

THE GERMAN SOCIETY OF PENNSYLVANIA

Friday Film Fest Series



Der rote Baron

(“The Red Baron”)

By Nikolai Müllerschön

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Film, Food & Discussion

Donations \$15, Members \$12

The German Society of PA

611 Spring Garden St.

215-627-2332



Der Rote Baron

Director: Nikolai Müllerschön

Drehbuch: Nikolai Müllerschön

Producers: Thomas Reisser, Dan Maag, Roland Pellegrino

Cinematography: Klaus Merkel

Special Effects: Rainer Gombos

Music: Stefan Hansen, Dirk Reichardt

Release Date: April 2008

Spieldauer: 106 minutes

Cast: Matthias Schweighöfer (Manfred von Richthofen);

Maxim Mehmet (Friedrich Sternberg); Til Schweiger (Werner Voss); Hanno Koffler (Lehmann);

Joseph Fiennes (Capt. Roy Brown); Lena Headey (Käte Otersdorf); Axel Prahl (Gen. Ernst von

Hoepfner); Volker Bruch (Lothar von Richthofen); Ladislav Frei (Emperor Wilhelm II)



Commentary by A. Krumm

On The Origin of Species ...

There is a good bit of speciation within the genus War Hero. There is the self deprecating type: asked by a small boy during his 1960 campaign how he became a hero, John Kennedy replied: "It was easy, they sank my boat." Then there is the "up close and personal" specimen, à la Audie Murphy: "They were killing my friends." There is moreover the mystical kind who sees something beautiful in war, epitomized by Robert E. Lee's remark: "It is well that war is so terrible - we should grow too fond of it." Ernst Jünger wrote about this beauty and the euphoria it induced in *In Stahlgewittern*.

And then there is the most alluring species of war hero, the "I have a rendezvous with death" branch. One is easily tempted to categorize Baron Manfred von Richthofen as an instantiation of this variety. In popular lore he is certainly seen as such. According to the orthodox metanarrative, for such an individual death is the dialogue partner and although this type of hero knows that at some point that pale partner will abruptly and rudely terminate the conversation, he perseveres in the dialogue.

The mechanized fighting of the First World War certainly made individual heroics difficult, if not impossible. At least in aerial combat the human virtues literally did have some space in which to express themselves, if not to flourish. Maybe it was the stark disparity between the mass slaughter in the mud of the trenches versus the sense of individuality and freedom in the air that made so many young men long to become pilots, particularly those from an aristocratic background.

Richthofen, born in Breslau 1892, came from a Junker family. He entered a military school in Wahlstatt at the age of eleven, and later attended the Royal Prussian Military Academy at Lichterfelde. He was commissioned in 1911 and began his military service in the cavalry. He actually led a cavalry unit briefly on the eastern front when the war broke out.

Given the gusto with which generals were embracing tanks and machine guns, it was obvious the cavalry was no longer a growth industry, so in May of 1915 Richthofen transferred to the German Army Air Service. By Christmas he had qualified as a pilot, and was a fully fledged *Jagdflieger* of Oswald Boelcke's unit by September 1916.

By January of 1917 he had been awarded the *Pour le Mérite* and was a national hero.

It was also around this time that he decided to start painting his various planes a bright in your face red. In the months following, members of his *Jagdgeschwader* received his permission to paint their aircraft according to their particular whims, and inevitably his squadron began to be referred to as Richthofen's Flying Circus by the Brits.

By May of 1917 Richthofen had achieved something akin to rock star status in Germany. April had been his greatest month. He had twenty two confirmed kills. He had been contracted to write his memoirs, and postcards of him wearing his medals sold like hotcakes.

He had just turned twenty-five years old. After being severely wounded in July of 1917, he completed writing his memoir, *Der Rote Kampfflieger*, a work encouraged if not commissioned by the propaganda arm of the *Luftstreitkraft*.

Richthofen's dialogue ended on April 21st, 1918 when he disregarded his own advice. After he became a commander, he had written an Air Combat manual, in which he had said: "You should never stay with an opponent whom, through your bad shooting or his skillful turning, you have been unable to shoot down, the combat lasts for a long time, and you are alone, outnumbered by adversaries."

Richthofen had pursued a plane flown by a Canadian pilot named Wilfred May, who, after his machine guns had jammed, had turned away from the main dogfight in an attempt to reach friendly territory. Richthofen, apparently utterly absorbed in the pursuit, followed May over no mans land across the British lines. He seemed unaware or indifferent that he himself was being pursued by another enemy aircraft flown by another Canadian named Roy Brown.

He was killed by a single bullet, although no one knows for certain who fired that bullet. It may have been Brown, although it is more likely that it was one of the ground troops who were firing at him. In the event, having broken every one of his rules, he crashed and was dead when they pulled him from the wreckage. His confirmed kill total stood at eighty. As was customary, the Royal Air Force dropped a message behind German lines to inform them of the Red Baron's death and burial. He had been given full honors.

Richthofen's personality seems to have been a baffling combination of hard nosed pragmatism and unfettered romanticism. He disdained aerial acrobatics, always preferring to have the better machine as well as the sun behind him and the enemy below him. Yet he liked to have silver cups made to commemorate his victories and to retrieve artifacts from the planes of his downed opponents when possible. He was a hunter growing up, and aerial combat must have seemed to him to be the ultimate hunt, with a contingent dualism in play where each flyer was at once hunter and prey.

It is worth noting that Nicolai Müllerschön and his producers managed to independently finance *Der Rote Baron*. The film has its weaknesses but the thought of a big budget Hollywood rendition of the story should engender gratitude for Müllerschön's self-sufficiency. He has assembled a fetching cast, and the computer generated aerial combat scenes are exhilarating despite intermittently inducing a sense of participating in a virtual reality game.

Müllerschön portrays Richthofen as gradually having come to see through the war propaganda and having become an almost in-house antiwar spokesperson by the later stages of the war. Disillusioned he may have become, but it is probably bit much to have Richthofen suggesting surrender as a strategic option to Hindenburg.

Müllerschön has emphasized the historical accuracy of the film and probably deserves some measure of credit here, but it seems in the end he privileged message to a degree over mimesis. He commented in an interview that "...I decided that no matter who Richthofen was, he would deliver my message about the war" and conceded that the film was about "... what's relevant to youth and to an audience today."

Whatever Richthofen had come to think about war and heroism by 1918, friend and foe alike acknowledged his chivalrous conduct and courage. He could easily have stopped flying in combat long before, and in fact had been encouraged to do so by his superiors. Richthofen kept flying after recuperating from the severe head wound in July 1917. He kept flying as the allied air forces began to achieve regular numerical superiority, and he kept flying as the enemy aircraft became technically superior to those being produced by Germany. He kept flying, obviously a creature in thrall to the habits of his species. He kept flying, apparently, in deference to his rendezvous.

