

Volume I



# *World War I*



*The Birth of Military Aviation*



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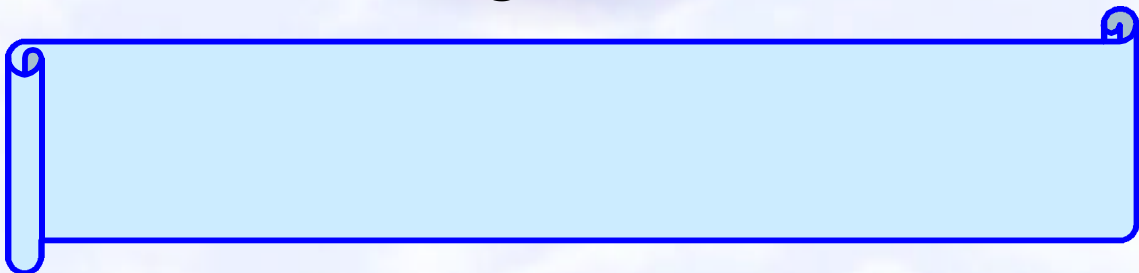


Volume I

# World War I



By  
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# P r e f a c e

## **Twelve Seconds That Changed History**



### ***December 17, 1903 - Kitty Hawk, North Carolina***

Orville Wright watched the toss of the coin turn in his favor and smiled with satisfaction. He would be the FIRST to try to do what no man had ever done before...FLY! The elder Wilbur Wright helped his kid brother settle into the 605-pound frame of their unusual invention. The 13-horsepower engine sputtered to life, turning the bicycle chains that caused two wooden propellers to rotate. Facing their contraption into the 20-mile per hour freezing wind that blew across Kill Devil hill, the two self-taught mathematicians and machinists from Dayton, Ohio, felt confident. Slowly the craft began to move forward on its 60-foot launching track, and then ever so slowly it lifted off the ground. For twelve seconds their creation defied gravity, traversing 120 feet of distance in the first controlled-power flight.

Three more flights, each successively longer and farther, followed as the brothers took turns enjoying the success of three years of experimentation. On the fourth flight of the day, Wilbur piloted the aircraft for 59 seconds, almost a full minute. In that final flight the first successful airplane flew for 852 feet before Wilbur gained the dubious distinction of being the first pilot to make a crash landing. As the FLYER nosed into the ground, its frail spruce-and-muslin horizontal rudders fell apart. But the day had been a wonderful success; the Wright Brothers had made history.

Five years later on September 17, 1908, Orville Wright was in the cockpit during a demonstration at Fort Myer, Virginia. On this day Orville faced disaster, crashing a modified version of their original FLYER. Orville was injured, and US Army Lieutenant Thomas E. Selfridge, who was along as an observer, was killed. It was a devastating turn of events causing the Army to delay for six months the delivery of the first military aircraft.

The following summer the Wright brothers fulfilled the first step of their military contract by delivering the first Army airplane on July 30 after 3 days of flight performance tests. The second portion of their contract called for training two Army officers as pilots. The first to fly for the US Army were Lieutenants Frank P. Lahm and Frederic E. Humphreys. Through the fall of 1909, just six years after the birth of powered flight, the first Army aviators were trained under the guidance of the brothers who had developed the first successful airplane. Within another eight years the US Army would begin to see results, though the full impact of those results would not be accepted for nearly half a century.

Perhaps the birth of military air power was marked more by politics than anything else. It would cost one high-ranking pioneer his military career. It cost many more their lives. But through it all there arose a new breed of American fighting man--adventurers with dreams in the clouds and nerves of steel. These were men beyond discouragement, determined to prove their mettle, and dedicated to a new kind of warfare. They were the knights of the sky, the last of the great explorers, and a brotherhood of proud AIRMEN.

# Introduction



## **The Birth of Military Aviation**

Sergeant Rickenbacker tried to steady himself against the bob and swell of the lumbering ship that carried the first American soldiers of General John J. Pershing's American Expeditionary Force to France. Despite the fact that *The Great War* had already been fought for three years, Pershing's AEF would be the inaugural American military presence on the battlefield.

Rickenbacker himself was a raw recruit. Fame as an American racecar driver had granted him friends in the right places which in turn had given him the opportunity to join the contingent whose headquarters' commander was a young captain named George S. Patton, Jr. The call had come just two days earlier from Burgess Lewis in New York: "Eddie, we're organizing a secret sailing to France. We need staff drivers. Would you like to go?"

"It sounds wonderful, Burgess," Rickenbacker replied. "I'd like to think about it overnight. Give me a call again at 8:00 in the morning." When the call came right on schedule, Rickenbacker lined up another driver for his scheduled run in Cincinnati's *Memorial Day 500* race and joined the troupe of other recruited staff drivers, all of them sergeants, as they boarded for their Atlantic passage.

Sergeant Rickenbacker's excitement at being among the first American soldiers to land on French soil since the United States formally declared war on the German Empire the previous month, was quickly tempered by the condition of his accommodations. The sergeant drivers were billeted on hammocks loosely strung in steerage. The ship was filthy and when Rickenbacker went for his meals in the mess hall, he found it even dirtier. Oilcloth covered the Spartan tables and beneath these crawled hordes of bugs. The man who throughout his life proclaimed, "I'd rather have a million friends than a million dollars," was beginning to wonder what a friend had gotten him into.



After forcing down a meal, the dubious sergeant headed for the deck and some fresh air. There he met a doctor he knew whom he soon learned had garnered a second-class cabin. "You're a sergeant just like me," Rickenbacker stated quizzically, "so how do you rate this when I'm down in the hold with the bugs?"

"I'm a sergeant first class," the other replied, making Sergeant Rickenbacker aware for the first time that there were different types of sergeants in the United States Army.

Next to General Pershing himself, the next highest-ranking officer aboard was Colonel T. F. Dodd, Pershing's aviation officer. Prior to his abrupt enlistment in the Army, Rickenbacker had met Colonel Dodd and fixed his airplane motor. Rickenbacker, never shy about asking for what he wanted, went in search of the Colonel and his first promotion.... "After all, I had been in the Army for 48 hours."

Colonel Dodd took in the request with a dutiful ear, and then said, "Promotions come through meritorious service, Eddie. Now how do you intend to go about that?"

"I don't know, Colonel," Rickenbacker replied flatly. "***That's why I brought YOU along.***"

When the Colonel finished laughing, Sergeant Rickenbacker was spot-promoted to Sergeant First Class Rickenbacker and assigned to a second-class cabin.



The men who gave birth to American air power were often considered a new breed of soldier: inventive, impetuous, independent, innovative, and perhaps just a bit brash. Had they been otherwise, world history may have turned out far different throughout the conflicts and victories of the 20th century. Sergeant First Class Edward Vernon Rickenbacker may well have exemplified all that the American airman was in the beginning, and then matured in to all that it would become in the decades that followed.

Even as Sergeant Rickenbacker was sailing to France and into American legend and lore, aviation was as *green* in the world's annals of military history as the impetuous young sergeant was among the ranks of the U.S. Army. Less than 14 years had passed since that historic moment at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, when Orville Wright had, by the fateful turn of a coin toss, become the first man to pilot a heavier than air motorized vehicle through the skies for twelve incredible seconds. In those fourteen years aviation technology had advanced slowly, but it had advanced. Great strides had been made in Europe largely due to the ongoing war with the German Empire. Only the United States lagged behind other world powers in its development of the airplane as a military weapon, or for that matter, as even a viable means of transportation. A list of certified pilots at the beginning of 1911 reflected the statistics shown in the table at the right.

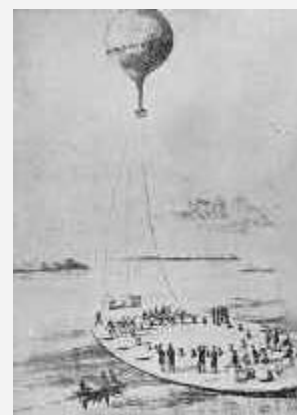
Nation	Pilots
France	353
England	57
Germany	46
Italy	32
Belgium	27
United States	26
Austria	19
Holland	6
Switzerland	6
Denmark	3
Spain	2
Sweden	1

The low number of certified American pilots cannot be interpreted as a total lack of interest in aviation in the United States. Shortly after the historic moment at Kitty Hawk, the United States Army demonstrated an interest in the airplane as a tool for its Signal Corps, already well immersed in tactics from the heavens.

The first humans to view Earth's landscape from above were the Montgolfier brothers who in November 1783 floated the first balloon 3,000 feet into the skies above Paris. In the century that followed, lighter than air balloons gained increasing interest from the world's military tacticians.

In the early 1860s Thaddeus S. C. Lowe, a balloon enthusiast and would be world traveler in his lighter-than-air creations, found in the American Civil War some of the first military uses for aircraft. Met with great skepticism, on June 18, 1861, he rose above our Nation's capitol with a telegraph operator as a passenger to transmit a message half-a-mile below to President Abraham Lincoln. A few days later, following the Battle of Bull Run, from his perch among the clouds, Lowe was able to ease worries in the Capitol by reporting that there were no Confederate movements towards Washington, DC. On July 25, less than two months later, Lowe met with the President who noted his impression of the experiment by establishing a Balloon Corps.

Lowe is often called the *Father of Army Aviation* and certainly was the first major proponent of the use of aircraft in warfare. In his own day however, despite successful uses of his balloons to observe and report on Confederate troop movements, every advance for his Balloon Corps was made only with great effort. He once said, *"I would rather have faced the entire Confederate Army of Northern Virginia defending Richmond, than one Union Lieutenant, defending his own small bureaucratic territory."* The struggle to build an American air force would continue for nearly a century, and more than one proponent of air power would feel the truth of his telling observation of warfare traditionalists.



Thaddeus Lowe continued to be an innovator, developing the first *aircraft carrier*-- a barge that could ferry everything necessary to operate his balloons over land. He was unsuccessful in his attempts to convince the military of the value of aerial photography, however. Perhaps his greatest success came on July 4, 1863, when President Lincoln personally promoted him to the rank of Colonel; and the Balloon Corps was officially attached as a branch of the Army Signal Corps. Thus began the link between airmen and the Signal Corps that would endure until the United States Army Air Service became its own branch within the US Army on May 20, 1918.



For the next forty years the use of observation balloons for military purposes continued to grow beyond Lowe's early concepts. At the turn of the century the eminent secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, Samuel P. Langley, sought to create a motorized balloon utilizing the new combustion engines developed for the automobile. He called his creation an Aerodrome, from the Greek word for "air runner," and launched it to great hype in October 1903. The utter failure of his effort caused the editorial board of the *New York Times* to write, *"The flying machine which will really fly might be evolved by the combined and continuous efforts of mathematicians and mechanics in from one to ten million years."* Two months later, two self-taught mathematicians and machinists from Dayton, Ohio, named Orville and Wilbur Wright accomplished it at Kitty Hawk.





In 1905 the Wright brothers offered their aeronautical invention to the US Government while awaiting the patent on their flying machine. Twice the government declined the offer failing to see any value in the airplane. The following year the brot the interest of a powerful ally. Rumors of the new flying machine had reached the White House, and President Theodore Roosevelt ordered the U.S. Army to review the matter. On December 23, as issued for a "heavier- -air flying machine." The result was the

Aeronautical Section of the

Signal Corps

On August 20, 1908, Orville Wright brought his Virginia, where he began regular public flights two weeks later. On September 9

inventor becoming the first Army officer to fly as a passenger in an Orville was flying with yet another Army officer as his

wire causing the 1908 Flyer to crash. Wright was seriously injured; his passenger, Lieutenant Thomas E. Selfridge died as a result of his own injuries. It was e first recorded airplane fatality.



that year the Wright brothers signed their contract with the Signal Corps; former President Theodore Roosevelt took to the air a

Curtiss earned a prize as the first aviator to fly from Albany, New York, to New York City. The \$10,000 award, offered by the prompted rival publisher, Randolph Hearst, to offer a \$50,00

in 1910 on August 20, Lieutenant Jacob E. Fickel fired the first shot from an airplane-- semi- ck near New York City from an altitude of 100 feet.

Italy was first to engage the airplane in military operations using them for reconnaissance flights in its 1911 Italo Turkish war in North Africa. The Italian airmen became the first bombardiers in the s propaganda leaflets from an airplane.

up its first flying school in Pensacola, Florida. This was the same year that the Navy sent a force to

April 25 Navy Lt. (j.g.) P.N.L. Bellinger flew his Curtiss AB- support of the American action at Vera Cruz. It was the first operational air sortie flown by an

established the Aviation Section (Signal Corps)

listed men.

By August of 1914 the fledgling American air force had six airplanes, in contrast to the rapid development of military aviation in Europe. At the time the three major powers were well ahead of the United States military with:

Germany	180 Airplanes
France	136 Airplanes
England	48 Airplanes

On July 28, 1914, Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated, and in the following month the European powers began aligning themselves for war. In the frantic week that followed, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia; Russia mobilized in support of its Balkan ally; and Germany declared war on Russia and France before marching into strategically vital Belgium. This act prompted Great Britain to declare war on Germany for violating Belgium's neutrality, and the Central Powers (Germany and Austria) aligned themselves in war against the Allies (England, France, and Russia). In the Western Hemisphere President Woodrow Wilson called on the American people: "To be neutral in fact as well as in name...impartial in thought as well as in deed."

It had been less than 11 years since the historic flight at Kitty Hawk and the airplane had grown from infancy to the edge of adolescence. The rapid growth and changes this maturing process generates in the passage from infancy to maturity in the organic world, would not be lost on the growth of military aviation. In the organic world the changes are called "puberty," for military aviation it would be called:



# World War I

On the ground the foot-soldiers, mobilized by the warring nations of the *War to End all Wars*, slugged it out across muddy fields, through dense forests, and across fire-swept plateaus. Traditional warfare had advanced rapidly from the days of single-shot muskets and slow firing cannon, to deadly hails of machine gun fire and devastating artillery. It was a brutal way to do battle.

As the commanders on the ground moved their troops like pawns on a chess board, positioning their units for maximum advantage, high above flew the prying eyes of enemy observers. Unlike the observation balloons of the previous wars, the airplane gave enemy planners a highly mobile means of learning what their foe was doing so that they could move quickly to counteract. Balloons were a useful tool and were used extensively throughout the war. But balloons were tethered by cable to a ground support unit, which meant they were only effective when a unit was close to the front. The observation airplane could fly well beyond enemy lines to locate enemy artillery positions, direct friendly artillery fire, and catch shifts in strategy in its earliest stages.

Somewhere over the German lines of advance, a French airplane flew through the August skies to view, record, and report the direction of the war. As the pilot enjoyed the brisk breeze that swept through his open cockpit, it was hard to connect to the death and tragedy that was unfolding on the ground below. To some degree the euphoria associated with being among the first to fly could easily overcome what was happening in the *real world*.

Returning to his airfield when his fuel tank had nearly expended its supply, he crossed the lines to see a German observation plane returning from his own mission over the French lines. Passing in the wind the two aviators gave each other a thumbs up, wagged their wings, and continued to their respective landing strips. There was little more that they could do. Both airplanes were unarmed. Both pilots were observers, not combatants. Though enemies on the ground, they were brothers of the sky working similar missions and writing new history in aviation.

The scene would play out each day, almost like a routine, until one day when the German pilot forgot to give the thumbs up or wiggle his wings. Perhaps he'd had a bad day, and he even made an angry gesture towards the French pilot. Angry now himself, the French pilot reached beneath the seat in his cockpit to withdraw the hammer left there by his mechanics and hurled it at the enemy flier.

Before taking off the following day, the German pilot shoved a brick behind his seat, ready to give the Frenchman a "taste of his own medicine." As the Hun brick ripped through the fabric on the wing of his Newport that day, the French pilot went home to arm himself. The following day the German flier's insults would be met with hot lead from a Frenchman's pistol.



No one knows exactly how aerial combat was born, though it probably came about in a fashion quite similar to the above postulation. War in the air developed quickly, almost comically, as each side responded to the other by leaning out of open cockpits to toss wrenches, bricks, and eventually bullets at each other. Russian aviator Petr Nikolaevich Nesterov was a talented flier known for his acrobatics, and became the first aviator to perform a normal loop (subsequently called the *Nesterov loop*). As aerial combat developed, Nesterov started letting out weighted cables from his own airplane to smash into the canvas of his enemies. On August 26, 1914, three Austrian planes near the town of Sholkiv in Galicia attacked Staff Captain Nesterov. Nesterov gained immortality that day as the first Russian air hero when he rammed one of the enemy planes, destroying it in the first true dogfight at the loss of his own life as well.



As these early fighter pilots struggled to develop their methods, tactics and skills, a French pilot named Lieutenant Roland Garros was working on his own innovation. A former stunt pilot, Garros had mounted a Hotchkiss machine gun on the nose of his Morane-Saulnier Type L monoplane to shoot straight ahead instead of sideways in the cockpit. The idea was not new; others had considered the advantage of aiming at the enemy by flying directly towards them, only to see the rain of automatic fire shred their own propeller.

Prior to the war Raymond Saulnier had worked on an interrupter gear to synchronize the cycle of the machine gun's fire between the revolutions of the prop. This had proved ineffective and Saulnier's work was briefly halted until Garros revived it with a twist...steel deflector plates on his propeller to deflect errant rounds. On April 1, 1915, Lieutenant Garros downed a two-seat German Albatross with his nose-mounted gun, and then quickly added four more kills to his tally to become an ACE. On April 19 Garros lost a battle when hit by ground fire while strafing a German infantry unit near Coutrai. Unable to destroy his airplane when forced to land in enemy territory, his modified airscrew wound up in the workshop of a Dutch engineer named Anthony Fokker.

Fokker was quick to improve on Roland Garros' concept, soon arming German airplanes with synchronized Spandau machine guns. For months until the technology of the Allies caught up, the *Fokker Scourge* ruled the skies with impunity. When at last George Constantinesco gave Allied pilots a semi reliable, forward mounted machine gun, the field of battle equalized to some degree and aerial combat became a true art of warfare.

To say that these advances in both aviation and combat in the early days of World War I bred a NEW kind of fighting man in the annals of military history sounds catchy, though it is probably grossly in error. It would, perhaps, be more accurate to say that aerial combat REVIVED A LOST breed of fighting man.

From 1914 to 1918 in the skies over France for perhaps the first time since the Medieval Period, fighting men went to war in a long forgotten manner of military tournament. Mounting machine-born steeds of canvas and pipe, these warriors rode aloft to do battle, one-on-one with their enemy while their prowess was viewed by spectators from a distance. The battles were no less dangerous than had been the jousts of old; indeed, they were certainly far more deadly.

*Like the ancient warriors of the Roundtable, however, adventurous young men from both sides rose to the challenge, to become the:*





## ***Knights of the Skies!***



### Manfred von Richthofen *The Red Baron*

*"I have not gone to war to collect cheese and eggs,"* the 23-year old German quartermaster wrote in his request for assignment to a flying unit. After a relatively nondescript tenure of duty on the Russian Front during the early days of the war, followed by several months in the rear, Manfred von Richthofen was pleading for a chance to do what soldiers are trained to do—fight.

By May 1915, less than a year after *The Great War* began, the man who would become a legend to both his friends and his enemies was at last flying. A junior observer on reconnaissance and then bombing missions, he finally entered flight training the following October, graduating on Christmas Day. Over Verdun on April 26, 1916, Manfred von Richthofen sighted a French Newport and opened fire. As the French fighter dived into the ground, von Richthofen had his first kill (though he didn't get official credit for the victory). In the two years that followed, von Richthofen would hone his aerial skills in a cool, calculating manner that would be unprecedented and unequalled.

#### September 17, 1916

*"In a fraction of a second I was at his back (the pilot of an RAF two-seat FE-2 airplane.) I gave a few bursts with my machine gun. I had gone so close that I was afraid I might dash into the Englishman. Suddenly, I nearly yelled with joy for his propeller had stopped turning. I had shot his engine to pieces; the enemy was compelled to land, for it was impossible for him to reach his own lines.*

*"The Englishman landed close to one of our squadrons. I was so excited that I landed also and in my eagerness, I nearly smashed up my machine. The English airplane and my own stood close together. I had shot the engine to pieces and both the pilot and observer were severely wounded. The observer died at once and the pilot while being transported to the nearest dressing station. I honored the fallen enemy by placing a stone on his beautiful grave."*

**Manfred von Richthofen**

Within six weeks of this action, Richthofen was a double ace with 10 victories, and poised for his greatest victory to date. On November 23 he claimed his 11th airplane, downing British hero and Victoria Cross recipient Major Lanoe George Hawker. *"He was a brave man, a sportsman, and a fighter,"* Richthofen wrote of the battle between two skillful men that resulted in the death of the commander of Great Britain's Number 24 Squadron. Upon downing his 16th

organize his own *Jagdstaffel 11*, which journalists soon began calling "The Flying Circus." Baron von Richthofen painted his own airplane red and came to be known as "The Red Baron."

In the first three months of 1917, the Baron and his signature all-red, brand new Albatross D III airplane became one of the most sought after targets, and one of the most feared sights in the skies. By March 26 his tally reached thirty-one Allied planes shot down. As the winter weather that had hampered flying for months cleared in April, aerial missions for both sides increased. The Red Baron claimed an amazing 20 victories in that one bloody month alone, making him an Ace ten times over.

Von Richthofen scored five more victories before the odds caught up with him on July 2, 1917, when he encountered the British RFC 20th Squadron. A bullet creased his skull splintering bone, and the Red Baron spiraled to earth in a crash he would survive, but with a wound from which he would never fully recover. For the remaining year of his life he suffered horrible headaches that plagued his waking moments and may have hampered his brilliant aerial tactics. By September the German legend had recovered enough to return in his famous red Fokker Dr. I tri-plane and bring his score to an unprecedented 60 victories. During the winter months aerial missions slowed again due the weather, but the count rose slowly. Victory number 64 was 2nd Lieutenant H. J. Sparks who was wounded but survived his crash. When the Red Baron learned that the British flier was recovering in a hospital, he sent the man a box of cigars. By mid-April of 1918 von Richthofen brought his final tally to 80 confirmed victories, a record unequalled in aviation history.

While the Red Baron was ruling the skies over Europe, the United States was being drawn ever closer to abandoning its position of neutrality. The May 7, 1915, U-boat sinking of the British passenger liner *Lusitania* killing more than 1,000 people including 128 Americans strained efforts at neutrality. The tension eased only when the German government agreed to rein in its submarine fleet.

