

NISSIM DE CAMONDO AND THE GREAT WAR 1914-1917

> MUSÉE NISSIM DE CAMONDO

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His enthusiasm rekindled and he adopted his fellow airmen's lifestyle, always subject to the weather: "When we cannot fly, which is frequent, the day goes by pleasantly enough," he explained. He took his first flying lessons at Le Crotoy then went on a photography course at Plessis-Belleville. Rapidly put in charge of the squadron's photographic service, he felt useful and gained confidence: "I am succeeding with my photos, they are currently proving invaluable"⁴. (Fig.4) In the spring of 1916, in April and May, his squadron took part in the Battle of Verdun. In the autumn, every time Nissim took part in the Franco-British offensive in the Battle of the Somme, he was mentioned in dispatches. "An aerial observer-photographer of great value, for his daring, composure and professional skill. During the battles of Verdun and the Somme, in which the army corps was engaged, due to his courage, he successfully completed a considerable number of photographic missions made highly dangerous by violent attacks by heavily armed enemy fighter planes, particularly during the day of 3 November 1916, when his aircraft was severely damaged. Lieutenant de Camondo has already been mentioned twice in dispatches: by order of the division and by order of the army corps"⁵. He piloted regularly from June and his licence was approved in November 1916.

At the beginning of 1917, he was sent on a training course at the 5th Army's Aeronautical Superintendency at Fismes in the Marne. In the spring, 33 Squadron frequently changed sector in the Marne and fought during the disastrous Nivelle offensive on the Chemin des Dames in April 1917. Despite difficult weather conditions, the squadron went on numerous reconnaissance flights. In June, it was stationed in the heart of Lorraine, in Meurthe-et-Moselle, first at Moyeu then at Lunéville in August. In June 1917, the squadron received Dorand AR 1 reconnaissance biplanes to replace its Farman F.40s, considered obsolete (Fig. 5). In the morning of 5 September, Flight Lieutenant Nissim de Camondo and Observer Lieutenant Lucien Desessard took off on a reconnaissance mission aboard this new plane and never returned. As there were no eyewitnesses, the fate of the two aviators remained in doubt. Not

until late September did their death become a certainty. Nissim de Camondo's fifth mention in dispatches gives an account of this last combat: "Having forced an enemy plane to land behind its lines, his own aircraft being badly damaged, he attempted to remain airborne until the last moment (...)"⁶. It was later established that the young officer was buried with military honours on 9 September in the German cemetery at Avricourt (Fig. 6). And so the sombre premonition that the young man confided to his girlfriend Renée Dorville – "Aviation is a devourer of men and tomorrow I may be no longer"⁷ – had come true.

His remains were brought back to Paris late in January 1919 and interred in the Camondo family vault in Montmartre Cemetery, where they remain to this day. At Avricourt, Moïse de Camondo erected a funerary monument on the plot where his son had been buried. A stele was installed on the site where his plane crashed. In 2005 it was moved to the nearby Entonnoirs national memorial cemetery at Leintrey. Count de Camondo succeeded in having his son posthumously awarded the Cross of Knight of the Legion of Honour.

As he admitted himself to a close acquaintance, his son's tragic death shattered his life and all his future projects. Determined to preserve Nissim's memory, Moïse de Camondo soon decided to dedicate his newly built mansion and the collections he was still augmenting, to the memory of his son by creating a museum in his name. He explained in his will: "My mansion will be given the name of my son, Nissim de Camondo, for whom this mansion and these collections were destined." He expressly demanded that the various portraits of the young hero hanging in the mansion's rooms should remain where they were. Count de Camondo thus created a museum that would preserve his family from oblivion and death while brilliantly affirming his passion for the refinement and elegance of French decorative art in the 18th century.

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Fig.5. Lieutenant Nissim de Camondo piloting a Dorand biplane, 1917. Photo Les Arts Décoratifs, Paris



Fig.6. On his last leave, with Renée Dorville at Deauville in August 1917. Photo Les Arts Décoratifs, Paris



Fig.1 Flight Lieutenant Nissim de Camondo, 1917. Photo Les Arts Décoratifs, Paris

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4. AMNC, P.LN.3, letter from Nissim de Camondo to his father, 27 April 1916.
5. *Le Gaulois*, 3 January 1917, "Le Livre d'Or de l'Armée", p. 1.

6. Excerpt from dispatch no.169, 24 October 1917.
7. AMNC, P.RD.1, letter from Nissim de Camondo to Renée Dorville, 4 February 1916.

