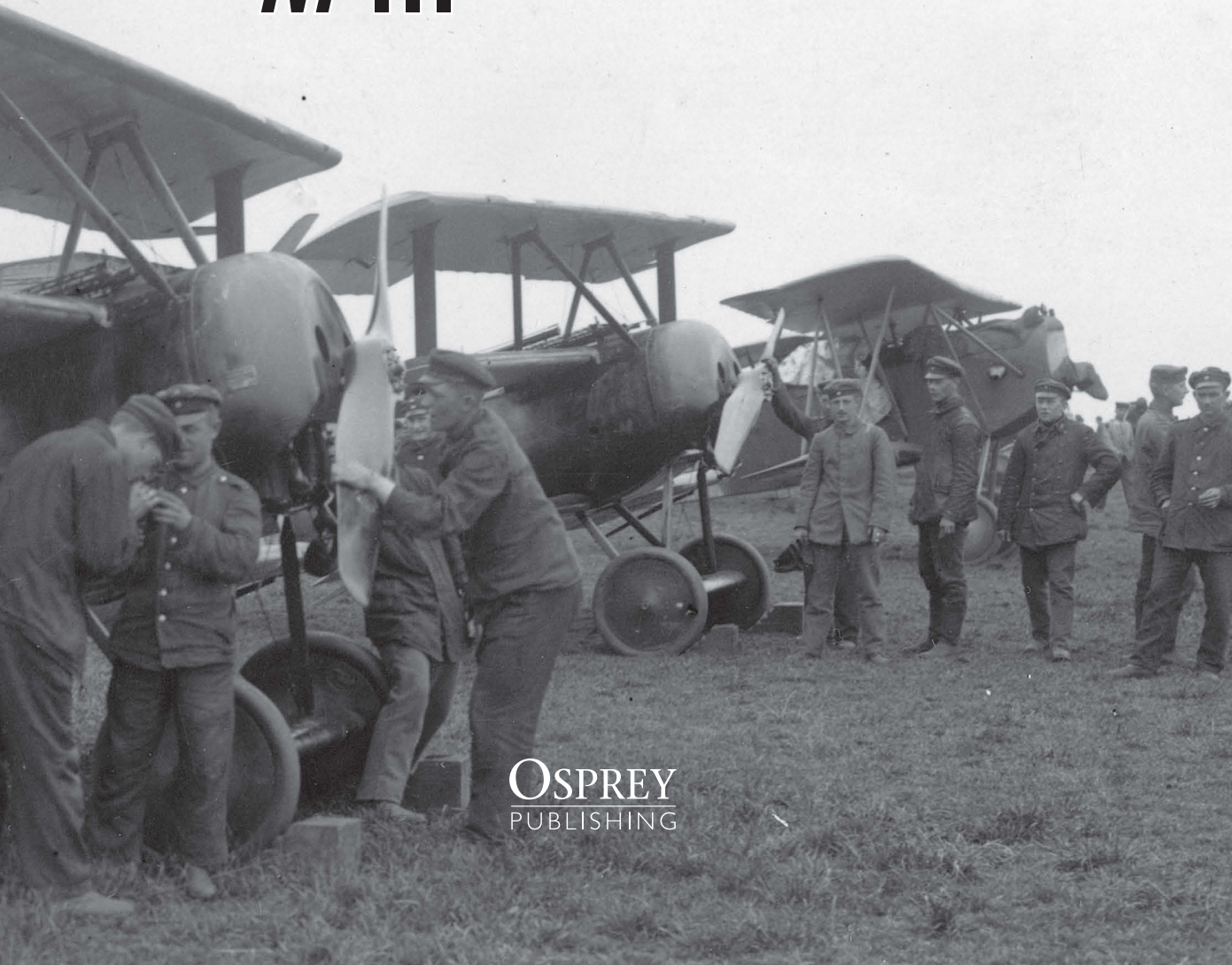
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Greg VanWyngarden

