

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 140

“The Hindenburg Line”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

In December 1916, Allied commanders met once again at Chantilly, in France, to make their plans for 1917. The 1917 plan didn't look much different from the 1916 plan. Again, the French and their British allies would attack in Picardy and Champagne in the hope of forcing the Germans back. This time it would work, they told themselves. There were more British soldiers in France than ever, almost one and a half million now, with more arriving every week, and both armies were better equipped and wielded more firepower than ever before.

But 1917 would see dramatic changes that would render those plans obsolete. The February Revolution. The U-boats. The entry of the United States into the war. And a shift in German defensive tactics that would challenge the Allies all over again.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 140. The Hindenburg Line.

The French commander at that December 1916 conference at Chantilly was our old friend, General Joseph Joffre. He took the lead in hammering out the 1917 war plan with no idea he wouldn't be around to lead it. In much the same way that the British General Sir John French participated in the December 1915 Chantilly conference and was sacked soon after, Joffre's turn came shortly after the 1916 conference.

The new French commander would be Robert Nivelle, the hero of Verdun who had led the counterattacks late in 1916 that had retaken many of the German gains. Nivelle's key innovation was the use of artillery not so much to destroy the enemy's defensive positions as to suppress enemy defensive fire with the creeping barrage technique. Force the Germans to keep their heads down and they wouldn't be able to fire at advancing French troops and—*voilà!*—frontal assaults work again.

Nivelle's success at Verdun—and the acclaim he received for it—went to his head. He thought he had unlocked the secret of modern warfare. Give him command of the entire front, he boasted, and he would send the Germans reeling.

The French Prime Minister, Aristide Briand, backed Nivelle enthusiastically, telling anyone who would listen how during last fall's Verdun counteroffensive, Nivelle would send the Cabinet regular telegrams outlining what objectives would be taken next, and every one of them fell, right on schedule.

Once Nivelle took over as commander in chief, he wanted to make a few changes to the plan for 1917. The broad outline remained the same, but if you looked closely, the new plan was considerably different.

The British Army were asked to take over an additional twenty miles of front line in the north to free the French to beef up their line in Champagne. The British and the French would then begin a new offensive in the region of the Somme, just like last year, but this time it will be a diversion. After the Germans divert their reserves to this sector, Nivelle will begin his Champagne offensive, which, he promised, would be different this time. This time, it will blow a gaping hole in the German line that will force the Germans into a strategic withdrawal across the front, the beginning of the end for them.

The new British Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, liked this plan. What he liked best about it was that it subordinated Douglas Haig to French command. Lloyd George still hadn't forgiven Haig for the Battle of the Somme; you'll recall that afterward he wanted both Joffre and Haig sacked. The French had given Lloyd George half of his wish list, but he couldn't fire Haig without losing the support of the Conservatives in his government, so depriving Haig of his independence would be the next best thing.

The British and French cabinets and commanders agreed to Nivelle's plan, subject to two conditions. The first was that if Nivelle's offensive failed to blow up the German line in the way he was predicting, that it would be called off after 48 hours. Again, memories of Verdun and the Somme were still fresh in everyone's minds, particularly the parts where the offensives had failed, but their leaders had rationalized excuses for keeping them going anyway. So we're all in agreement that this time it's going to be different, right? This time, if the offensive doesn't work, we quit, instead of dragging it out for months, right?

Second, Haig would only agree to taking over those twenty miles of French line if Nivelle agreed to take them back later in the year, because, you see, Haig still wanted to try his Flanders offensive along the coastline. It would be easier for the British to keep an offensive supplied here, so close to Blighty, and moreover, the Germans were using Belgian ports to supply their U-boats, and once unrestricted submarine warfare returned, the British felt it an urgent priority to deny the Germans the use of those ports.

Nivelle derided Haig's obsession, or *idée fixe*, as Nivelle described it, with a Flanders offensive, but agreed to Haig's terms, confident that once his offensive turned the tide of the war, this agreement will become obsolete, and Haig's Flanders offensive will be forgotten.

[music: Debussy, *Cello Sonata*]

Meanwhile, on the other side of the front line, Hindenburg and Ludendorff were also looking ahead to 1917. Things were difficult on the home front in Germany. The Turnip Winter was over, but Turnip Spring still held food shortages. It would take until the 1917 harvest came in this autumn before one could hope Germans would be eating better. The food ration amounted to about 1,200 calories per person per day. In our 21st century dietary guidelines, that level of caloric intake is regarded as adequate for a sedentary four-year old.

