It started as an observation platform and rapidly evolved into a weapon. By the end of the war it was realized that if you control the skies above a battlefield you will win the battle.

At the war’s beginning in 1914, all of the belligerent nations had air forces of one type or another. France had 140 aircraft, Germany about 250 and Great Britain about 180. All were flimsy, difficult to fly, short ranged and slow. Even with those limitations, aircraft were absolutely crucial in influencing the outcome of WW1.

On August 22, 1914, two British aircraft returned to their base with news of a huge column of the German First Army passing through Gramont. The German movement was the beginning of a turn to the east; it was part of the plan to envelope the British and French armies. Incredibly, British headquarters believed the air-born gathered information, and the British held their ground long enough for the French to escape. Then, on August 31st, additional Royal Flying Corps aircraft saw the Germans turn to the southeast in an apparent move to envelope Paris. Armed with this knowledge, the British and French were able to establish defensive positions around the French capitol. The resulting Battle of the Marne halted the German advance, and reversed the course of the war. Kaiser Wilhelm's dreams of defeating France in six weeks and then turning to defeat Russia were over. Germany was caught up in a fatal war on two fronts. Thus, in the first month of the Great War, aircraft, primitive as they were, made a decisive contribution to its outcome.

However, these events overrate the importance of aircraft in WW1 (and, frankly, even in the two battles mentioned). During the opening stages of WW1 in 1914, the war was still one of fluid movement. Aerial reconnaissance was at the very best, spotty and uncoordinated, and provided little useful intelligence that was not otherwise available. The incredibly short range of aircraft, the lack of aerial photography, and other technical limitations meant that recon was at best a hit or miss proposition. The complete lack of an organized aerial recon force only emphasized this problem. While some good intelligence was gained, it merely supplemented that gleaned by cavalry and traditional recon units.

Later in the war, aerial corps recon became more reliable, and some technical improvements helped with a few of the limitations. However, by then, the lines were static, and the range of aircraft was still too limited for very good strategic recon to occur and battlefield recon was still the norm.

The fact is that aircraft were just too new in WW1 to have any measurable impact. Aerial recon was limited by technical means, and fighters and bombers were just in their infancy.

But the Great War saw two cycles begin that were to become perennial parts of the future of aviation. One cycle was the ongoing competition - as one side gained an advantage with an improved aircraft, the other side would counter. The other cycle was the same sort of competition between the makers of fighters and the makers of bombers. Better fighters created the need for better bombers, which in turn created a need for better fighters, and so on. As terrible a war as the Great War was, it is fortunate that it ended when it did because both sides had already produced the beginnings of a fleet of advanced bombers that would have decimated cities and resulted in even greater civilian deaths across Europe.
Thirty years ago, on November 9, 1989, a most extraordinary thing happened. After decades of dividing a city and a nation, the Berlin Wall came down in a revolution that was sweeping communist Eastern Europe. In the blink of an historical eye, Berlin would be drastically changed and Germany's biggest city would be reunited. For that matter, the entire country would be.

The ripple wave from this event would eventually reach Moscow, toppling the Soviet Union's empire and ending communist rule in Russia that dated back to World War I.

The leader most responsible for the fall of the Wall was President Ronald Reagan, who stood in front of the Brandenburg Gate in June 1987 and issued a direct challenge to the Soviets, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall." Barely two years later, the wall collapsed because of the Reagan Doctrine, which applied economic, political and strategic pressure (including the Strategic Defense Initiative) on Moscow. Democracy triumphed over Communism in the Cold War and it was later written about by Mr. Reagan in his autobiography. He described the battle of ideas to be "between one system that gave preeminence to the state and another that gave preeminence to the individual and freedom."

Included in the museum's new Cold War Exhibit is a concrete section from the Berlin Wall (shown above). This historic artifact was earlier displayed at the U.S. Army Aviation Museum, Ft. Rucker, Alabama and is a great complement to the Cold War Exhibit in the South Wing.

Richard Henry "Hank" Collins, Jr. 1937 - 2019

Longtime member of the Board of Directors of the Southern Museum of Flight, "Hank" Collins, Jr. was born in 1937 and grew up in Homewood, attended Shades Valley High School and graduated from Marion Military Institute Junior College and the University of Alabama.

