

Canadian pilot or Australian gunner: Who killed the Red Baron?

Phil Egan & Barb Swanson - April 2025

*“Do you come from a land down under
Where women glow and men plunder?
Can't you hear, can't you hear the thunder?
You better run, you better take cover...”*
From the song “Down Under” by Men at Work

The Land Down Under is trying to steal Canadian thunder!

For decades, military historians have credited Canadian fighter pilot Roy Brown with shooting down the deadliest flying ace of the First World War. Manfred von Richthofen, better known as the Red Baron for his blood-red Fokker triplane, had 80 victories to his credit when he was finally shot down and killed over France's Somme Valley in April of 1918.

But Australia is claiming credit for eliminating the scourge of the skies over the Great War's western front.

The Canadian Encyclopedia, long an advocate of Roy Brown's Victory, describes the action this way: The RAF's 209 Squadron contained two Canadian flying aces involved in the Red Baron takedown: Captain Roy Brown and his former high-school companion, Wilfrid (Wop) May.

On April 21, 1918, they encountered a German squadron that included both von Richthofen and his cousin, a rookie pilot. Von Richthofen dived to attack May when he saw the Canadian pursuing his cousin. Brown then came to May's aid, diving on the Red Baron's distinctive aircraft and firing on it.

Both von Richthofen and Brown were now dangerously close to embattled ground forces. Brown broke off and soared skyward as the Red Baron's Fokker landed with a mortally wounded von Richthofen. The Red Baron was quickly surrounded by Allied troops.

The 25-year-old von Richthofen died valiantly in an attempt to save his cousin. In doing so, he had broken his own rules about never flying alone, and especially low over enemy territory. This much is undisputed.

However, the Aussies have a different twist on the tale.

They claim that von Richthofen, perilously close to the ground as Brown pursued him, came under fire from Lewis gunners attached to the First Australian Imperial Force. As the Red Baron banked left to avoid collision with the ground, Sergeant Cedric Popkin of the 24th Machine Gun Company let loose the fatal burst from his Vickers gun.

Hmmm. It sounds to us that the Aussies have been standing upside down in Oz so long that it has gone to their heads.

Regardless of who is entitled to the credit for his demise, there is no question that Manfred von Richthofen has emerged as one of the most fascinating, and legendary, combatants of the First World War.

Born in 1892 to an aristocratic Prussian family dating its lineage to the Middle Ages, von Richthofen was initially enrolled in a company of cavalry. He quickly realized, however, that the perceived glory days of mounted combat had become an anachronism. Thrilled by the sight overhead of pilots engaged in aerial dogfights, von Richthofen turned his ambitions skyward. In October of 1915, he began flight training.

Shooting down his first enemy aircraft in September, 1916, von Richthofen quickly achieved ace status with four more kills. By January of 1917, the legend of the Red Baron had been born. That April alone, von Richthofen shot down 22 British aircraft. By the time Canadian pilot Roy Brown and Australian soldiers were emptying their guns on their famous enemy, the Red Baron was the deadliest flying ace of the war, accounting for 80 enemy aircraft (Canada's renowned Billy Bishop ranked third with 72 confirmed kills).

Because of his stature, Commonwealth forces afforded the Red Baron a full military burial in a small French churchyard, with a 21-gun salute. In 1925, von Richthofen's brother returned the remains to Berlin and, in 1973, they were moved for a final time to a family plot in Wiesbaden.