All this privation, plus the Russian Revolution, would have political repercussions in Germany, but I want to hold off on that topic for later and focus right now on military affairs. Recall that the duo of Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff are now in command of the German military. They had been staunch proponents of an Eastern strategy for Germany, but once they were elevated to command of both fronts, they began to see the wisdom of Falkenhayn's Western emphasis, though they still disagreed with his tactics.

For Germany, 1917 would not be a year of huge land offensives. Germany can not afford another Verdun any more than France can. One million German soldiers have been killed since the war began and an additional three million have been wounded, and Germany is seriously outnumbered on the Western Front, 190 Allied divisions to 154 German, and the gap is getting bigger every month. Austria and Turkey are in worse shape still, and both of her allies are telling Germany it is time to make peace. Germany has played its last card—unrestricted submarine warfare—and her strategy now will be to hunker down in the trenches and wait until the U-boats win the war.

Initially, the results looked promising. The German Admiralty believed that if the U-boats could sink 600,000 tons of British shipping every month for the six month period from February through July, then Britain would be starved into submission before the 1917 harvest could come in. In February, the first month of unrestricted warfare, the U-boats sank 400,000 tons, pretty close to the target number. March went even better, with 500,000 tons sunk, and April 1917 was the best month of the war, with 860,000 tons sunk, well above the monthly quota. Confidence grew in Berlin that the British were nearly done for, and even in the British Admiralty, some were close to panic. Granted, unrestricted submarine warfare had brought the Americans into the war, but there was reason to hope that the gamble would pay off and the war would be over before the Americans could do anything about it.

On the Western Front, you'll recall that Hindenburg and Ludendorff have hatched a plan to shorten the front line in the region where last year's Battle of the Somme had taken place. By pulling back from the German salient there and straightening out the line, the duo calculated they

could hold the new line with fourteen fewer divisions. These divisions could then be shipped east where they could do more good helping the Austrians.

The Germans spent the winter months preparing their new positions, various portions of which were called *Siegfriedstellung*, *Wotanstellung*, and *Hundingstellung*, after characters in the Wagner ring operas. The Allies would refer to these new positions collectively as “the Hindenburg Line.” Enormous quantities of steel-reinforced concrete were used to construct the defenses, not to mention tens of thousands of conscripted workers including Russian POWs.

The new defensive line was not to be merely the same design as the trenches the Germans would be abandoning. The new German tactic would be “defense in depth.” Instead of offering ferocious resistance to an enemy attack right at the front trench, which has been the standard tactic so far, the new defense would be deeper, with fortified positions for machine guns and fields of barbed wire that could be kilometers deep. Attacking enemy soldiers would be forced to advance slowly into this deep defensive zone, while all the while subjected to artillery and machine gun fire from camouflaged locations all around them.

These preparations took place over the winter. The Allies had some idea that the Germans were up to something, but had difficulty determining exactly what it was, as their air reconnaissance was hampered by the bad winter weather of 1916-17 and German air superiority.

While the Allied commanders tried to guess what the Germans were up to, some German commanders were concerned about the morale effect a broad retreat would have on German soldiers. One of the principal reasons for the conventional strategy of holding fast at the front line no matter what has been that once your army starts pulling back, it discourages your soldiers and encourages the enemy. But the plan went ahead, and on February 9 began Operation Alberich, named for yet another character in Wagner’s Ring operas, this one the malevolent dwarf who forges the Ring and thus causes so much grief.

Operation Alberich would also cause grief. The Germans pulled back as far as 25 miles at some points on the line, but they didn’t simply withdraw. They left behind a wasteland. Buildings were razed, forests felled, railroads ripped up, roadways torn apart, and wells poisoned. The abandoned French lands were littered with mines and booby traps. Able-bodied civilians of both sexes were forcibly relocated to other areas of occupied France to work for the Germans, which was another violation of international law, if you’re still keeping score. Those left behind were children with their mothers, the elderly, and the disabled. In other words, the Germans deliberately created a humanitarian emergency for Allied forces to deal with when they advanced into the abandoned lands.

Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria, who now commands the northern German army group that includes the units involved objected vigorously to Operation Alberich and almost resigned in protest. He was dissuaded only by the argument that his resignation would lead the enemy to question

Bavaria's commitment to the Kaiser and the war. Even Ludendorff called the scorched earth withdrawal deplorable, although he viewed it as a regrettable necessity.

