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# A CASE STUDY IN EFFECTIVE COMMAND: AN ANALYSIS OF FIELD MARSHAL RICHTHOFEN'S CHARACTER AND CAREER

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The German armed forces produced many effective commanders during the last world war, some of whom survived and made themselves more famous, and further enhanced their reputations, by writing memoirs. Albrecht Kesselring, Heinz Guderian and Erich von Manstein have proven most popular. Their memoirs are still available, appearing from time to time in new editions. Yet their performance, although consistently good and seldom poor, never matched that of Wolfram Freiherr von Richthofen, whom I consider the ablest and most consistently effective operational commander of the Second World War. First as an air corps commander and then as head of an entire air fleet, he proved himself a courageous, resolute leader, a stern, rigid disciplinarian and an efficient and effective administrator. He earned the respect and, in some cases, affection of his men. In spite of his arrogant, brusque manner, he was an excellent leader and, no less important, an energetic and reliable subordinate. At all times, he skillfully exploited his forces' limited capabilities to the fullest, producing satisfactory results under the worst of circumstances and superb results under the best. I am not alone in recognising Richthofen's command excellence. An American historian recently called him "certainly one of the best tacticians in the history of air warfare".<sup>1</sup> Another called him "extraordinary".<sup>2</sup> Even during his lifetime he possessed a reputation for excellence. This reputation extended beyond Axis forces. The British Air Ministry, for instance, praised his outstanding abilities, noting in 1943 that he was resolute, tough and effective, and that, "with his good name and appearance, brutal energy and great personal courage, he is the German ideal of an Air Force General."<sup>3</sup>

If Richthofen's name doesn't immediately ring bells, it's probably because he earned his laurels primarily on the eastern front, because he was an airman, not a soldier, and because he died prematurely of a brain tumour in 1945, without having first published his memoirs or diaries. This analysis has two aims: first, to bring this outstanding but relatively unknown commander to the attention of the audience he deserves; and second, to examine his career and character in order to determine which actions and attributes account for his consistent excellence. This should, of course, prove interesting not only to military historians, but also to New Zealand officers seeking keys to unlock their own command potential. In order to achieve these aims, I will employ Richthofen's own unpublished diaries and consult other sources that shed light on his command style and on his dealings with both superiors and subordinates.

## **Richthofen's Career**

Richthofen was born into an aristocratic family in Barzdorf, Silesia, on 10 October 1895.<sup>4</sup> As a young ensign, he served in the 4<sup>th</sup> Hussars Regiment from March 1913 until September 1917. He then transferred to the Imperial Air Service, eventually joining the famous Richthofen Squadron, whose first commander had been his cousin Manfred, the legendary "Red Baron". After the war he studied engineering, eventually gaining a doctorate. He resumed his military career in November 1923, and throughout the 1920s his Reichswehr service included time in the cavalry, infantry and artillery. From April 1929 to October 1932 he served as air attaché in the German Embassy in Rome, where he befriended Italo Balbo, the Fascist hero and Italian Minister of Aviation.

In October 1933 Richthofen joined the fledgling Reich Air Ministry, which evolved into the Luftwaffe two years later. In 1936 he served as Chief of Staff to both Generalmajor Hugo Sperrle and his successor, Generalmajor Helmuth Volkmann, commanders of the "Condor Legion" which earned fame (and infamy, after the bombing of Guernica) during the Spanish Civil War. In November 1938, promoted to Generalmajor himself, he became the final commander of that unit. During the Spanish Civil War he experimented with close air support tactics and aircraft (including a few early Ju 87 Stukas) and, no doubt influenced by his experiences as both a soldier and pilot during the Great War, developed tactics and a ground-air liaison system that improved air support effectiveness.<sup>5</sup> Also, his experiences in Spain removed his earlier doubts about the dive-bomber. Realising that the dive-bomber was far more accurate than current horizontal

bombers – and, therefore, more useful for tactical purposes – he returned to Germany as one of its leading advocates.

Because of his outstanding successes in Spain and his competence in the use of the dive-bomber and new methods of tactical air employment, which had a significant effect on German air planners, Richthofen soon found himself hailed as the Luftwaffe's expert in this field. In July 1939 he formed a special close support force, Fliegerführer z.b.V. (Special Purposes Air Command), which quickly expanded into the powerful Fliegerkorps VIII (8<sup>th</sup> Air Corps). Under his command, this specialised ground attack corps distinguished itself in Poland and France by its excellent support of advancing Panzer spearheads. For this he won the Knight's Cross and promotion to General der Flieger. His sluggish Stukas, on the other hand, proved so vulnerable to enemy fighters in regions where air superiority had not been attained that he felt compelled to provide fighter escorts. Even so, British fighters still severely mauled the Stukas during the Battle of Britain, forcing Richthofen to withdraw them hastily. However, his corps provided exemplary close support in the absence of enemy fighters during the Balkans campaign and the airborne invasion of Crete. Enjoying the luxury of almost total air superiority, his Stukas inflicted heavy losses on Allied troops (including hard-pressed New Zealanders), transports and shipping. For his dynamic leadership he received Oak Leaves to the Knight's Cross.



