

The Cult of the Ace: The Airman and His Role in the First World War

John Papic

The new Siegfried rides his red chariot across the sky, though its course falters towards the ground. He fumbles at the crude controls while trying to make a safe landing. His Teutonic comrades in the muddy valley below watch his fall, astonished. "How could this happen to our knight?" they lament. The new Siegfried lands in the territory of his Australian foes. He breathes his last breath into his blood-filled lungs and dies a warrior's death. The Australians climb out from their muddy trenches to take souvenirs off his red chariot, ripping off pieces of the three canvas wings, the machine guns, and the engine. They realize what has been accomplished: Manfred Freiherr von Richthofen, the "Red Baron," Germany's greatest pilot, has just been shot down, an unthinkable act. Official reports later described the hero's passing: "[t]he body of Rittmeister Freiherr von Richthofen showed only one wound: a bullet had hit him in the heart. He was buried with military honours appropriate to his rank."¹

Richthofen's death "did not change the course of a battle or turn the tide of a war,"² but it did signify the climax of an age, a knightly battle in the sky that was unique to the First World War. Aerial warfare was used for the first time in history, and this untested technology and weaponry bred a new species of soldier and hero: the Ace. Although Richthofen was the prime example, he was only part of a larger phenomenon. All the belligerent nations celebrated their pilots as heroes. It seems natural that heroes would be found in the sky, where "the fighter pilots were as distinctive and individualistic as the medieval knight..."³ and through their individual actions they became heroes, in contrast to the bleak attritional trench warfare on the ground. Aces and fighter pilots did not serve as great a strategic purpose as most ground and other operations, such as reconnaissance and strategic bombing; however, their roles in raising morale, contributing to propaganda efforts and acting as the heroes that the trench war lacked made the Aces indispensable to their respective homelands and led to their postwar immortalization.

At the beginning of the war, aeronautics were used primarily for reconnaissance and its combat aspects had yet to be exploited. In the opening months of the war, enemy reconnaissance planes would pass each other civilly; as one French pilot recalled, enemy pilots and observers would exchange waves, "not cordially, perhaps, but courteously... as much as to say, '[w]e are enemies, but we need not forget the civilities.'"⁴ As the war progressed past those first few months, this "courtesy" was forgotten, and aerial combat slowly began to take shape. Air-to-air combat began crudely, with reconnaissance pilots carrying "not only pistols, muskets and rifles, but also bricks, grenades, and other assorted missiles,"⁵ with which they could use to attack their foes. Through the pioneering efforts of French aviator Roland Garros and German

plane manufacturer Anthony Fokker, various systems were developed that allowed pilots to shoot machine guns effectively through their propellers without destroying them and causing their planes to crash. But later the machine gun was made so that it would not shoot through the propeller, making it considerably easier to shoot down enemy planes, treating the entire plane as a weapon. Aerial warfare was transformed forever, setting the stage for the rise of the ace.⁴

As aerial combat became slightly more commonplace, certain pilots were awarded for their prowess in aerial combat. Germany was the first belligerent who made their hero pilots into celebrities, beginning with the success stories of Max Immelmann and Oswald Boelcke in late 1915 and early 1916. After they both had shot down eight enemy aircraft, they were awarded the *Pour le Merite*, Germany's highest military honor by Kaiser Wilhelm II himself. A propaganda campaign on the home front followed, with "postcards, trading cards, press accounts, photographs, and newsreels [bringing] their pictures and news of their exploits into every German home and schoolroom."⁷ The Germans seemed to be the most eager to develop a hero culture around their aces; the stalemate that arose after the failure of the vaunted Schlieffen plan required a press distraction, and the aces were primed to play this role.⁸ The German Aces also came to symbolize the belief the Germans held that they were the most progressive and modern nation in Europe through their embodiment of the "modernist merging of man and machine," that they were "men of steel both in the sense of what they endured physically, but also in the sense of...a strong-willed and highly skilled ruthlessness."⁹ The German public would have their fill of aces throughout the course of the war; even after both Boelcke and Immelmann were killed in action, Germany still had squadrons full of ace heroes to adore and laud. Through December 1, 1917, Germany had nearly twice as many aces (1,093) as France (567), demonstrating their relative superiority in the air.¹⁰ Manfred Freiherr von Richthofen became the most feared ace to arise from these ranks and amassed a most impressive record; before his death on April 21, 1918, he had shot down 80 enemy aircraft, more than any other pilot in the First World War. His red airplane and combat prowess caused him to receive nicknames such as "*le petit rouge*"¹¹ and "The Red Baron," and made him the most identifiable ace (and possibly person) of the First World War. His legacy contributed greatly to the public's stereotypical image of the ace as a chivalrous warrior knight of the air.¹²

