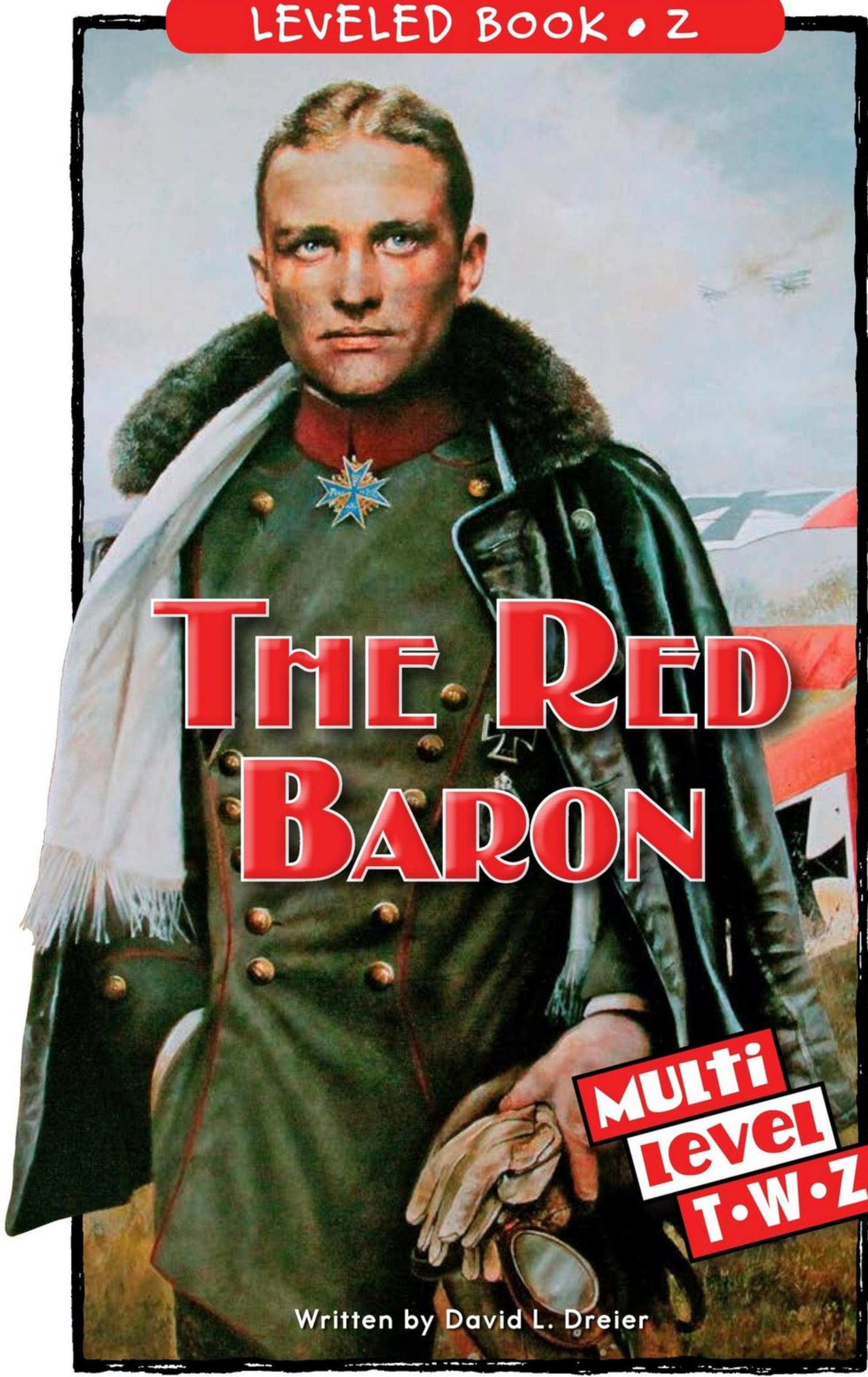


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# The Red Baron

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Written by David L. Dreier

# THE RED BARON



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Billy Bishop poses with his Nieuport 17 scout.

## A Memorable Encounter

On April 30, 1917, Billy Bishop, Canada's top **World War I flying ace**, flew a combat patrol in the skies over France with his commander, Major Jack Scott. The Canadian pilots spotted four German fighter planes heading toward them and turned to attack. In the "lightning fight" that followed, Bishop squared off against a bright red German plane. Bishop managed to put some bullet holes in the red plane but got several bullet holes in his own plane for his efforts. He quickly realized his foe was unlike any he'd ever faced. The German pilots broke off the fight when four British planes arrived, but Bishop never forgot the battle.

