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A Trophy of the First World War in the Air Captain William Wendell Rogers' and his Victory over a German Gotha Bomber, 12 December 1917

James Whitham

On 12 December 1917, Captain Wendell Rogers, a Canadian pilot in the Royal Flying Corps, was leading a patrol near Ypres, Belgium when his flight intercepted a group of German bombers. In the ensuing combat Rogers shot down a giant Gotha bomber, the first time such an aircraft had been brought down over continental Europe. A piece of that bomber was recovered and was recently acquired by the Canadian War Museum. The artifact, a fabric Iron Cross salvaged from the wing of the downed Gotha, was donated by Captain Rogers' son Lloyd. The following article will trace how this object came to reside at the new Canadian War Museum in Ottawa.

Born in Alberton, Prince Edward Island, William Wendell Rogers (1896-1967) grew up in the upper class surroundings of politics and business. His grandfather, Benjamin Rogers, had been a prominent political figure in Charlottetown since he had joined the Provincial Legislative Council in 1872. Benjamin Rogers would later become lieutenant-governor of the province from 1910 to 1915.

Wendell Rogers (he chose to drop the name William in everyday dealings¹) spent his early years with his family in Alberton, but moved to Toronto in 1914 to attend the University of Toronto. In 1915, Rogers enlisted in the Canadian

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Officers' Training Corps (COTC) and trained as an infantry officer before moving on to the Royal Artillery School in Kingston. Unsure of when his artillery regiment would be shipped overseas, Rogers departed alone for the conflict in Europe and arrived in England in 1916, where he enlisted in the Royal Flying Corps (RFC).²

Rogers qualified as a pilot over the winter and was sent directly to No.1 Squadron RFC, which flew Nieuport scout aircraft. Arriving in France on 18 May 1917, Rogers established himself as a talented pilot, his first official victory over a German aircraft occurring on 12 July 1917. Flying a Nieuport, Rogers shot down an Albatros DIII, sharing the victory with Second Lieutenant H.S. Davies.³

Wendell Rogers continued his success in the air claiming unshared victories over three German Albatros DV aircraft, between 7 and 9 October 1917. Working with other Canadian air aces from No.1 Squadron, such as Guy Moore (10 victories), Earnest Kelly (six victories), and Lumsden Cummings (five victories), Rogers would become a well-respected and skilled pilot.⁴

On 12 December 1917, while leading a patrol from No.1 Squadron, Rogers and four other Nieuport aircraft climbed through the clouds and encountered two formations of German Gotha



Captain William Wendell Rogers in his Nieuport. Note the Lewis machine gun mounted above the wing.

bombers. Forty feet in length and with 80 foot wingspans, the massive Gothas had superseded Zeppelins in raiding England during the summer of 1917. When compared with Zeppelins, the Gotha bombers were a much more formidable adversary as they were better armed with fewer weaknesses, especially blind spots, that could be exploited by attacking aircraft.

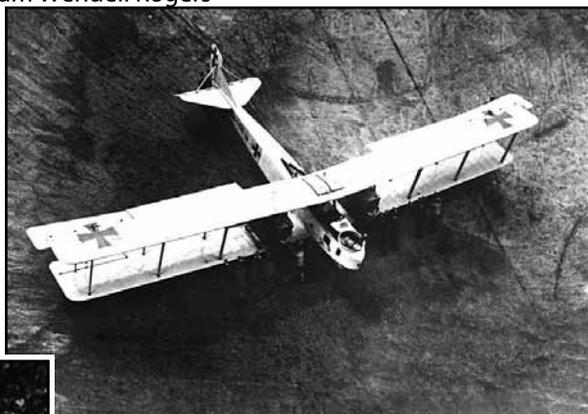
The engagement began with the Gothas opening fire on Rogers' force of diminutive Nieuports from above. Rogers' force quickly manoeuvred out of range and he and two others of his party climbed to a position above and behind the Gothas. They opened fire on three of the enemy aircraft that were at the tail of the formation. Rogers moved in on the centre aircraft which had either fallen behind or was beginning to turn for home. He lined up a perfect shot on the fuselage and, with the bomber's observer directly in his sight, opened up with his Lewis gun.⁵

