The RED KNIGHT of GERMANY

By FLOYD GIBBONS

(The carnage reaped by the German air forces over the Russian front in the early period of the war was appalling. Richthofen told of it with great glee in the preceding installment of this series. Then the future ace went back to the western front and scored his first English "kills.")

INSTALLMENT III.

The Death of Boelke.

BOELKE, the master, had watched his fledglings with happy pride that September morning when Richthofen shot down and killed his first two Englishmen.

High in the sky above them, his eagle trained eyes observed every feature of their performance. It pleased him to note that his pupils, by following his instructions to the letter, reflected great credit on the man who had selected them and trained them to kill.

His pleasure and pride found immediate expression in a sudden descent into the mêlée, where he engaged one of the enemy squadron and brought it down. It added another victory to his "bag," which then amounted to twenty-six.

One other thing he saw that day that was entirely new to his experience and, at that time, unprecedented in the records of martial aviation.

It happened as the jagdstaffel was flying back to its airdrome after the fight with the enemy squadron. The German formation was approaching a small bank of clouds floating on its exact level. Just before reaching the clouds an English two seater plane, with motor full on, emerged suddenly from the fleecy white vapor and flew straight for the center of the German V, but did not fire a shot.

Several of Richthofen's flying mates swerved to attack and one was forced to dive suddenly to avoid a head-on collision with the English plane. Boelke's fledglings dived on it from above and from the right and left, pouring round after round of machine gun lead into the machine.

Boelke dived to a position over the tail and pressed the machine gun trigger. He saw his bullets go into the bodies of both the pilot and the observer, who were sitting bolt upright in their cockpits. Still there was no return fire from the English plane and no attempt to maneuver out of range and shake off its pursuers.

The German ace was puzzled. He flew closer and closer, holding his fire, and ready at any minute to meet a sudden attack from the strangely acting plane. Gradually he flew directly over it. Banking his wings slightly to depress one side of the fuselage, he peered into the cockpits of the English plane and into the bloodstained faces of two dead men.

The plane was a derelict of the air.

Death had placed its controls in neutral, holding it to an even keel as it sped onward across the sky, its motor roaring with life from a wide open throttle.

"A glorious death," was the comment of young Baron von Richthofen. "Fight on and fly on to the last drop of blood and the last drop of benzene; to the last beat of the heart and the last kick of the motor—a death for a knight. A toast to his fellows, friends and foe!"

They drank it standing, and with feeling—drank it in French red wine from the large silver victory cups that had been the reward of each of the five young fledglings who had brought down their first victims in the air that day.

BOELKE had presented the cups in the name of the air commander. They were large, heavy, beaten silver mugs of medieval German design, capable of carrying a full quart inside and an ample inscription on the outside.

Richthofen's cup pleased him and gave him an idea. It was a proper trophy commemorating a great achievement. But one trophy was not enough. The young uhlan decided to inaugurate his own system of cup presentation.

Instead of the one official cup for his first victory he would present himself with a silver victory cup not only for that victory, but for each successive one.

He ordered the first cup that night by mail from a jeweler in Berlin. He described in detail the kind he wanted—small, plain, two inches tall, and a little more than an inch across the top, with sides sloping slightly to a smaller base; the whole to be done in finely polished sterling, and the inside of the cup to be plated with a dull gold finish. He instructed the jeweler to engrave on one side the following inscription:

"1. Vickers 2. 17. 9. 16."

This indicated that the cup commemorated his first victory and that the type of the enemy plane he had shot down was a Vickers. The second figure indicated that it was a two seater, followed by the date of the combat—the 17th of September, 1916.

Today, in the bedroom of the flying uhlan in his mother's home in Schweidnitz, one may see how that collection of dead men's cups grew as the war in the air progressed. On a table under a large photograph of the dead ace one may count sixty of them and read from the inscriptions the types of machines, the number of occupants, and the date on which Richthofen shot down each of them from the sky.

Almost a year later, after engraving the inscription of the sixtieth victory, the jeweler had to decline further orders. He had run out of silver and could get no more. As a result Richthofen's last twenty victories in the air are commemorated only by reports and the graves of his victims.

But in the flush of his first kill, and still tingling with pride to be dying under the eyes of Boelke, Richthofen renewed his determination to kill and kill—and kill.