**Figure 1** World War II's premier tactical airpower specialist: Wolfram Freiherr von Richthofen.

Richthofen's air corps won further laurels in the eastern campaign, especially during the height of the 1941/42 winter crisis when, operating by itself after the transfer of Kesselring's air units, its support of the army in the critical central zone before Moscow proved outstanding.<sup>6</sup> In recognition of these achievements, Hitler promoted him to Generaloberst on 1 February 1942. This was a unique honour for an air corps commander; he now had the same rank as the air fleet commanders and the most senior Luftwaffe staff officers, such as Hans Jeschonnek and the late Ernst Udet. During the preliminary eastern campaigns of 1942, Hitler bypassed Hermann Göring, the Luftwaffe's incompetent Commander in Chief, and organised the deployment of air units himself.<sup>7</sup> He wanted "massed airpower" in support of ground forces<sup>8</sup>, so he drew upon the services of the airman he trusted most: Richthofen, whom he called back prematurely from

long-overdue leave.<sup>9</sup> Richthofen demonstrated such excellent leadership and provided such effective tactical air support during the Battles of Kerch and Sevastopol that Hitler appointed him head of the entire Luftflotte 4 (Fourth Air Fleet) with responsibility for all air operations during Operation Blau (Blue), Germany's major campaign of 1942.

This campaign initially went very well, with German forces gaining vast amounts of territory, pushing into the Caucasus towards the oilfields that Hitler desperately wanted, and capturing almost all of Stalingrad. Richthofen's air fleet contributed significantly to these successes, providing ground forces with excellent close air support and, after the army's supply lines became congested and finally deteriorated, an impressive amount of logistical support. Richthofen deserved, and received from Hitler, much of the credit; he managed to provide this support even after July, when the Führer committed his major mistake of 1942. Encouraged by his troops' seizure of vast areas and misreading the significance of their relatively small prisoner haul, Hitler deviated from *Blau's* original conception of striking to the Volga River, securing the northern flank and then plunging into the Caucasus. Instead, he divided the campaign into two simultaneous offensives: against Stalingrad (previously not even a main target) and against the Caucasus. This dissipated army and air force strength, opened a large and vulnerable gap between his two army groups, created major logistical difficulties for both groups, and expanded Luftflotte 4's combat zone to an unmanageable size. Richthofen coped extremely well, creating new logistics systems and reorganising his formations to suit better their new tasks. He could not cope, however, when Hitler decided in November to use his totally unsuited air fleet, which was now depleted and needing rehabilitation, for the aerial supply of Sixth Army, encircled at Stalingrad.

Richthofen and his command staff worked energetically to ensure that all missions, airlift and regular combat, provided the best possible results. Under the circumstances, though, good results were impossible. Despite Richthofen's drive and determination, Luftflotte 4 could not overcome poor suitability for its designated tasks, its loss of established airfields and forced use of hastily prepared and inadequate landing strips, its loss of air superiority and its high attrition rate (caused primarily by bad weather but also by Soviet Air Force attacks and strong flak). As a result, Luftflotte 4 failed to sustain Sixth Army and to prevent the entire southern sector of the Eastern Front being rolled back by the Red Army. Richthofen received no blame; on the contrary, Hitler promptly promoted him to Generalfeldmarschall. The airman wasted no time in proving he deserved it. In close co-operation and careful coordination with Manstein, he conducted a masterful counteroffensive that gave Germany back the strategic initiative and much of the lost territory.



Figure 2 Richthofen worked closely with army commanders. Here Manstein (looking through field glasses) and Richthofen (with peaked cap) observe joint operations on the Kerch Peninsula.

In June 1943, after almost two years of continuous service on the Eastern Front, Richthofen finally left for warmer surroundings. Needing someone competent to organise successfully the air defence of the Southern Front against the expected Anglo-American invasion, Hitler transferred him to command of Luftflotte 2 (Second Air Fleet) in Italy. Manstein, then preparing Operation *Zitadelle* (Citadel), that year's major eastern offensive, was horrified; he needed Richthofen in the East.<sup>10</sup> Hitler's ears remained deaf to his pleas, and Richthofen duly commenced duties in Italy. Unfortunately, his new command faced overwhelming odds, and proved incapable of throwing back Allied landings on Sicily and at Salerno.

Although he again demonstrated his mastery of tactical air support, earning Kesselring's gratitude and praise, he simply lacked the aircraft and resources needed to remain competitive. Hitler would doubtless have transferred him to northwestern Europe to command Luftwaffe forces opposing the Normandy landings, except that the airman fell gravely ill. He had an inoperable brain tumour, and finally transferred to the Führer Reserve in November 1944. He suffered great pain throughout his last months and died as a prisoner of the Americans on 12 July 1945 at Bad Ischl, Austria.

