Manfred von Richthofen was more than the most successful fighter pilot of World War I. While he shot down 80 enemy aeroplanes, a score not equalled by any other pilot in that conflict, he also received more high decorations than any other German combatant in World War I and set a standard for leadership in combat. At the height of his career, he held the rank of Rittmeister [Cavalry Captain], which inferred boldness. Richthofen’s choice of having his aircraft painted red to make him identifiable in the air, along with his aristocratic stature as a Freiherr [a form of baron], led to his being called ‘the Red Baron’ by Germans and non-Germans alike. That nom de guerre enhanced his reputation in life and helped to perpetuate his memory in the nearly nine decades since he was killed in combat at noon on Sunday, 21 April 1918.

Manfred von Richthofen became a living legend and had an effect on German culture that extends to the present time. Imperial German Government propagandists equated him to heroes in Richard Wagner’s Teutonic myth-based operas and to philosophical ideals in Friedrich Nietzsche’s writings, both of which enjoyed wide popularity in Germany at the time. The legend continued during World War II when a fighter wing [Jagdgeschwader] carried his name into aerial combat to inspire another generation of airmen. It was resurrected during the Cold War and continues to the present with democratic Germany’s Luftwaffe operating a ‘Richthofen Geschwader’ to help maintain peace in the skies over members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

Manfred Freiherr von Richthofen has been the subject of many books, including a translation of his memoirs and four other volumes about him written by this author alone. Many of his contemporaries mentioned him in their accounts of the aerial conflict in the skies during what has been called The Great War. So why is there yet another book about him? Because Richthofen remains a fascinating figure and questions about him and his exploits continue to be raised. The interest has also been fuelled by the reunification of Germany beginning in 1989, which has led to the discovery of new material from former East German state archives and other sources.

Continued inquiry and source examination has also led to new insights. For example, this author discovered a first-hand German-language document that finally allows analysis of a long mentioned but otherwise undocumented contention that Manfred von Richthofen was killed – executed – by British Commonwealth troops after his last crash-landing. Additionally, a review of Richthofen’s little-seen medical records sheds light on the after-effects of his being shot down and badly injured on 6 July 1917, including informed commentary by modern medical specialists, to whom I express my deep gratitude: Prof Dr Med Henning Allmers of the medical faculty of the Universität Osnabrück in Germany, Dr Andrew Bamji of Great Britain, Dr Dieter H.M. Gröschel, a retired professor at the University of Virginia School of Medicine, and Dr M. Geoffrey Miller of Australia, who also very kindly allowed me to quote from his article ‘The death of Manfred von Richthofen: Who fired the fatal shot?’ which appeared in Sabretache, the Journal and Proceedings of the Military History Society of Australia. Additional insights come from a newly discovered World War I German Air Force [Luftstreitkräfte] report on the effects of flying on the human body that is likely a pioneering effort in the then new field of aviation medicine and how it was applied to early 20th century combat airmen.

The author is grateful to a number of aviators who survived World War I and, via correspondence and/or personal visits beginning some 45 years ago, provided insights into the times and events in which Rittmeister Manfred Freiherr von Richthofen became such a notable part. They have long since departed this life, but live on in memory: Wing Commander Ronald Adam, OBE, former Leutnant der Reserve Oscar Bechtle, Major Carl A. Dixon, former Leutnant der Reserve Johannes Knauer, Major Clayton Knight, OBE, former Leutnant der Reserve Oskar Kuppinger, and Oberleutnant der Reserve a.D. Hanns-Gerd Rabe.

The author expresses sincere gratitude to succeeding generations of German friends linked in one way or another to airmen of World War I, especially to: Fritzcarl Prestien, son of a Richthofen flying comrade; Donat Freiherr von Richthofen; Hartmann Freiherr von Richthofen, nephew of the illustrious flyer; Botschafter a.D. Prof (hc) DLaws (hc) Dr Hermann Freiherr von Richthofen, GCVO; Manfred Freiherr von Richthofen, nephew and namesake of the ace; and Wolf-Manfred Freiherr von Richthofen, son of Lothar and
nephew of Rittmeister Manfred Freiherr von Richthofen. For helping an American learn more about the intricacies of German military and civilian customs and traditions, the author offers special thanks to the late Dipl.-Ing Klaus B. Fischer, Alfred von Krusenstern, and Klaus Littwin.

The author is grateful to the late Cole Palen, founder of The Old Rhinebeck Aerodrome, for providing the experience of being in the air, in the backseat of an open cockpit two-seat biplane during mock combat between replica and original World War I aircraft. Special tribute is due to another Rhinebeck flyer, the late Dave Fox, who, like Richthofen, flew and died in a Fokker Dr.I Triplane. Other resources, only slightly less adrenalin-producing and just as valued, were provided by Major Dr Harald Potempa, Director of the Luftwaffenmuseum der Bundeswehr in Berlin, and Falk Hallensleben, Director of the Richthofen-Geschwader Museum in Wittmund, and by helpful people at the Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, and Bundesarxiv facilities in Berlin, Dresden, Freiburg and Potsdam, as well as the Elihu Burritt Library at my Alma Mater, Central Connecticut State University. Special thanks for comments, observations, photographs and much other help goes to: Charles H. Donald, the late Ed Ferko, Norman L.R. Franks, the late Peter M. Grosz, Adrian Hellwig, Colin Huston, Dr Eberhardt Kettlitz, Dr Volker Koos, Carl-August Graf von Kospoth, Paul S. Leaman, James F. Miller, the late Neal W. O’Connor, Lothair Vanoverbeke, Gregory VanWyngarden, the late George H. Williams, and the late H. Hugh Wynne.

