

Udet, Ernst

By [Richard Byers](#)



Ernst Udet (1896-1941)

Ernst Udet (1896-1941) was a German aviator during the First World War. He was the second-highest scoring German “Ace” fighter pilot of the First World War, with sixty-two confirmed victories, and the highest-scoring German pilot to survive the war. He successfully worked as a stunt pilot and appeared in several movies after war. This postcard of Udet reads: “Unser erfolgr. Kampfflieger Leutnant Udet Führer einer Jagdstaffel” (“Our successful fighter pilot Lieutenant Ernst Udet commander of a Jagdstaffel”).

Unknown photographer: Paul Wadin of the Royal Prussian Jagdstaffel 37, n.p., n.d.; source: private collection of Elvira Wadin-Herrmann, via Europeana 1914-1918, https://www.europeana.eu/portal/en/record/2020601/https__1914_1918_europeana_eu_contributions_6824.html?q=ernst+udet#dclid=1571750284618&p=1.

This file is licenced under Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported (CC BY-SA 3.0) licence: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>.

Udet, *Ernst*

Aviator

Born 26 April 1896 in Frankfurt am Main, German Empire

Died 17 November 1941 in Berlin, German Empire

Summary

Ernst Udet was the second-highest scoring German “ace” fighter pilot of the First World War,

with sixty-two confirmed victories, and the highest-scoring German pilot to survive the war. Udet later became an internationally famous stunt pilot and aerial cinema pioneer.

Table of contents

[1 Pre-War](#)

[2 World War I](#)

[3 Post-War](#)

[Selected Bibliography](#)

[Citation](#)

Pre-War

Ernst Udet (1896-1941) was born in Frankfurt am Main, but as a young boy his family moved to Munich, Bavaria.

World War I

Udet attempted to enlist in 1914, but was initially rejected due to his height, which was 5 feet 3 inches. Undaunted, he joined the 26th Württemberg Reserve Regiment as a dispatch rider. His duties brought him into contact with pilots, and Udet decided to pursue military aviation. In April 1915 he paid 2,000 marks for flying lessons at the Otto Works and received his pilot's license. Private Udet was posted to *Flieger Abteilung* (FA) 206, an [artillery observation](#) unit, where his aggressive style and eagerness for combat experience soon saw him promoted to *Unteroffizier* (staff sergeant). He then transferred to FA 68 as a fighter pilot flying the Fokker E.III *Eindecker* (single wing). Udet's initial combat encounter proved traumatic, motivating him to intensify his training and perfect his shooting and flying combat skills. By March 1916, this approach had paid off, and he engaged no less than twenty-two enemy planes during a dogfight near Mulhouse.

FA 68 was reorganized as *Jagdstaffel* 15 in September 1916, with Udet promoted to *Leutnant der Reserve* (reserve lieutenant) in January 1917. Now flying a new Albatros D.III, Udet's unit relocated to the Champagne area of the front. In June 1917 he transferred to *Jagdstaffel* 37, and became its commander that August.

Udet proved a capable and popular leader of "Jasta" 37, who mentored junior pilots and cultivated a flashy image as a dapper ace who enjoyed having a good time. In early 1918, Udet met with [Manfred Freiherr von Richthofen \(1892-1918\)](#), who invited him to join his unit, the *Jagdgeschwader* I. After Richthofen's death in April 1918, Udet was transferred to lead "Jasta" 4. Udet's victory tally rose throughout 1918, even as Germany's war efforts collapsed.

Shot down in a dogfight, Udet parachuted to safety, the first pilot to do so. Udet was also the first pilot credited with destroying a [tank](#) from the [air](#). Between June 1918 and the war's end, Udet shot down twenty-eight more [aircraft](#), for a total of sixty-two confirmed victories.

