

Legend of Germany's Great Ace Revived in Comic Strip

Snoopy's 'Red Baron'

Harry Trimborn
from Los Angeles Times 3/4/68

With magnificent savoir-faire (energy and spirit), the young pilot swings into his Sopwith Camel and roars skyward to meet the foe.

They clash above the trenches. Their frail craft strain through wild catortions-- loops and power dives - - as each uses every trick of flying skill to get the enemy in his gunsight.

Machine-guns chatter. Good grief! The Sopwith is hit! Black smoke streams from the stricken craft as it flutters to earth for a crash landing.

Unhurt, but crushed by defeat and frustration, our hero angrily shakes his fist at the sky.

"Rats!" he cries, "I'll get you yet, Red Baron!"

The fallen adversary is, of course, one of the most famous and endearing characters of modern fiction - - Snoopy, the long-eared dog in the comic strip "Peanuts."

His continual defeat by the Red Baron occurs in Snoopy's flights of fancy. The invincible foe is never shown in the strip, and he exists only in Snoopy's runaway imagination.

Yet there really was a Red Baron, a man of flesh and blood who lived and died in the sky above the Western Front in World War I.

"Red Knight of Germany"

His name: Baron Manfred von Richthofen, "The Red Knight of Germany." He was the most famous air ace in the bloody history of the 20th Century. He filled the sky with the blood of more men killed in single aerial combat than any other aviator in the 1914-1918 conflict.

In 20 months of aerial combat, Richthofen shot down at least 80 planes, killing or wounding more than 100 pilots.

Germany honored him as its greatest hero of the war and showered him with medals. Frauleins (German women) adored him. And the imperial general staff's dour strategist General Erich Ludendorff praised him as the equal of three divisions.

Richthofen's bright red Albatross became the most famous--and feared-- machine of the front lines. Allied pilots considered themselves charmed with luck to have grappled with the Red Baron and lived to tell about it. And when he was killed above the Somme Valley by a single bullet in the chest on April 21, 1918, his enemies buried him with all the honors due a gallant soldier.

Yet virtually larger than life in the eyes of his contemporaries, the "scourge of the skies," the "ace of aces," hardly fit the stereotype of the thick-necked Prussian with shaved head and monocle (single eye glasses). He was not someone who lived only

for the moment with cognac in hand and fraulein (German woman) on the knee like the man who exists in Snoopy's--and Hollywood's--imagination. Rather, he was a handsome, slender young man with clear, penetrating eyes and a pleasant smile.

Although he enjoyed shop talk with squadron mates, he was shy and a loner, preferring the silent fields and forests of his native Silesia to the frenetic glitter of the cabaret (similar to a dance club). One of his closest friends was Moritz, a Great Dane that followed him through the war. He seemed to care little for women. Romance touched him only fleetingly, and that was when (like many wounded soldiers) he became enamored of his nurse while recovering from the wound of a bullet that creased his skull.

In a cool and scholarly work, "Von Richthofen and the Flying Circus," co-authors H.J. Nowarra, a German aviation historian, and U.S. Air Force Major Kimbrough S. Brown said of the Red Baron:

Richthofen was more than a German: he was a Prussian of noble birth. He inherited military traditions in spite of an early environment that would provide an interesting study for a modern psychologist.

Abrupt Change

Dressed 'adoringly' as a child with long, curly hair, mingling only with friends carefully chosen and restricted . . . he was flung (at the age of 11) into the harsh, frugal life of a cadet school whose motto was "Learn to obey in order that you may command." It demanded much of him, and he in turn demanded much of others. (But) demanding though he was, he never asked the impossible. He was a leader showing by impeccable example what was required.

As a highly decorated celebrity, Richthofen could have retired to safety behind the lines, spending his days as an example to the youth of the fatherland. But he spurned such suggestions, even when they came from high-ranking officers. In language that now sounds stilted and pompous, but that was no doubt sincere, Richthofen wrote in response to such appeals:

I should indeed consider myself a despicable person if, now that I have achieved fame and wear many decorations, I should consent to exist as a pensioner of my dignity and to preserve my life for the nation, while every poor fellow in the trenches--who is doing his duty equally as much as I--have to stick it out.

