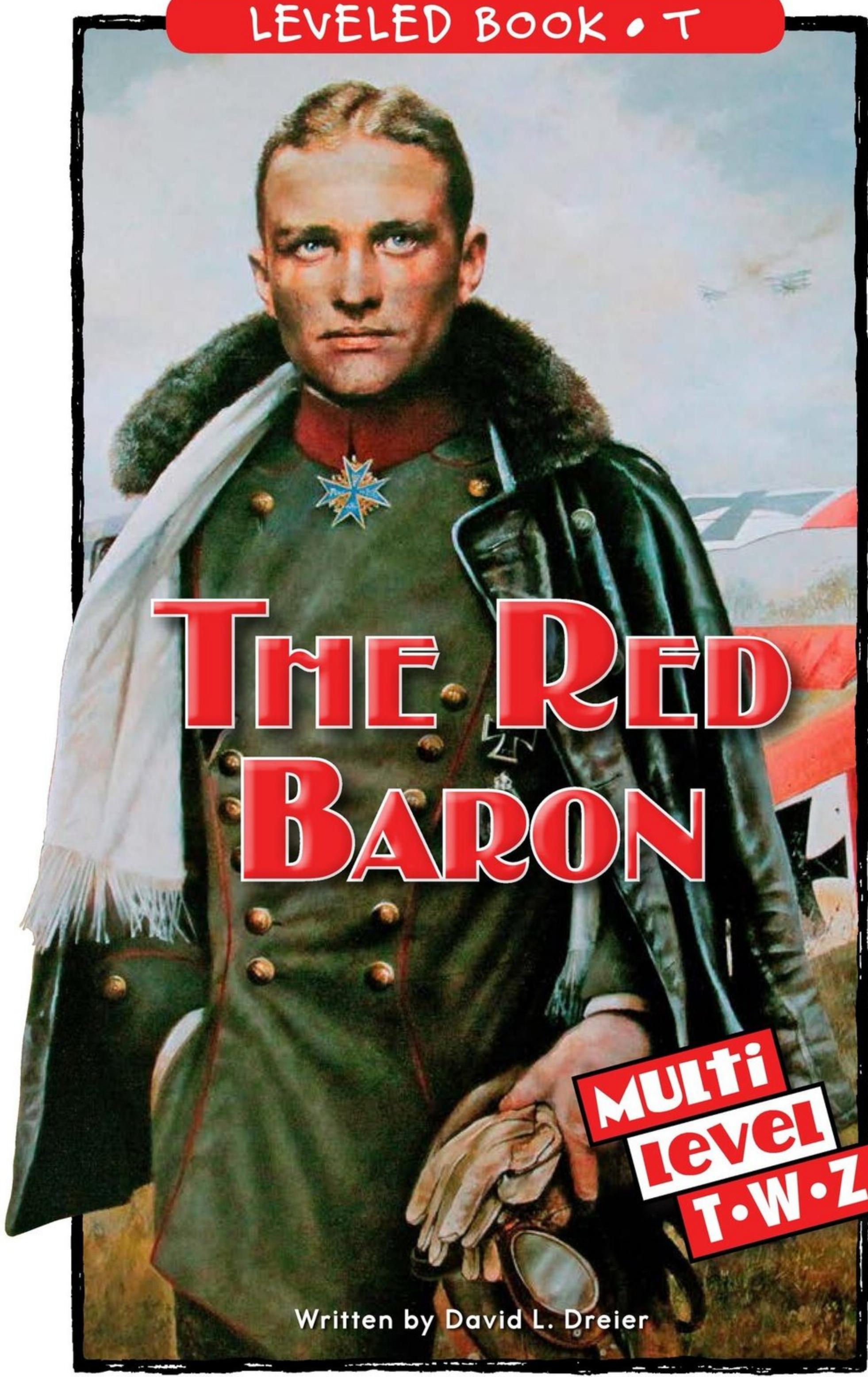


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The Red Baron

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Written by David L. Dreier

THE RED BARON



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World War I (1914–1918) was the first war in which airplanes were widely used.

