

More than 100 pilots surpassed Manfred von Richthofen's kill total, but none earned his fame or notoriety.



The Red Baron

By Dik A. Daso

In the history of aerial warfare, there is no name more recognizable than Manfred Albrecht Freiherr von Richthofen—the Red Baron. Credited with 80 victories (there were certainly more, unofficial ones), Richthofen's rise to the pinnacle of the aerial elite began in the cavalry and survives today in an era witnessing the slow demise of the century-old ethos and profession of the fighter pilot.

Why is the Red Baron still lionized after nearly 100 years? There are some 1,800 World War I aces, all belligerent countries counted. Why don't the ever-colorful Eddie Rickenbacker, Canadian William A. Bishop, Frenchman Rene P. Fonck, Germany's Ernst Udet, or English ace Edward C. Mannock hold such mystique?

During World War II, more than 100 pilots had exceeded Richthofen's 80 victories. Germany alone ended the war with more than 5,000 ace pilots. Yet, the leading aerial ace of all time, Erich A. Hartmann (352 in World War II), remains relatively unknown. Can it be as simple as the fact that the Red Baron was the first "Ace of Aces"? Are there lessons from Richthofen's experiences that might be relevant today?

In his youth, Richthofen enjoyed hunting and became a skilled marksman. At the turn of the 20th century, game hunting was a popular pastime, particularly among the affluent. He had a keen eye and became particularly accurate with a rifle. Much has been made of this skill, but Richthofen was certainly not unique in this regard.

George C. Marshall and Henry H. "Hap" Arnold, American Army officers, future five-star generals, and Richthofen contemporaries, were both avid hunters. Arnold was also accomplished at shooting skeet, but never became an ace pilot. In 1909, former President Theodore Roosevelt single-handedly provided the Smithsonian Institution with a collection of thousands of African mammals. Philosophically, the crux of this fascination with hunting revolves around developing the determination and will to intentionally take the life of another living thing—the killer instinct.

Richthofen, of course, killed dozens of airmen during the course of the war—sometimes at such a close range their blood spattered his aircraft. Marshall and Arnold went on to command Allied forces during World War II and routinely



Painting by Ivan Berryman courtesy of Cranston Fine Arts

Above: This painting by Ivan Berryman depicts Richthofen flying his iconic Fokker Dr.I triplane.

made decisions ultimately resulting in thousands of casualties on both sides of the battle lines. The ability to kill calmly and with purpose carried over to military experiences around the globe. Being an excellent shot was simply an added benefit in Richthofen's case.

The Red Baron's military career began in the cavalry. The thunderous charge and the flashy uniforms often enticed young men into service as horsemen. Tales of Teutonic knights impervious to enemy attacks fashioned the ethos of German nobility. Composers, such as Richard Wagner, wrote operas and symphonies honoring these heroic characters.

Born into social status and influenced by high culture, Richthofen had been

exposed to traditional aspects of nobility and personal glory at an early age. Acclaim in the skies could not yet be imagined, as aerial weaponry was then only in its infancy, but he envisioned a triumphant celebration at his hereditary home after cavalry victories in combat. Trench warfare completely derailed any such thoughts and he remained unfulfilled while on cavalry duty on both fronts during the first year of the Great War. In May 1915, Richthofen took his longing for glory with him when he transferred to the Fliegertruppe (the German air service).

Close-in Work

Oswald Boelcke, one of Germany's early fighter pilots, became Richthofen's flying tutor. This master of the air and Max Immelmann became the first two airmen admitted to the Order Pour le Mérite, an honor sought by every Prussian soldier and reserved for fighter pilots with a history of confirmed victories.

Strangely, neither Boelcke nor Richthofen cared much for flying. They placed more importance on audacity in the face of the enemy than on piloting ability (looping and aerobatics). Both men believed that ultimately the purpose of military fighters was to attack and destroy other aircraft and kill enemy airmen.

Richthofen even went as far as to forbid aerobatics of any kind during his months in command. He believed that a pilot need not "be an aerobatic artist or trick shooter" but did require courage enough to "fly right up to the opponent."

In modern fighter pilot terms, he meant it was essential to "get close to your work." In the days of the early aerial machine gun, closer was definitely better for killing a target maneuvering in three dimensions. Richthofen understood that the object of combat flying was killing the enemy, and attacks in a stabilized "two-dimensional" environment were usually more successful, particularly when unobserved by the victim. Preservation of one's own forces and equipment became far more important than practicing loops and barrel rolls. Richthofen's airplane became his steed—the machine gun, his rapier.