Lived Only for His Duty

His devotion to duty was intense. "He was bent on doing his duty to the last and he lived only for that," said the two authors. "When not in the air he sought the four walls of his hut." His pleasures were equally somber. His idea of fun was to spend the night on a frozen field tracking a wild boar. Hunting was his passion, and to many writers, it was this passion that honed the instincts of the successful wartime killer. "Manfred was a shrewd hunter," said Nowarra and Brown. "With keen eye and infinite patience, he stalked his prey. His shots were telling, for with continual patience he knew the right moment to shoot. Brave as he was, Manfred was usually cautious."

Coupled with a thorough knowledge of aerial combat tactics, these were the qualities that Richthofen employed so successfully against human prey. His tactics were invariably the same: Get in close behind the enemy plane, aim at the pilot and fire.

Richthofen commemorated each kill with a sterling silver cup bearing the name of the victim and the date of the victory. But Germany ran out of silver before Richthofen ran out of victims.

Sought Easy Prey

Richthofen deliberately sought out the easiest and most vulnerable prey. But, cautioned the two writers "it was no reflection upon his courage. It was his duty . . ." and in speaking of Manfred and his younger brother, Lothar, who became a squadron mate, shooting down 40 aircraft in 77 days at the front, Nowarra and Brown said:

That the quality of mercy was at times withheld by the Richthofens in continuing to fire at aircraft already doomed is true enough. But their duty was to ensure that neither the end nor their machines should be of any further use to the enemy.

The atrocity is war, the authors maintain, not the men who become pawns of it. Neither of the Richthofens contrived the "rules" of war and therefore "in the eyes of the world both may be regarded as honorable men."

Fire Withheld

Still, Manfred could show mercy. After crippling his 30th victim, he withheld further fire from the plane to enable the pilot to land safe--in German territory. And his many letters to his mother were frequently full of praise for the "splendid fellows" whom he shot down.

At the start of the war, Richthofen was a 22 year old lieutenant in the 1st Cavalry Scouting unit, then one of the most dashing in the service. A skilled horseman who once competed in a race with a broken collar bone, Richthofen engaged in several cavalry skirmishes on both the Russian and Western Fronts. One almost killed him. In a foray that did not reflect well on his tactical skill, he led a 14-man patrol into an ambush. Only he and four troopers escaped.

With steel replacing horses as engines of war, the days of the cavalry were at an end, and Richthofen became a supply officer. There was no glory in that, and Richthofen wanted glory. His first flight in a plane piloted by a friend convinced him that the path to glory lay in the sky. He first became an aerial observer, then a pilot.

His first official kill came on September 16, 1916, when he shot down a British Vickers, mortally wounding its two occupants, while testing a new plane. He landed his craft beside the wreckage to savor the victory. "I was rather proud of my try-out," he wrote in a letter to his mother.

Aside from a few crash landings and a wound to his head, the other victories followed with deadly monotony. Before 1916 ended, he had 15 victories, including the great British ace, Major Lance G. Hawker, who was No. 11. The following year brought 48 more victims. In 1918, he claimed 17 more.

On the morning of April 21, 1918, Richthofen, after a romp with Moritz, took to the air in search of his 81st victim. He found him in 2nd Lt. W.R. May of the Royal Air Force. But before he could fire, a single bullet ripped into Richthofen's body, apparently killing him instantly.

Flying a Sopwith Camel, a member of the Royal Air Force, A.R. Brown slipped behind Richthofen as he pursued May in a dog fight that brought the combatants virtually down to ground level. Brown, a Canadian with a gastric ailment that finally resulted in his retirement from service, was officially credited with the kill. But for more than 50 years aviation enthusiasts have disputed the claim. Some say the fatal shot came from a rifleman of an Australian unit watching the fight.