Hank served his country as a member of the United States Army at Fort Ord, CA before being accepted to the Army Aviation School in Fort Rucker, AL. He served with the 3rd Infantry Division in Kitzingen, Germany and in Vietnam. He was assigned platoon leader of the 4th Platoon in Vietnam and during 1965 and 1966, he flew daily surveillance flights in the fixed wing Cessna L-19. He received the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Air Medal, the Bronze Star Medal, as well as three Cross of Gallantry medals awarded to him by the Republic of South Vietnam. He later served as the Operations Officer at Wright Army Airfield at Fort Stewart in Georgia.

Following his separation from the service, Hank returned to the Birmingham area and was employed as an Area Sales Manager for the John Harland Company. He joined SouthTrust Bank in 1982 as the manager of the Commercial Development Dept., earned his Master of Public and Private Management at Birmingham-Southern College in 1986, and retired as a Senior Vice President of the bank in 2006. In 2017, he received the Glenn E. Messer Trophy for his ongoing contributions of interest, time, and effort to the continued growth of the Southern Museum of Flight.

He will be missed by his loving and devoted wife, Irene, and his many family members. His wisdom, wit and humor will also be missed by his many associates at the museum, but his vision for the future of this institution will help guide those who carry on his efforts.
The Museum’s restored Fokker D.VII replica is the featured aircraft for November as symbolic recognition of the end to World War I in 1918.

This accurate and painstaking restoration began when this famous aircraft was transported from the former Ryder Replica Fighter Museum in Lake Guntersville to the SMF. This aircraft, one of three D.VII-65s originally built in 1965 by Rousseau Aviation of Dinard, France for the movie, “The Blue Max”, was rumored to have been flown by the star of the movie, George Peppard, before it was “ground-looped.” In the 1980s, all three of the D.VIIs briefly resided with The Fighting Air Command in Denton, Texas.

The 1st Rousseau D.VII (N902AC) now flies in New Zealand with The Vintage Aviator Ltd., and has been restored to more accurately resemble an original D.VII. The 2nd Rousseau D.VII (N903AC) is currently at the Stampe & Vertongen Museum at the Antwerp International Airport in Belgium.

Work on the 3rd distressed Rousseau D.VII (N904AC), now displayed in our museum, began by straightening the fuselage and rebuilding the wood and fabric wings, while at the same time a talented museum volunteer began the construction of the “mock” engine from wood (Mercedes Model 1466-D31). All the museum volunteers participating in this restoration worked with the same dedication and passion so evident on all previous restorations of the museum’s vintage aircraft.

The Museum’s Fokker D.VII restoration project transformed this classic airframe, that had been severely damaged, into what you see today as the museum’s WW 1 representative aircraft. The Southern Museum of Flight is grateful to the former Ryder Replica Fighter Museum and the late Frank Ryder for their donation of this aircraft.

Fokker Flugzeug-Werke built fighter aircraft for Germany during World War I, and arguably the best fighter of the war produced by this firm was the Fokker D.VII. German pilots who flew combat in the D.VII marveled at the plane’s high rate of climb and excellent handling characteristics. It was German fighter ace pilot Manfred von Richthofen, “The Red Baron”, who pointed out, after testing the aircraft, that it can be a little unstable at times especially when diving. Thus, Fokker made modifications to improve the stability of the aircraft.

The Fokker’s service ceiling was higher than most Allied fighter planes. This advantage allowed D.VII pilots to built up speed and energy during an attack run, giving them the luxury of being able to pick and choose their targets.

In August 1918, Fokker fighters destroyed 565 Allied aircraft, making the D.VII one of the most feared aircraft of World War I. Over 2,000 of the D.VIIs were built in several different factories in Germany and equipped with either a Mercedes or BMW engine. It was the only airplane singled out in the Treaty of Versailles for confiscation or destruction at the end of the war.

After the war, Anthony Fokker returned to the Netherlands, focused on commercial aircraft and developed a profitable American branch of his Dutch firm in 1924. After World War 2, Fokker started over again with the F-27 which pioneered the short-range turboprop airliner concept in 1955. The worldwide airline crisis of the 1990s and fierce competition put Fokker out of business in 1996. The four Fokker subsidiaries were purchased by Stork and renamed Stork Aerospace in 1999.