### **Intelligence**

Richthofen clearly possessed an attribute shared by most distinguished commanders: high intelligence. His attainment of a doctorate testifies to his cognitive abilities, yet he had no interest in acquiring knowledge with no practical application. He wanted to know so that he could do. In anticipation of closer links between Germany and Italy – to mention perhaps the most obvious example – he learned Italian, and did so very well, quickly becoming thoroughly conversant. Likewise, when he joined the Condor Legion in January 1937, he soon mastered Spanish. Not surprisingly, these efforts produced the result he wanted: improved relations with his new allies. The Spanish Nationalist commanders, in particular, felt impressed by his efforts and the speed with which he learned their language.<sup>11</sup> Other German commanders looked enviously upon his close and effective working relationship with Spanish counterparts, yet few seemed to realise that the strength of that relationship grew from his willingness to treat the often-ridiculed Italians and Spanish as *equals*, with languages worth learning.

During World War II he continued this pattern, learning as much Rumanian as the chaos of war permitted. He consequently enjoyed closer co-operation and better relations with Rumanian commanders than almost any other Wehrmacht leader (except perhaps Manstein, who also tasked his sharp mind with learning the Rumanian tongue).<sup>12</sup> On the Eastern Front, where the Rumanians generally proved themselves useful allies, these efforts certainly bore fruit in the form of improved C3 (Command, Control and Communications) and combat effectiveness.

### **Innovation**

To the German officer class (*die Generalität*), the individual mattered less than the system that had been developed by successive great military thinkers – including Scharnhorst, Gneisenau, Clausewitz and von Moltke – in order to create a military "code" with standardised approaches to problem-solving, planning and the formulation and issuing of orders. This code had its own patterns of behaviour and communication and it gained strength from consistency, conformity and adherence to "proven" doctrines. Yet the resulting uniformity also limited independent thought and discouraged initiative. The danger of it fostering mediocrity could only be averted if men of unusual sharpness of mind and clarity of vision rose to the top.

Richthofen was such a man. His intellect and temperament lifted him above his training and experience as a staff officer and, coupled with his imagination and willingness to experiment, enabled him to emerge as a truly innovative and influential figure. He certainly contributed as much to the development and eventual conduct of Blitzkrieg as Guderian, another man of high intelligence, whose ideas on armoured warfare perfectly complimented his ideas on tactical airpower.

Drawing upon his Great War experiences as a cavalryman and airman, and his Reichswehr experience as a soldier and artilleryman, Richthofen used his time in Spain to experiment with dive-bombers, the development of which he had originally opposed. He pioneered, and then persuasively advocated, the techniques and tactics that made them, and other ground-attack aircraft, feared and effective weapons during the successful campaigns of 1939, 1940 and 1941.

In Spain Richthofen also drew upon his experiences in various services and arms as he experimented with ways to improve the effectiveness of tactical air support. Ground troops were not yet able to establish direct radio contact with aircraft overhead, which greatly reduced the potential for effective air support. Richthofen partly solved this problem by introducing a new inter-service communication system. He appointed Fliegerverbindungsoffizier (air liaison officers, or Flivos), specially trained air force officers in radio-equipped armoured cars, to all forward ground units. In constant radio communication with their air corps, Flivos appraised the corps of the situation and the intentions of the ground units, advised army commanders of the most practical and effective use of airpower and passed on their requests for air assistance.

This highly innovative system, pioneered by Richthofen well before American, British, French and Russian air forces even seriously addressed the issue of inter-service communication, worked well when Luftwaffe units were attacking clearly defined positions during static or slow moving operations. Panzer and other army formations were often able to receive effective air support only twenty minutes after requesting it. Yet this system did not always work well when the situation on the ground was far more fluid. "Friendly fire" incidents were surprising low, all things considered, but still occurred with distressing frequency (and still do today, as accounts of the Gulf War reveal).

To prevent these incidents, Richthofen implemented troop recognition systems harking back to those he had used during the Great War. In order to make themselves visible from the air, ground units spread out white identification panels and, when necessary, used flares and smoke pots. These measures proved so successful that they were soon copied by Soviet and other Allied armies. Of course, the introduction of radio equipment that allowed direct communication between ground forces and aircraft eventually rendered these methods obsolete.

Without these innovations, Panzer and army forces certainly would not have received the effective air support they soon came to rely on, and would not, as a result, have achieved their stunning victories in the war's first years. Richthofen's name will forever be associated with the Stuka and tactical air support, just as Guderian's will be with the Panzer and armoured warfare. Blitzkrieg, the fruits of their innovative ideas, ushered in a new era in warfare and initially gave Germany great advantages in battle.

#### **A Capacity for Hard Work**

Analysts of command and leadership characteristics tend to focus their attention on such glamorous personal traits as intelligence, charisma, resolve, courage and passion for battle. Richthofen certainly possessed those traits, yet also possessed a quality that analysts tend to ignore or downplay; a quality that not only contributed significantly to Richthofen's own command effectiveness, but also to that of most other truly effective leaders. That quality, put simply, is a capacity for *hard work*.



**Figure 3** During critical periods, Richthofen spent more than an hour each day on the phone, issuing instructions to group and squadron leaders, conferring with local army commanders and briefing the Luftwaffe High Command.

At almost all stages of his illustrious career, Richthofen pushed himself to the limit of his physical and emotional endurance. By the time of his promotion to Hauptmann in February 1929 he had already earned a reputation among colleagues as a workaholic who would remain at his desk, poring over paperwork, into the late evening or early morning. This habit remained until terminal illness finally robbed him of it in 1943. Even during periods of relative calm on the Eastern Front during 1941 and 1942, he usually worked up to seventeen hours each day. During periods of crisis or intense activity, he worked truly punishing hours.

