



An interview with Baron Hermann von Richthofen

This interview with Hermann von Richthofen (HvR) was carried out by the television production company 3BM for the Channel 4 programme *Dogfight: The mystery of the Red Baron*. Baron Hermann von Richthofen (b. 1933) – the grand-nephew of the Red Baron – was formerly the German ambassador to Nato and to the UK.

Early training

3BM: What was Manfred von Richthofen like as a young man?

HvR: Manfred was a young nobleman. The Richtofen family were landed gentry in Silesia. Most of them were landowners, farmers, lawyers, diplomats or professors ... rarely also soldiers. His father had been a soldier. They had a very happy family life. His father, due to an accident, had to go on early retirement and lived in a town house in Schweidnitz, which still exists today. Manfred had a very happy youth: he was athletic, he was strong, he was joyful and he very much liked shooting, riding, swimming as young boys do!

3BM: Was he a good marksman early on?

HvR: Yes, I think he was. It was more the choice of his father for him to go to boarding school to be trained as a later officer. It was not particularly his choice, but he followed his father's example. After having finished the school, he entered the 1st Regiment of Uhlans, named after the Russian emperor Alexander III, and he went in the footsteps of his father.

3BM: As a cavalry officer?

HvR: Yes, that's right. It was normal for a young nobleman to serve in the cavalry, which was the élite

troop. Particularly if you come from family in Silesia, you would enter that.

First duties

3BM: At the start of the war, what was Manfred doing?

HvR: Manfred was not a 'hoorah' patriot. He was with his regiment on the German-Russian border, and they hoped that peace would prevail. They were surprised that this was not the case. When war started, he thought of entering fresh and in good spirits into this adventure. But later, in 1918, he thought quite differently about war and what it was asking from people.

3BM: Was he attracted to the new aerial fliers?

HvR: The role of cavalry in the First World War was no longer as an attack force but reconnaissance, and that's what Manfred primarily did on the Russian front. But, in a way, he saw no development for himself. He got bored and wanted to have a more exciting role in this war. When he met people who served in the air force (which was not existing as such), he got attracted and he thought that could be something for him. You could have success, it would be a very mobile life and that's what he wanted to have for himself.

3BM: Why didn't he train as a pilot straightaway?

HvR: He thought he should go to the air force, no matter what role he had. He thought to train as a pilot would take much too long a time. He wanted to have it now. Therefore, he was quite happy to be going in reconnaissance and bomber flights as a companion [observer] but not as a pilot.

3BM: Did he enjoy his first flight?

HvR: He was maybe not a talented flier from the outset. He failed his first flying exam, but he was very quick at grasping the essentials, and learned and enjoyed it. He once said, 'It's wonderful to hunt from the air!'

3BM: Was Manfred a natural flier?

HvR: He felt at home in the air, but what is a natural flier? I mean, he was trained as a pilot, and over time, he acquired a competence and quality which hardly anybody else reached. Is it natural? Is it inborn? I don't know.

His relationship with Boelcke

3BM: How important in his life was the first meeting with [Fokker test pilot Oswald] Boelcke?

HvR: I think this is very, very important for him because he considered Boelcke as very competent, which he was, very serious, and a man already practising what Manfred wanted to achieve. Manfred asked his advice and Boelcke told him, 'If you want to have my experience, you must fly and you must become a pilot.' Then Manfred decided to go through the training and become a pilot.

3BM: Boelcke became one of his mentors?

HvR: Yes, Boelcke became a key mentor in his life. But Manfred developed his tactics and theory further on, and in the end, he wrote his own manual on air operations.

3BM: What qualities did Boelcke see in Manfred?

HvR: Certainly Boelcke must have seen his talent, but also his talent as a natural leader – Manfred was very charismatic. They both knew each other very well, so Boelcke knew very well who he was picking out.

3BM: What lessons did he learn from Boelcke?

HvR: He spoke with the highest regard of Boelcke. It must have been the tactics and also the leadership, and Manfred, like Boelcke, was a very modest man.

3BM: What was the effect on Manfred of the loss of Boelcke?

HvR: A great personal loss. A shock as well. And it demonstrated to him how near death was. I remember

one scene when he was home in Schweidnitz and he showed a photo to his mother [in which he was] surrounded by young comrades. She was asking, 'Oh, what is this lieutenant doing?' Manfred said, 'He's dead.' Then she pointed to another one, and he was also dead. And then he said, 'Don't ask any further. They're all dead.' That's terrible!

Manfred's character

3BM: What attracted Manfred to the *Eindecker* [single-wing, single-seater plane] fighter pilots?

HvR: Maybe the question of success. They became, in the early years, already known. Manfred wasn't out for being famous, but it must have played a role as well.

3BM: Were they like pop stars?

HvR: It was the first appearance of mass communication in the 20th century, and indeed, the young men were used to distract from the gruesome warfare on the ground. I think there was a deliberate use of these young men, who were good-looking and had success, and they were developed as stars.

3BM: What was Manfred's character?

HvR: He was fearless, he was bold, he was courageous, but he was never, ever hazardous. He had a very balanced mix of all these good qualities. He was never irresponsible, and he was always feeling a high responsibility for his men who flew with him.

3BM: What separated him from other fliers?

HvR: Manfred had high respect for his opponents. He admired the quality in the British air force and also in the aircraft industry. So I think he had a good feeling of fair competence on the other side as well, and I think he recognised if his people had qualities which he could honour.

3BM: Did he take risks?

HvR: He was very responsible, and he knew that he was a leader and should not bring his people, his men into risk. But once he was attacking another plane, he would never give in.

3BM: Did he believe that his role was to protect reconnaissance aircraft?

