



A TRIBUTE TO AN "OLD AVIATION PIONEER" – MY OPINION

The field of aviation can be counted as the last of the great frontiers that humans conquered. We can count ourselves lucky to have experienced the majority of the historic events during the 20th century. The Wright brothers' epic flight in 1903, the first man in space right through to the first man on the moon; these events occurred within a comparatively short time of only 66 years! Records are therefore not really lost in the mists of time. The majority of the events have been meticulously recorded and hence from these records we can always draw firm conclusions.

Aviation has had its share of pioneers, inventors; courageous men, who gambled with their life. There were the greats such as Sir Charles Cayley and Otto Lilienthal, the latter, who even while dying due to an aviation accident had the courage to say, "Sacrifices have to be made". All these people were similar to wee cogs in a big machine. Each played his or her part so that a bigger picture came to light with time. In most of the instances the cogs were inter-linked and therefore one pioneer could not carry on without the tasks and experiments of his or her predecessor.

Every person, who helps towards the common goal, was a pioneer and it is largely a matter of opinion of the individual when he or she selects a true pioneer.

I would like to pay tribute to my aviation hero and discuss a true pioneer of aviation, who for the better or for worse, truly transformed a section of aviation by acting as a student, leader, teacher, friend and finally as a mentor to all, who followed him. The basic principles and rules he wrote down and practised over 85 years ago, have withstood the test and 'drag' of time and they have become an unofficial bible for a special type of aviators across the globe today. Yet he was dead and gone since 1916 at the young and tender age of 26!

This unusual man was "Hauptmann Oswald Boelke" – Imperial Germany's greatest fighter pilot and the man who single-handedly developed aerial warfare and whose basic rules, written in 1915, are still used by all crack air forces in the world.

Heinrich von Treitschke once said that a nation without heroes and hero-worship must perish. Oswald Boelke having lived at the end of an era full of chivalry, honour and bravery managed to be that hero for an entire generation and more perhaps. For the elders during the period of the 1910s, he was the son, whom one could be proud of. For the youngsters, he was the elder brother, whom they could look upon. To his comrades he was their friend and mentor. Last but not least, for the Germans in the trenches, he was the soothing balm that healed their spiritual wounds.

How could one man transform something from nothing? Especially considering the fact that all this was done just eleven years after the Wright brothers' historic flight. Let us turn the clock back to Giebichstein near Halle in Imperial Germany. Oswald Boelke was born in the year 1891 - the fourth child of a schoolmaster and a housewife. The family moved to Dessau four and a half years later and it was here that young Boelke attended Grammar school and excelled at History, Physics and Mathematics.

He was the outdoor type counting swimming, tennis, football and diving as his favourite sports. All this might seem normal to anyone until told that the young Oswald had an asthmatic tendency due to an attack of whooping cough as a baby. From a tender age he let it be known to everyone that he had no inclination for any learned profession – to the greatest dismay of his father of course!

One could have gauged of what was to come had he read Boelke's three themes for elocution in 1908 well in to his second form. They were "General Scharnhorst and his army reforms", "The First Airship Flights" and "Count Zeppelin's life before his earliest experiments in aeronautics"!



Motivated from an early age on a military career, he had the audacity to write to the 'Kaiser', with an appeal to help him be an officer. Although his wish was granted, the parents made him carry through with his matriculation before he could embark on this new venture. In 1911, having gained his matriculation, Boelke set out for Koblenz to join the Third Telegraph Battalion as a cadet due to his love for Physics and Mathematics.

Here we see the young ensign Boelke, going through all the strenuous training in the cadet school before graduating and then being posted to various cities where the telegraph cables were being laid and wireless stations were being erected at that time. During a visit to the city of Halberstadt, he was to see a flying school and after carefully planning his next move he sent in an application for a transfer to the flying school in April 1914. The transfer was to come in May the same year.