Raked by Rogers' fire, the Gotha swung sharply to the left and began a fall towards the ground, its engines bellowing smoke and its fuel beginning to ignite. Following it in its plunge, Rogers began to fear that that the German pilot might be able to guide the aircraft to safety after all. Consequently, placing a fresh drum of ammunition in his machine gun, Rogers swung behind the stricken Gotha to attack again. Conditions within the enemy aircraft were worse than he thought, however, and, as he closed in,

two of its crew jumped out. Within seconds the aircraft exploded, its bits and pieces cascading downwards over no-man's-land in the vicinity of Armentières.⁶

Rogers' victory had consequences greater than just the downing of a single aircraft. The formation that he had attacked was Kagohl 3, which had been formed by German high command in early 1917 for the express purpose of bombing England. The Gotha's observer, upon whom Rogers had focused his sights, was none other than Hauptmann Rudolf Kleine, the squadron's commander. Kleine had taken over the squadron after its first commander, Hauptmann Ernst Brandenburg, had been severely injured in a crash. Kleine had been a key figure in the bombing of England through the summer months. He had overseen the transition to nighttime operations and initiated the use of incendiary bombs. Kleine's death would further lower the already decreasing morale of the crews tasked in the German bombing campaign.⁷

On safely returning to his airfield, Wendell Rogers soon received news that he was the first RFC pilot to bring down a Gotha bomber over continental Europe, and that he was to receive the Military Cross for his efforts. In a chance occurrence, a visiting Australian Army officer had been a witness to Rogers' victory over the Gotha, which had occurred over his unit. The Australians had recovered some souvenirs from



Left: Captain Rogers with his Gotha bomber trophy. **Above and Below:** A German Gotha bomber. It can be clearly seen how the bottom of the cross is separated from the rest by the aileron.

Inset: Hauptmann Rudolf Kleine, the commander of Kagohl 3, was killed when Rogers shot down his Gotha.



Photo courtesy Lloyd Rogers

the downed aircraft, including two wing tips with their iron crosses, which had made it to the ground unscathed. On learning that it had been Rogers that had downed the Gotha, the officer had the two crosses presented to the victorious pilot.

In 1918, William Wendell Rogers left No. 1 Squadron and returned to Canada to work with the Royal Flying Corps training station in Borden, Ontario until the end of the war. After leaving the military, Rogers continued in the field of aviation, and is reported to be the first person to pilot an aircraft into his home town of Alberton, Prince Edward Island, on 5 July 1930, to visit his parents.⁸ Meanwhile, Wendell had become a prominent businessman in Saint John, New Brunswick, and continued to promote civil aviation throughout that province.

In 1938, Rogers was appointed commanding officer of the No. 117 (Fighter) Squadron of the RCAF. But to his great disappointment, he was too

old to return to combat during the Second World War. Leaving the military, Rogers would take a position managing the Canada Veneer company in Saint John, a key supplier of high-grade plywood used in the fabrication of de Havilland Mosquito fighter-bombers.⁹

On 12 January 1967, William Wendell Rogers died in the Saint John General Hospital at the age of 71 after several months of illness. With his passing, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation announced that "Canadian airmen would pay tribute to a flier who put a chink in German air power in 1917."¹⁰

As for the two trophy iron crosses from the Gotha he downed in December 1917, Rogers had presented one to his squadron's mess in Flanders. The other he kept for himself.¹¹ The one at the mess was lost when the Germans captured the building during their great offensive in the spring of 1918. The other returned with Rogers to Canada. After he settled in Saint John

in 1924, the fabric iron cross eventually found a home in that city's Byng Boys' Club. Founded in 1919 by the First World War veteran and future lieutenant governor, Larry MacLaren, this club was a prominent association of distinguished local First World War veterans. It was later expanded to include veterans from other conflicts, the prime requirement for membership being that the veteran had seen actual combat. The meeting room was filled with military artifacts, mostly from the First World War, including rifles, bombs, machine guns and Rogers' fabric iron cross from the Gotha bomber. A photograph of the German commander, Von Kluck, occupied a prominent place in the room as did, most notably, a human skull wearing a German helmet, the exact provenance of which remained uncertain. In 2004 the club was forced to move to new

Rogers' Iron Cross as it was displayed at the Byng Boys' Club in Saint John, NB. It was surrounded by a variety of other First World War memorabilia including various helmets, the armoured brestplate of a German sniper and a human skull of unknown provenance.



