

# THE DEATH OF von RICHTHOFEN

by Des Martin



## INTRODUCTION

*The death of Rittmeister Manfred von Richthofen is a never-ending item of intrigue for many aero historians. The following material, presented from an Australian point of view, provides still another perception of this event and the reader is cautioned that what follows is based upon an individual's recollections of events which took place long before the memory was set to paper. It is produced with the kind assistance of our American member, Noel Shirley.*

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In the cemetery at Wodonga in Victoria, Australia rests the body of a man whose sworn statement that an anti-aircraft Lewis gunner named Monckton shot down Rittmeister Manfred von Richthofen was handed to the Australian War Memorial at Canberra, along with copies of letters held by his family that support this declaration. The plaque above his grave states that No 20278, Driver Edgar Turner, won the Military Medal and Bar in 1914-1918, and saddled up again for the 1939-1945 return match as VX 9494. A quiet and most respected family man, Jack Turner, as he was always known, never missed an Anzac Day march, completing the last one in a wheel chair shortly before he died. Jack volunteered his story to the author, and made the sworn declaration on 24 December 1975 as to the accuracy of his statements.

Manfred von Richthofen began his war service as a Lieutenant in the Nr.1 "Kaiser Alexander III" Uhlán Regiment on the Eastern Front in 1914. Transferring to the Air Service in May 1915 he was posted to Feldfliegerabteilung Nr.69, flying as an observer in two-seater reconnaissance planes. He subsequently transferred to pilot school and, upon graduation, was assigned to an observation unit on the Western Front. As a raw student pilot von Richthofen had found the conquest of the air difficult, but his determination and intense application to anything he undertook saw him develop into an airman whose ability was noted by none other than Germany's leading fighter commander, Hauptmann Oswald Boelke. Boelke invited von Richthofen to join his scout squadron, Jagdstaffel 2, in September 1916. With them he got his first kill when he shot down an FE2B of 11 Squadron RFC, flown by 2Lt L.B.F. Morris, with Lt T. Rees as observer.

Richthofen was to kill many more Allied airmen in the months that followed, and to be decorated with the Ordern Pour le Merite, Germany's highest decoration for valour, in January 1917. He then became commanding officer of Jagdstaffel 11 at the time when Germany's aviators were the kings of the wartime skies, and in the month known to

Allied airmen as "Bloody April" (April 1917), he shot down no less than 21 enemy aircraft.

Richthofen was then promoted to command the new formation of fighting planes that was his own development of a basic idea Boelke had thought up. This was Jagdgeschwader Nr.1, comprising Jastas 4,6,10 and 11, which was to become famous as von Richthofen's Flying Circus. The Circus aircraft were brightly painted, with a preference for red, but the Baron did not always fly a completely red aircraft.

On 21 April 1918 he was flying Fokker Dr 1 425/17, when he supposedly became engaged with some Sopwith Camels of 209 Squadron, RAF, over Sailly-le-blanc, and one version of his death is that he was tailing young 2Lt W.R. May at a very low altitude when May's Flight Commander, Captain A. Roy Brown DSC, joined in at less than 100 feet and put his last burst of ammunition into the Fokker, which faltered and then landed near the gun positions of 33 Battery, 5 Division, Australian Field Artillery. The pilot, found dead by the Australians who ran from everywhere, proved to be von Richthofen. Or so wrote Quentin Reynolds in *They Fought for the Sky* in 1959. This story was promulgated by the British, though not quite so romantically as by Reynolds who has Brown telling a shocked young May in the mess that he thought it was von Richthofen. This was possibly because it was better public relations to have a Canadian in the RAF shoot down Germany's greatest fighter pilot, than admit a mere Australian Lewis gunner did it from the ground.



Members of No.3 Squadron, AFC inspecting the remains of Manfred von Richthofen's Fokker Dr 1 at Bertangles in April 1918.

In his book *Saving the Channel Ports*, Lt Col Donovan Joynt VC makes it very clear that the British propaganda machine saw little value in lauding the exploits of the AIF, so it was many years before Australian reaction to Brown being handed the credit for shooting down von Richthofen got any sort of hearing. As we shall see, all attempts by

his Number Two to rightfully claim credit for the Digger behind the gun were completely ignored at the time of the action, and later.

In 1931 Major-General L.E. Beavis, who in 1918 commanded 53 Battery, AFA on the day in question, brought strong evidence to uphold the claim that the Baron's death had been caused by a bullet from an Australian gunner on the ground. Major Beavis, to use his 1918 rank, could not provide the name of the gunner but he believed that Mr. George Ridgeway, then living at Lang Lang, Victoria, would be the nearest living witness to the event. All this Major-General Beavis stated in a letter to the Editor of the *Army Quarterly* in London, as part of a then current controversy that was to bring forward more than one Australian name before it ended. That list has continued to grow but, like Brown himself, none of those nominated has come forward to claim the honour. Of course, the man concerned may not have seen the war out, or he might have died in the meantime.

Major-General Beavis had not heard of No 20278, Driver Edgar Turner of 7 Artillery Brigade, who was then attached to 7 Bde HQ and quartered in an old house in a wood near Corbie, which was sometimes called Cappy by the troops. On 21 April Jack Turner and three other artillerymen were talking together on the edge of the woods near the anti-aircraft Lewis gun pit.

