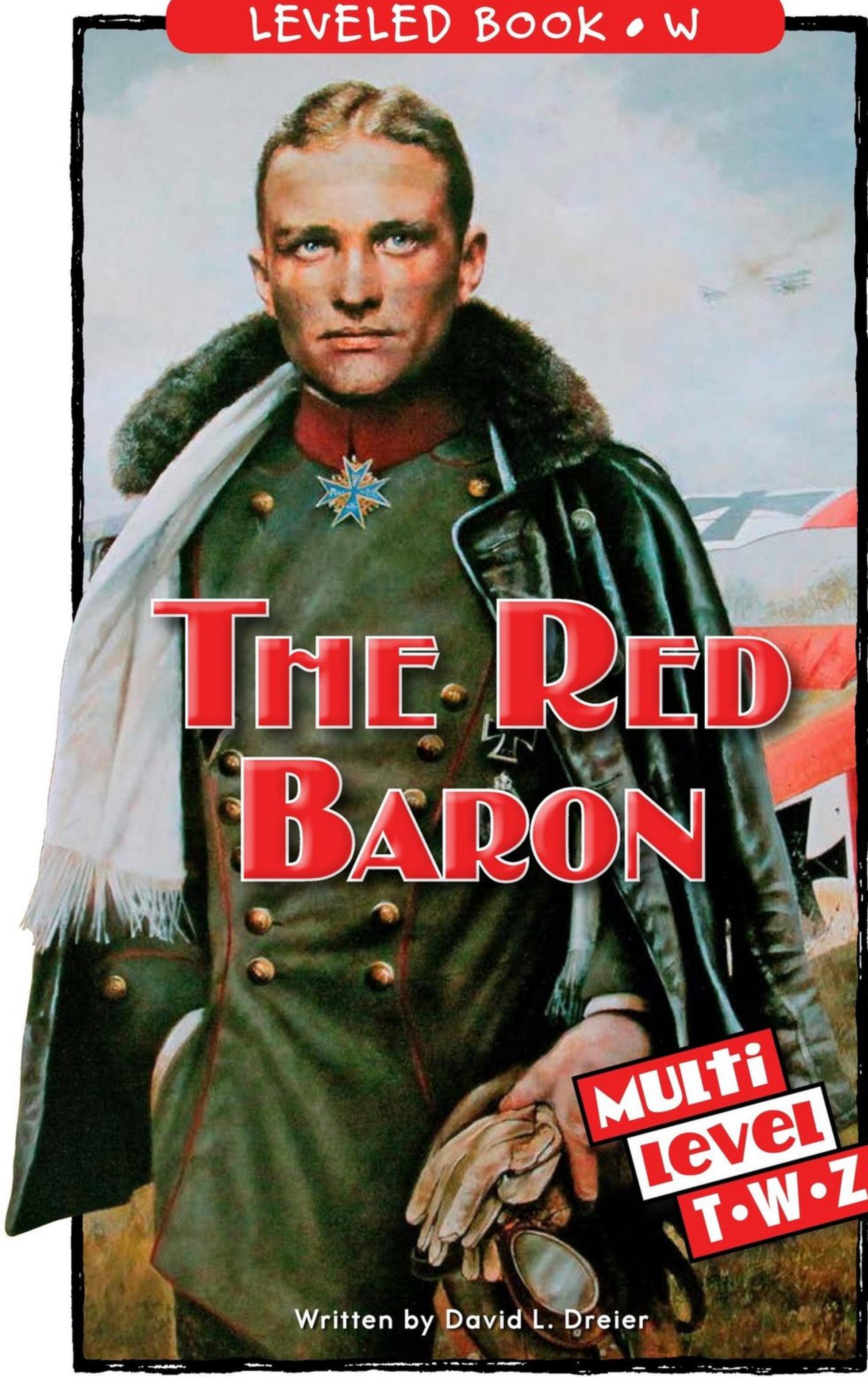


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The Red Baron

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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

