

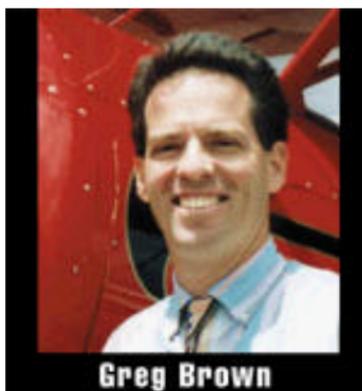
Commentary

Flying Carpet

Pilgrimage To Old Rhinebeck

"Rat-tat-tat-brrrrrrmmm, rat-tat-tat-brrrrrrmmm!" I could scarcely believe my ears, for there, dogfighting over my head, were World War I fighters – SPAD, Albatros, Fokker Triplane, Camel, and Nieuport-marques I had read and dreamt about and even seen in a few museums. But never had I guessed that one day I'd actually hear and see them fly.

Most aviators would agree that Oshkosh, Wisconsin, is the Mecca of the skies to which true believers must eventually trek by slow airplane to camp under a wing.



But if Oshkosh is Mecca, Rhinebeck Aerodrome is Medina. So this year, when I was drawn back to Oshkosh after 15 years away, 1,300 extra miles to visit Rhinebeck and make my pilgrimage complete seemed like nothing.

Old Rhinebeck Aerodrome is an ethereal grass strip carved from dense woods along the Hudson River, where World War I airplanes still fly. Ever since succumbing to Sir Walter Raleigh's 1922 classic, *The War in the Air*, I've been captivated by early airplanes and the men and women who flew them. Structurally limited, powered by primitive engines, and barely able to lift their own weight, these planes duked it out over Europe only a dozen years after the dawn of powered flight.

Rhinebeck's oldest flying aircraft is an original 1909 Bleriot, like the one its designer flew across the English Channel that year to global acclaim; Bleriot was the Lindbergh of his day after conquering 26 miles of unbroken water.

But the World War I aircraft are what especially drew me to Rhinebeck. Some are original, and others are faithful reproductions, but all are true to their heritage. I sought, in particular, the mystical sound of rotary engines that powered so many of them – primitive devices with radially mounted cylinders that spun with their propellers around fixed crankshafts bolted to the airframe. That's right. The whole engine turned, improving cooling at the slow airspeeds of the day and saving weight through mechanical simplicity, but aggravating handling because of gyroscopic effects.

In rotary engines, fuel was distributed by centrifugal force to the cylinders. No throttles or carburetors were installed. The engines ran wide open all the time, so to reduce power pilots pressed a kill switch, suspending ignition to the spark plugs. "Brrrp..., brrrp....," was the music on final as pilots blipped engines on and off for landing.

The difference between maximum structural speed and stall speed was as little as 10 miles per hour on early aircraft, with death lurking at either margin. Stalls and spins were considered unrecoverable in the early days, while structural failures were common at higher airspeeds still far below cruise in a modern Cessna 172.

Rotary engines were lubricated with castor oil, centrifugally distributed with the fuel. Without return lines, used lubricant streamed back over both fuselage and pilot. That's one reason early aviators wore scarves-to wipe castor oil from their faces in futile attempts to stave off its unpleasant effects on the bowels and stomach.

Perhaps most incredible of all, pilots at the height of the war in 1916 received as little as eight hours of training in difficult and unstable aircraft – no wonder their lives were measured in only weeks upon arriving at the front.

Imagine doing battle aloft after just a few hours of training, in an aircraft having only a 10-mph speed range, questionable structural integrity, and an unreliable engine that hampers turns in one direction and makes you sick. Then surely you'll understand why I had to see such airplanes fly.

Finally the long-anticipated day arrived. We shoehorned our *Flying Carpet* between tall trees and the Hudson River bridge at Kingston-Ulster Airport, then journeyed by taxi at inflated fares over the bridge...to Rhinebeck Aerodrome!

We toured primitive hangars filled with ancient airplanes while a 1929 New Standard biplane delivered open-cockpit rides to the faithful. Then we watched two Rhinebeck "pioneers" take flight: a bird-like 1910 Hanriot reproduction and a marvelously crude 1913 French Caudron.

But the main course was Rhinebeck's famous Sunday show, conceived by the Aerodrome's late founder, Cole Palen. Complete with good guy, villainous Black Baron, and kidnapped heroine, it's a silent movie melodrama perverted with enough noise to keep everyone holding their ears throughout. Ancient autos scrambled, early airplanes battled an original World War I Renault tank, dogfighting took place, bombs "fell," bad jokes by the announcer proliferated, and all was encompassed by an outrageous story line that could hardly have fooled the most gullible spectator. Add some clever tricks pulled on the audience (I won't ruin the surprises), hot dogs, and a sunburn for full effect, and we were altogether transported back to our distant origins as pilots.

Rhinebeck Aerodrome is hammy, crude, and yet a wonderful diamond in the rough – every enthusiast having the slightest tinge of aviation romance should visit this rare place where World War I airplanes still fly. Some day it will end, and missing it would be a sin for any real aviator, like pilgrims missing Mecca or Medina.

As we flew away that afternoon, the smooth rumble of our *Flying Carpet* was displaced in my ears by uneven music from ancient airplanes. Peering over my shoulder to foil attack by the Black Baron, I was suddenly overtaken by words from Sir Walter Raleigh.

"The engine is the heart of an aeroplane," he wrote in 1922, "but the pilot is its soul."

Looking down at the beautiful Hudson River below, I realized that 80 years of progress haven't dulled the miracle of flight one bit.

By Greg Brown

Old Rhinebeck Aerodrome Column Photos

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Generally considered the best fighter of World War I, the 1918 Fokker D.VII was the only aircraft so feared by the Allies that they specifically stipulated in the Treaty of Versailles that all examples be turned over by the Germans upon surrender.



An Albatros D.Va joins the evil forces of Rhinebeck's tongue-in-cheek "Black Baron." Germany's real Red Baron, Manfred von Richthofen, actually scored more victories in the Albatros than in his famous red Fokker Triplanes.



Evil "Black Baron" and associates...