

# WHO KILLED VON RICHTHOFEN?

by Lieutenant-Colonel David Bashow

*If he had been my dearest friend, I could not have felt greater sorrow.*

Arthur Roy Brown upon viewing the remains of Manfred von Richthofen

Controversy is swirling yet again around an epic aerial encounter from the First World War. This time it is centred upon *Rittmeister* Manfred *Freiherr* von Richthofen, the legendary Red Baron, and his death in battle over the Western Front on 21 April 1918. A recent television documentary downplayed the role played in the engagement by Captain Arthur Roy Brown – believed by many to have been the man who shot down von Richthofen. In the wake of the documentary, family, friends and supporters of Roy Brown have professed outrage, betrayal and disappointment at the manner in which they feel the ten-victory ace from Carleton Place, Ontario, was trivialized. As a fighter pilot and an historian, this controversial encounter had long piqued my interest, and I first wrote extensively about it in a book released several years ago that paid tribute to the exploits of Canada’s fighter pilots of the First World War. The nub of the controversy is: Who actually killed von Richthofen?

By mid-April 1918, General Erich von Ludendorff’s last-ditch spring offensive on the Western Front, code-named Operation “Michael”, had fizzled out. Although there had been a perceptible lull in the Amiens sector, it was clear to Allied intelligence that the Germans were gearing up for yet another attempt to capture that key city. Accordingly, on 21 April, Roy Brown’s 209 Squadron, based at a mud-hole named Bertangles, was assigned to patrol the Australian-held sector of the front between Harbonnières and Albert, above the Somme River. At 12,000 feet in their Sopwith Camel scouts, the squadron was to provide cover where necessary to Allied observation aircraft in the vicinity. The 209 Squadron force was divided into three flights of five aircraft each, with Brown leading ‘A’ Flight and the entire formation. One of the four young lieutenants he was shepherding that day was a former school chum from Edmonton, Second Lieutenant Wilfred “Wop” May, who was embarking on just his third war patrol. “Brown had warned May to stay clear of any air combat that might ensue, to adopt an ‘observe and learn’ posture, and to separate rapidly towards Bertangles should he be threatened. Ironically, Manfred von Richthofen provided parallel instructions to his cousin Wolfram, who was a novice member of his flight on this fateful day.”

At approximately 10:30 AM on the other side of the lines at Cappy, some 35 kilometres east of Bertangles, Manfred von Richthofen and pilots of his *Jagdgeschwader 1* received word that British aircraft were approaching their operational sector. Soon

thereafter, two *Ketten* (flights) totaling nine Fokker Dr.1 Triplanes, led by von Richthofen, launched into clearing skies to confront the British threat. Fifteen minutes later, von Richthofen and *Leutnant* Weiss detached from the German formation and had an inconclusive engagement with two RE8 two-seater observation aircraft from No. 3 Australian Flying Corps (AFC) Squadron at 7500 feet over Hamel. A plucky and effective defence by the Australian airmen drove the two Germans away. However, Weiss’s Triplane was visibly damaged during the scrap, and this resulted in a preliminary victory claim over von Richthofen once the word spread later that day that he had been felled. This claim was later discounted as being incompatible with the Baron’s actual time of death.

After this brief engagement, von Richthofen rejoined his formation and, shortly thereafter, led them in an attack on Roy Brown’s force, which was now south of Hamel. A free-for-all rapidly ensued, and young Wilfred May was unable to resist the temptation to engage briefly in combat. However, his guns soon jammed, leaving him defenceless. He then did as Roy Brown had instructed, and rapidly dived westwards towards the sanctuary of the Allied lines.

This abrupt exit from the fight was witnessed by both Roy Brown and Manfred von Richthofen, whose hunter’s instinct sensed a quick 81st aerial victory. May, aided by a strong tailwind out of the east, was soon hurtling west at mere feet above the Somme River valley, with von Richthofen in hot pursuit and rapidly closing to lethal range. Roy Brown, immediately grasping the extreme danger that had befallen his young charge, used the potential energy of his height advantage, combined with skilful flight path prediction, and commenced a steep 45-degree dive at extremely high speed towards the relative positions of May and von Richthofen. This dive was, in its own right, an incredibly courageous act. In fact, Roy Brown wound his Camel up to nearly 190 miles per hour in this last-ditch offensive manoeuvre, and put the fighter into a flight envelope where it had some notoriously vicious flight characteristics, even for an experienced pilot. Brown did not take the time to close to ideal firing range, since his primary motivation was to fire a long, high-closure-rate burst to distract von Richthofen from pursuit of May by making him honour the threat from behind.

This was exactly what transpired. Although Brown fired from behind, above and to the left of the Baron, von Richthofen, instead of doing the normal thing and commencing a tight left turn *into* the threat, broke off to the right, away from Brown. This was probably due to the sun angle and position at the time, which would have made both Brown’s Camel and rapidly rising terrain off to his left difficult to discern. At any rate, this



*The Red Baron's Last Flight*, painting by Stephen Quick.

By permission of the artist

reaction removed the Baron from his pursuit trajectory of May, and drove Richthofen closer to the waiting guns of the Australian Corps below. Approximately ninety seconds after Roy Brown took his shot, Manfred von Richthofen, having reversed his flight path eastwards, crashed in a sugar-beet field and gasped his last breaths as Gunner Ernest Twycross of the Royal Garrison Artillery approached the crashed scarlet Triplane. After uttering a short phrase, von Richthofen expired from a gunshot wound to his chest.