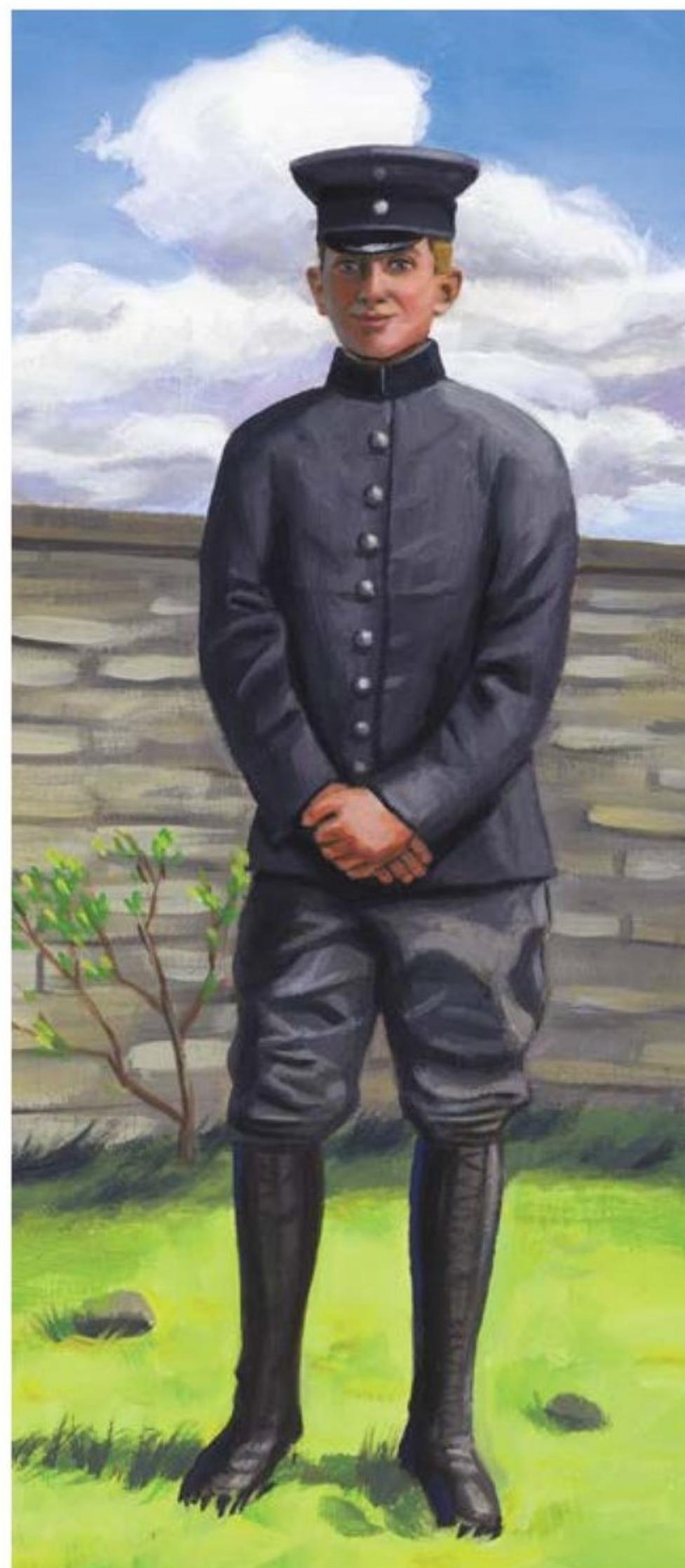
When **World War I** began in 1914, the airplane had only been around for a little more than ten years. Thousands of men trained to fight in the skies during the war. They were pioneers in a new age of aerial combat. Many of them died during the conflict. A small number of airmen stood out from the rest. Through a combination of luck, skill, and daring, these pilots became so successful in the air that they were respected and admired by people on both sides of the war. The most famous of them all was Manfred von Richthofen, the Red Baron.