Thus on the 2 May 1914, the second career of "flying" began for Boelke, which was to be a fateful event. Life at the Flying school would have been tough as the pupils were woken up at 0330 hours when the weather was ideal for flying! The 70-horse power Bristol-Taubes was the airplane used for most of the training at this time. These early machines had such sensitive engines that during periods of high temperatures, they did not develop enough power for an instructor and pupil to take off! This would mean that pupils had to taxi on the ground virtually doing nothing else during intense periods of heat! Boelke and other students seem to have taken all this in stride, if one is to interpret some of the letters he sent home to his parents.

Boelke soloed on the 3rd of July 1914 although the flight was far from perfect. The engine quit during the landing phase and he had to make an emergency landing in a cornfield, thereby breaking off the propeller and an under-carriage strut! More training was to follow before he managed to pass his flight tests on the 14 July 1914.

Mobilisation was to start soon afterwards towards the "Great War" and Boelke finds himself stationed in Darmstadt with fifty new pupil pilots. He graduates to flying the "Aviatik Biplanes" in the meantime. Soon Boelke was to be transferred to Pontfaverger, where at that early time, the German aircraft were to establish themselves in carrying out reconnaissance flights over the area to report enemy troop movements. Boelke's ability at this time might have shown up in dispatches as the Kaiser awarded him the Iron Cross in October 1914 and First Class of the Iron Cross on the Kaiser's birthday in 1915.

Also during this time we see Boelke moving from the double seater Fokker at the end of 1914, to the Fokker E3 by May 1915. This was a turning point in aerial warfare. Together with the machine gun that could be fired through the whirling propeller, which was patented by Anthony Fokker himself, Boelke managed to turn the E3 in to a magnificent fighting machine by sheer genius of his flying skills. The manoeuvres he developed and mastered to perfection became standard for aerial duels and so remains to this day!

Such was his skill at organising and training that he was entrusted with the leadership of the first scout group, which was to be formed during this time. His fame at this time was so great that the high command forbade him to fly for periods of time. Due to his abilities, a new word was to enter the German language at this time, 'Oberkanone' which meant Topgun! Later, with instructions to form the 2nd Jagdstaffel and to lead it, he was to tour the East with the intention of recruiting qualified personnel. In Kovel, he was to meet a young Uhlan Rittmeister and a reserve lieutenant, whom he managed to convince to join his Staffel. The Rittmeister went on to become the ace of all aces and even to this day is considered one of the most famous fighter pilots of all time. His name was Baron Manfred von Richthofen. Better known as the 'Red Baron'. The reserve officer was Erwin Boehme, a man who was to play a fateful role in Boelke's life.



Not long after this, Boelke with many of his comrades, were transferred to a base at Doui. It was here that Boelke was to get his first 'kill' on the 6 July 1915. This first victory for Boelke and his gunner von Wuehlich was a first for German aviation too, as this was the first time that a duel was fought and won according to plan. 39 more victories were to follow for Boelke.

Since obtaining his first single seater, the Fokker E3, he was now the observer, gunner, and pilot and he excelled in all. Together with the unique machine gun/ propeller co-ordination, he was to re-write some of the basic rules of that time. This combination was another catalyst in Boelke's career. As he himself was to say later, "the strong man is mightiest alone".

Parallel to his career, other careers were also taking off at this juncture. The ensigns such as Immelmann, Mueller, Boehme, and von Richthofen were being trained by Boelke during this time. Time would tell the performances these youngsters would show the Allies after a thorough and professional training that was injected into them. Doui will of course play a part in all these airmen's life as the majority of the fliers, such as Immelmann got their first victories here.

