Grid: The Life and Times of First World War Fighter Ace Keith Caldwell.
By Adam Claasen.
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Reviewed by Gary Sheffield.

Combat in the air brought a rare splash of colour to the Western Front in the First World War. In what otherwise seems to be an anonymous conflict of mass armies and grinding attrition, individual pilots emerged from the mass of khaki and field grey. The names of the most famous of them – the German Manfred von Richthofen, the Canadian William Avery Bishop, and the Englishman Albert Ball, among others – continue to resonate to the present day. Keith Caldwell, the highest scoring New Zealand ace of the war with twenty-six victories, enjoyed some celebrity in his own time but is much less familiar today. In his fine biography of Caldwell, Adam Claasen gives the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) pilot nicknamed 'Grid' the degree of attention that he deserves. Ironically, as Caldwell was a modest man, he probably would have been embarrassed by the attention.

Claasen makes skilful use of Caldwell's papers, supplemented by other material such as the writings of Ira Jones, who served under Grid. The result is a biography of man set very firmly in the context of the institution and the broader military picture. The bulk of the book is concerned with Caldwell's career in the First World War, but there is enough personal material to give a sense of the man and his family. The book also covers, inevitably briefly, Grid's life in New Zealand in the interwar years, and his time back in uniform during the Second World War.

It is striking that the picture that emerges of the RFC, which became the Royal Air Force in April 1918, is of a genuinely imperial institution. 'Colonials' such as Caldwell abounded in squadrons that mixed men from Britain and Ireland with those from the dominions and even some Americans; Australia was the only dominion to set up its own flying service. This was quite a contrast with the land forces and Australia, Canada, South Africa and New Zealand had 'national' formations from an early stage in the Great War. These held an increasingly quasi-independent status, as befitted, to use the words of the Canadian historian Desmond Morton, 'junior but sovereign allies' of the British.[1] It was in the air service that the ideal of a genuinely pan-Empire military force came closest to realisation. Airmen did not have a problem with combining love of their native country (New Zealand in Caldwell's case) with a sense of 'Britishness' and pride in the Empire. In a rare slip, Claasen refers to the Irish ace 'Mick' Mannock as a 'mass of contradictions … [including being a] supporter of the British Empire who agitated for Irish Home Rule'. Far from this being a paradox, this was a common position of constitutional Irish nationalists who looked to the parliamentarian John Redmond as their leader. Although the events in Ireland from Easter 1916 onwards eventually marginalised such men, Mannock's views were fairly mainstream.

Claasen is excellent on Caldwell as a leader. As the 22-year-old commander of 74 'Tiger' Squadron he had a heavy burden of management and administration – the RFC was not lacking in military bureaucracy – but it is clear that Grid crossed that invisible line from boss to leader. Many years ago, Correlli Barnett commented wisely that leadership cannot be imposed on people. An individual may be appointed to a position of authority, but they only become a leader when their power and influence is accepted, willingly, by their subordinates. As a flight and later squadron commander, Caldwell cared deeply for his men. Moreover, as one of his pilots commented, he 'possessed that indefinable quality called Personality' (p. 12). Claasen

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cites many examples of Caldwell's leadership in action. One of the most memorable was his order that there must be a party in the Mess whenever the Squadron had suffered casualties: 'The death of anyone amongst us must never be allowed to affect our morale' (p. 216). Men were denied the space to brood.

Leadership involves making hard choices. Replacement pilots who did not measure up to Grid's exacting standards were posted away, if they lived long enough that was. It was in the interests of both the squadron's pilots and the rejects themselves for Caldwell to be ruthless in weeding out those who were unsuitable. By contrast, newcomers who showed promise received expert training and mentoring. One novice pilot who found a German fighter on his aeroplane's tail 'remembered Grid's advice in such a situation – joystick full forward, engine full on, dive like hell and get away'. He escaped. Ira Jones recalled that Caldwell's success as a 'C[ommanding] O[fficer] lay in example, both by words and deeds he inspired us to fight and kill … by patience, practice and [fearless] leadership, he welded together a unit which feared no foe' (p. 2).

Not the least of Dr Claasen's achievements is to paint such a convincing portrait of a true military leader, providing a wealth of detail of air fighting in the process. In air combat, Caldwell was numbered among the elite. At one stage, Caldwell had something a reputation for being a poor shot, because of his initially slow accumulation of kills. His eventual number of aerial victories was probably higher than the officially recorded 26, but Caldwell, unlike some other pilots, was cautious in making claims unless he was absolutely certain that he had destroyed an enemy aircraft.

Personally modest, Keith Caldwell was courageous and relentlessly aggressive. Ira Jones, himself a notable air fighter, wrote of the leader of his squadron 'I must hand the palm to Grid for individual valour … He frightens us as much as we frighten the Huns … "The sods, the Hunnerinoes – crack them at all costs!" is his motto' (p. 230). This level of hatred for the enemy – at least while in combat – undermines the popular image of gallant Knights of the Air duelling in the skies above the trenches. At least Caldwell was not as extreme as Mannock. Going down in flames was the airman's worst fear. As the RFC/RAF did not provide parachutes, many a pilot carried a revolver to shoot himself rather than burn to death. When von Richthofen was killed, some on the British side of the lines had 'mixed emotions'. Not so Mannock, who said 'I hope he roasted all the way down' (p. 216). Mick and Grid would tease each other about dying in such a horrible way, Caldwell wagering that Mannock would be the first to 'sizzle' (p. 217). Such was the way that two highly proficient fighter pilots handled the twin psychological burdens of killing and running the risk of being killed.

Grid is a book rich in detail on a number of matters: life in New Zealand in the twentieth century; the RFC in the Great War (Caldwell's views on Billy Bishop's controversial action for which he was awarded the Victoria Cross will be of great interest to historians of aviation – he doubted the truth of 'Bish's' story); and above all, military leadership under appalling stress. It is a significant achievement by a historian on top form.

[1] Desmond Morton, "'Junior but sovereign allies': The transformation of the Canadian expeditionary force, 1914–1918," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth Studies* 8, no. 1 (1979): 56–67.

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