

# Training in the German Air Force, 1914-1918

by Dr Hannes Täger – Part 1

## Joining the Air Force

In the early days of the war a large number of volunteers flocked to the *Fliegertruppen* (flying service). In a comprehensive selection process the military tried to choose the best suited flying and ground service personnel. Applicants with a technical qualification were preferred. For example, Gustav Leffers, later a knight of the *Pour le Mérite*, volunteered for aviation in Berlin as one of 300. After the selection process only 30 men were left who were to be trained as pilots.<sup>1</sup> Hauptmann Adolf Victor von Koerber reported that about 1900 enthusiastic young people applied for the *Feld-Flieger-Abteilung* he was establishing in September 1914!<sup>2</sup> The strength of a FFA was only 15 officers and 117 non-commissioned officers and enlisted men at this time – thus about 14 persons applied for every position!<sup>3</sup> Other newly established flying units reported similar situations at that time.

Because of the fast increase of the *Fliegertruppe* units and the rapidly increasing losses, a lack of well-suited flying personnel soon developed. To compensate for the lack of trained pilots and observers, officers from other branches of the army were appointed. These men had often suffered combat wounds that left them unfit for the war in the trenches. Surprisingly, the biographies of many flying aces prove that these men could be successful in air combat despite the severe wounds they had received earlier in the war! It is often claimed that cavalry officers were dominant among the German aviators because the cavalry lost its importance in the developing modern warfare and cavalry officers were searching for new fields of activity. Statistics do not support this assumption. The flying personnel consisted mainly of former infantry and artillery soldiers. In addition, members of technical troops – e.g. storm troopers and railway men – were represented in high proportions.

After the heavy waste of manpower in the battle of Flanders

in 1917 a severe shortage of flying personnel was seen again. According to the KOGENLUFT (*Kommandierender General der Luftstreitkräfte*, Commanding General of the Air Force), Ernst von Hoepfner, this was not the result of diminishing applications from officers. In fact, the reason was the natural instinct of ground force commanders to keep the few remaining officers in their units on the front. After an order of the *Oberste Heeresleitung* (OHL, Supreme Command) at the end of July 1917, every application by an officer for transfer to the air service – whether supported or not – had to be passed on to an *Armee-Oberkommando* (AOK, Army High Command). They then decided after hearing from the *Kommandeur der Flieger* (Kofl, commander of aviation troops of an army).<sup>4</sup> This measure was successful and – together with the introduction of NCOs and enlisted men as observers and gunners – satisfied the increasing demand. With the continuing war it was quickly obvious that service in aviation was not only bringing greater glory and faster awards and promotions but also more comfortable accommodation and better food. These were additional reasons for volunteers to leave the trench war with all its blood, mud, excrement, hunger, rats, gas, and decomposition.

## Medical Examinations

At first all volunteers applying to aviation from all sections of the Army were examined locally for their general fitness for flying service. Next to the physical demands of agility, sharp eyesight, healthy nerves, and the right body weight (for observers maximally 75kg/166lb) a solid character, self control and abstinence were required. Observers had to have not only some technical knowledge but also a good tactical understanding and a certain length of service as an officer. Knowledge of engines or flight technology, or coming from a technical service or an engineering school was seen as an advantage.<sup>5</sup>

*The pre-war military flying schools - this one looks rather like a family group - grew into a giant training machine during the war, but despite some advantages in the quality of training given to German aviators, it never outweighed the superior numbers of the enemy.*

*:Deutschlands Eroberung der Luft*

