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CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM

Developing *Deadly Skies*

JOHN MAKER

Abstract: The Canadian War Museum's exhibition Deadly Skies – Air War, 1914-1918 examines the first air war from the perspective of nine international participants representing Canada, the United States, France, Great Britain, and Germany. Eschewing the romantic mythology of First World War aviation that focuses on the achievements of individual fighter pilots, the exhibition examines four key aspects of the air war: training, observation, bombing, and aerial combat. Adopting an interpretive approach that appeals to intergenerational audiences and that highlights personal experience in the war, the exhibition is presented as a series of life-sized graphic novels, supplemented with key artifacts, photos, audio clips, and videos. The historical and interpretative approaches together present a holistic and modern examination of the world's first air war.

ON 10 June 2016, the exhibition *Deadly Skies – Air War, 1914-1918*, opened at the Canadian War Museum after two years in development. Using artifacts, photographs, large media displays, interactive elements, and life-sized graphic novelizations, the exhibition presents the history of the first air war through the experiences of nine participants. *Deadly Skies* takes a new look at the war in the air. Rather than focussing on the air war as it is often remembered—a series of one-on-one aerial duels—this exhibition revolves around the personal accounts of observers, bombers and fighter pilots. It draws from personal and institutional archives to bring to life real accounts of some of the many and diverse people affected by the war in the air.

Ask people about the First Air War (1914-1918) and most will say they know something about aerial duels over the Western Front and about Germany's highest scoring ace, Manfred von Richthofen.

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Exhibition Intro. [Canadian War Museum, CWM2016-0041-0021-Dm]

Also known as “The Red Baron”, von Richthofen’s reputation endures largely because of wartime propaganda as well as Charles Schultz’ *Peanuts* comic strip, which featured an ongoing duel between Snoopy and the Red Baron. In Canada, many people remember Billy Bishop of Owen Sound, Ontario, who was credited as the highest scoring ace among British Empire pilots. Like the Red Baron, Bishop’s story has been told and retold since 1917 to the point of mythologizing.

The enduring popularity of fighter pilots was fueled by contemporaneous propaganda and the romanticism of their chivalric image. Wartime press and propagandists sought to provide alternative narratives to the dreary casualty reports from the trenches. Encouraged by their governments and publishers, pilots—Bishop and von Richthofen among them—wrote vivid accounts of their aerial

combat, even while the war still raged.¹ These were instant bestsellers. Further enhancing this image, the British Flying Services also tended to treat the air war as a “pilot’s war,” downplaying the important roles of the observer and other non-pilot aircrew, who only *began* to receive formal status in late 1915.² British Prime Minister David Lloyd George, speaking in the House of Commons in October 1917, helped build this image, stating that pilots were “the knighthood of the War, without fear and without reproach.”³ However, historian A.D. Harvey has pointed out that, despite their knightly image, most of the young pilots themselves had “little interest in horses or fake medievalism.”⁴ Still, even in death, the fates of some of the most famous “knights of the sky,” not least through their elaborate and publicized funeral ceremonies, were exploited for political and propaganda purposes, communicated through the print media.⁵

Together, these factors have produced a popular memory of the air war that highlights the accomplishments of fighter pilots and places aerial combat at the apex of military aviation in the First

¹ For these two books, see: Manfred von Richthofen, *Der Rote Kampfflieger* (Berlin: Ullstein, 1917); William A. Bishop, *Winged Warfare: Hunting the Huns in the Air* (New York: Hodder and Stoughton, 1918). Other pilots published similar works during the war, though this phenomenon began in Germany. Some pilots had ghost writers to help get these books to print, which partially explains critical comments by both Bishop and von Richthofen who both disliked their autobiographies. Gunther Plüschow, the one-man air force at Germany’s Pacific Naval station at Tsingtao, published his memoir after he returned to Germany in 1917. See: Gunther Plüschow, *Die Abenteuer des Fliegers von Tsingtau* (Berlin : Ullstein & co., 1917). Some were published posthumously. Such was the case with Max Immelmann, Germany’s first ace, whose memoir was published less than a year after his death. See: Max Immelmann, *Meine Kampfflüge* (Berlin: A. Scherl, GmbH, 1917). Credited with shooting down 57 enemy airplanes, British pilot James McCudden’s memoir was published before he could even edit the manuscript as he was killed in a crash in July 1918. The result is a quite frank relation of the life of a First World War fighter pilot. See James McCudden, *Flying Fury: Five Years in the Royal Flying Corps* (London: Lionel Leventhal, 1987 [originally 1918]).