On the sixth day after the killing of Morris and Rees he posted another letter to the jeweler in Berlin. In effect it read:

"One more cup, please, just like the last one ordered. Engrave it with the following:

"2. Martinsyde 1. 23. 9. 16."

A week later, on the thirtieth of September, 1916, he shot down another two seater, and the happy little German jeweler in Berlin scratched the blood victory on another silver tombstone.

His fourth and fifth victorious combats were with two more English machines, one a Kampf 2, a cumbersome pusher type with openwork tail spars instead of fuselage, and hardly a match for the speedy Albatross tractor that Richthofen flew. Richthofen downed his fifth on Oct. 16 and his sixth on Oct. 25, a fact that he mentioned simply to his mother:

"The weather is rather poor here now, but, even so, I brought down my sixth Britisher yesterday."

Although winter was approaching and the changing elements added to the difficulties of the conflicting forces, the long series of bloody encounters known as the Battles of the Somme, 1916, comprising a part of the allied offensive of that year, continued with unrelenting fury.

And then, on Oct. 28, came a disaster that went deep to Richthofen's heart. His master, his hero, his air god—Boelke the Great—was killed.

It happened toward the end of the Battle of the Ancre Heights, after the British ground forces had captured the Schwaben and Stuff redoubts and parts of the Regina trench system.

Boelke was leading his jagdstaffel of six fighting planes on his last flight. His spirit always animated his pupils: "We always had a wonderful feeling of security when he was with us," are the words of Richthofen.

Although outnumbered three to one and far away from their own lines, two British planes immediately accepted battle. Boelke dived on one of the planes. Richthofen, right behind his master, fastened himself above the tail of the other machine and poured in a murderous stream of lead, but the flying uhlan had to pull out of the fight because of the return fire he encountered and because one of his comrades dived between him and his intended quarry.

Then down from above came another German Albatross with another of Boelke's pupils, a favorite, at the controls. He was diving at a terrific speed to the assistance of his master. His eyes were on the enemy plane.

But the newcomer watched too closely his enemy and not his leader. As he swept past to the attack the tip of one of his planes touched the tip of Boelke's right wing.

The pupil who had collided with Boelke followed him down and, as the master's plane came out on the under side of the cloud curtain, the horror stricken disciple saw that the falling Albatross was minus one complete plane.

Weakened by the jolt of the collision, it had been torn off by the rush of air in the increasingly rapid descent. It plunged downward, entirely out of control. Thus perished the man whom Richthofen held to be the greatest air fighter in the world.

Boelke's body lay in state in the military hospital at Cambrai. His military funeral behind the front was one of the most impressive ceremonies of the war.

Richthofen returned from Boelke's funeral and wrote to his mother as follows:

"With the Boelke Combat Squadron
Nov. 3, 1916.

"Liebe Mamma:

"Unfortunately, I missed the train after Boelke's funeral, to which I was detailed as the representative of the squadron. Now I can only visit you at the middle of the month.

"During the funeral services and in the procession I carried a pillow displaying his decorations. The funeral was like that of a reigning prince.

"During six weeks we have had, out of twelve pilots, six dead and one wounded, while two have suffered a complete nervous collapse. Yesterday I brought down my seventh shortly after I had accounted for my sixth. The ill luck of all the others has not yet affected my nerves."

Richthofen, as one of the three survivors of the original twelve pilots of the jagdstaffel, was placed in command of the formation, which from that time on, by special citation of the high command, was designated as the Jagdstaffel Boelke.

TWELVE days after Boelke's death the flying uhlan had an opportunity to test the fighting capacity of the jagdstaffel in an air battle that, for the number of machines engaged, was the greatest in the war up to that time.

Eighty airplanes and more than 100 knights of the blue took part in that aerial tourney of death—at least, that is the aggregate of the estimates of both sides as to the strength of the enemy they encountered.

It was on the morning of Nov. 9, 1916, during the last phase of the allied offensive of 1916, which was to end ten days later with the capture of Beaumont-Hamel.

The day was bright and clear. "Carry on!" sang out the O. C.'s in the Royal Flying corps airdromes off the Bapaume road.

Hardly twenty miles away, almost due east, but on the other side of the German line, another man was sampling the weather, rubbing his hands briskly, breathing delicious lungfuls of the fresh morning air, and gazing into the bright sky with a smile of approval.

