



The Lafayette Escadrille

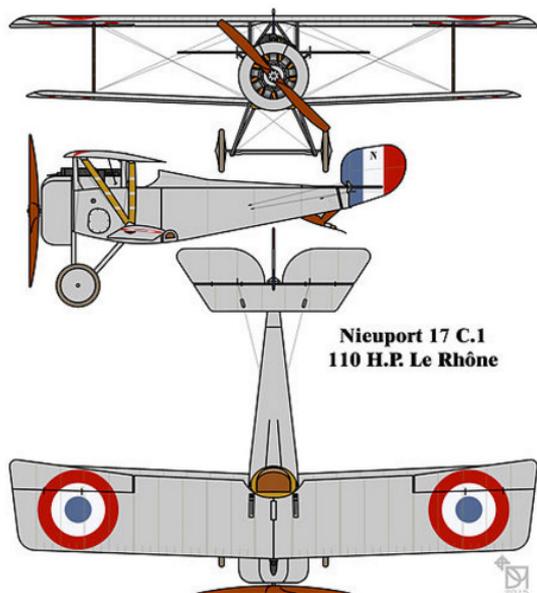


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FORWARD

By chance this month's main article is about the French/American Lafayette fighter squadron in WWI. At our January meeting we had a splendid lecture, in research, content and delivery, by Greg Baughen entitled 'From Flying Dreadnaught to Dogfighter'. The fighter most flown by the Lafayette Squadron was the Nieuport 17, precisely the kind of fighter needed by the RFC in 1916. The most fascinating thing for me in Greg's lecture was the Royal Aircraft Establishment's (RAE) interpretation of what a 'fighter' should be.



Pilots at the front wanted a light, fast, single-seat 'scout' with a fixed forward-firing machine gun, like the Nieuport 17. What the RAE attempted to develop matched none of this description. The favoured RAE design had 2 or 3 swivel mounted cannon, each with a gunner; because of its weight it was slow and thus needed two engines. Photographs of this attempted design, not surprisingly, look like bombers.

To be fair, cannon were abandoned in favour of machine guns when it was realised that several cannon at up to 350 lbs weight (plus gunner) each were somewhat of a burden in a flying machine. The recoil also presented some difficulty, in one test stopping the aircraft dead in the air.

The development of a suitable British fighter was a sad tale of failure to analyse and understand the problem then specify, design and engineer an appropriate solution.

Andy Cornwell – Editor, 5 Feb 2017

THE ESCADRILLE de LAFEYETTE

Introduction

President Charles de Gaulle (who led the Free French in WWII) in a meeting with US President Lyndon Johnson in 1966 declared he was taking France out of NATO and decreed that, "all U.S. troops must be removed from French soil". President Johnson instructed Secretary of State Dean Rusk to ask De Gaulle about the Americans buried in France. So, at end of the meeting Rusk asked De Gaulle if his order to remove all U.S. troops from French soil also included the 60,000 soldiers buried in France from World War I and World War II. De Gaulle, embarrassed, got up and left and never answered.

There are two surprising features in this account. Firstly, it is impossible to believe that De Gaulle was ever remotely embarrassed about anything in his whole life. Secondly, it marked an astonishing low point in a Franco-American friendship going back to the mid 1770's. De Gaulle had a deep hatred of the 'Anglo-Saxons' (Britain and the USA). With Britain this was merely an extension of 900 years of warfare and animosity; but why with the Americans?

The origin of the close French/US friendship began with the American War of Independence in 1775 to 1783, which preceded the French Revolution in 1789. Each was fighting a 'tyrannical' king and they shared ideals on the rights of man, liberty, equality and fraternity.

One leading figure who fought in both revolutions was Marie-Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert du Motier, **Marquis de Lafayette** (in the U.S. often known simply as Lafayette). He was a young French aristocrat and military officer who served with distinction in the American War of Independence. A close friend of George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, and Thomas Jefferson, Lafayette was a key figure in the French Revolution of 1789 and the July Revolution of 1830.

This closeness in spirit continued in the 19th century: *"The Statue of Liberty Enlightening the World" was a gift of friendship from the people of France to the United States and is recognized as a universal symbol of freedom and democracy. The statue was dedicated on October 28, 1886. (US National Park Service).*

The iconic (or perhaps now, 'ironic') lines:

*"Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"*

are uniquely identified with the Statue of Liberty.

