

THREE ACES

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The most important day in World War II was April 21, 1918.

Everyone here is quite sure that my maiden paper is off to a bad start with a foolish mistake on dates. Let me assure you that April 21, 1918, is a very important date for history well beyond the First and Second World Wars. As I told my wife the night I came in at 3am, I can explain everything.

Let's start with the first ace of the title. There is no greater icon of air war than this ace. This is a man who was a hero during his life and a celebrity after his death. Still celebrated nearly nine decades later on two continents and beyond with his name bringing instant recognition for everything from comic strips to frozen pizza. Baron Manfred von Richtofen, The Red Baron, is known even where his real accomplishments are no longer remembered. He was the ace of aces in World War I with 80 credited victories and his actions noted and feared by his enemies and treasured by his countrymen.

It is important to this story to understand the man as well as his fame. Manfred was the first son of Baron Albrecht and Baroness Kunigunde von Richtofen. Following a career in the military, the Baron had retired to an estate in a small Silesian village in the Weistriz Valley. Manfred developed a real love for hunting and riding in the dense forests of the region. He was schooled by private tutors until the age of nine and then sent to the Cadet Corps to finish his education.

Young Richtofen entered the military on Easter, 1911 and received his commission as a Lieutenant of Cavalry in the fall of 1912 at the age of 20. Those who knew him at that time recognized his obvious sense of leadership based on his aggressiveness and burning honesty. This was a direct and forceful young man with a keen sense of purpose.

When war started for the Germans in 1914, his cavalry unit saw duty first against the Russians and then in Belgium. However, it was clear to Lt. Richtofen as well as the rest of the army that horse mounted cavalry was not going to have a role in the trenches of that war. While in Belgium, he saw his first military airplane and, like a compass needle pointing suddenly to true north, he saw his military future and transferred to the air service.

The early days of military flying for the Germans and Allies were not days of exciting air to air combat in nimble flying machines. Instead, the planes were slow and heavy two seaters used for reconnaissance and artillery spotting. Richtofen started his flying career as an observer and learned to choose his pilot from those who were young and aggressive. As more and more planes took to the air, it did not take long for the observer

to start carrying a rifle or a light machine gun to try to shoot down opposition aircraft. The days of chivalry in the air with opposing observers waving to each other did not last past the first pilot who got a bullet between his eyes. Richtofen thrilled to the concept and shot down two French planes in late 1915 and early 1916 using a light machine gun. He did not seek or receive credit for these two victories.

With his aggressive character, Manfred found a way to transfer into the brave new world of fighter aircraft. It is interesting that he never was known as a great pilot. After 25 training flights in a fighter, his first solo was not auspicious. In his account of the landing he said: "I lost my balance, made some wrong movements, stood on my head and succeeded in converting my aeroplane into a battered school bus." There are no intricate aerial maneuvers named for him and he developed little interest in acrobatic techniques. He did however, exhibit great interest in ways to kill his enemy. This was a hunter not a showman.

His first victory was in September, 1916, and by the end of that year, just four months, he had a remarkable 15 victories. Clearly, he had met the unique intersection in time where man, mission, and opportunity came together with perfect harmony. He became a squadron commander in late 1916 and found the unit with low morale and poor performance. Manfred brought a new determination and proficiency to the unit and in April 1917, so called Bloody April by the Allies, his single squadron of about 15 planes downed 97 allied planes. By the middle of 1917 he was promoted to Fighter Wing Commander. The German Fighter Wing consisted of three squadrons and was designed to be highly mobile – moving their tents, trucks, and planes along the front to wherever they were needed. Along the way, Richtofen had his plane painted a deep, blood red color so that his comrades could identify him easily in the air. The pilots under his command took this idea to heart and everyone painted their aircraft in garish colors with stripes, polka dots, and wild combinations. With the movement of the Wing from location to location, the Wing picked up the obvious nickname – "The Flying Circus."

As his victories grew, so did his fame. He was called back to Germany to speak to bond rallies where citizens jammed parade routes and young boys collected cards bearing his visage and accomplishments – exactly like baseball cards today. Allied newspapers took to calling him the "Red Devil" and everyone in the air and on the ground recognized and respected the red airplane bearing the German cross. I cannot think of any comparable military figure since then who comes close to the recognition and respect that this single figure did on both sides of the conflict.