France noticed the positive effect that the German ace pilots had on the home front and decided to deify their pilots as well. They reserved special respect for pilots who scored five or more air to air victories, naming them "*l'as de notre aviation* [the ace of our aviation]," from which the widely used term "ace" derives.¹³ The beginning of the campaign was well timed, as it followed the massive casualties inflicted at Verdun in mid-1916 and provided good press in this difficult time. The most famous French Ace, Georges Guynemer, was lionized for his prowess in combat and his lone wolf nature, garnering an "international reputation" and "legendary status" through them. He symbolized the tenacity that the French were to emulate; he had recorded two instances in which he shot down three enemies in one day, and shot down four, once, in another. He had been shot down eight times himself, and frequently disobeyed orders to go on leave or take rest.¹⁴ One of the most famous stories regarding Guynemer was his dogfight with one of the leading German aces, Ernst Udet. Guynemer had the upper hand throughout the duel, but upon realizing that Udet

had jammed his gun, he disengaged, allowing him to live in the name of fair play and chivalry.¹⁵ For this reason, the French often regarded him as the “Roland of our epoch,”¹⁶ and along with other French knights of the air provided the hero roles that their country desperately needed.

The British were a bit slower to recognize their aces as celebrities, because higher command believed all the way up to January 1918 that, “to propagandize the achievements of particular pilots would adversely affect the morale of the [RFC] as a whole.”¹⁷ Military command did not release reports to the press about successes in the air, as the military command favored praising the whole rather than individuals. The reluctance to recognize aces was rather uncharacteristic of British culture because the adventurous air battles and sporting attitudes of the pilots were conducive to the “play the Game” sentiment that was so important to the British since sports became an integral part of the culture in the Victorian period.¹⁸ However, after the disaster at the Somme and protestations by the press and members of Parliament, the British started recognizing pilots more readily, such as the leading British ace at the time, the young Captain Albert Ball, as useful objects of propaganda.¹⁹ With Britain’s rich history involving knighthood and chivalry, it was logical that the ace would become an important cultural hero there as well, as their actions were viewed as, “a return of the Paladin, the champion, who relied on personal skill and courage and who followed a chivalric code of behavior both on and off the battlefield,”²⁰ and were viewed as the most romantic and chivalric defenders of the Empire.

Further exploration into the topic demands an answer to a very specific question: who were these men who put their life on the line for a dangerous and strategically insignificant branch of their countries’ military operations? Of course, the aces were like any demographic and varied from individual to individual, but they did often share certain traits. First, these pilots required a daring sense of adventure—a person of less than extraordinary courage and daring would simply not be cut out for aerial combat. Several of the higher-scoring aces were young; Britain’s Albert Ball did not get to see his twenty-first birthday, Guynemer was twenty-two at the time of his disappearance and Richthofen died when he was twenty-five. The youthfulness of the air corps’ volunteers was logical, as aviation itself was a young branch of service at the time. No aerial combat veterans were present at the beginning of the war, mostly because airplanes had not been extensively used in combat for any purpose before 1914. In this regard, almost every ace received his training during the war at some point. Many celebrated Aces came from middle-to upper-class backgrounds, such as Richthofen, whose family “was the recipient of a hereditary Bohemian knighthood...,”²¹ and several members of the Lafayette Escadrille were upper-class young Americans with ivy-league education. Of course, recruiters looked for such traits and backgrounds in their prospective pilots—only the best and brightest were to fly these very expensive and fragile planes. Almost all had served in some other branch of the military earlier in the war like Richthofen who was a member of an elite cavalry unit on both the Eastern and Western Fronts,²² and most aces had some experience in the ground war in one way or another. Several aces, such as Richthofen and many members of the Lafayette Escadrille, sought transfers to the air corps in order to escape the dull and terrifying trenches and to seek more adventure. Some had extensive experience like Edmond Genet, a member of the Lafayette Escadrille, served both in the American

Navy before the war as well as in the French Foreign Legion during the brutal fighting at Champagne before seeking a transfer to the French air division.²⁸ He summed up his feelings toward the glory of air combat in a letter to his mother in 1916:

This is the most dangerous branch of the service, Mother, but it's the best as far as future is concerned... The glory is well worth the loss. I'd rather die as an aviator over the enemy's lines than find a nameless, shallow grave in the infantry, and I'm certain you'd all feel better satisfied too.²⁹

The Ace's background could be seen as one reason why the public found them so alluring, and played right into the romanticism and adventure that would become synonymous with the air war; while the aces desire for glory was mirrored by the public's desire that they achieve it.