Two postmortem examinations, as well as a subsequent verification inspection by a senior medical officer, were done on von Richthofen's remains. Both Brown and one of the Australian Air Force RE8 crews who had earlier engaged the Baron claimed von Richthofen as a victory, as did a number of soldiers from the Australian Corps. After a hasty preliminary examination, a second, *official* examination noted that the round that killed von Richthofen had entered the right side of his chest "about the level of the ninth rib...just in front of the posterior axillary line. The bullet appears to have passed obliquely backwards through the chest, striking the spinal column, from which it glanced in a forward direction and issued on the left side of the chest at a level about two inches higher than its entrance on the right and about in the anterior axillary line."<sup>2</sup> The bullet trajectory is significant, since, given these entry and exit wounds, there is no way in which Brown could have fired the fatal shot from above, behind and to the left – a firing position that was witnessed and documented by another reputable member of Brown's squadron, Captain Oliver LeBoutillier.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Brown had reasonable grounds to think that he was the Baron's victor. This was because the *initial* postmortem inspection, and the only one to which Brown was privy for a very long time, suggested "a large multiple-bullet entry hole in von Richthofen's left breast with the apparent choice of exit locations low down in the abdominal area on his right."<sup>4</sup> This initial inspection of the corpse fueled the belief by the RAF that Roy Brown was the real victor, and they subsequently proclaimed him as such. When experts later inspected the wreckage of the Baron's red Triplane, the distinctive fabric covering had been ravaged by souvenir hunters, which possibly obliterated evidence of some battle damage done by Brown. However, the only obvious bullet hole was on the right-hand side of the fuselage, below the cockpit rim. No bullet holes were found on the opposite side of the fuselage, nor were any found on the rear decking behind the cockpit, nor through the pilot's seat.

Brown, May and others from 209 Squadron were apparently not privy to the true nature and location of the entry and exit wounds until many years after the event. A modest and gentle man, Roy Brown took no joy from his role in von Richthofen's demise. Nor did he ever try to claim definitively that his was the killing shot; many others did that for him. He staunchly and repeatedly claimed for the rest of his life that he had taken the shot from the left-hand side. In 1927, American journalist Floyd Gibbons wrote articles and then a book entitled *The Red Knight of Germany*. Unaware that Brown had ever declared he had shot at Richthofen from the left-hand side, and at a loss to reconcile the now-known trajectory of the wounds, Gibbons stated that Brown had fired from the right side. A subsequent article written for the American *Liberty* magazine, entitled "My Fight with Richthofen", very loosely based upon an interview with Brown, borrowed heavily from Gibbon's book and thus each one appeared to confirm the other. Brown was falsely cited as the

author.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, "Gibbons' legacy to mankind is that from 1928 onwards most drawings and paintings show Brown attacking from the right, and this has become the popular belief or misconception. The myth of the right-hand attack was born, and it has been perpetuated by many distinguished historians over the years."<sup>6</sup> Over time, Roy Brown, although never deviating from his position that he had fired at the Baron from above, behind and the left, became very close-mouthed on the entire subject, and he refused to enter debate or offer further clarification right up until the time he passed away in 1944.

And so we return to the original question as to who killed von Richthofen. In 1997, historians Norman Franks and Alan Bennett, in their book *The Red Baron's Last Flight*, published with objectivity and impartial clarity what is in my view the definitive chronology of the last few moments of Manfred von Richthofen's short but illustrious combat career. In many respects, Manfred von Richthofen killed Manfred von Richthofen, for he violated a number of his own fundamental combat tenets by pursuing the tyro pilot May over the enemy side of the lines without a supporting cast of wingmen, while simultaneously flying a very predictable flight path – all cardinal sins in aerial combat under the circumstances. That said, Franks and Bennett determined that the most likely vanquisher of Manfred von Richthofen was Sergeant C.B. Popkin of the 24th Australian Machine Gun Company, who fired a long-range, low probability of success burst from his Vickers gun at the Fokker's right-hand side from approximately 800 to 850 yards range, just after the Baron reversed his flight path to the east.<sup>7</sup> If it was not Popkin, the chance killing shot could have been fired by any one of a number of infantrymen in the vicinity at the time.

In spite of these later revelations and clarifications, let there be no doubt, Roy Brown, aside from Manfred von Richthofen himself, was the pivotal character in this drama. His highly courageous and exceptionally dangerous high-speed attack forced a reaction from the Baron that in all likelihood saved Wilfred May's life and certainly forced von Richthofen into the killing zone of the Australian ground gunners. Arthur Roy Brown very deservedly won the Bar he was subsequently awarded to his Distinguished Service Cross for his actions that long-ago morning of 21 April 1918. Thanks to Brown's tenacity and courage, "Wop" May lived to fight another day. In fact, he would win the Distinguished Flying Cross and be credited with 13 aerial victories before war's close. Between the wars, he carved out an illustrious career by helping to open up Canada's north as a pioneering bush pilot. But that is another story.

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### NOTES

1. David L. Bashow, *Knights of the Air – Canadian Fighter Pilots in the First World War* (Toronto: McArthur and Company, 2000), p. 166.
2. Results of the second (and official) post mortem, as published in Norman Franks and Alan Bennett, *The Red Baron's Last Flight* (London: Grub Street, 1997), p. 91.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
4. Results of the initial post mortem. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
5. Alan Bennett, Letter to Author, 8 October 1999.
6. Franks and Bennett, p. 129.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 103.