Operation Alberich was underway when the February Revolution broke out in Russia, and as the Allies were gearing up for the Nivelle Offensive. Once the British and the French realized the full extent of the German withdrawal, they might have tried attacking immediately, in the hope of disrupting the operation, but they didn't, or rather, they did advance into the territory the Germans had abandoned, but very cautiously. Maybe too cautiously.

And what's more, once the Germans had completed their withdrawal, that might have been a good time for Nivelle to rethink his offensive, because the first part of the plan involved a Franco-British diversionary attack that now was poised to strike right into the middle of the newly constructed and occupied Hindenburg Line. This might be cause for concern, because a) remember that part of the logic for attacking the Germans here was that this was a German salient, and salients are always vulnerable, only now after the withdrawal there's no salient anymore, not to mention b) this plan is now going to require an attack into the teeth of the newly constructed German defensive line, and right now there's no one on the Allied side who knows exactly what's there or how the Germans plan to use it.

So, yeah, it might have been a good time for Nivelle to stop and take a moment to reconsider his offensive. He didn't. To the contrary, he was adamant that everything proceed according to the original plan. Not everyone agreed with him. There was dissension in the French government that burst out into the open on March 15, when the war minister, General Hubert Lyautey, was shouted down in the Chamber of Deputies after refusing to answer questions about war planning. Lyautey was a career army officer, conservative in outlook and no fan of republican rabble. He'd only been appointed war minister last December 10, during the latest Cabinet reshuffle. Barely three months into the job, he'd had enough and he resigned. The prime minister, Aristide Briand, couldn't find anyone else willing to take the job and was forced to resign himself on March 20.

The new prime minister would be the 75-year old Alexandre Ribot, France's third prime minister since the war began. This would be Ribot's fourth and final turn as prime minister. He'd previously held the position for four months in 1893, nine months in 1895, and four days in June 1914. That's the Third Republic for you. The new war minister would be Paul Painlevé, who, besides being a politician was a noted mathematician, specializing in the solution of differential equations. This work led him into an interest in aeronautics. In 1908, Wilbur Wright took Painlevé for a ride in the Wright Flyer during his visit to Paris, and the following year, Painlevé taught the first ever course in aeronautics in a French university. His familiarity with the high-tech weapons of modern warfare made him an attractive choice for war minister.

The new ministers Ribot and Painlevé and the French President, Raymond Poincaré, met with Nivelle and his commanders soon after their appointments to discuss the upcoming offensive. Ribot and Painlevé were skeptical, and General Pétain, the man who was passed over when

Nivelle was made commander in chief, added his voice to theirs. They argued that French losses had been too great and wondered whether the French Army was in any condition to mount yet another major offensive. They pointed out that the revolution in Russia meant that the French could not count on the Russians to bail them out once again if things got too difficult. By this time, the United States had declared war on Germany, and so they suggested that perhaps it would be best for the French Army to maintain a defensive posture until the US could send soldiers and supplies to help make up for French losses.

Nivelle wasn't having any of it. If the politicians refused to accept his plan, he would offer his resignation. They weren't willing to push it that far. Ribot concluded that he and his government had taken office too late in the planning process to force wholesale changes. He felt stuck. Poincaré reminded everyone that Nivelle had committed to cancelling the offensive if it failed to produce a breakthrough in 48 hours. Perhaps the French Army was not ready for another twenty-week offensive, like the Battle of the Somme, but surely France could afford to try out a 48-hour offensive and see how it goes?

So Nivelle got approval from the new government. The very next day, word came that a German raid had apparently captured a copy of Nivelle's plan. Even so, Nivelle refused to make any changes. The offensive began with a British attack that will become known as the Battle of Arras, on April 9, which was Easter Monday that year, after a five-day artillery bombardment. The British put to use their hard-won experience and increasing advantages in equipment and technology. Monday morning saw a brief but intense artillery attack, what we're now calling a hurricane barrage, followed by a creeping barrage as the soldiers advanced. The British used gas, they used underground explosives, they used tanks, and they put the Royal Flying Corps into the air above the German positions for reconnaissance. Infantry assaults were not mass attacks, but relied on small and flexible formations—small infantry units, each with its own machine gunner, sniper, and grenade specialist that had the ability to suppress enemy fire on their own, without having to call in to the rear for artillery support. These small units would alternate between advancing themselves and providing support for other units in a leapfrog pattern. Lessons learned from the Battle of the Somme.

