

## Eddie Rickenbacker

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### America's Ace of Aces

Eddie Rickenbacker watched as four SPADS taxied across the field, engines revving, as they slowly lifted into the afternoon skies to fly out over the battle lines.

Easing his lean frame into the open cockpit of his own airplane, he increased fuel to the powerful engine and listened to it hum. Moments later the commander of the 94th Aero Squadron was himself airborne and following his other four planes at a leisurely pace. It was Rickenbacker's third flight of the day on this 30th day of October. Before noon he had flown two uneventful patrols.

Now he tagged along behind a flight led by Lieutenant Kaye, who was filling in as flight leader for the hospitalized Reed Chambers. Two of the young American pilots in Kaye's flight were *rookies*, and Rickenbacker had elected to tag along to watch how Kaye fared as a new flight leader.

On this mission, Lieutenant Kaye's flight was assigned to patrol the lines between Grand Pre and Brioules at the unusually low level of just 2,000 feet. Rickenbacker kept well to the rear and about a thousand feet higher. This gave him an unobstructed view to gauge Kaye's tactics and an advantageous point from which to spot any enemy aircraft that might try to slip in behind the four Spads below.

After two uneventful passes between the two towns, Lieutenant Kaye maneuvered his flight for a third pass when Rickenbacker noticed two enemy Fokkers flying low from inside Germany as if to slip in on the unsuspecting American patrol. From his higher elevation, Rickenbacker had so far gone unnoticed. Kaye's patrol was flying west across their sector, with the two Fokkers creeping up on their tail. The combat-wise squadron commander turned his own Spad eastward, winging well into Germany to angle back in behind the hunters.

The attack came more quickly than Rickenbacker had anticipated, the two Fokkers slipping in behind the formation of Spads to open fire. Rickenbacker was now well inside German air space, too far from the attack at this point to intervene. Fortunately, as the enemy pilots pulled the triggers of their machineguns, Kaye spotted the threat and turned his flight south towards the aerodrome and home.

Enemy tracers flew past the rear airplane piloted by Lieutenant Evitt, one of the two rookies. Rickenbacker could only trust the flight commander to quickly evade and bring his patrol safely home. There was also some comfort in the fact that the other

experienced pilot in the group was Lieutenant Harvey Cook, one of the few remaining aces in the 94th Aero Squadron.

The German pilots were good, Rickenbacker had to admit to himself from his distant vantage point. In a daring display of aerial prowess and courage, the two enemy pilots flew directly into the flight that out-numbered them two to one. Lieutenant Kaye remained focused, refusing to break up his formation and continuing to lead a beeline deeper into France and the landing field. After that first attack, the German pilots broke off and turned towards Grand Pre. Rickenbacker smiled. His pilots were safe and the German pilots were flying in a path that might well lead them directly into his own gun sights.

But for the two distant Fokkers, Captain Rickenbacker had the skies to himself as afternoon turned into evening. Well inside Germany, he continued his own lone-wolf patrol, a habit that had served him well. Early on, he had learned from a great leader of the 94th Aero Squadron, the legendary Ace Raoul Lufbery, that solo flights relieved a commander of the distractions of responsibility for his other pilots. Lufbery put it this way:

*“There’s a hell of a lot of difference in going out alone, no matter what the odds are against you, and in going out as a member or a leader of a group of pilots who may or may not be as good as you are. It’s a great responsibility to shepherd these pilots out and get back home safe. I prefer to fight alone, on my own.”*

Flying solo missions had enabled Major Lufbery to achieve an incredible record of victories and made him one of the most famous pilots of World War I, as it also had for [Lieutenant Frank Luke](#) of the 27th Aero Squadron. Both of those great pilots were gone now, and it seemed their mantle had fallen on the shoulders of Eddie Rickenbacker.

Rickenbacker had known both men, loved one, and grudgingly admired the other despite his personal flaws. The differences between the two of the greatest American pilots of the war were both obvious and blatant. Lufbery had come to the 1st Pursuit Group as one of the few experienced combat veterans, having flown with the Lafayette Escadrille. Already an Ace, he was worshipped by his men and treated with great respect. Luke had come to the Group a rookie, loud and irreverent, and quickly made himself the most hated man in his squadron. About the only thing the two legendary fliers had in common was the tendency to fly highly successful, lone-wolf missions over enemy territory. Strangely, another difference between them was that Lufbery had been admired for his courage in these missions; Luke had been criticized for not being a “teampayer”.