Until recently, like many people (including The Times main cartoonist), I thought these words were carved in large friendly letters on the stone plinth – or possibly on the copper tablet held by the lady in question. In fact they are part of a poem inscribed on a modest plaque inside the pedestal of the statue, placed there in the early 1900's in memory of Emma Lazarus who wrote it.

During WWI this spirit of friendship continued and US citizens, though neutrals, sought to join the French forces. The Escadrille de Lafayette was a squadron of the French Air Service, the Aéronautique Militaire, during World War I composed largely of American volunteer pilots flying fighters commanded initially by French officers. It was named in honour of the Marquis de Lafayette, the hero of the American and French revolutions.

Each day The Times newspaper publishes a brief story about events exactly 100 years ago during WWI. The following was published in November 2016 (and inspired this article):

"I talked today to some of the 14 American airmen who are now working with the French Armies on the Somme. They arrived about a fortnight ago from the Verdun front. Since May, when the squadron was formed, they have between them accounted for 22 of the enemy's machines, at a cost to themselves of two killed and three wounded. Five of the 22 have been brought down by Adjutant Raoul Lufberry, who thus becomes what in French aviation slang is called an "as" [ace].

All the men are, of course, volunteers. Before joining the squadron they have gone through a course in French aviation schools, including one month devoted to fancy-flying, which is an obligatory subject, and they form a part of the French Army, use French machines, and are under the orders of French officers.

Just after I reached their camp five of their blunt-nosed Nieuports started for the front near Peronne, a journey of six or seven minutes. It was not a good day for flying, as there was a strongish wind and a broad bank of clouds made observation difficult. But the Americans wanted to learn their ground, and set off in spite of the weather. They all looked to me an extraordinarily useful set of men, as fearless as the young lion cub which has been adopted as the corps' mascot, and far more modest.

As those who had been out came swooping back from their two-hour trips, clearing the machines standing on the ground by what looked like inches, they gave some wonderfully neat displays of nose-dives and steep banking. In the distance over the lines between the British right and Chaulnes, which is their present sphere of action, the sky was smudged with smoke-puffs from the shrapnel with which the Germans were trying to curb their activity.

The whole squadron consists of chasers. As a rule they fly at an altitude of between 6,000ft and 7,000ft, keeping guard over the French observation aeroplanes below them, whereas the German method is to fly their chasers in two strata, one above the other, the lower one considerably above the Americans and the French. When necessary the Americans go higher to get above any enemy who may have the temerity to attack them, but, above or below, they have got the whip-hand of the Germans."

The beginning

Pilot James McConnell wrote the following accounts. In March 1917 he was the last American aviator killed by the enemy before America's entry into the World War.

He wrote further accounts of the Escadrille on other parts of the Western Front and these can be found on:

http://www.worldwar1.com/heritage/le_verdun.htm



Early in the war many Americans showed a sincere interest in joining the French Air Service. The popularity of the air service among French Soldiers coupled with a suspected spying incident by an American, who deserted the air service early in the war, created some resistance by the French initially.

Requests for entry were being granted on an individual basis, usually with the help of a French official. Americans began flying as both pilots and observers within French squadrons with no less than 7 future Lafayette Escadrille members serving in these capacities.

No single individual can be credited with creating the Lafayette Escadrille, but rather it was the result of the combined efforts of some idealistic young American men, some prominent Americans living in France, and a few farsighted French officials.

Two Americans who envisioned a squadron made up of American flyers were Norman Prince and William Thaw. Upon the outbreak of the War, both volunteered for service with the French Foreign Legion; and since both were licensed pilots in America, they transferred to France's Service Aeronautique in 1915.

Right: A twin engined Caudron G-IV of the type flown by Bill Thaw when William Thaw was initially assigned to a Caudron bomber squadron, Escadrille C.42 commanded by Capitaine Georges Thenault, whom eventually became commander of the Lafayette Escadrille.



During 1915, Prince, Thaw and some prominent Americans, particularly Dr. Edmund Gros and Jarousse deSilac of the French ministry of foreign affairs joined forces to promote the formation of an American volunteer squadron. The French saw an American group as an excellent way to generate support in America for the Allied cause.

In April 1916, a separate American squadron designated as N (Nieuport) 124 was established. Joining Prince and Thaw were five other Americans; Victor Chapman, Elliot Cowdin, Weston (Bert) Hall, James McConnell, and Kiffin Rockwell.

The designation N-124 was soon changed to Escadrille Americain, but the Germans objected to this name since America was not officially in the War. In response to this protest, the name was changed to Lafayette Escadrille in December 1916.