With a dead man at the controls, Richthofen's Fokker tri-plane glided to a landing, sustaining only minor damage to the landing gear. But moments later it was torn apart.

Troopers stripped the plane for souvenirs while beside them lay the body of a 25 year old man who in time became the object of gentle humor as the imaginary adversary of a non-existent puppy.

Was brain injury Red Baron's secret killer?

By The Associated Press and Knight Ridder Newspapers

COLUMBIA, Mo. — History books say The Red Baron, the legendary World War I German flying ace, was shot out of the sky and died in April 1918. But new research suggests that his death spiral may have begun nine months earlier.

Two retired Air Force psychologists now contend that Manfred von Richthofen had suffered so traumatic a brain injury in a previous air battle that his judgment was fatally impaired. "He had clear lapses in judgment," said Daniel Orme, a neuropsychologist at the University of Missouri, Columbia. "He wrote the book on what to do, and he broke his own rules." Orme and colleague Thomas Hyatt of Cincinnati, also a neuropsychologist, took up The Red Baron mystery after long careers evaluating Air Force pilots for their mental fitness to fly after injuries or illnesses. They had seen a television documentary that investigated theories about who shot The Red Baron. But it didn't examine to their satisfaction how von Richthofen's brain injury might have affected his behavior.

Classic signs noted

After analyzing accounts of The Red Baron's injuries and his medical records, Orme and Hyatt concluded that the ace exhibited classic signs of traumatic brain injury, including depression, fatigue and impulsive behavior. Their study is to be published this fall in the international journal *Human Factors and Aerospace Safety*. Von Richthofen was wounded July 6, 1917, by a bullet that creased his forehead. He was paralyzed and blinded momentarily and his plane plunged into a dive, but he recovered to make a crash landing. His headgear had filled with blood. The 4-inch wound never healed fully and was bandaged for the rest of his life. Orme said the bullet, which "put a divot in his skull," likely damaged the frontal lobes, which play an important role in governing mood, judgment and impulse control. The impact also could have caused von Richthofen's brain to shake violently in his skull, causing further damage. "It was a very serious injury," Orme said. "Immediately, he became a changed person. He was miserable, in bad spirits, impulsive."

This lack of inhibition, Orme said, led the son of Prussian nobility to do uncharacteristic, impulsive things such as putting his head on a Berlin restaurant table to display

his wound to a friend's mother. His mother, Baroness von Richthofen, wrote that "something painful lay 'round the eyes and temples" of her son after the injury.

"I found Manfred changed ... the high spirits, the playfulness, were lacking in his character — he was taciturn, almost unapproachable," she wrote.

His final battle

The Red Baron's final battle came in April 1918, nine months after he was injured. Von Richthofen, 25, pursued a fleeing British plane near Vaux sur Somme, France, locking the pilot in his sights and following him into British territory at treetop level where he faced deadly fire. His Fokker triplane was shredded, von Richthofen was shot in the chest, and the plane crashed. Orme said von Richthofen broke his own rules by continuing to chase the British plane into enemy airspace. "He wouldn't have done what he did the day he was killed if he didn't have the brain injury," Orme said. "We (as psychologists) would call it mental rigidity. In the Air Force we call it target fixation."

Historian skeptical

Canadian historian Alan Bennett, co-author of the book "The Red Baron's Last Flight: A Mystery Investigated," agreed that the injury may have affected von Richthofen's judgment, but not his abilities as a pilot. "There was nothing wrong with his flying ability,"

Bennett said. "The day before he died in less than five minutes he shot down two Sopwith Camels." Von Richthofen was credited with about 80 "kills" of Allied aircraft. The day he was shot down, prevailing winds had reversed direction and clouds obscured the ground, Bennett said. Many German pilots inadvertently drifted into Allied territory. "It seems fairly obvious (von Richthofen) had lost his air position. He was nowhere he thought he was," Bennett said. "The wound in his head would have helped with that disorientation, but the major factor was the wind direction."

Bennett agreed with Orme on at least one point: Von Richthofen should not have been flying with that head injury.