

THE DEATH OF A HERO. MANFRED VON RICHTHOFEN AND THE LEGEND OF THE RED BARON

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Abstract: Of all the fighter pilots during World War I, Manfred von Richthofen gained a special place at that crucial moment in history, when heroes were so sorely needed, serving as a role model to be followed by men who were to distinguish themselves through extraordinary deeds. Credited with shooting down 80 enemy aircraft during the 20 months of fighting on the Western Front, for which he received 24 military decorations, Manfred was the most efficient and well-known flying ace of the Great War.

In these few lines, we are trying to outline the process of heroizing young Manfred underwent, the factors that contributed to his transformation into a symbol and, not least, the actual grounds for his success.

The German propaganda played an important role in this regard, his image being photographically disseminated and made public throughout Germany. Not only the soldiers, but also the ones on the home front could be enlivened if they were given a symbol to believe in, and Manfred had become such a symbol. The newspapers made constant reference to him and carefully avoided publishing information about his injuries in battle. His fame increased to such an extent that the renowned General Erich von Ludendorff considered Manfred to be the equivalent of no less than three infantry divisions.

The explanation of Manfred von Richthofen's success lies in the type of defensive air warfare that Germany waged for most of the armed conflict period. Thus, chances were much greater for a pilot of the Central Powers to fly again if he was not seriously injured, for the battles often unfolded behind the German lines.

Keywords: aircraft, hero, war, propaganda, symbol.

Preliminaries

Many people refer to the outbreak of the Great War in 1914 as an event that marked the end of an era. Those hopeful times, when the world smiled at one the most beautiful speeches delivered by William Gladstone, according to whom "above all, men and women, trust me, the world is getting better from age to age, from generation to generation. May pessimism not find a way into your souls and may optimism bestow its glory on all your lives, now and forever,"¹ were to be perturbed by a phenomenon whose magnitude would have been impossible to foresee at first.

From soldiers to the most important leaders, there was an almost universally shared belief that the war would be short, lasting a few weeks or a few months, at most. The general mobilization decreed for all men capable of fighting and the millions of people and resources deployed to this end made it rather unlikely that a long-lasting conflict could be supported.² World War I was the ultimate war not only because it involved an impressive number of countries from around the world, but also because of its character, a legacy from the time of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, whereby virtually all the resources of a

¹ François-Georges Dreyfus, Albert Jourcin, Pierre Thibault, Pierre Milza, *Istoria universală Vol. 3 Evoluția lumii contemporane*, Bucharest: Editura Univers Enciclopedic, 2006, p. 293.

² Jean Carpentier, François Lebrun, coord., *Istoria Europei*, Bucharest: Editura Humanitas, 2006, pp. 314-315.

country were pooled against the enemy forces. Human, material, economic, military and, not least, moral forces³ were mobilized to ensure a quick and complete victory. World War I took all these to a different level, invented increasingly more destructive methods, devised annihilating weapons and solutions, demolished pedestals and elevated heroes... it was, according to a penetrating and comprehensive opinion, “a total historical phenomenon, of unparalleled complexity.”⁴

The evolution of the conflict did not fulfill the initial expectations and the illusion of a brief war was dispelled in the autumn of 1914, with the failure of the major offensives in the west and the east. At the end of 1914, the front stabilized, and the dynamic conflict anticipated at the beginning turned into a positional conflict, which entirely changed its characteristics.⁵ First of all, new ways had to be found to make the enemy come out of his fortress, and one of these was the use of planes for the first time in an armed conflict.

The Great War began virtually with no military aircraft, at most with civil aircraft adapted for combat, but as the conflict escalated, everything that could fly was sent into military service.⁶ Aviation traveled a winding road, because it had to evolve in spite of and not thanks to the conservatives and the traditionalists, the old generals and commanders, who could not conceive modern war in any other terms than those of men, horses and guns.⁷

The first airmen's job was, from the very beginning, a useful one, of reconnaissance and observation. As the war got stuck into muddy trenches, it became necessary to signal out the communication lines and the enemy positions so that they could be attacked. At one point, both sides tried to stop the enemy aircraft and pilots would attack one another up in the air, using the guns and rifles that they took with them. From here to mounting machine guns on airplane there were only a few steps, battles being wages as fiercely in the air as on the ground.⁸ It was in such an atmosphere that the great German air heroes were formed, examples including Max Immelmann, Oswald Boelcke, Werner Voss and, not least, Manfred von Richthofen, the ace of all aces, known and especially dreaded as *The Red Baron*.