On the ground, meanwhile, the conflict slowly became one of attrition. New weapons such as machine guns and gas killed soldiers like it was an industry in and of itself. The romanticism and sense of adventure at the beginning of the war had left for the skies, as heroes rarely emerged from the trenches. The Ace came to signify all the romantic and heroic elements that were missing from the ground war. Movement over the vast firmament harkened back to fast and furious battles on horseback, and tales of chivalry and bravery in the face of danger were commonplace among stories relating to the aerial war. Richthofen described air combat as, "the remnant of the knightly duel... A chivalrous battle with similar weapons, each with a machine gun and an airplane, some athletic ability and: all that remains is for the heart to be weighed."³⁰ The war in the air was the "Gentleman's War" that was expected to be on the ground; a recorded instance where Max Immelmann helped a pair of British pilots after shooting them down is one of many such examples of the respect the enemies in the sky had for each other. It was not common for pilots to hate their opponents. Those who were shot down by Immelmann and other feared pilots often stated, "it's no disgrace to be caught and shot down by him!" indicating the mutual respect and overall lack of hate between foes in the air.³¹ This went hand in hand with the aforementioned sporting spirit of the British; the famous ace Captain Lanoe Hawker gave Richthofen a wave during a dogfight, "as if he wanted to say 'Well, well, how do you do?'"³² This chivalry and code of honor was another draw for the public towards the air war.

The heroic and romantic nature of these combat pilots made them natural propaganda symbols; as Robertson argues, "the aim of constructing a symbolic hero out of the combat pilots certainly outweighed any intent to explain the real significance of the air war to the public."³³ The best example of aces used as propaganda was the early campaigns centered on Boelcke and Immelmann. The campaign around the two during late 1915 to early 1916 set the standard "to appropriate air-to-air combat specifically for the purpose of demoralizing the enemy and undermining the opposing public's confidence in its leadership."³⁴ German military leadership tried to have Boelcke grounded after Immelmann's death, fearing the effect on morale his death would have. Their efforts were to no avail; Boelcke was not even vanquished by a Frenchman or British pilot, rather, on October 28, 1916, a wingman ran into his plane, causing him to spiral down to the Earth and his death.³⁵

Publicity tours were another common method that utilized aces for propaganda. Boelcke made several, as did Richthofen, to Germany's allies, Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire for goodwill purposes.³¹ The British aimed a propaganda campaign against the Red Baron, offering an impressive monetary reward to have him shot down, and a larger reward if his demise was filmed. This campaign only made the German people more confident in their red flyer.³² Film also used aces for propaganda aims. Eddie Rickenbacker, the leading American ace of the war, was filmed in a staged dogfight with captured German planes to demonstrate the Allies' superiority in the skies by having Rickenbacker vanquish an enemy squadron singlehandedly.³³ Aces were also used widely in recruiting propaganda. The success stories of pilots such as Richthofen and Rickenbacker could entice more recruits into the most dangerous and untested branch of the military, which needed new recruits solely because of absurdly high casualty rates.³⁴ Such Aces could adorn posters and convince young men to learn to fly to defend their country, and the danger and adventure attracted many recruits.

The dangerous career of fighter pilot attracted many young adventurers, especially youngsters in neutral America during the earlier years of the war. Some Americans joined the Royal Flying Corps in Britain. In France, an entire squadron was formed for American pilots. In April 1916, the *Escadrille Americaine*, later known as the Lafayette Escadrille, was formed and began its operations over France.³⁵ The squadron caused quite a stir in the States, (not least because it caused controversy over U.S. neutrality)³⁶ and raised interest in aerial combat and the war in Europe. The members of the group were also of great interest to the American public. Many, like Edmund Genet, were former Foreign Legionnaires who transferred to a more glorious assignment; others, like Bert Hall, were soldiers of fortune that loved the limelight. The pilots of the Lafayette Escadrille lived like the celebrities they actually were; they were quartered in an old health spa built for King Louis XV, they feasted on fine food, drove the finest automobiles and had servants appear "at a clap of the hands."³⁷ The squadron also enjoyed the company of "Whiskey" and "Soda," two lion cubs that served as mascots, which further contributed to their roguish and daring image.³⁸ By the war's end, the Lafayette Escadrille had achieved many aerial victories, and the veterans joined up with the American Air Corps upon the entry of America into the war, where they were regarded as living legends, earning the admiration of American pilots such as Eddie Rickenbacker.³⁹

Despite the glory, glamour and heroism, the war in the air "had its grim and dismal side."⁴⁰ And a dismal side there were pilots who suffered from many problems stemming from combat, such as, "[p]hysical stress, sleep deprivation, loss of memory and concentration, grief, and absolute despair."⁴¹ The high mortality rate also affected pilots, even those who were left alive; the death of a friend and squad mate is hard to take, and the uncertainty pertaining to missing comrades was unbearable.⁴² Genet had an especially hard time with the death of wingmen and he and the rest of his squad passed time by predicting who would go next, a most unhealthy and demoralizing habit.⁴³ Also, aerial combat duty was not always as exciting as it was thought to be; patrols would become routine, and bad weather could ground a squadron for days at a time. Genet described his great dissatisfaction with such inactivity in his journal: "[I] am very disgusted with the present prospect of flying. I came here for active service. It sure hurts to sit around like this lazy way. We've got lots of ambition but no chance to

