OSPREY AIRCRAFT OF THE ACES® • 110

Austro-Hungarian Albatros Aces of World War 1

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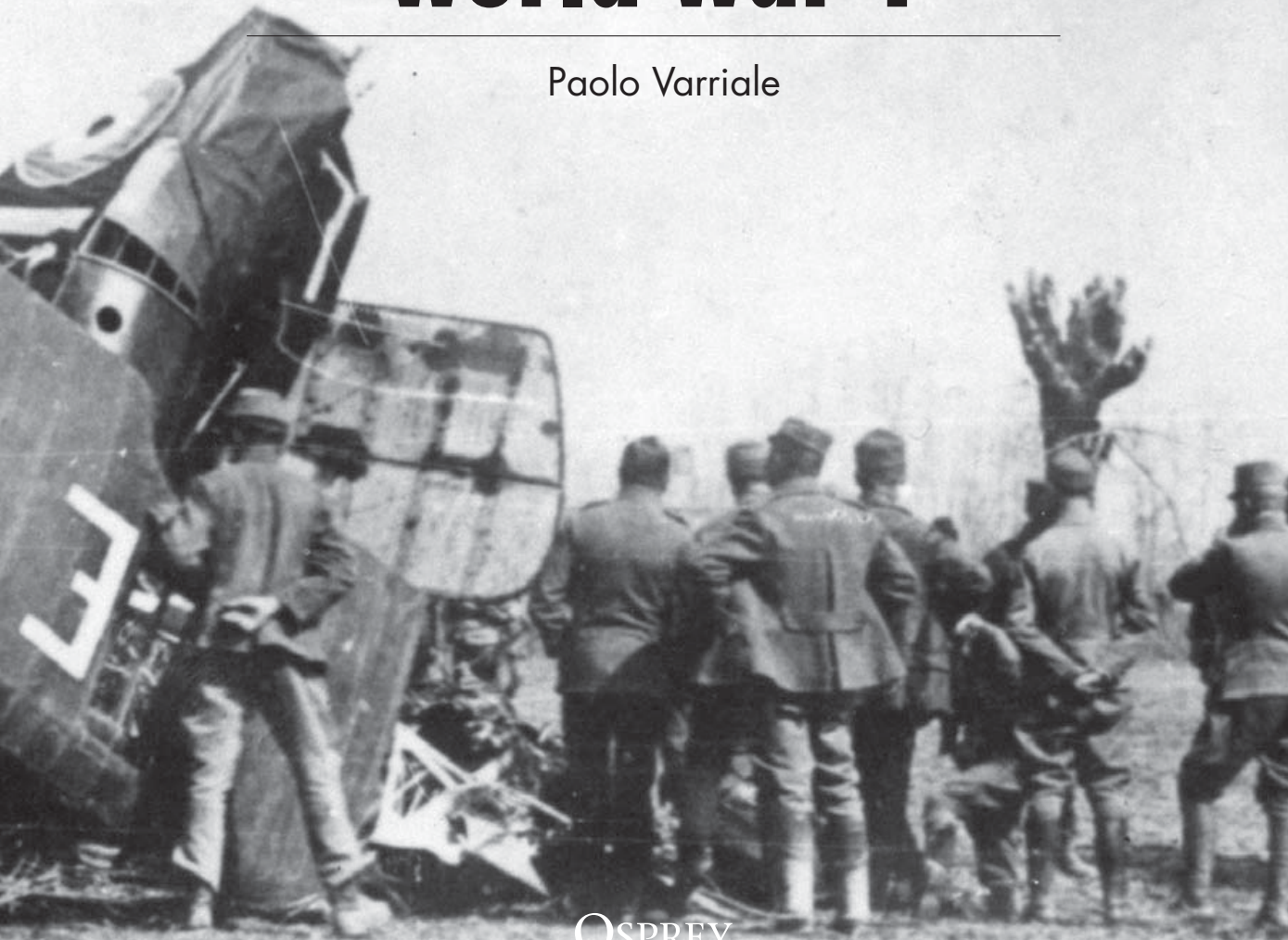

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CONTENTS

A LONG-AWAITED FIGHTER

'One of our pilots shot down an enemy biplane in an aerial fight near San Lorenzo di Mossa, where the Italian aeroplane was destroyed by our artillery.'