There were, however, a few other similarities between the two men:

- Both men had achieved far beyond any other American pilot, Lufbery netting 17 victories and Luke 18. (The closest any pilot other than Rickenbacker would come to their impressive tally was Lieutenant George Vaughn with 13.)
- Both men had ventured repeatedly beyond the lines to engage the enemy so often, Luke had earned only one victory over friendly lines and Lufbery claimed none. All other destroyed aircraft had landed behind the lines, and one could only estimate how many similar victories had gone unverified because they had not been witnessed by other pilots or allied forces on the ground.
- Both Lufbery and Luke had held, for a time, the title *Ace of Aces*, and
- Each had bequeathed that title to another when they died in action.

The history of all previous men who held that title had certainly been deadly. Of the seven pilots who had earned the distinction, only Rickenbacker and Lieutenant Edgar Tobin (who held the title for two days after the death of Lieutenant David Putnam and before Rickenbacker pulled ahead of him), were gone, three of them in deadly aerial combat and Frank Luke as a result of his death on the ground after being shot down.

<b>From: (1918)</b>	<b>To: (1918)</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Hometown</b>	<b>Victories</b>	<b>Result</b>
	May 19	Maj. Raoul Lufbery	Wallingford, CT	17	KIA
May 19	May 22	1Lt. Paul Baer	Fort Wayne, IN	9	WIA/POW
May 22	Jun 17	Lt. Frank Bayliss	New Bedford, MA	13	KIA
Jun 17	Sep 12	1Lt. David Putnam	Jamaica Plains, MA	12	KIA
Sep 12	Sep 15	1Lt. Edgar Tobin	San Antonio, TX	6	
Sep 15	Sep 18	1Lt. Eddie Rickenbacker	Columbus, OH	7	
Sep 18	Sep 29	1Lt. Frank Luke	Phoenix, AZ	18	KIA
Sep 29	War End	Cpt. Eddie Rickenbacker	Columbus, OH	26	

On this next-to-the-last-day of October, Eddie Rickenbacker's claim to the title *Ace of Aces* was beyond dispute, based on an incredible record of 24 victories in the air. As a squadron commander, he could have further protected that role by staying at the aerodrome and fighting the war from a desk. It was a practice he refused to adopt. Captain Eddie, as he preferred to be called, wouldn't ask any of his pilots to do anything he wouldn't do. *"Never did I permit any pilot in my squadron,"* he

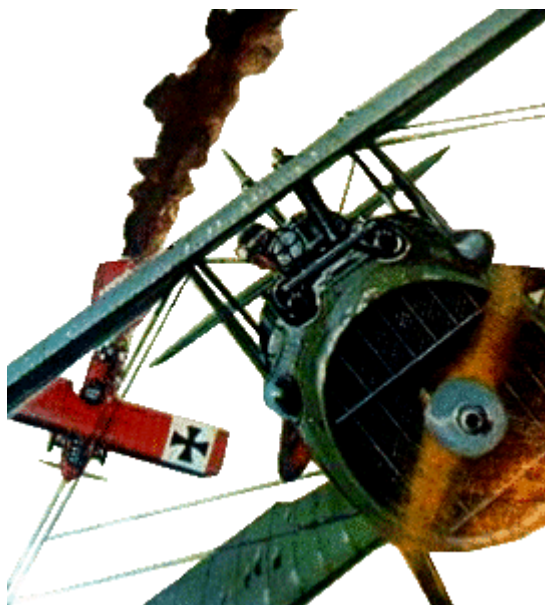
later wrote, "to exceed the number of hours flying over the lines that were credited to me in the flight sheets." None did!

Nor was the intrepid squadron commander content to sit on his record of victories, despite the fact that no other American pilot was even close. He was keeping a cautious eye on the two Fokkers that had earlier attacked Lieutenant Kaye's flight, and plotting yet another aerial dogfight.