² C.G. Jefford, *Observers and Navigators and Other Non-Pilot Aircrew in the RFC, RNAS, and RAF*, 2nd ed. (London: Grub Street, 2014), 30.

³ *Hansard: House of Commons*, vol. 98, col. 1247, 29 October 1917.

⁴ A.D. Harvey, “Why Was the Red Baron’s Fokker Painted Red? Decoding the Way Aeroplanes Were Painted in the First World War,” *War in History* 8, no.3 (2001): 323-340.

⁵ Florian Schnurer, “‘But In Death He Has Found Victory’: The Funeral Ceremonies for the ‘Knights of the Sky’ During the Great War as Transnational Media Events,” *European Review of History* 15, no.6 (December 2008): 643-658.

World War.⁶ In reality, the first air war was a multifaceted and complex event involving thousands of direct participants in a struggle that affected millions of people around the world. The first air war set precedents for the use of aircraft as reconnaissance and bombing platforms, uses that continue today. The large aerial battles, the most well-remembered aspect of the air war, presaged ideas about seizing control of the skies, a concept known ever since as aerial superiority. But even these fighter-centric battles were waged to create safer operational space for the observation and bomber airplanes to ply their trades unmolested by enemy fighters. Observation missions were the first and primary use of aircraft in the war and all their other uses derived from this central purpose. Eventually, the various roles came to complement each other; fighter support and air superiority facilitated bombing and observation, while the need for the latter missions often dictated when and where fighters were employed.

The junction between the popular memory of the air war and a more nuanced understanding of the conflict was at the heart of the research and interpretative approach taken to the Canadian War Museum's *Deadly Skies* exhibition. We intended to confront the popular "knights of the air narrative" by presenting to Canadians the reality of the air war and placing the fighter duels into the context of the overall aerial struggle. This meant accessing different realities and experiences than those that air force historians and aficionados have long championed.

PART II

While presenting a nuanced history was our primary imperative, we also wanted to show this history to as many people as possible, and to have those people connect with the history on display. This led us to choose the graphic novel as our primary interpretative strategy. Recent research points out that use of the graphic novel for exhibitory purposes can be very effective. Goldsmith argues that it "...permits the writer or artist to present the personal as well as the public

⁶ Von Richthofen's popularity has been reinforced through the production of popular culture bearing his name and reinforcing the myth. There have been at least two major studio films titled *The Red Baron* (1971 and 2008), four video games, several songs and, of course, Charles Schultz's *Peanuts*.

aspects of a historical moment as fully intertwined... the historically based graphic novel text can move the reader from the personal to the public within a small amount of page space, requiring the mind to attend to what the eye shows: the personal has a public context, the public has a personal effect.”⁷ Similarly, though the roles of members of the exhibition team, including Historian, Creative Developer, and Collections Specialist, are often seen as highly compartmentalized, Dorian Knight recently noted that “narrative is the linking dialogue between these sub-disciplines, potentially facilitating the creation of powerful and embodied museum experiences.” Knight, who recently developed a graphic novel in a museum setting, continues that the use of narrative “...is particularly strong within the gallery space due to its multidimensionality and multimodality.”⁸

We decided to couple the historical approach with interpretive approaches increasingly used over the past five years and developed at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington D.C. A study of visitor engagement from the Smithsonian observed that, “visitors don’t necessarily notice or learn much during a visit; and essentially get out of their experiences what they want.”⁹ For *Deadly Skies*, we wanted to explore our messages in such a way as to engage as many visitors as possible. In short, we wanted people to gain a new understanding of the air war and we did this by immersing them and having them become emotionally invested in the various people’s experiences presented. To better understand what visitors were doing and why, the authors of the Smithsonian study identified four key visitor preferences: Ideas, People, Objects, and Physical. That is, they posited that different visitors react to different types of information and presentations according to their personal preferences. Museum exhibitions that focus too strongly only on artifacts, for example, would appeal to only one section of the visiting public. This approach led us to develop an approach that coupled engaging stories that did the double duty of also carrying historical messages. The exhibition was divided into four content zones: Training, Observation, Bombing,

⁷ Francisca Goldsmith, “Picture It: The Diverse Possibilities of Graphic Novel Literature,” *Young Adult Library Services* 9, no.4 (Summer 2011): 24-26.