Bishop landed safely back at his home airfield. "It was a close shave, but a wonderful, soul-stirring fight," the Canadian said later. Despite his skill and combat experience, Bishop was lucky to have escaped unharmed. The pilot he tangled with that day was Germany's greatest ace: Manfred von Richthofen—the famous Red Baron.

## The Young Baron

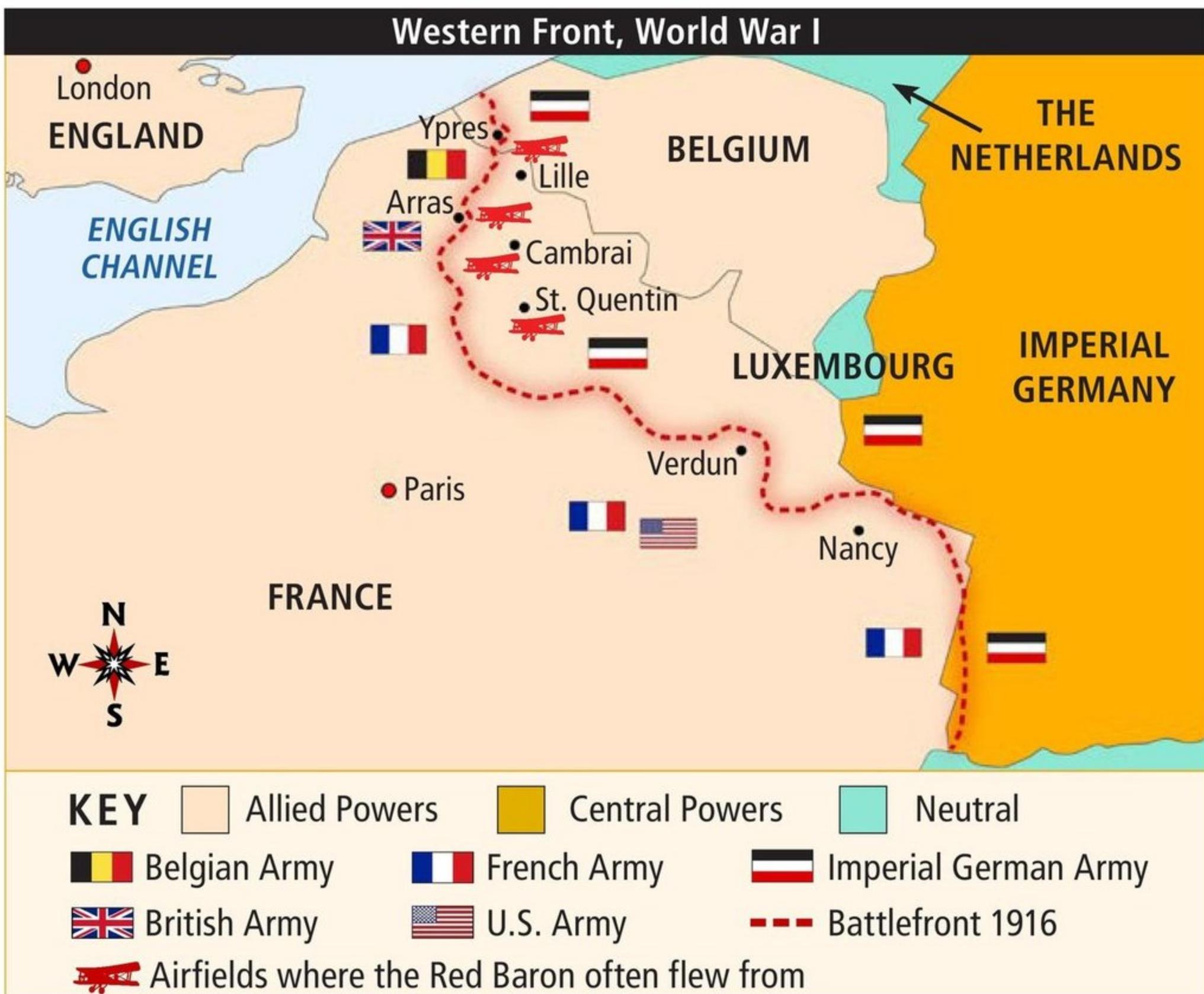
Manfred von Richthofen was born in 1892 into a noble family in Prussia, the most powerful state in Germany. He had an older sister and two younger brothers. Manfred's family were minor nobles in Germany, so he was sometimes called a *baron*.