The original Lafayette Escadrille had 38 American pilots under the French commander, Capitaine George Thenault. Lieutenant Alfred deLaage de Meux served as executive officer.

Training

American volunteers of the French Air Service began their journey to pilot status with the approval of Dr. Gros in Paris and acceptance into the Foreign Legion in order to retain US citizenship. The next step was a lenient physical exam. Ted Parsons stated, "The French paid scant attention to physical handicaps. Their greatest and practically only requirement was that we should have that intangible something called guts."



The entrance to the military training facility at Avord, where several American volunteers received their 'Brevet'. The entrance to other military installations was similar and Americans were greeted by such a sign at Buc and Pau as well as others.

Compared to most other countries, the French system of fighter pilot training was unique. The student was given instruction on the ground and then controlled a series of low powered aircraft alone, without the aid of dual control.

First the students learned to taxi with a clipped wing monoplane called a 'penguin'. Eventually graduating

through a series of more powerful machines, they were ready to complete a three part test. Once successfully completed, they were awarded their military pilot certificates, or brevet.

Of the 38 members of the Lafayette Escadrille, 15 earned their brevets on Bleriot, 16 Caudron G-3 while the other seven trained on various types. Once the brevet was awarded, all were promoted to caporal and continued with advanced instruction.



A Bleriot Penguin trainer (right), with its clipped wings making it incapable of flight, was used for developing skills on the ground. Although it seemed easy to drive the length of the field in a straight line, more often than not students began turning circles. It could take a month to master the simple penguin.

Aerial Manoeuvres, Tactics, and Combat

aviators learned acrobatics used for both offensive and defensive maneuvers. A group defensive measure, the Lufbery Circle, was developed by Raoul Lufbery.

Americans at Avord, March, 1917.

In addition, pilots learned to power dive in order to attack from above or escape attack from behind. Other tactics included coming from out of the sun to prevent being spotted by the enemy. They quickly learned the value of knowing the strengths and weaknesses of their aircraft as well as the enemy in order to gain the advantage in a fight.



However, all the preparation of advanced training could not prepare the novice aviator for actual combat. If one survived the first four weeks, he might stay alive for some time. One had to 'gain his eyes' to be able to find enemy planes in the distance, above, below or especially behind. As one pilot stated, 'ones head needed to be on a swivel'.

A trick used by both friend and foe was placing a two-seat reconnaissance plane alone as bait to be attacked by an enemy fighter. A novice was susceptible to this tactic and was pounced upon by several enemy machines. If the novice was lucky, he was protected by a veteran and lived to fly another day. As Ed Parsons stated many, including himself, were saved by Raoul Lufbery.

Uniforms and Insignias

Upon completion of his flight training, the student pilot of Lafayette Escadrille was awarded the badges of a pilot brevet, the wings and star, and his corporal's stripes. The style and colour of his uniform was a matter of the pilot's individual personal preferences.

As the illustration shows, the colours of tunics varied from sky blue to navy blue and black, and pants were usually riding breeches, a carry-over from the cavalry days. Head gear was either the traditional French military "kepi" or forage overseas cap. High boots or oxfords with "puttees" were usual footwear. The air service uniforms carried on the older military tradition of colourful uniforms. Note the Lafayette Escadrille's famous lion cub mascot, "Whiskey," in the illustration.



The Nieuport 17 C.1

The Nieuport 17 C.1 used by the Lafayette Squadron was a WWI French fighter designed by the Nieuport company. Its outstanding manoeuvrability and excellent rate of climb gave it a significant advantage when it entered service over all other fighters on both sides. As a result it was widely used and enjoyed substantial production runs in France, Italy (Nieuport-Macchi) and Russia (Dux), eventually being used by every Allied power, and even being copied in Germany.



Production of the new Alkan-Hamy synchronization gear permitted the top wing mounted Lewis gun to be replaced by a synchronised Vickers gun mounted on the fuselage to fire through the propeller. The new 17 model reached the French front in March 1916 and quickly replaced the earlier Nieuport 11 and 16 fighters in French service that had been instrumental in ending the Fokker Scourge of 1915.

Many British Empire air aces flew Nieuport fighters, including top Canadian ace Billy Bishop, who received a Victoria Cross while flying it, and Albert Ball, V.C. who often hunted alone in his Nieuport. 'Mick' Mannock VC flew Nieuports early in his career with No 40 Squadron. His VC award reflected his whole combat career - including his time on Nieuports. The top-scoring Nieuport ace was Captain Phillip Fletcher Fullard of No.1 Squadron RFC, who scored 40 kills between May and October 1917, before breaking his leg in a football match.