⁸ Dorian Knight, “On the Beat: Stories From 1914-1918. A Fresh Approach to Interpreting Crime History at Bishop’s Stortford Museum,” *Law, Crime and History* 5, no.1 (Spring 2015): 117.

⁹ James B. Schreiber, et al, “Understanding Visitor Engagement and Behaviors,” *The Journal of Educational Research*, 2013, vol. 106, 462-468.

and Aerial Combat. Nine people were selected whose experiences could carry the historical messages but also stand on their own as stories. Thus, the exhibition transforms the real-life experiences of these nine figures into stories told primarily using a graphic novel approach, supported by relevant artifacts, images and interactive activities. Within each zone, the character stories, coupled with the artifacts, images and their supporting text, work together to provide a full understanding of the overall historical narrative.

In the presentation of our nine personalities, we were concerned that some visitors might think we trivialized the content by making it into a “comic”. First, it is a misperception that graphic novels and comics are necessarily light-hearted. Comic books and graphic novels have always dealt with social issues, ranging from war, to First Nations rights, to feminism and environmentalism,¹⁰ “frequently questioning old assumptions and challenging established authorities instead of endorsing traditional values.”¹¹ Much like Dorian Knight’s museum team, the Canadian War Museum team wished to avoid presenting knowledge in a one-dimensional way. We wished to present multiple angles and admit to doubts in the historical record. For example, our exhibition presents the controversy surrounding the downing of the Red Baron, simply by showing in the graphic novel multiple people claiming to have fired the fatal shot. And, again like Dorian Knight’s team, we wanted to present an open, subjective and emotive approach that provided the “potential for sensorial and empathetic interpretations of the collection...” acknowledging that, “museums and galleries are places where people feel as well as think.”¹²

The stories presented were real stories based on meticulous primary and secondary research conducted across the globe. The graphic novelizations were realized through a process of collaboration with an illustration team that relied on our research, storyboards, and guidance through every step of the process. Each character was chosen for a variety of reasons, but key among those was that each

¹⁰ For example, the *Maus* series of graphic novels by Art Spiegelman deals with the Holocaust. The *Moonshot* collection of graphic novels brings together dozens of creators from across North America examining the heritage and identity of indigenous storytelling.

¹¹ Dorian Knight, “On the Beat: Stories From 1914-1918 - A Fresh Approach to Interpreting Crime History at Bishop’s Stortford Museum,” *Law, Crime and History* 5, no.1 (Spring 2015): 117.

¹² *Ibid.*



Richthofen Zone. [Canadian War Museum , CWM2016-0046-0001-Dm]

story conveyed important information about the air war, while at the same time telling a compelling story in its own right. But who did we choose and why?

PART III

Most visitors are likely to know only one of the characters: Manfred von Richthofen. Including von Richthofen, the Red Baron, was both an obvious and difficult decision. On the one hand, we did not want to reinforce the popular narrative of the air war, but we also understood that most people would respond to this character. Furthermore, given our approach to dealing with the air war holistically, we did not want to present more than one famous fighter pilot. Nevertheless, we were concerned that some visitors would bemoan the absence of Canadian fighter aces, of whom there were many, and especially Billy Bishop who many see as Canada's most important war hero. Given that the museum's permanent gallery already highlights Bishop's story in a dedicated display containing his propellor, windscreen, Lewis gun, medal set, and photographs, we decided to devote space to other, lesser known Canadians like Eric Ohman, Henry Wiser, Joseph Gorman, and James Moses. This allowed us to adhere to our decision to present the stories of everyday people whose experiences

were largely unknown. Each zone includes participants from various nations, including at least one Canadian per zone.

