



remembrance ni



Queen's professor of medicine and the death of German air-ace the Red Baron

Thomas Sinclair,
(Left), Professor
of Medicine at
Queen's
University,
Belfast, in April
1918, found
himself at the
centre of one of
the major

incidents of the First World War, namely the cause of the death of the most famous and deadliest German fighter pilot, Manfred von Richthofen, the Red Baron.



During World War I, no name struck more fear into the hearts of Allied airmen than that of Manfred von Richthofen, better known as the “Red Baron.” After scoring his first kill on September 17, 1916, the German pilot spent the next 19 months prowling the skies in his signature red airplane, winning one air battle after another. He was later shot down and killed in April 1918, but not before he became the war’s highest-scoring fighter ace.

Professor Thomas Sinclair had an outstanding record in his profession.

He was educated privately and intended to go into business.

However, in 1877 he entered Queen's College, then a constituent college of the Royal University of Ireland, in which he graduated with first-class honours in 1881, winning the Malcolm exhibition in 1880 and a gold medal in 1881.

He then worked at the London Hospital, in Vienna, and in Berlin, acted for a time as demonstrator of anatomy at Queen's College,



Baron von Richthofen with one of his triplanes.

Belfast, and took the Membership of the RCS in 1882 and the Fellowship in 1886.

His first hospital appointment in Belfast was on the surgical staff of the Ulster Hospital for Children and Women, where he was ultimately consulting surgeon; in 1885 he was elected assistant surgeon to the Royal (afterwards Royal Victoria) Hospital, becoming surgeon in 1898 and consulting surgeon in 1923. He was also consulting surgeon to the Forster Green Hospital, the Co Antrim Infirmary, and the Lisburn and Coleraine Cottage Hospitals.

In 1886, at the age of 29; he succeeded Alexander Gordon as professor of surgery at Queen's College. He held the chair for thirty-seven years, retiring at the age limit in 1923, and is said to have taught more than 2,000 students.

WAR SERVICE AND THE RED BARON

During the war Professor Sinclair was consulting surgeon to the 4th Army, under Rawlinson in France and later under Allenby in Egypt, with the rank of colonel, in the Army Medical Service, having been commissioned on 15/11/ 1915. He received the CB in 1917.



Manfred von Richthofen (center) poses with young German officers.

The Red Baron was the name applied to Manfred von Richthofen, a German fighter pilot who was the deadliest flying ace of World War

I. During a 19-month period between 1916 and 1918, the Prussian aristocrat shot down 80 Allied aircraft and won widespread fame for his scarlet-coloured airplanes and ruthlessly effective flying style. Richthofen's legend only grew after he took command of a German fighter wing known as the Flying Circus, but his career in the cockpit was cut short in April 1918, when he was killed in a dogfight over France.

Baron Manfred von Richthofen "The Red Baron" was born on May 2, 1892, into an affluent family of Prussian nobles in what is now Poland.

He enjoyed a privileged upbringing and spent his youth hunting and playing sports before being enrolled in military school at age 11. In 1911, after eight years as a cadet, Richthofen was commissioned an officer in the 1st Uhlán cavalry regiment of the Prussian army.



Canadian Captain Arthur Roy Brown, whom the Royal Air Force officially credited with shooting down Manfred von Richthofen in 1918.

At the beginning of World War 1, Richthofen's cavalry regiment saw action on both the Eastern and Western Fronts. He received the Iron Cross for his courage under fire, but he later grew restless after his unit was consigned to supply duty in the trenches.

Desperate to make his mark on the war, Richthofen requested a transfer to the Imperial German Air Service, supposedly writing to his commanding officer that he had not joined the military "to collect cheese and eggs."

The request was granted, and by June 1915 the headstrong young officer was serving as a backseat observer in a reconnaissance plane.

RED BARON TAKES TO THE SKIES

Richthofen spent the summer of 1915 as an aerial observer in Russia before being transferred back to the Western Front, where he earned his pilot's license. After honing his skills flying combat missions over France and Russia, he met the famed German flying

ace Oswald Boelcke, who enlisted him in a new fighter squadron called Jasta 2.

Under Boelcke's tutelage, Richthofen grew into a seasoned fighter pilot. He recorded his first confirmed aerial victory on September 17, 1916, by shooting down a British aircraft over France, and soon racked up four more kills to earn the title of "flying ace."