Combat - Verdun

The Battle of Verdun, fought from 21 February to 18 December 1916, was one of the largest and longest battles of the First World War on the Western Front between the German and French armies. It was one of the most costly battles in human history with casualties estimated on both sides (dead, wounded and missing) approaching one million men. This was one of many sectors in which the Lafayette Escadrille served and is described as follows:

In May 1916 the escadrille was ordered to the sector of Verdun. While in a way we were sorry to leave Luxeuil [in the Alsace], we naturally didn't regret the chance to take part in the aerial activity of the world's greatest battle. The night before our departure some German aircraft destroyed four of our tractors and killed six men with bombs, but even that caused little excitement compared with going to Verdun. We would get square with the Boches over Verdun; we thought it is impossible to chase airplanes at night, so the raiders made a safe getaway.

The fast-flowing stream of troops and the distressing number of ambulances brought realization of the near presence of a gigantic battle. Within a twenty-mile radius of the Verdun front aviation camps abound. Our escadrille was listed on the schedule with the other fighting units, each of which has its specified flying hours, rotating so there is always an escadrille de chasse over the lines. A field wireless to enable us to keep track of the movements of enemy planes became part of our equipment.

Lufberry joined us a few days after our arrival. He was followed by Johnson and Balsley, who had been on the air guard over Paris. Hill and Rumsey came next, and after them Masson and Pavelka. Nieuports were supplied them from the nearest depot, and as soon as they had mounted their instruments and machine guns, they were on the job with the rest of us. Fifteen Americans are or have been members of the American Escadrille, but there have never been so many as that on duty at any one time.

Story of the Battles in the Skies

Before we were fairly settled at Bar-le-Duc, Hall brought down a German observation craft and Thaw a Fokker. Fights occurred on almost every sortie. The Germans seldom cross into our territory, unless on a bombarding jaunt, and thus practically all the fighting takes place on their side of the line. Thaw dropped his Fokker in the morning, and on the afternoon of the same day there was a big combat far behind the German trenches.

Thaw was wounded in the arm, and an explosive bullet detonating on Rockwell's windshield tore several gashes in his face. Despite the blood, which was blinding him, Rockwell managed to reach an aviation field and land. Thaw, whose wound bled profusely, landed in a dazed condition just within our lines. He was too weak to walk, and French soldiers carried him to a field dressing-station, whence he was sent to Paris for further treatment. Rockwell's wounds were less serious and he insisted on flying again almost immediately.

A week or so later Chapman was wounded. Considering the number of fights he had been in and the courage with which he attacked it was a miracle he had not been hit before. He always fought against odds and far within the enemy's country. He flew more than any of us, never missing an opportunity to go up, and never coming down until his gasoline was giving out. His machine was a sieve of patched-up bullet holes. His nerve was almost superhuman and his devotion to the cause for which he fought sublime. The day he was wounded he attacked four machines.

Swooping down from behind, one of them, a Fokker, riddled Chapman's plane. One bullet cut deep into his scalp, but Chapman, a master pilot, escaped from the trap, and fired several shots to show he was still safe. A stability control had been severed by a bullet. Chapman held the broken rod in one hand, managed his machine with the other, and succeeded in landing on a near-by aviation field. His wound was dressed, his machine repaired, and he immediately took the air in pursuit of some more enemies. He would take no rest, and with bandaged head continued to fly and fight.

The escadrille's next serious encounter with the foe took place a few days later. Rockwell, Balsley, Prince, and Captain Thenault were surrounded by a large number of Germans, who, circling about them, commenced firing at long range. Realizing their numerical inferiority, the Americans and their commander sought the safest way out by attacking the enemy machines nearest the French lines.

Rockwell, Prince, and the captain broke through successfully, but Balsley found himself hemmed in. He attacked the German nearest him, only to receive an explosive bullet in his thigh. In trying to get away by a vertical dive his machine went into a corkscrew and swung over on its back. Extra cartridge rollers dislodged from their case hit his

arms. He was tumbling straight toward the trenches, but by a supreme effort he regained control, righted the plane, and landed without disaster in a meadow just behind the firing line.

Soldiers carried him to the shelter of a near-by fort, and later he was taken to a field hospital, where he lingered for days between life and death. Ten fragments of the explosive bullet were removed from his stomach. He bore up bravely, and became the favorite of the wounded officers in whose ward he lay. When we flew over to see him they would say: "il est un brave petit gars, l'aviateur américain". [He's a brave little fellow, the American aviator.]