Though we decided to use von Richthofen, we were not interested in presenting only the legend. In keeping with the way we treated all other subjects in the exhibition, we wanted to show the man and his experience behind the legend. For this reason, we show the Red Baron as a mentor to his men, as a son whose mother worries about his well-being, as a casualty, a man wounded in action, who returns to service against doctor's orders. In doing so, the exhibition acknowledges that he was a very effective fighter pilot, but turns the legend on its head, noting that he shared much with other people highlighted in the exhibition.

The exhibition examines other aspects of his life and personality. He was popular and well-liked by his men because he was a good leader. As commander of Jagdstaffel 11, von Richthofen clearly cared for the well-being of his men, training each of them personally and insisting they put in hours of target practice. When on their first missions, one young pilot recalled that von Richthofen protected new pilots, "like a hen with her chicks."¹³ *Deadly Skies* also examines how his wounding affected him. Von Richthofen's own mother noted that he was changed by the experience and she worried about his welfare; again, something explored in the exhibition and researched using von Richthofen's and his mother's memoirs, as well as various secondary sources.¹⁴ Using these techniques, we aimed to penetrate the veil of propaganda that has clouded interpretation of the air war since the war itself.

¹³ Edward H. Phillips, "The Red Baron on Leadership," *Aviation History* 26, no.1 (September 2015): 16-17.

¹⁴ The two memoirs are: Kunigunde von Richthofen, *Mother of Eagles: The War Diary of Baroness Von Richthofen*, ed. Suzanne Hayes Fischer (Atglen, PA: Schiffer, 2001); Manfred von Richthofen, *Der Rote Kampfflieger* (Berlin: Ullstein, 1917). Some useful secondary sources on von Richthofen's military career include: Norman Franks, et al, *Under the Guns of the Red Baron: The Complete Record of Von Richthofen's Victories and Victims* (London: Caxton, 2000); Leon Bennett, *Gunning for the Red Baron* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2006); on the controversy around who killed the Red Baron, also see: Lt-Col David Bashow, "Who Killed von Richthofen?" *Canadian Military Journal* 4, no.1 (Spring 2003): 58-59; Robert Buie, "I Killed Richthofen!" *Cavalier Magazine* (December 1959): 11-12, 48-52; Norman Franks and Alan Bennett, *The Red Baron's Last Flight: A Mystery Investigated* (St. Catharines, ON: Vanwell Publishing, 1997); M. Geoffrey Miller, "The Death of Manfred von Richthofen: Who Fired the Fatal Shot?" *Sabretache: the Journal and Proceedings of the Military History Society of Australia* XXXIX, no.2 (June 1998).

Juxtaposing von Richthofen in the combat zone is Lieutenant Eric Ohman, a heretofore unknown Canadian fighter pilot from Montreal who also appears in the exhibition's training zone. The team worked with Ohman's daughter and son-in-law developing his story, which is based on over 500 documents and artifacts Ohman sent to his parents during the war or brought home with him after it. These letters provide intimate details of his training in southern Ontario, the exhilaration he felt when flying, and his fears. The detail in this collection allowed us to delve into his experience. For example, he often wrote of his prized possession: his flying goggles. First asking his father to send him a pair on 22 August 1917, only days after he started flying, Ohman later wrote about how happy he was that the goggles had not broken during a training crash in January 1918. By including this detail in the story, and then displaying Ohman's actual goggles near his graphic novel in the gallery, we were able to better contextualize one aspect of a pilot's experience and also an artifact that might otherwise appear as an abstraction without the context of his story.

Ohman and his story were known only to his family. By highlighting this person, we showed what service was like for a pilot whose life has never received the attention of historians or interested aviation enthusiasts. Through Ohman's experiences, which include being forced to the ground by enemy fighters, reported killed, nearly taken prisoner, achieving two aerial victories, and simply living as a pilot on the Western Front, visitors get a sense of what it was like for the average person fighting the air war.¹⁵

In the training zone we also highlight the training experience for young Canadians early in the war, when they were required to already possess a pilot's licence if they wished to join the air services. This aspect of training is told through the story of Marjorie Stinson, a nineteen year-old American flying instructor in San Antonio. Within that story we also examine the experience of her first pilot graduate Joseph Gorman, of Ottawa, who received his pilot's licence after 11 days' training in December 1915. He went on to join the Royal Naval

¹⁵ Ohman's son-in-law spent 20 years transcribing and collating the document collection. The book will soon be available to consult at Library and Archives Canada. He recently self-published this work. Please see: Nils Eric Ohman, *Letters Home: Journey of a World War I Pilot*, ed. Gordon R. Southward (Montreal: self-published, 2015).