By early 1917, Richthofen had downed 16 enemy planes and was



Buried by the British with full military honours he was mourned throughout Germany

Germany's highest-scoring living pilot. In recognition of his deadly precision on the battlefield, he was presented with the Pour le Mérite, or "Blue Max," Germany's most illustrious military medal.

In January 1917, Richthofen was placed in command of his own fighter squadron known as Jasta 11, which featured several talented pilots including his younger brother, Lothar von Richthofen.

Around that same time, he had his Albatros D.III fighter plane painted blood red. The distinctive paint scheme gave rise to the

immortal nickname “the Red Baron,” but he was also known by a number of other monikers, including “le Petit Rouge,” “the Red Battle Flier” and “the Red Knight.”

THE FLYING CIRCUS

The spring of 1917 proved to be Richthofen’s deadliest period in the cockpit. He shot down nearly two dozen Allied planes during the month of April alone, increasing his tally to 52 overall and cementing his reputation as the most fearsome flier in the skies over Europe.

He also became a beloved propaganda symbol in Germany, where he was lavished with military decorations and featured in numerous news articles and postcards.

Unlike many of World War I’s top pilots, who prided themselves on their white-knuckle acrobatics, Richthofen was a conservative and calculating tactician. Preferring to avoid unnecessary risks, he typically fought in formation and relied on the aid of his wingmen to ambush his enemies by diving at them from above.

To mark his growing kill count, he commissioned a German jeweler to make a collection of small silver cups bearing the date of each of his aerial victories.

In June 1917, Richthofen was promoted to leader of his own four-squadron fighter wing. Officially called Jagdgeschwader I, the unit became known in the press as “the Flying Circus” due to its brightly painted aircraft and swift movement to hotspots along the battlefield.

Later that summer, it was outfitted with the Fokker Dr.1 triplane, the distinctive, three-winged machine that would become Richthofen’s most famous aircraft.