Perhaps his greatest accomplishment was not in his victory total but in his talent as a leader. The Flying Circus was not a group of clownish airmen but an extraordinary fighting unit molded by their leader. Here are two quotes from one of his pilots: "Each time we came back von Richtofen told us what we had done right and where had made mistakes. I noticed to my great astonishment, that he never lost sight of us even when fighting for his life." "He shone with calm in the most critical moments which quite naturally exercised the most salutary influence on all of us."

The Baron conducted daily training sessions with his pilots to review techniques and share any new developments by their opponents. This new form of warfare was providing lessons every day and Manfred was determined that his “hawks,” as he called them, would be as prepared as possible. He said “The commanding officer is responsible that neither he nor his any of his pilots are surprised by the enemy. If he cannot see to that, he is no good as a leader.” Among the lessons that he imparted in those training sessions were: turn to meet the enemy – rather than try to escape, always try to be above your enemy, keep the sun to your back when possible, if your gun jams or your engine mis-fires – go home to fight another day. Most importantly, he taught them his most basic technique: “Don’t waste your bullets on enemy machines. Always go for the man.” By his own definition, Richtofen was a hunter, someone who enjoyed the hunt, and a shooter, someone who knew his job was to destroy the enemy.

Six months before the Armistice in 1918 the war was starting to go badly for the Germans when Manfred von Richtofen flew his last mission. On the fatal day of his last flight, there were two brand new pilots who played key roles. On the Allied side, Lt. Wilfred May was on his first combat mission in a group of 15 Sopwith Camels commanded by Captain Roy Brown of the Royal Canadian Air Force, an ace with 8 victories. The new German pilot was The Red Baron’s cousin, Wolfram von Richtofen, on his first mission with the Flying Circus. Both of these “newbies” had strict instruction from their commanders to stay away from actual combat and simply observe any battles. To enter into an aerial battle on the first day was a sure way to make your mother very unhappy. A battle did develop near the front line in France between the 15 British planes and about 27 Germans. Typical of battles of the day the sky became filled with a veritable cloud of aircraft wheeling and circling at close range.

True to their instructions, young Wilfred and Wolfram were slightly away from the main battle observing the scene. May found himself slightly above the younger Richtofen’s plane, a Fokker tri-plane with purple wings and a silver body. Wilfred could not resist and dove on the plane below firing wildly hoping for his first kill on his first day. Wolfram reacted quickly and immediately dove his plane into the swirling melee below. May lost contact with Wolfram who escaped back to his base unharmed. However, Manfred caught sight of May attacking his cousin and closed quickly on the Camel with guns blazing. May did not record his exact words at that moment but “Oh shit” might have been appropriate. He turned his plane and began a shallow power dive toward the safety of friendly lines.

Captain von Richtofen had May dead to rights. May dove for the relative safety of the Somme Canal with its heavily wooded and hilly embankments stirred on by the occasional burst of bullets past his head. The actions of Richtofen at this point are the subject of some debate. He certainly did follow May and was in position to shoot him on several occasions. But we know that his left gun was hopelessly jammed with a defective cartridge and the right gun had a split firing pin requiring him to manually cock the weapon for each round. He clearly violated his own teaching and continued to chase after his intended victim even though he was over enemy lines with defective weapons. Most think that he misread the topography due to an unusual, strong east wind that

moved the cloud of planes further west than he thought and he was just angry that this inexperienced enemy had tried to kill his cousin. As a result he flew directly into an area occupied by Australian forces including infantry, artillery, and machine guns.

As a badly frightened May followed the canal below treetop level toward the town of Corbie, he began looking for a place to crash his plane into the water rather than be blown out of the air. About a mile into this chase, Captain Brown caught sight of the two planes and tried to dislodge the Red Baron from May's tail by diving on the German plane. Brown dove from a position high and to the left of Richtofen firing all the way down, wind screaming through the struts of his Camel. He climbed from his dive almost directly above Richtofen at three hundred feet probably feeling lucky that his wings were still with him. About that time, ground fire from a few men with rifles and two machine guns were being directed at the red plane. Minutes later, Richtofen's right gun jammed permanently and he likely realized he was no longer in friendly company. Approaching a ridge line, he climbed and turned to go back toward home. As he was turning, the Red Baron's plane was seen to jerk suddenly. At that moment he did two instinctive acts taught to every pilot when injured - he threw off his goggles and killed his engine. The red plane crash-landed relatively intact in a clearing near the canal and the soldiers who rushed to the plane found Baron Manfred von Richtofen dead in the cockpit.