The road to recognition



In the following pages, we intend to disclose a few details about the image of von Richthofen, one of the popular figures of the war and attempt to discern the elements that formed the basis of the myth woven around him. We know many details about his childhood not only thanks to the historians who have studied him, but also from his own autobiography, entitled *Der rote Kampfflieger*. The von Richthofen family had strong Prussian roots and was elevated, in 1741, by Frederick II of Prussia to the baronial rank, granting its

³ Pierre Renouvin, *Primul Război Mondial*, Bucharest: Editura Corint, 2006, p. 26.

⁴ Toader Nicoară, “Istoriografia Marelui Război: de la istoria politico-diplomatică la noua istorie culturală,” in *Războiul și societatea în secolul XX*, Gheorghe Măndrescu, Giordano Altarozzi (eds.), Cluj-Napoca-Rome: Editura Accent, 2007, p. 34.

⁵ Serge Bernstein, Pierre Milza, eds., *Istoria secolului XX. Vol. I: sfârșitul lumii europene (1900-1945)*, Bucharest: Editura Bic All, 1998, p. 68.

⁶ Norman Franks, *Dog-Fight: Aerial Tactics of the Aces in World War I*, London: Greenhill Books, 2003, p. 13, <http://lib.freescienceengineering.org/view.php?id=718478> (accessed on 10.04.2014).

⁷ Raymond Lawrance Rimell, *The German Army Air Service in World War One*, London: Arms and Armour Press, 1985, p. 5, <http://lib.freescienceengineering.org/view.php?id=361569> (accessed on 15.04.2014).

⁸ Norman Franks, *Ibidem*, p. 13.

descendants in the male line the title of *Freiherr* and those in the female line the title of *Freifrau*.⁹ Born in Breslau (now Wrocław, in Poland) on May 2, 1892, Manfred Albrecht Freiherr von Richthofen was the eldest of the family's four children. After living for a while in Kleinburg, the Richthofen family moved to Schweidnitz, where the young Manfred went to school for one year. Then he enrolled in the school for cadets from Wahlstatt, at the age of eleven, as he recalls: "I was not pleased that I was to become a cadet, but my father wanted it, so I was never asked about it."¹⁰

At the school for cadets, he found it difficult to comply with the strict discipline and to follow orders. He did not care very much about the instruction he received and he stated, in his autobiography, that he had never been good at learning things. He studied just enough so that he could pass and believed it would have been wrong to do more than it was required of him. He worked as little as possible, so his teachers did not pay much attention to him.¹¹ One activity, however, that the young Manfred had practiced passionately since his early childhood was hunting.¹² The passion that made people fear him in the air accompanied him throughout his life. He hunted for the prey and for the thrill the chase offered him. It was a sport that attracted him and that he practiced whenever he had the opportunity, whether on leave at home or in his spare time on the front.

Being very anxious to join the army, in 1911, after his examination, he required to be included in the "Emperor Alexander III" Cavalry Regiment, whose garrison was stationed in Silesia, with which he was familiar. After eight years of functioning as a cadet, he became a lieutenant in the autumn of 1912, in a unit of Uhlans (the cavalry). Driven by an *élan* that is characteristic of youth, Manfred, like so many other men of his age, was very enthusiastic about the possibility of war breaking out, unaware of the dramatic turn it would take. In 1914 he envisaged himself at the head of his cavalry regiment, performing bewildering attacks that would bring him the trophy of the brave: a decoration.¹³ He did not have to wait long as the outbreak of the war was an opportunity for him to display his courage as a cavalryman and to satisfy his urge to hunt and kill for Germany. That was all he wanted at the time, as revealed by his writings: to be useful to his homeland. Inebriated with effervescence, he knew the time had come for glorious exploits of arms to be performed. His first encounter with the French at the lead of his cavalry ended, however, with a resounding failure: in a forest on the Western Front, after a bizarre occurrence, he lost 10 of his 14 men, without even firing a single shot.¹⁴ Still, he did not allow himself to lose his focus or his temper, even though he realized that he had done wrong.¹⁵

