

Kiwis at War 1917: Machines of War

By Brian Falkner

• Reading • Writing • Social Studies • Health • Art
• Technology • Debating • Research



Synopsis

1917 is a coming of age story centred on Keith Sunday, a young New Zealand soldier who volunteers for the Royal Flying Corps. His real name is Robert, but he has assumed the identity of his dead brother as he is only 17 – too young to enlist.

Sunday is sent to 48 Squadron, in La Bellevue, France as an observer on the new two seater Bristol Fighters. He is young, excitable and itching to get into action against 'The Hun'. He arrives at the start of 'Bloody April', a devastating month for the RFC. The aerodrome is under attack by German bombers. Sunday helps rescue a man from a flaming building, burning his hands in the process. He meets a young nurse at the aid station.

In time, Sunday gets to know the other airmen at the squadron and starts to form friendships. Because of his injuries, he is not able to participate in the first patrol of the Bristol Fighters, at the start of the battle of Arras. Of the six planes that leave, only two return. One is badly shot up. Keith is devastated at the loss of his new friends.

When his hands heal, he assumes his job as an observer, and applies for pilot training. Together with Errol Wright, a brilliant and flamboyant pilot, Sunday undertakes a number of missions, battling flak, ground fire and the German air force.

Shot down during the battle of Messines, Wright is killed by fire from the German trenches and Sunday is rescued by Charlie, a young New Zealand soldier. Charlie is suffering from shellshock and about to be summarily executed by his sergeant when Sunday intervenes.

On his return to the aerodrome, Sunday finds out that his application to flying school has been accepted. While in England he encounters the nurse that tended his burned hands and strikes up a romance with her.

At flying school, he is trained by a young New Zealander, Keith Caldwell (real-life character), then returns to 48 Squadron as a pilot. He meets another young New Zealander, Keith Park (another real-life character). They fly support missions during the battle of Passchendaele, appalled at the terrible loss of life.

During the battle of Cambrai, Sunday is again shot down; this time over German lines. He is captured but rescued when a tank smashes through the defences into the German command post. Under counterattack by the Germans, Sunday goes on board the tank to replace a Vickers gunner who has been killed. They hold off waves of attacks until the infantry arrives.

Returning to his squadron, Sunday learns that the young nurse he was seeing has been killed in the sinking of a hospital ship.

Despite everything he has been through, he puts on a brave face and gives an inspiring speech to the next crop of young pilots as they prepare for yet another mission over France.



About the Author

Brian Falkner was born and raised in Auckland, New Zealand. He began college intending to study computers, but along the way he decided to shift his focus to something more creative. After gaining a diploma of journalism, he worked as a reporter and advertising copywriter.

Other jobs helped pay the bills and also expand the first-hand experiences that would enrich his fiction, among them stints as a motorcycle courier, radio announcer, graphic designer, and internet developer. His first novel *Henry and the Flea* was published in 2003 when Brian was in his 40s.

Brian has now had fourteen novels published internationally, many of which have been shortlisted for major awards. His most recent book is *Shooting Stars* (also published by Scholastic NZ), and his novel *Battlesaurus: Rampage at Waterloo* was the NZ Children's Book Awards Winner for Young Adult Fiction in 2016.

He lives on the Gold Coast of Australia.

Writing Style

1917: Machines of War is a compelling read written in the first person, which will grip the reader from the outset. The narrator, Keith (or Bob as we discover), is a thoughtful, sincere and ultimately brave young man who will quickly take young readers to the edge of their seats. The story moves quickly, adding complex and believable characters into Keith's world.

This novel is likely to pique many readers' interest in the complexities of war and the young men and women who sacrificed their lives in the war effort, and will inspire more in-depth learning studies as well as supporting learning in English, History and Social Studies.

Shared Learning and Discussion Points

SHARING THE NOVEL:

- The students are likely to encounter words that are unfamiliar. Support them to ask questions to deepen their understanding of the text and themes presented in the novel.
- Encourage the students to make predictions based on the information they have so far about what will happen next. Support them to reflect throughout the novel to identify and share whether the assumptions they made changed as they read further.

INTRODUCING THE NOVEL

- Tell the students to study the front cover and read the back-cover blurb. Then ask:
 - What can you tell about the setting of this book?
 - Which war does it involve?
 - Which countries might be involved?
- Using the blurb and the cover illustration can you tell if the book will be fiction or non-fiction? Are you expecting it to be a sad story? Do you expect to find a hero in the story? What makes you think this?
- Why was it called 'The Great War'? What does 'it was a scar across the face of Europe' mean? What imagery does this give the reader?

PART ONE

Chapters 1–3

- Why did Keith feel so at home even when he was far away from his real home? What was so familiar?
- How did referring to the Germans as 'the demonic hordes' help the pilots?
- Why did Keith want to avenge the death of his brother?
- Keith was still excited about seeing 'action', even after being in the hospital tent and seeing the injured men. Why was he excited instead of afraid?
- At the hospital, Keith met a man who had lost his arm, but it wasn't the enemy that caused the amputation. What was the chain of events that resulted in him losing his arm?
- Where do you think Elisabeth got the uniform for Keith from? Why didn't she tell him?
- Why did they target Arras, even though they didn't plan to 'take it'? What did they hope would happen?
- Describe how each part of the armed forces carries out its role to meet the end goal. Is one more important than the other? Explain your reasoning.
- What did Bettington assume Keith had done to be so late? Could there have been another reason he wanted to keep Keith from flying?

