

Bizarre, Fascinating, and Wacky World War I & II Secrets. Chasin' Fat Hilda

Lieutenant William "Willy" Coppens, just loved chasin' Fat Hilda! Although Fat Hilda certainly is no lady, she sure is big and fat! He flew a Belgium Air Force fighter airplane at an altitude of 3,000 feet. As he looks below, there is the city of Brussels, the capital of Belgium (which is now occupied by the hated "Huns") while to the left far below is big Fat Hilda! She sure is ugly, she looks just like a big fat sausage! In fact, Fat Hilda is a big fat sausage shaped observation Hun balloon. ("Hun" is what the Germans were called in World War One) and "Fat Hilda" is what they called their balloons.

Now, both the allies and the Germans used observation balloons to spy out troop movements at the front lines. Usually two men are stationed in the balloon's basket. One uses binoculars and the other a telephone. But this Fat Hilda carried no men. Its purpose is to deliberately bait Lt. Willy to his death, because the Huns hated him for his daring and accuracy. Many times he came as close as 50 feet before opening fire. He has already shot down too many Fat Hildas. This one is fully loaded with high explosives, just one shot and kaboom!

Allied agents have discovered the plot, and have warned Lt. Willy. He has also been ordered to stay away from this particular balloon. But he smiled and said, "I could not resist checking out this Fat Hilda balloon bomb!" A balloon is very dangerous, because every balloon is usually ringed with anti-aircraft batteries. A flyer must dive in low and close, in order to set the gas bags on fire. And only a tracer bullet will ignite the hydrogen gas. But today all of the anti-aircraft batteries are silent on purpose. The balloon handlers are busy unwinding the balloon, which is attached to a long steel cable. Some balloons ascend

to the great height of 2,000 to 3,000 feet. However, this balloon bomb was only a short distance from the ground when Lt. Willy buzzed it. While directly below, German staff officers and ground crews were all gathered round. They were waiting to celebrate the death of the dastardly balloon busting Belgian ace.

Lt. Willy did not hesitate, but he triggered his machine gun with a short burst. With a much bigger blast than expected, the balloon immediately exploded! A blooming red expansion of gas and the deadly TNT went up and out, in all directions. Pieces of the burning balloon dropped down all over the spectators. Many of the Huns were killed instantly. The rest were injured. The force of the blast caught Lt. Willy's airplane and tossed it up, down and around. Many holes were torn in the fuselage and both wings. Finally, Lt. Willy, the Belgian balloon buster, flew away... unhurt!

The "Hanriot HD 1" was the favorite fighter plane of Lt. Willy during most of his balloon busting career. It had a 100hp engine with a top speed of 113mph. A single-seat fighter with two wings, and one Vickers synchronized machine gun. (Which would shoot off the propeller, if it failed to work properly. The device was to keep the gun from firing, if the propeller was in the way. The Hanriot HD 1 was built in France, beginning in 1916. It was very popular with the pilots, because of its strength and maneuverability. The plane was used by the Belgian Air Force and the Italian Air Force. Soon it became the standard Italian fighter airplane. (Remember that during World War One, Both

Italy and Japan were our allies, not our enemies!)

Lt. Willy would become the leading Belgium ace with 37 victories. He is awarded the title of "chevalier" by the king of Belgium, chevalier means knight in English, and a knight is supposed to have a province. Therefore, he

became the chevalier de Houthulst. the Houthulst forest area is where he shot down most of his Huns. Lt. Willy received the cross of the Legion of Honor medal, and the Croix de Guerre (cross of war) medal. So he became Lieutenant William "Willy" Coppens de Houthulst.

Lt. Willy certainly did not fit the role of a fighter ace. He was slightly built, very short, and not handsome at all. He was also pale, almost colorless, and not at all talkative. He would have passed in a crowd completely unnoticed. Actually, on the ground, Lt. Willy was almost a genuine misfit. But in the air, he became another person, part man and part machine. He would dive on his quarry like a peregrine falcon. Lt. Willy would attack a balloon at 3,000 feet or 250 feet. The cable handlers would try to reel in their Fat Hilda before he could shoot it down. But he would follow it down until it fell in flames. The two observers would bail out and parachute to safety, if they were lucky. One time Lt. Willy was chasing one and ran out of bullets. So he actually tried to set it on fire, by rolling the wheels of his plane across its top.

