

## Praise for Walt Shiel's Books

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"[*Cessna Warbirds*] is going on the reference shelf for sure!"—Dave Menard, National Museum of the US Air Force



ONCE A KNIGHT

**Books by Walt Shiel**  
T-41 Mescalero  
Devil in the North Woods  
Pilots and Normal People  
Cessna Warbirds

# ONCE A KNIGHT

A NOVEL OF  
AERIAL COMBAT & ROMANCE  
IN WORLD WAR I

WALT SHIEL



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*Gratefully dedicated to all the intrepid  
air combat pioneers of the Great War*



# ONCE A KNIGHT

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## One

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**T**HE GERMAN was hell-bound determined to stay alive, and truth be told, I wasn't all that eager to kill him. But I was just as determined to keep flying as he was to keep alive and, if I didn't kill him, he might've killed me and that'd sure enough have ended my short flying career.

So, being as how it was going to be him or me, I decided it really should be him, though we were both just doing our jobs. Killing wasn't exactly new to me, having killed three men back in Texas, but those were honest-to-God criminals who'd earned the right to be killed.

This particular German didn't take to my idea right away and dragged his Pfalz biplane in front of the sun and, while I was squinting, sideslipped right out of my Aldis gun sight. He turned back into me so hard I had to zoom up, roll over downside-up, and dive back down just to get him lined up in the Aldis again.

As I watched the Pfalz swell up to fill the 100-yard range circle, I felt just a tic of pity. Something I'd never felt with those three criminals. This German and I shared something—we were both flyers. He must

have seen how I had the advantage then, because he turned even harder, but he was too late and all I had to do was ease back on the joystick and push down a bit on my right rudder bar to keep him in the sight. I squeezed the firing switch smooth and steady just like Dad had showed me years ago with the touchy trigger on his old Winchester 45-60. My Lewis gun rattled and my Nieuport shuddered and tracers leaped out at the German. Bullets tore clean through his airplane. Some of them shredded the fabric on the fuselage and wings and others cut some flying wires and control cables.

The Pfalz jerked nose-straight-up, rolled on over on its back, dangled there for a moment refusing to surrender, then just sort of flopped nose-down into a spin. Flames licked out from under the engine cowling and swallowed up the cockpit and pilot. I was sickened and exhilarated like the day I'd killed my first deer.

I watched as it spun round and down, all flames and death, and for a crazy moment I was sure I could hear the German screaming. The Pfalz smashed into the ground and shattered into a hundred pieces of burning wood and fabric and metal and flesh.

I prayed the impact had killed him before the fire got to him. The thought of his burning to death was more than I cared to dwell on.

I swallowed the sour bile rising up from my gut as I circled above, unable to turn away from the death and burning wreckage I'd just caused. But when the stutter of a machine gun and flash of tracers forced me to worry some about my own death, I came around quick enough.

I snapped over into a steep right bank and wrenched around to see who it was that wanted to kill me. An avenging Pfalz was closing in with his Spandau machine guns spitting out deadly venom. The horrors of a few moments before left me, and I knew I had to kill again. But this time wasn't going to be so easy. When I twisted left, he twisted left. When I rolled right, he rolled right. When I dove down and zoomed up, he dove down and zoomed up. We each took whatever high-deflection shots we could get, but we could neither hit each other nor escape. We fought for position and struggled for advantage, each second-guessing the other into a stalemate.

Two strangers determined only to murder each other.

About the time I decided the loser would be the flyer who ran out of petrol first, I spotted a brother Nieuport diving on my attacker out of

the sun from behind the Pfalz with his Lewis gun spewing vengeance and MacDougal's bright red flight leader's streamer flapping from a wing strut. MacDougal charged that Pfalz like an enraged bear sow protecting her cub.

I was mighty happy to be that cub.

With a deadly efficiency born of experience, Mac's bullets stitched the German's cockpit and the Pfalz rolled over as gracefully as any stage dancer, right down into a diving spiral, twisting and rolling until it joined its brother, one more twisted heap of wood and metal planted in the French soil. Mac followed it down just to pump a few last shots into his thirty-fourth victory.