The Australians and their British commanders realized quickly who they had and later conducted a very large, dignified funeral with a hastily made casket carried along a procession lined with troops at attention. A plane flew over German lines and dropped a message at the airfield occupied by the Flying Circus notifying them that their commander, the Ace of Aces, had been killed. The effect on all of Germany was intense. Crowds formed in town squares, spontaneous memorial services were held across the country as the whole nation went into mourning over the loss of this one man. There are some who think that Manfred's death had such a demoralizing effect on the German people that it prepared them to accept their defeat six months later.

Baron von Richtofen was that unusual man whose personal military feats were extraordinary to the point of idolatry by his countrymen but whose leadership abilities exceeded those individual feats. His loss was a true turning point in history.

This brings us to our second ace. Unlike Baron von Richtofen, this one was a vile, evil man guilty of some of the most heinous crimes against humankind in world history. He was the very cartoon of himself – overweight, self indulgent, braggart, and pompous – but enough of his good points. This ace is Hermann Wilhelm Goering. Most known for his role as second in command of the Third Reich in World War II and convicted at the Nuremberg Trials for crimes against humanity. However, for this paper, we will focus on his military career in both world wars.

Hermann was born to a family of bureaucrats with his parents in the German Foreign Service moving from country to country. He was raised in boarding schools in Germany with a god-father in Bavaria looking after him. As Germany prepared for war, young Goering was commissioned a Second Lieutenant in 1912 and formed a motorcycle unit

apparently thinking that this would be the new cavalry. When motorcycles proved to be no more effective in modern war than horses, Hermann joined the Luftwaffe in 1915 as an observer and then became a fighter pilot in the spring of 1916. His flying style can best be described either as bold or foolhardy. Several times, he took on multiple allied planes by himself and suffered crashes and wounds on three occasions. By May 1917, he had accumulated seven victories and his superiors gave him command of a squadron. At the end of 1917, he had 17 kills and his total reached 21 by June 1918 when he took command of a fighter wing. He was known as someone who made friends easily – particularly among his superior officers.

His appointment as wing commander was controversial since his 21 victories were less than many pilots in the wing. Also, there were unfortunate tendencies to get him and his pilots in deep trouble by letting his boldness outstrip his skill and some concern that a number of his victories were behind Allied lines and could not be verified. However, Hermann did a good job winning over the pilots in the wing and he did gain one more victory to bring his total to 22 before the war ended a few months later. Certainly, his record qualifies him as an Ace.

However, the key point is that the wing he commanded was the Richtofen Wing made available by the death of Baron von Richtofen. This was the most famous and skilled fighter wing for the Germans and perhaps the Allies as well. Not only did this average achiever replace the most skilled air leader of the war but Hermann wrapped himself in the glory of Manfred von Richtofen for the next twenty years or more.

After World War I ended, Goering spent a few years barnstorming around Scandinavia as a part time representative for Fokker airplanes and occasional flyer of freight. His claim to attention as a post-war pilot was that he was Commander of the Richtofen Wing – an immediate point of recognition. In 1922, he returned to Germany and was mesmerized by a speech by Adolph Hitler. Goering became very close to Hitler who seemed to like his action orientation, his military reputation, and his political skills. As the Nazi Party gained seats in the Reichstag, it was Goering who worked the political issues that Hitler could not fathom. When the Nazi's took control of the Reichstag in 1933 with Hitler as Chancellor, it was Goering who worked the back rooms to make it happen and won the gushing gratitude of Hitler.

Because of his reputation as a World War I air ace and commander of the Richtofen Wing, Hitler gave Goering sweeping authority for much of the military and particularly the air force, the Luftwaffe. During the course of World War II, Hitler often took command of various military situations but usually gave Goering his way with the Luftwaffe. A full listing of his ineptness as leader of the Luftwaffe would require more than any one paper so we will focus on three events or issues that changed World War II in the favor of the Allies.