Richthofen's early learning experiences were not out of the ordinary. During World War I, for example, Marshall's mentor was Gen. John J. Pershing, commander of the American Expeditionary Forces in Europe. During the years after the war, Arnold's mentor was none other than Brig. Gen. Billy Mitchell. Clearly, the mentor's abilities and characteristics can have a dramatic impact on a student's future performance. Richthofen joined the Pour le Mérite order one year after his teacher, Boelcke, had received its "Blue Max."

There is certain irony that Boelcke's death came in a midair collision between his aircraft and his wingman's, both taking evasive action to miss an enemy D.H.2—chased by a young Richthofen. Such an end had denied Boelcke what Richthofen characterized as a "beautiful death."

Richthofen would only write that the loss of his mentor "affected all of us very deeply."



Photo via National Archives

Like many fighter pilots of his day, the Red Baron was an ambitious, glory-seeking egomaniac.



The Red Baron took trophies from every kill.

Yet, witnessing aerial accidents was not a unique occurrence in those days. A young Lt. Jimmy Doolittle saw a fatal collision between two training aircraft just before taking off on his first military training flight, and then helped to pull survivors from the wreckage. He continued the mission and took off. Doolittle later escaped death himself after decapitating a student pilot during a midair collision in the traffic pattern.

Events such as these hardened most pilots to the realities of early aerial combat.

Richthofen took command of Royal Prussian Jagdstaffel 11 (Jasta 11) in January 1917 and arrived at his new base in the newest fighter available, the Albatros D.III. Immediately, he ordered his standard camouflage paint scheme changed to a solid, bright blood red over the entire Albatros.

This was the same month he received the Pour le Mérite after his 16th victory. These hard-fought wins had taken five difficult months. By April 21, 1918, he would add 64 more.

Richthofen had the rest of his unit's airplanes also painted red, and each individual pilot added distinguishing colors or markings so they could be identified by the color during aerial combat.

It took little time for British and French pilots to report that they had been attacked by—and barely escaped from—a group of airplanes that resembled a “flying circus,” with the leader's aircraft completely red. Richthofen scored the vast majority of his victories in his red Albatros, although

his red Fokker Dr.I triplane may be more iconic.

Modern characterizations frequently highlight those few kills that he scored near the end of his career in that colorful three-winged aircraft. While the translation was different in each country, soon everyone knew that engaging the blood red Albatros meant a tangle with the Red Baron. This was precisely the effect he had been hoping for.

Guts for the Glory

By laying down the gauntlet, Richthofen made certain there would be other aerial “knights” to challenge Jasta 11—the pilots and the commander. This approach might today be interpreted as taking nose art to an unhealthy extreme, but to the Red Baron, it established an attitude of invincibility that he continued to instill in his airmen by both word and deed.

Yet, beyond his obvious courage and daring, there remains a less examined side, perhaps the side that made Richthofen so deadly in the air and also resulted in his demise: He was an ambitious egomaniac, a “Kreuzschmerzen” (slang for one diligently pursuing the Iron Cross), and he was not alone.

French pilots freely admitted medals brought the glory they sought in combat. Canadian ace Bishop flew and fought relentlessly until he had earned the Victoria Cross, his country's highest award for valor. Again, nothing in Richthofen's persona was particularly unique. In fact, glory quests were rewarded not only with medals but also with fame and notoriety.

It was common practice after an aerial victory to land near the vanquished and retrieve a piece of the enemy's airplane. While this act may sound a bit crazy, German fighter airplanes primarily had a defensive role and seldom crossed over Allied lines any farther than would allow them to glide back to friendly territory in an emergency.

Richthofen, however, often went far beyond the simple proof required for an aerial credit. Typically, he or the ground soldier verifying the kill, cut from his victim's airplane a swath of cloth that included the serial number, and then Richthofen affixed the cloth to the wall in his trophy room. In at least one case, lacking any physical proof from a destroyed airplane, he had a rather graphic photograph taken of the dead pilot as proof of the kill, reproduced it, then sent a copy home to his mother.

The quest for military honors was initially fueled by the requirement to reach eight victories—a number typically needed to earn the Pour le Merite. By the time Richthofen gained acceptance to the order with 16 kills, he was the first to successfully meet its increasingly demanding aerial victory numbers.