He was born near Brussels, Belgium on July 6,

1892. He was 20 years old in 1912, when he was drafted into the Belgium Infantry, 3rd Battalion of the 2nd Grenadiers. But Lt.

selected pilot to a duel in the air, but this time Lt. Willy is answering a request from allied artillery. "Please destroy some Fat Hildas above

the town of Thoorout, Belgium. There are several balloons swaying and hanging at about 1,000 feet."

"I shot down one balloon." he said, "and turned to attack a second one while heavy

anti-aircraft fire was bursting all over. Suddenly I felt a terrible blow on my left leg. A tracer bullet came through the floor and struck my shinbone. It smashed everything in its path, and inflicted a very painful wound. And the bullet was hollow, so it flattened out and became a "dumdum" bullet." (A dumdum bullet has a soft head, or is cut across the tip, which causes it to expand on impact and tear a gaping wound. These bullets were first made in the town of Dumdum, India, that is why the funny name.) "My leg muscles were torn apart, the bones shattered, and the artery cut in half." The pain was so great, his right leg stretched out and became rigid. This kicked the right rudder bar violently forward, and of course his left leg was completely useless. This caused Lt. Willy's fighter plane to swing around and go into a spin. But he still had the satisfaction of "Flaming" this second Fat Hilda. The rudder bar was fitted with straps at each end, and his feet passed under these straps. This kept his left leg from jamming the bar. And it allowed Lt. Willy to work the rudder with only his right foot. "Therefore, after three revolutions, I was able to bring my plane out of the spin," he said proudly.

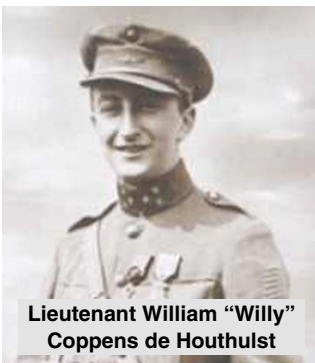
Now he must return to his lines quickly before he passes out. (With his leg artery cut in two, he was losing too much blood.) A bullet also went through one inlet pipe on his engine, so



by Cecil Owen



Hanriot HD 1 vs. Fat Hilda



Lieutenant William "Willy" Coppens de Houthulst

his speed was greatly reduced. And he still had to fly six more miles before he could reach his lines. He took off his goggles, fur-lined cap, and his silk muffler. He needed the ice cold air to blow in his face, to keep him from fainting. He could feel his strength forsaking him, so he fought desperately to stay awake. He wanted to keep from falling into the hands of the hated Huns. At last he was on his side of the battle front, so he began to land. He found a small field by the roadside near the little town of Essen, Belgium. The field was too small, and hemmed in with hedges, so he crash landed. His undercarriage was badly shot up by machine-gun fire and collapsed when it hit the ground. In fact, his Hanriot HD 1 was riddled with bullet holes from one end to the other. As soon as he stopped, he could see stretcher-bearers forcing their way through the hedges. They started ripping open the fuselage of his plane to extract his mangled body. They had trouble releasing his left foot from the rudder strap. There was a large pool of blood in the bottom of his cockpit. Then he passed out.

When he woke up, he only had one leg.

The hated Huns had finally silenced the guns of their arch enemy, Lieutenant William "Willy" Coppens de Houthulst: Belgium's top ace, who just loved to chase Fat Hildas. And he had succeeded in flaming twenty eight.

Sources:

The Canvas Falcons by Stephen Longstreet

Aces and Aircraft of World War One by Christopher Campbell

Fighter by Bryan Cooper and John Batchelor

Knights of the Air by Ezra Bowen