These few lines in the *Heeresbericht* (Austro-Hungarian Army Bulletin) mark the first official aerial victory by an Austro-Hungarian fighter, on 25 November 1915. The aircraft that shot down the Italian biplane of *11ª Squadriglia* Farman were an Albatros B I biplane and one of the two Fokker A III monoplanes (the Austrian designation for E I) recently delivered from Germany to *Fliegerkompagnie* 4 (Air Company, or *Flik*) on the Italian Front. The Fokker was piloted by Hptm Mathias Bernath.

The number of aeroplanes on the Italian Front increased over coming weeks, and in February 1916 the monoplanes were gathered into a provisional fighter unit named *Fokker-Kampfstaffeln* or *Fokker Alarm-Bereitschaft* (Fokker Alarm Detachment), the first *Luftfahrtruppen* (Aviation Troop, *LFT*) unit to be given such specialised duties.

Apart from their synchronised Spandau machine guns, the Fokker monoplanes were lacking in several respects, but their day of glory came on 18 February 1916, when the first true fighter in history met one of the first true bombers. On that day the Italians sent a group of Caproni 300 hp twin-engined biplanes to attack Ljubljana in retaliation for the raids on their cities, unaware of the arrival of the Fokkers. The bombers crossed the lines individually, and near the Ternova Wood Ca.478 was attacked by the Fokkers of Bernath and Hptm Heinrich Korstba, who emptied their machine gun belts into the target. Two of the three Italian airmen, Maggiore Alfredo Barbieri and Capitano Luigi Bailo, commanding officer of the *1ª Squadriglia da Offesa*, were killed, but the survivor, Capitano Oreste Salomone, was able to bring the aeroplane limping back to an Italian airfield. He was subsequently awarded the *Medaglia d'Oro al Valor Militare* for his efforts, thus becoming the first member of the Italian air service to receive the highest Italian award for military gallantry.

However, the Capronis' ordeal was not over. On the way back from the target Ca.703 also ran into the Austro-Hungarian fighters, which had had time to land in Ajsevica, refuel and rearm, and take off again. According to the late Dr Martin O'Connor, Hptm Heinrich Korstba, who was flying Fokker 03.51 during the combat, wrote in his report;

'I reached a height of 2700 m [8860 ft] and dived on a Caproni, which was flying at 2600 m [8530 ft]. I fired about 150 rounds from a distance of less than 80 m [260 ft]. He turned into me and fired at me with a machine gun from in front of and below me [the ribs and covering fabric of 03.51 were shot through]. I fired the rest of my ammunition at the rear

of the enemy from about 40 m [130 ft]. At this moment Oblt Hautzmayer dived on him skilfully and shot him again. I flew on the Caproni's right flank and prevented his escape by changing my course. Over Prvazina the other Albatros and Fokker aircraft overtook the Caproni. I do not wish to belittle the contribution of our other aircraft, and I emphasise that, were I alone, the Caproni would have slipped across the frontline, because I fired all of my ammunition and was now out of fuel.'

Aboard the Italian bomber, Capitano Tullio Visconti had been killed trying to defend the aeroplane, and his colleague, Capitano Gaetano Turilli, could only crash-land the riddled Caproni in a field near Merna, in enemy territory. The bomber was recovered and repaired, later flying with the serial 00.52 from Aspern airfield, where it was found by its former owners in November 1918 after the Armistice.