On a shelf by his bed, done up in a handkerchief, he kept the pieces of bullet taken out of him, and under them some sheets of paper on which he was trying to write to his mother, back in El Paso. Balsley was awarded the Medaille Militaire and the Croix de Guerre, but the honors scared him. He had seen them decorate officers in the ward before they died.

Chapman's Last Fight

Then came Chapman's last fight. Before leaving, he had put two bags of oranges in his machine to take to Balsley, who liked to suck them to relieve his terrible thirst, after the day's flying was over. There was an aerial struggle against odds, far within the German lines, and Chapman, to divert their fire from his comrades, engaged several enemy airmen at once. He sent one tumbling to earth, and had forced the others off when two more swooped down upon him. Such a fight is a matter of seconds, and one cannot clearly see what passes. Lufberry and Prince, whom Chapman had defended so gallantly, regained the French lines. They told us of the combat, and we waited on the field for Chapman's return. He was always the last in, so we were not much worried.

Then a pilot from another fighting escadrille telephoned us, that he had seen a Nieuport falling. A little later the observer of a reconnaissance airplane called up and told us how he had witnessed Chapman's fall. The wings of the plane had buckled, and it had dropped like a stone he said.

We talked in lowered voices after that; we would read the pain in one another's eyes. If only it could have been some one else, was what we all thought, I suppose. To lose Victor was not an irreparable loss to us merely, but to France, and to the world as well. I kept thinking of him lying over there, and of the oranges he was taking to Balsley. As I left the field I caught sight of Victor's mechanic leaning against the end of our hangar. He was looking northward into the sky where his patron had vanished, and his face was very sad.

By this time Prince and Hall had been made adjutants, and we corporals transformed into sergeants. I frankly confess to a feeling of marked satisfaction at receiving that grade in the world's finest army. I was a far more important person, in my own estimation, than I had been as a second lieutenant in the militia at home. The next impressive event was the awarding of decorations.

We had assisted at that ceremony for Cowdin at Luxeuil, but this time three of our messmates were to be honored for the Germans they had brought down. Rockwell and Hall received the Medaille Militaire and the Croix de Guerre, and Thaw, being a lieutenant, the Legion d'honneur and another "palm" for the ribbon of the Croix de Guerre he had won previously. Thaw, who came up from Paris specially for the presentation, still carried his arm in a sling. There were also decorations for Chapman, but poor Victor, who so often had been cited in the Orders of the Day, was not on hand to receive them.

Morning Sortie over Verdun

Our daily routine goes on with little change. Whenever the weather permits - that is, when it isn't raining, and the clouds aren't too low - we fly over the Verdun battlefield at the hours dictated by General Headquarters. As a rule the most successful sorties are those in the early morning.

We are called while it's still dark. Sleepily I try to reconcile the French orderly's muttered, C'est l'heure, monsieur, that rouses me from slumber, with the strictly American words and music of "When That Midnight Choo Choo Leaves for Alabam'" warbled by a particularly wide-awake pilot in the next room. A few minutes later, having swallowed some coffee, we motor to the field. The east is turning gray as the hangar curtains are drawn apart and our machines trundled out by the mechanics. All the pilots whose planes are in commission, save those remaining behind on guard - prepare to leave. We average from four to six on a sortie, unless too many flights have been ordered for that day, in which case only two or three go out at a time.

Now the east is pink, and overhead the sky has changed from gray to pale blue. It is light enough to fly. We don our fur-lined shoes and combinations, and adjust the leather flying hoods and goggles. A good deal of conversation occurs - perhaps because, once aloft, there's nobody to talk to.

"Essence et gaz! [Oil and gas!]" you call to your mechanic, adjusting your gasoline and air throttles while he grips the propeller. "Contact!" he shrieks, and "Contact!" you reply. You snap on the switch, he spins the propeller, and the motor takes. Drawing forward out of line, you put on full power, race across the grass and take the air. The ground drops as the hood slants up before you and you seem to be going more and more slowly as you rise. At a great height you hardly realize you are moving. You glance at the clock to note the time of your departure, and at the oil gauge to see its throb.

The altimeter registers 650 feet. You turn and look back at the field below and see others leaving. In three minutes you are at about 4,000 feet. You have been making wide circles over the field and watching the other machines. At 4,500 feet you throttle down and wait on that level for your companions to catch up. Soon the escadrille is bunched and off for the lines. You begin climbing again, gulping to clear your ears in the changing pressure.