HvR: Absolutely. He had a mission to fulfil. And he never, ever picked out easy targets to increase his marks. But he was just knowing that the Allies had superiority in the air and that he had to do everything to protect his own front and to prevent reconnaissance on the German side and to defend the German side against in-flying enemy aircraft. So that was his *raison d'être* – but not to pick out easy targets.

3BM: Was he a cold-blooded killer?

HvR: I cannot see that he was ruthless, ambitious and calculating. On the contrary, he was good-natured. He was bold, yes, and, in a way, ambitious to be recognised in what he was doing. But he was not the killer as he is portrayed in certain media. He never was that. And he suffered greatly, as we know, from the last months of his life, by the war and the victims this war cost.

3BM: What did he believe in?

HvR: He believed in his family. He believed in the virtues. He believed also in his country. I mean, he was a patriot like all airmen from both sides were.

3BM: Did he have any weaknesses?

HvR: I don't know of any. He was a natural young man who also could have a drink with his comrades. He could also play a hand of cards with them, but normally he would retire rather early to be fresh the next day.

3BM: Did he enjoy the celebrity of being an ace and a leader?

HvR: He wasn't indifferent. But he took it natural and he never took any star attitudes. I remember a scene when, in Berlin, he was asked to give autographs and he did it. He said to somebody else, 'Well, you know, I *have* to do it.' But he didn't do it because he wanted to boast.

3BM: What about the duel with [British ace Lanoe] Hawker?

HvR: I have read about this encounter. Here Manfred really found someone who was matching him, and he was the lucky one because, in the end, he could bring him down. But he really respected his competence and talent.

3BM: Why did he devise 'flying circuses'?

HvR: You needed mobility, and you also needed strength. Therefore, he developed a tactic to go out, if necessary, with 30, 40 planes, in order to have the upper hand. I think he had a good feeling for what was necessary to have supremacy.

The end approaches

3BM: Did his attitude to war change?

HvR: The wound he had in his head caused him pain and long-lasting headaches. So that alone changed his attitude, made him more morose, made him more pensive. Also the war, in the third year, was not the same as in 1914, when on both sides people went out with a great *hurrah* and enthusiasm. You saw the huge victims; you saw the uselessness of this kind of warfare. I think he knew perfectly well that time had changed and that you had to be very sceptical.

But he stayed in his squadron. He was asked whether he would go to the general staff, but he declined because, he said, 'I do not want to be a high-decorated officer in a safe place and my men are in the dirty field and dying.'

3BM: Is it true that he was due to be recalled?

HvR: I do not know whether his mother requested it. But you can imagine, as a mother and also his father, they were interested that, having served for so long very close to death, he was put a little bit more in the rear. But Manfred did not like this idea. I can imagine that the general staff was interested to save him because they used him – for instance, in the peace negotiations with the Soviets, to impress the Russians, who, in fact, were not impressed at all. So there was an interest to save his life, and the likelihood to be killed was very high.

3BM: Was Manfred interested in retiring from the front?

HvR: He was not interested in retiring from the front line. And I do not know whether, in the end, it was a kind of insight into the fatality of life. He had, as I said earlier, been very serious about the question of life and death, and he must have known that one day he would be a victim himself.

The last flight

3BM: It is ironic that he was killed at the height of his skill ...

HvR: It is very sad and ironic that he was killed – let's say, at the height of his competence and success. On the other hand, he would not have survived as a symbol for chivalrous warfare as he has in being killed.

I was invited by the War Graves Commission and was shown the archives of his burial and this whole ceremony. It's all very neatly inscribed in the books, and it's a great honour for my family that he is still so well remembered. Not only in the air forces of the Allies and Nato, but also in China and Japan and all over the world.

3BM: Why did he break the rules on his last flight?

HvR: Manfred, of course, was a human being, and a human being is not without faults. Yes, he disobeyed his own rules for reasons which we do not know, which we cannot pursue nowadays, but he did and he paid it with his life. For his mother, the only possibility was that he was shot by Major [Roy] Brown from the air. She would have never believed that her son could have been killed from the ground.

3BM: What do you believe?

HvR: I believe both happened – that he was hit from above, but also flying very low and also the Australian

rifleman hit him and brought him down. I had a very moving letter from a family – the grandfather had been in this section of the front and he saw Manfred's plane coming down and [ran] to the site. So it really attracted people's interest.

3BM: Why is there controversy?

HvR: Because people want to have the real truth. That's very understandable. And, you know, lots of experts make a lot of estimates about it, so that's natural that you want to clarify.

Icon and symbol

3BM: Why has Manfred become an icon?

HvR: It is astonishing. It has to do with mass communication and being presented as an icon. But people can use it as a kind of personal courage, as a kind of chivalry and galantry, as a kind of warfare that was not so gruesome as the warfare in Verdun or the Somme battle or so.

They could identify also with him as a person, despite his great success, remaining modest, noble, fair in his attitude, good-natured. That's all together a number of qualities which people like to see in one figure.

3BM: Has Manfred become an enduring symbol?

HvR: To me, he is a symbol of chivalry. He is also a bridge between nations. Therefore, he is so well remembered in all the air forces, and I think that's very consoling as well.

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The Red Fighter Pilot

www.richthofen.com/

English translation of Manfred von Richthofen's autobiography, written by the ace in 1917.

Manfred von Richthofen: The red baron

<http://history1900s.about.com/library/weekly/aa052401a.htm>

Seven-part article on the World War I ace, plus links to related websites.

The Red Baron

www.briggsenterprises.com/bluemax/

Brief biography and a chronology of von Richthofen's wartime career.

Combat Reports of Manfred von Richthofen

www.geocities.com/taipan1961/Richthofen.htm

Detailed account of the Red Baron's World War I career, including numerous quotes from letters home and combat reports, including his own account of the dogfight with Lanoe Hawker.