His cavalry days were to come to an end as the new course of the war no longer allowed him to engage in daring charges. Manfred saw the utility of the cavalry disappear right before his eyes due to the trenches and barbed wire. He could also see how the infantry

⁹ Kilduff, Peter, *The Illustrated Red Baron. The Life and Times of Manfred von Richthofen*, London: Arms and Armour, 1999, p. 11, <http://lib.freescienceengineering.org/view.php?id=900125> (accessed on 15.04.2014).

¹⁰ Rittmeister Albrecht Freiherrn von Richthofen, *Der rote Kampfflieger*, Berlin: Ullstein & Co, 1917, p. 12, <http://lib.freescienceengineering.org/view.php?id=708042> (accessed on 15.04.2014).

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² Floyd Gibbons, *The Red Knight of Germany*, New York: Garden City, 1927, p. 10, <http://www.unz.org/Pub/GibbonsFloyd-1927-00038> (accessed on 15.04.2014).

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 24.

¹⁴ Rittmeister Albrecht Freiherrn von Richthofen, *op. cit.*, pp. 31-35.

¹⁵ Floyd Gibbons, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

also laid aside weapons to take up the shovel and the pickaxe. The precious image of war he kept in his heart - flags waving, swords shining, the cavalry charging, confrontation, all these slowly disappeared and turned into the sad reality of muddy shell-blown pits, water-filled ditches, dampness and disease. Where was the glory of war?¹⁶ Bored by the reconnaissance missions he had to carry out, especially when he found out he was to be transferred to the supply lines, even further away from the front, he requested the commander to have him moved, in a letter that gave rise to many stories: “Your Esteemed Excellency! I did not go to war to collect cheese and eggs, but for a different purpose.”¹⁷ His desire was fulfilled and in 1915 he was transferred to the aviation service. A new stage began in his life.

The beginnings of aviation were, for him, insecure, all the more so as he was not at all familiar with the aircraft. In 1914, he could not tell the difference between German and Allied aircraft, and in the autumn of the same year his men would shoot at anything that flew over their heads, being tempted by the excellent human targets.¹⁸ On his first flight, in which his mission in a two-seater aircraft was to direct the pilot, he got lost over his own airfield, but experienced the wonderful feeling of being the master of the air.¹⁹ He made his apprenticeship in the German aviation as an observer on the Eastern Front, where he gave valuable information about the enemy troops and carried out bombing attacks, but he never piloted a plane. After a brief period in the air, two very important events for him occurred.

One of them was his meeting with Oswald Boelcke, whom Manfred idolized. In the autumn of 1915 when the two met, Boelcke had registered four aerial victories, being the only man in the Army of the Central Powers who had accomplished this. Von Richthofen decided to follow in the footsteps of his idol and pilot an airplane himself.

The second event was related precisely to his attempts to take the pilot exam. His first flight ended for him with a landing that destroyed the plane, making him the butt of jokes. There followed the first examination, which ended in failure... as did the second. Who would have thought that the ace of aces, the most feared hunter of the Kaiser, needed to sit in three examinations before he could pass?²⁰ Perseverance paid off, and he was sent as a pilot back east for observation and bombing, not an excessively difficult undertaking since the Russians had no aviation and had little anti-aircraft weaponry. He was still dissatisfied and wanted more. Even though he had the opportunity to kill, he did not fight. He preferred a combination of the two.²¹

Chance smiled again when Oswald Boelcke, the star of German aviation at that time, returned from Turkey to personally select a few men capable of forming an air unit. On the western front on the Somme, the French had been laying down the law in the air and the German High Command entrusted Boelcke with gathering a team that would counter the Allies' aerial superiority. When, decorated with the Order *Pour le Mérite*, he knocked on von Richthofen's door to invite him into his hunting squadron, the latter nearly collapsed with elation.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 25.