Surveying the other machines, you recognize the pilot of each by the marks on its side - or by the way he flies. The distinguishing marks of the Nieuports are various and sometimes amusing. Bert Hall, for instance, has Bert painted on the left side of his plane and the same word reversed (as if spelled backward with the left hand) on the right - so an aviator passing him on that side at great speed will be able to read the name without difficulty, he says!



The country below has changed into a flat surface of varicolored figures. Woods are irregular blocks of dark green, like daubs of ink spilled on a table; fields are geometrical designs of different shades of green and brown, forming in composite an ultra-cubist painting; roads are thin white lines, each with its distinctive windings and crossings - from which you determine your location. The higher you are the easier it is to read.

In about ten minutes you see the Meuse sparkling in the morning light, and on either side the long line of sausage-shaped observation balloons far below you. Red-roofed Verdun springs into view just beyond. There are spots in it where no red shows and you know what has happened there. In the green pasture land bordering the town, round flecks of brown indicate the shell holes. You cross the Meuse.

Immediately east and north of Verdun there lies a broad, brown band. From the Woevre plain it runs westward to the "S" bend in the Meuse, and on the left bank of that famous stream continues on into the Argonne Forest.

Peaceful fields and farms and villages adorned that landscape a few months ago - when there was no Battle of Verdun. Now there is only that sinister brown belt, a strip of murdered Nature. It seems to belong to another world. Every sign of humanity has been swept away. The woods and roads have vanished like chalk wiped from a blackboard; of the villages nothing remains but gray smears where stonewalls have tumbled together.

The great forts of Douaumont and Vaux are outlined faintly, like the tracings of a finger in wet sand. One cannot distinguish any one shell crater, as one can on the pockmarked fields on either side. On the brown band the indentations are so closely interlocked that they blend into a confused mass of troubled earth. Of the trenches only broken, half-obiterated links are visible.

Columns of muddy smoke spurt up continually as high explosives tear deeper into this ulcered area. During heavy bombardment and attacks I have seen shells falling like rain. The countless towers of smoke remind one of Gustave Doré's picture of the fiery tombs of the arch-heretics in Dante's "Hell." A smoky pall covers the sector under fire, rising so high that at a height of 1,000 feet one is enveloped in its mist-like fumes. Now and then monster projectiles, hurtling through the air close by, leave one's plane rocking violently in their wake. Airplanes have been cut in two by them.

For us the battle passes in silence, the noise of one's motor deadening all other sounds. In the green patches behind the brown belt myriads of tiny flashes tell where the guns are hidden; and those flashes, and the smoke of bursting shells, are all we see of the fighting. It is a weird combination of stillness and havoc, the Verdun conflict viewed from the sky.

Far below us, the observation and range-finding planes circle over the trenches like gliding gulls. At a feeble altitude they follow the attacking infantrymen and flash back wireless reports of the engagement. Only through them can communication be maintained when, under the barrier fire, wires from the front lines are cut.

Sometimes it falls to our lot to guard these machines from Germans eager to swoop down on their backs. Sailing about high above a busy flock of them makes one feel like an old mother hen protecting her chicks. Getting started is the hardest part of an attack. Once you have begun diving you're all right. The pilot just ahead turns tail up like a trout dropping back to water, and swoops down in irregular curves and circles.

You follow at an angle so steep your feet seem to be holding you back in your seat. Now the black Maltese crosses on the German's wings stand out clearly. You think of him as some sort of big bug. Then you hear the rapid tut-tut-tut of his machine gun. The man that dived ahead of you becomes mixed up with the topmost German. He is so close it looks as if he had hit the enemy machine. You hear the staccato barking of his mitrailleuse (machine gun) and see him pass from under the German's tail.

The rattle of the gun that is aimed at you leaves you undisturbed. Only when the bullets pierce the wings a few feet off do you become uncomfortable. You see the gunner crouched down behind his weapon, but you aim at where the pilot ought to be - there are two men aboard the German craft - and press on the release hard. Your mitrailleuse

hammers out a stream of bullets as you pass over and dive, nose down, to get out of range. Then, hopefully, you re-dress and look back at the foe. He ought to be dropping earthward at several miles a minute. As a matter of fact, however, he is sailing serenely on. They have an annoying habit of doing that, these Boches.

A Fight over Fort

Douaumont Rockwell, who attacked so often that he has lost all count, and who shoves his machine gun fairly in the faces of the Germans, used to swear their planes were armored. Lieutenant de Laage, whose list of combats is equally extensive, has brought down only one. Hall, with three machines to his credit, has had more luck.