Commemorating the centenary of the heroic death of Flight Lieutenant Nissim de Camondo (1892-1917) in air combat on 5 September 1917, this exhibition and the accompanying publication pay tribute to his memory (Fig. 1).

Born in Paris in 1892, Nissim de Camondo was the last male heir to the Camondo family. His father, Count Moïse, banker and passionate collector of 18th-century French decorative art, and his mother, née Irène Cahen d'Anvers, also born into a family of brilliant financiers and art lovers, separated shortly after the birth of his sister Béatrice in 1894. The future of this handsome, athletic young man, born in the most auspicious circumstances, was set out for him: he would direct the family bank, I. Camondo & Cie.

An excellent horseman, Nissim enlisted before call-up for his military service, in the cavalry regiment stationed at Senlis. He was discharged in November 1913 with the rank of sergeant and went to work in the Securities Department of the Banque de Paris et des Pays-Bas.

THE CAVALRYMAN, 1914-1915

At the outbreak of the First World War, Nissim de Camondo was twenty-two years old. On 1 August he rejoined his regiment and left for the front. From then on he wrote regularly to his family. All the letters he wrote to his father and sister, in

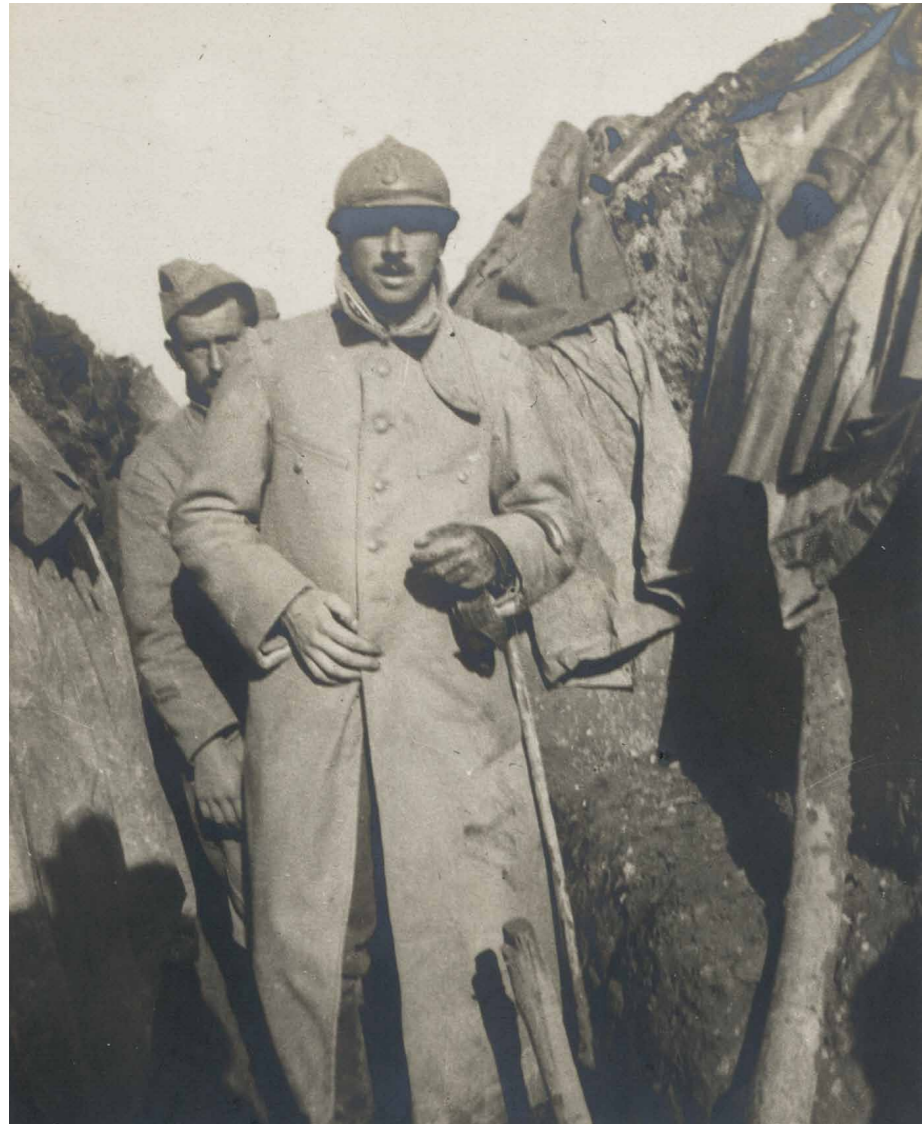


Fig.2 In the trenches at Bois-en-Hache in the Aix-Noulette sector, November 1915
Photo Les Arts Décoratifs, Paris

the museum's archives, constitute a fascinating and moving testimony. He also kept a campaign journal, with Ordinance Survey maps indicating his movements and where he was billeted, enabling us to follow his movements day by day.