Unfortunately for the British, they were up against not only a wholly new and improved German defensive system but a freak April snowstorm that conspired with the Germans to slow the British advance. The new German strategy allowed the British to advance, right past hardened strong points that the Germans called *Widerstandnester*, or "resistance nests" that continued to fire into the next wave of attackers even after the first wave had passed. British units that stopped to attack a resistance nest were themselves counterattacked by stormtroopers who would dash in, surprise them with a flank attack, and then dart away again.

Still, the British had surprised the Germans on that first day, claiming two miles of ground in some places. As it happened, April 9, 1917 was also Erich Ludendorff's fifty-second birthday. Now, the duo of Hindenburg and Ludendorff had been commanding the Eastern Front from rural

Silesia. With their change of focus to the Western Front in 1917, they had moved army headquarters to Bad Kreuznach, a quaint and charming spa town in the Rhineland noted for its mineral baths, hence the “Bad” in “Bad Kreuznach.” In Imperial Germany, Bad Kreuznach had become a favorite vacation getaway for the aristocracy, who stayed at fine hotels in the town or at villas in the countryside and “took the cure,” as they said in those days. The mineral-laden waters were also recently discovered to contain radon, a radioactive gas discovered by Ernest Rutherford in 1899. In those days, when the effects of radioactivity on human beings were not well understood, the presence of radon in the water was thought healthy and touted as beneficial to those taking the cure.

In early 1917, Hindenburg, Ludendorff, and the General Staff took over Bad Kreuznach, installing themselves in the posh hotels and the country villas and loving every minute of it, I’m sure. Much cozier than Silesia. Field Marshal von Hindenburg had gotten into the spirit of their new quarters, arranging a lavish birthday gala for his sidekick. For some reason, whenever I try to picture this party, Diana Prince is crashing it, wearing a beautiful blue satin gown with a sword stuck down the back. Well, if she wasn’t there, she should have been.

But it wasn’t Wonder Woman who was crashing this party, it was the British Army, and the birthday boy spent his special day at his desk, making frantic telephone calls to the front-line commanders, trying to figure out just what the hell was going on, and why his new and carefully thought out defensive works were failing the very first time the enemy tested them. (He would later decide it was Crown Prince Rupprecht’s fault for not properly deploying his reserves.) When evening came, and Hindenburg arrived to collect him for the party, Ludendorff was still in a state. Hindenburg took his hand and told him that in the most recent dispatches, the British attack was already showing signs of petering out, and after all, wasn’t that how these offensives always ended? “We have lived through more critical times than today together,” he told Ludendorff. And they went off to the party, which by all accounts was very nice.

Hindenburg’s optimism was vindicated when the first day of the British offensive proved to be the best day of the offensive, which went on for another six weeks but accomplished little beyond the first day’s gains. But before we move on to the French part of the offensive, I have to pause for a moment to say a word about the Battle of Vimy Ridge. This was just what it sounds like, the capture of an important ridge in the early days of the Battle of Arras, but its significance is that the ridge was taken by the Canadian Corps, which is one corps within the British First Army, but it consists entirely of Canadian soldiers, now four divisions of them on the Western Front.

Now, with all due respect to my Canadian listeners, I feel compelled to point out that in the grand scheme of things on the Western Front, Vimy Ridge is really just one skirmish within the Battle of Arras, which itself is just a diversionary attack meant to distract the Germans from the real offensive, which hasn’t even begun yet. But none of that matters to a Canadian. What matters is that Vimy Ridge was a meticulously planned and flawlessly executed operation

involving four Canadian divisions, a military force without precedent in Canadian history, and it won a victory against what was regarded as the world's most formidable army, and it is remembered to this day as a crucial milestone in the development of a distinct Canadian identity, separate from the British Empire. One hundred and fifty years ago, European armies came to North America to fight out European quarrels on Canadian soil. Now the Canadian Army is in Europe, asserting Canada's stake in the latest European quarrel. *Vigilamus pro te.*

[music: "O Canada"]

The British offensive in the north had advanced a few miles in the first day, and then stalled out. (How many times have I said those words by now? Even I've lost count.) Hindenburg's birthday party optimism had been vindicated, but remember that this was a diversionary attack. It was not expected to produce any breakthrough that would change the balance of power on the Western Front. It was expected to divert German reserves to the north and make possible Robert Nivelle's offensive in the south, the one where he promised a breakthrough in the German line within 48 hours.

French soldiers shivered in their trenches during the second week in April as the freak spring storm dropped snow on them as well. On April 16, one week after the British began their attack, it was the French turn. "The hour has arrived," Nivelle told his troops. "Confidence! Courage! *Vive la France!*" If nothing else, Nivelle was always ready with an inspiring declaration.

