Baron Manfred von Richthofen was killed in air combat on 21 April 1918. He is one of the most celebrated air warriors in the history of air combat having shot down 80 enemy aircraft during World War I. The British called him the ‘Red Baron’; the French called him the ‘Red Devil’; and Australia’s official war historian C E W Bean described him as the “star of stars in the German Air Force.” He was both feared and respected as the highest scoring air ace of World War I.

One of the reasons behind his success in air combat was his adherence to doctrinal maxims that guided his judgement in deciding when and how he would enter the battlespace and also the selection of the target to engage. Richthofen strictly followed ‘Dicta Boelcke’ as tactical doctrine to guide his decisions in the battlespace.

‘Dicta Boelcke’ is a set of tenets or maxims on air combat developed by Oswald Boelcke, Germany’s first air ace in World War I, who scored a total of forty victories. Boelcke was Richthofen’s mentor, instructor, squadron commander and friend. But his legacy extends far beyond his relationship with his famous pupil. Richthofen wrote of Boelcke that, “We were all beginners. None of us had had a success so far. Consequently, everything that Boelcke told us, was to us, gospel truth.”

Boelcke’s character, leadership, organisational genius, as well as his development of air-to-air tactics and their impact on aerial doctrine, have ensured that Boelcke remains an inspiring figure in air warfare history, to this day.

While commanders were still seeking to understand roles for aircraft as the newest war machines to enter the battlespace, Boelcke was the first fighter ace to apply critical thinking to air combat.

Boelcke drew on his own observations of his successes and failures in aerial combat, and analysed them to identify the critical decision points and pilot behaviour. He examined tactics and decided which could be further refined to improve the probability of success in future aerial combat. He personally tested and evaluated the ‘rules’ he formulated before recommending them as “rules for success” that should be adopted by pilots flying in air combat as individuals or as a group in a squadron.

This was the first time that air combat had been analysed to identify and recommend best-practices that would form the foundational maxims for air combat doctrine. His aerial warfighting principles were endorsed by the German Air Force to all airmen, including the Red Baron, as ‘Dicta Boelcke.’

‘Dicta Boelcke’ was published by the German military in a pamphlet and distributed as a training manual on fighter tactics to each pilot upon graduating from fighter pilot training, prior to being posted to a “Jasta”—a WWI German fighter squadron. Richthofen and other German pilots used Dicta Boelcke as an early form of tactical doctrine.

Richthofen fully embraced ‘Dicta Boelcke.’ After gaining further experience and some victories in aerial combat, he applied critical-thinking to identify gaps in the maxims in order to improve and complement tactical doctrine. One of his own doctrinal maxims that complemented ‘Dicta Boelcke’ was to “never obstinately stay with an opponent” This meant knowing the decision-point when an attack should be broken off as the situation evolved to no longer being favourable. He did not adhere to this principle on his final mission.

On 21 April 1918, Richthofen pursued a Sopwith Camel piloted by novice pilot, Lieutenant Wilfrid May. May was
in combat with a fellow novice pilot, Richthofen’s cousin, Lieutenant Wolfram von Richthofen. Upon seeing his cousin being attacked, Richthofen flew to his aid and started to pursue May. With Richthofen in pursuit, May disengaged from his dogfight with Wolfram von Richthofen.

At this point in the aerial combat, another Sopwith Camel piloted by Canadian Captain Arthur “Roy” Brown engaged Richthofen. Richthofen evaded this initial attack by Brown and resumed his pursuit of May who was descending rapidly to move away from the battlespace in order to escape the German Ace.

May would later explain that his aircraft guns had jammed while being pursued and, unable to out-maneuuvre Richthofen, he decided to fly low into friendly territory, in order to “make a dash for a landing as his only hope.”

At this stage, Richthofen appeared to break his own rules and those of Boelke, that he had consistently applied in air combat. Ignoring all else except his quarry, he followed May down to very low altitude over enemy lines, and within range of machine-gunners in the Australian trenches. Richthofen was fatally wounded by a single .303 bullet fired from the ground. He managed to make a controlled landing before dying in the cockpit, in Australian-held territory. The reasons as to why he made a judgement error in his last dogfight, leading to his death, are still debated.

Forensic medical analysts have reviewed medical records and observations of Richthofen’s behaviours in the months leading up to his last combat mission. They have generally concluded that he seemed to suffer from an uncharacteristic episode of “target fixation” in breaking his own rules of air combat to “never obstinately stay with an opponent.” Medical researchers have since attributed that uncharacteristic error in judgement to a head injury that might have persisted from a head wound caused by a machine gun projectile during a dogfight that occurred nine months earlier.

Irrespective of the cause of his deviation from established doctrine, Richthofen’s decision to ignore the ‘rules’ that had been drawn from his own experiences, and proven to be tried and tested in air combat, contributed to his demise even though he was the highest scoring air ace of World War I.

Doctrine is drawn from the analyses of observations taken from experiences. Success in war, campaigns or tactical engagements are analysed to identify and recommend repeatable best-practices.

Doctrine describes what a military force believes to be the best way to conduct military operations at various levels of command. Military doctrine describes accepted and officially endorsed fundamental principles that guide the decisions of warfighters and their actions in the battlespace. Air power doctrine describes the best ways for efficiently applying air power and effectively delivering effects from, and in, the air domain. It is applicable to all warfighters, irrespective of their level of combat experiences. However, doctrine may be prescribed differently at different levels of a military organisation – tactical, operational, and strategic - depending on the perspective and span of decision responsibility.

Ideally, doctrine should enjoy a degree of stability, as it is built upon an analysis of lessons learned from operations. Changes to doctrine should only occur as new experience expands the available source of data to inform it, or if there are changes in the character and conduct of war or technology. The longevity of well-crafted doctrine is reflected in the fact that ‘Dicta Boelcke’ were issued to Luftwaffe pilots in World War II fighters and were used by pilots in the Korean War.

However, the World War II era air combat doctrine began to lose its relevance with the introduction of modern combat aircraft equipped with ‘beyond visual range’ sensors and weapons. This reflects the fact that doctrinal concepts are not immutable physical laws but are interpretations of evidence-based analyses of the battlespace. As the character of the battlespace and/or the conduct or aerial warfare changes, the evidence-based analyses should be updated. Air warfare, and the application of air power, must keep pace with the changes observed in the battlespace.

Developed from experience and tested on operations, doctrine offers both guidance for the novice, as was the case with the German pilots arriving on the battlefield soon after completing their training, and for more experienced professionals, such as Richthofen in 1918. Doctrine remains a critical enabler of professional mastery regardless of experience, and it can only be ignored and violated at one’s own peril.

**Key Points**

- **Richthofen diligently applied tactical doctrine, ‘Dicta Boelcke’, to achieve his 80 air combat victories**
- **Richthofen being shot down is attributed to a medical condition that impaired his judgement, causing him to break one of his own maxims of air warfare.**
- **Air Force doctrine is a living document, and an evolving articulation of what is the collective and authoritative wisdom learned from over 100 years of Australian air operations experience.**