

# The Blue Max

The Pour le Mérite is an order of merit established in 1740 by King Frederick II of Prussia. The Pour le Mérite was awarded as both a military and civil honor and ranked, along with the Order of the Black Eagle, the Order of the Red Eagle and the House Order of Hohenzollern, among the highest orders of merit in the Kingdom of Prussia. After 1871, when the various German kingdoms, grand duchies, duchies, principalities and Hanseatic city states had come together under Prussian leadership to form the federally structured German Empire, the Prussian honors gradually assumed, at least in public perception, the status of honors of Imperial Germany, even though many honors of the various German states continued to be awarded.

The Pour le Mérite was an honor conferred both for military (1740–1918) and civil (1740–1810, after 1842 as a separate class) services. It was awarded strictly as a recognition of extraordinary personal achievement, rather than as a general marker of social status or a courtesy-honor, although certain restrictions of social class and military rank were applied. The order was secular, and membership endured for the remaining lifetime of the recipient, unless renounced or revoked.

New awards of the military class (known in First World War informally as the Blue Max ceased with the end of the Prussian monarchy in November 1918. The civil class was revived as an independent organization in 1923 (Pour le mérite für Wissenschaften und Künste). Instead of the King of Prussia, the President of Germany acted as head of the order. After the Second World War, the civil class was re-established in 1952. This version of the Pour le Mérite is still active today. The Pour le Mérite still is an order into which a person is admitted into membership, like the United Kingdom's Order of the British Empire, and is not simply a medal or state decoration.

The Pour le Mérite gained international fame during World War I. Its most famous recipients were the pilots of the German Army Air Service, whose exploits were celebrated in wartime propaganda. In aerial warfare, a fighter pilot was initially entitled to the award upon downing eight enemy aircraft. Aces Max Immelmann and Oswald Boelcke were the first airmen to receive the award, on January 12, 1916. It was awarded to Germany's highest-scoring ace, Manfred von Richthofen, in January 1917. Although it has been reported that because of Immelmann's renown among his fellow pilots and the nation at large, the Pour le Mérite became known, due to its color and Immelmann's first name, as the "Blue Max," that has not been confirmed.

The number of aerial victories necessary to receive the award continued to increase during the war; by war's end the approximate figure was 30.