As head of the Luftwaffe, he also was responsible for the research and development of new aircraft. Although he wanted to make all the decisions, he shunned discussions of technology claiming that he did not need to know any details. One of his subordinates

said: “A right decision or critical judgment in technical matters was often a matter of pure luck in his case.” Typical of Goering’s need for recognition and control, he replaced the very competent head of aircraft development who had developed the Stuka and Me 109 with a friend from the Richtofen Squadron who had no skill at organization. The design criteria established by Goering included the need for every aircraft to be capable of dive bombing. The net result of this astonishing directive was that Germany never developed a heavy bomber that was flyable. By the time the R&D leadership was restored in 1942, the program was in total disarray. Fortunately for the Allies, there was little effective German aircraft development from 1938 to 1942 allowing Britain and the U.S. to gain superiority in all types of airplanes.

Hermann’s blundering management style made him the target of ridicule inside the military. Of course, with a weight of over 300 pounds, an addiction to morphine and codeine, changing uniforms five or six times a day to costumes suitable for Gilbert and Sullivan, and constant self aggrandizement, made his nicknames obvious – The Fat One, The Peacock, and most telling – Nero.

Let’s look at just one period of time that may have made the most difference to the outcome of the Second World War – May, 1940, to May, 1941. By May of 1940, the Germans had swept across most of Western Europe with little difficulty. The British Expeditionary Force containing most of the British fighting units fought valiantly to stem the German surge but was continually frustrated by the collapse of French and Belgium forces on their flanks. Or as the Tommies called them – “the runners.” In an impressive use of air support for Panzer and infantry advances, the Germans had managed to capture thousands of prisoners and had most of the remaining French, Belgium, Dutch, and British forces trapped in a pocket at the French port city of Dunkirk. Approximately 370,000 troops were faced with sure destruction by the coordinated German forces.

Fortunately, Hermann Goering came to their rescue. He was so puffed up by Luftwaffe victories over mostly unarmed cities that he convinced Hitler that destroying this pocket was a job for the Luftwaffe alone. The Panzers were pulled back and the infantry set up a perimeter around the city to contain not to attack. The decision was so ludicrous to those on the scene that the Stuka commander, General Wolfram von Richtofen – remember Manfred’s cousin from our earlier discussion, made an angry but unsuccessful call directly to Hitler demanding Panzers. Well, the Luftwaffe certainly did damage to troops and ships at Dunkirk but Goering completely missed three essential and obvious points. One was that it is difficult to capture ground forces from the air. The second is that the Luftwaffe had limited night or bad weather capability so could not stop the evacuation of most of the trapped troops under cover of night and rain. Third is that he and his boss continually underestimated the resolute spirit of the English troops and people. Net result is that 338,000 troops were safely evacuated to England to save the heart of the British army.

Immediately following the Dunkirk evacuation, the Germans began preparations for a possible invasion of Britain – Operation Sealion. The first phase was an air assault on British air fields, aircraft, aircraft manufacture, and air defenses starting in July, 1940.

For the next three months, fierce battles between the Luftwaffe and the RAF filled the skies over Southern England. Although the Luftwaffe lacked the heavy bombers needed to reach further around England, the lighter bombers with strong fighter support could easily reach the air defenses around London and the docks. By the end of August, the RAF was in serious trouble, losses of both aircraft and pilots exceeded replacement rates and half of the bases of the Southern Command were seriously damaged. Fortunately, the Germans never shutdown the new radar stations since Goering dismissed them as no more important than weather reporters in a country where it always rains.

