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Ernst Udet



German Ace, 62 victories

By [Stephen Sherman](#), Aug. 2001. Updated April 15, 2012.

Oberleutnant Ernst Udet was the second-highest scoring German ace of World War One, the leading surviving ace, and the youngest ace, age 22 when the war ended in 1918. He started as a flying Private, was promoted to officer, and flew with Jasta (*Jagdstaffel*) 15, and later commanded Jastas 37, 11, and 4. He was awarded Germany's highest military honor, the *Ordre pour le Mérite*, the "Blue Max."

Aviatik Pilot

In the summer of 1915, Lt. Justinus of *Flieger-Abteilung* (Aviation Section) 206 sent for Private Ernst Udet. Justinus was in Darmstadt recruiting new pilots, and Udet, although only 19, seemed promising.

He began flying Justinus' Aviatik B two-seat observation plane. (Early in the war, German pilots were frequently enlisted men, while the observers were officers.) Based at Heiligkreuz, they spotted for the artillery, relatively oblivious to enemy aircraft, as none were armed.

On September 14, they were more than 15 kilometers beyond German lines, flying at 3,500 meters, when the Aviatik began to spin down. Using all his strength, Udet stopped the spinning, but the aircraft still listed as it glided down. He shut off the engine, as it caused the plane to spin. Lt. Justinus climbed out on the wing as a counterbalance. Udet opened up the throttle briefly, but still couldn't hold the plane level. Justinus joined Udet in the pilot's cockpit; with their combined strength and intermittent use of the engine, they managed to struggle along.

They desperately hoped to glide to Switzerland. At 8 kilometers, they were down to 1,000 meters. They passed the border town of St. Dizier with 600 meters of altitude left and began to hope to reach Germany. They continued to descend and touched down just over the barbed-wire, on the German side. A local blacksmith promptly fashioned a replacement for the shackle that had failed, when an aviation *Hauptmann* (Captain), drove up. He insisted on recovering the failed shackle for testing; another Aviatik had been lost the same day for the same reason.

For saving one of the Fatherland's aircraft, Udet won the Iron Cross, Second Class and Justinus won the Iron Cross, First Class.

Later, they were assigned a bombing mission and the Aviatik was overloaded with bombs, extra fuel, two machine guns, and a new radio. Just after take-off, the plane crashed when Udet banked left. Both he and Justinus were hospitalized. And literally, "adding insult to injury," Udet was sentenced to seven days' arrest for "careless maneuvering which endangered the life of his observer and caused the destruction of a valuable aircraft." During his week-long confinement, Udet had to recite a little confessional speech. On the day of his release, another officer-observer grabbed him and then went to bomb Belfort. On this sortie, a live bomb got stuck in the plane's undercarriage, and only through "careless maneuvering" was Udet able to free it.

After this, he was assigned to single-seater, *Jagdflieger* (fighter-pilot) Combat Command at Habsheim. He was provided a brand-new Fokker to fly there, but it crashed on take-off (through a defect proven to be not Udet's fault).

Jagdflieger

When Udet arrived at Habsheim fighter command in December, 1915, it turned out that he was one of only four pilots in a very quiet billet. In his first encounter with a French Caudron, he froze and couldn't fire; the French gunner shot off Udet's goggles, cutting his face with glass splinters but nothing worse. Privately shamed by his failure of nerve, Udet redoubled his gunnery practice, working with mock-up of a Nieuport.

On March 18, 1916, a Sunday afternoon, word came over the telephone of enemy airplanes headed toward Muelhausen. Alone, Udet went up to 2,800 meters in his Fokker to intercept. He found over twenty French bombers: a large Farman in the middle, flanked by other Farmans and Caudrons. This time, he kept his nerve, closed with the Farman, and opened up at forty meters, flaming it. His first victory! He continued diving through the formation as other French planes went after him. He dived down steeply about 300 meters to escape.

When he pulled out he saw more fighters from Habsheim had joined the fray. He spotted a lone Caudron retiring and he pursued it, firing a burst at long range, over 150 meters. He approached to 80 meters and fired again, this time knocking out one of the Caudron's engines. But as he closed in for the kill, his gun jammed, and the French plane made off.

That night Sergeant Ernst Udet and the Habsheim *Jagdflieger* celebrated. They had beaten off the first large French air attack, downing five of them.

He was based at Habsheim until early 1917 and downed three more planes in that area.

Champagne: La Selve & Boncourt

Staffel 15 (formerly Habsheim Fighter Command) transferred to La Selve in March, 1917, opposite the sector patrolled by The Storks, the French squadron of [Guynemer](#) and [Nungesser](#). On April 24, Ernst achieved his first victory on this front, a Nieuport over Chavignon, his fifth overall. During this time, he lost many friends: his roommate Esser, the CO Lt. Reinhold, Puz, Glinkermann, and others. At the end of April, Lt. Heinrich Gontermann took over as CO; he was already an accomplished ace, with 12 airplanes and 6 balloons to his credit (his final tally was 39). May 5 evening patrol: Gontermann got a Nieuport and Udet a Spad (Udet's sixth victory). During two weeks in command of *Staffel* 15, Gontermann shot down eight more planes. He was then awarded the *Ordre pour le Mérite* and four weeks leave. He appointed Lieutenant Ernst Udet acting CO in his absence.