Despite this exploit the Fokker A III soon became outdated, especially when faced by the increasing number of new Nieuport 11 fighters being fielded by the air service of the *Regio Esercito* (Italian Army). The Germans were unable to help their ally by supplying their new fighters, but the *LFT* believed it had the right aeroplane in the form of the new Brandenburg D I, commonly known as the KD (*Kampfdoppeldecker*; combat biplane) and nicknamed *Spinne* (spider) owing to the arrangement of its interplane struts. Operational trials of the D I carried out by *Flik* 26 on the Eastern Front gave rise to high expectations, and on 25 August 1916 an order for 50 was placed. According to *Austro-Hungarian Army Aircraft of World War One*, by Peter Grosz, George Haddow and Peter Schiemer, Oberst Emil Uzelac, commander of the *LFT*, was pleased to be able to inform his staff that 'The Fokker fighter is outdated, therefore I have authorised the production of a light biplane fighter that is equal to all combat requirements'.

Unfortunately his trust was misplaced, because the first Austro-Hungarian fighter to be built in quantity proved a great and painful disappointment for the men of the *LFT* and their leader from the very start of its operational use in the autumn of 1916. When reports of the KD's bad performance became to arrive in the office of the Kommandant of the *LFT*, Uzelac began visiting the frontline units to learn more. On 7 November 1916 he arrived at the airfield of *Flik* 19, whose commander, Oberst Adolf Heyrowsky, had grounded all the D Is, awaiting further instructions. As usual for Uzelac, this was a surprise visit, and Heyrowsky was away, but the *Koluft* decided to test the aeroplane himself. Having no respect for rank, the KD also tried to kill the senior officer, who luckily suffered only concussion when the aircraft crashed.

At this time the *Flik* were still not specialised, and their inventories included different aeroplanes for different tasks, but in the spring of 1917 the *LFT* created two pure fighter units on the Italian Front, *Flik* 41/J and 42/J ('J' for *Jagd*, fighter), and equipped them with the KD.

Even though the KDs built by Phönix were slightly better than the original ones produced by Hansa-Brandenburg, there were general complaints about the type's poor ceiling and tricky flying characteristics, it being prone to enter a sudden spin which left inexperienced pilots with little hope of regaining control. The previously mentioned book quotes a discouraging number of adverse opinions of the D I from units that used it. *Flik* 23 wrote that 'In the pilots' unanimous opinion, they cannot give full attention to the combat

The Austro-Hungarian pilot's badge is visible on the tunic of Oblt Godwin Brumowski, who is standing in front of the peculiar interplane struts of a *Flik* 41 Brandenburg D I in this photograph, taken before May 1917 – the month in which he was promoted to hauptmann. The *LFT's* most successful ace started his career as a fighter pilot, and obtained 18 of his confirmed victories with this very demanding aeroplane *(Vinko Avsenak)*

The Albatros fighter's elegant lines were enhanced by the Oeffag company's renowned woodworking skills. The D III production prototype 53.21 made its maiden flight in February 1917 from Wiener-Neustadt airfield. In this photograph the aeroplane has the winter cowling fitted over the cylinder heads, and the machine guns have not yet been installed. In September 1917 the aircraft was flown by StFw Friedrich Hefty, and it then moved to the *Feldfliegerschule* in Campoformido, where it crashed on 4 June 1918 with the loss of the pilot, Oblt Otto Patz – a former observer from *Flik* 2 (*via Author*)

at hand if they are so totally occupied with controlling the aircraft. In addition, the climb is so slow that the fighter must take off well before our observation aircraft in order to reach escort altitude. The KD's ceiling is much inferior to that of enemy Nieuports, which generally operate between 4000 and 5000 m [13,000 and 16,000 ft]'.

