



Vizefeldwebel Kurt Wüsthoff photographed beside an Albatros D.V shortly after joining Jasta 4 and wearing just a pilot's badge on his tunic. This is possibly D.V D1162/16 previously flown by Ltn Ernst Clausnitzer. This aircraft had a yellow spinner, grey-green painted wheel discs and engine covers. The wound stripe was black and the tail assembly was over-painted with straw-coloured paint leaving the crosses outlined in white and the Albatros motif visible. :CCI

Introduction

Many wide ranging emotions and motivations surged through the young men who fought history's first war in the air: patriotism, an intense sense of duty and sacrifice, a yearning for adventure, a need to revenge fallen comrades and – although it is often overlooked as a motivating factor – a burning desire for glory and fame, sometimes at any price.

Kurt Wüsthoff, born in the ancient town of Aachen on 27 January 1897 as the son of a music director, embodied many of these forces. A youthful, complex character, he was Germany's youngest recipient of the coveted *Pour le Mérite* medal. His brilliant and dramatic career as a combat pilot is illustrative of the myriad desires which then as now pulse through young combat pilot's veins—the drive to face great perils simply to win a medal, and the competitive urge to be number one, which entails the distasteful but necessary task of carefully tallying up and comparing one's victory list with those of comrades. Although distressing to romantics, these are among the characteristics which produce successful fighter pilots and cause them to be bold where most men are shy, which impel them to ever greater feats to gain the accolades of their peers while others are content to simply do their bit, and to strike hard at the enemy while most merely want to survive. Wüsthoff was never happy just doing his bit. He always aimed his arrows at the sun. But his impressive rise from obscurity was to come at an enormous personal cost.

Only recently have researchers begun focusing on the strains and terrors of WWI aerial fighting, the terrible toll of combat fatigue that caused nervous breakdowns, alcoholism, drug addiction, depression and very often a carelessness or numbed indifference that led to death. It is arguable that

AMBITION AND GLORY

Letters and Documents Concerning Kurt Wüsthoff

*Introduction and translations
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highly successful aces such as Edward Mannock, Georges Guynemer and even the great Manfred von Richthofen himself were all brought down because they had pushed themselves beyond human limits of endurance. Even the careful and calculating flier James McCudden once recalled being 'so intensely cold and miserable,' that '...I did not care if I was shot down or not.'¹ Many lives were lost and many shining careers cut short for want of a period of rest and relaxation away from the killing.

But the eager young never conceive of such a fate touching their lives. Wüsthoff, always ambitious, joined the air corps when he was only 16½ years old. After receiving his pilot's licence, he was posted to Grossenhain as a flying instructor at *Flieger-Ersatz-Abteilung 6*, where he flew DFW, LVG, Aviatik and Albatros two-seaters. Burning to get to the front and the fighting, he was finally sent to Flanders in 1916, flying with *Kampfstaffel 3*, *Kampfgeschwader 1*, and participating in the aerial battles over Verdun and the Somme. He then flew bombers and observation craft on virtually every eastern front from Romania to Greece. But he clearly yearned for a different type of thrill and the chance to fight his war in a fighter aircraft. By June 1917, now a Vizefeldwebel, Wüsthoff entered *Jasta 4*, led by Oberleutnant Kurt-Bertram von Döring, as a fighter pilot.²

It did not take Wüsthoff long to get started in his new career. On 15 June 1917, he brought down a Sopwith 1½ strutter from 45 Squadron RFC over Vormezeele in Flanders. He would score once more in June – this time a balloon – and an impressive five times in July. By the end of September, with his victory list now at 21, he was a rising star in the dangerous world of combat flying and was elevated to the pantheon of German war heroes where he was immortalized in the popular Sanke postcard series. Awards, ranging from the Iron Cross to the Knight's Cross with Swords were showered upon this teenager, although his intense wish was to receive the *Pour le Mérite*. Promoted to Leutnant, his dreams were fulfilled when he was awarded the 'Blue Max' on 26 November, with his victory list at 26. He was 19 years old and had already served as acting commander of *Jasta 4* when von Döring had gone on leave.

Wüsthoff had that mix of fearlessness, sang-froid and drive which the most successful combat pilots shared and which pulled them out of the ranks and into the realms of the aces. Although this was a bonus to the German air force, his fellow pilots sometimes felt differently about the young star. He was considered pushy, a man who was continually eager to increase his victory score, looking for praise and promotion and who had a penchant for solo fights in his hunt for ever more victims. In the letters below, one reads about Wüsthoff's desire for awards and sees him in a flash of arrogance and pride even listing himself among the top scorers. This over-eagerness may have lain behind his claiming a Sopwith single-seater on 27 July, which was officially contested and later confirmed to Leutnant Wewer of *Jasta 26*.³

But the cost of fame and success was extremely high. Shortly after receiving the *Pour le Mérite* Wüsthoff, his nerves and inner body in tatters, was sent to a sanatorium in Dresden, suffering from stomach problems.⁴ When he