The Young Baron

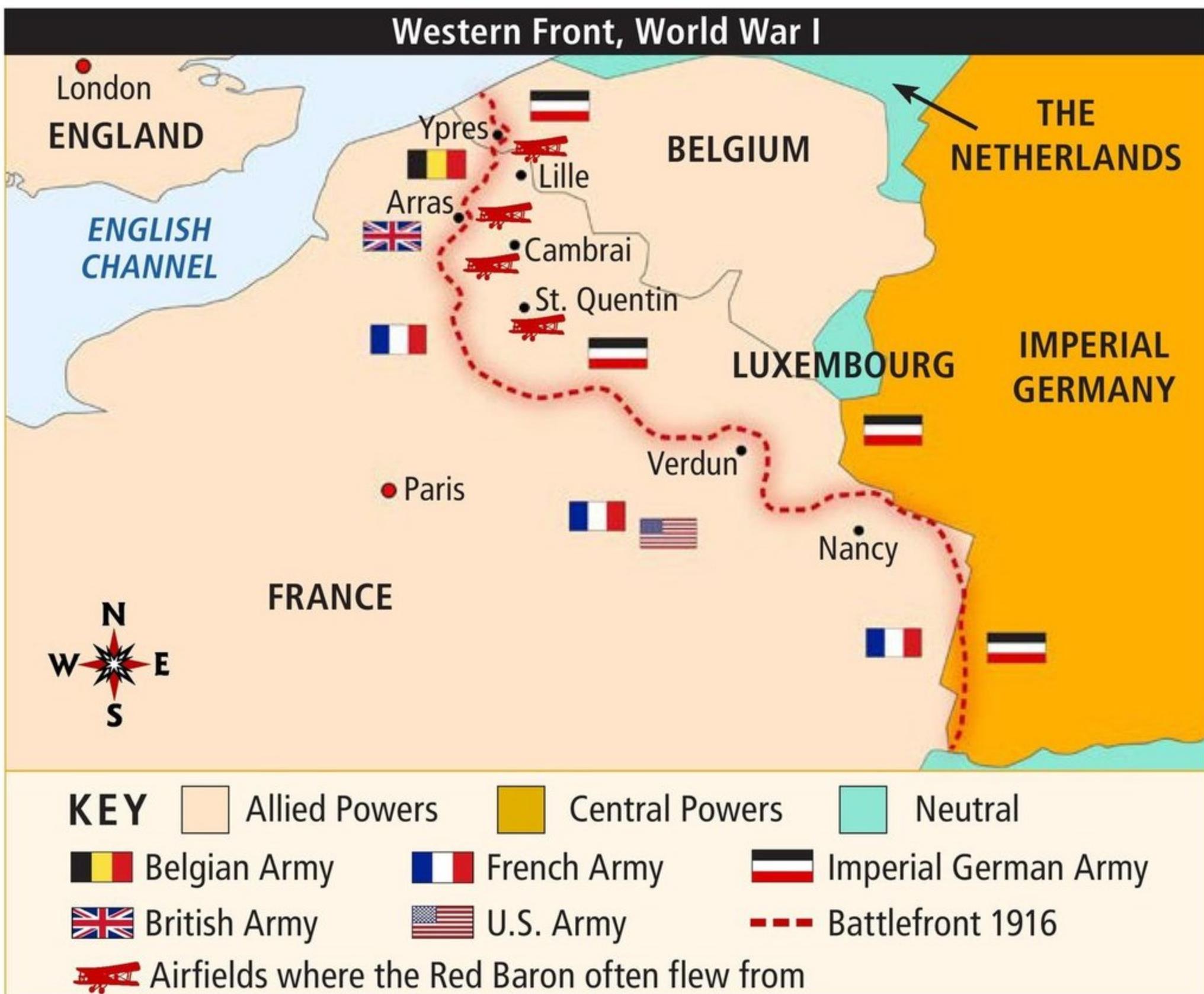
Manfred von Richthofen was born in 1892 into a **noble** family in Germany. He had an older sister and two younger brothers. Manfred's family were minor nobles, so he was sometimes called a *baron*.

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

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 airplanes of the day were made mostly of fabric and wood and were fragile. A plane had to be light in order to fly because the engines weren't very powerful. The 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.



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

Combat in the Clouds

In late 1916, Richthofen got the opportunity he had been waiting for. 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 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 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 rule told pilots to hold their fire until they were close to an enemy plane.

Richthofen was never a flashy pilot, but he was disciplined, following 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 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 squadron and a promotion to captain.