A New Kind of War

When World War I began in 1914, the airplane had only been around for a little more than ten years. Thousands of men trained to fight in the skies during the war. They were pioneers in a new age. Many of them died during the war. A small number of them were so successful that they became famous. The most famous of them all was Manfred von Richthofen, the Red Baron.

The Young Baron

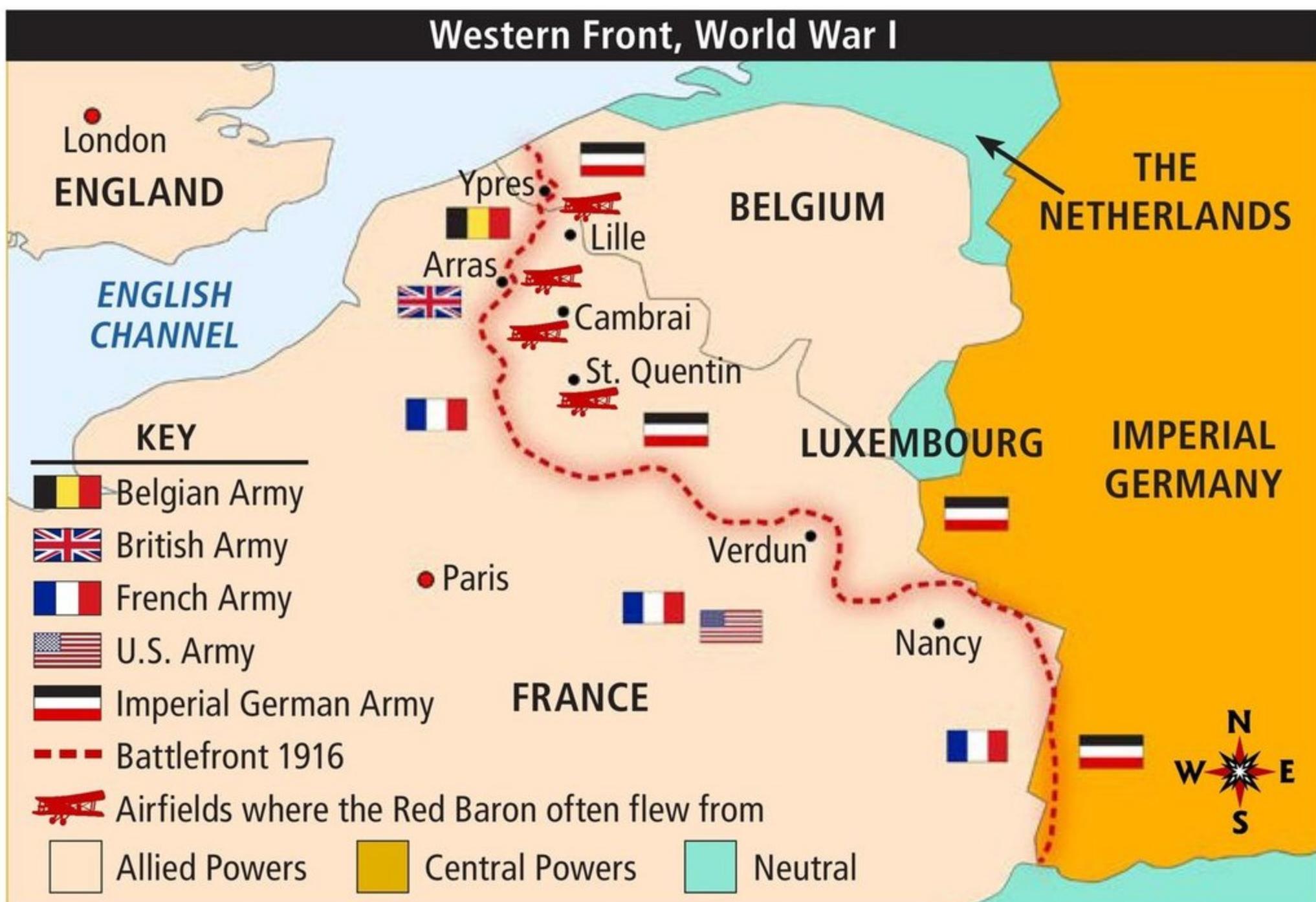
Manfred von Richthofen was born in 1892 in Germany. He had an older sister and two younger brothers. Manfred's family were minor **nobles** in Germany, so he was sometimes called a *baron*.