¹⁷ Rittmeister Albrecht Freiherrn von Richthofen, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

¹⁸ Floyd Gibbons, *op. cit.*, pp. 33-34.

¹⁹ Rittmeister Albrecht Freiherrn von Richthofen, *op. cit.*, pp. 45-46.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 67-73.

²¹ Floyd Gibbons, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

The legend of the Red Baron

Boelcke taught von Richthofen what fighting in the air meant and what he should do in case of a confrontation, stipulating a set of principles entitled “Dicta Boelcke,” which the *Rittmeister* followed scrupulously after the disappearance of his mentor. Concisely put, these rules are:

1. “Seek advantage before attacking. If possible, keep the sun at your back.
2. Having begun an attack, always follow through.
3. Only fire at short range, and only when your opponent is positively in your sights.
4. Never lose sight of your opponent, and do not be fooled by his tricks.
5. In every attack it is important to get approach your opponent from behind.
6. If your opponent attacks from above, do not try to evade but fly to meet him.
7. When over enemy territory, never forget your path home.
8. For the Staffel: attack on principle in flights of four or six. When single combat ensues, take care that many do not go for one opponent.”²²

Similarly, perpetuating a strange habit of his master’s, of rewarding - with a silver goblet - the squadron member who shot down an enemy plane, Manfred von Richthofen ordered from Berlin a goblet whenever he shot down an enemy aircraft. The number of these goblets reached 60, where he stopped. The Berlin jeweler had to decline his next offers due to the shortage of silver in Germany, and it was the Baron, as people sometimes claim tongue-in-cheek, who had brought about this shortage.²³

How was the legend of the Red Baron born? We shall try to provide an answer to this question by briefly following the Freiherr’s trajectory from an obscure cavalry officer who promised nothing to the successful pilot and squadron leader, credited with shooting down 80 enemy aircraft during twenty months of fighting on the Western Front, for which he received 24 military decorations.²⁴

The first one responsible for this success was none other than Manfred von Richthofen himself. Fostered by the historical context²⁵ of World War I, the myth of the Red Baron arose due to convergent factors on which we shall linger below. When he flew with Boelcke and secured his first victories and silver goblets, Manfred was no longer the pilot who had got lost over his own airfield.

²² Greg Van Wyngarden, *JagdStaffel 2 „Boelcke.” Von Richthofen’s Mentor*, Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2007, p. 12.

²³ Floyd Gibbons, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

²⁴ Kilduff, Peter, *op.cit.*, p. 10.

²⁵ See Raoul Girardet, *Mituri și mitologii politice*, Iași: Editura Institutul European, 1997, the chapter “Salvatorul,” pp. 47-74.

He was starting to become an increasingly skillful flying ace, drawing attention to himself especially after the fight with Captain Lanoe Hawker, the first British pilot upon whom the Victoria Cross, the highest award for bravery, had been bestowed. For him, Hawker was merely number 11 in the series of 80 victories, but this automatically propelled him into the spotlight. His desire to be the first among all aces led to a very strange decision one day: that of painting his plane red, which could be seen as an invitation to his enemies to attack him, as he was very easy to recognize. The rationale behind this was expressed by von Richthofen himself in his memoir: he wanted to be known²⁶ and apparently he succeeded in that. The



British and the French who survived the encounter with the squadron in which he was a pilot spread news about *The Red Devil*, *Le Diable Rouge* or *Le Petit Rouge*, and it was believed for a while that given the red color of the plane, it was piloted by a woman.²⁷ By Boelcke's death, the latter had accumulated 40 victories, and on 28 October 1916 Germany seemed to have been left without a hero, but the ground was prepared for another

to take his place. The Baron's string of aerial victories constantly grew and so was the number of trophies he adjudicated from the aircraft he felled and later decorated his room in his hometown. The month of April 1917 left a huge imprint on aerial battles of the Great War, Manfred personally shooting down 21 aircraft, which led the British to call this fateful month *Bloody April*.²⁸