Chapters 3–6

- Why did the men in the Mess Hall not want Keith to ask any questions? What is a 'ruddy gob'? What is a 'baptism of fire'?
- Why do you think the pilots carried a pistol in the cockpit?
- What is an 'Ack Emma' and why are they called this? Why couldn't Keith be friends with Mick? Who would disagree with them being friends?
- Why did the other men become more friendly to Keith after his first flight? Why had they been hesitant to become friends with him?
- Why did Wray and his observer return before the others? Why did Wright tell Bettington 'Don't wait up', when he returned from his flight?



teacher toolkit

 SCHOLASTIC

Chapters 7–9

- Who was referred to as ‘fresh meat’? Who called them ‘fresh meat’?
- Why do you think Keith volunteered to test fly the new plane in a different way with Wright?
- Why was Keith so confused about Wray’s actions? How do you think Wray was feeling? Keith asks himself, ‘Would the outcome have been different with six planes instead of five?’ Describe how the outcome may have been altered if Wray had stayed.
- What was the curtain at the service hiding? Why might they have tried to hide these?
- What happened to stop Keith’s trial? What news does Hughes bring? Why didn’t the officers already know about the Americans?

PART 2

Chapters 10–12

- Can you guess what the significance of the top hat was, and why Keith was chosen to have it next?
- Aside from praise for Keith, what other benefits might there have been for the allies if Keith had succeeded in shooting down a German ace?
- What had Keith misunderstood about Stohle?
- Why would the government have wanted Captain Albert Ball’s death kept a secret? Who didn’t they want to know about it, and why?
- What does Wright mean when he says, “We took something beautiful and turned it into something obscene”?
- What was the purpose of their secret mission? What were the risks for the pilots?
- What does the phrase ‘as much skill as luck’ mean?
- What is a cacophony?

Chapters 13–15

- What did the Allied troops do to protect Pip and Keith after they went down?
- What do the Germans look like to Keith in no-man’s-land?
- Why do you think the government made it so easy for boys as young as 15 to sign up?
- Why does Charlie call Keith ‘Sir’? Why are Charlie and Keith asked about the All Blacks in ‘05?
- Why wouldn’t the major give Charlie a break? What do you think happened next to Charlie?
- What significant piece of ‘technology’ was introduced at Upavon?

Chapters 16–18

- What does the Tennyson quote, “Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all” mean? Do you agree?
- Why did Elisabeth want Keith to meet her father? What is Lord Baron’s view of New Zealanders?
- What effect do you think parachutes would have had on the pilots?
- What is a ‘suffragette’? Can you name a New Zealand suffragette?

Chapters 19–20

- How did Keith pass his final flying test?
- Why did Calthorp’s horses not go to war?
- Do you believe Elisabeth won’t care if Keith dies? Why did she say that?

PART THREE

Chapters 21–24

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of the airfield moving to a new place?
- How were the German planes camouflaged?
- How does Keith feel about Wray’s admission? What do you think about it? Why does Keith pretend that he can’t remember the conversation when Wray asks him the next day?
- What was Voss’s message to Keith? How do you think they came to terms with respecting someone they were trying to kill?
- Who do you think told the lie about Keith? Why would he do it? How is Shield convinced that Keith is not a coward?
- How did Keith feel about Voss’s death? How old was Voss when he died? Were you surprised, given Voss’s reputation, how young he was?

Chapters 25–30

- Why did Wray tell Shield it was Keith that said he would surrender behind enemy lines? What did the Combat Wombat mean by, “You’re going to get either the Victoria Cross or a wooden cross”?
- Why didn’t Keith tell Shield about Wray once he’d learnt of Wray’s death? What would have been the consequences for Wray, and his family waiting at home for him, if he was seen to be a deserter or traitor?
- What does a pilot have to do to be called an ‘ace’? Do you think having it marked on your plane helps?
- What are the Hague Conventions that Keith tried to tell his captor about?



Activities

ACTIVITY 1: HIGH TECH UNIFORM REDESIGN

Choose a uniform from one of the branches of the armed services described in the book. Research the uniform as it was in 1917. List the disadvantages of its design and redesign it. Draw your design and label it, noting the improved features. Consider the weather, terrain and combat style in your design.

ACTIVITY 2: PHONETIC ALPHABET

Mick and Keith tease each other by using the Phonetic Alphabet, which makes communication clearer in the armed forces. In pairs, use the blackline master to relay messages to each other. Challenge the class to design more complex challenges for each other using the Phonetic Alphabet, or, as a class, redesign the alphabet around a theme, e.g. words relevant to your school or community.

ACTIVITY 3: GETTING REVENGE

On p. 110 Keith describes his feelings about revenge. Use his words (below) to inspire the beginning of another fictional story. Consider the main character's motives for revenge. Will their motives be obvious from the beginning of the story or something you will reveal at the end, or even not at all?

"I could not even say it was a desire for revenge. It was something else. A kind of bloodlust. A need to punish. To hurt. To kill my enemy, even though it would – as it surely must – cost me my own life."

ACTIVITY 4: DEBATE

And did you exchange a walk-on part in the war for a lead role in a cage? [Pink Floyd]

On p. 49 Wright gives the men the following speech, which Keith repeats at the very end of the story:

"Some of us may die," he said. "But know this: if you do, know that you will have seen more, know that you will have done more, than most people do in fourscore years. You will have marched amidst the clouds like a god and left your footprints on the world. Not for you the slow death from a thousand niggles as you waste away in your asylum. You will die as you have lived, a brilliant flash across the heavens and you will be remembered forever."

Remind the students of this text and then play them Pink Floyd's song 'Wish You Were Here' (Lyrics can be downloaded at www.pink-floyd-lyrics.com). Ask them to consider their opinion of Wright's speech and the song and prepare an argument to convince another classmate of their point of view.

ACTIVITY 5: CHEMICAL WARFARE

Research the methods of chemical warfare mentioned in the book; phosgene, chlorine, mustard gas. Show your findings in a Venn Diagram.

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teacher toolkit

 SCHOLASTIC