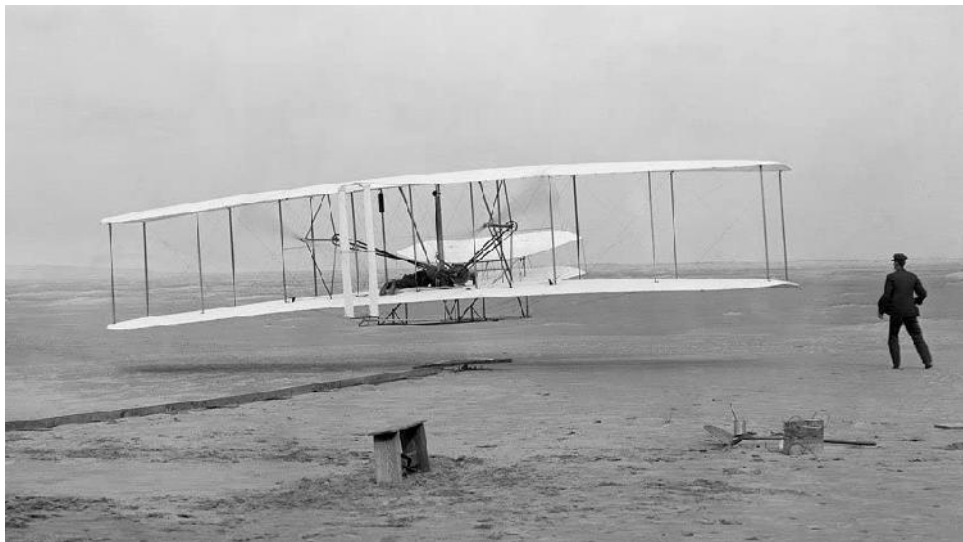


For today's 'On this day' we go back to April 21 1918, 102 years ago. WORLD WAR I was still being fought between the Germans on one side, and the British and the French on the other - with the Americans and Canadians having joined the war on the British and French side. The German side had an ace fighter pilot called MANFRED VON RICHTHOFEN on their side. His nickname was 'THE RED BARON' and he had an amazing reputation as a fighter pilot. WORLD WAR I saw many changes in the way war was fought.

Horses were out - they were never used again in battle after World War I. Tanks (eventually) were in - they were an invention that the British came up with in World War I to get round the problem that their soldiers simply couldn't attack a German position that was defended with machine guns - the guns sprayed too many bullets too quickly and killed all the soldiers attacking it. The solution was to put the soldiers inside armoured vehicles - tanks - which could deflect the bullets. And the invention of the tank helped the British and their allies win WORLD WAR I.

But another big change in WORLD WAR I was the idea of fighting in the air - in planes. THE WRIGHT BROTHERS had only managed to make the first controlled flight of a heavier-than-air plane in 1903 (at KITTY HAWK, in North Carolina) - so if you think about



it, it's pretty amazing that within only 11 years, by the start of WORLD WAR I, planes had developed enough that people could think about using them in warfare, as a way of dropping bombs on enemy positions or firing guns at soldiers below on the ground. And once someone had had the idea of using planes for that, then other people had the idea of putting planes in the air that were designed to be able to shoot down the enemy planes. And that's where THE RED BARON comes in.

MANFRED VON RICHTHOFEN was originally a cavalryman in the German Army, which meant he would go into battle on a horse. But remember I said that it soon became obvious that horses were useless on the battlefield in modern conditions - so he joined the German Air Force in 1915, one year after WORLD WAR I began, and soon got a big reputation as an amazing fighter pilot. He would go on to shoot down 80 planes flown by the British and Allies and because his plane was painted red, he got the nickname 'The Red Baron'. But because his plane was painted red, it made easy for other pilots on the other side to identify him and come after him. Probably that's what Von Richthofen wanted: his red plane was an

invitation - 'Come and have a go if you think you're hard enough' and he probably ended up shooting down a lot of planes because pilots on the other side went after him and tried to shoot him down. But on April 21 1918, his luck ran out. While engaged in aerial combat with two Canadian planes, Von Richthofen was shot and he died after managing to land his plane. Funnily enough, it doesn't seem like that the shot that killed Von Richthofen was fired by either of the planes he was fighting. Instead, it seems like a soldier on the ground shot Von Richthofen when his plane got very close to the ground. So Von Richthofen could claim to have been undefeated by another pilot - he was instead killed by someone on the ground. How unromantic.



But the reputation of the Red Baron as a dashing and brilliant fighter lives on. For example, in the Peanuts cartoons (if you have ever seen those), Charlie Brown's dog Snoopy often climbs on top of his kennel and imagines that he is a British pilot flying a 'Sopwith Camel' and fighting the Red Baron. In fact, there's a whole book of cartoons about this which I used to own, called 'Snoopy and the Red Baron'.

And after WORLD WAR I ended, air power became increasingly important in warfare. Not everyone could accept this new-fangled way of fighting wars. An American general called BILLY MITCHELL called for the creation of a United States Air Force, based on his flying experiences in World War I, and predicted that if the United States did not prepare itself, Japan would use planes to bomb and sink the American fleet at PEARL HARBOUR. But the American government refused to believe him, and Billy Mitchell was actually put on trial for telling the public about how unprepared America was for the war in the air that he thought was coming. This prediction would come true in 1941, and the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbour triggered the United States' entry into WORLD WAR II. But that's a story for another time.