Young Manfred loved to hunt on his family's land and became a very good shot. He also enjoyed riding horses.

Manfred's father had been an **officer** in the German **cavalry**. He wanted his sons to join the military as well. At the age of eleven, Manfred was sent to a military school. He was not a great student but was a strong athlete. After Manfred finished school, 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 sent to the Western Front, where Germany faced the Allied forces, including Britain, France, and Canada.

By early 1915, the front lines of the war were not moving much. The sides were evenly matched, and neither could advance far before being stopped again. Soldiers lived in muddy **trenches** guarded by barbed wire and machine guns. Cavalry units became useless. Richthofen's unit's horses were taken away, and he became a foot messenger.

Becoming a World War I Flyer

Richthofen quickly grew tired of life in the filthy trenches. Being stuck there was not how he wanted to spend the war. Far above him, he could see airplanes flying through the clean air and clouds. He wrote in his book about himself that he became “tremendously excited” whenever he saw a **pilot**. Joining the German Flying Service became his “greatest wish.”

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 he wanted more. In October 1915, Richthofen went back to flight school to become a pilot.

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



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

Combat in the Clouds

In late 1916, Richthofen met one of Germany's greatest fighter pilots. That man was Oswald Boelcke (BULL-kuh), who was then putting together a new group of fighter pilots. Boelcke invited Richthofen to join the group, and he jumped at the chance.

Boelcke trained his men to be smart in the air so they would always have the upper hand in combat. He made a list of eight rules for his men to follow when fighting the enemy.



Like other pilots, Richthofen wore a leather cap, goggles, and a warm flight suit while flying to protect himself from the wind and cold.

Richthofen was never a flashy pilot, but he had a lot of discipline. He followed Boelcke's rules 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.

Word Wise

An ace is a military pilot who has been given credit for shooting down five or more enemy planes.

Near the end of October, Boelcke died after a midair crash 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.

Richthofen was awarded Germany's highest military medal, called the "Blue Max." He was also put in charge of his own fighter group.



Boelcke shoots down an enemy plane while flying an Albatros fighter. Manfred von Richthofen scored his first victories while flying this same type of plane.



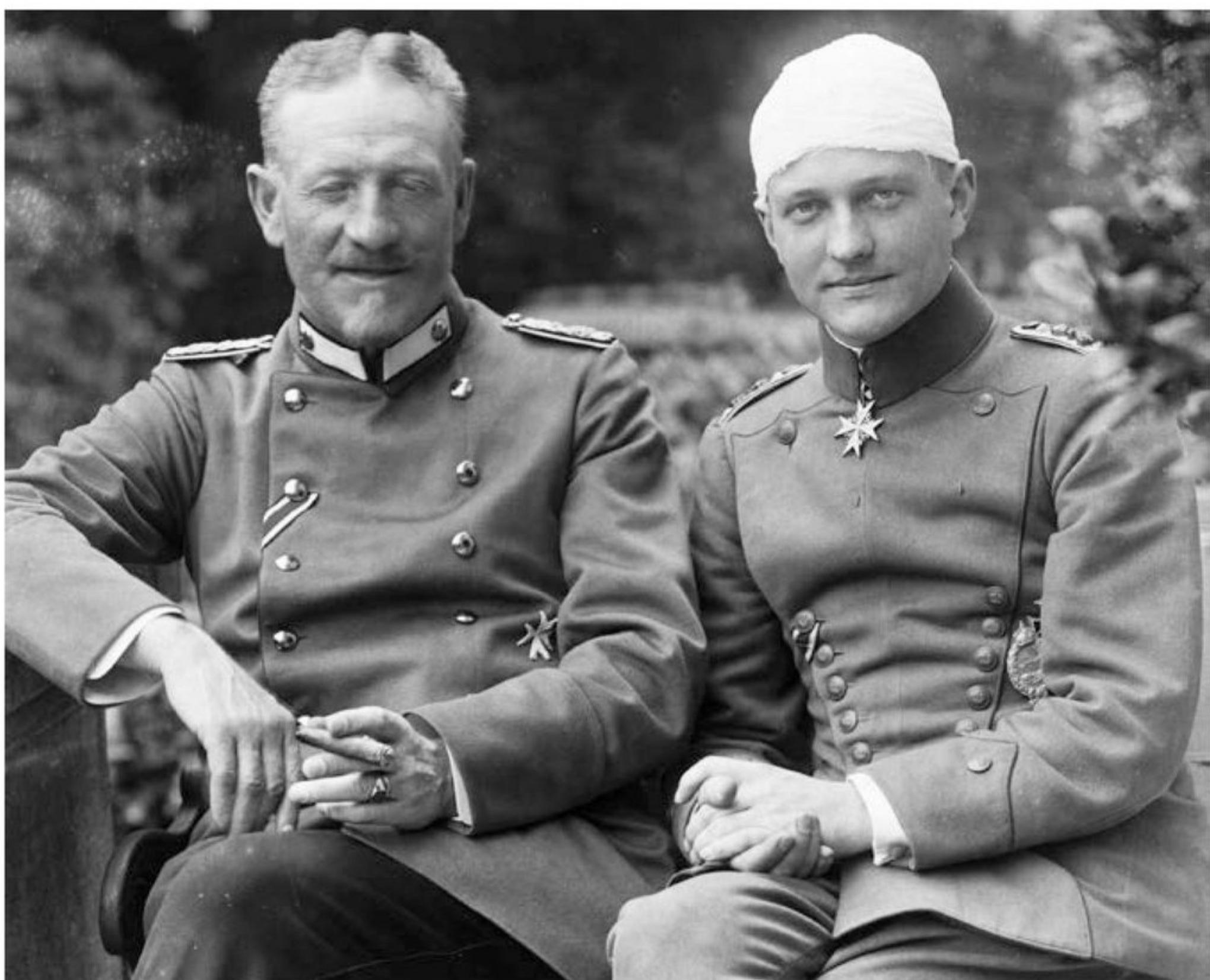
Richthofen (center) leads pilots from the Flying Circus on a patrol in 1917.