This one almost looked too easy. Skimming along over their own friendly lines at barely 1,000 feet, the Fokkers were heading directly towards Rickenbacker, who watched them from a slightly higher elevation. They passed him less than half a mile to the east, never noticing the American Spad with the now-famous "Hat in the Ring" emblem painted on the side, lying in wait.

Rickenbacker watched the two enemy airplanes pass leisurely beyond him in the

distance, then dipped



over, swung around, and opened

his engine wide as he zoomed in from their rear. The pilot in the trailing Fokker didn't even know he was under attack until a stream of twenty rounds slammed broadside full into the center of the fuselage. After that single burst, Rickenbacker released the trigger. It had been enough, and he watched as the German airplane began spiraling slowly to the ground 1,000 feet below. As he watched Victory #25 plummet from the sky, he noticed for the first time the brilliant, bright-red nosepiece on the enemy Fokker. There was increased satisfaction in the realization he had just outwitted a pilot from the famed von Richthofen *Flying Circus*.

Before the American Ace could turn his guns on the remaining enemy plane it had dived for the protection of the enemy-held terrain below. To follow him to the ground so deep in Germany would be suicide, and Eddie Rickenbacker, though seemingly fearless, had a zest for life. Content with one more victory, he nosed upward to escape the hail of Archie (anti-aircraft fire) he was sure would follow and headed his Spad for

home.

It was already getting dark as Rickenbacker neared the small village of St. George. Two more miles and he would cross the lines and be inside the friendly territory, for what would certainly be a quick and relatively safe flight to the aerodrome. Passing high over the town he looked down and was surprised to see a Drachen, one of the dreaded enemy observation balloons that had been the death of all too many American pilots, including Frank Luke. This balloon was still in its nest, which meant Allied observers probably were not even aware of its presence at St. George. With dawn, the enemy would allow the balloon to rise into the sky to spy across the lines and direct deadly artillery fire on advancing American infantrymen.

In what he later described as a *sudden impulse*, Rickenbacker kicked over his rudder and aimed his nose-mounted machineguns into the side of the Drachen by flying directly at it. As he flew within 100 feet of the large gas-filled bag, he stitched it from nose to tail with his guns, pulling away to climb for another pass only at the last moment. The second pass wasn't necessary. As he nosed upward for altitude a sudden flash of heat chased him upward, illuminated in the darkening skies by brilliant flashes of yellow and orange. It was victory #26 for America's *Ace of Aces*. It would be his last, not because another man would replace him after a deadly crash, but because twelve days later [World War I](#) came to an end.

As a pilot Captain Rickenbacker embodied all of the best to be found in men like Raoul Lufbery and Frank Luke, then blended it into his own unique character. During World War I, he possessed all of the fierce independence and unorthodox military bearing that marked fighter pilots as a *different breed*. In the years after the war, he came to illustrate the maturity and stability those young fighters could grow into as our Nation's young Army Air Service matured to become the U.S. Air Force.

If ever there lived the epitome of the term "*All-American Hero*", it surely would have been...



**Eddie Rickenbacker**

*“It is not old-fashioned to wave and love the flag of our country or to worship God in heaven. Let us acknowledge and be grateful for the blessings of freedom that God has given us. Let us dedicate our lives to the perpetuation of the American principles of freedom with confidence. Let us stop and analyze ourselves to find out what life means to us.*

*“Let us, therefore, pray every night for the strength and guidance to inspire in others the gratitude, the love, the dedication that we owe our beloved country for the sake of our posterity.*

*“Then, and only then, can we say when the candle of life burns low  
“—Thank God, I have given my best to the land that has given so much to me.”*

**Little Eddie**



When Eddie Rickenbacker wrote at the close of his 1967

autobiography how much his country had given him, he was a hero, a successful entrepreneur, and a wealthy man. It was not these things to which he referred, however. Rickenbacker was a self-made man, working hard to achieve everything he

came to do or possess. The United States of America had afforded him very little beyond the one thing that made all the difference. Eddie Rickenbacker had been given the opportunity.