A very important factor that contributed to his reputation was propaganda. His victories would have had merely local echoes if they had not been made famous throughout Germany by newspapers and news reels. The time necessitated this. What were needed were heroes, charismatic personalities, symbols around which expectations and hopes could revolve, and the adhesion of those on the front and back home could be forged.²⁹ As a hero, he sacrificed himself for his country, since for him duty to the nation had moral grandeur.³⁰ Moreover, a void had to be filled: when Max Immelmann fell, Boelcke was sent on a mission to Turkey to avoid two heroes disappearing at the same time. At the death of the latter, Germany could not mourn for long, because this would have affected everyone's morale. It was imperative that another person should be immediately promoted, surpassing his predecessor and raising the torch higher every time. The level to which Manfred von Richthofen raised it was not reached by any other flying ace of World War I. A telling example of how the German propaganda "shaped" his image is offered by victory number 33. Floyd Gibbons, who wrote about the Baron a few years after his death and had interviewed many people from his intimate circle, including the airmen who had survived battles against, carefully studied what happened on the day of the battle and how facts were distorted, being presented in three different versions.

²⁶ Rittmeister Albrecht Freiherrn von Richthofen, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 130.

²⁸ Floyd Gibbons, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

²⁹ Simona Nicoară, *Istorie și imaginar. Eseuri de antropologie istorică*, Cluj-Napoca: Editura Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2000, pp. 176-177.

³⁰ Idem, *Națiunea modernă: mituri, simboluri, ideologii*, Cluj-Napoca: Editura Accent, 2002, p. 162.

The first, unofficial version said that after the English plane was shot down by the Baron, the occupants of the two-seat aircraft³¹ were spared after the fight, despite the fact that they had continued to fire even from the ground. Version number two, which was also the official report, claimed that one of the occupants was killed on the ground, while version number three, which belonged to the English pilot whom Gibbons interviewed after the war, said that the observer had been hit in the air and he could not remember having been shot at on the ground.³² The version that was offered to the public - whether it was true or not - was



the first, for it put the Baron in the position of a knight, the stronger man who took mercy on the felled enemy. The fact is that the propaganda had in this case, as well as throughout the entire war, the mission of portraying the hero to the public as he was expected to be, not as he was, perhaps, in reality. Actions that for Manfred may have meant sheer duty were transformed to meet the expectations required by the exceptional situation in which Germany found itself. It was not very difficult to achieve these objectives, because the propaganda had a great advantage that has sometimes been overlooked. Technological progress had enabled the capturing of situations that would otherwise

have remained mere written information: we are referring here to the camera. Manfred had a natural ability to look good in front of the camera, so many postcards and photos featuring him circulated in Germany and beyond to increase his popularity.³³ Thanks to photography, which experienced unprecedented development in the twentieth century, unknown aspects of the lives of great personalities were actually revealed.

In May 1917, for his outstanding merits, he was forbidden to fly and was sent to Berlin - on order that he should use land transport - to be received in audience by the most powerful men in the country at the time: Erich von Ludendorff, Paul von Hindenburg and, not least, Kaiser Wilhelm II himself. The meetings were repeated and, strangely, the Kaiser asked him to stop doing what he knew best: hunting in the air for Germany. Here is how Manfred described these meetings: „That prohibition goes only so far. After I had attained my 30th [victory], His Majesty said to me: ‘I do not want to hear that you are still flying!’ Then, when I came back after the 50th, His Majesty wagged his finger at me [and said]: ‘I have heard that you have been flying again. Be careful that nothing happens to you’.”³⁴ These facts suggest how important he had become for the Germans’ morale. Not only was he granted meetings with the most important personalities, but he was continually reminded not to push his limits and even to give up flying. His degree of legitimacy and the recognition of his value in the eyes of the world increased even more after these meetings. No wonder that Ludendorff claimed that Manfred von Richthofen alone was worth three infantry divisions.³⁵ We may understand how concerned the German Command was with his fate, for after a severe head injury the ace had received in a battle, neither the German press nor the allied intelligence

³¹ The pilot plus the observer, the latter acting as a shooter, which means that a two-seat plane was defended by two men.

