

BARON MANFRED VON RICHTHOFEN

(Did a Gunner shoot him down?)

Part 2 - Gunner Robert Buie's Story

Kevin Browning



Buie placed on the editor's desk an official copy of a telegram sent to Major General Hobbs from General Rawlinson.

To: 5th Australian Division – Major General T.J. Hobbs

No. 3801 Gunner R. Buie
53rd Battery, Australian Field Artillery
Please convey to 53rd Battery 5th Australian Division my best thanks and congratulations on having brought down the celebrated German aviator RICHTHOFEN.

General H.S. Rawlinson

The editor was impressed but decided there was still a wealth of sensationalism to be tapped and the controversy continued.

And continue it does to this day. Captain Roy Brown has been given credit for the victory and was awarded a bar to his DFC. Sergeant Cedric Popkin received credit for the victory in the Official Australian History of the War by C.E.W. Bean. Although Gunners Robert Buie and William Evans were recommended for a Mentioned in Dispatch they did not receive it. Even Buie's record of service contains only the following note:

'Congratulated for prompt action in defending

their Battery position with a Lewis gun on 21/4/18'. Evan's record doesn't even have that! A look through their records would not hint at the part they played.

Now with the passage of time what really happened on that day will never be known. In researching this article I have felt a sympathy for Robert Buie for the frustration it has caused him. He has not sought the glory but he did want the facts brought out. Before we present Robert Buie's case it is appropriate to respond to the other main claimants.

Captain Roy Brown DFC and bar

Roy Brown did not doubt his part in the saga and the reason for this was given in 1958 by Lieutenant Oliver Le Boutillier (an American volunteer flying with the British).¹ A pilot with 209 Squadron Le Boutillier was nearest the action and witnessed the incident from above.

'By the time I had reached the vicinity of Vaux, I'd dropped down to about 1000 feet and was flying parallel to the Somme. I looked down to my left front and saw a camel zigzagging low towards the west and almost over the Somme. Directly behind



**Morlancourt Ridge with Corbie in the foreground.
Taken in 1918 this photo shows the steep rise of the ridge from the River Somme.**

and slightly above it by not more than three or four plane lengths a red triplane followed manoeuvring for a burst now and again. The Camel was fairly hard pressed; it was wobbling its wings and rocking from side to side in violent manoeuvres.

'Then almost immediately, I saw coming in from the right in a steep 45-degree dive at an angle of about 15 or 20 degrees to their flight paths, another Camel with two white stripes around its fuselage (this was Brown's aircraft). It dropped from about 3,000 feet in a roaring speed at least half again the speed of the two hedgehopping planes over the Somme. His speed was so great that when he pulled out of the dive above and behind the German plane, he had time to fire only about 40 rounds from both guns. I clearly saw his tracers strike the red triplane, which immediately pulled up and to the right.

'As Brown saw the tracers enter the triplane, he began his climbing turn to the left. His right wing blanketed what followed in those critical 20 to 25 seconds as May led Richthofen over the Australian battery. He didn't see Richthofen settle back down on May's tail. When he levelled out, turned to the right and looked down, it was in time to see Richthofen stagger and crash. Naturally he assumed his bullets had got him.'

Sergeant Cedric Popkin

Cedric Popkin was credited with the victory by the Official Australian War Historian C.E.W. Bean. A conclusion he arrived at some 20 years after the event. It is difficult to see any conclusive proof. He appears to have based his finding on the angle of the bullet wound but the angle of the aircraft at a given moment can only be assumed. The fact the range at which he fired is 600 yards also leaves room for doubt.

Popkin first fired about 80 rounds at the aircraft at a range of 'about 100 to 150 yards from our position' and thought he had hit the pilot. When over 53rd Battery position Richthofen banked his aircraft to the right and Popkin fired a further 80 rounds at the aircraft until the gun jammed. They thought the German was heading towards them when suddenly it swerved shakily in the opposite direction and crashed. To the machine gunners it appeared obvious their last burst had done its work. At age 74 Cedric Popkin said 'I am fairly certain it was my fire which caused the baron to crash, but it would be impossible to say definitely that I was responsible'.