Young Manfred loved to hunt on his family's land and became an expert shot. He also enjoyed horseback riding and was a skilled athlete.

Manfred's father, Albrecht, had been an officer in the Prussian **cavalry**. He encouraged his sons to join the military. At the age of eleven, Manfred was sent to a military school. He was only an average student but had strong athletic abilities. After completing his schooling, he became a cavalry officer in 1911.



Manfred began preparing for a military career as a child.



With the start of World War I in August 1914, Lieutenant Richthofen was sent to the Eastern Front to fight the Russian Army. Soon afterward, he was transferred to the Western Front, where Germany faced the Allied forces, including Britain, France, and Canada.

By early 1915, the war had become a **stalemate**. Soldiers lived in muddy **trenches** guarded by barbed wire and machine guns. This style of trench warfare, which allowed for little forward movement, made cavalry units practically useless. Richthofen's unit was stripped of its horses, and he became a foot messenger.

## Becoming a World War I Flyer

As 1915 wore on, Richthofen grew tired of the filthy trenches. Being stuck there was not how he wanted to spend the war. Far above him, airplanes soared through the clean air and clouds. He wrote in his autobiography that he became “tremendously excited” whenever he saw an **aviator**. Joining the German Flying Service became his “greatest wish.”



German soldiers watch from a trench as a biplane passes overhead.

In May 1915, Richthofen was accepted for pilot training. He asked to become a flying observer rather than a combat pilot because the training period was shorter.

Richthofen spent several months flying as an observer, but this type of flying didn’t satisfy the hunter in him. In October 1915, Richthofen went back to flight school to become a pilot.



Richthofen began his flying career in the back seat of a plane used for taking photographs, like the one shown here.

The young baron must have known the dangers of being a fighter pilot. The planes were fragile, and pilots did not have parachutes. Most new combat pilots didn't survive past their first two weeks. Like most new flyers, Richthofen probably thought he could beat the odds.

The airplanes of the day were light, flimsy vehicles made mostly of fabric and wood. Planes had to be lightweight in order to fly because the engines used in them weren't very powerful. In addition, most of the planes at the time were biplanes—planes with two sets of wings. Two pairs of wings gave a plane increased structural strength and reduced the weight that each wing had to support in the air.



The Fokker Eindecker fighter plane temporarily gave German flyers the advantage in 1916.

During the first year of the war, both sides had experimented with putting machine guns onto planes. The best place to position machine guns was atop the nose of the plane in front of the pilot. The problem with this arrangement was that the plane's propeller was in the way and would get chewed up by the bullets.

The Germans solved the problem by **synchronizing** the guns with the rotation of the propeller. With this system, the machine-gun bullets passed harmlessly between the spinning propeller blades. The British soon developed a similar system of their own. The airplane had now become a deadly weapon for both sides in the war.

It was a weapon Richthofen was hungering to use against Germany's enemies. In late 1916, he got the opportunity he had been waiting for.

## Combat in the Clouds

A chance encounter with Oswald Boelcke (BULL-kuh), one of Germany's leading flyers, opened new doors for Richthofen. At the time of their meeting, Boelcke was putting together a new *jasta* (YAW-stuh), or fighter **squadron**, of handpicked pilots. Boelcke invited Richthofen to join the group, and he jumped at the chance.

Boelcke wanted to make sure that his men always had the upper hand in aerial combat. He made a list of eight dicta (rules) for engaging the enemy. One rule instructed pilots to dive out of the sun at their **adversaries** so the enemy would not see them coming. Another told pilots to hold their fire until they were close to an enemy plane.



Oswald Boelcke (center) reviews pilots under his command in 1916.

Richthofen was never a flashy pilot, but he was disciplined, following Boelcke's dicta to the letter. On September 17, 1916, he scored his first confirmed shoot-down of an Allied plane. By October 16, he had downed four more Allied aircraft. With five victories under his belt, Richthofen was now an ace.

Near the end of October, Boelcke was killed when his plane crashed following a midair collision with one of his own men. With Boelcke gone, Richthofen became the leading combat pilot in Germany, and his victories quickly added up. In January 1917, his score of downed planes reached sixteen.

In honor of his achievements, Richthofen was awarded Germany's highest military honor, a medal called the "Blue Max." He also received command of his own jasta and a promotion to captain.