From here on the story is as sworn by Mr Turner.

*"The AA gunner, a man named Monckton, was with us. At a cry of "Planes coming!" Monckton manned his gun. He did not have a Number Two (the assistant who passes fresh ammunition drums to the gunner), so I stood by him. Very soon a British plane came over with a German right on his tail, too close for us to fire on him. They passed over, and shortly afterwards the German returned alone. We had no means of knowing whether he had shot down the Britisher, or had merely broken off the engagement, which was possible as he was well over our lines and there were no other planes in that particular area at that time. As he came towards us Monckton opened up on him, and swung to follow him on a half circular course round our position. The plane was quite alone in the sky, and its red colour told us it was one of von Richthofen's famed Circus, but it did not go very far after Monckton opened up before coming down to land in a clear little field close to the wood. We could follow his descent all the way till the plane ceased to move, and from the Lewis gun position could see the pilot sitting motionless in his cockpit.*

*Men rushed from everywhere to get souvenirs of the German fighter, and I was one of the first to reach it. I saw the pilot had been shot through the head (sic), but nobody bothered to get him out of the cockpit, for most of the men were cutting pieces of fabric from the wings and fuselage. One man did get up to the cockpit, where he tried to get a ring off the pilot's finger. Finding it fitted too tightly, the soldier pulled out his jackknife with the obvious intention of hacking off the finger to get the ring. At that very moment an officer arrived and told the crowd to stand back. When the man trying to get the ring became nasty, this officer pulled out his revolver and convinced him that he had the wrong idea about collecting souvenirs. From this point the whole affair became an official matter, and the pilot's papers showed him to be none other than Captain Freiherr Manfred von Richthofen, Germany's greatest fighter ace.*

*That evening the shelling was very bad, and we had to wait till dark before a burial party, of which I was a carrier, took the blanketed body down to the cemetery, named, I think, Hautmont, where the R.C. Padre attached to 7 Brigade conducted the service. Because of the circumstances at the time there was no firing party, and no special ceremonies that night (sic). Later the body was exhumed for the purposes of giving von Richthofen a full military funeral at which the British and Australians paid tribute to von Richthofen as a gallant enemy, and over which the German pilots flew to drop a wreath (sic). Still later, his body was returned to Germany for burial in his own country.*

*What happened to the men whose names I mentioned I do not know. But I can swear that no other plane was in sight when Monckton shot down von Richthofen."*

Mr Turner signed four Statutory Declarations concerning the above statements. One copy went to the Director of the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, one was sent to a German military historian seeking this information, one was retained by the Turner family and one by the author of this article.<sup>(1)</sup>

Jack Turner thought von Richthofen had been shot through the head, but he was to have no other association with the Baron's body until he carried it, sewn in a blanket, to its first grave. What he probably saw was blood that had been carried to von Richthofen's face by his hand as the dying pilot pulled off his glove and tried to do something about his wounds (sic). The medical evidence was that the bullet which actually killed von Richthofen entered on his right side and came out two inches higher on his left side, clearly showing that it had been fired from below.<sup>(2)</sup>

Knowing that an old friend, Mr Jack Hughes - editor of the magazine *Australian Post*, was deeply interested in all von Richthofen's history, the writer put the Turner statements at his disposal, and the *Australian Post* ran a major feature on them in the issue of 15 January 1975. This produced two very interesting letters to Mr Turner. The first was from a lady then living in New Zealand, whose father had told her of the death of von Richthofen, of how he ran to the plane himself, and of the incident when the officer prevented the soldier from cutting off the pilot's finger. The second was even more valuable for it came from the Sydney address of former Major G. Burrows MC and Bar, 14 Field Engineers, 5 Division, AIF, who was the officer who produced his pistol during the ring and finger incident. Major Burrows wrote that his section had been working very close to Monckton's Lewis gun position, and that they all ran for the red triplane when it landed. He went on to say that he arrived as the souvenir hunter was about to hack into von Richthofen's finger, and he "*strongly objected, as stated in your interesting article*".

Jack Turner tried "*two or three times*" to get formal recognition of Monckton's feat, but his appeals fell on officially deaf ears, so he desisted until the 1970's, when his son-in-law found him more receptive ones. In Driver Turner and Major Burrows we have two obviously responsible men who were part and parcel of Manfred von Richthofen's passage from this life. There is no possibility of collusion between them where the story of the souvenir hunter is concerned. Therefore, there is no reason to suggest that Turner's earlier Statutory Declaration as to Monckton's part in it is anything but the truth.

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NOTES

1. Unfortunately the author of this article passed away in 1995, before we were able to obtain from him a copy of the sworn declaration made by Mr Turner regarding the death of Rittmeister von Richthofen. Enquiries at the AWM have also failed to locate any trace of a copy of the Statutory Declaration.
  2. Current medical thinking is that von Richthofen was killed instantly by a single bullet which passed through his chest. The blood on his face can be explained by the probability that his face impacted with the butts of his machine guns on landing.
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A white-powdered 'death portrait' photograph of Manfred von Richthofen, taken by an Australian photographer on 22 April 1918. The damage to his face caused by its impact with the twin machine gun butts is evident.