I dove down and rejoined with Mac, followed soon by the other three members of our flight. Mac, bloodthirsty as always, led the five of us deeper behind the lines to look for more German planes. We patrolled up and down above the German troops, searching for a fight and dodging Archie (German anti-aircraft fire). Though I knew Archie was more of a nuisance than a threat those constant woofs and mushrooming balls of black fury and turbulence were damned unsettling. I longed for the safety of Allied skies and our home field and the warmth of French wine in my churning gut.

As usual, though, Mac had other plans. He'd spotted a convoy of trucks heading to the front and threw his craft into an almost vertical dive for strafing. I hated ground strafing, as did just about every other scout pilot except Captain Bruce MacDougal. Too damn many machine guns down there. But like good troopers, we all followed him down.

I lunged earthward with the hammering of my heart damn near drowning out the scream of my engine. I framed a truck in my sight and pressed the firing switch. The Lewis rattled again, and the truck swerved and hit a drainage ditch and rolled right over. I was fascinated and delayed my pull-out until I almost didn't make it. I bottomed out so low that, if that truck hadn't rolled over, I probably would have hit the damn thing. A dozen Hun infantrymen raised their rifles in anger and fear, and one of their bullets tore clean through the cockpit floor, just missing my leg.

I pulled up and away from those Huns and that burning truck and looked all around but couldn't find the rest of my flight. I felt abandoned, sort of the way I had as a little tyke when my mom died.

The sky was suddenly an empty and lonely and forbidding place, so I pulled up farther and, bobbing right and left, looked everywhere for Mac and the others. Then from beyond a bomb-cratered hilltop up ahead, a pair of Nieuports popped up, climbing steeply with Mac's beautiful streamer flying from one of them. I zigzagged through the lines-of-sight of probably a thousand machine guns and raced to catch them up. Another Nieuport, with Carson's big blue D on its side, trailed behind, apparently unable to keep up. The poor kid was just nineteen and at the front for maybe two weeks and looked so damn helpless just limping along there like some wounded pup trying to follow his master.

The others hadn't noticed Carson so I held back just enough to guard him. The kid wobbled like a drunkard, climbing and diving, bobbing left and right. I kept a look-out for attackers and tried not to think about the Allied lines three very long miles away.

"Come on, Carson," I urged, wishing he could hear me. "Just two more minutes and you can land among friends."

Just as though he'd actually heard me, he leveled out and flew along steady as can be. I suppose I relaxed just a bit at that point, figuring Carson must have had a bit of a control problem was all. I told myself the kid was going to be all right.

He was going to make it.

I kept my worried lookout for German scouts 'cause the bastards just loved to attack injured stragglers. In fairness, I'd have to admit we often did the same. After all, any pilot who makes it home today just might be the one to shoot you down tomorrow.

Carson must have taken a hit in his engine since he was barely holding on to 85 miles-per-hour. I was relieved that there didn't seem to be any Germans around, other than the scattered ground fire we were slowly climbing above. I thought of Carson as a greenhorn kid even though I'd only been flying combat patrols four weeks more.

The Pfalz I had downed that day had been my first kill.

With no warning or reason I could see, Carson's plane just rolled left and nosed down like he was setting up for a strafe run. But he wasn't, and I knew it.

His Nieuport eased right over onto its back and its nose dropped into a pure vertical dive. His speed built up and he lost all his hard-won altitude.

“Throttle her down!” I shouted, diving to stay with him. “Pull out, damn it!”

That’s when his right lower wing snapped clean off and his plane pivoted left. The top wing folded back just about the time he corkscrewed into the ground. The debris was thrown all over a hundred-yard circle.

Nobody could have survived such a crash.

For the second time that day, I circled above a wreck. This time I was furious and frustrated as well as sickened. Since there was nothing I could do, I turned for home. The others had continued west, Mac probably assuming Carson and I were either dead or long gone home already. I flew straight for the Allied lines, keeping down low without so much as even one zig or one zag. I suppose I was actually daring the Germans to attack an easy target.

But they didn’t.