On the night of August 23rd, an accident changed the course of the battle. A German bomber pilot was unable to drop his bombs on designated airfields because of foul weather. As he returned toward the continent, he jettisoned his bombs thinking he was over the channel. Instead, the bombs fell directly onto central London. Churchill was outraged and immediately ordered an air strike against Berlin. Hitler was similarly enraged and called in Goering and demanded that London be bombed. Goering had said that if enemy bombs ever hit Berlin, "you can call me Meier," was so embarrassed that he completely shifted the attacks from the RAF to the cities in what has been called 'The Blitz.' Although tragic for the English citizens, the respite in direct air attacks gave the RAF exactly the break they needed to rebuild and re-staff. Also, Goering personally dictated the formations to be used by the bombers and their fighter escorts. Since the bombers were not well equipped for air defense, he ordered the fighters to fly in and around the bombers all the way to the target area. The main fighter at that time was the Me 109 which was an excellent aircraft with a decided advantage over Spitfires and Hurricanes at altitudes above 20,000 ft. However, at the bombers altitude of 10,000 ft or less, the Me 109 burned excessive fuel and more than met its match with the British fighters. Through the end of 1940, the Luftwaffe continued their devastations on English cities but at a tremendous cost in aircraft lost to the RAF and anti-aircraft fire. Thanks to Dale Flick and Robert Smith, we have learned that The Literary Club has an artifact from the Blitz in fragments from Samuel Johnson's home burned by the raid on December 29, 1940. Goering kept telling Hitler that the English spirit was about to be crushed. As we know, the English proved much stronger of spirit and fortitude than Hitler or Goering could dream. Here is a marvelous example of British spirit from the revised rules of St. Mellons Golf Club during the Blitz: "... a ball moved by enemy action may be replaced .. a ball lying in a crater may be dropped .. a player whose stroke is affected by the simultaneous explosion of a bomb or by machine gun fire may play another ball penalty one stroke." These are not easily intimidated people.

By early 1941, the Germans had abandoned any plans of invasion and even stopped air attacks by May to move onto further disasters in Russia. Without going further into Goering's blunders in the remainder of the war, it is my opinion that the Germans lost the war in 1940. They not only never regained air superiority after the Battle of Britain but also did not control England. I don't think that a successful invasion was likely, but consider what would have happened if those 338,000 troops had not been able to escape the continent and if the Luftwaffe had continued their devastation of the RAF to control the air over Southern England. If England had been rendered defenseless, it is unlikely that the United States could have joined with them to build the staging area for the

invasion of Europe. Without this base so close to the continent, any intrusion of the U.S. into the war would have been solely through Africa and the Mediterranean. It is possible that the U.S. might not have joined the battle for Europe without the access to the ports and fields of England. In my mind, Hermann Goering won the war for the Allies with his malfeasance in managing German production and the Luftwaffe. As it turns out, even with his blunders, the conquest of Germany was no easy task and cost the lives of hundreds of thousands troops, civilians, and millions of Jews over five more long years.

I am sure that you are following my logic at this point – even if you don't agree with it. The date that Baron Manfred von Richtofen was killed was April 21, 1918. His fame and leadership qualities were sustained well past his death. When his body was exhumed and returned to Germany in 1925, crowds lined the railroad tracks and jammed stations to pay homage to this single man. If he had survived World War I, it is a virtual certainty that he would have been the man in charge of the Luftwaffe. Hermann Goering probably would have still been the evil, political twin of Hitler but would not have been given the control over Germany's air force if the Ace of Aces was alive. Hermann would not have been commander of the Richtofen Wing and would have been just another war veteran – an ace but never mentioned in the same breath with The Red Baron.

From what we know of Richtofen the hunter and air strategist, I cannot believe that he would have blundered his way through failed aircraft development or would have let the British escape Dunkirk for his own vanity or would have let the RAF off the hook in 1940. Knowing how painful the conquering of the German war machine was with a fool at the helm of the air arm, think what it would have been like with a cool, focused hunter in charge of the Luftwaffe. Therefore, the man who killed Manfred von Richtofen changed the course of history in ways he could never understand and that brings us to our third Ace.

First, let's examine in some gruesome detail the nature of Manfred von Richtofen's fatal wound. After his body was recovered from his downed plane, it was examined on three different occasions by British doctors although no exam included a full autopsy. I have seen a photo of the body and, although my forensic skill is unproven, the following conclusion matches my visual scrutiny. The body was not "riddled with bullets" as some have claimed. The Baron's face had been slightly damaged by impact to the butts of his Spandau machine guns when the plane hit the ground. However, the fatal shot was a single entry wound on the right side that broke the ninth rib with an exit wound just below the left nipple. The spent 30 caliber bullet was found in Manfred's flying suit and it is likely that the inch and a half bullet tumbled as it tore a path through the upper torso. Doctor's in this room can verify that the path of the bullet likely included ripping through some segment of the heart causing death in well less than a minute – some have speculated within 30 seconds.