Victories and orders came steadily to Boelke thereafter. He was presented with the Order of the Hohenzollern on the 1 November 1915 for his 6th victory. On the 15 January 1916, he was to be awarded the highest German honour of all time – the "Pour le Merite" (PLM), "The Blue Max". In addition he was promoted to Hauptmann at the young age of 25 – the youngest Hauptmann in the German Armed Forces and one of the youngest recipients of the coveted PLM. During the period between September 1915 and June 1916, Boelke was to develop his airmanship and the tactics of aerial warfare until he was a master at the game. Subsequently he was posted to Somme, where during nine short weeks he managed to transform the 2nd Jagdstaffel or "Hunter squadron" into a force to reckon with. On the 26 October 1916 Boelke was to shoot down his 40th victim. This was to be his last 'kill', as two days later he was to collide with one of his own pupils (Erwin Boehme) during aerial combat and perish. As fate would have it, Boelke was not wearing a helmet and had not strapped himself tightly into his seat. It would have been interesting to have seen the outcome of the aerial battle during the Great War had Boelke taken more precautions while flying as the collision itself and the resulting crash was not very serious!

A whole nation mourned as Boelke was laid to rest in his native Dessau after a memorable funeral service held in Cambrai on the 31 October 1916. Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria led the Generals while General von Below represented the Kaiser. Manfred von Richthofen carried his master's orders and decorations during the death march.

Even the allies dropped many wreaths with one from the English Royal Flying Corps (later RAF), which read "to the memory of Captain Boelke, our brave and chivalrous opponent". Lt. Col. Thomsen spoke on behalf of the whole Imperial German Airforce and summed up, when he said; "every lad will one day say – I want to be a Boelke." A memorial stands today in Dessau in memory of this extraordinary man.

How will history judge Boelke? Let us analyse some facts.

Boelke the pioneer

How can we judge Boelke in the field of aviation? He was not an inventor in the technical sense. There is no patent to his name. Yet we enter his name as a "great"! In the days of yore and trench warfare, the sole purpose of the airplane was to play the part of the "eye in the sky". During the initial stages, the reports sent in by the reconnaissance pilots had to be verified by the cavalry units before they could be even considered by the infantry commanders! With time and developments the air patrols gained fame on either side of the war and in no time aerial photography developed. Even then the role of the airplane was limited to patrolling the front and ensuring that no enemy aircraft strayed over the lines. The German general staff had actually forbidden pilots (as the case with the Allies) to stray over and into enemy territory. Boelke changed this way of



thinking. It was he, who first defied this rule and went to look for opponents over the enemy's own territory. The term 'Jagdflieger' or 'Hunter' in the flying sense was born by these

ventures. From this habit of hunting, the world was to get a new name – 'Jagdstaffel'. The honour therefore goes to Boelke for laying the basic rules for offensive aerial warfare. It was however unfortunately only after his death that four of these Jagdstaffel grouped to form a bigger squadron under the command of one of his greatest pupils, Manfred von Richthofen to create havoc on the Allies.

Moreover, the first eight months of Boelke's flying career was during the infancy of German aviation. To a man such as Boelke, who always seized the initiative this was more of an ideal time, where he could mould the complete scenario to suit his purpose. However unlike the French, the Germans were slow to recognise the importance of aviation. It was a case for a long time of 'too little too late'. Although there were men with vision such as (then) Oberst Ludendorff and Hauptmann Thomsen, they were few and far between. Therefore in more ways than one Boelke laid down ground rules, which the high commanders adopted in due course.

Boelke the human being

People can be anything, but they are nothing if they forget the basic fact of being human. Here Boelke was exemplary. As a young lieutenant, he saved a French boy from drowning in Doui. The enemy whenever shot down, was treated with the utmost courtesy. When his 20th victim – Capt. Wilson was shot down, Boelke personally flew low over the crash site and made sure that he was safe and directed troops to rescue him from the crippled aircraft. Later he invited Wilson, who was then escorted to the German airfield and shown around the aircraft. Wilson of course never forgot this gesture. During Boelke's funeral there was a wreath sent over by this English officer.

Boelke the teacher and mentor

It was perhaps here that Boelke's mettle shows most clearly. Having mastered the art of flying, he gladly gave his knowledge back to his students. He was a strict master who demanded discipline at all times during work. But he was also their friend and mentor.

