

# FRONTIER

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MAY 1981

## *The Red Baron's Last Flight*

*Silver Turns To  
Gold In Vegas:  
A Special  
Section*

*Phil Donahue:  
An Interview*





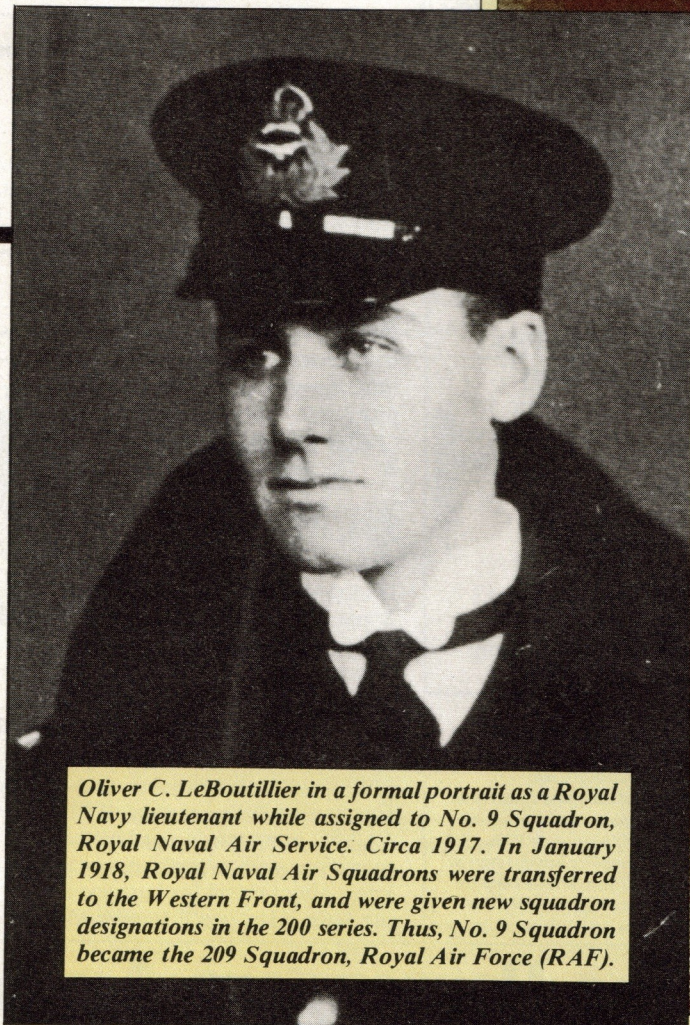
# I SAW THE RED BARON DIE



*Sunday, April 21, 1918, dawned cold and wet with zero ceiling. Our usual dawn patrol had been cancelled. Not the type of day one would expect to witness the most controversial air battle in history!*

**By Captain Oliver C. "Boots" LeBoutillier, 209 Squadron RAF  
As told to Bill Madsen**

Over the Somme River Valley, France, 63 years ago, Rittmeister Manfred von Richthofen, Germany's famed Red Baron and leading ace of World War I, was shot down. But who killed him? For two-thirds of a century, a controversy has raged over whether it was Australian machine gun fire from the ground that brought the red Fokker Triplane to earth, or whether it was deadly tracers from Captain Roy



*Oliver C. LeBoutillier in a formal portrait as a Royal Navy lieutenant while assigned to No. 9 Squadron, Royal Naval Air Service. Circa 1917. In January 1918, Royal Naval Air Squadrons were transferred to the Western Front, and were given new squadron designations in the 200 series. Thus, No. 9 Squadron became the 209 Squadron, Royal Air Force (RAF).*





*When the identity of the Red Baron was established after his crash landing along the Bray Corbie road, his body was transported to the Australian Field Artillery Division Headquarters. His red Fokker Triplane was loaded on a lorry and transported to the headquarters tent. There the Australians souvenired it, taking parts and cutting pieces of the fabric away from the airframe as mementos. Even the two Spandau machine guns disappeared. Pilots of the Australian Flying Corps stand about the triplane in this photo.*



Brown's aircraft in a diving attack that did it. I was there. Flying overhead, I watched the chase, the air attack, the ground fire, the crash. I saw it happen!