Lufberry, who evidently has evolved a secret formula, has dropped four, according to official statistics, since his arrival on the Verdun front. Four "palms" - the record for the escadrille, glitter upon the ribbon of the Croix de Guerre accompanying his Medaile Militaire.

A pilot seldom has the satisfaction of beholding the result of his bull's-eye bullet. Rarely - so difficult it is to follow the turnings and twistings of the dropping plane - does he see his fallen foe strike the ground. Lufberry's last direct hit was an exception, for he followed all that took place from a balcony seat. We had set out on a sortie together just before noon, one August day, and for the first time on such an occasion had lost each other over the lines.

Seeing no Germans, I passed my time hovering over the French observation machines. Lufberry found one, however, and promptly brought it down. Just then I chanced to make a southward turn, and caught sight of an airplane falling out of the sky into the German lines.

As it turned over, it showed its white belly for an instant, then seemed to straighten out, and planed downward in big zigzags. The pilot must have gripped his controls even in death, for his craft did not tumble as most do. It passed between my line of vision and a wood, into which it disappeared. Just as I was going down to find out where it landed, I saw it again skimming across a field, and heading straight for the brown band beneath me.

It was outlined against the shell-racked earth like a tiny insect, until just northwest of Fort Douaumont it crashed down upon the battlefield. A sheet of flame and smoke shot up from the tangled wreckage. For a moment or two I watched it burn; then I went back to the observation machines.

I thought Lufberry would show up and point to where the German had fallen. He failed to appear, and I began to be afraid it was he whom I had seen come down, instead of an enemy. I spent a worried hour before my return homeward. After getting back I learned that Lufberry was quite safe, having hurried in after the fight to report the destruction of his adversary before somebody else claimed him, which is only too frequently the case. Observation posts, however, confirmed Lufberry's story, and he was of course very much delighted. Nevertheless, at luncheon, I heard him murmuring, half to himself: "Those poor fellows."

The German machine gun operator, having probably escaped death in the air, must have had a hideous descent. Lufberry told us he had seen the whole thing, spiralling down after the German. He said he thought the German pilot must be a novice, judging from his manoeuvres. It occurred to me that he might have been making his first flight over the lines, doubtless full of enthusiasm about his career. Perhaps, dreaming of the Iron Cross and his Gretchen, he took a chance - and then swift death and a grave in the shell-strewn soil of Douaumont.

We American pilots, who are grouped into one escadrille, had been fighting above the battlefield of Verdun from the 20th of May until orders came the middle of September for us to leave our airplanes, for a unit that would replace us, and to report at Le Bourget, the great Paris aviation centre.

Epilogue

The Lafayette Escadrille, "The Lafayette Squadron," was made up of only 38 American Volunteers. Approximately 170 other Americans served in various other French squadrons, and as a group, these men were designated the Lafayette Flying Corps.



Of the original 38 aviators:

- Nine had pre-war flying experience
 - 28 had already served in France in some capacity
 - Seven of the 28 had served in the French Air Service
 - 23 were from the Eastern states, nine were from New York and two from the West
 - Average age was 26; ages ranged from 20 to 40 years
 - Eleven were sons of millionaires
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- Thirty held college degrees or had enrolled in a higher educational institution. Harvard had nine alumni in the squadron

The Lafayette Escadrille Memorial pays tribute to and is a final resting place for America's first combat aviators. It is located in the Parc de Saint Cloud, in Marnes-la-Coquette, half-way between Paris and Versailles. The monument is composed of a central monumental arch, half the height of the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. On the façade of the monument are the names of the 68 pilots of the Lafayette Escadrille and the Lafayette Flying Corps who died in World War.

More than 250 American pilots fought with the French Air Service before the United States joined the war, either in existing squadrons with French pilots, or as one of the 38 pilots who flew in the all-American Lafayette Escadrille squadron. The Memorial commemorates the courage and the sacrifice of all these American pilots who came to France before April 1917, collectively called the "Lafayette Flying Corps".

The 68 American pilots who died in WWI, or after the war, as a result of their wounds, are buried in the crypt located under the central arch of the Memorial. Sixty-eight sarcophagi are located in a crypt underneath the monument in honour of the 68 pilots who died during the war; however, only 49 contain remains. They lie in a broad semi-circle, each under a cenotaph bearing the pilot's name and date of death. Their French commanders, Georges Thénault and Antonin Brocard, who died respectively in 1948 and 1950, wanted to be buried with their American comrades.