ACES OF *JAGDGESCHWADER* *Nr III*



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Front Cover

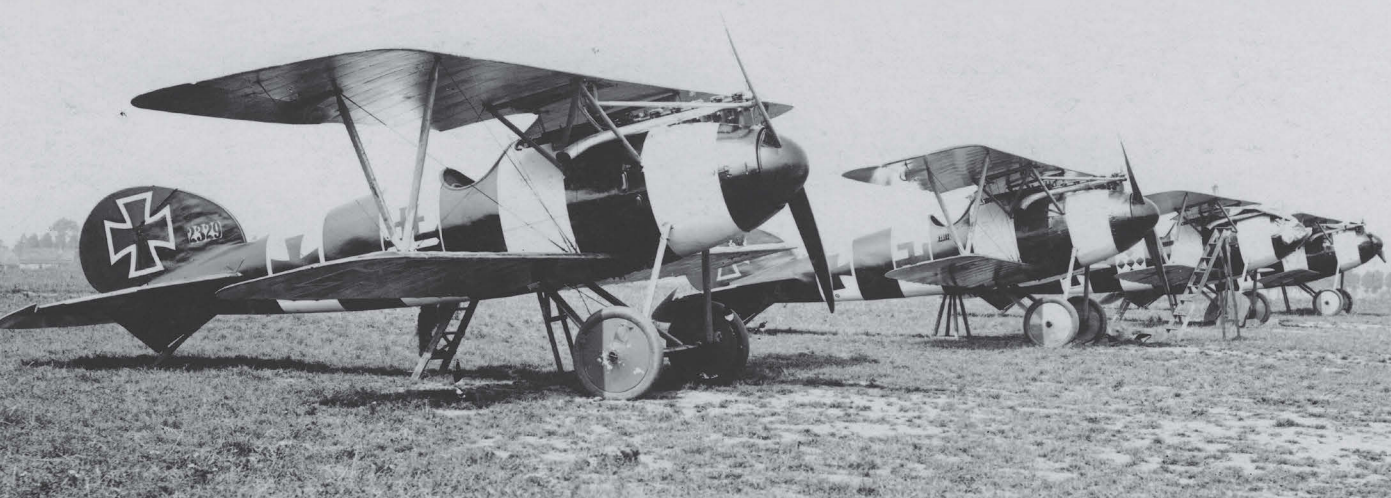
In the early morning of 4 September 1918, 12 Sopwith Camels – two flights – from No 70 Sqn were heading deep into German territory near Douai, in northern France. The formation was led by Canadian Flight Leader Capt J H Forman DFC, a highly experienced ace with nine victories. At 3000 metres over Hamel, the RAF pilots sighted a group of seven Fokker D VII's from *Jasta 57* below them, led by their commander, Ltnd R Paul Strähle. One of the Camels dived to attack a straggling D VII, as Strähle subsequently recalled. 'One of our aircraft was lagging behind, and I turned around to aid him. It developed into an air fight, and since our *Staffel* was numerically [inferior] to that of the enemy, the air fight was not successful'. Indeed, two of the *Jasta 57* Fokkers were shot up and one pilot was badly wounded in the stomach.

Fortunately, just in time, '*Jagdgeschwader Nr III* dropped down and joined in the attack', Strähle continued. 'They had more success. One Sopwith went down on fire'. The pilots from *Jastas 26* and *27* of JG III were led by the *Geschwader* commander Oblt Bruno Loerzer, a celebrated 'Blue Max' winner with 37 victories. Loerzer flew a flamboyantly decorated Fokker that displayed the black and white stripes of *Jasta 26* on its fuselage and tail – as the commander's machine it had the vivid striping extended to the wings too.

The veteran pilots of JG III, many of whom were flying the superb BMW-engined D VII, dropped out of the clouds from 3500 metres and savaged the Camel formation. As *Jasta 27* ace Friedrich Noltinius wrote, 'A lively aerial battle with a strong Sopwith squadron commenced'. The 20-minute battle began at 0910 hrs, with the *Jasta 26* Fokkers proving especially effective. Loerzer himself fastened on to one of the Camels and shot it down near Monchecourt for his 38th victory, while his adjutant, Oblt Theodor Dahlmann, was credited with a brace of British aircraft downed in two minutes over Palluel. *Jasta 26*'s deadly Otto Fruhner brought his own tally to 23 by claiming three Camels, and his fellow ace Erich Buder added two more. Of the 12 Camel pilots from No 70 Sqn that originally engaged *Jasta 57*, only four made it back to their airfield.