Alas, the initial results were less than inspiring. The preliminary French artillery bombardment had already been going on for several days, signaling to the Germans the location of the French attack, which the Germans knew in any case, since they had captured a copy of the plans. The French bombardment proved less effective than Nivelle had hoped, but when the French soldiers went over the top, German machine gun fire was as effective as ever.

Even the Germans marveled at the courage of the French attackers, but the hard reality was that French casualties ran higher than Nivelle had predicted and his 48-hour deadline came and went without the promised breakthrough. On the third day of the offensive, the war minister Painlevé came to Nivelle's headquarters to discuss ending the offensive. But in spite of all the discussion, the promises, and the determination not to repeat Haig's self-deception at last year's Battle of the Somme, Nivelle had succumbed to Haig Syndrome, convincing himself that the offensive was succeeding, somehow, even though it wasn't producing any of the predicted gains.

Nivelle's tactics had been effective when he counterattacked at Verdun because the German defenders were trying to hold positions recently captured. They had not had time to properly prepare a defense. But here, against German soldiers placed in carefully designed defensive positions, Nivelle's method proved not to be a game changer after all.

Again, the French made some modest gains, and had taken a significant number of German prisoners in the early days, but the offensive stalled out. Nivelle insisted on continuing the

attacks against the Germans, but this time, by the beginning of May, something new began to happen. French units turned up drunk, or became insubordinate when given orders, or refused to take up their weapons and return to the front line. In some units, the rank and file soldiers began electing representatives to petition their commanders for an end of the offensive.

In a word, mutiny had broken out in the French lines. Over 40% of the French front-line units were affected. These were not mutinies as you might normally envision when you hear the word; these were more like labor actions, like strikes, if you will. After nearly three years of endless, mindless bloodshed, of perpetual offensives and the ceaseless bugle calls, demanding once again that the infantry go over the top and charge the enemy in the teeth of barbed wire and machine guns and artillery fire and the perennial promises that this time would be different, that this attack would be the decisive attack that would drive the enemy back across the Rhine until the umpteenth admission by the senior commanders that this offensive too had ended in yet another bloody impasse, after all of this, the French rank and file had had enough. To paraphrase a soldier from a future war, who wants to be next to die for a mistake?

No one, it turned out. Hence, the mutinies. No one should have been surprised by this development. The only thing I find surprising is that it took three years.

The fact of the mutinies was kept secret, in order to prevent the Germans finding out about it. The mutinies would remain secret for fifty years, until 1967, when the military archives were opened to the public. But the mutinies would bring Nivelle's offensive to an end, and the failure would lead to Nivelle being replaced by the man who was passed over when Nivelle was appointed, that is, Philippe Pétain. Pétain's reputation as a commander who actually cared about the lives of the soldiers in his command and would not sacrifice them needlessly made him indispensable at this moment of crisis. Even the mutinous French soldiers were willing to credit Pétain with the good sense not to throw their lives away, and this reputation helped to restore order.

Pétain believed the French Army was in no condition for another offensive, at least not until such time as the Americans arrived in force and French tanks arrived. The French had by this time begun experimenting with tanks themselves, following the lead of the British, but it would likely be 1918 before there were enough tanks and Americans in France to make another offensive thinkable. For a French soldier in the trenches in 1917, this was very good news indeed. Pétain also increased the length of leave time for French soldiers in another gesture to mollify the unhappy men.

Those were the carrots. Pétain also wielded the stick of courts martial. Some 3,000 ringleaders of the mutinies were tried and over 500 death sentences handed down, although most of these were commuted; only about forty or fifty soldiers were actually executed.

Why the mutinies? Why now? French soldiers had had their hopes raised, first by Nivelle's lofty promises and second by the US declaration of war. But circumstances quickly dashed their hopes

as the offensive ground to yet another stalemate and it became increasingly clear that if the Americans were going to come at all, it wouldn't be for some time yet.

There was also the matter of the Russian Revolution. It is no coincidence that the French mutinies happened soon after the Russian Revolution. In 1916, as part of a deal to secure French arms, the Imperial Russian government sent about 40,000 Russian soldiers to the Western front and Greece. This was a more complex operation than it sounds because of the Central Powers' blockade of Russia. Soldiers had to be shipped out of Archangel and around Scandinavia to get to France, or even via the Trans-Siberian Railroad to Vladivostok and then south around Asia and through the Suez Canal and into the Mediterranean. Some Russians were posted alongside the French and British troops holding the Greek city of Salonika, but most of them found themselves in France.