The 209th Squadron, Royal Air Force (RAF), was based on the Bertangles aerodrome about 15 miles behind the front lines. We were flying British Sopwith Camels with new 150-horsepower Bentley rotary engines. A feisty fighter, the Camel developed tremendous torque from the whirling engine, and would go into a violent spin if stalled at full power. Deadly—close to the ground!

There were four principal participants in the action the day the Red Baron died. First was Lt. Wilfred May, 22, the unwitting cause of the whole affair. Recently assigned to 209 Squadron, he was our least experienced pilot. Also a Canadian, he was pleased that Captain Roy Brown was to be the flight leader on his first high-offensive combat patrol.

Captain A. R. "Roy" Brown had known May before the war when both were students at Alberta College South. Brownie was glad to see May, but could do little except give him sage advice. Ill and tired, Brown had been suffering from acute gastritis and battle fatigue for several weeks. He was the senior flight leader for our squadron.

Rittmeister Manfred Frierherr von Richthofen, Germany's idol, holder of the Pour le Merite (Blue Max), commander of the feared Flying Circus, was the third participant. He flew an all red Fokker DR-1 Triplane, and had been fighting continuously for the Fatherland almost four years. At 25, he was our most respected adversary.

The fourth component was the Third and Fifth Australian Divisions deployed north of the Somme River along the Morlancourt Ridge, a vast amphitheater overlooking the river valley. It was a natural barricade for the dug-in Aussies who held the enemy at bay. On heights above the entrenched infantrymen were batteries of Australian artillery. At both ends of each gun battery were loaded Lewis machine guns mounted on swivel posts ready for instant action, for occasional Hun aircraft strafed their position.

It was approximately 9:20 a.m. that morning before clouds lifted enough to permit takeoff. Major C. H. Butler, 209 Squadron commander, briefed us on our mission: intercept enemy recon-

naissance or pursuit planes in the Hamel sector, and destroy them! Keep the Somme River Valley open.

Brown stood beside May's Camel, goggles glistening in the feeble sunlight.

"Well, Wop, this is it!" Brown said to the young flyer, using his nickname. "Now remember—if we meet enemy aircraft and get into a fight, you stay clear. Understand? I don't want you hurt in your first air battle! If we dive on them, stay outside and overhead—watch! You will learn a lot."

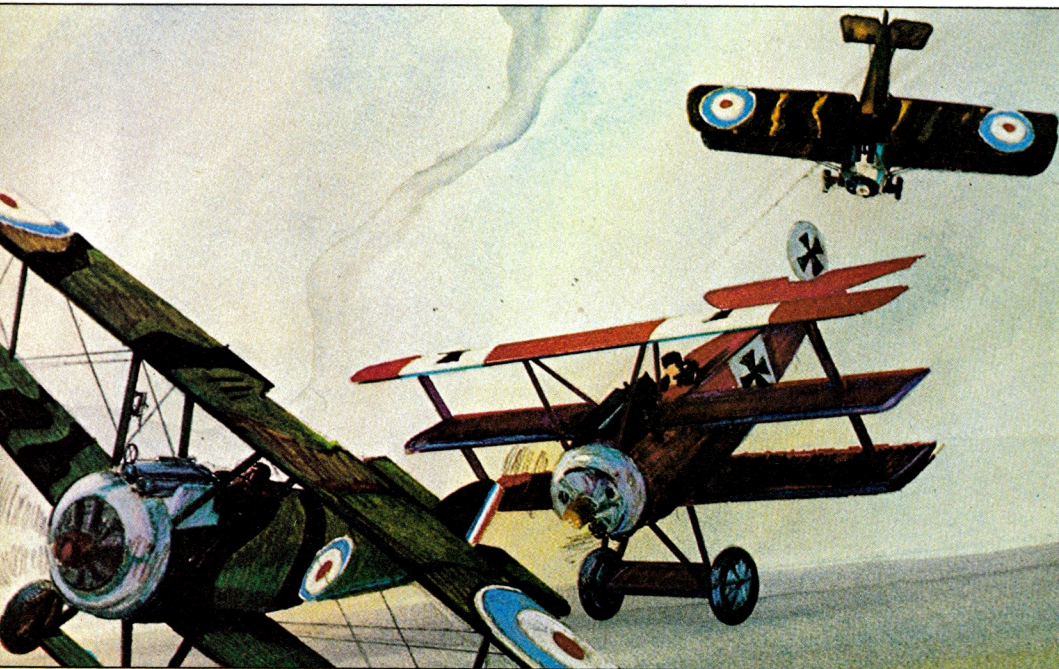
May nodded, eyes intent on his leader.