The avoidance of war was largely welcomed in the United States, which had problems to contend with on its own shores, some of which had recently prompted the creation of the U.S. Coast Guard on January 28, 1915. In September U.S. Marines landed at Haiti to restore and preserve order. The following year on March 9 a Mexican revolutionary named Pancho Villa crossed the southern US border with more than 500 men to raid Columbus, New Mexico. The death of 17 Americans forced General John J. Pershing to send troops to protect the border, as well as to mount a punitive expedition supported by the first American tactical air unit ever placed in the field, the 1st Aero Squadron.

Meanwhile on the European battlefield, young Americans were getting their first taste of aerial combat in a most unorthodox fashion designed to avoid violation of US neutrality. The 38 volunteer pilots were all American citizens, most of them Ivy League college graduates who believed strongly in fighting to preserve the rights and freedoms of other nations. The men flew French aircraft, wore French uniforms, and served under the leadership of French Captain Georges Thenault. They organized in April 1916 as the *Escadrille Americaine*, "American Squadron." The German government soon complained to Washington, DC, that the unit was a violation of American neutrality, prompting a name change in December. The first fearless American fighter pilots thus became known as:

## **Lafayette Escadrille**



Though the French government authorized the *Escadrille Americaine* on March 21, the unit did not organize formally until April 20, when these volunteer American aviators were placed on front-line duty at Luxeuil-les-Bains near Switzerland. The unit flew its first mission on May 13, and five days later in yet another aerial mission, Kiffin Rockwell shot down an LVG reconnaissance airplane to score the first victory by an American-born fighter pilot. Forty days later his friend Victor Chapman was shot down, the first American pilot to be killed in action.

In the months that followed, the now combat-experienced pilots of the Lafayette Escadrille were rotated among other French units, which were absorbing a fresh crop of volunteer American pilots into its Lafayette Flying Corps (often erroneously confused with the Lafayette Escadrille). In all, more than 200 Americans served as members of the French flying forces.

From its organization on April 20, 1916, until the newly arrived United States Army absorbed it on February 18, 1918, the men of the Lafayette Escadrille were engaged in every major battle. The squadron downed 57 enemy aircraft, and lost 9 of its own pilots in battle. Of the 200 American fliers of the entire Lafayette Flying Corps, eleven became aces. The leading figure among them and the man who would be called America's first Ace of Aces was a French-born American citizen from Wallingford, Connecticut.

### **Raoul Lufbery**

#### **A Hero to TWO Countries**

**Raoul Lufbery was over age 30 when he joined the Lafayette Escadrille on May 24, 1916; just one month after the unit was organized. Already he was a combat veteran and an experienced pilot, two qualities sorely lacking among the unit of American volunteers.**

**Born in France, Lufbery's father came to America shortly after his son was born, leaving young Raoul in the care of his grandmother. When Raoul was nineteen years old, he sailed for America. Ironically, on the very day Raoul departed, his father returned to Europe; and the two never saw each other again.**



A stint of service in the United States Army, coupled with a tour of duty in the Philippines, netted Raoul Lufbery American citizenship. When World War I erupted, Lufbery felt a responsibility to defend the land of his birth, while prizing his U.S. citizenship. He resolved the situation by joining the French Foreign Legion as an infantryman, which would not jeopardize that citizenship.

Lufbery got his first aerial victory on July 30, 1916, and his second victory later the same day. Over the next two months, he shot down three more enemy airplanes to become an ace and the leading flier of the Lafayette Escadrille. When the United States Army absorbed the Escadrille in 1918, Raoul Lufbery was the *Ace of Aces* for two nations, the country of his birth and the country in which he held citizenship. As an American pilot in a French uniform he had shot down 16 enemy aircraft.

## **Saving Democracy**

Nearly a century after *The Great War*, most Americans think of World War I as a long period of protracted warfare similar to the World War II experience. For the European nations of the Central Powers and the Allied Forces, this was true—four years of bitter fighting. For nearly three-fourths of that war however, the United States maintained its neutrality. Not until April 6, 1917, did the United States Congress, by a vote of 373 to 50, pass a resolution of war. The Senate had approved the measure two days earlier by a vote of 90 to 6.

Even then, the United States entered the war with great reluctance following the impassioned speech by President Woodrow Wilson:

*"The world must be made safe for democracy. It is a fearful thing to lead this great peaceful people into war, the most terrible of wars. But the right is more precious than the peace, and we shall fight for the things that we have always carried nearest our hearts...FOR DEMOCRACY...for the rights and liberties of small nations, for a universal dominion of right by such a concert of free peoples as shall bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world itself at last free."*

The following month saw Staff Sergeant Eddie Rickenbacker en route to Europe as a member of General Pershing's Expeditionary Force. Pershing's force arrived in France late in June, and participated in a grand parade through Paris on July 4 to the tomb of the Marquis de Lafayette who had figured so prominently in the United States' own victory during the American Revolution. Media reports announced worldwide that historic moment as Pershing stood before the tomb to announce, "Lafayette, we are here!" (General Pershing subsequently denied speaking perhaps the most famous phrase of World War I, crediting it instead to his aide, Colonel Charles Stanton.)

The arrival of fresh American combatants, eventually five full divisions, brought a new sense of hope and relief to the Allies. Even so, it was several months before American combat units were placed on the front lines. On October 20 the First Division (*Big Red One*) assumed a combat position near Luneville. During this period the Aviation Section spent most of its time training and preparing for war. Things were relatively quiet for the A.E.F. in 1917. All that would change with the thaw of the winter of 1918.





## **Hat In the Ring Squadron**

Early in 1918 the Army organized two brand new squadrons of American fliers for combat. They were given the designation of the 94th and 95th Aero Squadrons. The idol of two countries, Raoul Lufbery, was absorbed by the U.S. Army and granted the rank of Major, who then assumed command of the 95th Aero Squadron on January 28. Among the veteran combat pilots' green recruits was Lieutenant Eddie Rickenbacker.

The 94th and 95th were assigned to the aerodrome near Villeneuve, about 15 miles from the front lines. As winter thawed and weather permitted increased flying time, historical events began unfolding rapidly.

On March 6 Major Lufbery led a flight of three aircraft in the first all-American flight across the lines by an American trained squadron. The two pilots he chose to accompany him were 1st Lieutenants Douglas Campbell and Eddie Rickenbacker. Five days later Lieutenant Paul F. Baer gave the 103rd Aero Squadron the first victory of any American squadron during the war when he downed an enemy airplane near Rheims. For his action he became the first aviator to earn the Distinguished Service Cross. The following day Captain Phelps Collins of the same squadron crashed while on a combat patrol near Paris, the first member of the Aviation Section to die in a war zone.

On April 10 an aerial legend was born with the first appearance of the 94th Aero Squadron's new emblem. Suggested the previous month by Captain Paul Walters of the Medical Corps and drawn by 1st Lieutenant John Wentworth, it featured *Uncle Sam's* trademark hat with a ring around it. The ring had been suggested by Walters, based on the American tradition of throwing a hat into the ring as an invitation to battle.

On April 12 Major Lufbery *threw his hat in the ring* in the skies over Epinez shooting down his 17th enemy aircraft, though the victory was not confirmed. Rickenbacker flew for the first time with the squadron's new emblem emblazoned on his own Newport two days later on the first combat mission ever ordered by an American commander of an American squadron of American pilots. Rickenbacker would return empty-handed but Lieutenants Campbell and Alan Winslow scored a double victory that sent a ripple of excitement around the world and made headlines at home. The day following the exciting victory for American fighter pilots, 1st Army commander Brigadier General Liggett and the Chief of Air Service, 1st Army A.E.F. Colonel William *Billy* Mitchell visited the *Hat in the Ring Squadron* to observe their progress and congratulate the men for their success.

### **ON APRIL 21 AN AERIAL LEGEND DIED!**

Canadian Captain Roy Brown was leading the flight of fifteen Sopwith Camels as cover for photo planes when they were jumped by an equal number of German Fokkers and Albatrosses. As 30 pilots dodged and weaved among the clouds in one of the classic dogfights of the war, an all-red tri-plane spiraled to earth. To this day no one knows for sure who was responsible for the victory, but when the German airplane plowed into the ground near a position held by Australian soldiers, it was found to contain the body of Manfred von Richthofen. The Red Baron was dead.

The following day the British held a grand funeral for the man who had been their greatest adversary, complete with six RAF Captains as pallbearers and a fourteen-man firing party. All flights of the 17th Aero Squadron of the United States Army contributed to the floral arrangement that covered his casket. Photographs were taken of the last farewell to perhaps the greatest ace of all time, then dropped over his airdrome at Cappy with the message:

**TO THE GERMAN FLYING CORPS:**

*Rittmeister Baron Manfred von Richthofen was killed in aerial combat on April 21st, 1918. He was buried with full military honors.*

**From the British Royal Air Force**

One month later on May 19, another legend died. Rickenbacker had just returned from a patrol to hear the news that Raoul Lufbery had been shot down in a field near Nancy. In his autobiography Rickenbacker recounted the scene:

*"He held the plane on a straight course (after being hit) for about five seconds. Then, from the ground, eyewitnesses saw him squirm out of the blazing cockpit and climb onto the fuselage. Straddling it, he pushed himself back toward the tail. He rode in this position for several seconds as the flames fanned back over him. Then he jumped.*

*"I returned from patrol to hear this shocking story. A phone call came in with the exact location of the spot where he had landed. A group of us jumped into a car and drove to the spot. He had fallen in a lovely little garden in a small town near Nancy. Nearby was a small stream; he may have been trying to land in the water. Instead his body had been impaled on a picket fence. Death must have been instantaneous."*

The loss of two of the greatest icons in World War I aviation served as a vivid reminder to the young men of what had now become the United States Army Air Service, that aerial combat was not a game. It was a dangerous experience with deadly consequences. By July the individual American squadrons were in fierce competition to be the best, while watching sadly as more and more fellow fliers fell to enemy pilots or even ground fire. New heroes emerged, new aces arose, and new exploits were recorded; but none could compare to the legendary status of the Red Baron or Raoul Lufbery. Their deaths had left a void that could only be filled by some as yet undiscovered new legendary Knight of the air.

Another disheartening blow struck the heart of the Army Air Service on July 14 when a 20-year old Lieutenant was shot down in flames over German lines. The body of the young pilot was photographed in the most grotesque and macabre positions of his death; and German propagandists circulated those pictures back to the United States. The young officer was First Lieutenant Quentin Roosevelt, youngest son of the former American president.



By the end of July those men of the American Aero Squadrons who had survived their months of combat were seasoned veterans, many of them aces. After the death of Lufbery, Eddie Rickenbacker attained the title of American "Ace of Aces." but despite the heroic sorties and valiant tournaments among the clouds, no American flier had risen to legendary proportions of the two lost icons among the Knights of the Skies. If ever a new hero was desperately needed to boost morale, it was now, and the American pilots were ready for him to appear.

When a swaggering blonde cowboy from Arizona arrived, he was ready to rise to that challenge. The only problem was the seasoned pilots of his squadron were not ready for HIM!

# Frank Luke

## The Balloon Buster

August 16, 1918



Second Lieutenant Frank Luke nursed the engine of his French Spad-13 as twilight was falling over the field at Coincy near the Western Front. He was late again, the rest of the planes from his squadron having returned much earlier from their evening protection patrol for two photographic Salmsons from the 88th squadron. So what else was new? Luke was always returning late, and usually alone after being separated from his squadron on most of their missions.

The 16-plane patrol including three from Luke's 27th Aero Squadron had left shortly after five o'clock that evening on what would be a frustrating but uneventful patrol. Shortly after takeoff the American pilots began dropping out of formation one-by-one as they struggled with the temperamental engines of their Spads (most of them less than two weeks old). In very short order, about the only airplane still flying was that of 27th Squadron Commander Major Harold Hartney.

Hartney was furious as he headed back to the airfield at Coincy. These new Spads were proving to be an airborne disaster. Mechanical problems were knocking far more of his planes out of the sky than the Germans were. An Ace with five kills while flying with the British Royal Air Force before transferring to the new American First Pursuit Group, Hartney was one of the few experienced pilots in the air that day. Despite his experience, he never noticed the four enemy aircraft that slipped up on his tail or heard the rattle of machine gun fire from the one other Spad still flying. He didn't even know he had an ally behind him, single-handedly taking on four enemy planes as Hartney banked and headed safely home to land at Coincy.

On the ground thirteen pilots paced, cursed, and kicked the tires of their Spads while denouncing the day the "lumbering bricks" had replaced their semi trustworthy French Nieuports. To make matters even worse, a fourteenth pilot had made it back in his faltering Spad but would never be going home. As Lieutenant Ruliff Neivius came in at 6:45, he misjudged his landing and crashed to his death. The one moment of relief came when the pilots, fearing the loss of their commander when he had not returned, saw Major Hartney's Spad land and taxi to join them. That left only one airplane unaccounted for, the Spad flown by Lieutenant Frank Luke of Arizona. Not to worry—Luke was always late! And if worse came to worse, none of them would shed any tears over the grave of the brash young rookie who had been with the 27th for only three weeks. Already the Arizona cowboy had worn out his welcome.

Coming in above the field, Lieutenant Frank Luke felt the cool evening wind whip through his long blonde hair as he banked towards the airstrip. He knew the guys below didn't like him, in fact, had gone out of their way to shun him. They called him *The Arizona Boaster* because of his brash,

matter-of-fact talk of what he would do when at last he saw combat. Perhaps on this evening in the early stages of Frank Luke's career as a fighter pilot, he still held some hope that he could win them over. It was dangerous work flying almost daily in skies patrolled by German airmen intent on shooting you down. It was doubly difficult to come back home and find that even your allies were your enemies.

Luke gunned his engine, tipped his wings, and leveled for a landing. He was used to being cheered for his guts and accomplishments. Back in Arizona, where Luke had been an athletic star in track, baseball and football at Phoenix Union High School; the 5'9", 155-pound young man would never quit. As starting tailback and captain of his football team, he played with an energy and abandon far beyond his size. When he broke his collar bone in the first half of one football game, the crowd cheered at the opening of the second half to see the injured but determined young man come back in to ignore his pain and finish the game. On this day, Luke had finished the game once again, so let the cheering begin. With a loud whoop he stepped out of the cockpit and excitedly shouted:

***"I GOT ME A HUN!"***

There were no cheers...only blank stares.

*"You hear me? I got a Hun! There was four of them, right there coming in on the Major's tail when I opened up. I got one and sent the others hightailing it for home."*

More dead silence followed. Then one of the pilots looked Luke in the eyes and asked, "Who SAW you shoot down this plane?" More dead silence followed.

No one, not even Major Hartney, had seen Luke's purported battle with the German airplanes. With grunts of disdain and only half-concealed words of contempt, the pilots of the 27th Aero Squadron turned to head for the mess hall. The *Arizona Boaster* was not only a loudmouth; he was now a bald-faced liar! There would be no cheers for Frank Luke on this day.

## **The Western Front - 1918**

Three years of warfare had given the Allies little hope against the Central Powers when at last the United States entered the war and began sending soldiers to Europe. By May 1918 however only about 500,000 of what would eventually be a force of 1.2 million combat troops had arrived in France. The American presence that spring gave the Allies little more than a hope for change and some badly needed moral support.

On March 21 the Germans launched a major offensive to preempt any success the newly arrived American doughboys might afford, shifting some 40 divisions to the effort along the Western Front. By May they held a line only 56





miles from Paris, and the French were reeling from the series of sudden attacks. Poised to deliver a crushing blow, the Germans pushed their advantage in the Marne region on May 27. The following day American troops of the AEF's First Division met the Germans at Montdidier, repulsed their attack, and then pushed on to capture the strategically located town of Cantigny. It was the first major American action of the war and the first American victory, despite losses of 187 killed in action and 636 wounded.

German forces continued their spring offensive, driving through the Belleau Wood in the first days of June. A full American division was moved up to stop the German Seventh Army. The bloody battle of Chateau-Thierry was the worst fighting for American soldiers since the battle of Five Forks in the Civil War, much of it borne by the men of the 5th Marines who struggled with the enemy often in hand-to-hand combat. Fighting in the Belleau Wood continued throughout the month of June until the American forces launched their final assault on June 25. Despite nearly 10,000 casualties in the AEF's Second Division, the brave marines and doughboys had defeated four enemy divisions.

Throughout this period, aviators from both sides slugged it out in the skies. On April 21 with their Spring Offensive one month old, the German "Ace of Aces" Baron von Richthofen was killed after 80 victories for the homeland. One week later Lieutenant Eddie Rickenbacker of the 94th Aero Squadron shot down his first enemy airplane. On May 19, just one week before the first American victory at Cantigny, Allied Ace Raoul Lufbery was shot down. On May 30 Lieutenant Rickenbacker downed his fifth confirmed enemy aircraft (he had at least two unconfirmed kills), becoming an Ace for his own 94th Aero Squadron. Throughout the period, a young Second Lieutenant named Frank Luke was sitting out the war in combat flight training at Issoudon, followed by gunnery school.

On June 1, the 27th Aero Squadron became operational in the relatively quiet Toul sector of France as a part of the 1st Pursuit Group. The 1st PG consisted of four squadrons, populated by veteran pilots and commanded by respectable leaders.

### 1st Pursuit Group

Major B.M. Atkinson

#### Aero Squadrons



\*In the closing weeks of the war, the 185th "Bat" Squadron, a night-pursuit squadron, was added to the 1st PG.

The day before the 27th Aero Squadron became operational, 21-year old Frank Luke got his first assignment. To him fell the inglorious task of being a ferry pilot for American Aviation Acceptance Park No. 1 at Orly. His duties consisted of flying new aircraft to the aerodromes on the lines to be used by the men who were fighting the air war. His return trips consisted of nursing badly shot up airplanes back to Orly for repairs. These were bullet riddled with windscreens shattered and fabric torn. All too often blood stains and pieces of human tissue were spotted throughout the cockpit, grim reminders that aerial combat was not a game.

On July 20 the *Eagle Squadron* fielded a five-plane patrol from which only three returned. Three pilots, including Second Lieutenant John MacArthur (6 victories and the 27th's only Ace) and Zenos Miller (4 victories), were wounded and shot down. The third pilot wound up in a hospital in France, leaving the squadron very short on manpower. Five days later a group of replacements received orders for the 27th Aero Squadron. Among the young pilots was Lieutenant Frank Luke.

## July 25-26, 1918

It was close to midnight when the seven pilots arrived at the 27th Aero Squadron's headquarters near Saints. Of the seven men all were rookies but one, Lieutenant Donald W. Donaldson who was transferring from the 95th. The move took the young rookie would-be fighter pilots from an insulated world that saw combat only through the tales of others, to the real world of blood, horror and sudden death. Squadron commander Major Hartney was quick to point this out the following morning in his *welcome speech* to the new recruits:

*"You are in the 27th in name only. When you have shown your buddies out there that you have guts and can play the game honestly and courageously, they'll probably let you stay. You'll know without my telling you when you are actually members of this gang. It's up to you."*

*"If you survive the first two weeks you're well over the hill. I'm not trying to discourage any of you, but you may as well know what you're up against from the first. Some of you are certain to be washed out during the first two weeks. If you get through that period safely and your own personal god continues to strap himself in with you, you'll probably accomplish things. That's all, gentlemen."*

Throughout his brief speech, Hartney couldn't help but notice one of his rookies. "In a way, I resented his attitude," Hartney later said. "He seemed to be saying, 'Don't kid me. I'm not afraid of the bogey man.' When I had finished talking he was grinning. That ruffled me, too."

On his first day with the squadron, Frank Luke was already off on the wrong foot and with the squadron commander no less.

The fact that Major Hartney's welcome speech dealt more with "belonging" than with fighting was no coincidence. Hartney knew the men of his squadron well, knew that the word "fraternity" perhaps defined them more appropriately than the word "team." His words were a cautionary note to the new pilots designed to help them *fit in*.

## **The Good Ol' Boys**

Major Hartney himself wasn't necessarily a member of the "Good Ol' Boy" network—didn't, in fact, need to belong. He was the "Old Man"...the boss and an experienced pilot with the title "ACE" which in and of itself commanded some respect. Thirty years old when he commanded the squadron, he was older than any of his pilots by several years. After serving with the Royal Air Force, the Canadian-born aviator had assumed command of the 27th Aero Squadron in September 1917 when it was sent to Toronto to train for war.

When his new replacements arrived on July 25, they joined a squadron of 16 other men, three-fourths of whom had been together since the Kelly Field, Texas, muster of the squadron on May 8, 1917. That dozen had been together through initial training...further training in Canada under Hartney,

the long trip to Europe, and the early days of aerial combat during Germany's Spring Offensive of 1918. They were a tight-knit group that knew each other well, had learned to trust each other, and found unity in the things they had in common. One of the common denominators was that ALL had college educations, most from prestigious Ivy League institutions. Their enlistment in the Army's Air Service had been for most of them simply a move from one fraternity to a new one.

If the aerodrome at Saints had been a University Campus, the B.M.O.C. would probably have been First Lieutenant Alfred "Ack" Grant. During his tenure at Kansas State Agricultural College, Grant had served in the campus military cadet corps. Though not necessarily impressive in either resume or combat flight, Grant had a little more military bearing than the others and tended towards leadership. He also had two confirmed victories in combat.

In contrast was the hard-working Lieutenant Jerry Vasconcells, born and raised in the small Kansas town of Lyons, then working his way through an education at the University of Denver in Colorado. (With one confirmed victory when the replacements arrived, Vasconcells would go on to become Colorado's ONLY ace of World War II, yet vanish into obscurity in his home state.) The military bearing that marked Grant was more than made up for by the engaging personality of Vasconcells.

Neither Grant nor Vasconcells had ever attained the Ivy League status held by most of their contemporaries, but both were able to find their niche in the 27th Aero Squadron. The Good Ol' Boy Fraternity consisted of a dozen young men in their early twenties, who had traded their fraternity sweaters for a pair of goggles and their walking sticks for ailerons. It was into this mix that the green but eager young replacements were thrown.

### **The Arizona Boaster**

Asking the 21-year old kid from Arizona to become part of this fraternity was akin to mixing oil and water. To begin with, though a college education was required even among the earliest US Army aviators, no one knows when, where, or even **IF** Frank Luke attended college. He graduated from Phoenix's Union High School somewhere around 1915-16, where yearbooks described him as "Too happy-go-lucky to know his own talents." What he did in the two years following is not generally known. If he did NOT attend college, he must have pulled some fancy strings to get into pilot training.



Frank Jr. was born and raised in Arizona Territory, in its own way "the new kid on the block" having only achieved statehood six years before Luke arrived in Europe. Frank Luke Sr. was a respected man in the community, a shopkeeper before turning to politics where he served as the Phoenix City Assessor, Maricopa County Supervisor, and finally as a member of the Arizona State Tax Commission. In 1917 the family patriarch moved his family (there were nine children with Frank Jr. squarely in the middle) into a new home at 2200 Monroe Street, one of the city's finest homes in one of its best neighborhoods.