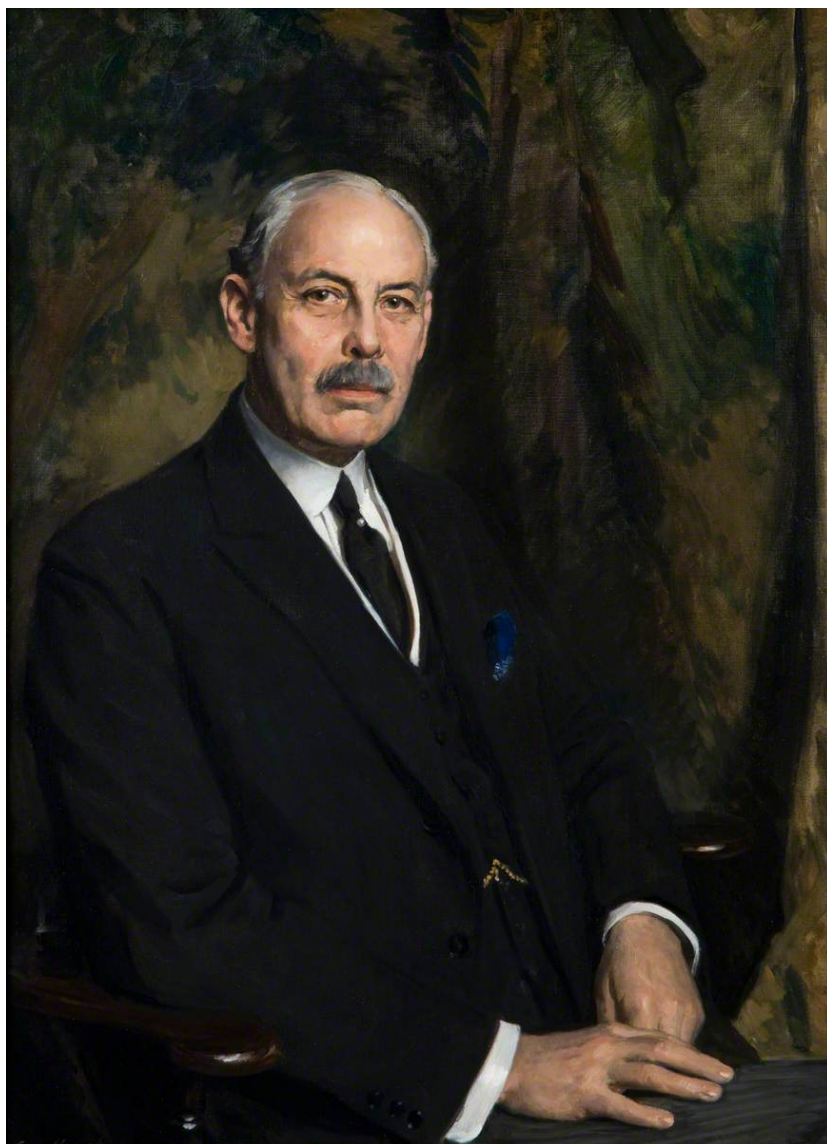
DEATH OF THE RED BARON

Richthofen endured numerous close calls during his flight career, but he suffered his first serious war wound on July 6, 1917, when he sustained a fractured skull after being grazed by a bullet during a dogfight with British aircraft.

Despite returning to duty with his Flying Circus just a few weeks later, he never fully recovered from the injury and complained of frequent headaches. Some historians have since speculated that he may have also been suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

The Red Baron's final flight took place on April 21, 1918, when pilots from his Flying Circus engaged a group of British planes over Vaux-sur-Somme, France. As Richthofen swooped low in pursuit of an enemy fighter, he came under attack from Australian machine gunners on the ground and a plane piloted by Canadian ace Arthur Roy Brown.

During the exchange of fire, Richthofen was struck in the torso by a bullet and died after crash-landing in a field. Brown got official credit for the victory, but debate continued over whether he or the Australian infantrymen fired the fatal shot.



Thomas Sinclair examined the body of Richtofen. Sinclair established that Richtofen had been shot in combat in the air by Captain A R Brown, an Australian pilot.

SERVICE TO THE UNIVERSITY

After the war Professor Sinclair returned to Belfast and occupied himself particularly with the affairs of the Queen's University, as Queen's College had become in 1908. He was

registrar from 1919 to 1931, an ex officio member of the University Senate from 1919 as registrar and from 1931 as one of the pro-chancellors, his colleague in this office being the Rt Hon James Andrews, Lord Chief Justice of Northern Ireland.

He was a generous contributor to the University, as well as to the hospitals with which he was connected, and in 1926 founded the Sinclair medal, to be competed for each year by the members of the surgical class in the University.

He represented the University on the General Medical Council from 1919 till 1927, when he became a Crown nominee upon it, and was also a member of the Dental Board. He was for many years a senator of the Parliament of Northern Ireland, and in 1923 he was elected unopposed as MP for the University in the Imperial Parliament, in succession to Sir William Whitla, MD. He held the seat for seventeen years, retiring only two months before his death, and was returned unopposed at four general elections.

He died at Belfast after several months' illness on 25/11/1940. Born in Belfast on 17/12/1857, the third child and second son of Samuel Sinclair, flax-merchant, and Isabella McMorran, his wife. He was unmarried.

A great teacher and a wise administrator, he held a unique place in the professional and academic life of Belfast for more than a quarter of a century. A portrait, presented in his honour in 1931, hangs in the Great Hall of the University.

THOMAS SINCLAIR - First President of QUB Services Club - 1918, 1919, 1920

Colonel. AMS. CB 1917; MRCS 1882; FRCS 1886; LM MCh MD RUI 1881; MP.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Richthofen: Beyond the Legend of the Red Baron. [By Peter Kilduff.](#)
Ace for the Ages: World War I Fighter Pilot Manfred von Richthofen.
[Aviation History Magazine.](#)

World War I: The Definitive Encyclopedia and Document Collection.
[Edited by Spencer C. Tucker.](#)

How Did the Red Baron Die? [PBS.](#)



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The **remembrance ni** programme is overseen by Very Rev Dr Houston McKelvey OBE, QVRM, TD who served as Chaplain to 102 and 105 Regiments Royal Artillery (TA), as Hon. Chaplain to RNR and as Chaplain to the RBL NI area and the Burma Star Association NI. Dr McKelvey is a Past President of Queen's University Services Club. He may be contacted at houston.mckelvey@btinternet.com

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