Air Service, flew in Great Britain and Italy, and was killed in a demonstration flight in the presence of the King of Italy near Padua in 1917. Thus we chose two characters for that zone—Ohman and Stinson—whose stories were interesting in their own right, but which carried the historical messages of the zone.

One of the exhibition's key messages is that observation was the first and primary use of aircraft in the First World War. Three characters populate the exhibition's Observation zone. Gunther Plüschow, James Moses, and Maurice Arondel. Plüschow was a naval flying officer who, when war broke out, was stationed in Tsingtao, in the German concession of Kiautschou Bay, China. He was the only pilot with a functioning airplane and so operated as the German defenders' one-man air force. Through his story we examine the role of an observer early in the war. He was expected to fly the airplane while also observing enemy ground forces, scribbling notes, and dropping hand-made bombs on targets of opportunity. His only armament was his service pistol, which he claimed to have used to shoot down a Japanese airplane. After the fall of Tsingtao to Japanese and British forces on 7 November 1914, Plüschow escaped across the Pacific Ocean, the United States, and the Atlantic Ocean before British forces finally captured him in Gibraltar. After two months' captivity, Plüschow escaped and returned to Germany, the only German to do so throughout the war.¹⁶

James Moses belonged to the Six Nations Confederacy, near Brantford, Ontario. He began the war as an officer in the 107th Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, a pioneer unit. He served at Hill 70 before joining the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) as an observation officer in September 1917. The exhibition team worked closely with his great nephew, who loaned to the museum Moses' letters, photographs, and service documents. Using these materials we developed a picture of the work Moses typically engaged in as an observer in his short time with the RFC. Through his experience

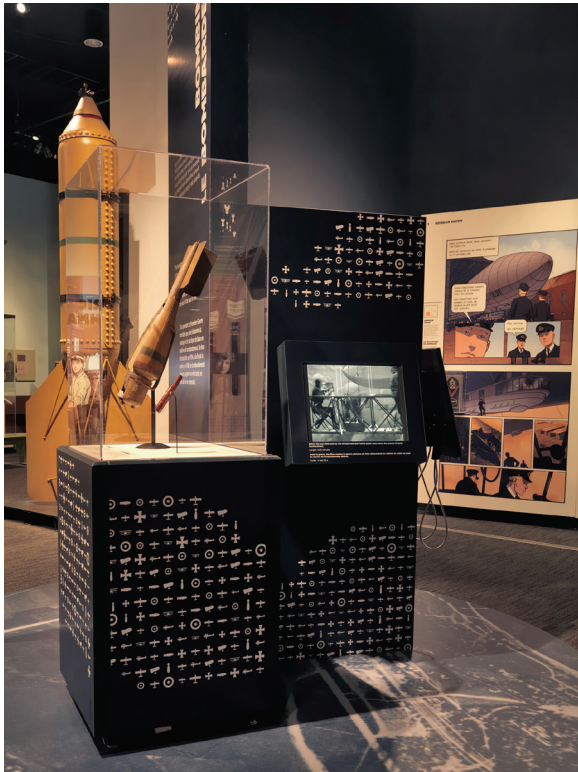
¹⁶ See: Gunther Plüschow, *My Escape from Donington Hall: Preceded by an Account of the Siege of Kiao-Chow in 1915*, trans. Pauline De Chary (London: John Lane, 1922); Gunther Plüschow, *Die Abenteuer des Fliegers von Tsingtau* (Berlin: Ullstein & co., 1917); Anton Rippon, *Gunther Plüschow: Airmen, Escaper and Explorer* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2009); Robert E. Whittaker, *Dragon Master: the Kaiser's One-man Air Force in Tsingtau, China, 1914: a Non-fiction Book of Military Aviation History*, trans. Susanne Kawatsu (Cleveland, Wis.: Compass Books-Video-Films, 1994).