In September 1917 Frank Jr. trained at the School of Military Aeronautics at Austin, Texas, where he managed to get orders for flight school. On a two-week leave that fall, he returned to Phoenix to visit the new family home on Monroe Street. During that brief period he was rushing off to watch a football game one night when his mother called for him. Tillie Luke was busily turning the new house into a home and wanted her son to plant some lily bulbs before he left. Hurriedly Frank dug up a few holes, randomly placed the bulbs, covered them neatly, and rushed off to catch his game. It was a simple act, one of those common occurrences in life that, in Frank's case, would ultimately add a touching appendix to his legendary life.

On January 23, 1918, he got his wings and a commission as a second lieutenant at Rockwell Field in San Diego. After another leave he was off to catch his ship in New York and find his war.



## August 1, 1918

When Frank Luke and the other replacements arrived at 27th operations on July 25, the squadron's only Ace was Commander Hartney, who had got his kills flying with the R.A.F. No other pilot in the squadron had more than two victories.

In that last week of July, Hartney wasted no time getting his new pilots in the air, often leading them himself on combat patrols. Despite almost daily flights...not a single combat report was filed by any of the pilots. The mission on August 1 would change all that and give the new pilots a rude welcome to the unfriendly skies.

The early dawn mission was an 18-plane protection patrol for two Salmsons darting in and out of German territory to photograph enemy positions. After three successful passes, on the fourth incursion eight Fokkers of the Richthofen Flying Circus jumped the American planes. In the initial attack Lieutenant Charles Sands went down in a fatal dive—dead his first week on the front. A short time later he was joined by Lieutenant Oliver Beauchamp who had arrived at the front with him. Neither man had survived Hartney's "two-week" benchmark. But the rookies would not be the only casualties on the most disastrous day the Eagle Squadron suffered in World War I. *Charter member* of the 27th Lieutenant Jason Hunt was also killed in action.

The Eagle Squadron pilots claimed six victories that day, three of them by Lieutenant Donald Huston who now had raised his total to four victories and was close to becoming the only ace in the Squadron. Jerry Vasconcells also got a victory, bringing the future Ace's total thus far to two confirmed victories. But three more 27th Squadron pilots also fell that day, bringing the American losses to six. Veteran Lieutenants Richard Martin and Clifford McIlvaine and rookie Frederick Ordway were shot down in enemy territory and captured. With a 33 per cent casualty rate for the day, Major Hartney's squadron was decimated and would not fly another mission for more than a week. Frank Luke had missed the battle due to engine problems.

It was in the days following the August 1 disaster that the 27th Aero Squadron started getting its new Spads to replace the aging Neuports. Though the Spads became popular with the fliers of the 94th and 147th Squadrons, the men of the Eagle Squadron hated them for their unreliable engines. On August 9 a 13-plane reconnaissance flight was mounted to boost Hartney's pilots from the doldrums the August 1 disaster had dealt them. Four of the Spads had so many problems they had to make forced landings, including the one piloted by Frank Luke. Luke's was the only of the four Spads that was salvageable.

The squadron continued flights over the coming days finally engaging in their first combat action in two weeks on August 14. Though neither side scored a victory, the bullet holes in the canvas of the returning Spads proved that the 27th Aero Squadron was back in the battle. It was a badly needed morale boost, especially in view of the recent victories of now ACE Eddie Rickenbacker and the "Hat in the Ring Squadron." Competition was fierce among the squadrons of the 1st Pursuit Group, but it seemed that the 94th was the perpetual front-runner.

From the arrival of Frank Luke on July 25 until his purported victory on August 16, the only victories scored by the entire 27th Aero Squadron were the six enemy planes claimed in the August 1 battle.



## August 17, 1918

Frank Luke's victory the previous day had not only failed to earn him the respect of his fellow pilots, it had the opposite effect. Despite the disbelief of the others, Lieutenant Luke filed his combat report, and then went into isolation. Major Hartney seemed inclined to believe Luke's claim, but within the Good Ol' Boy network, there was only derision. For his unauthorized flight over the lines, Luke was grounded for three days and ordered to act as airdrome officer from 4 a.m. until 10 p.m. each day. Two of the rookies stood with Luke: Lieutenant Joe Wehner, who had arrived with Frank on July 25, and Lieutenant Ivan Roberts, who had joined the 27th in May. Beyond those two, however, Luke was a man alone.

Luke's misfortune took a devilish turn on August 21 when orders arrived assigning Major Hartney to the post of Group Commander. Though Hartney had been more than miffed by Luke's reaction to the welcome speech and even more upset at the young man's demeanor on the ground, he seemed to have an almost paternal understanding for the troubled young flier. After the war Hartney would describe Luke as: *"Bashful, self-conscious, and decidedly not a mixer...his reticence was interpreted as conceit. In fact, this preyed on his mind to such an extent that he became almost a recluse, with an air of sullenness, which was not that at all."* Other pilots recall Hartney saying of Luke during the war: *"He was the damnedest nuisance that ever stepped on to a flying field."*

Whatever Hartney's true feelings, he at least was the one person in authority who could view Luke rationally, to the point that the other pilots ribbed their commander by referring to Luke as Hartney's "boyfriend." Hartney's promotion left a void in the Eagle Squadron's command structure that was quickly filled by Lieutenant "Ack" Grant. There would be no *slack* cut on behalf of Frank Luke in the days ahead. After one of his solo missions, Grant called him in to straighten him out. "I don't know what you got away with under Hartney," he told Luke, "but things will be different now. You will get with the program, fight this war by the book, or so help me I'll have those shiny wings of yours." Then, to emphasize his point, he made Luke the engineering officer—one of those dreaded details that consisted of menial tasks and long hours.



In the weeks that followed, Luke avoided the other pilots when he could, taunted them to fisticuffs when he could not. To pass the daylight hours he began honing his marksmanship. On a motorcycle he would bounce across the field at Saints with a pistol in each hand firing simultaneously at targets mounted on nearby trees. With his mechanics he worked on his Spad, honing the engine and tightening turnbuckles to try to increase its maneuverability. The most hated man in the U.S. Army Air Service didn't seem to care if no one liked him. He was a loner and had carried that reputation since his first day on the lines.

That was how the legend of Lieutenant Frank Luke would be told for future generations. It is probably a very inaccurate explanation for the complexity of the young aviator's psyche.

Of course Luke had become known for weeks as *the pilot who was always dropping out of formation to strike out on his own*. The fact of the times was that dropping out of formation was a

regular occurrence for ALL pilots of the 27th, more so after the arrival of the hated Spads. If another pilot developed engine trouble, dropped out, and made a forced landing, it was chalked up to mechanical problems. Where Luke was concerned, mechanical problems became an excuse for those who disliked him for his boisterous talk, to label him independent, rebellious against authority, and a loner.

Luke was independent and quick to ignore orders if he had a better idea. But it is safe to assume that prior to August 16 the Arizona cowboy had still hoped to win over his fellow pilots. Had he not expected his victory to earn him a new niche in the Squadron, the negative reaction would not have affected him so deeply. In the weeks after his first victory, Luke did drop out often to visit with the French fliers. Everybody needs someone, and Frank Luke found his only human solace among these French pilots who seemed to welcome his company. Similarly, had Frank Luke been a true loner, he would never have developed the friendship that helped him generate a legend and ultimately turned him into a "MADMAN."

### **The German Spy**

When the new replacements arrived at the 27th Aero Squadron on July 27 Corporal Walter "Shorty" Williams wrote in his diary: "We suspect a couple of German spies are in our outfit." Somehow, the reputation of Lieutenant Joseph Frank "Fritz" Wehner had preceded him to the Western Front in France.

Wehner was indeed German by heritage, the American-born son of immigrant Frank W. Wehner who had risen from poverty to the American Dream in Everett, Massachusetts. The elder Wehner's sons had benefited from the Land of Opportunity, and had taken advantage of every opportunity presented to them. Like Frank Luke, Joe had been a standout athlete in high school, captaining the 1913 Everett High School football team to an undefeated season. When he graduated in 1914, his football prowess netted him a two-year scholarship to the Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire, where he earned honors as a member of the Kappa Delta Pi fraternity.



Joe Wehner was indeed the All-American young man—bright, athletic, and dedicated to all things good. Upon finishing his education at Exeter, he went to Berlin as the private secretary to an official in the Young Men's Christian Association. There he reportedly worked to help Allied prisoners of war until April 1917 when the United States severed diplomatic ties with Germany. He promptly returned home to learn that his surname made him suspect as an enemy spy, allegations further enhanced by his time living in Berlin.

Such charges were not uncommon during World War I, even famed race driver Eddie Rickenbacher (he changed the Arian spelling to Rickenbacker during his military service, partially due this prejudice), had been suspect and repeatedly tailed and investigated...even after joining the Army and going to Europe with the A.E.F.

Wehner joined the Army Air Corps during the summer of 1917 and was preparing for war at the Aviation Corps in Bellville, Illinois, when the F.B.I. launched an investigation on October 8. On October 14 the cadets received Sunday passes; and while they were out of the billets the assigned agent went through Wehner's belongings. Nothing incriminating was found, but the suspicion continued to hang over Joe Wehner for the rest of his military career.

As Joe was preparing to leave New York for duty in France in January 1918, he was again detained. It took a judge's order to free him so that he could join the February departure.

When Joe joined the 27th Aero Squadron, the suspicions followed him and denied him close friendships save for Frank Luke, a fellow first-generation German-American with a personality as different as could be scripted from that of Joe Wehner. Luke seems never to have suffered much of the suspicion endured by Rickenbacker, Wehner, and others (perhaps his father's political influence back in Arizona spared him); but among the pilots of the Eagle Squadron, Luke's friendship with the spy Wehner made him guilty by association and gave Grant and his buddies even more fuel to fan their hatred of the boisterous Arizonian.

## St. Mihiel

After August 16 the flights by pilots of the 1st Pursuit Group were all routine. Rarely did the pilots even see an enemy plane, and not a single victory was scored by any of the four squadrons. It was just as well. Colonel William *Billy* Mitchell was gearing up for the greatest American *air show* of the war, and until the opening guns he wanted his aerial armada well concealed.

On August 29 the Eagle Squadron got orders to move to a new aerodrome at Rembercourt near the Marne River. From the small grass field hidden by a ring of trees and artificial camouflage, the 1st Pursuit Group would be launching support for the first American offensive of World War I near the town of St. Mihiel.

The 27th began moving on September 1 and completed the transition on September 6, one week before the opening salvos of the offensive were scheduled to begin on September 12. For air power, it would be a defining moment if Colonel Mitchell could pull it off. For months the Colonel had argued for a unified aerial role in the war, and the St. Mihiel offensive would give him that moment. Half a million American soldiers and Marines, supplemented by 110,000 French, were poised to strike at eight German divisions along the line from St. Mihiel. Mitchell himself would command more than 500 fighter, observation and bomber aircraft in support of the offensive.



A key role for the fighters would be to deny the German tacticians intelligence information on Allied troop movements. If the enemy did not know the Allied strength, the position of its elements, location of artillery units, and the movement of troops, the offensive might well be a great success and turn the tide of the war once and for all. Such information could only be denied if the fighter pilots could somehow keep the German observation balloons out of the sky.

## Drachen

Perhaps no other type of aircraft was as important to either side during World War I than the large observation balloons...called "Drachen" by the Germans and "Sausages" by the Americans. From a well-placed balloon near the front lines, an observer could watch enemy troop movements and direct deadly and devastating artillery fire with pinpoint accuracy. Where a well-placed machinegun might kill dozens of soldiers or a bomb perhaps even a hundred; a good balloon could account for thousands of deaths in a matter of hours. To the infantryman struggling to survive the horrors of war near the front lines, the appearance of an enemy balloon rising on the horizon was perhaps the most dreaded of all sights.

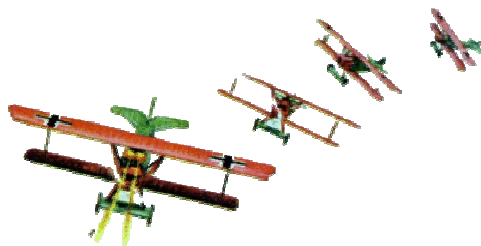
Because of their great value to warfare, both sides took extreme efforts to protect their balloons. Balloons were costly, scarce, and ultimately vital to success on the ground. One might think that the large orbs would be an easy target, stationary and far too big to miss. In fact, the most difficult victory for any flier on the Western Front was a balloon kill.

First and foremost, one could not *bag a balloon* without flying beyond friendly lines. Because they were stationary and tethered to the ground, they were hoisted only in an area controlled by their own forces. Furthermore, to protect the valuable balloons, anti-aircraft guns were concentrated around them on the ground to fill the skies with deadly explosions (called "Archie" by the Americans). This heavy concentration of fire built a literal protective wall around the gas-filled balloons that would quickly destroy any would-be attacker in the sky. Finally, if any pilot was foolish enough to fly into the deadly curtain of anti-aircraft fire in his quest to destroy one of the prized balloons, there was usually a flight of fighter planes lurking above to sweep in and quickly destroy him.

Attacking observation balloons was a suicide mission, and every pilot knew that. If, somehow a daring soul succeeded in his mission, and occasionally one did, the flaming eruption of the gas-filled airbag would all too easily engulf the attacker taking him with it in its final throes of death.

*"Any man who gets a balloon has my respect," Lieutenant Vasconcells said as the officers chatted in the mess hall on the evening of September 11. "I think they're the toughest proposition a pilot has to meet. He has to be good, or he doesn't get it."*

The other pilots nodded in ascent, adding their own small chatter to the subject of balloon hunting on the eve before the St. Mihiel Offensive was to begin. All participated in the discussion, that is, except for Lieutenants Luke and Wehner, who sat by themselves in the distance.



## September 12, 1918

At 5 a.m. the countryside near St. Mihiel reverberated with the sound of artillery as the first American offensive of World War I began. At Rembercourt, anxious pilots wolfed down a quick breakfast eager to become airborne and do their part to support the men on the ground. Their orders were to take to the skies to protect American balloons, but not to cross the trenches to engage enemy aircraft over hostile territory unless it was to conclude an engagement that had begun over friendly lines. Enemy balloons were to be identified and their location noted, but there was no standing order to attack beyond the trenches.

The steady rain that grounded all early aerial patrols for the 27th did not help the early morning jitters; not until 7:30 a.m. did the squadron get any of its pilots in the sky. When at last the first Spads took off, the flight consisted of eight pilots streaking out towards...and (despite earlier orders) across the lines of battle. Instead of flying in previously ordered three-man formations, all eight Spads hit the heavens like spreading shot.

One of the first pilots out was Joe Wehner. Shortly after takeoff he sighted a balloon near Montsec and fired 100 rounds into it. Quickly the German ground crew began winching the Drachen to the ground, and by the time Wehner had turned to make another run, the sausage was safely in its nest.



Lieutenant Leo Dawson sighted a line of enemy balloons, but avoided them after duly noting their position. He did manage to strafe enemy trenches before landing to refuel at Erize. Less than three hours after the patrol began, he was back at Rembercourt where he was quickly joined by the 27th's leading pilot Donald Hudson, who had seen no action other than to fire on a few vehicles in the city of St. Mihiel.

The day would not be totally uneventful for Allied fliers, however. First Lieutenant David Putnam of the 129th Pursuit Squadron was America's top pilot with thirteen victories (eight of these flying with the French before transferring to the US Air Corps), a role he had held since the death of Lieutenant Frank Bayless back in June. On the opening day of the offensive, the American "*Ace of Aces*" was shot down and killed. Though Allied pilots would claim more than a dozen victories that first day, Wehner was unsuccessful in his efforts to get credit for his balloon, leaving only one man to gain a victory for the entire 1st Pursuit Group. It would be the only confirmed balloon victory for ANY American pilot that day.



Lieutenant Frank Luke was near Marieulles, well out of his sector, when he saw the large black shape hanging steadily in the morning skies. Banking and turning 180 degrees, he climbed high above the Drachen, intent on fulfilling the statement he had made before he took off that morning, that he was going to bag a balloon.

High above now, he pushed the stick to the firewall, stood his Spad on its nose, and began his dive. The air around him shook with explosions as a curtain of *Archie* was hastily put around his target. Shrapnel ripped through the canvas of his wings and taught wires strained and snapped. Staring straight ahead he continued his dive, straight into the enemy balloon, opening up with his guns only when he was so close it would take great skill to avoid a collision. In the wicker basket hanging below the large black sausage, Lieutenant Willi Klemm tried to jump and parachute to safety, only to become fouled in the rigging. Below, the ground crew was anxiously winching the Drachen to its nest as Luke banked to come back for another pass.

The skies continued to explode around the balloon and heavy machine gun fire tore through the skies as Frank Luke made a loop and a half-roll to come in on his second pass. Moving even closer this time, he opened fire to rake a line of holes across the Drachen's side. Still, the balloon refused to die as he hammered it with every round he could until both guns jammed. Circling for a third pass, he reached under his seat, pulled out a hammer, and slammed it against his guns to clear them.

Few pilots dared to attack balloons, much less make a second pass if the first attack failed. Frank Luke would not be denied. Climbing in a chandelle as he hammered at his guns to free them, he flipped over on his back and came in again, machine guns blazing at the rapidly descending orb. Suddenly a white cloud erupted upward, nearly engulfing his Spad as intense heat threatened to burn

him alive. Coaxing all the RPMs his now ailing engine could muster, he burst through the explosion to see the enemy balloon collapse in a sea of flame. With a smile, he turned towards friendly lines.

The Spad's engine sputtered and struggled as Luke watched the trenches pass below as he crossed into friendly territory to land near Dieulouard. American infantrymen rose from their positions, running in the direction of his battered plane. "What's wrong, you hit?" asked one of the first to arrive.

"I'm okay," Luke replied. "Did you see me nail that balloon over there?"

"See it?" The soldier responded. "How could any of us miss it? How you ever managed to get out of there...."

"Here, sign this then," Luke interrupted as he held out a piece of paper and a pen to first one man, then another." This time no one would deny him his victory for lack of witnesses. Minutes later with a hand full of witness statements tucked in his pocket, Lieutenant Frank Luke climbed back in his Spad to return to Rembercourt. It was not to be. His engine had taken hits along with the rest of his airplane, and would fly no further.

Luke spent the day and that night with the men on the ground—weary infantrymen and the crew of an American balloon. Increasingly in the weeks ahead, he would finally find among them the crowd that cheered when he *came onto the field*. These men appreciated the work he was doing, eliminating the enemy balloons that could bring sudden death upon them. These were the men who fought it out in the trenches, who struggled often in hand-to-hand combat, to defeat their enemy and to try and survive one more day. These men appreciated the Arizona flier's tenacity and his raw courage to press his attack until he achieved victory. Without a doubt, they loved the *show* as well.

Lieutenant Luke didn't return to Rembercourt until the following morning, and then only after hitching a ride in a motorcycle's side car. It was Friday the 13th, but it would be a great day for American pilots—more than three-dozen victories. The 103rd Aero Squadron alone scored seven victories without a single loss. Among the four squadrons of the 1st Pursuit Group, however, not a single victory was recorded. Among the three-dozen Allied victories for the day, not a single enemy balloon victory was listed.

Luke fretted the time away waiting for Spad No. 26 to be patched up. The mechanics towed it back to Rembercourt and shook their heads in amazement. "*I've seen lots of planes come in,*" the chief mechanic stated, "*but when they come in this way, the pilot that flies 'em doesn't climb out of the cockpit.*" From the wings more canvas had been shot away than remained. The top left wing was nothing but air, wire, and three stringers. The empennage was a sieve and a huge gash had been ripped through the pilot's seat less than six inches from where Luke's body would have been seated.

Smiling, Luke stuck his finger in the hole in the seat and said, "You take care of the aircraft, chief. I'll take care of me. If I were going to get killed, this would have been it."

If Frank Luke swaggered a little more than usual on September 13, he had good reason. His balloon victory was more than verified (though strangely enough it wouldn't be officially credited for two weeks), and the condition of his Spad showed all too well the evidence of a man fearless in battle. His success did little to endear him to the rest of the squadron, more so in light of the fact that once again Luke had disobeyed orders, flying beyond the lines and poaching in another squadron's area. It also probably helped little that in two days the entire 1st Pursuit Squadron had scored no victories other than Luke's.

Saturday the 14th would be a different matter, however, a banner day for the entire Group. Second Lieutenant Wilbert White of the 147th knocked down one enemy Fokker and one Drachen. Eddie Rickenbacker, the most popular pilot in the *Hat In the Ring* Squadron (he had become an Ace by the end of May but hadn't had a confirmed victory in three months), brought down number six.

Luke left Rembercourt in a 12-plane patrol, armed for *sausage*. After his experience two days earlier, he had loaded his left machinegun entirely with tracers, hoping they would quickly ignite any balloon he encountered. Breaking away from the squadron with Lieutenant Leo Dawson, the two men attacked a balloon near Boinville. Luke's stream of tracers crippled the balloon, but failed to ignite it. In the first pass the German observer leaped out to parachute to the ground while Luke continued his dive to strafe the soldiers on the ground that were now pouring all their fire towards Dawson as he dived at the balloon. Lieutenant Thomas Lennon came in to deliver the coup de grace, the balloon collapsing slowly to the ground but never erupting.

The fate of the German observer who had parachuted to safety gives a unique insight into Luke's attitude towards his war at the time. Later asked why he hadn't strafed Sergeant Muenchhoff of German Balloon Company No. 14, Luke replied: "Hell, the poor devil was helpless." For Frank Luke balloon hunting, despite its danger, was still something of a sporting event, not a killing field.

Luke, Dawson, and Lennon each tried to claim credit for the balloon victory when they arrived back at the aerodrome. The squabble became just one more of those annoying disturbances Frank Luke would cause his new commander, Ack Grant. (Ultimately, each of the three men would receive credit for the victory.) After playing *referee* between his three pilots, Grant got an idea. Ignoring the one victory his squadron had scored that day, he threw a gauntlet before the swaggering blonde pilot that gave him so many headaches.

Pulling out a map, Grant drew a circle around the town of Buzy near the front lines of the ongoing offensive. *"There's a balloon there that has been giving us hell,"* he said. *"Corps has given our squadron the task of taking that balloon out. Luke, if you think you're so damn good, go get that balloon. It is heavily protected, not only by Archie but also by a whole flock of Fokkers. I'm going to send up a flight under Lieutenant Vasconcells. I want you to drop out of formation at Buzy and get that balloon. You can take one man with you."*

It was more than a challenge; it was a *solution*. Chances that Luke would succeed were slim at best, the job a suicide mission at worst. If Luke failed that might take some of the swagger out of him. If he got killed in the process, well, no one but Wehner and Roberts would shed any tears.