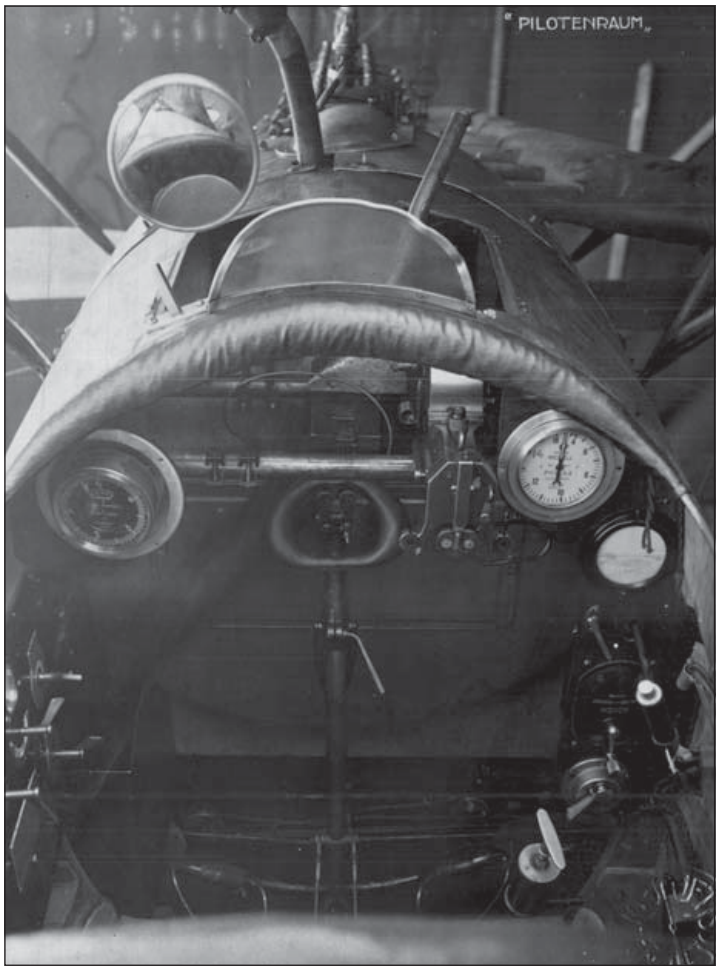
Flik 41/J echoed these words, stating 'The KD is absolutely useless. The best pilots (and only they can fly the type) are shackled, ruin their nerves and perish in the crashes over the airfield, without their expert skill achieving anything'. In more direct terms, pilots simply called the KD the *'fliegende Sarg'* (flying coffin) or *'Totschläger'* (killer).

Some of the very best pilots were able to achieve combat victories, almost all on Phönix-built examples, and future top aces such as Arigi, Brumowski, Fiala, Linke-Crawford and Kiss enjoyed success with the KD despite is unenviable reputation. The *LFT* had to fight on with this unpopular aircraft until it was replaced by a new fighter. Luckily, the substitute would be far better.

In August 1916 – the same month in which Uzelac had praised the KD – news of the accomplishments of the Albatros D I and D II fighters began to arrive in Vienna, following their successful operational debut with the German *Jagdstaffeln* (fighter squadrons) on the Western Front. Bad reports about the KD had increased alarmingly, and the Austro-Hungarian aircraft manufacturers, together with the *LFT*, hastened to acquire production rights for the D II and the new D III. The obvious candidate to undertake production was the Oesterr.-Ungarische Albatros Flugzeugwerke AG (Phönix Flugzeugwerke AG from February 1917), which was linked to the German parent firm, but the licence was refused because the factory was still engaged in KD production.

Moreover, the War Ministry tried to oppose the concentration of orders in the firms owned by Austrian entrepreneur Camillo Castiglioni. Castiglioni was also detested by Uzelac, who proposed that his Navy deferment be revoked in order to draft him and send him to the *Orientkorps* in Palestine, probably regretting that there was nowhere more distant.