Balloon Interactive.
[Canadian War Museum ,
CWM2016-0046-0009-Dm]

we showed how the role of observer had grown by 1918 to include not only the core tasks of taking photographs of enemy positions and artillery cooperation, but also dropping bombs, defending the airplane, attacking ground troops with the mounted Lewis machine gun, and even navigating. Through his story, Moses shows that by 1918, the roles adopted by the airplane's occupants began to resemble those used in the Second World War. Jim Moses and his pilot were shot down and killed on 1 April 1918, the same day the British flying services were amalgamated to form the Royal Air Force.¹⁷

¹⁷ Much of James Moses' story was based on family documents loaned to the Canadian War Museum and not publicly available. However, some information on James Moses can be found here: Department of National Defence, "Aboriginal People in the Canadian Military - Chapter Five: The World Wars, Department of National Defence, Canada, 7 August 2008, <http://www.cmp-cpm.forces.gc.ca/dhhdhp/pub/boo-bro/abo-aut/chapter-chapitre-05-eng.asp>; and here: Canada's Great War Album, "James David Moses," Canada's History, accessed 8 August 2016, <http://greatwaralbum.ca/Great-War-Album/About-the-Great-War/Air-Force/James-Moses>



Bombing Zone.

[Canadian War Museum
CWM2016-0041-0041-Dm]

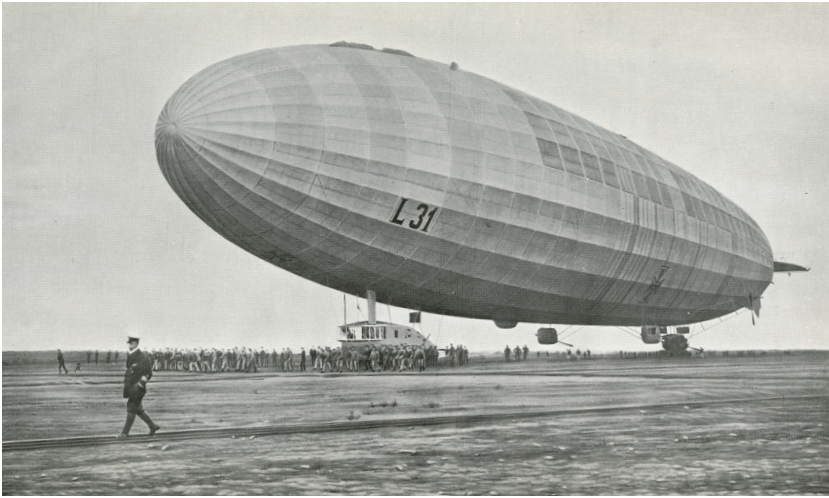
Maurice Arondel was a decorated French observation balloon pilot. Observation balloons are a largely forgotten aspect of the air war, but they were ubiquitous along both sides of the Western Front. Filled with hydrogen and highly flammable, balloons operated between 600 to 1000 metres altitude and ascended a few kilometres behind the front line, tethered to the ground by a steel cable. Balloon observers' main role was artillery cooperation, working essentially as forward observation officers. Unlike airplane observers, balloons were in constant contact with the ground thanks to a telephone wire run down the steel tether and they generally provided a stable and reliable observation platform. Airplanes frequently targeted enemy balloons because their artillery corrections often brought accurate fire down on both sides. But attacking one was hazardous as they were well protected both by airplanes and anti-aircraft batteries, while others were “dummy” balloons rigged to be exploded by ground crews if enemy aircraft ventured near. Arondel spent over 1800 hours in the

air during the war, earning both the *Legion d'honneur* and the *Croix de guerre*.¹⁸ To reinforce the visitor experience and understanding of balloon observation, we created an immersive balloon observation interactive. Visitors step into a balloon basket and look down onto a recreated, animated battlefield east of the French city of Arras that was based on contemporary maps, log entries, and aerial photos. Once there, visitors look for what Arondel would have seen, recording their observations on a piece of paper called their “logbook.” Through Arondel’s experience, and by engaging in an observation mission, visitors learn the value of aerial observation and the dangers and difficulties inherent in this activity.

