The short, intense life of Baron Manfred von Richthofen is perhaps a testament to one of the many great tragedies of war: Too many of its heroes die young. An enthusiastic sportsman in childhood, Richthofen became a skilled and deadly hunter of men as a German fighter pilot during World War I. A dedicated soldier, he helped his country’s cause with his many victories in the air. He was a dramatic hero who would inspire German troops in two world wars and earn respect even from his enemies.

An Unwilling Cadet

Manfred von Richthofen was born on May 2, 1892, into an aristocratic family. Both of his parents were descended from landowners, gentlemen farmers who were not inclined to go to war. However, Richthofen’s father, Albrecht, had chosen a military career and achieved the rank of major. He took his military duties seriously and chose a military career for his oldest son, Manfred, as well.

Von Richthofen was the second child of four. He was born into a comfortable life in an area of northeastern Ger-
many that today is part of Poland. Von Richthofen was an athletic youth who especially excelled in hunting and horseback riding. He was taught at home by tutors until he was nine years old; then he was sent to a school near his home for a year. When von Richthofen was eleven, his father sent him away to a military school in the town of Wahlstatt. Von Richthofen did not want to go, but he had to obey his father’s wishes.

As a cadet in military school, von Richthofen continued to demonstrate his skill at all sports but barely scraped by in his schoolwork. He had little interest in his classes, did not get along with his schoolmates, and did only enough work to pass. Six years later, when he entered the Royal Prussian Military Academy near Berlin in 1909, von Richthofen finally began to enjoy the military life. He still triumphed at athletics, and he was starting to enjoy working and competing with his comrades. In 1911, he graduated from the academy and entered the Prussian cavalry, earning the rank of lieutenant in 1912.

**From Horseback to the Pilot’s Seat**

Von Richthofen’s lifelong love of horseback riding, along with his energy and enthusiasm, made him a natural cavalry officer. In the years before the war, his days consisted mainly of riding patrols along the Polish border and riding his own horses in races during his off-duty hours. When Germany entered World War I in August 1914, von Richthofen’s cavalry unit, the Uhlan Regiment, was called into action to aid in the German attack on Belgium and Luxembourg and to fight in the first battle of Verdun in France.

It soon became apparent, however, that troops on horses were not going to hold their traditional place of importance in this modern war: Artillery was used to attack, and deep trenches were constantly being dug for defense. Von Richthofen and his men were soon off their horses and spending endless hours huddling in muddy trenches while the enemy fired shells at them. Life in the trenches was both boring and terrifying, and von Richthofen began to look for a more active way to spend the war. He sent a request to his general to be transferred to the *Fliegertruppe* (air service).

At first von Richthofen did not plan to pilot planes because he thought that flight training would take too long.
So, in May 1915, he began his flight career as an observer, sitting beside the pilot on a bomber plane and gathering information to be used in future attacks. Soon, however, his impulsive nature won out, and he longed to take control and fly his own missions, not in the heavy bomber planes, but in the lightweight, fast, and fragile fighter planes. He persuaded a friend to teach him to fly, and after only twenty-four hours of flight training, he made his first solo flight. Though he crashed upon landing, he had learned from his years on horseback not to give up when thrown. He continued to train until 1916, when he was assigned to a fighter squadron. He made his first kill as pilot of a fighter plane on September 17, 1916.

The Red Baron

An able hunter on the ground, von Richthofen became a skilled hunter in the air as well. Within a few months, he had shot down ten enemy planes, the number required for a German pilot to be called an “ace.” Each day he eagerly flew up
into battle, honing his skills in pursuit and marksmanship. The new young ace reveled in his victories. He collected souvenirs from each plane he shot down and bought a small engraved trophy to celebrate each of his kills. His victories made him so conceited that his superior officers began to worry that he would become sloppy in his flying. However, von Richthofen never became careless, but only more and more skilled at his deadly work. His cocky attitude eventually subsided a bit as he witnessed the deaths of many of his friends and comrades.

In November 1916, von Richthofen added to his fame by shooting down Major Lanoe Hawker, a famed British ace pilot. On January 16, 1917, von Richthofen was decorated with the highest German war medal, the *Ordre Pour la Merite*, or as it was nicknamed, the Blue Max. In the same month, he was given command of his own *Jagdstaffel* (fighter squadron). *Jagdstaffel* 11 was an unsuccessful squadron in need of a strong leader, and von Richthofen immediately began to whip them into shape. The squadron's air victories increased dramatically, but no one had more kills than the new commander.

Von Richthofen counted up his kills as enthusiastically as any sports fan keeping score. It was around this time that he painted his fighter plane bright red. He wanted it to be recognized from the ground, so that ground troops would not accidentally fire on it—and so that observers on the ground would give him credit for the planes he shot down. Other pilots in his squadron took up the practice of painting bright colors on their planes, and soon the squadron earned the fitting nickname, “the Flying Circus.” The British called the squadron commander the “red baron” or the “red knight,” and the French called him “le petit rouge” (little red). Both respected and feared the red plane's relentless pilot was adding several kills to his record nearly every day.

In April 1917, von Richthofen was promoted to captain. He was extremely valuable to the German army—not only for his combat skills, but also for his dashing and heroic image, which made an excellent propaganda (the spreading of ideas or information to further or damage a cause) tool to raise German morale. The few times he took leave to rest from the exhausting action at the front, he was pressured by those in charge of military propaganda to write the story of his adven-
For decades, World War I flying aces have captured the imagination of novelists, filmmakers, and dreamers everywhere. Perhaps it is because of the pilots’ flashy outfits, with leather helmets and coveralls, silk scarves, and fur coats; perhaps it is because of their tiny, delicate, yet fierce airplanes; perhaps it is because of their youth and their careless, smiling courage in the face of death. However, of all the daring aces, Baron Manfred von Richthofen, Germany’s ace of aces, is probably the best known.

In some cases, his name merely means romance. An American frozen food company uses the name Red Baron on its frozen pizza, and their commercials feature a handsome leather-helmeted pilot who turns up for dinner when his brand of pizza is cooked. In other cases, his nickname represents danger and a bloodthirsty inclination to kill: In the 1994 film Revenge of the Red Baron, for example, the Baron’s ghost returns to stalk the descendants of the British pilot who killed von Richthofen in 1918.

Perhaps the most famous and touching tribute to the German ace is found in Peanuts, a comic strip created in 1950 by Charles Schulz (1922–2000). One of the strip’s most endearing characters is Snoopy, a philosophical beagle whose favorite game involves pretending to be a World War I flying ace on the trail of the Red Baron. “Drat you, Red Baron!” Snoopy howls, shaking his fist as the German pilot escapes again and echoing exactly the mix of frustration and grudging admiration that Allied pilots must have felt when they confronted the Red Baron in the sky.
“ace of aces” by shooting down a total of eighty enemy planes. In the winter of 1917, his memoirs, Der Rote Kampfflieger (The Red Fighter Pilot) were published. His book was distributed to German infantry soldiers to encourage them to fight bravely.

On April 21, 1918, von Richthofen was in a fight against a British pilot. Pushing the limits as usual, von Richthofen chased the British pilot farther and faster than the rules said he should. As a result, von Richthofen’s plane was shot down over the Somme River in France, and he was killed in the crash. He was buried with honor and given a military funeral by the British troops who recovered his body.

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