On the orders of General André Sordet, his cavalry corps entered Belgium and deployed along the River Ourthe, in the Neufchâteau and Bastogne region to the east, to reconnoitre the German advance. From 15 August, his position moved to the north of the Sambre. Nissim de Camondo rapidly distinguished himself by his courage. He was cited for the first time in his division's dispatches and promoted to sub-lieutenant. Enthusiastic, he found combat "splendid" and regarded war as a game: "For the time being, it's wildly amusing," he wrote in the first days of combat. But the failure of the French offensive ended in retreat from 20 August. Early in September, his regiment took part in the Battle of the Ourcq, on the right bank of the Marne between Nanteuil-le-Haudoin and Meaux. The enemy retreated towards the Aisne. The allied armies attempted to contain the Germans between the Oise and the Aisne, but met with fierce resistance. The front stabilised in the east of the country. French and British forces attempted to expel the enemy from France. This was the beginning of the "Race to the Sea," the final stage of the mobile war. The Germans maintained their positions in the north and a continuous front established itself from the North Sea to the Swiss frontier. Ten French départements were now occupied by the enemy and all hope of a short



Fig.3 Next to a Farman biplane, 33 Squadron, 1916. Photo Les Arts Décoratifs, Paris

war vanished. Sub-lieutenant Nissim de Camondo and the 1st Cavalry Corps were now under the command of General Louis Conneau.

From October 1914 until the last weeks of the war the Western Front remained almost static. With more than 720 kilometres of trenches, these fortified lines symbolised the "war of position." Artillery was the weapon most frequently used by both sides to try and breach enemy lines. Nissim de Camondo now found himself immersed in trench warfare.

With the retreat came weariness, discouragement and the mud of the trenches: "It's one big mess, especially at night with your feet in water and the fog chilling you to the bone." And, as he began to express in his letters, he was far from his loved ones: "This is the first time that I have gone three months without seeing you (...) and time is beginning to weigh on me"¹.

Since his mobilisation, Nissim de Camondo had been suffering from abdominal pain. On 6 January 1915, he left the front to be operated for appendicitis in Paris. After convalescing at the Clignancourt Barracks until the end of March he was posted to Saumur, where he trained saddle horses, then in July and August he was instructed as an artilleryman at Sables-d'Olonne. The following month, he left for the front in the Pas-de-Calais, where he was posted to the infantry platoon of the 21st Regiment of Dragoons, part of the 10th Army.

Now a machine gunner in an infantry battalion, he bitterly lamented no longer being on horseback: "It's a dirty thing to be an infantryman and I've no great taste for the job"². During the third Battle of Artois, he fought in the trenches, often in the front line (Fig.2). Profoundly affected by the horrifying combat he endured and the loss of comrades during a "day of horror"³, he strove to change posting: "I've decided to apply for aviation (...) it's less dangerous than what I'm ungloriously doing everyday," he confided to his father in December 1915.

THE AVIATOR, 1916-1917

His wish was granted early in 1916. He was posted to 33 Squadron as an observer (Fig.3). The squadron, commanded by Captain Alfred Bordage, specialised in aerial observation and directing artillery fire. Its insignia, the double-bladed axe painted on its planes' fuselages, was a visual play on words: "hache d'A. Bordage" (boarding axe). When Nissim de Camondo joined the squadron, it was based at Bruay-en-Artois.



Fig.4 Sub-Lieutenant Nissim de Camondo, observer, 33 Squadron, aboard a Farman biplane, 1916
Photo Les Arts Décoratifs, Paris

1. Archives du musée Nissim de Camondo (AMNC), P.LN.1, letter from Nissim de Camondo to his father, 8 November 1914.

2. AMNC, P.LN.2, letter from Nissim de Camondo to his father, 16 October 1915.

3. AMNC, P.LN.2, letter from Nissim de Camondo to his father, 18 November 1915.