In May, they flew whenever weather allowed, sometimes three patrols a day, but rarely got involved in real fights. At this time Puz and Glinkermann were lost. On the 25th, while on a solo mission, Udet got into a duel with a Spad with Guynemer's markings. After some spirited, skillful jockeying, neither one could get behind the other. Then Udet's gun jammed, and in an increasingly rare chivalrous gesture, Guynemer waved to him and flew off.

Jasta 37

Udet transferred to Jasta 37, a Flanders-based squadron, in mid-1917. By February, 1918, he ran up his score to 20, having served as CO of the Jasta for the last six weeks.

Richthofen Group

When [Manfred von Richthofen](#) invited Udet to join his group (*Jagdgeschwader* 1, comprising Jasta 4, 6, 10, and 11). Udet explained the success of Richthofen's group:

Other squadrons live in castles or small towns, twenty to thirty kilometers behind the front lines. The Richthofen group dwells in corrugated shacks that can be erected and broken down in a matter of hours. They are rarely more than twenty kilometers behind the foremost outposts. Other squadrons go up two or three times a day. Richthofen and his men fly five times a day. Others close down operations in bad weather; here they fly under almost any condition.

However the biggest surprise for me is the forward combat airstrips. Just a few kilometers behind the lines, often within range of the enemy artillery, we are on fully dressed standby, lounging in reclining chairs in an open field. Our aircraft, gassed up and ready to go, are right alongside. As soon as an opponent appears on the horizon, we go up - one, two, or an entire *staffel*.

Udet arrived at Richthofen's group at 10 AM on March 27, 1918. At noon he flew his first sortie with them (also his first in a Fokker Dr.1 triplane) and he shot down his first plane as a Jasta 11 pilot, a British R.E.8 reconnaissance plane. In the same patrol, they pounced on a flight of Sopwith Camels, Richthofen knocking down one of them. Then they strafed a column of British infantry. Evidently impressed with Udet's head-on attack on the observation plane, Richthofen gave him command of Jasta 11.

He continued to fly almost every day. On March 28, he got into a heroic duel with a Sopwith Camel over Albert. After repeated head-on passes and maneuvers, Udet finally managed to deliver a lethal burst. He hadn't ever thought about his downed opponents, but this time he wanted to know. He went to a nearby field hospital, where he found his victim's body: Lt. Maasdorp, Ontario RFC 47. He downed his 23rd plane on April 6, another Sopwith Camel.

After this mission, he went home to Munich, to be treated for an ear infection and then for recuperative leave. He visited with his family and his girlfriend, Lo; he also received his *Ordre pour le Mérite* while on leave. He read in the newspaper that on April 21, von Richthofen was killed.

The End

By late May, 1918, Udet was back at the front, in command of *Jagdstaffel 4*. One day he got a little careless and was shot down by the gunner in a two-seater. He took to his parachute, which briefly tangled in his Fokker's tail. It shook loose; Udet dropped uninjured into no-man's-land and made his way back to his staffel that same day.

By this time, the Allied air forces vastly outnumbered the Germans. Udet later wrote, "The French fly only in large units, fifty, sometimes a hundred aircraft. They darken the skies like locusts. ... When one of our aircraft rises, five go up on the other side. And when one of theirs comes down near us, we fall on him and strip him bare, because we have long run out of such fine instruments, shining with nickel and brass." Gasoline was also in short supply. On the ground, Allied tanks and American manpower finally broke through the stalemated trench warfare. But for Ernst Udet and the crack pilots of the Richthofen group, hunting was good. In June, he shot down 12 planes, raising his total score to 36. In July, another 4, for a total of 40. And in August, Udet brought down 20 airplanes, for 60 altogether.

He usually flew a Fokker D.VII, with his girlfriend's name, "Lo," painted on the fuselage, and on the tail, the words "*Du doch nicht!!*" Literally translated as "Not you," but more idiomatically as "You and who else?"

One evening he went up after a pair of Sopwith Camels that were dropping leaflets over the German trenches. As they looped and twisted, Udet's Fokker D.VII skimmed over his opponent's upper wing, loosening it enough to bring down the airplane. Ernst visited the pilot in the hospital, a young Canadian named Roscoe Turner, later a famous racing pilot in the Thirties, whom Udet met 15 years later at a Los Angeles flying meet.

The end came quickly. Goering took over as CO of the Richthofen group; *Oberleutnant* Udet claimed two more victories, totalling sixty-two overall. When the Armistice came, the war was over and fighter pilots were no longer in great demand.

Between the Wars

Ernst Udet struggled to make a living in the early 1920's, as did most people in inflation-ravaged Germany. He built airplanes for a while. He raced, traveling to the United States and Argentina for air shows. He helped make exotic movies, traveling to Africa and the Arctic, piloting camera planes.

The Luftwaffe

When Hitler re-armed Germany in the Thirties, the Luftwaffe was an important element. Hermann Göring, 22-victory ace and commander of J.G. Richthofen, was named head of the Luftwaffe. Ernst Udet, now a General, was made head of the Luftwaffe's Technical Office. After the debacle of the Battle of Britain, Goering made Udet the scapegoat for the Luftwaffe's failure, and he was forced to commit suicide in 1941.

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