Gunners Robert Buie and William "Snowy" Evans

Gunner William "Snowy" Evans, a 27 year old former Queensland shearer, a roust-about on the rough and ready side and "a demon with the drink but a man who could really soldier" manned a Lewis gun located 10 metres to the left of the number six gun. The other Lewis gun, situated about 10 metres to the rear and centre of the line, was manned by 25 year old Gunner Robert Buie. Buie was a quiet shy



Gunner Robert Buie
photo taken in 1919
(Buie family)

man, a professional fisherman whose family had fished the mouth of the Hawkesbury River for generations. Each Lewis gun had elliptical AA sights, two ellipses - for fast and slow moving targets.

William Evans died before the controversy gained momentum and his story cannot be told. Robert Buie wanted the

facts bought out and here it is in his own words³.

'Seeing you have shown interest in the "Richthofen affair", I will proceed to tell you some of the true facts and very much true.

'On 21 April 1918 a fight was in progress a couple of miles away between a squadron of British planes and Richthofen's 'Red Devil' Squadron. During the course of the battle one plane was shot down, when suddenly another plane which looked like falling out of control, flattened out a few hundred feet from the ground and made for home, his course being direct towards my gun position. An enemy pilot, seeing this gave chase, that pilot was Richthofen, he gained rapidly firing short bursts as he came. On nearing my position our plane was in the line of fire, but I had my gun sighted on the enemy plane which was partly obscured by our own plane. Officer Commanding the Battery was standing about 100

yards away, alongside him Captain Ellis, and Lieutenant Doyle. Captain Ellis thought I was going to let the plane pass and he ordered 'Fire on that plane Buie'!

'But I still could not owing to Lieutenant May's position. I was swivelling my gun to follow the red machine, and Snowy Evans, manning the other gun on the opposite flank, got first clearance. He opened up at a range of slightly more than 300 yards.

I can still remember seeing Richthofen clearly. His helmet covered his head and face and he was hunched in the cockpit aiming over his guns. At 200 yards with my peep sight directly on Richthofen's body, I began firing in steady bursts. His plane was bearing frontal and just a little to the right of me, and after 20 rounds I knew the bullets were striking the right side and front of the machine, for I clearly saw fragments flying.

'Still Richthofen came on, firing at Lieutenant May with both guns blazing. Then just before my last shots finished at a range of 40 yards, Richthofen's guns stopped abruptly. The thought flashed through my mind - I've hit him! - and immediately I noticed a sharp change in engine sounds as the red triplane passed over our gun position at less than 50 feet and still a little to my right. The propellor slowed down and the engine sound disappeared, although the machine still appeared to be under control. Then it veered a bit to the right and then back to the left and lost height gradually coming down 400 yards away.

'The body was removed from the plane and carried back to our Battery on a stretcher. There I saw it, Richthofen was struck in the left breast, abdomen and right knee. Later that morning a Canadian pilot came to the battery and tried to lay claim that he had shot Richthofen down. I was called, and after argument with Brown he was convinced that he had been mistaken and that it must have been in another sector that he brought one down. I was taken out to our headquarters some days later where all evidence was taken. There were claims in from airmen to cooks.

'After the Inquiry, some couple of weeks later, I received in the line a message of thanks and congratulations from General Rawlinson, for the shooting down of Richthofen. Later on I had a personal visit made to me in the line, at my post, by General Birdwood, Major General Hobbs and

another British General whose name I cannot remember. General Birdwood approached me first and took my hand and thanked me and congratulated me. I remember his words quite well that he said to me: "It would have been more fitting if he had been brought down from the air and a great pity he had not been wounded and taken prisoner. He said Richthofen was a gallant airman but nevertheless he is better out of the way as he was very destructive towards our own men". He ended by saying "Good bye and Good luck Digger, keep on bringing them down".