"Above all, keep your head on a swivel," Brown continued. "If you are caught, fire back if you can, then dive and get out—return here. On takeoff, fly on my left wing. Are you ready?"

May nodded. Brown smiled, walked to his own Camel.

Brown, leading his flight, took off with Lieutenants Mellersh, Lomas, May and Mackenzie. Five minutes later, Redgate led "C" Flight into battle in formation takeoff with Lieutenants Aird, Drake, Siddal and Edward to right and left. They rose quickly through the misty haze.

In a few minutes I was leading my flight in an outbound



“Without hesitation Brown pitched downward to his friend’s rescue. In a high speed dive crossing from right to left, he zoomed in on Richthofen and squeezed off a long burst.”

Captain Roy Brown, a Canadian, was leader of 'A' Flight of five Camels. A Yank in the RAF, I was 'B' Flight leader, and Lt. O. W. Redgate was assigned as temporary leader of 'C' Flight that fateful day. Of fifteen aircraft that took off to do battle that morning, four were forced to return early because of engine malfunctions.

Von Richthofen, commander of the Flying Circus and personal leader of Jasta 11, was based at Cappy southeast of us on the German side of the lines. The son of a Prussian nobleman, an aristocrat, a graduate of the German military academy, and a deadly aerial marksman, he was the leading ace in the war with 80 confirmed victories—the highest of either side.

#### Four Main Characters

The Red Baron encouraged his pilots to paint their Albatros Scouts and Fokker Triplanes all colors of the rainbow—for a reason. He wanted us to know that when we tangled with those gaily colored fighters, we were up against the best hand-picked pilots Germany had. And it worked!



climb. On my right, forming part of the vee, were Lieutenants Taylor and Foster. Off my left wing Brock and Harker were drawn in close, their planes gently bobbing up and down in formation.

### Poor Visibility

The weather did not improve. Forward visibility varied two to four miles. We could see straight up and down. The whole sky was a beautiful, misty ochre haze, no visible horizon. We weaved between darker, towering cumulus clouds that loomed

Meanwhile, north of my position, Brown and Redgate had encountered von Richthofen's Flying Circus. Brightly colored Albatros Scouts and Fokker Tripes of Jastas 5 and 11 in vee formations suddenly met the two flights of Camels almost headon.

As preplanned, Brown signalled to May to separate from the flight and climb. As May banked up and away, Brown gave his other pilots the tally-ho — Attack! Attack! Attack! Their initial sally concentrated on a Jasta 11 flight led by Lieutenant Hans Weiss.

The Red Baron sighted the encounter over Hamel, led his formation in a climbing left turn to get above our Camels.

At this juncture my own flight, rounding a cloud base, burst into the thick of the melee. Brown and Redgate were already in the midst of it; my own pilots separated and immediately went after enemy aircraft. We were outnumbered two to one.

### Bullets Were Everywhere

Every third bullet from our Vickers was a tracer, and as the Germans used them too, the sky was interlaced with deadly threads of smoking bullets. Aircraft everywhere; they zoomed out of clouds, flashed in and out from all angles. It was every man for himself. Fokkers and Camels rolled across my sunsights; I fastened on a red Tripe with a blue tail, sent some tracers tearing into his upper wing. He dove into a cloud and I lost him.

