

Book Review

Wolfram Von Richthofen: Master of the German Air War

By James S. Corum

Reviewed by Gp Capt Al Byford

In popular consciousness, the name von Richthofen automatically evokes the First World War's most famous air ace. However, in terms of historical significance - and



Manfred von Richthofen, more commonly known as The Red Baron, was a German World War I fighter pilot.

particularly in the evolution of air power - the 'Red Baron' is totally overshadowed by his relatively unknown cousin, Wolfram. Wolfram von Richthofen was a competent and pragmatic air leader who commanded at formation level in at least seven major air campaigns before and during the Second World War, ranging from the Spanish Civil War, through the Polish



Wolfram von Richthofen Cdr, Condor Legion Uniform, 1939.

campaign and the Battles of France and Britain, then onto the Balkans, Russia - including Stalingrad - culminating at field marshal rank as the Axis air commander in the Italian campaign before being struck down by a brain tumour, leading to his premature death as the war ended in 1945. Though clearly a character of considerable historical significance, it may be asked why today's air power practitioners should be interested in von Richthofen. The answer is that while there are many elements of his story that have contemporary interest, his key role in the development of effective air-land integration - an issue of real current concern - provides an obvious focus of interest. Von Richthofen was the *Luftwaffe's* ground-attack commander *par excellence* and the techniques and principles of air-land cooperation he established are still worthy of analysis today. He helped put the theoretical concept of the operational air war into practice and played a key part in enabling the German army and *Luftwaffe* to work together in what we would now recognise as the Joint Campaign, concentrating overwhelming air and land combat power together at the *schwerpunkt* - the point of decision - to impose shock and paralysis, delivering the operational and strategic success of the early, *blitzkrieg* years. An analysis



Panzer IV tanks entering France May 1940.

of von Richthofen's life in detail should, therefore, significantly expand our collective understanding of the historical development of air power, while also providing enduring lessons of real contemporary relevance for current operations.

James Corum previously taught at the USAF's School of Advanced Airpower Studies and his works have included *The Luftwaffe: Creating the Operational Air War, 1918-1940* and *The Roots of Blitzkrieg*. His extensive specialist knowledge in this area is apparent in the way he has approached this study, billed as the first full-length biography of Wolfram von Richthofen. Corum apparently



German Luftwaffe Heinkel He 111 bombers.

cultivated his contacts with von Richthofen's family to secure access

to previously unpublished papers and, most significantly, his diary, and the story he tells is never less than fascinating. The author tracks von Richthofen's career as he progressed from cavalry officer to First World War fighter pilot in his cousin's old unit, JG1. He then joined the staff of the nascent *Luftwaffe's* technical office - where he played a major role in the gestation of the combat aircraft that were to fill the *Luftwaffe's* order of



German Messerschmitt 109 in Western Desert Jan 1942.

battle for much of the Second World War, such as the Heinkel He 111 and Messerschmitt Bf 109. Indeed, Corum makes the case that von Richthofen's replacement by Goering's favourite, Ernst Udet, contributed to the *Luftwaffe's* subsequent failure to bring forward a new generation of aircraft that could compete with the new and improved Allied designs that entered service later in the war, although ironically, this did pave the way for von Richthofen to move into operational command, establishing an enduring legacy as one of the greatest exponents of army-air force cooperation. The chapters on von Richthofen's contribution to the *Condor Legion* in Spain and the development of his philosophy of air-land integration will be of particular interest to current readers, although



Honour Standard of the "Legion Condor".

his experience of operational air command, at increasingly senior levels throughout the Second World War, is also never less than illuminating. Corum's style is easily readable and he always takes pains to set his central protagonist in the wider historical context; however, the emphasis on the bigger picture rather than von Richthofen himself is both a strength and a weakness. Those expecting genuine biographical insights into von Richthofen's character and motivation will be disappointed; despite the access to primary sources, there may be little here that is new to those already well-read in the 1939-1945 air war in general and the *Luftwaffe's* role in it in particular, although von Richthofen's early career - and especially the part he played as a catalyst for technical development - may be less widely known. Rather than being regarded as a traditional scholarly biography, this book is therefore better regarded as a general history of the development of German military aviation up to 1945, viewed from the particular perspective of one of its

most important figures.

Despite the links the author forged with the family, this is by no means a hagiography; Corum characterises Von Richthofen as a ruthless, difficult and demanding leader, self-confident to the point of arrogance and with a loyalty to Hitler and the Nazi regime that was total, if naïve. Despite his acumen as a commander, he was directly involved in two of the *Luftwaffe's* most signal defeats, in the



87 Sqn Scramble, 1940.

Battle of Britain and at Stalingrad, and his most critical failing was common across Germany's high command; a narrowness of vision that disregarded strategy in the expectation that tactical and operational excellence would be enough by themselves, and that if sufficient battles could be won, final victory would somehow inevitably follow, regardless of the overall direction of the war. Von Manstein, one of the most acclaimed practitioners of operational art, tacitly acknowledged this when he titled his memoirs *Lost Victories*¹. In von Richthofen's case, this shortcoming was manifest in his complacency

following the Battle of France, when in concert with his peers, he saw no reason to configure, organise and prepare the *Luftwaffe* for a long-term attritional war, and again in the Stalingrad campaign, when his focus on the tactical and operational levels blinded him to the opportunities available for the strategic use of air power, for example in attacking the Russian oil-fields, a point made more clearly in Joel Hayward's *Stopped at Stalingrad*² than in this work. Like the German armed forces, the US discovered in Vietnam that tactical victories do not win wars unless they are linked to a coherent overall strategy - arguably this lesson is being relearned in Afghanistan, where the heavy defeats suffered by the Taliban every time they confront NATO forces in the field have not yet been leveraged by an unambiguous strategy into campaign success.



Dornier Do 17s, France June 1940.

In sum, this biography is more useful as a general primer than for any particularly new insights it offers. But given this caveat, it does have merit, because von Richthofen was not just an important operational commander; his experiences encompassed the whole spectrum of the development of military aviation in the first half of the twentieth century, and the reader will learn as much about the

evolution of air power – particularly its employment in joint operations – as he or she will about von Richthofen himself. This is by no means a perfect book – at least within the terms it sets itself - and it says too little about von Richthofen as a personality to be considered a definitive biography. But it is useful, particularly for those previously unfamiliar with the subject, in broadening understanding of how



A U.S. Air Force North American F-100D-85-NH Super Sabre aircraft (s/n 56-3415) fires a salvo of 2.75-inch rockets against an enemy position in South Vietnam in 1967.

and why the *Luftwaffe* developed in the way it did and why its operational conception of operations, delivered within the framework of a joint campaign, was initially successful but because of its strategic flaws, resulted in ultimate failure.

D Def S (RAF)

Notes

¹Erich von Manstein, *Lost Victories* (London: Methuen), 1958.

²Joel S. A. Hayward, *Stopped at Stalingrad: The Luftwaffe and Hitler's Defeat in the East 1942-43* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press), 1998.

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