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CHAPTER ONE

ORIGINS AND BACKGROUND

Royal Prussian *Jagdgeschwader Nr III* was the last of the trio of celebrated fighter wings of the German Army Air Service that achieved great success in aerial combat during the final year of World War 1. A *Jagdgeschwader* was a permanent grouping of four fighter squadrons (*Jagdstaffeln*, each with an official strength of 14 aircraft) under a permanent *Kommandeur*. It operated directly under the orders of the headquarters of the Army to which it was assigned. The first *Geschwader*, created on 23 June 1917, was the legendary JG I composed of *Jastas* 4, 6, 10 and 11 and commanded by Manfred *Freiherr* von Richthofen. Under his leadership and example, JG I compiled an enviable record and was referred to as the ‘Richthofen Circus’ by its British and American opponents.

The success of JG I led to the creation of two more such elite formations, designated JG II and JG III, on 2 February 1918. In addition, there was a fourth army *Jagdgeschwader* – the Royal Bavarian JG IV – and the Royal Prussian *Marine Jagdgeschwader*, but these units were formed very late in the war and had little opportunity for achievements comparable to those of JGs I, II and III.

JGs II and III were formed in preparation for the role the Air Service would play in the massive offensive that German forces were scheduled to launch on 21 March 1918. There would be three attacking German Armies in the assault (the 2nd, 17th and 18th), and the Air Service planned to

A view of Albatros D V 2329/17, heading a line-up of fighters that are all marked in the distinctive black and white colours of *Jasta* 26 at Iseghem in the late summer of 1917 (courtesy R Absmeier)

Title Page Spread

Two yellow-nosed Fokker Dr I triplanes and one new Fokker D VII of *Jasta* 27 are seen on the airfield at Halluin-Ost in this official *Kogenluft* photo taken in May 1918. The Dr I in the foreground displays some form of personal insignia that involves five-pointed stars, barely visible ahead of the fuselage cross

provide each of them with its own *Jagdgeschwader*, along with several more *Jastas* and many other air units. JG I would go to the 2nd Army, while JG II (*Jastas* 12, 13, 15 and 19) would go to the 18th Army. JG III was to be assigned to the 17th Army, and it would be comprised of the celebrated *Jasta* 'Boelcke' (formerly designated *Jasta* 2, but renamed *Jasta* 'Boelcke' after its first commander) as well as *Jastas* 26, 27 and 36. That formation and its most successful pilots form the topics of this book.

A *Jagdgeschwader* was preferably led by a regular army officer who was not only a proven combat leader but also a successful air fighter. Suitably qualified officers were scarce, but JG III was fortunate to be led by Oberleutnant (later Hauptmann) Bruno Loerzer, one-time commander of *Jasta* 26 and already a prominent ace with nearly 20 victories. While JGs I and II both transitioned through three successive leaders due to combat deaths and injuries, JG III would serve throughout its entire nine-month career under Loerzer's leadership.

The reputation of Loerzer and his unit extended to the other side of the lines, as evidenced in American ace 'Eddie' Rickenbacker's book *Fighting the Flying Circus*. In writing of the opposition faced by his 94th Aero Squadron in October 1918, Rickenbacker recorded his belief that, 'The enemy had here concentrated the heaviest air force against the Americans that had ever been gathered together. Both the von Richthofen Circus and the Loerzer Circus were now opposed to us'.

By the time JG III was formed in February 1918 each of its four *Staffeln* had already been fighting at the front for months, compiling admirable records. It is appropriate to present brief summaries of their histories here so as to provide background knowledge and context for their accomplishments in the 'Loerzer Circus' in 1918.

Oblt Bruno Loerzer commanded *Jagdgeschwader Nr III* throughout its existence, and would finish the war as a Hauptmann with the *Pour le Mérite* and 44 victories to his name. The latter half of his tally was scored during his tenure as *Geschwader Kommandeur*. Here, he displays his 'Blue Max' and a captured British leather flying coat – a highly prized item



JASTA 'BOELCKE'

Jasta 'Boelcke' was one of the most respected *Staffeln* at the front, ranking second only to von Richthofen's *Jasta* 11 in its number of victories. It had originally been formed as *Jasta* 2 under the leadership of Hptm Oswald Boelcke at Bertincourt on 27 August 1916. Boelcke was a legendary and charismatic figure to both the flying service and the German public, truly the father of German fighter aviation. Boelcke and his contemporary Max Immelmann were the first Fokker Eindecker aces and the first aviation recipients of the *Orden Pour le Mérite* (the highest Prussian award for bravery in combat, popularly known as the 'Blue Max'). The story of Boelcke and his famous command has been told many times (see *Osprey Aircraft of the Aces 73 – Early German Aces of World War 1* and *Osprey Aviation Elite Units 26 – Jagdstaffel 2 'Boelcke'*), so only a succinct account follows.

