

The First 'Top Guns': The Red Baron Legend

By Joyce Peterson

Smithsonian News Service
Ask Americans who the "Red Baron" was, and chances are most of them will instantly think of a comic strip. Snoopy, the beagle with an overactive imagination in Charles Schulz's "Peanuts," has entertained newspaper readers for more than 25 years with his World War I "dog" fights against a colorful but gallant German

the real Red Baron was Manfred von Richthofen, a German World War I pilot who became an enduring hero in American popular culture, the legend of the fighter ace. The legend did not match the reality of life for World War I pilots, however. As the first combat test of the airplane in battle, World War I meant countless flights and nearly constant danger for many pilots. Propaganda pushed the image of the Red Baron, including von Richthofen's exploits in the "clouds of battle."

The drawing of Snoopy completing with aviation helmet and goggles in his "doghouse" is now permanent exhibition. The exhibit, "Memory of the Sky: Opening the Air at the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C.," is an exhibition that gives a historical account of the first widespread military use of the airplane in World War I and explores the origin of the romantic image of the fighter pilot—an image that persists today.

World War I was a tragedy of horrendous proportions. Beginning in 1914 as a local clash between Austria-Hungary and Serbia, the conflict escalated into a global war. By war's end in November 1918, more than 10 million people had died, many in trench warfare on the Western front in Belgium and France.

Although aviation technology was in its infancy during World War I, political and military leaders hoped that the use of aircraft would break the deadlocked land war. Still, the airplanes were fragile, unreliable and difficult to fly; training was often poor or nonexistent.

"Air power was often misused and its effects were not decisive in the outcome of

pilots, the most visible representatives of the air war, as marketable heroes.

"Post-war analysts overemphasized the importance of the airplane," Pisano adds, "which would have a profound effect on the military policy of World War II. Even today, military aviation strategy continues to be influenced by the image of the fighter ace."

After the Wright brothers' first successful flight in 1903, governments realized the military potential of the airplane. World War I forged technological advances in "heavier-than-air" craft and established many new uses of the airplane, including as a weapon of war.

"At the beginning of the war," Pisano says, "aircraft were used almost exclusively for observation so that ground forces could see what was over the next hill." By war's end, a variety of roles were defined: to carry reconnaissance cameras, strafe ground forces, bomb cities or attack other aircraft with built-in guns. "This contrasts with the popular notion that all World War I aircraft were fighters."

The development of the single-seat fighter airplane had a powerful hold on the public's imagination. An advertising poster for Germany's Fokker aircraft depicts man, airplane and machine gun as a single, devastating machine.

Thanks to advances in metallurgy, it became possible to build larger, higher-power yet lightweight aluminum engines. Aircraft could fly higher, faster and longer.

"Aircraft propulsion went from a 50-horsepower rotary engine to a 400-horsepower V-8 in-line engine—a staggering increase in so short a period," says Karl Schneide, one of the gallery's three curators. The first practical superchargers—devices that increase engine efficiency by forcing extra air into the combustion chambers—were introduced by BMW, he notes.

An important American contribution to aviation technology, Schneide says, was the development of higher-viscosity oil, "which allowed airplanes to fly at a much higher altitude at higher engine speed."

Control mechanisms were refined, increasing stability in the air, and most fighters were



"BEWARE OF THE HUN IN THE SKY"

Smithsonian News Service Photo courtesy of the National Air and Space Museum

During World War I, fledgling pilots on both sides received only rudimentary training. The Royal Flying Corps of Great Britain had to rely on posters to illustrate some of the hazards of flying. This poster reminds pilots to avoid enemy aircraft.

exactly stop and restart your engine. So a backup system comes in very handy."

While most of these advances were adopted by all the combatant nations producing aircraft in World War I, some strategic differences remained. By the middle of the war, Pisano says, "the Germans could not compete with the Allies' capacity for mass production and had to rely on quality over quantity." He compares two aircraft in the new Air and Space museum gallery: the Fokker DVII and the French SPAD XIII. Only 1,200 Fokker fighters were built, he says, as opposed to 8,000 French SPADs. "Yet the

DVII could fly rings around the SPADs."

Schneide adds, "The Allies had the raw materials—wood, linen, rubber and aluminum—and weren't blockaded, whereas Germany had very limited resources."

Newer, more powerful airplanes had a side effect: a hostile environment for the pilot. "At 10,000 feet," Schneide explains, "you're starved for oxygen and you might freeze to death." Though oxygen, pressurization and heating systems were introduced in World War I airplanes, they were far from perfect.

Besides these perils, and the

inherent danger of flying in battle, a pilot in an open-cockpit airplane was sometimes sprayed with engine oil. The oil often induced nausea and diarrhea.

"Clearly, the World War I pilot's life was not the happy-go-lucky series of dog-fights that the movies have led us to believe," co-curator Joanne Gerstein says. "There's this image of a dashing young man wearing a white silk scarf who climbs into a shiny red Fokker triplane, flies around for an hour and returns to tell of his brave exploits over a glass of champagne. It just wasn't so."

Though the fighter pilot's life
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Smithsonian News Service Photo courtesy of the National Air and Space Museum

Baron Manfred von Richthofen, Germany's famed "Red Baron" of World War I, is shown (left) in the company of the crew of the plane in this poster of his exploits. The poster is one of the earliest aviation propaganda posters, and it helped to create the image of the Red Baron as a heroic figure.