Rat-a-tat-tat! Machine guns behind me. I was a target for a Fokker on my own tail! Zing—plung—thunk! A bullet hit my plane solidly somewhere. I pulled hard back on the stick. The Camel roared up in a steep climb. I rolled inverted and did a split ess into a screeching dive. Turning slightly

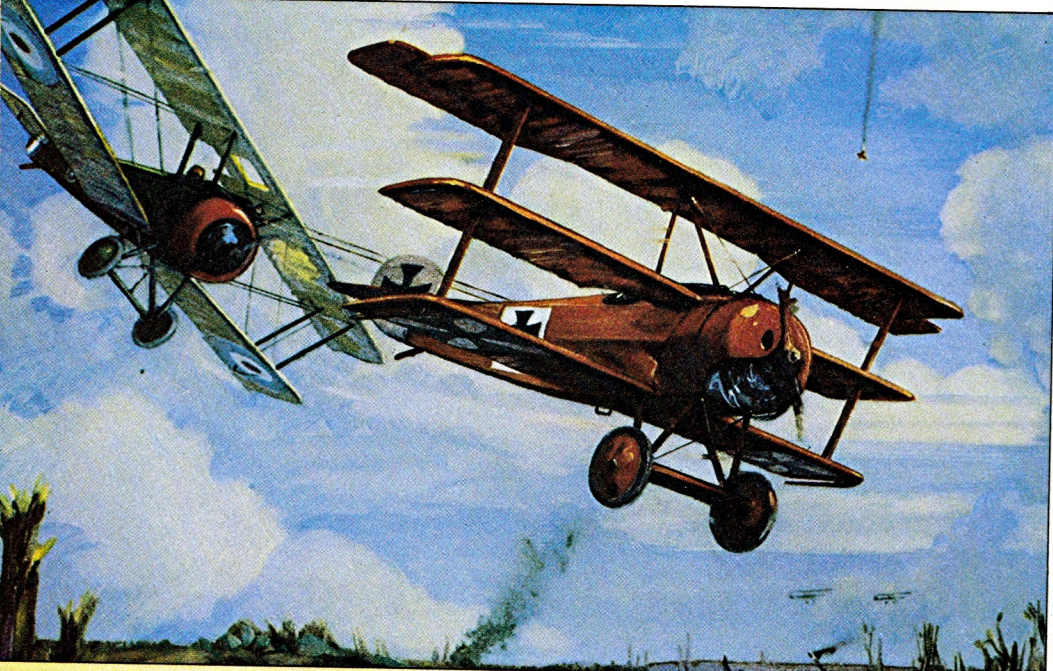
to the right. I streaked for a friendly cloudbank.

The Camel bucked and slowed in the grey interior; I adjusted the fuel mixture. In fifteen seconds I popped out the other side—alone, in hazy sunlight. I checked my aircraft controls and flying condition—all OK. Bullet holes in the fuselage, but I was not hit, nor the engine. I was over the Somme River descending in a northerly direction. It was from this position I saw the chase.

At the start of the dogfight, Lt. May circled overhead. He watched fascinated by the whirling air battle below him. Then he noted a Fokker with purple wings and silver fuselage circling below him, the pilot eyeing the fight, too. It was Wolfram von Richthofen, also a novice and the Red Baron's younger brother.

May could not resist. He dove on the Fokker, guns chukking as he came. The surprised German dove into the midst of the air battle, May following, trying to bring his guns to bear. Wolfram levelled off, scooted to safety.

May remembered Brown's instructions to "dive out of it." He went into a tight spiral, fingers depressed on the Vickers triggers, spraying bullets at all Fokkers that swung into his gun



“The Red Baron is said to have torn off his goggles, flung them overboard, as he had done once before when critically wounded in 1917.”

Illustration by Charles H. Hubbell

like giant pillars.

Ahead, Brown's and Redgate's flights reached the end of our assigned sector and turned north at an altitude of 12,000 feet. I kept my flight in a climb attitude as we passed through 9,000. All of us kept constant vigil, up and down, right and left.

Near Le Quesnel six miles inside the German lines, I looked over at Sammy Taylor. He was jabbing a finger downward; below us were two Albatros recon planes apparently bent on a photo mission, headed for our side. I signalled the attack; we dove on them, Taylor leading the way.

As we closed in, flying wires screaming, Taylor opened fire on the nearest Albatros. His tracers ripped through the center wing section and the engine. The plane flipped on its back, flamed as the petrol ignited, and went down in a twisting death spiral trailing black smoke.

I went after the second Albatros and missed. As I flashed by, the German pilot zipped into a cloud bank. We lost him. I signalled to reform. We continued our patrol northward. In the brief skirmish we had become well separated from the other two flights.



sights. The guns jammed—he could not free them. He spun into the Somme River Valley, headed west for Bertangles.