And while I'm sure the French appreciated the help and I'm sure it was a touching gesture of solidarity, it doesn't seem those Russian soldiers themselves were particularly happy with their lot. They had had to undergo an arduous voyage away from their homes and families and motherland to a distant location where the food was strange and no one spoke Russian. No doubt some of them resented being handed over by the Emperor to the French in a trade deal as if they were so many IOUs. They missed birch trees.

When the February Revolution broke out, their officers tried to keep the news from them. Like that was going to work. These Russian soldiers quickly picked up on the revolutionary zeal. They formed soldiers' committees and began complaining about their treatment, just like Russian soldiers back home. And they wanted more than ever to go home and be part of the momentous changes taking place in the new Russia. No longer were they the czar's pawns; why should they remain in France?

These Russian soldiers spread their new ideals to the French soldiers, aided by radical socialists in France and no doubt by a few Bolshevik exiles in Switzerland, and when this revolutionary spark struck the dry tinder of the disaffection and demoralization of the French Army, mutiny began to burn.

These mutinies did not lead to any dramatic changes in the stalemated war, but they did put fear into the French government and military command, and as a result, the failure of Nivelle's offensive would mark the end of French offensive warfare, at least for the rest of 1917. Combine this with the *de facto* armistice and revolutionary turmoil in the East, the repeated failures of the Italian offensives and the disappointingly slow mobilization of the Americans, and you come to the realization that the alliance is stymied. With the Central Powers hunkered down in a defensive crouch, it might well be that stalemate and inertia could bring the Great War to a halt and force the Great Powers into a demoralizing and inconclusive peace agreement.

And so, by the middle of 1917, it all comes down to the United Kingdom. The British at long last have built up an army on the continent capable of an independent offensive, and now Britain is

the only combatant left that still has the means and the will to do so, and thus keep up the fight until the French and the Russians recover their strength and the Americans muster enough force to step up the pressure on Germany. British willpower alone may determine whether the Allied war effort ends with a whimper or pushes on to victory.

But that is a story for another episode. We'll have to stop there for today. Thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Michael for becoming a patron of the podcast. If you'd like to be a donor or a patron, visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on "Help the Podcast." And allow me to remind you once again that either makes an excellent Christmas gift, as does a rating and review at the iTunes store. And thanks again to all of you who have already left ratings and reviews.

This will be the final episode for 2018. I will be taking the next two weeks off to do some reading and preparation, but the podcast will return on the second Sunday of the new year. In the meantime, to those of you who celebrate Christmas, I wish you a happy one, and I wish all of you peace and warmth and the fellowship of family and friends during this holiday season, and all the best in the year 2019.

And I hope you join me in the new year, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, when we will turn to the Eastern Front in 1917 and see what is happening—or not happening—in the aftermath of the February Revolution. The Cossacks Are Not Coming, next year, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Every year in the month of December, I try to touch on a topic that at least tangentially relates to Christmas, and I hope you'll indulge me now if I take a moment to talk about Manfred von Richtofen, the famed German fighter pilot of the Great War usually known today as the "Red Baron." What does the Red Baron have to do with Christmas, you ask? Well, if you are an American of a certain age, like me, you already know the answer to that question. If not, well, allow me to explain it to you.

This point in our historical narrative, mid-1917, is the high water mark of von Richtofen's career as a pilot. He began the year with sixteen kills and a shiny new Pour le Mérite, or "Blue Max" medal, but he was just getting started. Now flying a Fokker Albatros, he shot down 22 Allied planes in April alone. He was now in command of *Jasta 11*, or Fighter Squadron Eleven, and trained well the flyers under his command. It was at this time that von Richtofen began painting his airplane red. The idea caught on in the squadron, and the other pilots began decorating their own planes with individual markings in red or in other colors. The cheerful look of the planes and the skilled aerobatics of their pilots led to the unit being called "The Flying Circus."

Von Richtofen was wounded in the head in July 1917 and convalesced for a couple of months. He was never quite the same afterward, but insisted on returning to combat. He was shot down and killed by a Canadian pilot in April 1918, possibly due in part to reduced capacity from his

previous head injury. Still, he shot down 80 enemy aircraft during his career, more than any other pilot in the Great War.

Because of his red airplane, von Richtofen was known in Germany during his lifetime as *der rote Kampfflieger*, literally “the red battle flyer,” or perhaps we should say in English, “the red fighter pilot.” This was the title of his autobiography, which he wrote during his recovery from his head wound.