The Drachen at Buzy was concern enough that Major Hartney himself came over from Group that afternoon to visit the 27th. Flight Leader Lieutenant Kenneth Clapp informed him, "Grant and I are going to send your boyfriend, Luke, on that assignment. Now, here's the proposition: If he gets it, he stays in the 27th. If he fails and still comes back alive, you agree to transfer him to another outfit. Luke's a menace to morale."

Hartney didn't say much, just nodded his head. Meanwhile, Frank Luke was preparing for his flight with the one other pilot he had been allowed to select to accompany him, Lieutenant Joe Wehner. The two men mapped out their mission in detail, like teamwork. Luke had loaded his guns with incendiary rounds while Joe would arm with a mixture of tracers and slugs. Frank would fly in low to stitch a line of flaming rounds across the large black orb while Wehner flew up high to pounce on any Fokkers diving on the balloon buster. It was a well-laid plan but was still fraught with danger.

At 2:30 in the afternoon, Vasconcells led his seven planes as they lifted off from Rembercourt followed by Luke and Wehner. As they neared Buzy, Frank banked his wings towards Joe, and then

the two men broke away from formation to *do their thing*. This was the kind of stuff that had branded Luke an independent loner; only this time he was doing it under orders.

It was a stunningly clear afternoon, and even from a distance Luke could see the Buzy Drachen hanging brazenly in the sky. In the distance near Waroq he noticed a second balloon. That would be his encore performance. High above him Joe Wehner lurked, waiting for the dogfight that was sure to follow. Frank Luke knew Joe was going to have his hands full. In the distance he counted eight enemy aircraft speeding his direction to intercept his attack. Frank opened his engine wide, angling forward until he was rolling into a dive directly into a wall of exploding *Archie* and the looming shape of the German sausage. Gravity allowed his dive to reach speeds up to 160 mph, 30 miles per hour faster than the top speed of the Spad in normal flight. At such a dive, while holding fire until he was well within killing range, there was a very good chance he would take out the balloon in a collision instead of with bullets. Finally at point-blank range, he opened fire with both machine guns. A stream of deadly fire ripped through fabric...and then, his guns jammed...cooked by the rapid-fire of the incendiary rounds.

As his Spad passed the enemy balloon, he again felt the sudden rush of intense heat as gasses exploded and the balloon nearly disintegrated. As he passed the point of danger, his airplane began to shake under a horrible pounding to the side, as the bullets of an enemy Fokker raked him from prop to tail. The lead Fokker had nailed him and a second was coming in right behind him. Bullets splintered his instrument panel, shredded the canvas of his wings, and sailed furiously around his body in the exposed cockpit. Lieutenant Luke rolled to gain some distance, and then tried to break for safety with the enemy on his tail. Both of his guns out of commission and his airplane damaged to the point of nearly falling from the skies, it would be up to his partner now.

Joe Wehner had seen the explosion and knew that his partner had accomplished what no other pilot expected him to do. Now he watched as Luke rolled toward the ground with enemy machine gun fire ripping his Spad to pieces. Despite the odds, the brave little *kraut* from Massachusetts tapped his own machine guns and headed out of the sun to surprise the Fokkers. The ferocity of his attack startled the enemy squadron, which quickly dispersed. By the time they realized that they were being assaulted by but a single American pilot, it was too late. Luke had disappeared, and Joe Wehner was hightailing it back to join Vasconcells and the other seven Spads for the flight back to Rembercourt.

*"After the second patrol I had scarcely landed and made my way to Group headquarters when Grant, Clapp, and Dawson came galloping up, highly excited," Hartney later wrote of that day. "Dawson was the spokesman:*

*"Listen Major, we want to take that all back. Boy, if anyone thinks that bird is yellow he's crazy. I'll take back every doubt I ever had. The man's not yellow; he's crazy, stark mad. He went by me on that attack like a wild man. I thought he was diving right into the fabric. Then, even after it was afire, I saw him take another swoop down on it. He was pouring fire on fire and a hydrogen one at that."*

*"Said Clapp, with tears in his eyes: 'Gosh, Maj. Who spread that dribble around that Luke is a four-flusher? I'd like to kill the man that did. He's gone, the poor kid, but he went in a blaze of glory. He had to go right down to the ground to get that....balloon and they've got the hottest machine-gun nests in the world around it. They couldn't miss him.'"*

The Arizona Boaster had lived, and died, up to his brag. Three balloons in three days. It was unheard of. In death, Frank Luke finally earned the respect of his fellow pilots—the admiration that had eluded him in life.



And then the field phone rang. It was the 27th Headquarters.

*"Major, you'd better come down here quick and ground this bird, Luke. He's ordered his plane filled up with gas. He's just run over to Wehner's ship, and he says they're going out to attack that balloon at Waroq. His machine is full of holes, two longerons are completely riddled, and the whole machine is so badly shot up it's a wonder he flew her back at all. He's crazy as a bedbug, that man."*

## **The Arizona cowboy was back in the saddle.**

There was no third kill for Luke that afternoon. After an argument between Grant and Hartney ended with Grant posing the question to his Group Commander, "Who's running this outfit (the 27th Aero Squadron) Major, you or me?" Hartney had backed off to leave the man who had replaced him at the helm of the Eagle Squadron to command in his own rigid way. A good senior commander doesn't undercut those beneath him, and Hartney was a good senior commander.

That didn't prevent him from telling Luke in private, "I appreciate all you're doing. I'm so proud of you I hardly know what to do. It's only a few hours since the army called for the destruction of those balloons and you did it. No outfit can beat that."

Grant did allow Wehner to fly after the balloon at Waroq, but by the time Joe got there French Ace Rene Fonck had reduced it to flames. It was probably just as well. Ack Grant temperament could probably have handled no more heroics from the two outcasts of the Eagle Squadron on this day. A dose of jealousy might have only added fuel of his previous hatred of Luke and his partner, and it was no consolation that Frank Luke was now the Group Commander's *fair-haired boy*.

Things would only get worse for Grant on Sunday.

## September 15, 1918

The three-day rampage of the balloon buster did indeed send ripples throughout the 1st Pursuit Group that reached all the way to the top of the Air Service Command. Colonel Billy Mitchell labeled the 27th his "balloon platoon," and Luke had a friendly and open ear in Hartney to whom he could pitch his ideas. The Major was thinking about Luke's ideas for twilight balloon hunts when his planes began taking off in the morning. Soon, another ripple of excitement spread through Group Headquarters; 94th Aero Squadron pilot Eddie Rickenbacker had just shot down his eighth confirmed airplane. The *Hat in the Ring Squadron* was now the home of America's newest *Ace of Aces*.

Meanwhile, the *balloon platoon* was grudgingly preparing to carry out its own orders. Thanks to Luke's success, the squadron had received orders that morning via courier assigning it the task of taking out three balloons at Tronville and a fourth balloon at Villers-sous-Paried. The squadron's reputation, built by one daredevil pilot, seemed now to destine all of them to suicide missions.

Wehner was late taking off, so he was pushing his engine to catch up before Frank Luke broke away from the formation to do his work. Racing towards Etain (Boinville), Joe watched the mid-morning sky turn suddenly brilliant. Luke had beaten him to the punch and nailed the first balloon on his own. Instead of flying towards the brilliant fire in the distance, Joe turned towards the second target he and Frank had marked that morning, the Drachen at Bois d'Hingry. Again, as he

approached the area, the sky was filled with a bright orange flame and billowing white smoke. The Balloon Buster had struck again...two balloons and it wasn't even lunchtime.

This time Joe continued towards the scene of the explosion, concerned that his partner might be under attack from enemy fighters. He arrived just in time to find Luke streaking for home, seven Fokkers on his tail. Wehner opened fire to give his friend breathing room, shooting down one (the kill was unconfirmed and never credited to the soon-to-be Ace); and then both men raced for the American lines.

Frank had to land for repairs, but Wehner returned for a solo patrol to attack a balloon near Barq. After destroying it and shooting down one of its protecting Fokkers (neither victory was ever confirmed or officially credited), while returning he noticed eight enemy Fokkers attacking a single American observation plane. As he had defended Frank Luke against all odds, again Joe Wehner went into action, shooting down one and forcing the other to land out of control. For that action he would ultimately be awarded his first Distinguished Service Cross, though he was officially credited with but one kill...his first confirmed victory. (Wehner is also believed to have shot down one Fokker the previous day when he had covered Luke's attack on the balloon at Buzy.)

Shortly before five that evening, Luke and Wehner went out with yet another patrol in this most busy of days. As they neared the lines, the two pilots again split off from the main flight to hunt enemy balloons, but soon were separated. Northeast of Verdun Joe Wehner found his sausage hanging in the evening sky and filled it with incendiary rounds, getting his second confirmed kill for the day...2 for Wehner (1 balloon and one Fokker) and 2 for Luke (both balloons). Yet the two flew once more on this day of days.

Luke was eager to test his ideas of hunting balloons in the earliest stages of advancing night fall, and it was nearly eight o'clock when the skies lit up near Chaumont, and Frank Luke became a 6-kill Ace with three balloon victories in a single day. The feat was unprecedented, eventually earning Lieutenant Luke the Distinguished Flying Cross, though there would be no celebration back at Rembercourt. Attempting to return to his aerodrome, Luke became lost in the darkness and landed in a wheat field near Algers to spend the night, returning to the aerodrome after noon the following day.

## September 16, 1918

The St. Mihiel offensive ended its run with American soldiers pushing the Germans more than 10 miles backward in four days, the number of prisoners in the tens of thousands. Not only were the Kaiser's ground forces in total disarray, his airmen were reeling from the loss of more than 100 planes and balloons in the period. The normally invincible balloon companies were especially shaken, nervous now at the site of two lone Spads in the sky. Luke and Wehner had become a legendary team among both friend and foe.

The newfound respect the enemy had for them was posing its own set of problems. The duo flew two separate hunting patrols on the afternoon of the 16th, but every time they neared a potential target, the German ground crews were winching the large Drachen to the ground well ahead of the hunters. It was frustrating for two men making aviation history, and Luke approached Major Hartney once again about flying dusk patrols. He and Joe had noted balloon positions as they were hauled safely into their nests at the approach of their Spads earlier, and now Frank was promising the Group commander a triple-punch victory in twenty minutes if only he would authorize the flight.

In the boisterous manner of speech that had made him the most despised man in the squadron, he pointed to a map and said,

*"Wehner can get one about 7:10, I'll get another about 7:20, and between us we ought to get the third about 7:30. Just start burning flares and shooting rockets here on the drome about that time (to light up the field), and we'll get back all right."*

This time, fellow pilots took Frank Luke and his big talk seriously.

Not only was the experiment approved, it was publicized and even closely watched by the commander of all the aerial forces, Colonel Billy Mitchell himself. Rickenbacker himself, his new title of *Ace of Aces* in jeopardy, watched the events unfold in admiration and fascination, later recording the evening's activities in his autobiography, *Fighting the Flying Circus*. (Different accounts written after the war detail events and actual times with some discrepancies, but the basic facts of the balloon attack of September 16 are generally accurate.)

"Just about dusk on September 16 Luke left the Major's headquarters and walked over to his machine. As he came out of the door he pointed out the two German observation balloons to the east of our field, both of which could be plainly seen with the naked eye. They were suspended in the sky about two miles back of the Boche lines and were perhaps 4 miles apart.

"Keep your eyes on these two balloons," said Frank as he passed us. "You will see that first one there go up in flames exactly at 7:15 and the other will do likewise at 7:19."

"We had little idea he would really get either of them, but we all gathered together out in the open as the time grew near and kept our eyes glued to the distant specks in the sky. Suddenly, Major Hartney exclaimed, 'There goes the first one!' It was true! A tremendous flare of flame lighted up the horizon. We all glanced at our watches. It was exactly on the dot!"

"The intensity of our gaze towards the location of the second Hun balloon may be imagined. It had grown too dusk to distinguish the balloon itself, but we well knew the exact point in the horizon where it hung. Not a word was spoken as we alternately glanced at the second-hands of our watches and then at the eastern skyline. Almost upon the second our watching group yelled simultaneously. A small blaze first lit up the point at which we were gazing. Almost instantaneously another gigantic burst of flames announced to us that the second balloon had been destroyed. It was a most spectacular exhibition."

It had indeed gone like clockwork—Luke and Wehner both attacking the first balloon over Reville (for which each would get credit). Even as the flames from that first victory were fading into the darkness, Luke was single-handedly dropping the second balloon at Romagne in burning refuse over its ground crew while they in turn filled the sky with deadly bursts of *Archie* and machine gun fire. Minutes later Joe Wehner was completing the triple play as he flamed the Drachen at Mangiennes.

As the third balloon exploded, the ground crews at Rembercourt lit the sky to mark the field for their returning heroes, a fireworks display befitting the encore performance of the St. Mihiel offensive. For Joe Wehner it was four confirmed victories in two days. For Frank Luke it was an incredible eight balloons in five days...and the new title *American Ace of Aces*. Eddie Rickenbacker said he didn't mind being supplanted by the action, "We all predicted that Frank Luke would be the greatest air-fighter in the world if he would only learn to save himself unwise risks."

## **Madman from Arizona**

In the myriad of stories that were told and written about the Great Balloon Buster after the war, Frank Luke is often referred to as a "Madman" for the fearless abandon with which he attacked the Germans. On that night in September, as well as in the battles of the previous day, Lieutenant Frank Luke was far from MAD. Independent? Yes. A loner? To some degree, though his friendship with Joe Wehner shows he understood teamwork to some degree. But Frank Luke did not wage warfare with a crazy abandon. His incredible string of victories were the result of skillful flying, careful planning, and cunning calculation. All of that changed two nights after the famed triple play.

America's new *Ace of Aces* was a phenomenon, worshipped by the infantrymen who witnessed his amazing displays over enemy lines, revered by the mechanics that patched up his Spad after each action while marveling at his survival, and envied by pilots of both the Allied and German air forces. If Luke had any competition for first place in the ace category, it would come from Joe Wehner, not Eddie Rickenbacker or one of the other great fliers of the day.

Indeed, after the night of September 16 when Frank Luke bagged his eighth balloon, Joe Wehner could only claim four victories. In fact, had they all been confirmed and counted, Joe might have been one victory ahead of Frank. But where Frank and Joe were concerned, there wasn't a competition but a sense of teamwork. Rickenbacker described them thus:



*"There was a curious friendship between Luke and Wehner. Luke was an excitable, high-strung boy, and his impetuous courage was always getting him into trouble. He was extremely daring and perfectly blind and indifferent to the enormous risks he ran.*

*"Wehner's nature, on the other hand, was quite different. He had just one passion, and that was his love for Luke. He followed him around the aerodrome constantly. When Luke went up, Wehner usually managed to go along with him. On these trips Wehner acted as an escort or guard, despite Luke's objections. On several occasions he had saved Luke's life. Luke would come back to the aerodrome and excitedly tell everyone about it, but no word would Wehner say on the subject.*

*"Wehner hovered in the air above Luke while the latter went in for the balloon. If hostile aeroplanes came up, Wehner intercepted them and warded off the attack until Luke had finished his operations. These two pilots made an admirable pair for this work and over a score of victories were chalked up for 27 Squadron through the activities of this team."*

To say that Frank Luke was a loner who didn't need anybody on the night he became America's *Ace of Aces* would be to ignore one of military history's legendary friendships. The day following their spectacular night show, the two men went souvenir hunting together in the trenches and villages near the front lines. For the 27th, as well as most of the other squadrons, the successful conclusion of the St. Mihiel offensive warranted a day off. Frank had always wanted to capture an



enemy airplane with machine guns intact to send home as mementoes of his service in France. As the two scoured the battle torn countryside, they located a bombed-out house containing the bodies of a dozen Germans and two machine guns. Like kids, Luke and Wehner loaded the guns in their car to return to Rembercourt. There they cleaned and polished their trophies and shipped them to Paris to be held for them.

Shortly after five o'clock on the evening of Wednesday the 18th, the American infantrymen in the trenches heard the sound of two airplane engines. Looking skyward, they noticed two lone Spads crossing the lines and heading into enemy territory. The tempo seemed to pick up on the ground, and all eyes strained towards the east in anticipation of what they all knew was coming. High above Luke and Wehner could not hear the excited shouts of encouragement or see the waves of the weary soldiers. Instead, their attention was focused on Three Fingers Lake, the largest body of water in the area and a position the Germans had fiercely held since the earliest days of the war. With the doughboys driving them ever backward, the Boche had hoisted two important balloons carefully placed near the lake where they could easily observe the American troop movements and report back to the military planners on the ground.

While Wehner remained hidden high above, Luke went into a dive on a balloon tethered above a swampy area at the northwest edge of the lake. Echoes of heavy anti-aircraft fire rolled across the countryside as Luke pointed his Spad at the first target, never wavering as deadly missiles swarmed around him. At the last minute before it would seem his plane would disappear into the side of the



Drachen, Luke opened fire and banked away for a second pass, then a third. Rickenbacker wrote, *"Three separate times he dived and fired, dived and fired...constantly surrounded with a hail of bullets and shrapnel, flaming onions and incendiary bullets."* Suddenly the eruption of the volatile gasses mushroomed into the heavens and Lieutenant Luke banked, leveled off, and pointed his Spad east towards the second target.

To the west Luke noted six German Fokkers rushing to cut him off, but chose to withdraw by way of the second balloon in hopes of destroying it with a casual burst as he passed. Flying east towards his target, the six Fokkers managed to flank Luke to the south as he boldly dove at the second Drachen as the ground crew frantically tried to winch it down. Luke's success could not be missed...the lights of the exploding German *sausage* being witnessed all the way back to the American trenches. And then the six Fokkers were on him supplemented by three more that had slipped in from the north to catch him in a classic crossfire.

Whether by crafty design or by simple opportunity, the German fighter pilots had drawn the two American Aces into a well-laid trap. When Wehner dove to the rescue of his partner, he failed to see the three Fokkers that broadsided him from the north. In a moment the thrill of victory turned to horror as Luke watched his partner's Spad roll over, and then begin to fall, flames issuing from the its fuel tank. And then, suddenly, Lieutenant Frank Luke did become a madman.

At the moment the intrepid Frank Luke should have finally said "enough" and broke for home, instead a rage built up inside of him at the loss of his one friend. Banking his Spad, he hurled himself with abandon at the three Fokkers, both guns filling the heavens with deadly missiles of death.

Diving on the enemy plane to the left, Luke fired until it burst into flames and dropped from the sky. The other two enemy fighters were on his tail, and zipped past with their own machine guns blazing. Luke ignored the hail of death, banked and dove in on the second enemy Fokker. In his rage the fusillade was both intense and accurate. In the space of ten seconds, the Balloon Buster had destroyed two enemy fighters and sent the third running for home. His wrath still unabated, Luke banked again to seek out the remaining six Fokkers. They too were gone fading into the east.

In frustration, Luke scanned the horizon. North of Verdun he could see allied anti-aircraft fire in the twilight, indicating there was a German plane somewhere over the Allied sector. Luke banked and headed for the action, heedless of six more Fokkers that dashed to the rescue of their low-flying Halberstadt. The two-seater was an observation plane taking photos of the American positions at low altitude.



Luke zoomed past five French Spads, leaving them to deal with the Fokkers, as he dove on the German observation plane both guns firing incessantly. The large enemy airplane shivered against the pounding, then nosed over and plummeted to the ground. Luke was out of fuel and quickly switched to his ten-minute reserve tank, coasting into the forward advance field at Verdun. The field itself was under the command of Jerry Vasconcells, and it was there Luke spent his first tortured night after the loss of Joe Wehner. The victory was hollow in the face of his great loss, and Frank Luke would never be the same again.

That night General John J. Pershing receive a telegraph that read:

*"Second Lieutenant Frank Luke, Jr., Twenty-seventh Aero Squadron, First Pursuit Group, five confirmed victories, two combat planes, two observation balloons, and one observation plane in less than ten minutes."*

It was an accomplishment almost unprecedented in the history of aerial combat.

Thursday morning Major Hartney himself drove out to pick up Lieutenant Luke and bring him home. Knowing well the young man would be fighting the weight of emotion brought on by the loss of his friend, Hartney asked the stable and reliable Eddie Rickenbacker to join him. (Hartney also took along the Group's YMCA girl, Mrs. Welton).

They found Luke in a morose state unsatisfied with his incredible record of combat. His first question was, "Has Wehner come back?" Rickenbacker and Hartney just looked at each other in silence. Frank Luke had known the answer even before he'd asked the question. Still hoping against hope, the two men who had lost friends of their own, personally drove Frank to military headquarters in Verdun to see if any word of Wehner's fate had been uncovered. There was no word of the missing Ace, now credited with six kills (some records list him with only five, omitting the very plane he received the DSC for destroying on September 15.) For his part in the September 16 triple play that had been witnessed by so many, Wehner did receive a second posthumous Distinguished Service Cross.

While at Verdun HQ, Luke was informed that not only had his previous night's five kills been confirmed, but that three earlier victories had also been confirmed. The man from Arizona was credited with knocking down 14 enemy balloons and airplanes in only eight days. *"The history of war aviation, I believe, has not a similar record,"* wrote Rickenbacker in *Fighting the Flying Circus*.

*"Not even the famous Guynemer, Fonck, Ball, Bishop, or the noted German Ace of Aces, Baron von Richthofen, ever won fourteen victories in a single fortnight at the front.*

*"In my estimation there has never during the four years of war been an aviator at the front who possessed the confidence, ability and courage that Frank Luke had shown during that remarkable two weeks."*

That night the entire 1st Pursuit Group held a dinner in honor of Frank Luke, now a reluctant hero. When Major Hartney introduced him and asked the young lieutenant to say a few words, Luke stood quickly to his feet and simply quoted the father of one of the squadron's fallen comrades, "I'm having a bully time." Then he sat down amid a round of laughter, forcing a smile he really didn't feel in his heart. Frank Luke was a changed man.

Somewhere in the two days following his 14th victory and Joe Wehner's death, the Army sent a photographer to Rembercourt. The pictures probably comprise the best recollection the world would have of the Balloon Buster, and the most accurate look into his soul. Traveling into the countryside near Verdun, the wreckage of the Halberstadt that had been Luke's last victory was located. It was the only one of Frank's victims to ever fall inside friendly lines. There, Frank Luke posed for what is perhaps his most famous photograph. A closer look at his face reveals not the smile of a victorious hero, but the haunting gaze of a tortured soul.



