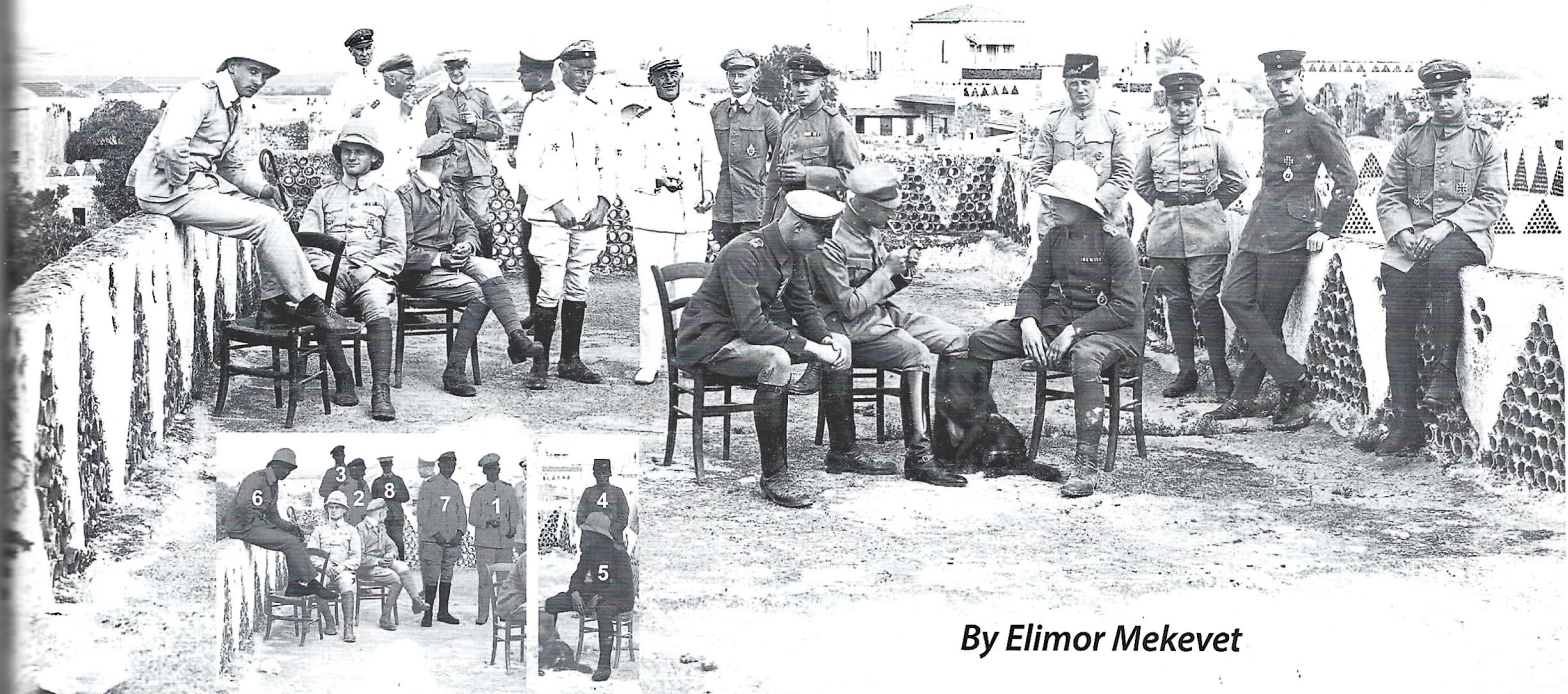


Flyers and Encounters in the Air Campaign in Palestine

The gentleman Pascha flyer, his 'genteel' Australian foe
and a little-known New Zealand fighter pilot



By Elimor Mekevet

The flyers of Flieger-Abteilung 300 'Pascha' lounging on a rooftop of the Franciscan monastery at Ramleh, this photo probably taken shortly after they had posed for their well-known group photo which is shown later on in this article. They include (inset): 1 – the CO of FA 300, Hptm Hellmuth Felmy (Observer); 2 – Obltn a D Gerhard Felmy (Pilot); 3 – Obltn Richard Falke (O); 4 – Obltn (Ottoman rank) Edgar Gustav Adolf Dittmar (P). Other flyers mentioned in this article are tentatively identified from various sources as: 5 – Ltn d R Kurt Fritzsche (O); 6 – Ltn Franz Schleiff (P); 7 – Ltn d R Erich Otto Schmarje (P). Also present: 8 – the unit physician, Dr Otto Fleischmann. Early summer 1917.

:Reinhard Zankl

In this article, the lives, operational records and personal achievements of three pilots serving in Palestine in World War One are linked together through common experiences and underlying themes. The resulting narrative may be seen to reflect the course of air fighting on this front, while placing special emphasis on certain activities, aspects and consequences of the campaign.

The first figure portrayed is a German pilot whose fame on either side of the front was comparable to that of a prominent fighter ace on the Western front. Since in the strict, formal sense no German pilot gained 'ace status' in Palestine alone, the record offered here is largely dedicated to an examination of his successful air combats with respect to this popular title.

Without launching into a lengthy discussion of the term 'Ace', for the purpose of this article it denotes a flyer credited with five or more recognized aerial victories. This definition is applied here in the interest of uniform study and analysis of the issue of victory tallies, but it is important to note that the 5-victory mark had evolved on the Allied side.¹ The equivalent German criterion for distinction in air combat actually stood at four victories, conferring the title of Fliegerhelden (Flying Heroes) on flyers who attained or surpassed this mark. A comprehensive listing by Kogenluft of Germany's successful flyers, published shortly after the war, bears out adherence to this official policy.²

In the course of the air campaign in Palestine, a considerable number of pilots and observers on the British side gained ace status by scoring victories solely on that front (including Transjordan)³. By contrast, only few German aces are known to have flown in Palestine⁴, and none were credited with five victories here. It is therefore interesting to learn from research into the campaign that the German pilot featured in the first section could be recognized as an ace of the Palestine front if

Allied criteria for evaluating claims and crediting victories were applied.⁵

GERHARD FELMY: 'A GENTLEMAN AND A SPORTSMAN'

From early days to Pascha flyer

Probably the best-known German flyer on both sides of the front during the air campaign in Sinai and Palestine in WWI was the pilot Oberleutnant Gerhard Felmy. In 1917 he was much fabled and admired by his adversaries on the British side, who lauded him as a gentleman and a sportsman. His reputation was not earned by combat accomplishments alone but stemmed also from his active role and personal involvement in fostering a practice of chivalry which was observed by both sides. Thus, a cordial exchange of greetings, messages and other items existed between his Flieger-Abteilung (Flying unit) and British squadrons in connection with downed flyers from the opposing air units.

Details of Felmy's service and exploits in the air campaign have been accorded extensive coverage in contemporary and modern sources⁶. This record will focus mainly on an evaluation of the tentative statement that Felmy may 'qualify' as an ace of the Palestine front. It will also expand on lesser-known facts and details as deemed relevant to a more complete account of his character and service.

Gerhard Hans Willibald Felmy was born on 12 December 1891 in Berlin to a middle-class family as the youngest of five children⁷. His early schooling in Berlin included a period at the Schindler'sche Waisenhaus (Schindler orphanage), his father having died in 1895. As a teenager he attended in 1905-1909 the Kadettenanstalt (cadet institute) at Karlsruhe followed by the prestigious Hauptkadettenanstalt (senior cadet institute)