In addition to shootdown trophies during these early days, he ordered a small cup, from a silversmith in Berlin, engraved with the aircraft type and the shootdown date, following each of his first 60 victories. Only a nationwide silver shortage stopped that tradition.

Bravado was common among all fighter pilots. Some might argue it was actually necessary in aerial combat in those days. Both French and British pilots personalized their airplanes, usually to ensure recognition by their own units in the air. British authorities, however, frowned on markings that overshadowed the cohesiveness of the fighting unit, and although individualism during aerial action was encouraged, individualism demonstrated in appearances was “in poor taste.”

The Red Baron narrowly escaped death on July 6, 1917, when a British F.E.2 observer's bullet struck him in the head, splintering a section of his skull. He was forced to land and was immediately hospitalized to heal the wound. Richthofen had just taken command of Jagdgeschwader 1, a fighter wing consisting of four Jastas. This unit, dispersed along the front lines and all painted in colorful schemes, became known as Richthofen's Flying Circus.

But it was also during these months that the British regained their technical advantage in the skies over Germany. Advanced Sopwith fighters (Triplanes and Camels), along with Bristol two-seaters, soon dominated Richthofen's Fokker aircraft. In a letter to a close friend written during his recuperation he said, “You would not believe how low morale is among fighter pilots presently at the front because of their sorry machines. No one wants to be a fighter pilot anymore.”

Wounded and facing mounting odds, he continued to command and to fight, refusing medical grounding. He returned to combat—shooting down two enemy airplanes in August—before taking another hiatus through the fall of 1917. He then flew two successful combat sorties but subsequently endured another dry spell until March 1918.

It seemed that the head wound had more long-lasting effects than initially thought by his doctors.

Recuperation from his open head wound was painful and required several surgical



Left: Richthofen (in the cockpit of an Albatros D.III) pictured with members of Jasta 11.

Approaching 10:30 a.m. on April 21, 1918, the Red Baron and two wingmen took to the skies, responding to incoming British aircraft. Less than an hour later Richthofen, deep in Allied territory, died in his airplane. His life was most probably ended by a lucky shot from the ground.

For whatever reason, Richthofen had violated his second general principle and followed a seemingly hapless British pilot, flying a Sopwith Camel, who was attempting to escape to friendlier skies. Flying very low, the dueling twosome etched their way through the Somme River valley until the baron's Fokker triplane, closing for the kill, appeared to suddenly spin into the ground behind the Australian Front.



The Red Baron's mystique still filters into popular culture in numerous ways. The rock band Led Zeppelin reworked the top left picture of the infamous baron and members of Jasta 11 for the cover of their second album—with their own and other music figures' heads superimposed on the bodies.

procedures and time, more time than Richthofen was willing to sacrifice away from his unit. During the period he spent at home, he did take the opportunity to deal with the realities of the war.

All indications are that, mentally, he had matured a tremendous amount. He completed an aerial tactics manual and also reread his diary-autobiography written during the early months of the war. As a seasoned combat veteran and a witness to mounting losses, he saw the poor morale—the result of looming defeat—among the fliers. He found his early writing flamboyant and self-important—not representative of the man he had become during the war.

On April 19, 1918, a copy of Richthofen's Air Combat Operations Manual was delivered to the Supreme Headquarters for dissemination to other units. The detailed document summarized combat flight experience into a practical aerial tactics manual. Among the lessons

learned: Exploit the element of surprise and shoot before being discovered, maintain energy in a tough dogfight (speed and power), and shoot the gunner of a two-seat aircraft first.

Richthofen also described two "General Principles" that were "never" to be violated.

First, never "overshoot" your adversary—that is, fly past a slower opponent who might then shoot at you.

Maturation

And second, "never obstinately stay with an opponent whom through bad shooting [by the attacking pilot] or skillful turning [by the defender] one has been unable to shoot down." He noted that when the battle lasts until it is far on the other side of the enemy lines, "one is alone and faced by a greater number of opponents."

He was 11 days shy of his 26th birthday.

Through the decades that followed, the legend of the Red Baron became larger than life, heroic in epic proportions. His funeral rivaled those given to heads of state and was perhaps more ceremonial.

Since his death, the Great War's leading fighter ace has represented the embodiment of the chivalrous "Knight of the Air," not only for Germany but for fighter pilots everywhere. Even in recent generations, the name "Red Baron" has repeatedly popped up in popular songs, cartoons, and elsewhere, ensuring that his legend continues. ■

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