Conspicuous by its absence in any of the written records by Hartney, Rickenbacker and others, is the reaction of Luke's commander Alfred "Ack" Grant. It is safe to assume that Grant never overcame his personal dislike for Frank Luke and resented even more the successes that endeared him to Colonel Mitchell and Major Hartney. The brewing clash of personalities would resurface again.



For the moment, Major Hartney could see that Frank Luke was near the breaking point. At the dinner in the Ace's honor, Hartney presented Frank with the most coveted prize in the Group—a seven-day pass to Paris. While Luke languished alone with his thoughts in the French capital, the entire world was learning of his exploits. Headlines in the September 21 *New York Times* read:

**11 GERMAN BALLOONS  
HIS BAG IN 4 DAYS**  
Lieut. Luke Also Destroyed Three Airplanes in the Same  
Period  
**USES INCENDIARY BULLETS**  
On One of His Flights the American Downed Two foes on a  
Few Gallons of Gasoline

## "The Last Straw"

Not even the magic of Paris could soothe the tortured soul of Lieutenant Frank Luke, and he returned from his leave early, probably much to the consternation of Lieutenant Grant. Ack had been at a loss as to how to deal with Luke for weeks. He was convinced the Arizona Balloon Buster had no respect for authority, no regard for orders, and was bent on becoming a one-man show in the air. At least with Luke in Paris for a week, the problem had a temporary solution. Luke's early return was not entirely a welcomed one.

While Luke had been gone, the ever-steady Vasconcells moved his B-Flight to the advance field at Verdun. On September 26, the day after B-Flight's arrival, the Allied forces opened their Marne offensive. It was to be a push to drive the Germans out of the Argonne Forest and ultimately lead to the end of war within six short weeks. Eddie Rickenbacker had done his part by knocking down three planes the previous day, the same day he also became commander of the famed *Hat in the Ring Squadron*. Despite his impressive record for the day, Frank Luke's position as *Ace of Aces* was intact, and Rickenbacker's intent according to his own autobiography had not been to compete with the Eagle Squadron's leading pilot so much as to compete with the entire squadron. Prior to that date, thanks to Frank Luke, the 27th Pursuit Squadron was the top squadron in the 1st PG by six victories. Almost since the inception of 1st Pursuit Group, under the leadership of the great Raoul Lufbery, the 94th had always led the pack. Rickenbacker was determined to see his squadron reclaim their position.

Frank Luke was back for the opening day of the offensive, flying out with Lieutenant Ivan Roberts, one of his few friends from the early days before the *Arizona Boaster* had been transformed into America's greatest hero of the air. It was Luke's first combat mission since the death of Joe Wehner seven days earlier.

While looking for balloons, Luke spotted a formation of five Fokkers near Consenvoye and Sivry and attacked. Though he claimed one victory and flamed a second, neither was ever officially credited to his already impressive tally. Ivan Roberts never returned from the mission. The last time Luke had seen his new wingman, Roberts had been tangling with two Fokkers on his own. The loss of two wingmen in two consecutive combat missions, both counted among his very short list of friends, was the final straw in the fragile psyche of Frank Luke. Never again would he fly in formation with or



endanger the life of another American pilot. In Frank's own mind, though he might be the greatest curse on enemy aircraft along the Western Front, he was a jinx to any Allied pilot who flew with him.

Returning to Rembercourt Frank thought about his new policy to only fly solo from that point on, fully aware that his vow would in all probability result in the loss of his wings or perhaps even a court martial at the hands of his by-the-book squadron commander. Bypassing the chain of command, Luke went directly to Major Hartney requesting permission to transfer to Vasconcells' field near Verdun where he would operate independently...and alone. Hartney agreed to discuss the matter with Grant, and Luke returned to his squadron to await the decision.

Sometime on the 28th, Frank ordered his Spad gassed and armed though no mission had been authorized. After flying to Vasconcells' field, he scanned the horizon waiting for the German Drachen at Bethenville. The balloon was by now notorious having appeared brazenly for two days while avoiding the guns of all Allied pilots. Luke himself had earlier stated that he would give his fellow pilots a shot at the belligerent enemy orb; and if they couldn't get the job done, he'd do it himself. Technically AWOL (absent without leave), and in what might have been considered a stolen Spad, Luke crossed the lines and made short work of the sausage that had eluded all other balloon hunters for nearly three days. In that unauthorized mission, Luke was also credited with the destruction of a Hannover CL near Monthainville. The tally was sixteen kills, and growing—unless Ack Grant could put a stop to his rebel pilot. In a final act of defiance, Luke landed to spend the night at Cignones field before returning to Rembercourt the following day to file his combat report.

## Epithet for a Gunslinger

The events of September 29 became muddled with the telling and the retelling of the legend of Frank Luke mired more perhaps by Hartney's efforts to spin the tale in a manner that reflected less his undermining of Alfred Grant's authority as commander of the squadron, and Grant's own efforts to play down his personal jealousy and dislike of Luke.

Just as the death of Lieutenant Roberts had been the final straw for Frank, the independent young Ace's unauthorized flight of September 28 was the final straw for Ack Grant. When at last Luke showed up in the afternoon at Grant's headquarters, the squadron commander exerted his authority. *"Where the hell have you been?"* he shouted.

*"There's a war on, Captain,"* Luke responded with a bit of arrogance. *"I've been out doing my job."*

Alfred Grant blew up. *"Listen to me hot shot, don't swagger in here and brag to me. Maybe you're the greatest thing flying since wings. In the air you may be better than the birds, but down here you are the lousiest officer I've ever seen. Down here you stink! Until you learn to act like a man, instead of a spoiled child, you don't fly. YOU ARE GROUNDED! Understood?"*

*"Yeah,"* Luke grunted, flippantly tossing his combat report on the desk as he turned to leave. *"By the way, I got you another balloon."* Then in yet another show of defiance, Lieutenant Luke walked to the airstrip, fired his Spad, and headed for Vasconcells' field.



As quickly as Luke's Spad lifted off, Grant was on the field phone to Verdun. "Jerry," he said when he had Vasconcells on the line, *"I've grounded Luke. He's on his way up to the field now. I want him arrested when he gets there. That's RIGHT! You hold him, I'll send someone else up to bring his plane back."*

*"What happens now?"* Grant's adjutant asked when the commander hung up the phone.

*"That damn Luke has to learn this isn't his own private war,"* Ack responded, knowing he was caught in a precarious position. He had just grounded the American Ace of Aces, the man who had single-handedly made the Eagle Squadron one of the most publicized flying units of the war. *"I'm recommending him for the Distinguished Service Cross,"* Grant continued. *"Then, I'm going to see that he's court-martialed."* (Some published stories after the war substituted "the Medal of Honor" for "the Distinguished Service Cross" when recalling Grant's statement that day, but a Medal of Honor for Frank Luke was the last thing on Grant's mind. When at last Grant did write the recommendation, it was indeed for the DSC and not the Medal of Honor.)

When Luke landed at the advance airfield near Verdun, a grim-faced Lieutenant Vasconcells met him. *"You're under arrest, Frank,"* he struggled against his own emotions to announce. *"I'm sorry, that's straight from Grant. I've got no choice."*

The tension was broken only by the sound of an incoming Le Rhone as it settled nearby. Major Hartney had chosen this day to visit Vasconcells' field to review the progress. As he approached the two fliers, Luke seized the moment. *"Glad to see you sir. I was just telling Jerry here, there's three drachens near Verdun. I've been watching them the last couple days, and I'm sure I can nail all three of them if you'll authorize a flight."*

Eagerly Luke sketched out his plan as Hartney nodded, and Vasconcells remained quiet about the fact that Luke was under arrest. When Luke finished, Hartney just shook his head in amazement. Military maneuvers were carefully crafted, weaving threads of intelligence, the guesswork of experts, and the education and experience of proven leaders into a well-planned strategic offensive. Once the plans were made, the commanders briefed their lieutenants, who in turn passed the word on down the chain of command to the men who would carry out those plans. With Frank Luke everything was reversed.

Luke laid it out simply, like plotting a drive on the football field. *"You set up a block here, you run down the field, you toss the ball....and TOUCHDOWN!"* Once he had mapped it out the intrepid junior officer briefed the commanders...Frank Luke strategy and chain of command all ran the opposite direction. And amazingly, it worked.

*"Okay,"* Hartney finally said. *"You want those three balloons, go for it."* Luke smiled. *"Frank, one thing though...."*

*"Yes sir?"*

*"I don't want you going out until dark. Wait until the sun drops, then do it the way you always have. Good Luck."*

Luke was impatient to get going. Hartney had set a takeoff time for nearly six that evening. At 5:40 the group commander was warming his own aircraft up for the return to headquarters when he noticed Luke already in the cockpit, his propeller starting to turn.

*"Highly exasperated I reached out of the cockpit and grabbed Vasconcells by the arm," Hartney recalled. "Go over and pull him out of that ship and tell him if he doesn't obey orders I'll stop his flying and send him to the rear."*

*"In a moment Luke's propeller stopped and Vasconcells made him get out of his ship. Luke looked at me sheepishly, grinning. I shook my fist at him. Frank knew he couldn't get away with it. The Le Rhone caught and I was off down the field for Group headquarters.*

*"That gesture, a shaken fist, was my parting with Frank Luke."*

Fifteen minutes later, in keeping with Major Hartney's timetable, Frank Luke was airborne and heading east. As he neared the enemy lines, he dropped low over the American trenches. Weary foot soldiers were quick to recognize the lone Spad, waving and shouting their encouragement. Near an American balloon company, Frank sent the Americans scurrying for cover as he leaned out of the cockpit and threw something to the ground. Circling for a moment, he waited while the curious soldiers ventured out to retrieve the brick he had dropped. It carried a handwritten note that read:

**"Watch those three Hun balloons along the Meuse. LUKE."**

Every eye along the front turned eastward where three German Drachen hung boldly in the fading twilight, then back at the legendary lone Spad as it began to gain altitude and enter enemy territory. Minutes later a cheer went up all along the American lines as the explosion of the first German sausage lit the heavens.

Though the first kill had looked surprisingly easy, it had not been. Perhaps as many as ten Fokker D-7s had seen him cross the lines and dove in to intercept him. Any hope Frank Luke had entertained of reaching the first balloon before enemy fighter cover reached him quickly vanished. Witnesses on the ground later recounted a five-minute aerial dogfight, one lone American in a French-made Spad against ten German Fokkers in the flickering flames of a burning Drachen. It was also reported that in the battle Luke shot down two of the Fokkers before his own Spad, riddled with enemy machine gun fire and trailing smoke...began its slow spiral towards the ground.

The Fokkers broke off as they watched the doomed Spad fall, turning in search of additional prey. With the enemy fading in the distance, Luke struggled with the controls, leveling off just 50 yards above the ground. Amazingly, he and his airplane had recovered from their lethal dive. Luke banked carefully on one wing; canvas now shredded, and pointed the nose of his Spad at the second balloon over Briere Farm.

Archie continued to break all around and the skies were full of flaming onions and flashing, ground-fired machine-gun tracers. On the edge of his peripheral vision Luke noticed the movements of two airplanes shadowing him. That would be Joe Wehner and Ivan Roberts, lurking above to protect him from German Fokkers.

Eyes intent on the second Drachen, he ignored all else to hold down the triggers of both his Vickers 11mm's and stitch the balloon's side with hot incendiaries. As he did,



he felt his own airplane shudder under a hail of bullets, then rocked back in his seat as something slammed against his chest. The Drachen erupted around him, hot gasses searing his face and momentarily allowing him to forget the pain in his shoulder. Breaking through the cloud of flaming hydrogen, the shadows were still there and continuing to pour a steady stream of bullets into the side of his Spad. "Why are Wehner and Roberts shooting at me?" He wondered, and then...

Joe and Ivan were dead. They'd fallen in the previous days demonstrating their loyalty to the *Balloon Buster*. Pain stabbed back in his shoulder as he reached towards the instrument panel to wipe away oil...and blood. Luke was hit, and hit bad.

Again he banked turning towards Milly where one more black Drachen was being hurriedly hauled towards earth by its frantic ground crew. Heedless of his pain or the now sputtering sounds of his airplane engine, he ran the gauntlet of continuous enemy fire. Holding down the triggers of his own guns, he swooped low on the third balloon as its crew tried in vain to bring it safely back to its nest. Again gasses exploded and the night sky lit up with the telltale signature of the American *Ace of Aces*...three balloons in less than fifteen minutes. Back at Vasconcells' field the fireworks began, lighting the airstrip inside Allied lines to beacon the American hero home.

Luke was already flying dangerously low after diving to nail the third balloon before it could be hauled into its nest. The lack of altitude now worked in his favor, hiding him from the enemy airplanes that had nearly ended his remarkable career. Streaking towards home, he felt the warmth of his own blood filling the lining of his flight jacket, and could see the sparks flying from the ruptured exhaust of his engine. The odds had finally caught up with Frank Luke, and he was in deep trouble. But he was still breathing, his Spad was still flying, and he still had bullets in his machineguns. Buzzing low over the village of Marvaux, he saw a troop of German soldiers along a trail that was in fact, the city's main street. Tipping his nose ever so slightly, Luke opened up as he passed over them, smiling as he saw half-a-dozen enemy soldiers fall.

And then Luke himself was falling. His last act of defiance in the face of death had sapped the Spad of any remaining ability to continue. In the distance he saw a line of trees just beyond the outskirts of the village and a small field perhaps large enough to put his crippled airplane on the ground. With the last of his ebbing strength, he fought the stick, leveling off as he fell and rolling to a landing across the muddy pasture. Behind him he could hear the shouts of the German patrol he had just fired on in Marvaux. Cradling his badly wounded shoulder, he forced himself out of the cockpit and ran for the tree line, working his way to a nearby creek. Dehydrated from the unstemmed flow of blood, Luke tried to gulp down the tepid water to give him strength for what lay ahead.

Suddenly the enemy was upon him, surrounding him from a distance and calling for his surrender. Reaching down with his good hand, Frank Luke drew his service pistol and gave them his answer. He had always said he would never be captured alive.

He wasn't! As quickly as Lieutenant Luke's pistol spoke in reply to the surrender demands, the enemy patrol riddled his body. Triumphantly, the Germans carried the shattered body of the American *Ace of Aces* back to Marvaux, stripping it of everything but the cheap wristwatch Luke wore on his left arm. There they dumped the body in the bed of an open manure wagon, refusing to let the townspeople even cover it. When at last the Germans had exacted their revenge, they dumped the body in an unmarked hole.

Throughout the night fireworks continued to light the sky near Luke's home field, a vain attempt to beacon the warrior home. The legend of Frank Luke wouldn't die even when he failed to return. Over the weeks that followed, stories circulated that the man who was perhaps the greatest



flier of World War I was hiding out with the French pilots among whom he had so often before found some semblance of friendship and respect. The Army carried him as "Missing In Action" for three months, and not until six months after his death, when stories circulating around Marvaux prompted recovery and identification of Luke's body (identification was confirmed by his watch), was all hope for Luke's survival put to rest. It was then also, for the first time, thanks to the reports of the villagers of Marvaux, that the story of Luke's last valiant battle on the ground became known.

Back in Phoenix, Arizona, however, the truth was already known. On a September morning in 1918 Tillie Luke walked out the front door of the big house at 2200 W. Monroe. It was well out of season for the lilies that normally bloom in the spring and yet, there they were in all their splendor—blooming in the place where a year earlier Frank Luke had planted them before rushing off to his football game.

## Blooming in the shape of a Cross!

### FOOTNOTE:

Lieutenant Grant was faithful to his promise, submitting Lieutenant Frank Luke for the Distinguished Service Cross. In 1919 the award was upgraded, and for his final flight on September 29, 1918, during which he engaged eight enemy Fokkers, destroyed three balloons, strafed a German column of infantry, and then landed and evaded capture until killed in action, Lieutenant Frank Luke was awarded the Medal of Honor.

Today, when one visits the Arizona State Capitol, you cannot miss the statue of a World War I airman standing alone beneath the Flag of the United States of America for which he fought. It is a home state tribute to the greatest airman of World War I, perhaps in fact, the greatest American Ace who has ever lived—Lieutenant Frank Luke.



## ***The Balloon Buster***

# F or the Men on the Ground

## Lost Battalion of WWI

Like the knights of old, the new *Knights of the Skies* were fiercely independent, notably courageous, and admirably chivalrous. Such chivalry was evident in their respect for the greatest among them, whether friend or foe. The impressive military funeral the British, French and American fliers gave their most dangerous enemy, the infamous *Red Baron*, illustrates that these men respected the qualities of skill, cunning, courage and aerial ability in even those they sought daily to battle with and destroy.

Also like the knights of old, these *Knights of the Skies* served with great empathy for the less fortunate, ever standing ready to defend them against all odds. It was to become a tradition that would mark the valiant service of American aviators, as well as those of other nations, through many wars to follow over the next century.

By the twentieth century dragons were known to be mythological, but modern weapons had advanced to the point that the ancient Knights of the Roundtable might have easily confused the big guns of the artillery or large tanks belching streams of deadly fire as a new breed of fire-breathing dragon. *Damsels in distress* may have been a rarity on the battlefields of the Western Front, but as pilots took off from their aerodromes each day to fly over the trenches in search of enemy planes, it did not take them long to realize that there was no shortage of distress. Perhaps one of the best glimpses of the impact the sight of ground warfare had upon the minds of an aviator, can be found in an account of 27th Aero Squadron Commander Major Harold Hartney's visit to the front lines with soon-to-be *Ace of Aces*, Frank Luke.

In the days after the August 1 air battle that cost Hartney 6 planes out of an 18-plane patrol, he assumed his dubious task of visiting the front lines to search for survivors or salvageable aircraft from the battle. In his subsequent book *Up and at 'Em*, he described some of the events of that trip:

*The first time I really took much of an interest in him (Lieutenant Frank Luke) was about three days after I had lost six of my officers and Don Hudson had shot down two Rumplers carrying four men on Aug. 1, 1918. I had already been up to the lines to see if I could find any of my boys. That first day I could not get any farther than Villers Cotterets, not far from our small advance airdrome, although farther north, and had to return by foot and freight train via Paris.*

*A couple of days later Luke came to my tent and said, "Major, Lt. Clapp (Luke's flight commander) says its all right for me to go up with you this morning if you can take me."*

*I shall never forget that journey. Frank, one enlisted man, and I went along in my Packard. On this trip he talked freely, of his days on the plains back home, of incidents of his training, (and) of his ambition to be an outstanding flier. He was extremely serious always.*

*Walking to the top of a hill we found the two German planes Hudson had brought down. The two pilots and their observers were still there, their faces black, the summer sun getting in its rapid work. One of them had on very light patent leather low shoes. This impressed Luke. "Wonder where he was the night before," he murmured. Rumor had it among the ground troops that one of the Germans was a girl, but this was not true.*

*Three hundred yards farther we came to the top of another knoll and looked down the other side, a smooth space of about a hundred acres. Never have my eyes rested on such a sight. May they never again behold one like it. The hill was literally covered with dead men, side by side, head to head, little or no space between, practically all of them American doughboys. They had died in droves charging German machine gun nests left behind to cover the retreat. Right in front of us were a German and an American who had actually pierced each other with their bayonets and neither bayonet had been withdrawn.*



*Frank stooped over and picked up some un-mailed postal cards fallen from a pocket of one of the dead boys. The one on top was addressed to his mother out in Iowa.*

*"Leave them there," I said. "That American padre over there is busy picking up such things to send back to the next of kin."*

*Carefully and reverently, Luke replaced the cards in the pocket of the dead Yankee.*

***"Boy!" he exclaimed. "I'm glad I'm not in the infantry. They haven't a chance, have they Major."***

No one can say for certain what impact Frank Luke's visit to the front lines had on his subsequent rise to become America's Ace of Aces. Luke certainly would not have become the great *Balloon Buster* had he NOT seen that battlefield early on, driven to attack them by the sheer fact that they were the greatest challenge to any airman. But perhaps to some degree, upon seeing the devastation thrown against soldiers of the ground, and in the knowledge that observation balloons contributed materially to such carnage, it gave him an added determination. We do know that during his brief stint as the Balloon Buster, he became a friend and hero to the infantrymen on the ground.

Of a truth, ground combat was no more dangerous than aerial combat. One of the best ways for a young man to become a combat casualty was to become an airman. But when the dogfight was over and the tracers had ended, the victorious pilot could fly back to his aerodrome to eat in a mess hall and sleep in a tent, while the infantryman struggled to sleep through a miserable night in a rain-soaked trench or "funk hole."

The sheer brutality of combat in World War I is perhaps most evident in the casualties sustained. During World War II some 16 million Americans served, suffering more than 1 million casualties, 408,306 of which were battle deaths over four years. During the three year Korean War

nearly 55,000 Americans were killed in action, and during the 14-years of American combat action in Vietnam, more than 58,000 Americans were killed in action.

While the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) arrived in Europe in June 1917, there was little combat action for the doughboys until the German offensive in the spring of 1918. From the closing days of May until the Armistice on November 11, U.S. Forces suffered more than 100,000 battle deaths and more than 200,000 wounded in action. That translates into more than 300,000 casualties among a force of 1.2 million soldiers in a period of only six months.

After decisive victories at Cantigny, Chateau-Thierry and the Belleau Wood to halt the Spring Offensive and push the German forces backwards, the 1st US Army under General John J. *Blackjack* Pershing launched the St. Mihiel offensive on September 12. Within 24 hours the German salient on the right bank of the Meuse River fell, eliminating a long-standing threat to the Allied line. More than a half-million American soldiers and airmen participated in the encounter. At the cost of 7,000 casualties they captured 16,000 Germans, 443 artillery pieces, and created a new threat to the enemy stronghold at Metz.



The results of these four major actions as well as British, Australian and French ground fighting primarily, in the north of France, had pushed the Germans all the way back to their first line of defense. In the north, this virtually impregnable system of trenches, bunkers, and barbed wire barricades was known as the Hindenburg Line. Built in 1916-17 under Paul von Hindenburg and his Quartermaster General Erich von Ludendorff, the well-fortified line stretched from Arras in the north to St. Quentin and eastward into Belgium. The dense Argonne Forest that lay between the Aisne and Meuse Rivers further extended this line of defense.

## The Meuse-Argonne Campaign

Though labeled a "forest," the Argonne could probably be more appropriately called a "jungle." Stretching from the Belgian frontier to Verdun, it comprises a region of northern France about 44 miles long and with an average width of 10 miles. Elevations average over 1,000 feet, but this average is difficult to compute because the area is ruggedly laid out in a series of deep valleys and sheer cliffs that rise to become high mountains. The entire region is heavily forested over a blanket of dense brush.

