

WHO SHOT DOWN ALAN JERRARD?

FLIK 51J ACE EUGEN BÖNSCH AND THE 30 MARCH 1918 COMBAT

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EUGEN BÖNSCH WAS ONE OF THE MOST SUCCESSFUL fighter pilots of the K.u.k. Luftfahrtruppen during the First World War. Like many other airmen of the Habsburg Empire, he came from the Czech lands. He was born on 1 May 1897 at Velká Úpa in the Krkonoše, Böhmen (now the Czech Republic), to Vinzenz Bönsch (1847-1932) and his wife Anne, neé Gleissner, (1854-1922) as the sixteenth of their seventeen children. Two of his brothers later fell at the front during WWI and the other three were captured. During the regular censuses under the Habsburg monarchy, the entire family used to report German as their *language of communication (Umgangssprache)* and they continued to identify as German speakers also after the War, when the censuses inquired about the *mother tongue (Muttersprache)*. The Bönschs were a well-known family in the Krkonoše mountains, owners of the Luční bouda (Wiesenbaude in German) – the oldest and the largest of several dozen Riesengebirge/Krkonoše mountain chalets.

After graduating from the Bürgerschule, Eugen Bönsch enrolled at a public Maschinenbauschule in the city of Chomutov (Komotau), Böhmen, about 150 kilometres from his home town. It seems probable that it was there where he learned stenography, which he would later use to write his war-time personal diary. Then the war began. After his 18th birthday, Bönsch volunteered to join the K.u.k. Armee and, on 15 October 1915 he was enrolled in the Viennese K.u.k. Infanterie-Regiment Nr.4 *Hoch- und Deutschmeister*, in which he underwent his basic military training. Subsequently, he was reassigned to the K.u.k. Luftfahrtruppen, at his own request.

He started his aviation service on 30 September 1916 as an aero mechanic at a Fliegerarsenal in Fischamend and then at other locations. On 10 March 1917, he finally commenced his long-desired pilot training course. During the subsequent six months he received training at four Fliegerersatzkompanien (shortened as Flek). He underwent his elementary training with Flek 12 at Klagenfurt in Kärnten, advanced training with Flek 4 at Szombathely (Steinamanger) in northwest Hungary and combat training with Flek 8 at Wiener Neustadt. During this stage of his training, on 21 May 1917, he was promoted to Gefreiter. One month later, on 22 June 1917, he became the holder of FAI-Österreich pilot diploma No.700.

The final stage of his instruction comprised fighter pilot training at Kampfschule Flek 6 also at Wiener Neustadt. He finished his fighter pilot training on the Hansa-Brandenburg D.I, which was relatively fast, but its flight characteristics made it literally life-threatening – especially for inexperienced student pilots. For instance, on 20 July 1917, during dogfight practice, Bönsch with his KD fell into a spiral without any prior warning. Thanks to his self-composure, he managed to regain control over his machine – actually twice in succession because he got into another spin after he had regained control for the first time. After successfully completing this final stage of his training, on 1 July 1917, he was promoted to Korporal. Then he was sent to the Italian front.

On the Italian front, Eugen Bönsch flew Albatros D.III (Oef) fighter planes with Fliegerkompanie Nr.51 Jagd, abbreviated to Flik 51J and officially the most successful K.u.k. Luftfahrtruppen fighter unit: its pilots recorded a total of 70 aerial victories including nine unconfirmed ones. His service with Flik 51J started on 22 August 1917 and lasted until early November 1918 – i.e. until the Austro-Hungarian capitulation at Villa Giusti and end of the Habsburg monarchy.

In the early stages of his front-line service with Flik 51J, Bönsch took part in the Eleventh Battle of Isonzo (August – September 1917) and, in late October 1917, also in the Battle of Carpoletto (also known as the Twelfth Battle of Isonzo), which forced the Italian army to retreat from Isonzo all the way beyond the River Piave. In the second half of June 1918, he again distinguished himself during the last Austro-Hungarian offensive at the River Piave. On 20 June he successfully participated in the epic air battle over Montello, which would be later celebrated as a memorable day for the Austro-Hungarian air service. He continued fighting until the collapse of the front in the end of October 1918, during which the Allied armies made a breakthrough of the Austro-Hungarian lines on the Piave and forced the collapsing Habsburg army to retreat.

The total number of Bönsch's combat sorties (Feindflüge) is unknown. According to the extant monthly summaries (Feindfluglisten und Monatsberichten), he made a total of 173 missions between 28 September 1917 and 17 August 1918, during which he participated in a total of 49 combats. This number, however, is certainly not exhaustive. The

Zugsf Eugen Bönsch, c.May-June 1918.

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