Manfred von Richthofen

Manfred von Richthofen Information

Manfred Albrecht Freiherr von Richthofen (2 May 1892 - 21 April 1918), widely known as the Red Baron, was a German fighter pilot with the Imperial German Army Air Service (Luftstreitkräfte) during World War I. He is considered the ace-of-aces of that war, being officially credited with 80 air combat victories, more than any other pilot.

Originally a cavalryman, Richthofen transferred to the Air Service in 1915, becoming one of the first members of Jasta 2 in 1916. He quickly distinguished himself as a fighter pilot, and during 1917 became leader of Jasta 11 and then the larger unit Jagdgeschwader 1 ("better known as the 'Flying Circus'). By 1918 he was regarded as a national hero in Germany, and was very well known by the other side.

Richthofen was shot down and killed near Amiens on 21 April 1918. There has been considerable discussion and debate regarding aspects of his career, especially the circumstances of his death. He remains very possibly the most widely known fighter pilot of all time, and has been the subject of many books and films.

Name and nicknames

Richthofen was a Freiherr (literally "Free Lord"), a title of nobility often translated as Baron. This is not a given name nor strictly a hereditary title since all male members of the family were entitled to it, even during the lifetime of their father. This title, combined with the fact that he had his aircraft painted red, led to Richthofen being called "The Red Baron" ("der Rote Baron" [help·info]) both inside and outside Germany. During his lifetime, however, he was more often described in German as Der Rote Kampfflieger (variously translated as The Red Battle Flyer or The Red Fighter Pilot). This name was used as the title of Richthofen's 1917 "autobiography.

Richthofen's other nicknames include "Le Diable Rouge" ("Red Devil") or "Le petit Rouge" ("Little Red") in French, and the "Red Knight" in English.

Early life
Von Richthofen was born in Kleinburg, near Breslau, Lower Silesia (now part of the city of Wrocław, Poland), into a prominent Prussian aristocratic family. His father was Major Alfred Phillip Karl Julius Freiherr von Richthofen and his mother was Kunigunde von Schloss und Neudorf. He had an elder sister (Ise) and two younger brothers.

When he was four years old, Manfred moved with his family to nearby Schweidnitz (now Świdnica). He enjoyed riding horses and hunting as well as gymnastics at school. He excelled at parallel bars and won a number of awards at school. He and his brothers, Lothar and Bolko, hunted wild boar, elk, birds and deer.

After being educated at home he attended a school at Schweidnitz, before beginning military training when he was 11. After completing cadet training in 1911, he joined an Uhlan cavalry unit, the Ulanen-Regiment Kaiser Alexander der III. von Russland (1. Westpreuβisches) Nr. 1 ("1st Uhlan Regiment 'Emperor Alexander III of Russia (1st West Prussia Regiment')")., and was assigned to the regiment's 3. Eskadron ("Number 3 Squadron").

When World War I began, Richthofen served as a cavalry reconnaissance officer on both the Eastern and Western Fronts, seeing action in Russia, France, and Belgium. Traditional cavalry operations soon became impossible due to machine guns and barbed wire, and the Uhlians were used as infantry. Disappointed at not being able to participate more often in combat, Richthofen applied for a transfer to Die Fliegertruppen des deutschen Kaiserreiches (Imperial German Army Air Service), later to be known as the Luftstreitkräfte, shortly after viewing a German military aircraft while deployed behind the lines. To his own surprise, his request was granted, and he joined the flying service at the end of May 1915.

Piloting career

"I had been told the name of the place to which we were to fly and I was to direct the pilot. At first we flew straight ahead, then the pilot turned to the right, then left. I had lost all sense of direction over our own aerodrome...I didn't care a bit where I was, and when the pilot thought it was time to go down, I was disappointed. Already I was counting down the hours to the time we could start again..."

From June to August 1915, Richthofen was an observer on reconnaissance missions over the Eastern Front with Fliegerabteilung 69 ("No. 69 Flying Squadron"). On being transferred to the Champagne Front, he managed to shoot down an attacking French Farman aircraft with his observer's machine gun in a tense battle over French lines; however he was not credited with the kill, since it fell behind Allied lines and therefore could not be confirmed.