Taken together, the three observers in this zone showed that observation was a key component of the air war from the very start. Even before the end of 1914, the number of observation missions increased steadily. Both sides attacked observers at any opportunity, using airplanes, anti-aircraft artillery, and even rifles and machine guns on the ground. By 1918, in addition to reconnaissance duties, the observer’s role included bombing, navigation, and using the mounted machine gun to fire at ground targets and defend the airplane from aerial attack. Still, cooperation with artillery and aerial reconnaissance remained the most important uses of aircraft throughout the war.

The exhibition’s bombing zone shows that the essential tactics and strategy of aerial bombardment were developed during the First World War. Though people often remember the destruction bombers wrought in the Second World War, aerial bombardment of cities and operational targets was widespread and common between 1914 and 1918. Three characters populate this zone: Heinrich Mathy, Ada May Smith, and Henry Wiser. Mathy was a famous zeppelin commander whose September 1915 raid on north London was the single most destructive raid of the entire war. His story focused on what it was like to be a zeppelin crew member. Through Mathy’s story we

¹⁸ Arondel’s story was constructed using his log book entries, his company’s war diaries (*Carnet de vol*) and maps that he and his commanding officer drew based on his observations. See: 39e compagnie d’aérostiers, comptes-rendus bimensuels d’opérations (septembre 1915 – novembre 1917), 1 A 229/2, and Journal des marches et d’opérations, 26 septembre 1912 – 12 septembre 1916, 1 A 230/1. Also, 41e compagnie d’aérostiers: état des opérations (janvier-août 1915), comptes-rendus bimensuels d’opérations (septembre 1915-novembre 1917), 1 A 231/1. Archives du Grand Quartier général, des armées et des unités, Mémoires des Hommes, Ministère de la France, France.



Zeppelin L31. [Canadian War Museum RARE FOLIO TL 658 Z4 G74 1917]

examine the stresses placed on these men and their families. His section ends with Zeppelin L31, which Mathy commanded, being shot down on 2 October 1916 with the loss of all hands.¹⁹ At the end of the graphic novelization, visitors see a 1:48 scale replica of the zeppelin (the replica is roughly 4.5 metres long while the zeppelin itself was 227 metres long). Projected onto this model is an animation showing anti-aircraft explosions and several passes by the BE2C airplane that shot down L31. This is followed by animation showing the burning of the model zeppelin, which also features internal lighting to simulate the glow of ignited hydrogen within. Next to this display are several pieces of destroyed zeppelins, including from L31, such as control panels, pieces of twisted superstructure, and even crew member clothing recovered from crash sites. The artifacts closely link to personal stories and provide context for their presentation in the exhibition. The presentation of the graphic novel, which also relates the stresses and worries of the captain and his wife, present a human

¹⁹ Wulstan Tempest, the RFC pilot who shot down L31, provided a vivid account of the zeppelin's destruction that was published in the British official history of the air war. See: H. A. Jones, *The War in the Air, Vol. V* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1931), 226-238. For books dealing with Zeppelins as strategic bombers in the First World War see: Guillaume de Syon, *Zeppelin!: Germany and the airship, 1900-1939* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002); Raymond Rimell, *Zeppelin!: a Battle for Air Supremacy in World War I* (Stittsville, Ont.: Canada's Wings, 1984).



Zeppelin Artifacts. [Canadian War Museum, CWM2016-0041-0005-Dm]

side to these nearly-forgotten crewmen and the artifacts they left behind.

Ada May Smith's story tells of the experience of witnessing early aerial bombardment. As an eight-year-old girl, she witnessed the first mass bombing by fixed-wing, purpose-built, bomber aircraft against England. In the fall and winter of 1916-1917, it was becoming apparent that airships were increasingly vulnerable to attack by airplanes. German army officials lost confidence in them as bombing platforms, though the German navy continued their use until near war's end.²⁰ German army zeppelins were largely replaced by new heavy bombers, the Gotha G.IV and G.V bombers being two of the most often used designs. On 22 May 1917, a squadron of 22 Gothas dropped their bombs on the British coastal town of Folkestone, and its vicinity. Ada May Smith, whose story in the exhibition is based on an interview she gave to the Imperial War Museum in 1986, heard the most deadly of the bombs dropped that day, which fell amidst a queue of shoppers, killing over 60 people. Her story shows her walking through the panic stricken streets of Folkestone as people