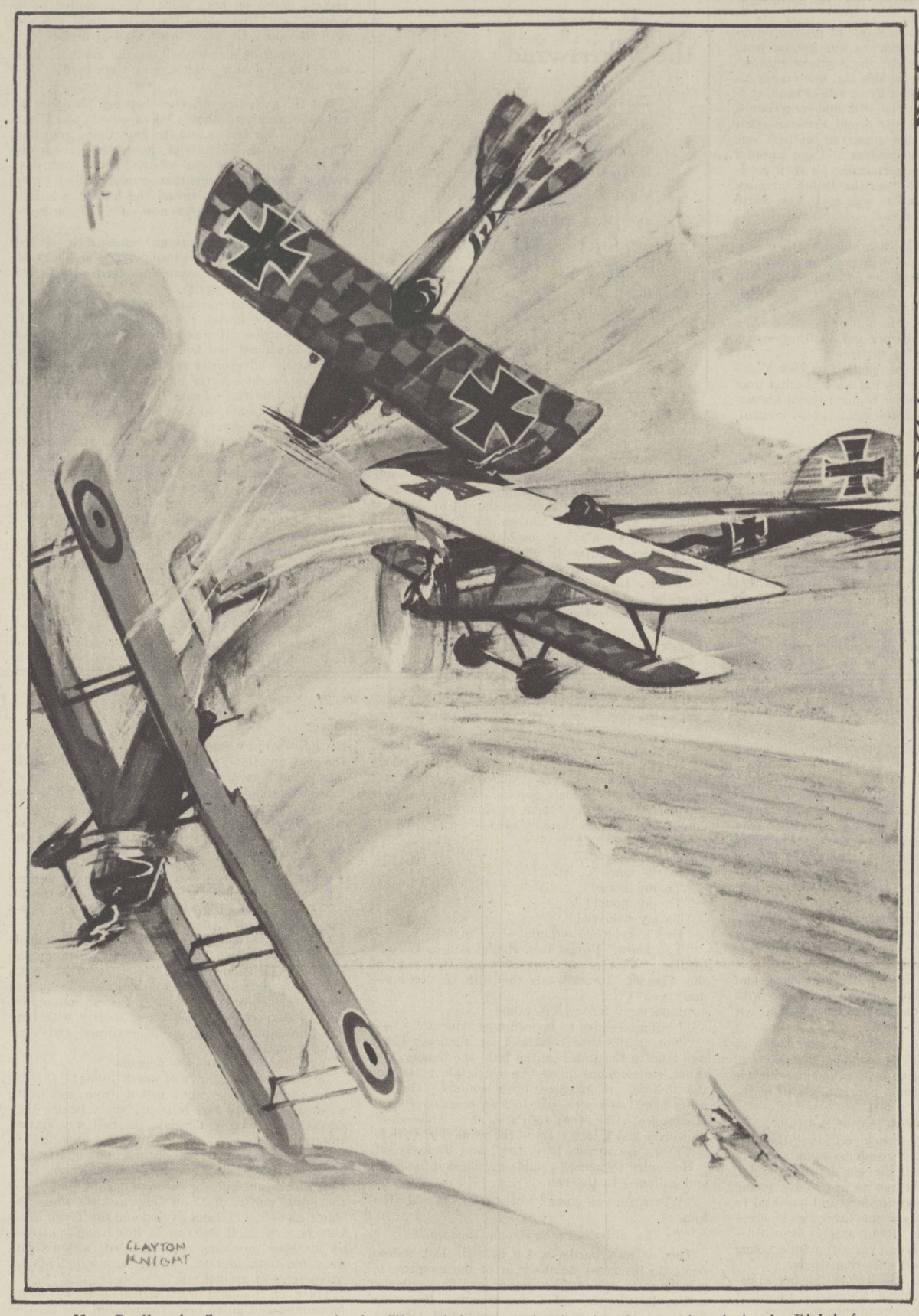
He was his royal highness, the Grand Duke of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, a noble relation of Emperor William and King George.

His headquarters were situated close to the occupied French village of Vraucourt, in the center of which was a large beet sugar factory that had been taken over by the Germans for the storing of vast quantities of material, mostly explosives. It was the principal munitions dump for the sector. It was near Laigncourt, not far from Richthofen's airdrome.

Some forty or fifty eyes of the air looked at the spot marked Vraucourt on their flying maps shortly after 8 o'clock, when sixteen heavy English bombing machines, with their escort of fourteen fighting planes, climbed into the morning sun and nosed their propellers eastward.