After a chance meeting of the German ace fighter pilot Oswald Boelcke, Richthofen entered training as a pilot in October 1915. In March 1916, he joined Kampffgeschwader 2 ("No. 2 Bomber Geschwader") flying a two-seater Albatros C.III. Initially he appeared to be a below average pilot, struggling to control his aircraft, and crashing during his first flight at the controls. Despite this poor start he rapidly became attuned to his aircraft and, as if confirmation, over Verdun on 26 April 1916, he fired on a French Nieuport, downing it over Fort Douaumont, though once again he received no official credit. A week later, he decided to ignore more experienced pilots' advice against flying through a thunderstorm, and later noted that he had been "lucky to get through [the weather]", and vowed never again to fly in such conditions unless ordered to do so.

After another spell flying two-seaters on the Eastern Front, he met Oswald Boelcke again in August 1916. Boelcke, visiting the east in search of candidates for his newly formed fighter unit, selected Richthofen to join Jagdstaffel 2 ("fighter squadron"). Richthofen won his first aerial combat with Jasta 2 over Cambrai, France, on 17 September 1916. Boelcke was killed during a midair collision with a friendly aircraft on 28 October 1916, Richthofen witnessing the event himself.

After his first confirmed victory, Richthofen ordered a silver cup engraved with the date and the type of enemy machine from a jeweller in Berlin. He continued this until he had 60 cups, by which time the dwindling supply of silver in blockaded Germany meant that silver cups like this could no longer be supplied. Richthofen discontinued his orders at this stage, rather than accept cups made in pewter or other base metal.

Instead of using risky, aggressive tactics like those of his brother, Lothar (40 victories), Manfred observed a set of maxims (known as the "Dicta Boelcke") to assume the success for both the squadron and its pilots. He was not a spectacular or acrobatic pilot, like his brother or the renowned Werner Voß. However, he was a notable tactician and squadron leader and a fine marksman. Typically, he would dive from above to attack with the advantage of the sun behind him, and with other Jasta pilots covering his rear and flanks.

On 23 November 1916, Richthofen downed his most famous adversary, British ace Major Lance Hawker VC, described by Richthofen himself as "the British Boelcke". The victory came while Richthofen was flying an Albatros D.II and Hawker was flying a D.H.2. After a long dogfight, Hawker was killed by a bullet in the head as he attempted to escape back to his own lines. After this combat, Richthofen was convinced he needed a fighter aircraft with more agility, even at a loss of speed. He switched to the Albatros D.III in January 1917, scoring two victories before suffering an inflight crack in the spar of the aircraft's lower wing on 24 January. Richthofen reverted to the Albatros D.II or Halberstadt D.II for the next five weeks. On 6 March, his aircraft was shot through the petrol tank by Edwin Benbow, and Richthofen force landed without injury. Richthofen then scored another victory in the Albatros D.III on 9 March, but since his Albatros D.III was grounded for the rest of the month, Richthofen switched again to a Halberstadt D.II.

He returned to his Albatros D.III on 2 April 1917 and scored 22 victories in it before switching to the Albatros D.V in late June. Following his return from convalescence in October, Richthofen flew the celebrated Fokker Dr.I triplane, the distinctive three-winged aircraft with which he is most commonly associated, although he probably did not use the type exclusively until after it was reissued with strengthened wings in November. Despite the popular link between Richthofen and the Fokker Dr. I, only 19 of his 80 kills were made in this type. It was his Albatros D.III Serial No. 789/16 that was first painted bright red, in late January 1917, and in which he first earned his name and reputation.

Richthofen championed the development of the Fokker D.VII with suggestions to overcome the deficiencies of the then current German fighter aircraft. However, he never had an opportunity to fly it in combat as he was killed just days before it entered service.
Richthofen was fatally wounded just after 11 a.m. on 21 April 1918, while flying over Vaux-sur-Somme, in a sector controlled by the Australian Imperial Force (AIF). One witness, Gunner George Ridgway, who had to dive steeply at very high speed to intervene, and then had to climb steeply to avoid hitting the ground. Richthofen turned to avoid this attack, and then resumed his pursuit of May.

It was almost certainly during this final stage in his pursuit of May that Richthofen was hit by a single .303 bullet, which caused such severe damage to his heart and lungs that it must have produced a very speedy death. In the last seconds of his life, he managed to make a hasty but controlled landing in a field on a hill near the Bray-Corbie road, just north of the village Vaux-sur-Somme, in a sector controlled by the Australian Imperial Force (AIF). One witness, Gunner George Ridgway, stated that when he and other Australian soldiers reached the aircraft, Richthofen was still alive but died moments later.
Richthofen was a highly experienced and skilled fighter pilot—fully aware of the risk from ground fire. Furthermore he was fully
in accord with his late mentor Boelcke’s rules of air fighting, which were strongly against taking foolish risks. In this context, it
is universally accepted that Richthofen’s judgement during his last combat was uncharacteristically unsound in several
aspects. Several theories have been proposed to account for his behaviour.