### The Chase Is On

At the edge of the fight, the Red Baron saw the lone Camel dive out and head for safety. Richthofen, in a power dive, went after May and closed rapidly. He opened fire at close range, his Spandau guns winking orange flames of death. May looked back, saw the red Triplane, and was terrified.

He began to weave and bank violently from side to side making an elusive target. The contour chase followed the river, crossed banks and bluffs, and the two planes got lower and lower as the Red Baron fired burst after burst at the swaying Camel. So intense was the Red Baron's concentration that he apparently was not aware they had crossed the front lines, were approaching allied territory.

A thousand feet or so above the east of Sailly-le-Sec, Captain Brown looked down, saw his novice wingman May in trouble, chased by a red Fokker. Without hesitation Brown pitched downward to his friend's rescue. In a high speed dive crossing from right to left, he zoomed in on Richthofen and squeezed off a long burst. From my vantage point above, I saw the tracers stream into the cockpit area of the Triplane. Then, in order to avoid imminent collision, Brown pulled off in a steep climbing turn to the left

and was out of it.

I am convinced to this day that the well-placed bullets from Brown's Vickers hit the red Triplane, and that one of them passed through the Red Baron's chest from right to left mortally wounding him. His aircraft wavered unsteadily for a few moments, then closed on the chase again. Although dying, von Richthofen probably wanted to bring down that last elusive target.

The chase continued onward another couple of miles, past Vaux and along the Morlancourt Ridge where the Australian

3rd and 5th Divisions were deployed. Australian artillery machine gunners saw the two planes approaching, alerted in advance by field telephones. The British plane was weaving violently, and the red Triplane was close behind firing repeatedly.

At this juncture the Red Baron broke off the chase, pulled up in a climbing turn to his right, and the Aussie machine gunners had a clear shot at the German plane as it passed fifty feet overhead. They fired from several positions.



Illustration by Robert J. Carlin

### The Final Approach

The Triplane continued in a descending turn to the northeast. The Red Baron is said to have torn off his goggles, flung them overboard, as he had done once before when critically wounded in 1917. The plane banked a little northeast, made a rather steep



landing approach to an open field along the Bray-Corbie road beyond a brick works. The Triplane bounced once, then came to rest on its nose. The landing gear was smashed, the lower left wing was crumpled, and one blade of the prop was broken. The pilot was slumped forward, motionless, in his cockpit.


The Red Baron must have been conscious on his final landing approach, skilled hands still controlling his aircraft. If he had died in the air, the unstable Tripe most certainly would have spun in with a devastating smash.

Upon seeing the aircraft crash-land, I made a low level pass, a flyby close beside it. I did not know the identity of the pilot until later, only that an all red Fokker Triplane had been shot down by Roy Brown. I flew back to our aerodrome at Bertangles and joined May and Brown who had already landed. We filled out our combat reports.

In the intervening years several books have been written on the von Richthofen legend and how the Red Baron died. Some of the authors spent years on research, interviewing witnesses—Australian, British, French, American, German—aircrews as well as ground troops, who gave their impressions of the incident. Most of the writers agree that von Richthofen met his destiny as a result of ground fire from one of several Aussie machine gunners.

From my point of view, however, I believe the Red Baron was shot and grievously wounded by Captain Brown in his diving attack. Although mortally wounded, von Richthofen continued to maneuver his craft until he could no longer function.

Then he landed his craft and died. He had earned his final decoration: a wooden cross.

I was there. I saw it happen. 

*(Editor's Note: Oliver C. "Boots" LeBoutillier is the last pilot living today on either side who fought in the air battle April 21, 1918, when the Red Baron died. After WW I, Boots did barnstorming and skywriting in New York and Pennsylvania. In the 1930's he went to Hollywood, flew in several war movies including "The Eagle and Hawk" and the classic "Hell's Angels". In 1937 he joined the Civil Aeronautics Administration, was Inspector-In-Charge for Colorado and Wyoming until 1948. He then settled in Nevada and formed his own pharmaceutical business. He is retired now with 19,000 hours in planes ranging from a Wright Model B Flyer to multi-engine bombers and lives in Las Vegas. Boots says he shot down eight German planes in WW I. He was never officially rated an ace, because his first four planes fell into the ocean.)*