Throughout three years of warfare, German forces had supplemented the natural barrier of the Argonne with elaborate concrete





and steel bunkers, some so advanced as to contain electricity and modern furnishings. Machine-gun emplacements had been built up with concrete and timber to withstand the most formidable of assaults, and then carefully camouflaged to enable them to catch any advancing foe by surprise. The valleys and ravines were strewn with barbed wire, logs, and other man-made obstacles. When the Spring Offensive failed, the German forces were able to retreat to an area into which only a foolish enemy would dare to advance.

On September 22, following the highly successful St. Mihiel Offensive, General Pershing reluctantly moved his 1st Army into the Argonne sector. Four days later the American line, consisting of the 1st, IIIrd, and Vth Corps, stretched nearly 20 miles from Regneville-Sur-Meuse to La Harazee in the Argonne Forest above the Biesme River. Nine divisions formed the front line with three held in reserve. West of the Aisne River and on to the East of the doughboys were French troops, now under U.S. Command, poised to attack the German fortress. Opposing them was the German Fifth Army with eight divisions, part of the German Third Army, and enemy commanders had at least eight divisions in reserve.

With British and Australian forces attacking the Hindenburg line in the north while French forces assaulted the middle, the AEF was divided between the two sectors. Pershing wasn't happy to have more than one million doughboys involved on two lines separated by some 60 miles, but followed orders to poise the forces under his command to enter the Argonne Forest. Allied military planners hoped that this autumn offensive would continue to push the Germans, still reeling from their earlier losses, out of their sanctuary before winter set in. If that could be accomplished, the Allies would mount their own Spring Offensive the following year and hopefully bring the war to an end. Even the most optimistic tacticians would never have dreamed that in six weeks the campaign would be so successful as to result in Armistice on November 11.

## Phase One

The great Allied offensive that ultimately ended the war within six weeks began on the morning of September 26, and was actually conducted in three phases. The first phase (September 26 - October 1) drove a salient about 7 miles deep into enemy positions in front of the Hindenburg line. The one blemish on the first four days of advance was in the Argonne region, where the 1st Army struggled not only against the German forces, but also against the rugged terrain and inhospitable weather.

On the left flank of the 1st Army's front along the Argonne was the 77th Infantry Division, better known as *New York's Own*. Organized at Camp Upton, Yaphank, New York on August 25, 1917, most of its 23,000 men were citizens-turned-soldier as a result of the Selective Service Act of the same year. Ultimately, the *Draft* would call to service 2.5 million men between the ages of 18 and 30 during World War I. As such, the men who were holding the left flank of the American assault on the Argonne Forest were former Manhattan taxi drivers, Bronx tailors, Brooklyn factory workers, Wall Street executives, and first generation emigrants.



The bright blue patch bearing the image of New York Harbor's most famous lady, the Statue of Liberty, earned the division another nickname that would endure through World War II. The 77th Infantry became known as the Liberty Division and was the first Army division to arrive in France in the quest to shine the light of the torch of liberty in war-torn Europe.



While the Liberty Division held the left flank of the First Army's assault, its component 308th Infantry Regiment held the left flank of the Division. First Battalion, 308th Infantry, 77th Infantry Division was commanded by 33-year-old Major Charles Whittlesey, a most unlikely citizen-soldier.

Born in Florence, Wisconsin, the bespeckled Whittlesey graduated from high school in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, where his classmates voted him "the third brightest man in the Class of 1905." After high school young Charles attended Harvard Law School, graduating in 1908. Whittlesey was practicing law in New York when he was called to active duty in August 1917 and ordered to report to Camp Upton. After three months of training and an OCS (Officers' Candidate School) commission, he was sent to Europe where he first served with Headquarters Company of the 308th. When a three-hour artillery barrage signaled the start of the Meuse-Argonne offensive at 2:30 a.m. on September 26, Major Whittlesey prepared to lead his battalion of citizen soldiers into the German lair. In the process the 1st Battalion, 308th Infantry Regiment, 77th Infantry Division would lose its official identity to become forever, and erroneously labeled:

### *The Lost Battalion of World War I*

## The First Pocket

At 5:45 a.m. the 308th Infantry began the ground assault in their area of the Argonne region near the town of Binarville. To their right were the rest of the 77th Division and the bulk of Pershing's 1st Army. On the left flank were the 38th French Corps and the 368th Infantry of the 92nd (Rainbow) Division. During the first day's advance, the 1st and 2nd Battalions crossed a large number of enemy trench systems. For the most part, resistance was light except for Company A which encountered an enemy force about a mile southwest of Binarville, resulting in 8 Americans killed and 23 wounded. As night fell, the men of the 308th dug in and tried to keep warm against the oncoming chill of winter. To facilitate the advance into the Argonne, the infantrymen had been ordered to travel light, leaving behind their winter garments and wool coats.

Of that first night of the offensive, Major Whittlesey later wrote, *"We found mineral water in bottles in the German dugouts, so it might have been worse."* The 308th had advanced a quarter-mile during the day, achieving the Corps objective, a marshy area north of the German third line of trenches. Unknown to them during their advance, as they had moved dangerously into enemy territory, their own left flank had been unprotected. The 368th Infantry had been withdrawn, and further flanking cover would fall to the French.

The advance resumed at 1 p.m. on September 27 with Whittlesey's First Battalion leading the way. Company A again ran into a deadly hail of fire that decimated their ranks, resulting in 12 men killed, 18 wounded, and 4 missing. In the first two days of fighting, the 205-man company was reduced to 144 doughboys led by a single surviving officer. Casualties mounted among the other companies as well, and 2nd Battalion under Major Ken Budd was rushed to the front of the American lines.

At regimental headquarters during that day, Colonel Prescott was relieved and command of the 808th Infantry Regiment was transferred to Lieutenant Colonel Fred E. Smith, a likable leader who had entered the service from Bartlett, North Dakota. Smith had previously ingratiated himself to the men of the regiment by smuggling in a quantity of grape marmalade, which he sold to the men at cost to provide some dessert for their otherwise bland diet of field rations.

By nightfall, despite increased enemy resistance, the 308th had advanced nearly a quarter of a mile further into enemy territory with orders to continue at 5:30 a.m. the following morning.



Despite the orders to continue the advance, September 29 dawned with some good news. The first field rations in two days arrived, even as some units were moving out. As the half-starved men turned to welcome the needed breakfast, German observers noted the activity and opened fire in what the veterans of the regiment later called the "Cruller Barrage." The commander of Company B recorded in his official report: *"Bacon, butter, bread, and a one pound cannon barrage from the Germans, which wounds Corporal Spahr."* Despite the irony of being shelled upon receiving their first ration detail in two days, the day would only get worse.

Moving into an ever more-dense forest, the advance companies found themselves frequently separated and confused. Enemy trench mortars halted the advance of the assault for hours, and Company A suffered two more soldiers killed, eleven wounded, and one man missing. Company D had been reduced to but two fighting platoons; and enemy resistance throughout the region had wreaked such a toll on the 308th in the first three days that beyond the three battalion commanders and Major Whittlesey's adjutant, no battalion officers remained. Noncoms were forced to lead entire companies of infantrymen, now devoid of company-grade officers, and every unit was suffering from being under strength for the task at hand.

By nightfall the 1st and 2nd Battalions realized that the Germans had filled their exposed left flank, and communications had been cut off to Headquarters. Major Budd of the 2nd Battalion watched as elements of B and E Company came under fire in an exposed ravine from an enemy machine gun and ordered their withdrawal while covering the retreat with his pistol. Most of his doughboys settled in near a railway in the valley to dig funk holes to try and survive the night.

Companies A, C, F, and H had advanced under Major Whittlesey to an area only a half-mile southeast of Binerville before digging in for the night. Despite the chill, the men welcomed the rain that came that night, many of them having gone without a proper ration of drinking water for nearly four days. By daybreak the rain had become a curse, filling the funk holes and turning the trenches into a field of mud.

From the night of September 28 until October 1, most of the First and Second Battalions were well ahead of the rest of the advance—dug in to find shelter from the now heavy enemy fire, and suffering from a lack of rations and ammunition. To make matters worse, their runner lines were cut off by the German infiltration, requiring them to communicate with headquarters by carrier pigeon. Though the subsequent isolation of October 3-7 would mark them the *Lost Battalion* and their tenuous position labeled *The Pocket*, survivors later spoke of *The First Pocket* (the position from September 29 - October 1) and *The Second Pocket*, the later incident. History has often confused the two separate incidents.

## **Runner Lines and Carrier Pigeons**

As in any war, communication was essential to the advances of any unit during World War I. Before the advent of radio communication, transmissions of tactical information between headquarters units was left to telegraphed messages, or even more rudimentary means. Military units on the advance, as was the case with the leading battalions of the 308th Infantry, could not reasonably establish telegraph lines back to headquarters, so messages were normally passed through RUNNER LINES.

As the infantry commander moved his front lines forward, runner posts were established at intervals to relay messages from the commanders at the front to the headquarters in the rear, much as a track team passes the baton in a relay race. It was an effective means of two-way communications unless, as happened during the night of September 28, the enemy was able to surround the advance element and break the runner line.

Even more rudimentary was the backup method of communication, sending messages by carrier pigeon. An advancing unit during World War I often carried some of these small birds, trained to fly back to their coop upon release. When a message couldn't be sent by runner line, the field commander would write his message, fold it neatly into a small canister attached to the leg of one of his pigeons, and release the bird to fly home.

Back at the pigeon's coop an intricate system of wires were rigged to sound a buzzer any time a bird returned home. The coop keeper would remove the message from the canister, and then pass it on by messenger or telegraph to the appropriate headquarters.

On the morning of September 29, Major Budd and Major Whittlesey sent four such carrier pigeons with messages to headquarters. One of them summed up the situation:

***"Our line of communication with the rear still cut at 12:30 p.m. by machine guns. We are going to clean out one of these guns now. From a wounded German officer prisoner, we learned that there is a German Company of 70 men operating in our rear, to close up the gap we made yesterday. We can of course clean up this country to the rear, by working our companies over the ground we charged. But we understand our mission is to advance, and to maintain our strength here. It is very slow trying to clean up this rear area from here by small details when this trickling back of machine guns can be used by the enemy. Can line of communication not be kept open from the rear? We have been unable to send back detail for rations and ammunition, both of which we need very badly."***



Back at headquarters Lieutenant Colonel Smith read the message from Whittlesey and Budd with mixed emotions—concern for their tenuous situation surrounded by enemy forces, and admiration at their determination to comply with orders to continue the advance and trust the reserve elements to mop up their now enemy infested rear. Quickly he assembled a small detachment of ten men, two officers, and some runners to carry messages. With them the element carried ammunition to resupply the beleaguered forward battalions, and the regimental commander himself led them to the anticipated rescue.



The soldier acting as a guide for Smith's squad-sized relief force believed he was leading the element directly into the forward element's position, when in fact he became confused and wandered deep into the enemy-infested left flank. The first sign of trouble came when a German machine gun opened up from a distance of only 50 yards.

Shouting for his men to take cover, Lieutenant Colonel Smith ordered his men to fall back and take cover, while boldly drawing his pistol to fire on the enemy gun crew. Hot lead opened a hole in the regimental commander's side and he staggered for a moment, severely wounded, then regained his footing. Despite the pain, he continued to fire at the enemy position until most of his party had reached safety.

Realizing the hidden enemy gun posed a dangerous threat to his command, Lieutenant Colonel Smith refused first aid for his wounds. Working his way to a hand grenade dump he armed himself, then returned in full view of the enemy to single-handedly attack the menacing position. Before he could locate it, enemy fire again tore into his body. For his courageous leadership that day, Lieutenant Colonel Frederick Smith was subsequently awarded a posthumous Medal of Honor, the first of five for the men of the 308th Infantry Regiment, and the second to be earned by a member of the *Liberty Division*. (Further north in the attack on the Hindenburg Line, nine other American soldiers earned Medals of Honor on this day. To the south of where Lieutenant Colonel Smith's body lay, an eleventh Medal of Honor was earned in support of the offensive into the Argonne Forest when Lieutenant Frank Luke destroyed three enemy balloons before vanishing into history.)

Back in *The First Pocket*, Majors Budd and Whittlesey struggled to maintain the morale of their now starving battalions in the face of almost certain doom. One of their company commanders refused to let the situation ruin his sense of humor. Captain George McMurtry enticed his men with suggestions of: *"How would you like to have a good thick rare steak mothered in onions and some French fried potatoes?"*

One month shy of his 41st birthday at the advent of the Meuse-Argonne offensive, Captain George McMurtry could well be described as an "old war horse". Born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, he was a Harvard graduate when at the age of 22 he enlisted in the Army at New York to serve in Troop D of Lieutenant Colonel Theodore Roosevelt's famous *Rough Riders*, with whom he made the legendary charge on San Juan Hill during the Spanish-American War. As a young enlisted man, McMurtry became a career soldier who worked his way up through the ranks, then obtained a commission when the Army established its first Officer Candidate Schools in May of 1917. Described as a big, burly, Irish-American with a ruddy face who seemed to always be of good cheer, McMurtry was one of the most experienced officers of the 308th Infantry Regiment who easily acquiesced to the orders of those above him despite his greater degree of military experience.



Captain McMurtry's sense of humor and overt optimism was sorely needed during the three-days of survival in *The First Pocket*. Relief finally arrived on the afternoon of September 30 when Captain Delehanty and Lieutenant Conn guided Company K through down a narrow path to bring supplies to the beleaguered forward elements of Major Whittlesey and Major Budd. It was the same day that Major Budd departed for the General Staff College at Langres, and Captain McMurtry was assigned to command 2nd Battalion, 308th Infantry. Major Whittlesey later wrote:

*"Lt. Taylor came up with a lot of rations and a big carrying detail. Looked 'practically O.K.,' as George McMurtry put it. And everybody ate! That night I went back to Regl. Advance Hdqrs.-which had been moved forward in the woods. It was the blackest night I've ever seen and I had to be passed on from reserve post to post holding the hand of each successive guide. And I'll never forget going into the Hqrs. dugout and getting warm for the first time, and seeing Frank Weld's genial face. Cocoa, cigars. Then back to the Bn. again, which I found with great difficulty in the darkness.*

**"Orders were to advance at daybreak."**

Advance they did, directly into the enemy fire and more tragedy. Lieutenant Scott led Company A in one assault becoming one of nine men killed during the day. By nightfall no living officer remained to command the company, and of the 205 men who had comprised Company A when the assault began on September 26, only 106 remained.

## Phase Two

The first phase of the offensive against the German lines in the Western Front closed on a highly successful note. In heavy fighting the British, Australians, French, and American soldiers in Northern France had breached the foreboding Hindenburg line and stood poised to break it completely. The only dismal reports reaching Allied headquarters seemed to be those coming from the Argonne region. Phase Two (October 4 - 16) was set to begin. General Robert Alexander, commander of the 77th Infantry Division, had decided it would begin with his doughboys already turning the tide in the enemy-infested forest. He ordered a three-prong assault directly into the middle of the Argonne with the 308th Infantry Regiment pushing through a gap in the German lines on the left flank of the American front. *"My orders were quite positive and precise,"* he wrote in his official record of the Argonne-Meuse operations for the 77th Division. *"The objective was to be gained without regard to losses and without regard to the exposed condition of the flanks. I considered it most important that this advance should be made and accepted the responsibility and the risk involved in the execution of the orders given."*

At 10 a.m. on October 2 Major Whittlesey received his orders. Together with McMurtry's 2nd Battalion, he was to proceed through the gap in the German defensive line towards the ravine along the Charlevaux Creek and take up a position below the east-west La Viergette-Moulin de Charlevaux road and the railroad track that paralleled it. Orders were precise; the objective was to be taken that day, regardless of casualties, and regardless of whether or not the anticipated protection on the left flank by the French forces materialized. Remembering the earlier tragedy when flank support broke down and his doughboys were trapped for three days in *The First Pocket*, Major Whittlesey protested:



***"Well, I don't know if you'll hear from us again."***

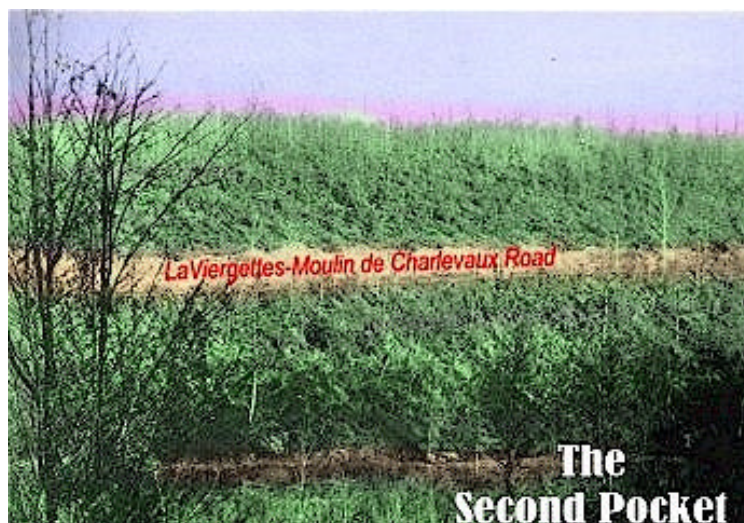
## October 2, 1918

As specified in his attack orders, Major Whittlesey placed two companies (D and E) under Lieutenant Paul Knight on the west end of the ravine as a containing force for the left flank. At 12:30 p.m. he then committed the rest of his force to the fulfillment of his battle orders.

The element that would later be called "The Lost Battalion" was not really a battalion at all, but a composite of three separate battalions and two machine gun companies. George McMurtry's 2nd Battalion entered the valley below Charlevaux Mill under the command of Major Whittlesey, giving him six companies of infantrymen from the 308th (Companies A, B, C, E, G, and H) for the attack, with Companies D and E in their position of containment. Supplementing the initial advance were nine machine guns from Companies C and D of the 306th Machine Gun Battalion. Despite the manpower of three different battalions in his composite force, Whittlesey's command was well below strength for a normal infantry battalion, and he entered the ravine with fewer than 700 men.

Slowly the American force wended its way along either side of the ravine behind a heavy artillery barrage and an advance line of scouts. Along the route Whittlesey placed two-man runner posts every two hundred yards, to relay messages to and from regimental headquarters. Resistance was relatively light and one patrol from Company D captured an entire company of German Hessians without a fight; the prisoners were marched back to the American rear guard. But when resistance WAS encountered, the results could be devastating. The already battered A Company assaulted one small hill and lost 90 men in less than thirty minutes of fighting. Only 18 men of the once 205-man company remained to enter *The Second Pocket* with Major Whittlesey.

After crossing Charlevaux Creek via a small footbridge, Major Whittlesey began placing his survivors beneath the road that was their objective. The battalion had reached its goal for the day by 6 p.m. and needed to dig in for the night. Whittlesey wisely selected a deep gash 300 yards long and 60 yards deep in the steep slope beneath the road. It was this gash, surrounded by heavy forest and dense brush, which would become known as *The Second Pocket*. Little did anyone realize that it would also be his home for the next five days. For too many men under the command of Major Whittlesey and Captain McMurtry, it would also become their cemetery!



The scholarly lawyer from New York certainly selected his position well, placing his command post in a funk hole in the center of the position and sharing it with Captain McMurtry. His machine guns were set up on either flank, and when the men had dug their own funk holes in the hard shale, they settled in for an evening meal of field rations. Quickly word spread that two of the companies had been marshaled forward so quickly they had been unable to draw their rations. Generously, and on their own initiative, the men of the other companies volunteered to share with those who had none, despite the order that had sent them into their present position with only one day's rations.



## October 3, 1918

### (Day 1)

Morning dawned after an uneventful but chilly night in the Argonne, as the men huddled for warmth in the absence of tents, blankets, or even heavy coats. Beneath the first rays of light, Major Whittlesey set in motion his runner posts, passing back to headquarters more than a kilometer away, news that he had reached his objective and advising of his condition and position.

Regimental headquarters already was aware of much that had happened the previous day, realizing that 1st and 2nd Battalion had entered the ravine below Charlevaux Mill after breaching the gap in the German line. Colonel Cromwell Stacey, who had replaced Lieutenant Colonel Smith after his death, also understood what Major Whittlesey didn't yet know. The two battalions from the 308th Infantry had been the **ONLY** American units along the entire 1st Army offensive line to break through the German defenses, leaving them alone behind enemy lines. On the evening of October 2, support units had been dispatched throughout the sector to support this advance American element. All had met heavy enemy fire, and ultimately only one small element succeeded in breaking through. That unit was the 97 men of Company K, 307th Infantry under a young Lieutenant named for a legendary American military hero.

Named for Civil War hero and Medal of Honor recipient Nelson Appleton Miles, Nelson Miles Holderman was himself destined to distinction. Entering military service as a member of the California National Guard, the Nebraska native had served in 1916 during the Mexican Border Campaign. When the United States entered World War I, he had risen through the ranks to the position of lieutenant in Company L, 7th California Infantry Regiment. He and his entire company were subsequently assigned as replacements to Company K, 307th Infantry Regiment, 77th Infantry Division. From the moment of his arrival at *The Second Pocket* early on the morning of October 3 until October 7, he and his 97 soldiers would be the last Americans to safely enter or leave the ravine along Charlevaux Creek. During the night of October 2-3, the enemy had discovered the breach in their lines, filled the gap, and then surrounded 554 Americans.