In 1999, a German medical researcher, Dr. Henning Allmers, published an article in British medical journal The Lancet,
suggesting it was likely that brain damage from the head wound Richthofen suffered in July 1917 (see above) played a part in
behaviour after his injury was noted as consistent with brain-injured patients, and such an injury could account for his
perceived lack of judgement on his final flight: flying too low over enemy territory and suffering target fixation.

There is also the possibility that Richthofen was suffering from cumulative combat stress, which made him fail to observe
some of his usual precautions. It is noteworthy that one of the leading British air aces, Major Edward “Mick” Mannock, was
killed by ground fire on 26 July 1918 while crossing the lines at low level, an action he had always cautioned his younger pilots
not to take. This was supported by a 2004 paper by researchers at the University of Texas. Richthofen’s
wounds, Popkin was in a position to fire the fatal shot, when the pilot passed him for a second time, on the right.

A 2002 Discovery Channel documentary suggests that Gunner W. J. “Snowy” Evans, a Lewis machine gunner with the 53rd
Battery, 14th Field Artillery Brigade, Royal Australian Artillery is likely to have killed Richthofen. However, Dr. Miller and
the PGS documentary dismiss this theory, because of the angle from which Evans fired at Richthofen.

Other sources have suggested that Gunner Robert Buie (also of the 53rd Battery) may have fired the fatal shot. There is little
support for this theory. Nevertheless, in 2007, a municipality in Sydney recognised Buie as the man who shot down
Richthofen, placing a plaque near Buie’s former home. Buie, who died in 1964, has never been officially recognised in any
other way.

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the crew of one of his squadron’s R.E.8s, which had also fought Richthofen’s unit that afternoon. However, in the latter respect, Popkin was
incorrect: the bullet that caused the Baron’s death came from the side (see above).

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real chance to win the war—in the face of Allied air superiority, the German air service was having great difficulty in acquiring vital reconnaissance information, and could do little to prevent Allied squadrons from completing very effective reconnaissance and close support of their armies.

Burial

Picture - No 3 Squadron AFC officers were pallbearers and other ranks from the squadron acted as a guard of honour during the Red Baron’s funeral on 22 April 1918.

In common with most Allied air officers, Major Blake, who was responsible for Richthofen’s remains, regarded the Red Baron with great respect, and he organised a full military funeral, to be conducted by the personnel of No. 3 Squadron AFC.

Richthofen was buried in the cemetery at the village of Bertangles, near Amiens, on 22 April 1918. Six airmen with the rank of Captain—the same rank as Richthofen—served as pallbearers, and a guard of honour from the squadron’s other ranks fired a salute. Allied squadrons stationed nearby presented memorial wreaths, one of which was inscribed with the words, “To Our Gallant and Worthy Foe.”

Picture - The funeral of Manfred von Richthofen

A speculation that his opponents organised a flypast at his funeral, giving rise to the missing man formation, is most unlikely and totally unsupported by any contemporary evidence.

In the early 1920s the French authorities created a military cemetery at Fricourt, in which a very large number of German war dead, including Richthofen, were reinterred. In 1925, Manfred von Richthofen’s youngest brother, Bolko, recovered the body from Fricourt and took the Red Baron home to Germany. The family’s intention was for Manfred to rest in the Schweidnitz cemetery, next to the graves of his father and his brother Lothar, who had been killed in a post-war air crash in 1922. The German government requested, however, that the final resting place be the Invalidenfriedhof Cemetery in Berlin, where many German military heroes and past leaders were buried and the family agreed. Later the Nazi regime organised a grandiose memorial ceremony over this grave, erecting a massive new tombstone with the single word: ‚at Richthofen‘. During the Cold War the Invalidenfriedhof was on the boundary of the Soviet zone in Berlin, and the tombstone became pockmarked with bullets fired at attempted escapees to the west. In 1975, the remains were moved to a family plot at the Sanktjürgedtfriedhof in Wiesbaden, where he is buried next to his brother Bolko, his sister Elisabeth and her husband.

Picture - Grave in Berlin (1931)

Number of victories

For decades after World War I, some authors questioned whether Richthofen achieved 80 victories, insisting that his record was exaggerated for propaganda purposes. Some claimed that he took credit for aircraft downed by his squadron or wing.