Consequently, the licence was granted to the Oesterreichische Flugzeugfabrik AG (Oeffag), which up to then had built C I and C II reconnaissance aircraft for the *LFT* and K-type seaplanes for the *K u K Kriegsmarine*. On 4 December 1916 the first order for the new aircraft was signed, comprising 16 Albatros D IIs and 34 D IIIs at a price of 30,500 *Kronen* each, without engines. After a successful static-load test on the lower wing, production was shifted to the D III, with the D II



The breech of a single Schwarzlose machine gun protrudes into the cockpit of this early Albatros. On the right is a Wilhel Morell Phylax tachometer, and beneath it is a bank indicator, while on the left is an altimeter, also built by Morell. In the lower right corner a Bosch magneto with its crank is visible. The handgrip of the control column already has the trigger for the second machine gun *(Koloman Mayrhofer)*

order being reduced to just four airframes. The D IIs were numbered 53.01 to 53.16 and the D IIIs were 53.20-53.53.

Engineers from the Stadlau firm did not simply produce a slavish imitation of the German D III, but strengthened the lower wings to eliminate the recurring wing-flutter failures that were the Achilles' heel of the original design. Almost dimensionally identical to their German counterparts, Austrian-built D IIs and D IIIs had a 185 hp Austro-Daimler engine instead of the original 160 hp Mercedes. Although it was heavier, the more powerful engine gave the Viennese breed a better rate of climb and a speed increase of about 15 km/h (9 mph) over the original fighter.

The first machine, 53.01, made its maiden flight in January 1917, 53.20 first flew in mid-February and the *LFT* commenced acceptance trials in May for both versions. That same February a second batch of 11 fighters (53.54-53.64) was ordered at a cost of 33,500 *Kronen* per aircraft, excluding engines and armament.

The nose of the Albatros fighter could house two Schwarzlose machine guns (the standard weapon of the Austro-Hungarian Army), which was able to fire its 8 mm bullets at 572 m/sec at a rate of 350-430 rounds per minute. For aerial use the original Modell M 7/12 had the water jacket cut open or removed altogether. The following version, developed by Steyr as the M 16 in mid-1916, lacked the heavy jacket from the outset, and its rate of fire was increased to 560-580 rounds per minute. However, this was reduced by the synchronisation system.

As with other air forces involved in the war, the *LFT* had to develop ammunition to suit the peculiar nature of air combat. The Schwarzlose guns installed in the aircraft used the usual mix of incendiary, tracer, explosive and armour-piercing bullets, but only in late 1918, with the introduction of SP and XX ammunition, did *LFT* airmen finally have an effective weapon. By this time it was simply too late.

The *LFT* was constantly plagued by a shortage of synchronisation devices owing to the scarcity of the precision tools necessary for their production. As a result, it was often obliged to accept aircraft unarmed and send them to the frontline units, where the armourers installed machine guns and synchronisation systems. Several makeshift solutions were tested in the field, as depicted in many photographs. These ranged

from a machine gun installed on the upper wing centre-section and angled to fire outside the propeller arc, to weapons mounted on a pillar on the fuselage side and angled to fire outboard.

It seems that most of the early Albatros fighters built for the *LFT* were fitted with devices developed in 1916 by the technical officer of *Flik* 8, Ltn Otto Bernatzik, which had a peculiar and irregular firing cadence with a high-rpm engine. The aircraft then began to receive the Daimler Geared Synchronisation that had been specially designed for twin machine guns, the device firing an alternate weapon at every second propeller revolution. It was not possible to fire the Schwarzlose M 7/12 with the engine idling, but there were no restrictions for the M 16 gun. Finally, in 1918, the system developed by Oblt Guido Priesel and tested for the first time on a D III in October 1917 became standard equipment for Albatros fighters.

Oblt Göttl smiles in front of D III 53.70. This aeroplane was accepted by the *LFT* in July 1917 and delivered to *Flik* 17/D, and it subsequently served with several units. The fighter's last known duty was as a trainer in *Flik* 3/J. It is in mostly a plain finish, but the rudder appears to be camouflaged and the tail painted a darker colour *(Boris Ciglic)*

The aeroplanes were soon sent to operational zones, with most of the D IIs being sent to the Russian Front, where the enemy threat was of less concern. Here, they served in *Flik* 3, 5, 7, 10, 14, 20, 22, 25, 26 and 37, while most of the D IIIs were sent to oppose the more active Italian air force.