For example, during the initial period of the Battle of Sevastapol in June 1942, when his air corps provided ground formations with an unprecedented level of air support, he slept an average of three hours per night. His diary entry for 2 June concludes: "Returned [to my quarters] to issue orders and wage war against my paperwork. Exhausted, so fell into bed at midnight."<sup>13</sup> His entry for the following day reveals the brevity of that sleep: "Up and away with [General] Martini at 0345 hours. Watched the first wave of the attack, then directed from my command post until 1500."<sup>14</sup> His day did not end there: he returned to his quarters and, aside from an interruption to eat dinner and award medals, remained locked in his "paper-war" until close to midnight. Thus, after having slept less than four hours, he worked continuously for almost twenty.

Richthofen even worked at this gruelling pace throughout the seventy-one days and nights of the Stalingrad airlift, yet, displaying tremendous resilience to stress and generalship of the highest order, he still managed to organise and command a superb counteroffensive after that ill-fated airlift ground to a halt in the face of overwhelming odds. This ability to work long hours over long periods with no obvious physical and emotional costs gave him a tremendous benefit: he could devote several additional hours each day to the maintenance and missions of his air fleet. While others slept, he sat hunched over his desk scrutinising daily after-action reports, planning the next day's operations and writing the appropriate instructions and orders. His ability to cope with long hours and little sleep, then, greatly increased his productivity.

The German airman is not alone in possessing this ability. Numerous famous commanders, including Hannibal, Caesar, Gustavus Adolphus, Napoleon, Lee, Patton, Manstein and Zhukov, worked unusually long hours, as did the three great protagonists of World War II: Churchill, Stalin and Hitler. The latter's long days and short nights are legendary. Hitler retired each night after 3 a.m., almost always taking a pile of documents with him to study in bed or at his desk. His exhausted subordinates and servants marvelled at his ability to rise, fresh and ready to go, and with his paperwork mastered and its key points memorised, after what seemed like only a few hours. Even his harshest critics consider this one of his most outstanding leadership strengths.

### **Aggression**

Richthofen's boundless capacity for work inspired his subordinates, as did another trait that doubtless contributed to his success in combat: aggression. His diary entries reveal that he perceived warfare in its simplest and crudest terms. His job was to kill as many enemy personnel as he could in the shortest time and with reasonable losses. "Unless the weather itself stops us," he bluntly wrote on 9 May 1942, shortly after the Battle of Kerch commenced, "no Russian will leave the Crimea alive!"<sup>15</sup> To make sure of this, he ordered his aircrews to pound the Soviet positions from dawn to dusk. They complied, conducting no fewer than 1,700 sorties that day. The following day they helped the army trap Soviet formations within a steadily tightening pocket. Richthofen wanted none to escape through the only gap. "By sunset we have isolated ten Red divisions," he penned in his diary, "except for a narrow gap. The pocket is almost closed."<sup>16</sup> He had plans for those still trying to flee, as his final sentence reveals: "In the morning the extermination can begin!" He ordered ceaseless attacks by all available aircraft, including fighters, Stukas, ground-attack ground planes and horizontal bombers. They rained down bombs of all sizes, including "devil's eggs" and other anti-personnel projectiles. These attacks proved devastatingly successful. Very few Soviets escaped. Even Richthofen himself felt amazed at the level of destruction. "We are inflicting the highest losses of blood and matériel," he wrote on the 11<sup>th</sup>. "Shocking! Corpse-strewn fields.... I have seen nothing like it so far in this war."<sup>17</sup> Although these comments may seem savage, they actually resemble those found within the personal papers of other prominent German commanders, including the "gentlemanly" Rommel, who, despite the gloss of historians' whitewash, also saw warfare in similar terms.

Richthofen's combat philosophy was simple: accept nothing less than victory, and spare no effort to attain it! Accordingly, as well as working extremely hard himself, he demanded the maximum effort from all his men, routinely ordering every airworthy plane into battle and forcing pilots to fly virtually from sunrise to sunset, pausing only long enough to refuel and rearm before taking to the skies again. His Stuka crews, for instance, almost exhausted themselves flying multiple missions against Stalingrad each day throughout September 1942. On the 15<sup>th</sup>, Hauptmann Pabst, commander of a Stuka squadron, climbed down from his cockpit after seven hours, during which time he had carried out five sustained and difficult missions against the city.<sup>18</sup> That was probably a typical day for him. Major Paul-Werner Hozzel, commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> "Immelmann" Stuka Wing and one of the most successful and acclaimed Stuka pilots of the war, describes how his wing was able to carry out so many missions each day. His units operated from airfields within forty kilometres from the city. "This meant," he explained,

that we needed for each sortie a chock-to-chock time of not more than 45 minutes, which included taxiing to the start, takeoff, approach flight, the climb to an altitude of 4,000 meters, target pickup, dive bombing attack, low level flight departure, landing, taxiing to the apron. Each turnaround – a new loading, a short technical overhaul, checkout – took us another 15 minutes. We were consistently able to fly with each plane about eight sorties from sunrise to sunset.<sup>19</sup>

Of course, supply, maintenance and airfield control personnel had to match their efforts, working tirelessly to keep their aircraft operational and their turnaround times low. Richthofen pushed them just as hard as aircrews, flying from airfield to airfield in order to praise those who worked hard and admonish those who didn't.