EUGENE JACQUES BULLARD



Following the article on the American Lafayette Squadron a few months ago Ken Campbell told me of the following airman, Eugene Bullard, who flew with the French in WWI. This is his story as told in the airandspace.si.edu website.

Bullard was one of 208 or so American airman designated as members of the 'Lafayette Air Corps'. 170 served in French squadrons, like Bullard; only 38 in the better known 'Lafayette Squadron' itself.

Bullard is considered to be the first African-American military pilot to fly in combat, and the only African-American pilot in World War I. Ironically, he never flew for the United States.

Born October 9, 1895, in Columbus, Georgia, to William Bullard, a former slave, and Josephine Bullard, Eugene's early youth was unhappy. He made several unsuccessful attempts to run away from home, one of which resulted in his being returned home and beaten by his father. In 1906, at the age of 11, Bullard ran away for good, and for the next six years, he wandered the South in search of freedom.

In 1912 he stowed away on a freighter bound for Hamburg, and ended up in Aberdeen, Scotland. From there he made his way to London, where he worked as a boxer and slapstick performer in Belle Davis's Freedman Pickaninnies, an African American entertainment troupe.

In 1913, Bullard went to France for a boxing match. Settling in Paris, he became so comfortable with French customs that he decided to make a home there. He later wrote, "... it seemed to me that French democracy influenced the minds of both black and white Americans there and helped us all act like brothers."

After World War I had begun in the summer of 1914, Bullard enlisted in the French Foreign Legion. While serving with the 170th Infantry Regiment, Bullard fought in the Battle of Verdun (February to December 1916), where he was wounded seriously. He was taken from the battlefield and sent to Lyon to recuperate.

While on leave in Paris, Bullard bet a friend \$2,000 that despite his color he could enlist in the French flying service. Bullard's determination paid off, and in November 1916 he entered the *Aéronautique Militaire*.

Bullard began flight training at Tours in 1916 and received his wings in May 1917. He was first assigned to Escadrille Spa 93, and then to Escadrille Spa 85 in September 1917, where he remained until he left the *Aéronautique Militaire*. In November 1917, Bullard claimed two aerial victories, a Fokker Triplane and a Pfalz D.III, but neither could be confirmed. (Some accounts say that one victory was confirmed.)



During his flying days, Bullard is said to have had an insignia on his Spad 7 C.1 that portrayed a heart with a dagger running through it and the slogan "All Blood Runs Red." Reportedly, Bullard flew with a mascot, a Rhesus Monkey named "Jimmy."

After the United States entered the war in 1917, Bullard attempted to join the U.S. Air Service, but he was not accepted, ostensibly because he was an enlisted man, and the Air Service required pilots to be officers and hold at least the rank of First Lieutenant. In fact, he was rejected because of the racial prejudice that existed in the American military during that time.

Bullard returned to the Aéronautique Militaire, but he was summarily removed after an apparent confrontation with a French officer. He returned to the 170th Infantry Regiment until his discharge in October 1919.

After the war Bullard remained in France, where he worked in a nightclub in the Montmartre district of Paris, then owned a nightclub and an American-style bar (L'Escadrille), operated an athletic club, and married a French woman. During this time Bullard rubbed elbows with notables like Louis Armstrong, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Josephine Baker.

By the late 1930s, however, the clouds of war began to change Bullard's life dramatically. Even before World War II officially began in 1939, Bullard became involved in espionage activities against French fifth columnists who supported the Nazis. When war came he enlisted as a machine gunner in the 51st Infantry Regiment, and was severely wounded by an exploding artillery shell. Fearing capture by the Nazis, he made his way to Spain, Portugal, and eventually the United States, settling in the Harlem district of New York City.



After his arrival in New York, Bullard worked as a security guard and longshoreman. In the post-World War II years, Bullard took up the cause of civil rights. In 1949 he was beaten by police; Bullard became deeply disillusioned with the United States and he returned to France, but was unable to resume his former life there.

During his lifetime, the French showered Bullard with honors, and in 1954, he was one of three men chosen to relight the everlasting flame at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Paris. In October 1959 he was made a knight of the Legion of Honor, the highest ranking order and decoration bestowed by France. It was the fifteenth decoration given to him by the French government.

In 1941 African American airmen started to be trained at Tuskegee for the US air force for the first time – 25 years after Eugene Bullard became a fighter pilot in 1917.

In 1992, the McDonnell Douglas Corporation donated to the National Air and Space Museum a bronze portrait head of Bullard, created by Eddie Dixon, an African American sculptor.