Richthofen had his Albatros **biplane** painted bright red to make it easier to see in the sky. His men followed his lead and painted their planes in bright colors as well. The Allies began calling Richthofen's colorful group the "Flying Circus."

It was a deadly circus. Under Richthofen's leadership, the group scored many victories. In April 1917, Richthofen's pilots 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 fame grew, Richthofen inspired nicknames such as the “Red Battle Flyer” and the “Red Knight.” The “Red Baron” nickname became popular after the war.

In July, Richthofen was badly wounded when a bullet nicked his head during a fight with another plane. He returned to his home in Germany for a month to recover. He healed from his wound but began to lose his taste for battle.



Richthofen, wearing his Blue Max medal, visits his father, Albrecht, in July 1917 after being wounded.



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 biplane and its two sets of wings for a new **triplane**. The slow but nimble fighter had three sets of wings. It quickly became the aircraft with which he is most often remembered.

Though he often suffered headaches from his wound and had grown tired of the war, Richthofen continued to shoot down Allied planes. 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 fighting above Allied lines, Richthofen was struck in the heart by a single bullet. He managed to land his plane safely but 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 moved to Germany after the war.



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

No one is certain who fired the bullet that struck Richthofen. Canadians thought it was one of their own pilots, Captain Arthur Brown. However, many historians believe the bullet came from an Australian gunner on the ground.

With eighty confirmed victories, Richthofen was the greatest ace of World War I. He was a national hero.

Even today, more than one hundred years after the start of the war, people still remember Manfred von Richthofen—the legendary Red Baron.

Glossary

biplane (<i>n.</i>)	an early type of airplane with two pairs of wings (p. 11)
cavalry (<i>n.</i>)	a group of soldiers who fight while mounted on horses (p. 5)
combat (<i>n.</i>)	fighting between military forces (p. 7)
nobles (<i>n.</i>)	people of the ruling class (p. 5)
officer (<i>n.</i>)	a person who holds a position of command or authority (p. 5)
pilot (<i>n.</i>)	a person who flies an aircraft or spacecraft (p. 7)
trenches (<i>n.</i>)	long ditches (p. 6)
triplane (<i>n.</i>)	an early type of airplane with three pairs of wings (p. 13)
World War I (<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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