Although this regime seems excessively hard, it produced the desired result. Richthofen's air units consistently performed well, achieving pleasing results in combat, which kept morale high and earned both aircrews and ground personnel a high reputation throughout the Wehrmacht as well as more tangible rewards: medals, leave, extra resources and praise from the highest levels.

#### **Courage and "leading from the front"**

Richthofen backed up his effort and aggression with great courage. He feared few people and few things. Although he was a loyal subordinate, and never refused an order from Hitler, to whom he remained committed until his untimely death, or from Göring, whom he obeyed only because of respect for the chain of authority, he never hesitated to challenge either if he considered an order or action otherwise.

For instance, in the first weeks after Hitler ordered the Stalingrad airlift, he repeatedly, but unsuccessfully, tried to convince both the Führer and the Reichsmarschall that it was a crazy idea.<sup>20</sup> After the airlift failed, he wasted no time in chastising them – the two most powerful men in western Europe – that they alone bore responsibility for the catastrophe. At Hitler's headquarters on 11 February 1943, he stridently refuted Göring's "lame excuse" that he had been given little choice. The Führer, Göring said, had clearly wanted to keep the Sixth Army on the Volga, and expected the Luftwaffe to keep it fully operational. He could not have refused. Anyway, at that time he expected the encirclement to be temporary. It probably would have turned out fine, he claimed, had the Italian section of the line not collapsed, allowing the Russians to roll back the German front and deprive the Luftwaffe of its forward airfields. Richthofen snapped back that the disaster began well before the Italian line collapsed, and that, in any event, the Reichsmarschall would know more about events and conditions at the front if he had actually risked going there in person. "If you can't trust your lucky star for your personal safety," he lectured, "then you have no right to believe that destiny has called you for greater things."<sup>21</sup> A heated argument ensued, during which Göring insisted that he tried to reason privately with Hitler on many occasions, but could not challenge him publicly, because that would "endanger" the Führer's authority. Richthofen – who later admitted to "playing the strong man" – replied that he saw things differently.<sup>22</sup> The Reichsmarschall did not challenge Hitler, but always agreed with him, because he was scared of the Führer's wrath. Naturally, Göring "energetically denied this".

Later that day, Richthofen spoke as bluntly to the Führer. He stated emphatically that local commanders "must be given tactical freedom to act as their own local experience dictates."<sup>23</sup> Taking a swipe at Hitler's

own leadership style, he boldly insisted that it was wrong to "lead them by the scruff of the neck as though they were children". Hitler indignantly replied that, had he not kept his general under close guidance, "they would be fighting in Germany by now". Richthofen refuted this, stating: "if you can't trust your most important figures, you must replace them." Perhaps referring again to the airlift, Hitler shortly afterwards complained that he was constantly let down by his closest advisers, who reported dishonestly and did little else. Clearly with the airlift in mind, Richthofen replied that "this is of no interest either to us at the front or to future historians." As Commander-in-Chief, he pointed out, the Führer alone was responsible for the success or failure of operations. There was no point in cursing or blaming his advisers. Hitler frowned disapprovingly but remained quiet, inwardly admiring the air leader's frankness and unable to challenge the truth of his comments.

Indeed, the Führer liked men of Richthofen's ilk: committed National Socialists, aggressive commanders, inspiring leaders, forthright advisers, loyal followers. Although he had sworn never to create another field marshal, Hitler announced on 15 February, four days after Richthofen had bluntly told him that he bore ultimate responsibility for Stalingrad, that he was promoting the airman to Generalfeldmarschall.

Richthofen was also physically courageous, a trait that his men admired as much as his boldness with superiors. Throughout his two years on the Eastern Front, he travelled constantly from base to base in his light Fieseler Fi-156 Storch aircraft, which often came under enemy fire and occasionally had to make crash landings. He took these risks in order personally to brief his wing and group commanders and flak battalion leaders, and to exhort them to increase their performance. Believing that commanders are only as good as the men they command, on many occasions he addressed not only officers, but also large groups of assembled Luftwaffe aircrews, ground support battalions and flak troops. He spoke frankly, demanding hard work and aggression, but promising his own total commitment, effort and support. His courage, forceful personality and constant presence at the front created a deep impression on many of these troops, who responded with a loyalty akin to that of Guderian's Panzer troops.