He was a publicity shy person, who never hoarded his kills. He was willing to share the spoils with his team and was one of the first on both sides to announce that a kill should be counted towards the squadron more than that towards the individual. His skill in the air and his tactical mastery coupled with a steady personality made him a leader and instructor in a class of its own. He moulded each man individually in all aspects of combat and then re-moulded the individuals in to a tightly knit team.

Boelke's legacy that he left behind

Boelke left his mark here more than anywhere else. He changed scout flying forever by fine-tuning the complete procedure. Therefore in the true word, he was a pioneer, as he grasped the facts faster than anybody else. His tactics of aerial warfare have come down the years unchanged. His basic rules of confrontation spelt out in 1915 are still being used by virtually all 'Top gun' schools around the world. The basic rules are noted below. (From the German air service, World War I).

- Try to secure advantages before attacking. If possible, keep the sun behind you.
- Always carry through an attack when you have started it.
- Fire only at close range and only when your opponent is properly in your sights.
- Always keep your eye on the opponent and never let yourself be deceived by ruses.
- In any form of attack, it is essential to assail your opponent from behind.



- If your opponent dives on you, do not try to evade his onslaught, but fly to meet it.
- When over the enemy's lines, never forget your own line of retreat.
- Attack on principle, in groups of four or six. When the fight breaks up into a series of single combats, take care that several do not go for one opponent.

Additionally, Boelke gave something far more than all the others mentioned above. That was his spirit to German aviation. His star students are the best example of this gesture. Jagdstaffel – 2, had some of the greatest aces of that era. Von Richthofen, Mueller, Boehme, Kirmaier and

Immelman all passed through Boelke and they owed their successes mostly to him. After his death Boelke was respectfully known as the 'Altmeister' or Postmaster.

Additionally, Boelke unknowingly gave lessons during that era, on one of the greatest attributes that should belong to a fighter pilot or to any pilot for that matter. This is "Situational Awareness", a subject studied by all modern day pilots in the civilian and military field. It was Boelke, who instilled this characteristic in his pupils - day in and day out. Unfortunately for Boelke on that fateful day in October 1916, five sorties flown would have made even his concentration levels slide to a low. The sixth sortie for the day, proved to be fatal due to (maybe) the lack of situational awareness combined with fatigue.

Could the airplanes he was flying have played a part in his successes?

Let us consider the aircraft being flown by the aerial powers during that time. The French flew the Farmans, Morane-Saulnier biplane and Voisins. The English had the Vickers Biplane, and the Sopwith Biplane with the latter claiming the most number of 'kills' in the entire war. The French came into the war with a great aviation background behind them. French aviators belonged to the elite group of people, who had many inventions under their belt. It was the French, who first fitted machine guns inside airplanes. Hence they had a far greater lead over the Germans where aircraft were concerned.

Anthony Fokker coming from neutral Holland developed the Fokker E1, E 3 and E 37, which the Germans used exclusively. He also developed the machine gun that could fire through propeller blades. Additionally he developed a better machine gun that had a cyclic rate of 450 – 600/min to the normal machine gun of that era that had a cyclic rate of only 400 per minute. Boelke and later the German Staffel used this modified machinegun.

It is therefore safe to mention, that a balance was struck amongst the air powers of the era.

But it should be mentioned, that common sense prevailed. The Germans learnt faster and applied what they knew in a better way than the rest – at least during the initial part of the Great War. The aircraft types flown and their armaments varied from country to country. Although the Germans might have had a wee edge with the armament, the Allies had, to a great extent, better and more powerful airplanes. The playing field was level!

As a conclusion, it should therefore be said, that the world learnt a few lessons from a twenty five year old; lessons that have had far reaching consequences. Hauptmann Oswald Boelke rightly deserves to be called the greatest master of aerial combat, who flew, taught, formed the Jagdstaffel and last but not least lead by example.

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