He was an aristocrat and held the title of *Freiherr*, which literally means “free lord,” and was regarded as equivalent to the English titles of “count” or “baron.” In our time, when you read about Manfred von Richtofen in a history book, it will probably tell you something like this: that because his airplane was painted red and because he held the title of baron, the British soldiers dubbed him “the Red Baron,” and that is the origin of the nickname by which he is usually known today.

This explanation makes sense superficially, but the Australian historian Brett Holman, who studies the history of British aviation, recently published [a provocative blog post](#) on this topic, in which he reports that a search of British newspaper archives turns up only one news article during the entire Great War that refers to von Richtofen as the “Red Baron,” and that was in a piece about his death.

Amusingly, Holman notes that he found many more newspaper references during this period to Red Baron, a stud bull owned by Frederick Wrench of Killacoona in Ballybrack. Red Baron won a prize at the 1912 Royal Ulster Agricultural Society show and apparently his stud services earned his owner pretty good money. But I digress.

British journalists of the time visited the front lines, and if it were true that the nickname “Red Baron” was in common use by the soldiers in the trenches, those journalists should surely have heard about it. You’d have to think something else is going on here. Tellingly, when von Richtofen’s autobiography was published in English translation in 1918, it was not titled “The Red Baron,” but rather, “The Red Battle Flyer.” Two biographies of von Richtofen were published in Britain in the 1930s; both of these books refer to him as “The Red Knight.” In their titles.

The “Red Baron” nickname was not unheard of during this period, but instances of its use are very rare. Holman did a Google ngram plot of “Red Baron,” and discovered that the term was used infrequently until the mid-1960s, but then the graph ramps up dramatically, leveling off in the 1970s, and the phrase remained in common use ever since.

The logical conclusion here is that something happened in the mid-1960s that firmly planted the nickname “Red Baron” into the popular consciousness. Again, if you are an American of a certain age, you already know where I’m going with this.

In the mid-1960s, the most popular daily comic strip in the United States, and probably in the world, was Charles Schultz's *Peanuts*, the story of a little boy named Charlie Brown, his dog Snoopy, and the collection of neighborhood kids Charlie Brown goes to school and plays with. The comic strip was a genuine phenomenon, with all sorts of spin-off merchandise: books, lunchboxes, greeting cards, and I could go on and on and on, but to give you a quick idea of the strip's cultural impact, I'll note that in the 1969 Apollo 10 lunar mission, the last one before the actual moon landing, the command module was named "Charlie Brown" and the lunar module "Snoopy."

The character of Snoopy, the dog, was a prominent and popular part of the strip. Snoopy did not speak, but Schultz would draw him with thought balloons that allowed the reader to know what the dog was thinking. It turned out he had a vivid fantasy life and engaged in a lot of role play. On Sunday, October 11, 1965, the phrase "Red Baron" appeared in the strip for the first time, in the context of Snoopy pretending he was a "World War I flying ace." He donned a leather helmet, goggles, and a scarf, climbed on top of his doghouse, pretended it was a Sopwith Camel, and took off in pursuit of the Red Baron.

Come to think of it, I guess today we would call that "cosplay" or describe Snoopy as a "First World War re-enactor."

The concept proved popular, and Schultz would draw many more strips on the same theme. The Red Baron always won these imaginary engagements, which typically ended with Snoopy on the ground next to his wrecked airplane, shaking his fist at the sky—dogs have fists?—and crying out, "Curse you, Red Baron." In thought balloon form.

Two months after the introduction of the Red Baron story line, on December 9, 1965, the first *Peanuts* animated television special debuted. It was titled *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. The child characters were actually voiced by child actors, a first in American animation, and I hesitate to admit this, but one of the people watching that TV special that first night was eight-year old me.

A Charlie Brown Christmas was hugely successful. It's become one of the most popular television programs of all time and has been shown on TV in the United States every one of the 53 Christmases since. It also probably single-handedly killed the 1960s fad of aluminum Christmas trees, for reasons you already understand if you've ever seen it, but that's another story. It certainly boosted the popularity of the comic strip to new heights. Even the soundtrack music, created and performed by jazz pianist Vince Guaraldi and his trio became a quadruple platinum album and a Christmas staple in its own right. If you today, dear listener, know anything at all about the *Peanuts* gang, you probably know *A Charlie Brown Christmas*.