Richthofen also liked to circle at low altitude in the skies over battlefields, monitoring progress on the ground and sending radio instructions back to his headquarters. Sometimes he was remarkably lucky to survive these daring flights; Soviet flak gunners filled his plane with red-hot shrapnel. He was the target not only of Soviet gunners, but, with distressing frequency, also of German gunners. For instance, while inspecting Axis positions on 25 June 1942, troops of the German 387<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division mistakenly open fire on his little aircraft, wounding his co-pilot, puncturing the fuel tank and filling his plane with holes. After making an emergency landing, he sent the commander of the division involved a letter "thanking" his men for their efforts.<sup>24</sup> "Whilst it is a delight to see the fighting spirit of the German ground troops against aircraft," he sarcastically wrote, "may I request that these troops direct their fighting spirit at the Red Air Force." After pointing out that visibility was excellent and that his aircraft was clearly marked, he added that "perhaps their gunfire was intended to be an ovation of greeting, in which case permit the commander of VIII. Fliegerkorps to express his gratitude for it and, at the same time, encourage them that similar greetings in future should be carried out with *blank* cartridges." His diary entry for that day is far more blunt. Well aware that he'd escaped death by the closest shave, he angrily scrawled: "Damned dogs! They don't fire at the Russians, but at our Storch!"<sup>25</sup>

To ensure effective army-air force co-operation, Richthofen visited not only Luftwaffe command posts and air fields, but also the command posts of local army formations. Airmen and soldiers alike marvelled at the sight of his light Storch bobbing and weaving above the battlefield or landing, sometimes riddled with shrapnel, on unprepared and uneven fields beside command centres. Again, this frequently placed him in grave danger. In order to plan joint operations in the Caucasus on 25 October 1942, for instance, he flew to the forward command post of General de Kavallerie von Mackensen, commander of the Third Panzer Corps. This "command post" was really little more than a deep hole in the ground protected in front by sand-bags. Generaloberst von Kleist joined Richthofen and Mackensen to plan the battle's next stage. Their meeting concluded prematurely, however, when all three commanders scrambled for cover, their uniforms sprayed with dirt and flying debris, as Soviet artillery shells crashed around them.<sup>26</sup> Ironically, despite almost losing his life, on this occasion Richthofen's decision to join the army at the front actually *saved* his life. Even as he brushed the dirt from this tunic, Soviet bombers pounded and gutted his own headquarters back in Baksan.



Richthofen's willingness to risk his life in order to lead from the front proved as inspiring to his men as Alexander the Great's, Napoleon's or even Rommel's did to theirs. His courage also impressed the army commanders he worked with, particularly Manstein, who ended the era with the reputation as Hitler's best army commander. Manstein later recalled: "Baron Richthofen was certainly the most outstanding air force leader we had in World War II".<sup>27</sup> "He made great demands on his units," the general continued,

but always went up himself [in an aircraft] to oversee important attacks. Moreover, I was always meeting him at the front where he would visit even the most forward units to get a clear picture of the possibilities of providing air support for army operations.

### Lack of Service Bias

Manstein's reference to Richthofen's desire for the closest working relationship between ground and air formations leads this discussion of the latter's command style onto another of his excellent traits: his abhorrence of inter-service rivalry, which, as shown above, led to significant innovations in the area of tactical air support. Richthofen was an arrogant and aggressive man, whose diaries are full of harsh and often unfair criticisms of both superiors and subordinates, yet at all times he remained "task-focused" and never let personalities or service rivalries interfere with the task at hand. He worked well with all other airmen, including Göring, whom he detested and considered worthless, and Generaloberst Löhner, his immediate superior for the first two years of war, whom he also disliked personally. Yet, more important, he worked well with all *army* commanders, even those he rated poorly, such as Generaloberst Paulus, whose weak command in the Stalingrad sector led to Sixth Army's encirclement and annihilation.

Furthermore, he even worked comfortably and amicably with army commanders of obvious talent and high reputation, such as Manstein himself. Despite the potential for a major ego clash between these two brilliant but conceited personalities, they interacted in a highly professional manner, without the jealousy and inter-service rivalry that many observers, including Hitler himself, anticipated. In fact, the partnership of these men, probably the most talented operational commanders of the Second World War (and certainly Germany's best), was never equalled during that great conflict. The spectre of petty rivalry revealed itself extremely rarely, and even then it appeared only in the pages of their private diaries. No open squabbles or instances of major strategic or tactical dissension existed during the many battles they jointly fought in the east (including Kerch, Sevastopol, Stalingrad and Kharkov).

This cannot be said of the professional relationships of many top Allied field commanders, including those now considered models of good generalship, whose ego clashes and strategical differences often caused significant problems and sometimes adversely influenced the outcome of certain engagements and battles. The case of Montgomery and Patton in the Mediterranean and in northwestern Europe springs to mind. Yet one has to search hard for evidence that the two Germans operated in anything but total unison. Even their *worst* disagreement involved only a minor bruising of ego and had no consequences. On 28 April 1942 – to show how insignificant his "tiff" was—Richthofen recorded in his diary that he felt snubbed that day by Manstein: "Waited for Generalfeldmarschall von Bock [commander of Army Group South]. I said 'Guten Tag' to him, after which Manstein apparently tried to prevent me meeting further with him."<sup>28</sup> Despite feeling annoyed that Manstein wanted to exclude him from his briefing with Bock, Richthofen said and did nothing to inflame the situation, but a few days later took great delight in beating Manstein in a debate over tactical differences at the 30<sup>th</sup> Army Corps' command centre. "Victory!," he jubilantly penned that night. "It's pathetic to say, but I'm 'top general!'"<sup>29</sup> Thus, he felt he had "repaid" Manstein for his insensitivity (which he probably never realised he had shown) without ever letting it become a point of contention between them.