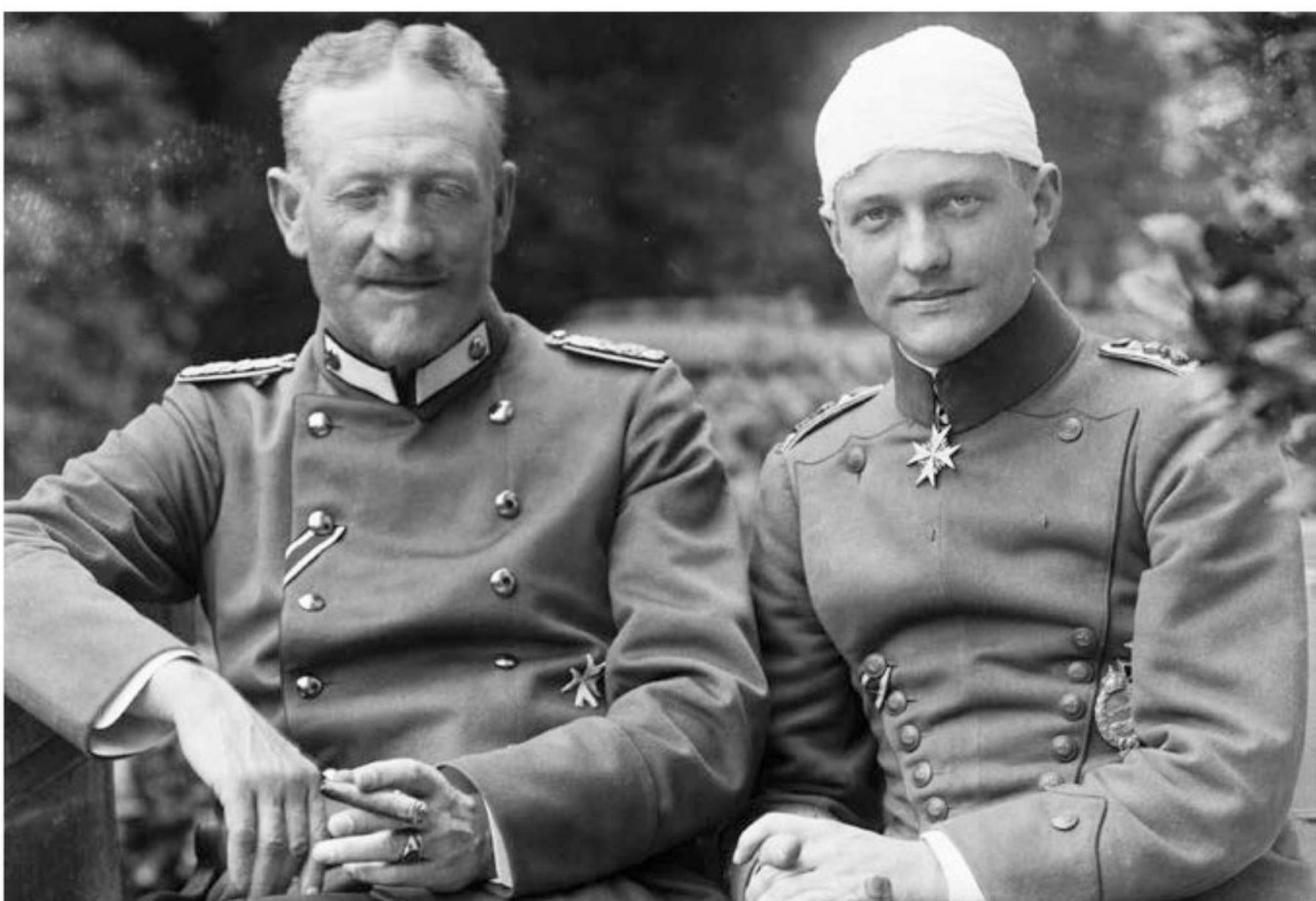
Richthofen (center) leads pilots from the Flying Circus on a patrol in 1917.

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 as well. The Allies began calling Richthofen's colorful group the "Flying Circus."

It was a deadly circus. Under Richthofen's leadership, the fighter squadron 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 and command responsibilities 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 suffered a severe wound when a bullet grazed his skull during an aerial combat. During a one-month recovery, Richthofen returned to his home in Germany. He and his brother Lothar—who was also an ace and who 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 taste for battle.



Richthofen 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 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 be a thorn in the side of the Allies. On April 20, 1918, he scored his eightieth victory. It would be his last.

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. He died moments later.



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

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.

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 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 fighter pilots, the first name that comes to most people's minds is Manfred von Richthofen—the legendary Red Baron.

Glossary

adversaries (<i>n.</i>)	enemies or opponents (p. 9)
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)
encounter (<i>n.</i>)	an unexpected meeting, a conflict, or an experience (p. 9)
maneuverable (<i>adj.</i>)	able to move or change direction quickly and easily (p. 13)
noble (<i>n.</i>)	a person of the ruling class (p. 5)
officer (<i>n.</i>)	a person who holds a position of command or authority (p. 5)
squadron (<i>n.</i>)	a military unit made up of more than one small group of soldiers, airplanes, or ships (p. 9)
stalemate (<i>n.</i>)	a draw or deadlock; a situation in a contest where neither side can gain an advantage or win (p. 6)
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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