²⁰ The last German airship raid on Britain—a complete failure—took place on 5 August 1918. During this mission, Zeppelin L70 was shot down off the English coast by future Canadian Chief of the Air Staff Robert Leckie and his pilot Egbert Cadbury, of the chocolate-making family. Adding insult to injury, the Chief Commander of German Imperial Navy Zeppelins, Robert Strasser, was killed in the destruction of L70. Strasser was instrumental in the development of long range bombing.

react to the first raid of its kind in England. Here too, as everywhere in the exhibition, we place artifacts in context. A piece of bomb shrapnel is mounted directly on the graphic novel, a model of Gotha G.IV loomed above visitors, and Ada May's own words fill the space as people see what she experienced that day.²¹

Finally, Henry Wiser was a Canadian pilot from Prescott, Ontario. Grandson of the founder of Wiser's Whiskey, he joined an infantry battalion in the Canadian Expeditionary Force before transferring to the Royal Naval Air Service. His service took him though Greece and into the eastern Mediterranean where he operated as a bomber pilot flying various types of airplanes. Through his story, like those of Plüshow and Stinson, the exhibition's regional scope is demonstrated to show the global scale of the air war. Wiser's story also shows that the allies expanded their reach to include enemy capital cities as it focuses on one of several raids he flew against the Ottoman capital, Constantinople, in the summer of 1918. Wiser's story also examines some of the unique aspects of naval aviation in the First World War. For example, early on, RNAS pilots used naval navigation aids since they flew long distances over water, devoid of the identifiable features that land-based pilots could sometime rely on. Wiser's logbooks and photo album reside in the collection of the Canadian War Museum, but his story was also bolstered with the assistance of his grandchildren.²² At the end of the war, Henry Wiser was the first allied officer to land in European Turkey, at the Galata Aerodrome on the Gallipoli peninsula. During the course of exhibition development, one of his descendants discovered the naval flag Wiser took with him when he first landed at Gallipoli in early November 1918. Displayed prominently near his story, the flag provides a powerful connection to the pilot himself, his branch of service, and the cooperation we experienced working with the various descendants of many of the characters in the *Deadly Skies* exhibition.

²¹ The best book on the raid was written by local, Folkestone historians. See: Martin Easdown with Thomas Genth, *A Glint in the Sky* (Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword Local, 2004). Many contemporaneous photographs, interviews, and newspapers are also available. Particularly useful fonds include: Fo/Z3/1 Album, August 1914 to December 1918; and Fo/S1/3 - Air Raid: Damage by Enemy Aircraft, 25 May 1917, Kent County Archives, Maidstone, Kent, UK.

²² Canadian War Museum, Pilot's Flying Log Books of Captain Henry James Wiser, Canadian War Museum Archives, 20100152-001; Canadian War Museum, Photograph Album of Captain Henry James Wiser, Canadian War Museum Archives, 20100152-003.

Deadly Skies – Air War, 1914-1918 offers a view into the personal experiences of nine participants in the air war. By showing the lives and experiences of people that most visitors have never heard of, the exhibition relates important messages about the air war without relying on the legendary stories and personalities that have dominated the air war narrative since the war itself. There is no doubt that the men who came to be known as the “knights of the sky” were brave and daring—and their stories are exciting. But a more thorough examination of the air war demanded that we expand the scope of experience, which was embodied in our choice of content zones that gave equal space to training, bombing, observation, and aerial combat. By turning our attention to less well-known people, and by looking at well-known people in different ways, we aimed to bring a deeper understanding of the air war to public attention. In *Deadly Skies*, through personal stories, we show a glimpse of what it was like for thousands of ordinary participants in the world’s first air war.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Maker is a historian at the Canadian War Museum. He curated the current special exhibition *Deadly Skies – Air War, 1914-1918*. His other exhibitions include *Enemy Aliens: Internment in Canada, 1914-1920* and *Open Wide: A Century of Canadian Military Dentistry*. He is currently supporting upcoming exhibitions on the Battle of Vimy Ridge and Canada’s 100 Days campaign. Along with Dr. Mark Humphries, John is co-editor of *Germany’s Western Front: Translations from the German Official History of the Great War*.