The reason this detail is important is that both soldiers on the ground and the RAF claimed credit for the victory. However, it seems obvious that the bullet that struck him came after the Baron decided to abort his attack on May and had started his turn toward home. During this climbing turn, the aircraft was seen to pitch upward to the right and

then lose power and come to the ground – consistent with a blow to the pilot’s right side. Obviously, the brave attempt by Capt. Roy Brown minutes earlier had the effect of convincing the Baron to break off his attack on May but Brown could not have fired the fatal shot. Remember, he attacked from high and to the left of the red plane about a mile from the crash site. No bullet path from Brown fits an entry wound to the Baron’s right side. After many messages and consultations, the RAF gave Captain Brown the credit for the kill since a victory over the German ace was great public relations and a British ace would be the most appealing victor. Politics often cause strange conclusions and the politics of the military can be stranger still. The controversy over the final shot dogged Brown to the end of his days and, even with two bars on a Distinguished Service Cross - one awarded by the Prince of Wales, his role as a very steady, trustworthy man and leader was diminished. The attacks by elements of the press frustrated him till his early death at age 50.

As you can imagine, several people on the ground fired at the Baron’s plane as it roared past at tree top level. Rather than take you through all the claims, let’s go to the one person that I have always thought fired the fatal round and is now recognized in recent scholarship – Sergeant Cedric Bassett Popkin of the 24th Machine Gun Squadron, Australian Imperial Force - AIF. The squadron was primarily in place to provide anti-aircraft fire for protection of an Australian artillery battery along the ridge and Cedric was in charge of four machine gun crews. However, at the time of the May-Richtofen chase, the machine guns were not manned since there had not been any enemy aircraft sighted in the vicinity. When Popkin saw the two planes roaring toward the ridge, he jumped into one of the gun pits to operate the 30 caliber Vickers machine gun himself with one of his troopers to feed the cartridge belt.

As the planes headed toward the ridge, Popkin was on the left of the line of flight but his hurried initial firing had no effect. However, as the tri-plane turned exposing the right side to Popkin, he fired another long burst at a range of about 800 yards at the moment that the red plane jerked violently and began to head to the earth. The range is appropriate for a bullet from the Vickers to have just enough velocity to penetrate a body but not enough to continue far beyond – consistent with the Baron’s fatal wound. There is no question in my mind that this volunteer from Sydney who gave up his work as a carpenter to enter the AIF killed the Red Baron. I also note that his actions were an immediate act of someone who saw his duty and did not hesitate. No one would have questioned him had he taken the time to call the gun crews together, issue instructions, and then look for a target that was long gone. Instead he jumped right to a gun and did his best to protect one of his allies. Had he not acted so quickly, it is likely that the Baron would have escaped back to his own lines where he could be covered by his comrades on the way home. Popkin’s claim of the kill was discounted in the eagerness of the RAF to take credit for their airman.

Cedric lost a leg two months later to German artillery shell and returned to Australia where he went back to carpentry and also became Postmaster of the charming town of Tyalgum in New South Wales near the Queensland border. His claim and those of other Aussies for the downing of the Red Baron were appropriately noted in the Australian

press and occasionally picked up by papers around the world. However, he always said that he thought he saw the effect of his fire on Baron von Richtofen but he did not want to quarrel that other Australian soldiers could have fired the shot as well. He died quietly at age 77 with a small obituary in the local paper.

At least now, we can declare that Cedric Bassett Popkin struck a blow for the ordinary soldier and, by doing more than required of him, changed the course of history. Without Manfred von Richtofen, skilled leader and the most influential early architect of air war, the Germans permitted a man who proved to be hopelessly inept to ruin their chances in World War II. We owe the memory of Sergeant Popkin a heartfelt debt of gratitude not just for his individual act on April 21, 1918, but because he reminds us of the role that everyone can play in history.

To Cedric Popkin, I say "Fair dinkum, Ace. Good on ya."

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