In fact, Richthofen’s victories are better documented than those of most aces. A full list of the aircraft the Red Baron was credited with shooting down was published as early as 1958—with documented RFC/RAF squadron details, aircraft serial numbers, and the identities of Allied airmen killed or captured. Of the 80 are listed as matching recorded British losses. A study conducted by British historian Norman Franks with two colleagues, published in Under the Guns of the Red Baron in 1998, reached the same conclusion about the high degree of accuracy of Richthofen’s claimed victories. There were also unconfirmed victories that would put his actual total as high as 100 or more.

For comparison, the highest scoring Allied ace was Frenchman René Fonck, with 75 confirmed victories and further 52 unconfirmed behind enemy lines. The highest scoring British Empire fighter pilots were Canadian Billy Bishop credited with 72 victories, and Mick Mannock with 50 confirmed kills and a further 11 unconfirmed.

It is also significant that while Richthofen’s early victories and the establishment of his reputation coincided with a period of German air superiority, many of his successes were achieved against a numerically superior enemy, who were flying fighter aircraft that were on the whole better than his own.

Honours, tributes and relics

Picture - Memorial in Polish at Richthofen's former home in today's Świdnica (formerly Schweidnitz)

Relics

Decorations and awards

Prussian Order Pour le Mérite: 12 January 1917 (in recognition of his 16th aerial victory).
Prussian Order of the Red Eagle, 3rd Class with Crown and Swords: 6 April 1918 (in recognition of his 70th aerial victory).
Prussian House Order of Hohenzollern, Knight’s Cross with Swords: 11 November 1916.
Prussian Iron Cross, 1st Class (1914)
Prussian Iron Cross, 2nd Class (1914): 12 September 1914.
Bavarian Military Merit Order, 4th Class with Swords: 29 April 1917.
Saxon Military Order of St. Henry, Knight’s Cross: 16 April 1917.
Württemberg Military Merit Order, Knight’s Cross: 13 April 1917.
Saxe-Ernestine House Order, Knight 1st Class with Swords (issued by the Duchy of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha): 9 May 1917.
Hesse General Honour Decoration, “for Bravery”
Lippe War Honour Cross for Heroic Deeds: 13 October 1917.
Schauburg-Lippe Cross for Faithful Service: 10 October 1917.
Bremen Hanseatic Cross: 25 September 1917.
Livbeck Hanseatic Cross: 22 September 1917.
Austrian Military Merit Cross, 3rd Class with War Decoration
Bulgarian Order of Bravery, 4th Class (1st Grade): June 1917.
Turkish Iniziat Medal in Silver with Sabres
Turkish Lakat Medal in Silver with Sabres
Turkish War Medal ("Iron Crescent"): 4 November 1917.
German Army Pilot’s Badge
German Army Observer’s Badge
Austrian Field Pilot’s Badge (Franz Joseph pattern)

Tributes
At various times, several different German military aviation Geschwader (literally "squadrons"; equivalent to Commonwealth air force "groups", French escadrions or USAAF "wings") have been named after the Baron:

Jagdgeschwader 132 "Richthofen" (1 April 1936 - 1 November 1938)-Wehrmacht aviation unit
Jagdgeschwader 131 "Richthofen" (1 November 1938 - 1 May 1939)-Luftwaffe
Jagdgeschwader 2 "Richthofen" (1 May 1939 - 7 May 1945)-Luftwaffe
Jagdgeschwader 71 "Richthofen" (from 6 June 1959)-the first jet fighter unit established by the post-World War II German Bundeswehr ("federal defence force"); its founding commander was the most successful air ace in history, Erich Hartmann.

In 1941, a newly launched Kriegsmarine (navy) seaplane tender was also named Richthofen.

The engine of Richthofen's DRI was donated to the Imperial War Museum in London, where it is still on display. The control column (joystick) of Richthofen's aircraft can be seen at the Australian War Memorial, in Canberra. The Royal Canadian Military Institute, in Toronto, holds two parts of the aircraft: its seat and a side panel signed by the pilots of Brown's squadron.

List of victories of Manfred von Richthofen

List of World War I flying aces

The Red Baron (film), a film released in 2008, which is largely fictionalized

Von Richthofen and Brown, a theatrical film released in 1971, spanning the time from just before von Richthofen's first confirmed kill until his death.

The Red Baron in popular culture

Footnotes

Citations


Concerning death


More aircraft

Source: WikiPedia

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The Red Baron was the name applied to Manfred von Richthofen, a German fighter pilot who was the deadliest flying ace of World War I. During a 19-month period, he was credited with 80 victories in a D.II biplane. Richthofen's aircraft was painted in a distinctive red scheme, and he was often referred to as the Red Baron.