Post-War

Ernst Udet emerged from World War I as a celebrity and war hero. He traveled the world during the 1920s, thrilling crowds with aerial stunt flying and appearing in several films. In 1934 he joined the *Luftwaffe* as [Nazi Germany](#) began extensive military rearmament, rising to the rank of major-general and head of the Office of Aerial Rearmament by 1939. Udet struggled with the politics of Nazi Germany's aviation policies. He became overwhelmed and depressed, and begged Air Minister [Hermann Göring \(1893-1946\)](#) to allow him to resign. When Göring refused, Udet spiraled into alcoholism, and took his own life on 17 November 1941 after receiving heavy criticism for the *Luftwaffe*'s shortcomings during the British campaign. Nazi officials sanitized his death, claiming he had died while testing a new aircraft that had crashed.

Richard Byers, University of North Georgia

Selected Bibliography

- [Ishoven, Armand van: **The fall of an eagle. The life of fighter ace Ernst Udet**, London, 1979: W. Kimber.](#)
- [Udet, Ernst: **Ace of the black cross. The memoirs of Ernst Udet**, Barnsley, 2013: Pen & Sword.](#)
- [Udet, Ernst: **Mein Fliegerleben**, Berlin, 1935: Im Deutschen Verlag.](#)

Citation

Richard Byers: Udet, Ernst, in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2019-10-30. DOI: [10.15463/ie1418.11425](https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.11425)

External Links

- [Collection of German newspaper articles about Ernst Udet \(ZBW - Deutsche Zentralbibliothek für Wirtschaftswissenschaften/Leibniz-Informationszentrum Wirtschaft\) \(Primary Source\)](#)
- [Gunkel, Christoph: Fliegerheld Ernst Udet "Ich bin nur noch ein Geist in Uniform", in: Spiegel Online, 17 November 2016 \(Spiegel Online\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Keitch, Charlie / Blair, Josh: What Impact Did the First World War Have on Aircraft and Aerial Warfare?, 7 December 2017 \(Imperial War Museums\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Menzel, Thomas: Ernst Udet - Des Teufels General? \(Bundesarchiv\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Reuters: Three well known German aviators \(British Pathé\) \(Video\)](#)
- [Scriba, Arnulf: Ernst Udet 1896-1941 \(DHM - LeMO Biografie\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Udet, Ernst: Kreuz wider Kokarde: Jagdflüge des Leutnants Ernst Udet, Berlin, 1918 \(Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin\) \(Primary Source\)](#)
- [Wilkin, Bernard: Aerial warfare during World War One, 29 January 2014 \(British Library\) \(Article\)](#)

Metadata

Regional Section(s)

[Central Europe](#) > [Germany](#)

Thematic Section(s)

[Violence](#)

Subjects

[Culture](#) > [Film](#)

[Culture](#) > [Mobilization, cultural](#) > [Hero cult](#)

[Politics, law](#) > [Political ideologies](#) > [Fascism](#)

[Warfare and the military](#) > [Battles, battlefields and campaigns](#) > [Battles, battlefields and campaigns, Western Front](#)

[Warfare and the military](#) > [Combatants](#) > [Artillery](#)

[Warfare and the military](#) > [Military planning and recruitment](#) > [Training and education, military](#)

[Warfare and the military](#) > [Soldiers, experiences and attitudes](#) > [Emotions](#)

[Warfare and the military](#) > [Warfare, air](#) > [Air warfare](#)

[Warfare and the military](#) > [Wars after war](#) > [Second World War](#)

Author Keywords

Udet; Luftwaffe; Ace; Cinema

GND Subject Headings

[Udet, Ernst](#)

LC Subject Headings

[Udet, Ernst, 1896-1941](#)

Rameau Subject Headings

[Udet, Ernst \(1896-1941\)](#)

Key Person(s)

[Richthofen, Manfred, Freiherr von](#); [Göring, Hermann](#)

Key Location(s)

[Frankfurt am Main](#); [Munich](#); [Mulhouse](#)

Title

Udet, Ernst

Author(s)

[Richard Byers](#)

Article Type

Encyclopedic Entry

Classification Group

Persons