'General Hobbs then thanked and congratulated me, as did the other General. General Hobbs asked me if I would let him have the special sight I had on my gun to keep as a memento. He said he would have it suitably inscribed. I may add it was the only one of its kind in use in France up to that time. The Fitter of the Battery had the new book from Ordnance showing anything new that was coming out, so he set to work and made the special sight to scale as shown in the book from an 18 pounder shell case. His name was (Fitter) Bartlett from Queensland. When the new sights were delivered to Ordnance I received one and General Hobbs got the one he wanted as a memento, and I believe that on his passing it was handed into the War Museum (sic) to go with the other exhibits.

'I might add that the inquiry in France as to who actually shot Richthofen down found: **'that after very careful consideration and weighing up of all the evidence, it has been proved beyond doubt that No 3801 Gunner Robert Buie 53rd Battery, Australian Field Artillery was responsible for the destruction of Baron Von Richthofen'**.

Although I officially received credit, I must include my digger mate William John Evans who passed away in 1928 and who manned our battery's other gun. I cannot help but attack our Official War Historian, Captain C.E.W. Bean, he should have had facts put in concerning Richthofen in our Official History, not would be claimants, whose claims were rejected at the inquiry in France.

'The officer I have referred to earlier in this as being my commanding officer in France Major Les Beavis DSO, I understand has a high position at Woomera Rocket Range. This gentleman I haven't seen since 1918 but I'll guarantee for one, he will bear out every word I have said here, re Richthofen's downfall, etc'

Robert Buie

6.10.54

Les Beavis⁴ retired as a Major General, and steadfastly maintained Buie and Evans were the gunners responsible for Richthofen's downing.

Neither Buie nor Evans claimed categorically that either was solely responsible for killing Richthofen. From the nature of the wounds it appears both shot him but neither was certain who inflicted the chest wound and which one inflicted the leg and abdominal wounds.

During the night of 8 August, his 26th birthday, Robert Buie –after spending eight months in the line, suddenly lost consciousness. When he came to in a field hospital he realised the war was over for him. For a week he was not allowed to stand and when well enough he was sent to a convalescent camp in the England. A few weeks later he was invalided home, on his tunic was a tag which listed his illness as myocarditis.

Early on the morning of 25 April 1964, Anzac Day, Robert Buie died adrift in his small dinghy. The 70 year old veteran had suffered a heart attack while fishing alone in Mooney Mooney Creek. His son Douglas found him after becoming concerned when his father failed to return. Robert Buie was laid to rest at Brooklyn on the Hawkesbury River.

¹ Interview given to Dale M. Titler, author of 'The Day the Red Baron Died

² Private Rupert Weston No 2 on Popkins gun

³ As told in a letter loaned by his son Kelly Buie to the author and from information provided to Dale Titler

⁴ Major General Leslie Ellis Beavis CB, CBE, DSO (25 January 1895-27 September 1975) graduated from RMC Duntroon in 1915, Battery Commander 53rd Battery 1st AIF. Master General of the Ordnance during World War II. Instrumental in planning the Woomera Rocket



Headstone marking the grave of
3801 Gunner Robert Buie
at Brooklyn Cemetery NSW

Test Range.

The Author wishes to thank the family of Robert Buie, especially his son 'Kelly', for their assistance and loan of personal papers .

Recommended Further Reading:

The Day the Red Baron Died by Dale M. Titler 1970 ISBN:0-8027-0321-6.

Who Killed the Red Baron by Pasquale (Pat) Carisella 1969

The Red Baron's Last Flight by Norman Franks and Alan Bennett 1997 ISBN:0 7329 0934 1

Citation

(from the War Records 53rd Battery)

No. 598 William John Evans
No. 3801 Robert Buie

Mentioned in despatch
as under...

These gunners were on duty with Lewis guns of the 53rd Battery on hills north of Corbie. At about 11 A.M. two aeroplanes flying low approached the battery position. Discerned to be a British Sopwith Camel closely pursued by a single-seater red triplane. As soon as the British plane had passed the line of fire both these gunners opened fire at close range at the hostile plane. Splinters were immediately observed to fly from the latter which crashed about 800 yards from the guns. It was then discovered that the enemy pilot was dead and identified as Richthofen. This

* 53 Bty is the Training Bty at the School of Arty.