

Wolfram von Richthofen: Master of the German Air War, by James S. Corum
(Lawrence, KS: Kansas U.P., 2008; pp. 421. £31.50).

Far more soldiers than airmen have become household names. Undoubtedly the most famous airman of all was Manfred Freiherr von Richthofen, whose exploits in his brightly coloured Fokker Dr.1 triplane earned him the marvellous epithet of the Red Baron. Less well known, but ultimately far more influential, was his cousin Wolfram. This illustrious member of the Richthofen family developed many of the ideas and practices still embedded within air-land integration: he commanded the Luftwaffe's premier close air-support units during the Second World War, directed the Luftwaffe during the Battle of Stalingrad and several other titanic clashes, and became, in 1943, the second youngest officer promoted to Field Marshal in German history (only beaten by the political promotion of Hermann Göring).

I first analysed Wolfram von Richthofen's extraordinary flair for war during the research for my book on Luftwaffe and joint operations before, during and following the Stalingrad cataclysm (*Stopped at Stalingrad*, 1998) and quickly realised that a complete and exploratory biography of this important aviator, perhaps the most effective 'tactical' air commander ever, was overdue and necessary. I had hoped to write it myself, but James S. Corum has beaten me to the punch. I am not disappointed; his book is excellent and I have learned much while reading it. Corum has produced a comprehensive study of Richthofen which chronicles his life and especially his military service during the Second World War. Corum concludes that Richthofen was an arrogant and sometimes narcissistic man, and was undoubtedly a disciple of Hitler who gained tremendous satisfaction from pleasing his Führer by zealously fighting his battles. War revealed Richthofen's cruel and brutal tendencies and he had few reservations about annihilating his enemies, especially those from the Soviet Union, whom he loathed and considered to be fanatical and inferior. Corum does not hide this side of Richthofen from his readers. Indeed, in a brief section titled 'The Question of War Crimes', he explores accusations of criminality made against Richthofen for his involvement in air attacks on Guernica, Warsaw and Stalingrad and for his treatment of Soviet POWs. Corum concludes that Richthofen had not acted criminally when directing the aforementioned attacks on urban areas, explaining that, although 'harsh', these were not crimes under the international law and norms of the period. Even if Corum is right—and I do not agree entirely with his understanding of existing laws and conventions—he might have strengthened his analysis of these infamous air attacks by drawing a distinction between legality and morality. Put simply, just because something is legal does not make it right or good. Did Richthofen wrestle with his conscience about his air fleet's deliberate killing of at least ten thousand, mainly civilian, inhabitants of Stalingrad on 23 August 1942? Did he care? Was he pleased? Saddened? Corum does not say.

Moreover, although he does attribute criminality to Richthofen for violating the Geneva Conventions through his callous and sometimes murderous handling of POWs and civilians, he inadvertently minimises the significance of Richthofen's criminality by pointing out (in a sketchy treatment of the issue at the beginning of the book) that Richthofen's attitudes and actions were the same as those of 'all the senior German commanders in the Soviet Union in 1941, including such notables as Manstein, Rundstedt, Guderian, Kleist,

Kesselring, Leeb, and Bock'. Yet Corum almost entirely ignores these issues throughout the next 350 pages. This would be understandable in a work of purely military operational analysis, but is less reasonable in a full and rounded biography of a prominent Nazi warfighter.

Having said this, his thorough and thoughtful book has many commendable strengths. As a work of military analysis it is stunning. The research is wide, deep and meticulous, with the aviator's personal diaries and family papers forming the basis of a well-constructed, judiciously argued and skilfully written narrative that greatly increases our knowledge of the cardinal contribution that Richthofen made to the Luftwaffe's conceptual and organisational development. Corum convincingly argues that, in many ways, Richthofen was the father of what we today call air-land integration, the two key air-power roles of which are interdiction and close air support. Conceptualising war in a Clausewitzian way with decisive battle being the normal mechanism for producing strategic results, he believed that an air force—the Luftwaffe anyway—should partner the army in the pursuit of battlefield victory and that both services should closely co-ordinate their efforts in space and time. Throughout the 1930s and during the Spanish Civil War and then the Second World War's first 'Blitzkrieg' campaigns, Richthofen developed, tested and refined key principles and techniques for enhancing air-land communication and, as a senior commander (even as a famous field marshal), he practised them himself. Corum demonstrates that Richthofen always strove to work closely and harmoniously with army counterparts, to keep the army safe from enemy air attack, to create joint 'intelligence pictures' with the army, including information gained daily from aerial reconnaissance, to identify and agree together the optimal points of main focus (the highly effective *Schwerpunkte*, or 'focal points'), and to synchronise the powerful 'fires' of his air units with those of army vanguards. Richthofen's genuinely joint philosophy and practice, and his remarkable successes in command of air divisions, corps and finally whole fleets, made him a darling of Hitler and the High Command as well as the German Army's favourite and most respected airman.

This insightful book actually makes a strong case that the air-power concepts and practices developed by Richthofen and his Luftwaffe colleagues were ingredients as crucial in the Blitzkrieg recipe as the more famous Panzer techniques and tactics developed by Heinz Guderian and others. Corum's book is an accessible, interesting, insightful and important contribution to the literature of the German way of war and of the evolution of air-power theory and practice. It is a must-read for students and scholars of both.

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