Boelcke's early group of handpicked pilots included future standouts Max Müller, Erwin Böhme and Manfred von Richthofen. Equipped with the Albatros D I and D II, these pilots announced their presence on the Somme front in spectacular fashion on 17 September when *Jasta* 2 destroyed four British aircraft – including Boelcke's 27th victory and the first of 80 for von Richthofen. Success followed success, with the *Staffel* tallying more than 50 victories by 26 October. Two days later, however, Boelcke met his tragic end when his Albatros collided in mid-air with

the aircraft of his friend Erwin Böhme. Boelcke died of a fractured skull sustained in the resulting crash landing, while Böhme was able to land safely. All of Germany mourned the loss of their hero, but the airmen of *Jasta 2*, now under the leadership of Oblt Stefan Kirmaier, continued to rack up victories above the Somme.

Kirmaier himself fell on 22 November, just one day after another promising pilot had joined the *Staffel* – a 19-year-old from Krefeld named Werner Voss. Kirmaier's replacement as CO arrived on 29 November in the person of Oblt Franz Josef Walz. From 17 December 1916 onward, the *Staffel* was honoured by Imperial decree to include Boelcke's name in its official designation (sometimes recorded as *Jasta 'B'*).

It was the frequent fate of the 'Boelcke' *Staffel* to lose its most successful *Jagdflieger*, as they were often transferred out to command other units. Thus, von Richthofen departed in late January 1917 to take over *Jasta 11*. Böhme also left that month for a temporary rest, but several newcomers would more than make up for the absence of these veterans. Werner Voss had initiated his string with a double victory on 27 November 1916, and he would add eight more before the end of February 1917.

23 February saw the arrival of Fritz Otto Bernert from *Jasta 4*, with seven victories. March 1917 really belonged to Voss, who tallied 11 more successes and was awarded the *Pour le Mérite* on 8 April. Bernert was credited with 15 Royal Flying Corps (RFC) aircraft during April to bring his own total to 24. By the end of April 1917 the unit's total of victories stood at 139. Two of those had been achieved by Ltnd R Hermann Frommherz for his initial victories. A 26-year-old from Baden, he had served in *Kampfstaffel 20* of *Kagohl 4* alongside Werner Voss in 1916. Frommherz would eventually rise to great prominence and play a pivotal role in JG III.

Voss was transferred to *Jasta 5* on 20 May 1917, while Walz left to take command of Bavarian *Jasta 34* and was replaced by Otto Bernert. In the summer of 1917 the fortunes of *Jasta 'B'* suffered a downturn. Only one victory was scored in all of June, that being a Sopwith Pup downed by Ltnd R Friedrich 'Fritz' Kempf on the 5th. Like Frommherz, Kempf hailed from Baden, and his name, too, would feature in the story of JG III. July passed without a single victory, and only one came in August – a Sopwith Camel that went down on the 17th to Ltnd R Johannes Wintrath as his first *Luftsieg* (air victory). Born on 13 September 1893 in Dortmund, Wintrath had arrived in February after two-seater service in *Flieger-Abteilung (A) 221*. Wintrath went on to claim another Camel at 1735 hrs on the 19th, but that Sopwith was recorded as merely *zur Landung gezwungen* (*zLgw* – forced to land behind enemy lines) and was not added to Wintrath's tally.

Luckily for the *Staffel*, August also saw the return of the talented Paul Bäumer, who had previously served a mere two days in *Jasta 'Boelcke'* at the end of June before being posted to *Jasta 5* for about six weeks. Bäumer was born on 11 May 1896 in Duisberg, and was seized by 'aviation fever' at a young age. Although a dental apprentice, he was taking flying lessons at Holten in August 1914. Indeed, just before Bäumer could take his examination for his aviator's certificate, the war broke out.

His attempts to enlist in the Air Service in the ensuing days were rejected, and he instead volunteered for service in *Infanterie-Regt Nr 70*