quarters which necessitated the dispersal of its collection of artifacts. Lloyd Rogers offered his father's trophy iron cross to the Canadian War Museum.¹²

Provenance and Historical Information

The cross can be seen in the photo on the next page with Rogers and his grandchildren. Not a great deal was known about it when it came to the Canadian War Museum, except that it was recovered from the aircraft that Wendell Rogers shot down. It was assumed, for example, that it had been positioned on the fuselage. A review, however, indicated that the fabric piece was, in fact, from one of the wing tips. This accords with contemporary accounts of the aircraft's intact wing tips being found. The conclusion is also supported by the visual evidence of a photo of Rogers with the insignia in 1918, where the bottom portion is clearly missing. This section of the cross would have been separate from the rest of the insignia due to its position on the wing. On a Gotha bomber, the insignia would have been positioned on the outside edge of the wing tip. But, due to the position of the wing's aileron, the bottom portion of the fabric would have been separate as it moved independently from the rest of the wing. As such, the cross would, have consisted of one large section (which was recovered) and another, smaller, section on the aileron. The bottom piece of fabric was attached to the main section of the cross at an unknown time; but the visible break in the lower foot of the cross insignia is still visible.

This further helps to confirm that the cross came from a Gotha aircraft. The Kagohl 3 bomber group, of which this bomber was a part, began operating Gotha IV and Gotha V bombers in September 1917.¹³ The cross's design, with a 50 mm white border around the outside edge corresponds to the prescribed format for this insignia in 1916-17.¹⁴ The design was later changed to a format that had no white border. And later, as of 18 March 1918, the so-called *Balkankreuz*, with notably straight lines, was adopted.¹⁵

With its solidly documented history and provenance, this artifact stands as a symbol of