In close consultation, Richthofen and his army counterparts meticulously co-ordinated their operations and created joint *Schwerpunkte* (points of maximum effort). They remained in close contact during all stages of combat, which usually meant, as noted above, that Richthofen took grave risks each day as he flew in his light, unarmed aircraft to the most forward army command posts. He often cursed in his diary some of his army counterparts, whose ideas, actions and decisions he may have found unpalatable, but his relationship with them remained professional at all times. Although he also frequently felt frustrated by

the responsibilities and restrictions associated with his force's tactical support orientation (and once described the Luftwaffe as "the army's whore"<sup>30</sup>), he never lost sight of the fact that close and unhindered inter-service co operation – now referred to as "jointery" – resulted in improved combat effectiveness. Indeed, Richthofen is a pioneer of jointery, whose career contains many lessons for those interested in the subject.

### Negative Traits

So, then, was Richthofen a perfect commander? The answer is simple: No. Like all commanders—indeed, like all people—he remained motivated by subjective factors of great complexity, and was occasionally prone, like many of us, to ambition, jealousy, anger and impatience. These factors seldom adversely influenced his decision-making and leadership effectiveness, although at times they made him a prickly character whom colleagues, whilst respecting his obvious abilities, found hard to get on with. His worst fault—as a commander, at least—was his reluctance to trust subordinates with key actions and decisions. As noted above, his capacity for hard work doubtless contributed to his overall effectiveness, but it probably stemmed from a character trait that occasionally diminished his effectiveness. Powerful leaders often find delegation difficult, mainly because they fear being let down by staff officers who, they believe, probably won't perform key tasks as well as they would themselves. Richthofen, like Napoleon, Lee, Manstein and others, liked to oversee or involve himself in all aspects of combat operations, and consequently proved a poor delegator.

This usually created no problems (although it doubtless partly explains why he worked such long hours), but occasionally his inability to release the reins caused difficulties. During both the Battle of Kerch and the Battle of Sevastopol (May and June 1942 respectively), he refused to place his powerful flak units even temporarily under the operational command of Eleventh Army's artillery officers, insisting instead on directing their use himself. Additionally, rather than dispersing his flak units amongst army divisions, as the artillery officers requested, he insisted they remain together so that their gunfire could be concentrated at crucial points as the need arose. Richthofen's actions were not based on logical arguments, but on his fear of losing control. They caused no major problems on the battlefield, but a great deal of inter-service friction. He admitted in his diary on 13 June 1942 that his inability to delegate authority over his flak guns had caused "a great squabble with army commands."<sup>31</sup> He lamely tried to blame the army's artillery officers, who wanted to "fritter away" his guns. They were "senile", he unfairly claimed, and wanted to deploy them according to the tactics of Wallenstein, leader of the Habsburg forces in the Thirty Years War of the seventeenth century.

Likewise, after assuming command of Luftflotte 4 (4<sup>th</sup> Air Fleet) in July 1942, he often found it difficult to delegate effectively to his two air corps commanders, Generals Fiebig and Pflugbeil, who were actually very capable men. During almost every temporary lull in fighting at Stalingrad, he flew south to the Caucasus to direct personally the missions of Pflugbeil's air corps, which operated against Soviet ground formations and Black Sea ports (but not, because of Hitler's poor prioritising, against the Caucasus oil fields, which might well have dealt Stalin a major blow). Richthofen's frequent flights south not only proved exhausting, because of their length and discomfort, but they also annoyed Pflugbeil, who resented his "meddling" and felt that he had not been trusted. Ordinarily, though, Richthofen's dislike of delegation caused no grave problems and should not be seen as evidence of inferior command skills. As noted above, even Napoleon hated trusting others with what he considered important tasks; that is, almost everything.

### Conclusion

To sum up, then, this study reveals that Richthofen deserves consideration as a commander of outstanding aptitude, certainly one of the best of the Second World War. He possessed a combination of traits and talents that contributed directly to his elevation to the highest rank in the Wehrmacht and, more important, to his consistently high performance in battle. He was intelligent, innovative, strong-willed, aggressive and vigorous, and a talented and skilful planner with a sure grasp of tactics and strategy. He also coped marvellously with stress and a punishing, albeit self-inflicted, work routine. Although a hard taskmaster and stern disciplinarian, he quickly won and never lost the respect and trust of both superiors and subordinates, who recognised from his constant presence at the front, frequent exposure to danger and ceaseless efforts to attain victory that he asked nothing from them that he would not offer himself.

He personally directed major air attacks after consulting carefully with his air corps commanders and, without succumbing to inter-service bias, also with relevant army generals, between whose headquarters or command posts he flew each day in his vulnerable Storch. He took care of all important decisions and actions himself, even if this meant extending his working day and reducing his sleep. In order to avoid dissipating his strength, he concentrated units in mass at certain Schwerpunkte (points of maximum effort), which he always selected in close consultation and careful co-ordination with the army, and he often deployed every available air asset against single targets if he considered it necessary. This produced devastating firepower, which frequently overwhelmed enemies so greatly that it led directly to the successful outcome of battles and campaigns.