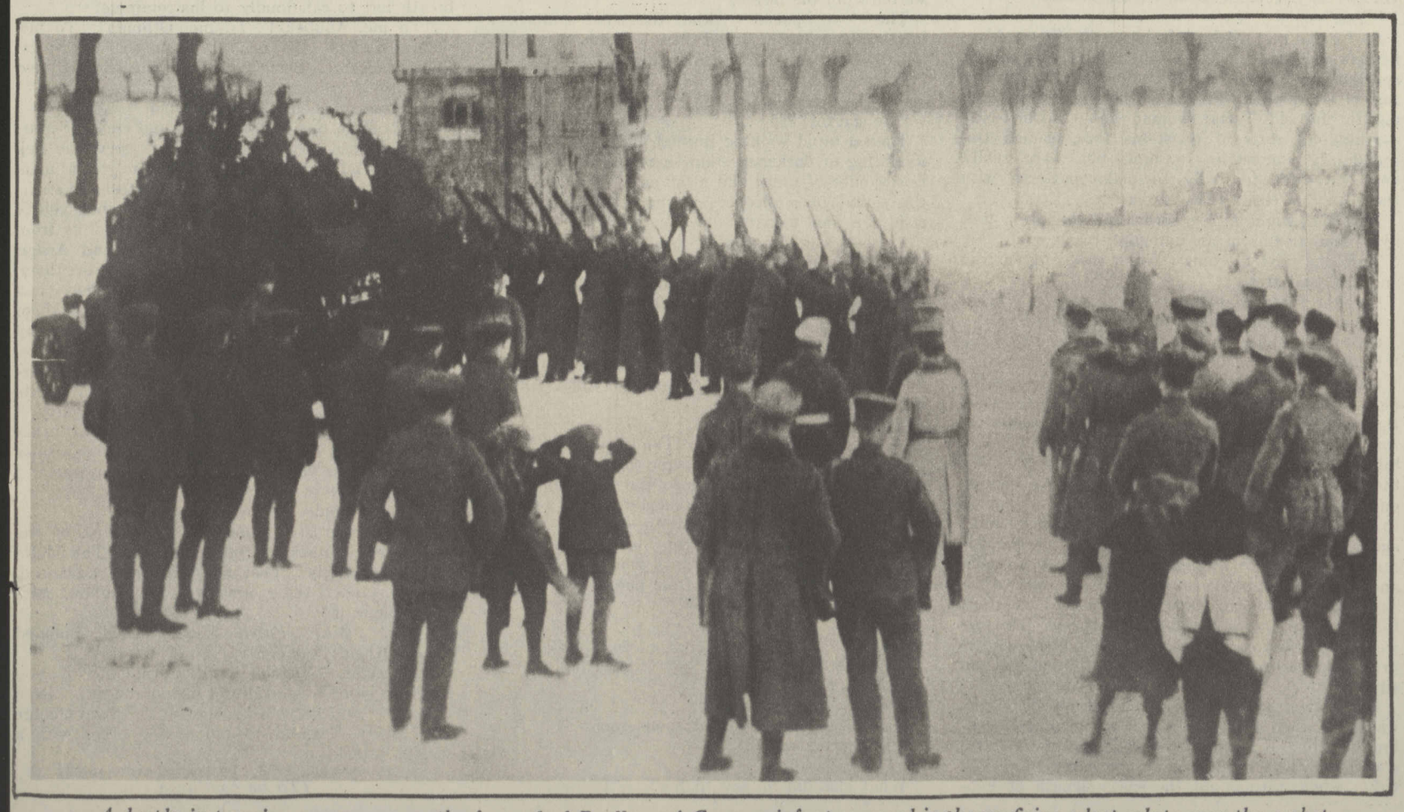
The objective of the English operation was to bomb Vraucourt and its environs, and particularly the sugar factory, with a couple of carefully selected and martially correct visiting cards to be dropped on his royal highness the grand duke of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha.

The Boelke jagdstaffel of fighting Albatross planes,



How Boelke, the German ace, met death. The artist's conception is taken from a description by Richthofen.
(DRAWING BY CLAYTON KNIGHT.)

Hero worshipers of Germany acclaimed Richthofen as their god. Here women near Berlin are giving him flowers.



A deeply impressive ceremony was the funeral of Boelke. A German infantry squad is shown firing a last salute over the casket.