## Do You Know?

The medal was nicknamed the "Blue Max" because of its blue color and the fact that the first German pilot to receive it was Max Immelmann.

Richthofen had his Albatros biplane painted a brilliant red to make it more visible in the sky. His men followed his lead and painted their planes in a variety of bright colors. The Allies began calling Richthofen's colorful group the "Flying Circus."

It was a deadly circus. Under Richthofen's leadership, the jasta racked up impressive victories. In April 1917, Richthofen's forces shot down 89 planes of Britain's Royal Flying Corps (RFC). Richthofen alone claimed 22 victories. The RFC lost 245 aircraft that month, which is remembered as Bloody April.

As his reputation grew, Richthofen inspired nicknames such as the "Red Battle Flyer" and the "Red Knight." The French called him "le Diable Rouge" ("Red Devil") or "le Petit Rouge" ("Little Red"). The "Red Baron" nickname became popular after the war.

In July, Richthofen suffered a severe wound when a bullet grazed his skull during an aerial combat. During a one-month recovery, he returned to his home in Prussia. He and his brother Lothar—who was also an ace and would survive the war—went hunting in the family woods. Richthofen had always been up for a hunt, whether on the ground or in the air. Now, though, he began to lose his zest for battle.



Richthofen scored his last nineteen victories flying the Fokker Triplane.

## The End of the Red Baron

Returning to the front in August, Richthofen traded his Albatros biplane for a new Fokker triplane. The slow but highly maneuverable fighter featured three sets of wings and quickly became the aircraft with which he is most often remembered.

Despite headaches from the incompletely healed wound and his growing distaste for the war, Richthofen continued to plague the Allies. On April 20, 1918, he scored his eightieth victory. It would be his last.



British soldiers stand at attention at Richthofen's funeral on April 21, 1918.

The next day, while engaged in combat above Allied lines, Richthofen was struck by a single bullet that pierced his heart. He managed to land safely and was pulled from his plane by Australian soldiers. According to one of the soldiers, the baron uttered one final word in German: *kaputt* ("done for"). He died moments later.

Allied pilots gave Richthofen a funeral with full military honors at a French cemetery. A wreath placed on his coffin read, "To our gallant and worthy foe." Richthofen's body was transferred to Germany after the war.

A controversy arose over who fired the bullet that struck Richthofen. Canadians insisted it was one of their own pilots, Captain Arthur Brown. However, many historians believe the fatal bullet came from an Australian gunner on the ground.



The Red Baron shoots down a Sopwith Camel the day before his own death.

With eighty confirmed victories, Richthofen was the greatest ace of World War I. In later times, people would **revere** other commanding figures of the air war. The French remembered René Fonck, with seventy-five victories, and Canadians honored Billy Bishop, with seventy-two. Americans had a special place in their hearts for Eddie Rickenbacker, who shot down twenty-six enemy planes in just the final eight months of the war.

Even so, in discussions of World War I aerial combat, the first name that comes to most people's minds is Manfred von Richthofen—the legendary Red Baron.

## Glossary

<b>ace</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a fighter pilot who has brought down five or more enemy planes (p. 4)
<b>adversaries</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	enemies or opponents (p. 10)
<b>aviator</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a pilot of an aircraft (p. 7)
<b>cavalry</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a group of soldiers who fight while mounted on horses (p. 5)
<b>maneuverable</b> ( <i>adj.</i> )	able to move or change direction quickly and easily (p. 13)
<b>revere</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	to deeply respect or hold someone or something in high esteem (p. 15)
<b>squadron</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a military unit made up of more than one small group of soldiers, airplanes, or ships (p. 10)
<b>stalemate</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a draw or deadlock; a situation in a contest where neither side can gain an advantage or win (p. 6)
<b>synchronizing</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	setting things to match in time or arranging things to happen at the same time (p. 9)
<b>trenches</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	long ditches (p. 6)
<b>triplane</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	an early type of airplane with three pairs of wings (p. 13)
<b>World War I</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a war between the Allied Powers and the Central Powers (1914–1918) (p. 4)

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Front cover: A painting of Manfred von Richthofen, known as the Red Baron, standing before his Fokker Triplane in March 1918

Back cover: A painting shows the last flight of the Red Baron.

Title page: Manfred von Richthofen spends a moment with his dog, Moritz, in 1914.

Page 3: German Albatros biplanes of the fighter group under Richthofen's command are lined up for takeoff at an airfield near the front.

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