Richthofen, then, certainly warranted the praise and promotion he received during his lifetime, but not the lack of coverage he has subsequently received from historians, military commentators and students of war in general. I hope this study helps to correct that imbalance.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> S.W. Mitcham, *Men of the Luftwaffe* (Novato: Presidio, 1988), p.170.
- <sup>2</sup> R. Muller, *The German Air War in Russia* (Baltimore: Nautical and Aviation Publishing Co., 1992), p.137.
- <sup>3</sup> *Notes on the German Air Force*, Air Ministry Publication 1928, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, April 1943, p.76.
- <sup>4</sup> Details of Richthofen's life and career, plus his personal papers and diaries from 1937 to 1944, can be found in the Nachlaß Dr. Wolfram Frhr. V. Richthofen, held in the Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany (cited below as BA/MA), File N671. For his time in Spain, see Vols. I, II and III. His abbreviated service record is in BA/MA MSG 1/1248.
- <sup>5</sup> J.S. Corum, "The Luftwaffe's Army Support Doctrine, 1918-1941", *The Journal of Military History*, 59, 1 (January 1995), pp.53-76.
- <sup>6</sup> BA/MA RL 8/49: VIII Fliegerkorps, Rußland-Feldzug: Mittelabschnitt, II. Teil 1941, ab 28.9.41. Zusammengestellt von H.W. Deichmann, Oberst a.D., damaliger Adjutant des VIII. Fl.K. an Hand von Aufzeichnungen, Umfragen and Tagebuch-Aufzeichnungen des Gen. Feldmarschall Dr. Ing. Frhr. v. Richthofen.
- <sup>7</sup> U.S. National Archives: T971/18/975-981: OKL, Chef Genst. 7644/42 Chefsache - Notiz über die Besprechung beim Führer am 17.4.1942, bezüglich Einsatz der Luftflotte 4.
- <sup>8</sup> F. Halder, Kriegstagebuch: Tägliche Aufzeichnungen des Chefs des Generalstabes des Heeres, 1939-1942, Volume III, p.421 (entry for 28 March 1942).
- <sup>9</sup> BA/MA N671/9: Dr Wolfram Frhr. v. Richthofen, Generalfeldmarschall. Persönliches Kriegstagebuch: Band 9: 1.1. -31.12.1942 (cited below as Richthofen TB), entry for 18 April 1942.
- <sup>10</sup> H. Plocher, *The German Air Force Versus Russia, 1943* USAF Historical Study No. 155 (New York: Arno Press, 1968), p.75n.
- <sup>11</sup> Mitcham, p. 41.
- <sup>12</sup> Cf. Generalleutnant Fiebig's comments on Richthofen's relations with Rumanian commanders: United States Air Force Historical Research Agency (cited below as USAFHRA), File 168.7158-335: *Tagebuch-Generalleutnant Fiebig (Stalingrad)*, 25.11.1942-2.2.1943, entry for 2 December 1942.
- <sup>13</sup> BA/MA N671/9: *Richthofen TB*, entry for 2 June 1942.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, entry for 3 June 1942.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, entry for 9 May 1942.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, entry for 10 May 1942.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, entry for 11 May 1942.
- <sup>18</sup> USAFHRA K113.309-3 Vol. 5: *Hauptmann Herbert Pabst, Staffelkapitän u. Gruppenkommandeur in einer Sturzkampfstaffel: Berichte aus Rußland, 1942*, entry for 16 September 1942.

- 19 USAFHRA K239.0512-1838: *U.S. Air Force Oral History Program # K239.0512-1838, Brig. Gen. Paul-Werner Hozzel, German Air Force, November 1978*, pp. 127-128.
- 20 J. Hayward, "Stalingrad: An Examination of Hitler's Decision to Airlift," *Airpower Journal*, XI, 1 (Spring 1997), pp. 21-37.
- 21 J. Hayward, *Stopped at Stalingrad: The Luftwaffe and Hitler's Defeat in the East, 1942-1943* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), p. 320.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p.321.
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 This fascinating report to the 387<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division is appended to his diary (BA/MA N671/9: *Richthofen TB*, entry for 28 June 1942).
- 25 *Ibid.*, entry for 28 June 1942.
- 26 *Ibid.*, entry for 25 October 1942.
- 27 E. Von Manstein, *Verlorene Siege* (Bonn: Athenäum, 1955), p. 258.
- 28 BA/MA N671/9: *Richthofen TB*, entry for 28 April 1942.
- 29 *Ibid.*, entry for 2 May 1942.
- 30 USAFHRA 519.619-7 (14 August 1945): HQ, US Strategic Air Forces in Europe (Rear), Office of the Historian, AAF Sta 390, APO 413, US Army, "Questionnaire on GAF Doctrine and Policy: Answers by Gen. Maj. von Rohden (P.W.) and Col. Kriesche (P.W.) to Questions Submitted by Major Engelman".
- 31 BA/MA N671/9: *Richthofen TB*, entry for 13 June 1942.

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