use it on the Boches."⁴⁴

The physical dangers were extreme as well—many aces were lost in combat. Though the losses in the air were considerably smaller than those on the ground, ten thousand to eleven million during the war years, pilots still faced a seventy percent chance of being wounded or killed in action, which were just as bad chances as those of the comrades in the trenches.⁴⁵ Some of the best, Richthofen, Britain's top ace Mick Mannock, Guynemer, American aces Raoul Lufbery and Frank Luke, not to mention Boelcke and Immelmann, all met their fates in the skies over the Western front. Such losses did not only hurt the air forces, they were a subject of great sorrow on the home front; propaganda writers were able to write impressive accounts of the lives of these fallen flyers, and even in death they were able to serve their country.

Despite heavy losses and the apparent mortality of these heroes of the sky, the cult of the Ace only grew after the war's end. Charles Lindbergh's flight across the Atlantic Ocean in 1927 only further ignited the existing interest in aces of the Great War.⁴⁶ Books about aces, such as the Floyd Gibbons' fictionalized account of Richthofen's life, *The Red Knight of Germany*, in addition to comic books about the aces sold very well in this postwar period.⁴⁷ These romanticized testaments to the past would serve as a source of inspiration for the next generation of adventurers and pilots, as well as being one of the main reasons why World War I would be better remembered for the romantic war in the air instead of the slow and brutal struggle on the ground. Aces also became the subjects of several popular films, such as *Wings*, *The Dawn Patrol* and *Hell's Angels*. *Wings* won the first ever Academy Award for Best Picture in 1927.⁴⁸ *Hell's Angels* was Howard Hughes' 1930 "Thrilling Multimillion Dollar Air Spectacle,"⁴⁹ with actual airplanes used to act out aerial combat scenes. The elaborate battle scenes made up for the "stock characters, contrived plots, love triangles and other improbable situations"⁵⁰ with their sheer excitement and scale. A scene involving a bombing run by a German Zeppelin was considered especially impressive by film critics of the time, including those at the *New York Times*. The film also portrayed an exciting bombing run on a German munitions dump, and a very large dogfight. The Red Baron even makes a cameo to shoot down the main characters over German lines.⁵¹ It was also a reflection of how the American public wanted to remember the war: heroically fought in the skies by dashing pilots, rather than in the murderous mire on the ground. First World War aces remain in the public consciousness today. Biplanes adorn pizza boxes and ties, gamers can fly against the Red Baron on their computer, and technologically inclined hobbyists build model airplanes to capture the romanticism attained by those pilots so long ago.⁵²

The aces fought on two battlegrounds: in the skies and in the hearts and minds of those who observed their accomplishments; the second seemed to serve a more important purpose. The air combat of the First World War was a last gasp at old world chivalry, where the pilots were "knights" and their planes were "steeds." Aces in later conflicts were not as well known, probably because they did not reach the chivalric plane achieved by the airmen of the First World War. However, even during the war aerial combat began to change. The original purpose of aviation, reconnaissance, as well as strategic bombing had significantly gained importance after the First World War, and the automation of war would slowly push the ace into the annals of history, foreshadowing the mitigation of the ace's role. The ace's fate as the First World War's

ultimate hero was sealed, though they had little to do with the outcome or course of the war at any point in time. Strategically significant or not, the ace and World War I are forever linked in the collective memory and social consciousness of our culture.

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Endnotes

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- ³ Philip M. Flammer, *The Vivid Air: The Lafayette Escadrille* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1981), 49.
- ⁴ Flammer, *The Vivid Air*, 37.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶ Robertson, *The Dream of Civilized Warfare*, 96-97.
- ⁷ Robertson, *The Dream of Civilized Warfare*, 92.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 393-394.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 363.
- ¹¹ Manfred Freiherr von Richthofen, *Der Rote Kampfflieger*, (Berlin: Verlag Ullstein & Co., 1917) 109, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/24572/24572-h/24572-h.htm> (accessed November 23, 2008).

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- ¹³ Pisano et al., 85.
- ¹⁴ Robertson, *The Dream of Civilized Warfare*, 185.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 240.
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- ¹⁷ Michael Paris, "The Rise of the Airmen: The Origins of Air Force Elitism, c. 1890-1918" *Journal of Contemporary History* 28, no. 1 (January 1993): 135.
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- ²⁶ Robertson, *The Dream of Civilized Warfare*, 179.
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- ³⁴ Robertson, 104.
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- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 285.
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- ⁴⁰ Flammer, *The Vivid Air*, 51.
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- ⁴² Robertson, 9.
- ⁴³ Brown, Jr. ed., *An American for Lafayette*, xxiv-xxv.
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