An hour before Lieutenant Holderman arrived in the pocket, Whittlesey had dispatched Company E under Lieutenant Karl Wilhelm to attack enemy positions west of the ravine and guide Companies D and F forward from their blocking positions. As yet the commander was unaware that his forces were surrounded and trapped, or that his runner lines had been broken. At 8:30 a.m. German artillery began to fall but with little damage, as the pocket was well protected by a reverse slope. During the bombardment, two small patrols were sent to recon the right and left flanks. Twenty minutes after the barrage began, the as-yet-undisturbed major dispatched the first of his carrier pigeons to the rear with a simple message:

*"We are being shelled by German artillery. Can we not have artillery support?"*

Shortly after the first pigeon was released, the bad news began arriving. Both reconnaissance patrols returned to advise Whittlesey that they had seen enemy patrols on both flanks and had been



unable to contact any friendly units. At 10 a.m. the survivors of Company E returned from their early morning mission to link up with the blocking force to the west. After departing the pocket and scaling the western slope of the ravine a large enemy force had engaged the company. Only 18 men under Lieutenant Leake had managed to get safely back to the pocket to advise the commander that the enemy had fortified the area to the rear of the advance line. Minutes later one of the men from the nearest runner post arrived to report that enemy fire had wiped out at least two posts, and the runner line was broken. At 10:45 Major Whittlesey sent his second pigeon back to headquarters with a solemn message:

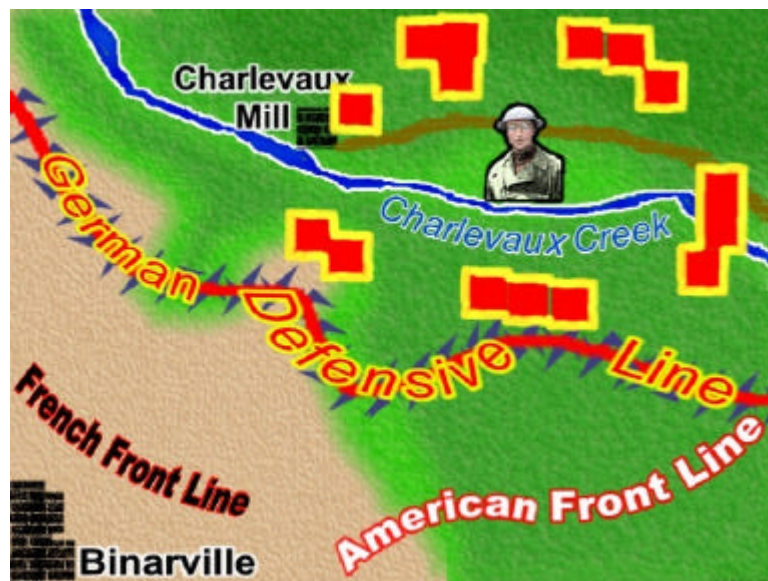
*"Our runner posts are broken. One runner captured. Germans in small numbers are working to our left rear about 294.6-276.2. Have sent K Company, 307th, to occupy this hill and open the line.*

*"Patrols to east ran into Germans at 295.1-176.3 (6 Boches). Have located German mortar at 294.05-276.30 and have sent platoon to get it.*

*"Have taken prisoner who says his company of 70 men were brought in here last night to 294.4-276.2 from rear by motor trucks. He says only a few infantrymen here when he came in. German machine gun constantly firing on valley in our rear from hill 294.1-276.0.*

*"E Company (sent to meet D and F) met heavy resistance, at least 20 casualties. Two squads under Lieutenant Leake have just fallen back here."*

Whittlesey and his men weren't lost in the traditional definition of the term. They knew exactly where they were, as did their command headquarters. Unfortunately for all of them, the Germans also knew exactly where they were. Even the wire service editor who later coined the term "Lost Battalion" acknowledged he had never meant to imply that the battalion was confused about its location, but rather that the battalion was *"done for... in a hopeless situation."* This latter definition was all too close to the truth of the matter.



<i><b>The Lost Battalion</b></i>		
<i><b>Roll Call - October 3, 1918</b></i>		
308th	1st Bn HQ and Runners	13
Infantry	Company A	18
	Company B	54
	Company C	85
	2d Bn HQ, Scout Platoon	52
	Co E	21
	Co G	56
	Co H	101
	Medical Detachment	3
306th MG Bn	Company C	13
	Company D	40
307th Infantry	Company K	98
<b>Total Strength - 554 Men</b>		

At last fully aware of their desperate position, Major Whittlesey and Captain McMurtry held council in the funk hole they shared, then personally passed their orders to their company commanders: *"Our mission is to hold this position at all costs. No falling back! Have this understood by every man in your command."*

As the afternoon wore on, sniper fire began raining on the pocket from all directions. In the distant woods the surrounded Americans could actually hear the enemy officers calling roll as they mustered their troops. And then they came, swarming the pocket from all directions. At 4:05 p.m. Whittlesey dispatched his third pigeon and last message of the day:

*"Germans are on cliff north of us in small numbers and have tried to envelope both flanks. Situation on left very serious.*

*"Broke two of our runner posts today near 294.7-275.7. We have not been able to reestablish posts today.*

*Need 8000 rounds rifle ammunition, 7500 chau-chat, 23 boxes M.G. and 250 offensive grenades.*

*"Casualties yesterday in companies here (A, B, C, E, G, H) 8 killed, 80 wounded. In same companies today, 1 killed, 60 wounded.*

*"Present effective strength of companies here, 245.*

*"Situation serious."*

Whittlesey's report of 245 effective soldiers reflected all that remained of the more than 400 men of the 308th that had entered the pocket the previous day. With slightly more than 150 men of the machine gun companies and Lieutenant Holderman's company, his force had fallen below 400 effective fighting men, and reflected a 25 per cent casualty rate in the first twenty-four hours alone.

To make matters worse, the men had eaten the last of their rations during the afternoon, and the vicious attack late in the day had taken a toll on the supply of ammunition. Fortunately his men had repulsed the enemy on all sides, despite heavy casualties. Over the days to follow the enemy would keep the Lost Battalion under his guns but did not again mount as heavy an infantry assault on the position. Perhaps the German commander understood that for the American soldiers trapped in the pocket above Charlevaux Creek, time was the German army's best ally.

## October 4, 1918

### (Day 2)

The weary men of the Lost Battalion welcomed the first rays of sunshine after their second frigid night in The Pocket. There had been little enemy action during the preceding hours of darkness, but to say the night had been a quiet one would have been to deny the cries of anguish from the many wounded. These put forth a heroic effort to maintain silence. Captain McMurtry had passed one private who had been shot through the stomach and paused to ask how he was doing.

Gritting his teeth against excruciating agony, the young doughboy replied, "It pains like hell, Captain, but I'll keep as quiet as I can."

Under cover of darkness, Major Whittlesey had dispatched several scouts with orders to try to break through the enemy cordon and reach the regimental headquarters. As daylight dawned a few of

these scouts returned to the pocket, wounded. Those who did not return were not heard from again and were counted among the missing.

False hopes were raised early on when a dawn scout patrol crawled through the marsh south of the pocket, only to be turned back by heavy enemy fire from the high ground. Though deterred from their mission, these reported that enemy activity seemed to be diminishing. Major Whittlesey appraised regimental command as such with his first pigeon of the morning, released at 7:25 with the message:

*"All quiet during the night. Our patrols indicate Germans withdrew during the night. Sending further patrols now to verify this report.*

*"At 12:30 and 1:10 a.m. six shells from our own light artillery fell on us.*

*"Many wounded here whom we can't evacuate.*

*"Need rations badly.*

*"No word from D or F Companies.*

*"Whittlesey, Major, 308th Inf."*

There was no mess call on this morning all rations having been consumed the previous day. The wounded were suffering the most among the men, but even those still unscathed by the intense enemy fire of previous actions were succumbing to the stress of more than forty-eight hours of continuous activity that precluded rest or sleep, the numbing effects of the cold nights without shelter, and the gnawing agony of their empty stomachs. Rising above their hunger and fatigue, those who could still walk turned to the sad task of burying their dead before the afternoon sun could begin its own morbid work on the bodies that littered The Pocket.

The burial detail was soon halted by an enemy trench mortar to the northwest, and Whittlesey sent out a large patrol that succeeded in climbing to the top of the ridge just in time to repulse an enemy force that was positioning itself to lob grenades into the pocket below. At 10:55 Whittlesey released one of his two remaining pigeons to advise headquarters:

*"Germans are still around us, though in smaller numbers. We have been heavily shelled by mortar this morning. Present effective strength (A, B, C, E, G, H, COS.)-175; K CO. 307-45; Machine Gun detachment-17; Total here about 235.*

*"Officers wounded: Lt. Harrington, Co. A; Captain Stromme, Company C; Lts. Peabody and Revnes, M.G. Battalion, Lt. Wilhelm, E Co., missing.*

*"Cover bad if we advance up the hill and very difficult to move the wounded if we change position.*

*"Situation is cutting into our strength rapidly. Men are suffering from hunger and exposure; the wounded are in very bad condition.*

*"Cannot support be sent at once?"*

Support was being sent and reinforcements had been struggling to reach the Lost Battalion almost from the moment it entered The Pocket, only to be turned back by the heavy German concentration around the ravine. The 3rd Battalion, which had been held in reserve and constituted almost all that remained of the 308th Infantry Regiment, had repeatedly thrown itself against the German defensive

line. On the morning of October 4 the battalion's K Company had seen its advance halted by a well-placed enemy machine gun.

First Sergeant Benjamin Kaufman gathered a small patrol to locate and destroy the well-concealed position. Moving in the direction from which the enemy fire emanated, he was separated from his patrol and continued alone until a bullet shattered his right arm.

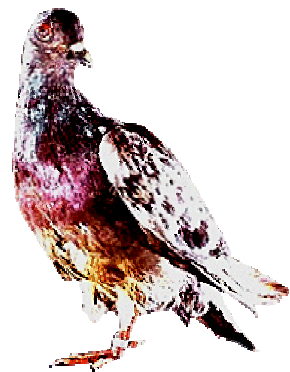
The line of fire that had severely wounded him had also marked the enemy position. Despite his pain, First Sergeant Kaufman advanced alone, throwing grenades with his left arm and then charging into the enemy with an empty pistol until he had scattered all of the enemy gun crew but one man, a prisoner with whom he returned to friendly lines along with the enemy gun. For his valiant action he was subsequently awarded the Medal of Honor.



The inability of the regiment, or for that matter the entire division, to reach the Lost Battalion with direct support left only one alternative—indirect support. This began arriving on the afternoon of Day 2 in The Pocket when American artillery shells began to fall across the enemy infested ridge to the southeast. The trapped Americans welcomed the boom of the heavy shells at first, and then became concerned as the rounds began to creep slowly down the slope. Then, as if to add insult to injury, one of the rounds landed in the pocket, to be followed by another and another. The men of the Lost Battalion took shelter in their funk holes, only to find the intense friendly fire burying some men alive as the holes collapsed under the explosive might of American artillery. Of equal concern was the devastating manner in which the explosions destroyed the trees and dense brush that had afforded the pocket camouflage from the enemy gunners. Across the small perimeter, hot shards of shrapnel flew to inflict even more casualties among the badly weakened composite battalion.

## An Unlikely Hero

Major Whittlesey's last carrier pigeon was a true *war veteran* named *Cher Ami*, French words meaning "dear friend." The Black Check Cock carrier pigeon was one of 600 birds owned and flown by the U.S. Army Signal Corps in France to carry important messages from the front lines. Already the pigeon had flown 11 important missions in the American sector around Verdun. Now Major Whittlesey scribbled out what might well be the most important mission *Cher Ami* would ever carry. It was brief and to the point:



*"We are along the road parallel to 276.4.  
"Our own artillery is dropping a barrage directly on us.  
"For heaven's sake, stop it."*

American artillery rounds continued to fill the air in and above The Pocket and had been joined by a German trench mortar. Into this beehive of deadly missiles, Major Whittlesey released *Cher Ami* and the last hope of his battalion. Stunned by the concussions around him, *Cher Ami* flew erratically, and then lighted in the lower branches of a tree. With hope fading, the doughboys yelled encouragement to the small bird, and then urged him to flight with some well-placed rocks.



At last the pigeon spread his wings and began to rise from the ravine. From hidden positions along the slope, German machine gunners directed a fearsome volley towards Cher Ami, knowing the small bird would be carrying important communications from the American commander below.

In *funk holes* desperate doughboys held their breath, then groaned in despair as they watched their important messenger take a deadly hit and then begin a slow spiral towards the ground. Somehow the little bird managed to spread his wings and level out, and then rise again to fly over the rim of the valley and beyond the range of enemy bullets. All they could do was hope and pray.

Twenty-five minutes later the buzzer sounded at the pigeon loft at Division Headquarters. An American Signal Corps officer peered in to see which of the birds had arrived. There, lying on his back and covered with blood, lay Cher Ami. The badly wounded pigeon had been blinded in one eye and shot in the breast leaving a hole the size of a quarter in his breastbone, from which dangled the few remaining tendons of his leg. Still attached to the nearly severed appendage was the silver capsule containing Major Whittlesey's message, which was promptly forwarded on to headquarters. Minutes later the deadly artillery barrage halted. Cher Ami had somehow survived to fly, badly wounded, through the hail of enemy fire. In less than half-an-hour he had covered 40 kilometers to save the lives of more than 200 Americans. For his final mission of World War I, Cher Ami was awarded one of France's most honored medals, the French *Croix de Guerre* with palm.

Back in The Pocket, Major Whittlesey breathed a sigh of relief. His men were exhausted, starving, and many had been badly wounded. The loss of 30 more Americans to the errant fire from their own artillery had been as demoralizing as it had been deadly. A flicker of hope was ignited late in the afternoon when the sound of an American airplane was heard high over the ravine. Whittlesey instructed his men to set out two large, white, marking panels so that the pilot could note the exact location of the pocket. The boost in spirit renewed the fighting vigor of the Lost Battalion, enabling them to turn back a determined enemy grenade attack before darkness fell.

By now ammunition was sorely depleted, and the three medical aid men had run out of bandages for the wounded. Despite the knowledge that with the advent of night the cold would again set in, the healthier doughboys removed their leggings so that bullet holes, shrapnel tears, and amputations could be bound up. Among the wounded was Lieutenant Holderman, suffering the first of what would eventually be three wounds in three days.

There were no rations and it had been at least thirty hours since any of the men in The Pocket had eaten. Water too was running out. Under cover of night Whittlesey dispatched patrols with canteens to draw water from a small pond below The Pocket. In the darkness the thirsty doughboys occasionally heard a tinkering sound like a bell, indication that a German bullet had struck the canteens and probably the brave soul who bore it. A few made it back with fresh water, but most were never seen again. What water was obtained was given to the wounded.

## October 5, 1918

### (Day 3)

Burial of the dead commenced with dawn on the third day. It was a slow, laborious task by men so weakened by hunger and lack of food or water they could barely walk; but with grim determination they bent to the duty of at least providing their comrades some dignity in death.

Throughout the day the sound of additional airplane motors could be heard, and occasionally the men would catch fleeting glimpses of the American biplanes circling high above the ravine. From

time to time a small bundle attached to a long streamer would be tossed from the open cockpits, messages of hope for the beleaguered men of the Lost Battalion. All of them fell far afield of The Pocket, many of them dropping among the Germans. Major Whittlesey had chosen his defensive position well, hidden deep in the side of the sheer slope and protected from enemy artillery by the reverse slope. The terrain that sheltered him from the enemy, however, also hid him and his men from the eyes of the American observers overhead.

At 10 a.m. an American artillery barrage was launched against German positions, creeping across the ravine and then settling with effective determination on the ridge to the north from which the enemy had launched daily attacks. The implied message for the Americans under Whittlesey and McMurtry was: *"We know where YOU are, and we know where the Germans are."* To the optimistic few remaining in the command, it was proof positive that Cher Ami had somehow made it through the enemy fusillade to deliver his important message.

The Germans had placed a machine gun to cover the drinking hole below The Pocket, from which they quickly rained deadly fire on anyone approaching to fill the canteens. Reluctantly, Major Whittlesey sent orders that no more efforts would be mounted to recover water from the hole. It was futile, and it was deadly.

After more than forty-eight hours without food, men foraged among the brush for leaves, roots, anything to take the edge from their now aching stomachs. Lieutenant Holderman received a painful leg wound, and Captain McMurtry carried the stick from a potato masher (grenade) in his back. Both leaders ignored their pain to continue rounds among their survivors, giving words of hope and encouragement, and urging them to continued resistance against periodic sniper fire and occasional attacks throughout the day.



Before the wounded that succumbed were buried, bandages were stripped from their broken flesh to be reused on other wounded who still clung to life. The filthy blood-and-puss soaked bandages were a certain shortcut to deadly gangrene, but there was little choice.

All along the American front line, the plight of the Lost Battalion was well known, though the details were certainly not understood. They had been the only American unit along the Argonne to breach the German defenses, and now they were paying the price for their success. Colonel Stacey had repeatedly thrown his 3rd Battalion against the enemy in an effort to reach Whittlesey, only to see the one remaining battalion of the 308th Regiment nearly decimated. He requested to be relieved rather than order them back into the morass and was replaced on October 5th by Brigadier General Evan Johnson and then Captain Breckenridge. All along the front, other American units of the 1st Army fought fiercely against the enemy defensive line in hopes of breaking the stalemate and somehow relieving the pressure on the Lost Battalion.

Responding to telegraphed news reports of the battalion of Americans in the Argonne Forest, a copy editor back in the United States penciled in the word "lost," and the erroneous title was born. Spanish-American War veteran and former *Pueblo* (Colorado) *Chieftain* reporter Damon Runyon picked up on the title and began using it in his own news stories wired back home. By now a leading American War Correspondent, his stories perpetuated the label and thus ensured that it would stick for succeeding generations.

Struggling to survive in a small pocket in the Argonne Forest, the "Lost Battalion" was becoming a sensational story. Needless to say, reports of their situation were read and well known to the German forces that surrounded them. Major Whittlesey was writing a new chapter in World War I history. On the cold, rainy night of October 5 the new United States Army Air Service was poised to write a new chapter in history as well.

## ***Help From Above***

**October 6, 1918**

**(Day 4)**



### **The 50th Aero Squadron**

Not all the pilots of World War I aviation were flamboyant, one-man fighting forces. The *glamour boys* were certainly the men who took to the clouds to dogfight with enemy airplanes, record a tally of victories, and claim the title "Ace." Of no lesser importance however, despite the rather mundane nature of their work, were the pilots who flew to watch friendly troop movements, observe and report on enemy positions, and map terrain for those planning the tactics of ground warfare.

One of these observation units was the 50th Aero Squadron. Mustered at Kelly Field on August 6, 1917, the squadron was working under the 130th Field Artillery and flying out of its aerodrome at Remicourt near Verdun. The squadron adopted the image of a Dutch girl, painting it on the sides of their DH-4 airplanes.



The squadron conducted its missions from two-seat biplanes designed by British Captain Geoffrey de Havilland and designated as the DH-4. The American version was a hardy airplane, well constructed behind a powerful 400-hp Liberty engine with a top speed of 128 miles per hour. Two forward firing, synchronized Marlin machine guns and two swivel mounted Lewis machine guns provided both offensive and defensive fire power. The pilot flew in the forward cockpit with his observer behind. Between the two open cockpits, directly in the line of fire from attacking airplanes or ground fire, lay the fuel tank. It was perhaps, the only major design flaw in the sturdy airplane, but so fatal a flaw that the men who flew it labeled the DH-4 the *Flaming Coffin*.

The tenuous situation of the Lost Battalion resulted in requests for support from the 50th Aero Squadron. Initially the aircraft flew observation or dropped messages; but on the morning of October 6 the squadron's DH-4 engines warmed for something previously unheard of in military aviation. On this day pilots of the 50th Aero Squadron would attempt the first airdrop in the history of U.S. military aviation in efforts to resupply the battered and starving men tucked helplessly into a pocket of the slope above Charlevaux Creek.



Lt. Harold Goettler  
and  
Lt. Erwin Bleckley



First Lieutenant Harold Goettler banked the wings of his DH-4 and pointed it towards the foreboding terrain of the Argonne Forest. The 28-year old Chicago native had enlisted in the Aviation Section of the U.S. Army fourteen months earlier, earning his wings and joining the 50th Aero Squadron in France less than two months earlier. Behind him sat Second Lieutenant Erwin Bleckley. During the same month in 1917 that Goettler had enlisted in the Army, Bleckley had been commissioned a second lieutenant in the National Guard of his own home state of Kansas.

Lieutenant Bleckley had arrived in France in March of 1918 as a member of the 130th Field Artillery. When the new US Army Air Service sent out a call for artillery officers willing to volunteer for observer's school at Tours, Bleckley had raised his hand, earned the single right wing of an aircraft observer, and joined the 50th Aero Squadron on August 14.

Goettler had piloted his first combat mission during the opening of the St. Mihiel Offensive on September 12 with Bleckley seated behind him. Over the following weeks the two men operated as a team in the air, performing their usually mundane observation missions in the region. Today, things were different. The DH-4 carried a number of small, tightly bound parcels. The mission was to fly into the enemy's lair within the Argonne forest, drop low across the ravine bisected by Charlevaux Creek, and drop the badly needed supplies to the waiting arms of a lost battalion of doughboys below.

From the heights of the heavens, the rugged mountains and valleys of the Argonne Forest began to loom ahead. Goettler eased up on the stick and dropped the nose of his airplane to descend lower. Soon small white clouds could be seen coming from the trees as the enemy turned his weapons on the advancing DH-4. With a sharp eye, Goettler located the ravine through which the Charlevaux Creek wended its way; parallel a dirt road and railroad track. Enemy bullets swarmed past his head and tore through the canvas and plywood body of his airplane, but Lieutenant Goettler ignored the danger to reduce airspeed as he dropped even lower into the Argonne. Behind him Lieutenant Bleckley scanned the broken forest for some sign of the Lost Battalion.

Though the general location of Whittlesey's pocket was known because of the messages sent out by carrier pigeon, the forest and the terrain hid the desperate doughboys from view. In moments the DH-4 was climbing out the other side of the ravine, and no sign of the American force had been noted.

Glancing to either side, Goettler noted the torn canvas of his airplane's wings. He had taken a brutal beating on the first pass, but the sturdy de Havilland had weathered the storm, and no rounds



had found the airplane's *Achilles heel* between the two cockpits. Determined to deliver the badly needed food and ammunition, the intrepid pilot banked for a second pass. Coming in even lower this time, he was dangerously exposed to not only ground fire below but to ground fire from the high sides of the ravine towering above him. He was virtually caught in a deadly cross fire from three directions, from both sides of the ravine as well as from overhead. Still he ignored the threat, reducing airspeed and flying at nearly treetop level while Lieutenant Bleckley leaned from his exposed rear cockpit to drop the neatly tied parcels in the general vicinity of the dirt road, where they knew Whittlesey's men waited.

The first pass of Goettler's DH-4 had been five hundred feet above the valley floor. On the second pass he had dropped to a dangerous 300 feet, while enemy fire literally ripped his airplane to shreds. Having dropped parcels but not having located Whittlesey's pocket, he banked for a third pass, this time skimming treetops at less than two hundred feet. Bleckley continued to drop parcels until the last of them had fallen into what he hoped was the range of Whittlesey's men. With wind whipping through the thin wires that held their DH-4 together, the two men returned to the aerodrome. There were more than 40 holes in the airplane, two of them large gashes ripped by large pieces of enemy shrapnel. While mechanics worked feverishly to repair the aircraft, other pilots of the 50th Aero Squadron flew out on similar missions.

Throughout the afternoon the ravine was filled with the roar of the big 400-hp Liberty engines and the crash of small arms and machinegun fire. Fourteen missions were flown before the afternoon was spent. Two DH-4s were shot down and crashed in no-man's land, and a third limped back to the aerodrome with its bloody pilot struggling to keep his airplane aloft long enough to reach safety. As shadows began to creep across the eastern horizon, dozens of small bundles lay scattered across the ravine, but no pilot had as yet made visual contact with the Lost Battalion. They could only hope that their best guesses had placed the bundles near enough that some could be recovered.

