

Famous flying ace no hotshot after all

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The legend of Manfred von Richthofen, aka the Red Baron, has taken a knock. The victories notched up by him and other great flying aces of the first world war could have been down to luck rather than skill.

Von Richthofen chalked up 80 consecutive victories in aerial combat. His success seems to suggest exceptional skill, as such a tally is unlikely to be down to pure luck.

However, Mikhail Simkin and Vwani Roychowdhury of the University of California at Los Angeles think otherwise. They studied the records of all German fighter pilots of the first world war and found a total of 6745 victories, but only about 1000 “defeats”, which included fights in which pilots were killed or wounded.

The imbalance reflects, in part, that pilots often scored easy victories against poorly armed or less manoeuvrable aircraft, making the average German fighter pilot’s rate of success as high as 80 per cent. Statistically speaking, at least one pilot could then have won 80 aerial fights in a row by pure chance.

The analysis also suggests that while von Richthofen and other aces were in the upper 30 per cent of pilots by skill, they were probably no more special than that. “It seems that the top aces achieved their victory scores mostly by luck,” says Roychowdhury.

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