Frontline pilots welcomed the arrival of the aircraft as a definite sign of progress, as they finally had an aeroplane that put them on a par with enemy fighters, being as fast as the hated KD but with a better rate of climb and superior manoeuvrability. Above all, it had none of the KD's vicious habits when aloft.

The Oeffag company's skill in shaping the plywood fuselage was superb, and this, together with the capabilities of its expert workers, created one of the nicest aeroplanes ever built, and the airframe was strong enough to take engines of greater power as soon as they became available. The 200 hp Austro-Daimler engine fitted perfectly into the fighter, and the series 153, so named according to the *LFT* designation system, was initially ordered as a first batch of 61 (153.01-153.61) on 3 February 1917, followed by a second of 50 (153.62-153.111) in July, a third of 100 (153.112-153.211) in October and a fourth (153.212-153.281) in May 1918.

Six Albatros D IIIs of Alarm Bereitschaft Pergine in the summer of 1917, with the village of Roncogno as a backdrop. The unit marked its aircraft with several colours. The noses, struts and wheel discs on the first and second fighters are painted white, while multiple sources attest that the darker colour seen on the other machines could be red, yellow or black on individual fighters. This narrow airfield was still in use for sport aircraft until several years ago, when a main road and an industrial area were built on the site *(Koloman Mayrhofer)*

The crowded production hall of the Oeffag factory in June 1917. Barely visible in the foreground is the Oeffag reconnaissance two-seater prototype 50.09. Behind it, several Series 153 Albatros await final fitting-out. The first aeroplanes of the type were accepted by the *LFT* in July. D III 153.04 was subsequently used by Oblt Frank Linke-Crafword to obtain his fifth confirmed victory on 23 September *(Greg VanWyngarden)*

From aircraft 153.112 the fuselage outline changed, the propeller spinner being left off to give a rounded nose. Several earlier aircraft had the spinner removed because of its tendency to come off in flight, which could damage the airframe. As an additional benefit the new version gained a speed increment of about 14 km/h (9 mph).

The new version was again praised by military pilots in both test and operational flights. According to Aharon Tesar's book devoted to the fighter, StFw Friedrich Hefty stated that the 153-series Albatros was 'an aeroplane of an excellent design, perfectly balanced and especially fit for aerobatics. Its climbing capacity equalled that of Hanriots and [Sopwith] Camels, but its horizontal speed was lower than that of SPADs'.

The improved Austro-Daimler engine, with an output of 225 hp, was also fitted, creating the 253 series, the last version of this pugnacious fighter. The order for the first 230 aircraft (253.01-253.230) was signed in May 1918, on the same day as the last batch of 153s was ordered.

The judgment was unanimous. 'Unquestionably the most manoeuvrable and safest fighter at the Front. It has the pilots' complete trust. Because of its excellent handling and performance, it is preferred over every other fighter. Mass production is urgent'. In August a final order for a batch of 100 (253.231-253.330) was signed, but in spite of this excellent aircraft and the desperate courage of the *K u K* airmen, the days of the old empire were numbered. At the end of the war it appears that work on the last batch of D IIIs continued up to the fuselage of 253.260. Altogether, between May 1917 and October 1918 the *LFT* took delivery of 16 D IIs Series 53, 44 D IIIs Series 53.2, 281 D IIIs Series 153 and 201 D IIIs Series 253 from Oeffag, making a total of 542 machines.

In 1977 Martin O'Connor asked Julius Arigi to compare the Austro-Hungarian fighters, the ace noting;

'The Phönix fighters were the most sturdily built. They were very solid and dependable. You paid a price for this because they were less manoeuvrable and climbed more poorly. They were excellent in a dive since you could dive them as fast as you wanted without fear of tearing their wings off.

'The Berg (Aviatik D I) was the opposite of the Phönix. It was light and extremely manoeuvrable, but was weakly built. There was a great tendency for the parts to bend and for the aircraft to actually lose wing and tail