The success of *A Charlie Brown Christmas* in 1965 spurred the creation of over three dozen other *Peanuts* TV specials over the following years, many of which were holiday themed. Personally, I think they pushed the holiday thing a little too far by 1976's *It's Arbor Day, Charlie Brown*, but maybe that's just me.

And no, I am not making this up.

A *Charlie Brown Christmas* did not include any references to the “Snoopy vs. the Red Baron” storyline, nor did the first follow-up special, *Charlie Brown’s All-Stars!* which aired six months later, on June 8, 1966. The second follow-up special, *It’s the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown*, a Halloween-themed program, aired less than five months after that, on October 27. This third animated special *did* include a sequence of Snoopy roleplaying his fantasy as a World War I fighter ace, goggles and all.

One month before that Halloween special, September 1966 saw the publication of a children’s book entitled *Snoopy vs. the Red Baron*. Dr. Holman believes this was the first book ever published with the phrase “Red Baron” in the title.

Two months after the publication of *Snoopy vs. the Red Baron* and just days after the broadcast of *It’s the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown*, November 1966 saw the release of a 45-RPM single, a novelty record of a song, also titled “Snoopy vs. the Red Baron,” composed by Phil Gernhard and Dick Holler and performed by a rock band called The Royal Guardsmen, who were from Florida, despite their intentionally British-sounding name. The chorus goes like this:

*Ten, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty or more
The bloody Red Baron was rollin’ up the score.
Eighty men died trying to end that spree
Of the bloody Red Baron of Germany.*

The song proved tremendously popular. It was number two on the charts in the United States for four weeks in January 1967, and it only missed number one because the Monkees’ “I’m a Believer,” the top single for all of 1967, was in the number one slot throughout that time. The song did reach number one in Australia and number six in the United Kingdom.

The popularity of this song also brought the nickname the “Red Baron” to the attention of anyone who hadn’t already encountered it in the comic strips or the book or the TV special, if there was any such person left.

And that, dear listener, is the reason why you and I know Manfred von Richthofen as the “Red Baron.”

I know what you’re thinking. “That’s all well and good, Mark, but what does any of this have to do with Christmas?” Well, bear with me just a couple minutes longer, because I’m not quite finished yet.

This song, “Snoopy vs. the Red Baron,” was written and recorded without the knowledge or permission of Charles Schultz or his syndicate, but of course when it became that popular, they could hardly have failed to notice it. There was a lawsuit, and a settlement which allowed the

Royal Guardsman to continue to perform and record “Snoopy vs. the Red Baron” and several other Snoopy-themed songs, which would become far and away the most popular recordings the band ever released. By the end of 1967, The Royal Guardsmen had accumulated enough of this music to fill up one side of an album, which they released under the title *Snoopy and His Friends*, with cover art drawn by none other than Charles Schultz.

The breakout single from that album was “Snoopy’s Christmas,” with a similar melody and new, Christmas-themed lyrics describing an encounter between Snoopy and the Red Baron in which the Baron shows mercy on Snoopy after being moved by the sound of Christmas bells, and after the popping of a cork, the two antagonists share a holiday toast, because dogs drink champagne now, apparently. We can perhaps read this as an oblique reference to the Christmas truces of 1914, episode 92. “Snoopy’s Christmas” reached number one on the charts in the US, Australia, and New Zealand during the Christmas season of 1967, and you sometimes hear it played at Christmas even today.

And that, dear listener, is the reason why the story of the Red Baron is a Christmas story.

I know I’ve taken up more of your time than usual already, but if you’ll indulge me just a little while longer, I would also like to share a personal reminiscence. It’s not often I can tell you what was going on in my life exactly fifty years ago, but today I can, and so I will. In December 1968, fifty years ago this month, I was eleven years old and in sixth grade at West Pottsgrove Elementary School in Stowe, Pennsylvania. Our teacher, Mr. Reitenour, assigned us students the task of decorating our classroom for Christmas. This was the Christmas after “Snoopy’s Christmas,” but the song was still getting a lot of play that year and was in all of our little minds, which is all the explanation I can offer for the fact that one of my classmates decided that a fighter plane he had made out of red construction paper was a suitable decoration for Christmas. And we hung it in our classroom. Because nothing says “Christmas” like Manfred von Richthofen and his Fokker Albatros.

And when my classmate built his little red paper fighter plane, he put swastikas on its wings, because of course he did. It was a German plane after all. Even at the age of eleven, I understood that was wrong, and my mother thought it was hilarious, but there it was.

And that, dear listener, is the reason why the world needs history podcasts.

[music: Closing Theme]