Whitham: Captain William Wendell Rogers

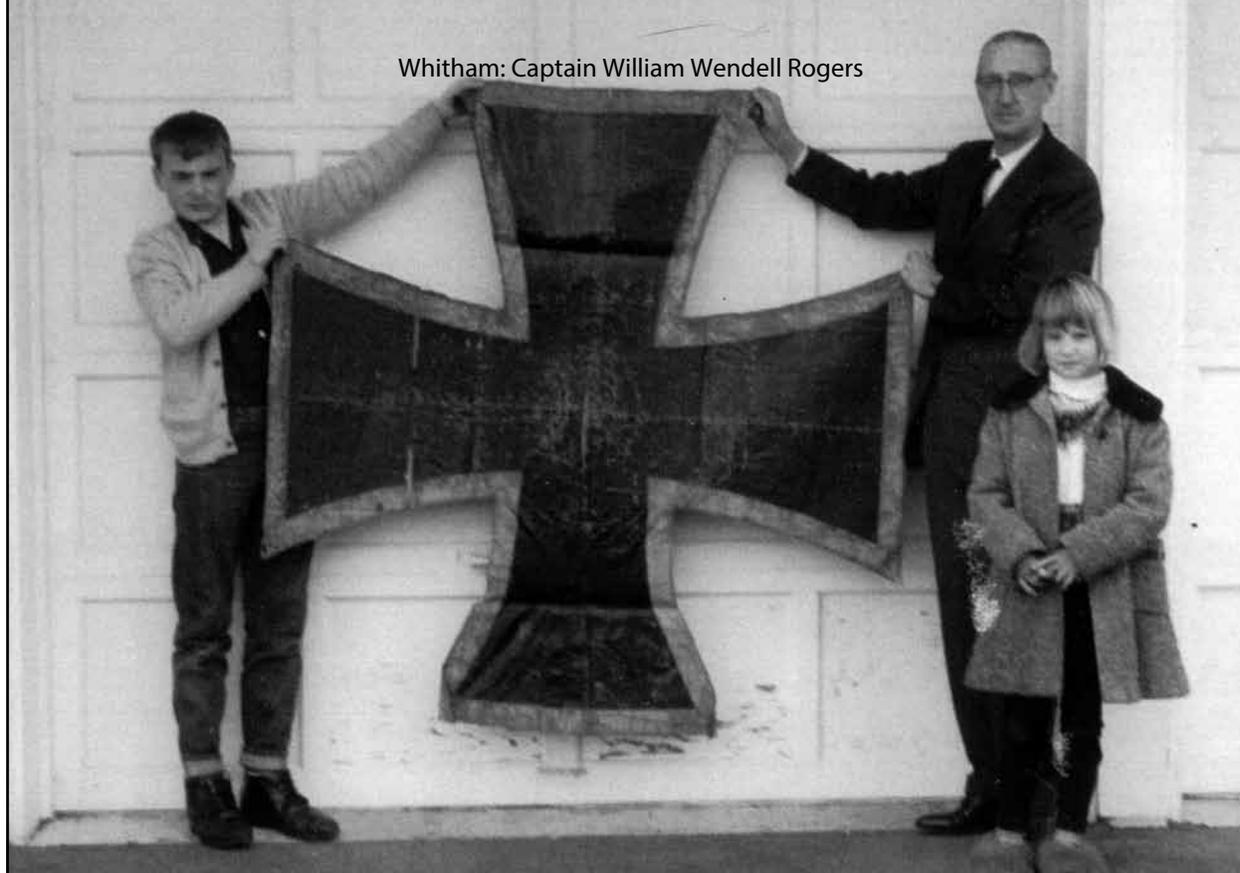


Photo courtesy Lloyd Rogers

Wendell Rogers and grandchildren in 1964 with the Gotha bomber cross. The missing piece had been sewn onto the larger part of the cross by this time and was on-route to Ottawa for repair.

the deadly battle of the skies fought in the flimsy canvas-covered machines of the First World War. It is a testament not only to the success of one enterprising Canadian airman but to the deaths of the bomber's three German crew members. Its acquisition by the Canadian War Museum ensures the preservation of a tangible reminder of the struggles in the air in the First World War.

Notes

1. Sources vary on how Rogers used his first and second name. His preference for Wendell W. Rogers was confirmed by interviews with Lloyd Rogers, Wendell Roger's son.
2. George Drew, *Canada's Fighting Airmen* (Toronto, 1930), p.238.
3. Christopher Shores, Norman Franks, Russell Guest, *Above the Trenches, A Complete Record of the Fighter Aces and Units of the British Empire Air Forces 1915-1920* (London, 1990), p.324.
4. *Ibid.*, pp.128, 221, 285.
5. Drew, p.243. In an interview, Lloyd Rogers recalled that Wendell Rogers' own account to his sons supported the account that he had attacked the aircraft that had fallen behind the other two. However, it should be noted that the Official History of the Royal Canadian Air Force, Vol. I, citing Rogers' own after action report, records that the Gotha he attacked had turned back. S.F. Wise, *Canadian Airmen and the First World War* (Toronto, 1980) p.254. This is also the conclusion of John Dodd, in *Brave Young Wings* (Stittsville, Ont., 1980), p. 194.
6. Drew, p.244.
7. C.M. White, *The Gotha Summer: the German Daytime Air Raids on England, May to August 1917* (London, 1986), p.129. Also, F. K. Mason, *Battle over Britain: a History of the German Air Assaults on Great Britain, 1917-18 and July-December, 1940, and the Development of Britain's Air Defences Between the Wars* (New York, 1969), pp.13-33.
8. Alberton Museum, Prince Edward Island, Community Memories Virtual Museums of Canada. <<http://www.virtualmuseum.ca>> Alberton Museum
9. *Telegraph-Journal*, Saint John, New Brunswick, Obituary entitled "Famed Air Ace Dies in Hospital," 12 January 1967.
10. Transcript provided by Lloyd Rogers from the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation on 20 January 1967 of the 13 January 1967 announcement.
11. Drew, p.245.
12. For information on the Byng Boys Club, see Tom MacGregor, "New Brunswick's Byng Boys Break Up Historic Collection," *Legion Magazine*, March/April 2004, pp.62-63. After it left the Byng Boys Club, Rogers' iron cross was temporarily on loan to the New Brunswick Museum.
13. D. McAdoo, *Color Profiles of World War 1 Combat Planes* (New York, 1974), p.168.
14. H. Nowarra, *Markings of German Aircraft in WWI 1914-1918* (Berlin, 1968), pp.54, 128.
15. B. Robertson, *Aircraft Camouflage and Markings 1907-1954*, (Letchworth, Herts, England, 1956), p.60.

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