Continued thanks go to Roderick Dymott, who encouraged me to develop a ‘zero-base’ research approach in my first Richthofen biography, and to my friends Trudy and Jules Baumann, and David E. Smith, whose comments on the manuscript have been invaluable. To my sons Clayton and Karl, I express special gratitude for their help with intricacies of 21st century technology and for generously providing other skills that go far beyond mine. And, from my own generation, grateful acknowledgement to my wife Judy for being a persevering proofreader and sounding board as this book was developed.

Finally, nearly five decades of research and a variety of sources, listed in the bibliography, preceded the writing of this book. The rationale for producing a volume about Rittmeister Manfred Freiherr von Richthofen and early air warriors connected to him is found in They Fought for the Sky by the late American journalist Quentin Reynolds (1957), one of the books that attracted the author to study World War I aviation history. Reynolds’ introduction, titled ‘Confessions of a Thief,’ characterizes a writer’s pursuit of such stories and expresses views with which I concur and wish to share with the reader:

‘Now that the book is finished I am disturbed by the thought that I didn’t really write it – I merely typewrote it. I picked the brains of hundreds of men, dead and living, and this is the result ... The material in this book was for the most part written by those who figure in it, and I, the predatory professional writer, have stolen their thoughts, their emotions and in some cases their very words. I make no apology – I think they bear repeating.’

Peter Kilduff
New Britain, Connecticut, USA
June 2007
In 1892, my uncle Manfred Freiherr von Richthofen came into the world in Breslau (Silesia). He served the last German Kaiser as an aviator and flew in the last year of the war until his death. The fame he attained among friend and foe alike during the war has meanwhile become a legend. The memory of Manfred von Richthofen remained even after World War II, which otherwise obliterated everything else, so strong and alive that the democracy and the republic that emerged from the rubble of the illegal German state did not hesitate to give his good name as the official designation to a squadron of the German Luftwaffe.

In World War II, everything that was German was so tarnished by the Nazi leaders that even now we struggle for explanations for the incomprehensible, horrible deeds that were committed at the time.

But, for all that, the ‘Red Baron’ is for the succeeding generation abroad a concept that stands for flying skill, for bravery and also for gallantry. After Manfred von Richthofen fell, he was laid to rest with military honours by Germany’s enemies of World War I. The Headquarters of the British Royal Air Force sent to his formal funeral a wreath with a ribbon bearing the inscription: ‘To Captain von Richthofen, the brave and worthy opponent.’

There is an explanation for this discriminate attitude towards a military opponent: especially in war, with all of its unimaginable carnage, there is a need for an ultimate order of moral values. And there was the need for good examples that support these orders of moral values, figures that embody these moral values for friend and foe alike, role models to prevent millions of soldiers from becoming blind and berserk.

Likewise, the gallant combat flyer von Richthofen from World War I came to honours, both unexpectedly and singularly in Anglo-Saxon countries after World War II. Perhaps here he also resonated the idea that carpet bombings such as in Dresden and the atomic bomb attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which at the end were carried out against civilians, were not only senseless, but also upset the soldierly order of moral values.

What was reported to us about my uncle – his sense of duty, his comradeship, his gallantry and his courage in battle, his devotion to his mission, the necessity of which he was convinced, his patriotism and his moral sense of protecting his own homeland and countrymen – are also today components of responsible thinking civil conduct.

Only from the distance of many decades and the experiences that we had to accumulate did we come to the realization that seldom is a young life so richly fulfilled as that of Manfred von Richthofen, the great German aviator.

Manfred von Richthofen
Berlin, Germany
June 2007
The Red Baron was the name applied to Manfred von Richthofen, a German fighter pilot who was the deadliest flying ace of World War I. During a 19-month period, the Prussian aristocrat shot down 80 Allied aircraft and won widespread fame for his scarlet-colored airplanes and ruthlessly effective flying style. The Red Baron Lyrics:

Manfred Albrecht Freiherr von Richthofen, 'The Red Baron' was born in Breslau, Prussia (today Wrocław, Poland) to a family that had a long record of state service. He is the ace-of-aces of World War I, a fighter pilot in the Imperial German Air Service. Sign up to our newsletter. As a subscriber to the Sabaton newsletter, you'll be the first to know when new Sabaton music and tour tickets are available! We will also contact you from time to time about new merchandise, exclusive offers, competitions and news about the band.