³² Floyd Gibbons, *op. cit.*, pp. 166-172.

³³ Peter Kilduff, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 63.

³⁵ Floyd Gibbons, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

knew anything about it for a good period of time,³⁶ after which he was reminded not to fly unless absolutely necessary.

The burden pressing on his shoulders must have been immense. Stories about him say that he did not feel very much at ease when he was in the midst of the crowds that worshiped him. He felt that “people have been exposed to quite another Richthofen than I truly am deep inside myself. When I read [my] book, I smile at my own insolence. I am no longer so insolent in spirit. Not because I can imagine how it would be one day when death is breathing down my neck ... although I have thought ... often enough that it can happen. I have been told by [people in] high places that I should give up flying, for one day it will catch up with me. I would be miserable with myself if now, burdened with glory and decorations, I were to become a pensioner of my own dignity in order to save my precious life for the nation, while every poor fellow in the trenches endures his duty as I do mine.”³⁷ Celebrity was a thing he avoided. As a soldier, he felt belonged only to the noise made by the propeller of his plane.³⁸ In 1918, Manfred was no longer the enthusiastic young man who had been dreaming of heroic cavalry charges and of a decoration *pour le mérite* as he had been at the beginning of the war. His head injury affected him and demonstrated that he could die anytime. Most of his comrades had fallen one by one, which raised a question mark: would his turn also come? On April 21, 1918, after a confusing battle, the Baron violated his own principles of flight, splitting away from his squadron to follow a rookie pilot, probably without realizing that he was above enemy lines and that Canadian Captain Arthur Roy Brown was behind him. Whose bullet was it that shot down the Red Baron? This is a question that engendered much controversy and debate, as for a long time it was believed that the merit belonged to Roy Brown, followed by a theory that an Australian battery had caused his demise. As if facts were not sufficiently intricate as such, an assumption that there was a third shooter has recently been launched. Paradoxically, these assumptions do not solve the mystery, but deepen it, and the conclusion will eventually be that there is no conclusion.

The news of his death, announced on the evening of 21 on the British channels, circulated like electricity through the trenches,³⁹ but curiously there was no news issued by the German side on that day. Two days afterwards, however, almost all the German newspapers had front-page articles like *Der Heldentod Richthofens*:⁴⁰ the hero had fallen and had been buried with full military honors by the enemy.

Of all the airmen of World War I, Manfred von Richthofen gained a special place in the history of that era. The young nobleman evoked the image of a gallant aristocrat who had won, from his position as a capable and charismatic leader, the trust of his superiors and had managed, by way of a mystical power, to inspire his men to imitate his actions.⁴¹ Brave, temperate, with a high sense of duty, respected even by his opponents, Manfred went out of history and entered the realm of legend.⁴² His transformation from an anonymous soldier into

³⁶ Peter Kilduff, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 118.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 66.

³⁹ Floyd Gibbons, *op. cit.*, p. 363.

⁴⁰ Peter Kilduff, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 7.

⁴² Antonella Astorri, Patrizia Salvadori, *Istoria ilustrată a primului război mondial*, Bucharest: Editura Rao, 2005, p. 132.

Germany's greatest hero was dazzling and caught him, perhaps, a little unprepared. He did not know how to deal with his fans because he suddenly found himself in the spotlight. He lived for the chase and was ultimately a soldier, abandoning the red carpet and the pleasures of a life sheltered from the Englishmen's bombs, who were looking for his next on the Western Front, and exchanging them with the uncertainty of life lived on the edge and with the freedom that only an air-borne existence could provide him with.

The hero has not been forgotten. 90 years after his death, a film production launched in 2008, featuring Matthias Schweighofer in the role of the Red Baron, captures a very interesting detail. The war is rejected as a means of manifestation, but the film glorifies the image of the *Rittmeister*, who is humanized and presented with the noblest of qualities. Perhaps that is what this is all about: the film talks about a time when gestures of chivalry had not vanished, just as the cavalry had not yet disappeared: the latter had merely taken the high road of the air and its battles were waged up there.

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