

THREE PILOTS AND AN ALBATROS

HOW A POSTER SERVED AS THE AUTHOR'S CHILDHOOD INSPIRATION INTO THE WORLD OF AVIATION AND HOW HE WOULD SOLVE A MYSTERY DECADES LATER

BY BEN MARSH

COLOR PHOTOGRAPHY BY PHILIP "GHOSTS" MAKANNA



It was my tenth birthday or thereabout, when my dad treated me to a flight from Rio Linda to Nut Tree Airport in an American Aero Club Cessna 150 N3583J. American Aero was owned and operated by Russ Kilmer, a USAF pilot, and his partner Audrey Snovell. It featured a dozen and a half early 100-series Cessnas, a Bonanza, and a Meyers OTW. Nut Tree was the northern California destination airport, complete with a small gauge train for pilot transport between transient parking and the complex. It was a kid-friendly facility with a toy store, a bakery, restaurant, and the most remarkable aviation bookstore I encountered to my first decade, and since.

My dad and I flew in under high overcast, kind of gloomy weather, navigating along I-80, noting landmarks

along the way, like Davis' three water towers. We met the train just off the Nut Tree transient ramp. It was a quiet December morning, not a lot of fly-in traffic, so we had the train to ourselves. The mid-morning weather was cool, but not inclement. We rode the train through the pastoral landscape, led by a kindly engineer who knew my enthusiasm well, having served many a kid lucky enough to fly in for the adventure. Entering the complex, it was truly like being a kid in a candy store, for there were concessions with every kind of sweetness a youngster should want, a toy store with amusements for all ages and a considerable collection of aviation-oriented curiosities. It was the bookstore that drew me in. There were hundreds of books, beautifully displayed, on every aviation topic imaginable. Even for a kid troubled

with dyslexic reading skills, there was plenty of interesting content. There were huge model airplanes hanging from the ceiling of varying vintages, even a real airplane among the shelves — a PT-22 painted in Nut Tree colors.

Merchandised throughout were aviation posters spanning the first decades of flight through the early post-WWII years. They were awesome, large format images of 24x36-inches that included the Spruce Goose in high-speed taxi, P-26 Peashooters *en masse*, P-38 Lightnings in stacked formation, airships, Warbirds, Snowbird Tutors cresting a loop with smoke on and more, many more. My Dad kindly told me I could pick one to take home. The trouble was, which one? Then I saw it, a print of three World War I German airmen standing in front of an Albatros D.V

appointed with white tail feathers and black and white alternating vertical strips along the fuselage. It was a striking sepia tinted print, the plane and pilots standing boldly in the forefront with hangars and a ground crewman behind. It was my champion, edging out the powerful image of Darryl Greenamyer's racing Bearcat *Conquest One* on the ramp at Stead.

That poster followed me for decades; always prominently displayed in my bedroom or apartment in later years. It became battle-damaged with time and application, thumbtack-holed at the corners, rips and tears from forgotten carelessness. From time to time, a visitor would ask me, who were the pilots? It was easy enough to pronounce the sternest of the three was von Richthofen, the Red Baron. But he didn't look like Manfred or his brother Lothar. The truth is, I didn't give the question much thought until a few years ago, nearly 50 years since my first encounter with that Nut Tree print.

By the time I got curious about their identity, my collection of WWI air war books had grown from Gene Gurney's *Flying Aces of World War I* with the remarkable dogfight image by Francis A. Chauncy portraying Albert Ball's near head-on collision with a burning Albatros to many dozens of editions and curios. So, who were these guys, I began to wonder. I should know the answer to that question, for certain. I'd never seen the image published, but for the print, entitled "World War I German Albatros D.V. Reproduction #8 in a series from the Nut Tree Aviation Collection © 1969." My ignorance and curiosity started to bother me. How could I not know who these guys are? Of all my aviation friends, I'm the one with the largest WWI library on the planes and pilots of those earliest days of air-warring. My collection failed me — no image therein hinted to the identity of the pilots or the distinctively marked plane.

The answer snowballed to me from the purchase of a 1/72nd scale die-cast model of a Fokker Dr. I appointed with thin green and light blue diagonal striping along the tops of its wings and fuselage. The rudder was white with black and white horizontal stabilizers and elevators, appointed with the iron cross insignia of the day. In block white letters along the top wing was painted "KEMPF." Atop the trailing edge of the middle wing was written "Kenmscht mi



The classic poster that caught the attention of a very young Ben Marsh.

noch?" The model packaging indicated that colorful and stylized triplane was piloted by Frederick "Fritz" Kempf. Kempf? Who was Fritz Kempf? Within two minutes of searching the internet in my 62nd year at 9 pm on a Friday night, I found the answer to the bigger question of who the guys were in my Nut Tree print. To my astonishment, I found a website published by Victor Kempf, the great grandson of Fritz Kempf (www.kempf.no). As I scanned the gallery of archival Kempf family photographs, I found the picture of the three flyers and the Albatros.

Their names were written below the image: "Lt. Gerhard Bassenge, Fritz, Vallendor." At



A young and extremely intense Oswald Boelcke stares at the camera in a challenging manner. The fighter tactics he developed are timeless.

Albatros Dawn Patrol — the sound of three Mercedes engines reverberates through New Zealand skies as a trio of exacting Albatros replicas created by Sir Peter Jackson take flight.