The mechanics had finished making temporary repairs to the battered DH-4 of Lieutenants Goettler and Bleckley, and the two men volunteered to make one more trip to the ravine before darkness fell. Lieutenant Goettler planned to fly even lower than before, intentionally drawing enemy fire in hopes of locating the hidden pocket by simple process of elimination. Then Bleckley would be able to drop the packages directly into the midst of the starving soldiers. "Sir," Goettler informed Lieutenant Dan Morse before taking off on the final flight of the day, "Erv and I have decided we're going to find that bunch of doughboys or die trying."

Half an hour later, Major Whittlesey, Captain McMurtry, Lieutenant Holderman, and the demoralized men of the Lost Battalion witnessed one of the most amazing air shows in history. From a distance they heard the roar of yet another Liberty engine as the DH-4 approached. Slowly the roar grew louder, drowning out even the crash of the heavy enemy barrage. Wings vibrating against the laws of aerodynamics, struts whining against the whipping wind, Lieutenant Goettler was running the



gauntlet so low at times it seemed the large DH-4 would actually touch ground. Fighting the stick, the airplane would rise just in time to clear a tall tree, and then drop on the other side to scour the terrain for any signs of the Americans. From time to time as he skillfully navigated the ravine, Goettler strafed enemy positions with his forward Marlin machine guns. Behind him, Lieutenant Bleckley ignored the whine of enemy fire zipping past his exposed torso to carefully sketch out the enemy positions. By mapping these, it was becoming much easier to locate the one spot in the ravine devoid of incoming fire. That had to be location of The Pocket.

Nearing the far side of the ravine, Goettler pulled back sharply on the stick to clear the slopes, then banked for a second pass. To run the gauntlet again seemed sheer suicide, but perhaps with one more pass he could enable Bleckley to finish his map and pinpoint the Lost Battalion. Shadows were starting to creep across the floor of the ravine and the DH-4 dropped into the valley of death one more time. The forest literally blinked with the flashes of tracer rounds, and a pall of spent gunpowder hung low to obscure the terrain. Still Lieutenant Goettler stayed his course.

Enemy machine gun fire shattered the windscreen, and then the instrument panel disintegrated before Lieutenant Goettler's eyes in a hail of incoming bullets. Behind him Lieutenant Bleckley's Lewis gun fell silent and the young soldier, formerly of the Kansas National Guard, slumped in his seat. With blood flowing unchecked from his ruptured body, Goettler pulled back on the stick, gripping it tightly lest it slip from his bloody hands, and headed over the ridge to the west. Moments later the battered airship pancaked with a loud crash in front of the French lines, and slid sideways to a halt.

Surprised French infantrymen raced to the scene of the crash. "*Ces aviateurs--ils sont morts!*" shouted the first to arrive..."Both aviators are dead!" Quickly they set about removing the bodies for fear the airplane would burst into flames. The pilot was indeed dead, yet somehow the airplane had "landed itself." The legend of the Lost Battalion was soon supplemented by the legend of the *Ghost Plane*.



As the French pulled the body of Lieutenant Bleckley from the rear cockpit, they found he was still breathing, though quite shallowly. Somehow the intrepid observer mustered the strength to press a piece of paper into a nearby hand before he died. When the paper was neatly pressed out, it contained the detailed map of enemy positions in the ravine and the most accurate estimate of the Lost Battalion's location since they had entered the ravine.

***For the incredible courage demonstrated that day by the pilot of a lumbering DH-4 and his back-seat observer, Lieutenants Bleckley and Goettler were awarded posthumous Medals of Honor. In the air, no mission was ever routine, and no aerial specialty mundane.***



To the doughboys in The Pocket, the spectacle of multiple American airplane missions over the ravine on this fourth day of isolation brought a much-needed boost in morale. The sight of the falling bundles, which all knew would contain food, ammunition and medical supplies, was greeted with great hope by men who had been without food for three days and had almost passed the point of further hope.

So exhausted and weak from hunger were the survivors still remaining, that they could no longer muster the strength to bury their dead. From time to time the men would attempt to toss a few handfuls of dirt over an exposed corpse, or cover it with brush, but for the most part the bodies remained exposed where they fell.

Despite the glazed eyes and blank expressions that marked soldiers beyond further endurance, patrols had to be dispatched to reconnoiter the immediate area and report back on enemy troop movements and positions. Whittlesey selected some of his healthier soldiers and sent them in small groups to attempt to break through the enemy in an effort to reach headquarters. Three soldiers finally succeeded, the first men to leave the pocket since the morning of October 3. The rest of the scouts sent out were never heard from again.

The hope inspired by the sight of packages falling from the American DH-4s likewise quickly vanished. Virtually all of the bundles bearing the badly needed rations, ammunition and bandages fell beyond The Pocket, some tantalizingly close, but still within the area controlled by the Germans. From time to time a hunger-crazed soldier would try to reach one of the nearest bundles, only to be shredded by enemy machine gun fire as his comrades watched helplessly.

At 5 p.m. that evening the Germans mounted another heavy attack on the position. Over twenty minutes the doughboys expended what was nearly the last of their ammunition to repulse the drive. On the battalion's right flank Lieutenant Holderman watched as two men from the machine gun company in his sector fell to the enemy fire. Though twice wounded and suffering intense pain, he braved the frenzy of incoming grenades and rifle fire to move forward and carry the two back to safety. Then he went back to recover the gun lest it fall into the hands of the enemy. Holderman was himself wounded yet again.

The indomitable Captain McMurtry was now twice-wounded himself, and fashioned a crutch from a tree branch to enable him to move from funk hole to funk hole to direct the fire of his men, distribute what little ammunition remained, and to shout words of encouragement. Two officers from the machine gun companies were killed, and only two of the machine guns remained of the original nine. It mattered little that these two were operational, no crews remained alive or unwounded to man them, and between the two guns there remained only five boxes of ammunition.



Somehow the battered unit rose to the level inspired by its intrepid leadership, and turned back the enemy attack after nearly a half-hour of intense fighting. In the fading twilight some of the men crept to nearer German bodies to strip them of rifles and bullets to replenish the nearly depleted American armory. Then darkness again settled in. It was the battalion's fifth night in the 4-acre pocket, and the fourth without food, shelter, or even overcoats. In the cold the wounded cried out in moans of agony they could no longer suppress. Beyond, in the dense forest, the weary men of the Liberty Division could hear the laughter of their enemy. The Germans had recovered many of the dropped parcels and dined heartily on bacon, bread, and even chocolate. The taunts and laughs of the enemy as they gorged themselves on the rations so sorely needed by the Americans cause hope and morale to sink to new lows.

Dehydrated soldiers, now crazed for lack of water, occasionally ventured back towards the stream beneath the pocket. Each was met with a hail of enemy gunfire, and the ranks of the living were reduced again. The situation had become so bad Captain McMurtry passed orders among the men that, *"I'm going to shoot the next man that leaves his position to get water."*

No longer did Major Whittlesey measure the degeneration of his command in terms of days. Each hour wounded men died and unwounded men grew weaker. For the Lost Battalion, the end was more than near...it was imminent!

### October 7, 1918 (Day 5)

Under orders from Major Whittlesey, no attempt was made to bury the dead on the fifth day. It was critical for every man to conserve what little strength remained in order just to defend the position. Patrols were again sent out, but these returned quickly after meeting intense enemy fire. Earlier reports during the night that the Germans had started pulling back appeared to be totally false.

Near 10 a.m. that morning, another patrol of eight soldiers left the pocket. Eighteen-year-old Private Lowell Hollingshead later wrote that the patrol left after a sergeant indicated that Major Whittlesey had requested eight volunteers to try and break through enemy lines and reach battalion headquarters. Other reports later stated the eight men had left their funk holes in the early morning darkness, and on their own initiative, in a desperate effort to recover some of the food bundles that had fallen the previous day. Whatever the reason, eight weary doughboys found themselves slowly picking their way through the forest behind a full-blooded Indian from Montana that they had delegated to guide them out. Later Private Hollingshead marveled at how the young Native-American had picked their route, avoiding the most dangerous trails and carefully guiding them towards safety. But there was to be no safe route; Germans surrounded the entire ravine.

Private Hollingshead dropped to the ground and pressed his body as low into the dirt as humanly possible at the first sounds of incoming machine-gun fire. Bullets kicked up dirt all around him, and ahead he watched as bullets ripped apart the head of the soldier ahead of him. "This is the last," he thought as the fusillade continued to rake the position, and fell into what he later described as "a sort of coma or daze". His mind had literally shut down.

Reality returned when a German soldier walked within six feet of the prostrate doughboy, leveling his Luger at the American's head. "Kamerad," the haggard young American shouted. It was the only German word he knew.



*"He slowly lowered his gun, but it seemed several lifetimes to me and I can never tell you all the thoughts that passed through my mind in that brief space of time. I do however, distinctly remember that my first thoughts were of my Mother, Dad and home and then a review of my kid days and a multitude of thoughts too numerous to mention flooded through my mind....The German lowered his gun (and) he smiled a great big smile, and what a lovely German he was. As he stood there in his gray uniform fully six feet tall, his smile seemed to broaden and broaden then he started walking toward me. I suppose the reason his smile is still in my mind is because it was so unexpected, as I had been taught to hate and expect fearful things from the Germans should they ever capture me.*

*"The German stepped over to me and started talking in his own language and pointed at my leg. I half turned and looked to where he was pointing and saw blood spouting from my leg near the knee. For the first time I realized I had been hit. Then the other Germans appeared and began looking at my comrades and I knew then how they had fared. Of my seven Buddies I found four had been killed outright and all the rest wounded. Our Indian guide was one of those who had been killed. With this realization a sickening sensation came over me and I thought to myself, 'this is not real, it is just a dream'."*

After sending a runner to German headquarters to advise their commanders that four Americans had been captured, instructions arrived detailing a guard detail to bring the Americans to the HQ. Three of the wounded doughboys were wounded so badly they were carried out on stretchers. With his arm around the shoulders of one of his captors, Private Hollingshead was the only prisoner able to walk, or at least limp, to the unknown destination.

As they group neared the enemy headquarters, the prisoners were blindfolded for the last few hundred yards of the journey. When the blindfold was removed, Private Hollingshead found himself inside an enormous dugout in the side of a hill. The command bunker was completely furnished, divided into small rooms, and had wooden floors. The most elaborate room had a modern sofa, several chairs, a phonograph record player, and an elaborate carved wooden table on which sat a typewriter. There a well-dressed German officer greeted him. In contrast to the condition under which he and his fellow soldiers had lived over the previous week, Private Hollingshead was stunned. *"For the first time,"* he later wrote, *"I had a deep feeling of resentment."*

*"How long since you have eaten?"* the German officer inquired in perfect English.

*"Five days,"* Hollingshead replied.

*"Poor devil, you must be starved,"* the enemy commander stated.

*"I certainly am!"* came the response.

The German officer ordered food for his starving prisoner and proffered a cigarette from the case on his table, and had a doctor treat the man's leg wound, while Hollingshead wolfed down the first food he had tasted in five days. *"While I was eating,"* he recalled, *"Prinz (the German commander) and two other officers started asking me questions about our outfit, but finding it of no avail as I was still hungrily gulping down the food and between bites told them I was too busy to talk to them."*

While the young private was eating, his leg wound began bleeding again, and the surgeon returned to stop the bleeding. Then the interrogation, if one could call it that, began in earnest. There

was no torture, no electrical shock treatment, none of the dramatic sparring of warring factions the term "interrogation" implies.

*"What state are you from, Private?"*

*"Ohio," Hollingshead answered.*

*"Oh yes," stated Prinz, "I have been there to Cincinnati."*

The German commander took his field glasses and walked to the doorway, motioning for Hollingshead to follow. "Look out there along the ravine. Can you see the rest of the men from your unit?"

Peering through the powerful binoculars, Hollingshead was surprised at how easily the American position could be seen through the glasses. *"I'm sorry sir," he lied. "I can't see much of anything over there. I guess I'm just a little mixed up in my directions."*

Lieutenant Prinz laughed, then instructed the weary American soldier to lie down on the couch and rest. It was an hour or two past noon; and as Hollingshead tried to relax, he could hear the sound of the typewriter on the table as the German commander began composing an important message to the American commander.

Lieutenant Prinz paused at the typewriter from time to time as he contemplated his composition. It was carefully drafted in perfect English. The man who commanded the German 76th Infantry Reserve Division that had so effectively maintained the gauntlet around the "Lost Battalion," had in fact, lived in the United States before the war. For six years he had operated his own business in Seattle, Washington, returning to Germany when World War I broke out.

By mid-afternoon the message had been completed. Prinz awakened Private Hollingshead and asked him if he would deliver the message to his commander in the ravine. Hollingshead asked to read the letter first, which was allowed. Throughout the earlier questioning he had been careful to reveal nothing that would harm his comrades and had conducted himself honorably as a prisoner. Realizing he was now being asked to deliver a request for surrender, he at first balked. Only when the letter had been redrafted to reflect the reluctance of the private to comply, did Hollingshead finally acquiesce.

Back in The Pocket the men that remained had miraculously weathered another day of nearly constant enemy sniper and machine gun fire. It was nearing 4 p.m. when mysteriously the hillside grew quiet. The men holding the left flank strained their eyes against the dense brush, wondering if the sudden cease-fire was the calm before a storm...prelude to an attack that would finally overwhelm their position. Something moved in the tree line. Tired eyes did their best to focus, as something white appeared to move slowly towards the pocket. Finally at the edge of the clearing they could see a soldier in an American uniform, limping on the cane that enabled him to hobble slowly towards them, while holding high a stick to which was tied a white cloth of truce.

(After the war Private Hollingshead wrote of the cane Lieutenant Prinz had given him: *"That cane is still one of my dearest treasures."*)

When at last Private Hollingshead reached the perimeter of The Pocket, he was passed down the line to the funk hole Major Whittlesey shared at the center with Captain McMurtry. Lieutenant Holderman was summoned to join the other two commanders for this new development. Reaching into his pocket, Hollingshead withdrew a neatly folded, white sheet of paper and handed it to McMurtry, then came to attention before his commanders. McMurtry read the letter, then passed it over to Major Whittlesey. The neatly typed surrender demand was addressed to:

**Commanding Officer  
Second Battalion, 308th Infantry**

**Sir:**

*The bearer of this present, Private Lowell R. Hollingshead has been taken by us. He refused to give the German Intelligence Officer any answer to his questions, and is quite an honorable fellow, doing honor to his Fatherland in the strictest sense of the word.*

*He has been charged against his will, believing that he is doing wrong to his country to carry forward this present letter to the officer in charge of the battalion of the 77th Division, with the purpose to recommend this commander to surrender with his forces, as it would be quite useless to resist any more, in view of the present conditions.*

*The suffering of your wounded men can be heard over here in the German lines, and we are appealing to your humane sentiments to stop. A white flag shown by one of your men will tell us that you agree with these conditions. Please treat Private Hollingshead as an honorable man. He is quite a soldier. We envy you.*

*The German Commanding Officer*



The offer was difficult to refuse, worded with polite reasoning and couched in praise for the American effort. The legend of the Lost Battalion as written in the media and retold in the years after the war was sensationalized with Major Whittlesey's purportedly defiant response: *"Go To Hell!"* Such is the way with a legend; it grows with the telling and retelling. The story of the Lost Battalion was so incredible the facts really needed no embellishment. Such a response from the quiet mannered scholarly lawyer from New York would have been quite out of character. The fact of that moment is that NO response, either verbal or written, was made.

**No response was necessary.**

Major Whittlesey DID immediately order the white panels that had been set out to mark his position for American aircraft removed, so as not to be mistaken for a sign of surrender by the Germans. Some later reports quoted Captain McMurtry as responding: *"We've got them licked or they wouldn't have sent this."* It is doubtful that this account is any more accurate than the erroneous reports of Whittlesey's own defiant response, though such a statement would certainly been quite in keeping with McMurtry's personality and character.



Perhaps the most accurate record of the Lost Battalion's days in The Pocket was the unit history written shortly after the war by L. Wardlaw Miles and based upon reports from Major Whittlesey and Captain McMurtry, among others who were present. Wardlaw recounted:

*A private expressed, in one exclamation, the answer of the entire command to the German letter. He asked one of the officers if it was true that they had been called upon to surrender. He was told that the rumor was correct.*

*"Why, the sons of \_\_\_\_\_!" he said as he pushed back his helmet.*

In the trenches and funk holes, men who had been too emotionally drained and physically exhausted for five days, spoke for the first time. Into the forest they hurled a chorus of defiance...."If you Germans want us, then come and get us!"

## **THEY DID!**

The lack of an answer from the American commanders was an answer in and of itself, perhaps more profound even than the fabled "Go To Hell!" Within half an hour the Germans launched their heaviest attack yet. Grenades fell from above with greater accuracy than the bundles dropped by American aircraft the previous day. Driven only by their anger at the surrender demand, and perhaps by the knowledge that they were doomed and had nothing left but to take as many enemies as possible with them to their grave in The Pocket, the doughboys fiercely repulsed the enemy for more than twenty minutes. Then, as the shadows deepened over the ravine, the enemy fire halted. Stillness fell across the Argonne broken only by the mournful cries of the wounded.

In their funk hole at the center of the American position, Major Whittlesey and Captain McMurtry looked at each other apprehensively. The sudden stillness on the heels of the vicious attack was as ominous as it was eerie. It was a few minutes after 7 p.m. that a shadow moved swiftly towards them. The two officers gripped their weapons tightly as they watched the quick moving shape approach. It was a breathless runner with a stunning message. An American officer and a few doughboys had just entered The Pocket from the right flank. They were men of the 307th Infantry, Lieutenant Holderman's regiment. "The officer wants to see the commanding officer," the runner whispered.

Quickly Major Whittlesey followed the runner back to the right flank. Standing before him was Lieutenant Richard Tillman and a few of his men. The officer informed Major Whittlesey that Companies A, B, and M of the 307th Infantry Regiment had entered the ravine and waited in the trees only a few yards distance.

***At last, the Lost Battalion had been found!***

## October 8, 1918 (Day 6)

After Lieutenant Tillman met with Major Whittlesey, the three companies from the 307th Infantry Regiment were guided into The Pocket to reinforce the Lost Battalion. The enemy forces, now aware of the successful breach of their defensive line by other American units, began withdrawing throughout the night. Within an hour of the relief, rations were passed through the lines



and to the starving men who ate for the first time in five days. Along with the rations came medical supplies and improved medical attention to the wounded.

At dawn more rations arrived along with new reinforcements. Under Lieutenant James Halligan, the unit's senior Chaplain, the incoming soldiers buried the dead. Ambulances arrived along the Charlevaux road above The Pocket, and the wounded were quickly transported to field hospitals. By mid-afternoon Major Whittlesey assembled all those who remained alive and able to function, and the remnants of the composite unit marched slowly back to Regimental Headquarters. Their ranks numbered only 194 men from the more than 700 men who had started the assault and the 554 men who had been trapped in The Pocket five days earlier.

Upon being relieved after the five-day ordeal above Charlevaux Brook, Major Whittlesey was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel. He was promptly submitted for the Medal of Honor, and in turn recommended both Captain McMurtry and Lieutenant Holderman for Medals of Honor as well. Whittlesey and McMurtry's awards were announced on December 2, 1918.

Following the November 11 Armistice, many of the doughboys returned home in time for Christmas, Lieutenant Colonel Whittlesey himself arriving back in his home state for the holidays. On Christmas Day a ceremony was held on Boston Common, and the Medal of Honor pinned to the tunic of the mild-mannered New York attorney. It was the first Medal of Honor of World War I to be presented to a member of the United States Army. Lieutenant Holderman's Medal of Honor was announced in War Department Orders two years later.



The story of the Lost Battalion became perhaps the most talked about and written about event of World War I, growing more sensational with each retelling. Sadly, the bare facts alone were sufficient to inspire. Americans have always sought for heroes, and Charles Whittlesey was hesitantly thrust into that role. But, as surely as we need heroes to inspire us, a sad fact of human nature is that heroes also inspire jealousy and often resentment. Yesterday's hero, all too often, becomes today's whipping boy.

Lieutenant Colonel Charles Whittlesey was honorably discharged from the United States Army the day before his Medal of Honor was announced. He attempted to return to the practice of law, but the legend of the Lost Battalion would not let him go. There were rumors and innuendo that Whittlesey was himself, personally responsible for the tragedy. Some pointed to the minor error in the map coordinates he had sent back by carrier pigeon, others claimed the unit had been trapped only because the Major had overzealously pushed his soldiers ahead of all others. The fact that Major Whittlesey had simply followed orders to the letter, no more and no less, or that the general location of The Pocket was well known in headquarters, could not stop these sad rumors.

In 1921 the reluctant hero boarded the *S.S. Toloa*, a vacation liner to Cuba, to escape the war that wouldn't end for him. During the voyage he penned a letter bequeathing the original copy of the German surrender request written by Lieutenant Prinz to his friend, George McMurtry. He left his Cross of the Legion of Honor to his closest friend, former classmate at Harvard, and law partner J.

Bayard Pruyn. On November 27, 1921, Charles Whittlesey finally completed his escape from The Pocket of a steep slope in the Argonne Forest when he leaped from the rail of the S.S. Toloa and vanished forever in the vastness of the Atlantic Ocean.

George McMurtry also returned to civilian life, becoming a solid rock of hope for the men of the Lost Battalion as they attempted to put the war behind them and get on with their lives. Until his death on November 22, 1958, he personally funded regular reunions for survivors of the Lost Battalion.

Lieutenant Nelson Miles Holderman returned to his home state of California, rejoined the National Guard, and was appointed a colonel. In 1926 California's governor appointed Holderman Commandant of the California Yountville Soldier's Home, where he continued to serve veterans until his death on September 3, 1953.

In 1919 Cher Ami, the carrier pigeon that had carried the last message out of the pocket, died from his multiple war wounds. Over the next two decades the little bird became a legend in his own right—taught about and remembered by school children throughout the United States. His name became as familiar as those of Eddie Rickenbacker and Sergeant York.\*

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\* Last year (2001), nearly a century after the men of the 307th and 308th Infantry Regiment made their heroic stand in The Pocket, the most written about battle of World War I was recreated for a new generation of Americans by the Arts & Entertainment industry. From Major Whittlesey to Lieutenant Prinz, these heroes of American history are still remembered in the made-for-TV movie titled *The Lost Battalion*. Cher Ami is remembered in the movie as well.

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