Born Edward Rickenbacker on October 8, 1890, in Columbus, Ohio, he was the third of eight children (one child died in its youth) of William and Elizabeth Rickenbacker who had immigrated to the United States from Switzerland. William built his own construction company, working hard to support his growing family, but there was never a surplus of anything in the Rickenbacker household. William constructed the family home himself on the outskirts of Columbus, but there was no electricity, indoor plumbing, or heat. Young Eddie grew up in poverty, helping his mother and siblings to tend to the garden that surrounded the house to provide the basic necessities of life.

There was little in young Eddie's early days to indicate he would someday become one of our Nation's all-time great Americans. He later admitted that he smoked at the age of 5, and started his own neighborhood gang shortly thereafter...called The Horsehead Gang. Of course, a neighborhood gang in 1890s Columbus, Ohio was not the same kind of organization one finds today. While the mischievous group of youngsters did engage in some nefarious activities such as breaking all the globes of the gas-burning streetlamps along Miller Avenue, the organization was more of a loose-knit fraternity of young boys seeking to find their own brand of adventure.

Eddie later often recounted how, at the age of 8, he and his Horsehead Gang had improvised their own "roller coaster" by riding a steel cart down the 100-foot incline of a local gravel pit. Quickly Eddie learned that adventure comes with danger and often pain. The cart flipped, then rolled over the young boy, bruising him from head to toe. One wheel cut his leg to the bone. It was Eddie's first scar, and his first brush with death.

Eddie's entrepreneurial prowess also emerged at an early age. He entered the world of business even before he started school, primarily he later admitted, to earn money to buy Bull Durham tobacco so he could smoke like his older brother William. His first job consisted of selling bones (they were ground up for fertilizer) and other *junk* to a neighborhood collector. Eddie approached his first job with the same critical eye and capitalistic nature that years later enabled him to build an airline. As his business grew, he enlisted other neighborhood kids, paying them a percentage to bring him the collectibles and then selling them to his own middleman.

As the collection grew, Eddie pondered ways to more easily move his stock from place to place. At the age of 9, he saw his first automobile, which set in motion the search for his own vehicle. He found the solution one day while watching a lady push

her infant around in a stroller. Shortly thereafter Eddie developed his own pushcart, a wide board that moved easily over a frame containing four rubber-tired baby-carriage wheels. With this, he could easily cover large areas to find and collect bones for the business. Years later when a more mature Rickenbacker shared the story of this early vehicle with businessmen from the Chevrolet Company, the idea was revived and America's Soap Box Derby was born.

*"What a wonderful childhood we had! Of far greater value than mere riches was the opportunity to work together, play together, learn together and produce together, all under the loving yet strict Old-World guidance of our parents."*

*"How many children in America today, I wonder, are blessed with the opportunity to see the food they eat develop from tiny seeds placed in the moist spring earth? We little Rickenbacker's enjoyed that privilege to the fullest extent."*

*"My father died when I was twelve years old."*

*"I didn't have to be told what we were up against. The day after my father's funeral I didn't go to school—I went to work. The night he passed I changed from a boy to a man."*

## **Becoming A Man**

The last words Eddie had heard from his father were, *"Eddie, you're a lucky boy to be born when you were. There are a lot of new things in the making, and you ought to be ready to have a hand in them."* On the following day, William Rickenbacker suffered an accident that put him in a coma and caused his death a few days later. He was buried in an unmarked grave at a local church cemetery.

In 1904 child labor laws forbade the employment of children unless they were 14 years old and had finished the eighth grade. Eddie lied about his age and school experience and went to work. It was six, twelve-hour night shifts at the Federal Glass Factory, but after one-week Eddie came home with his pay...three dollars, and handed it intact to his mother. He later said it was the proudest moment of his life.

The frugality that marked Rickenbacker's later life was evident in his early days. Every evening he walked two miles to work at 4:30 p.m., then walked home after his 12-hour shift. To have ridden the streetcar would have cost a nickel, and the Rickenbacker household needed every penny. During his lunch breaks, young Eddie learned the art of intricate glassblowing from other employees and used his time to create glass flowers to take home for his mother.



After a few weeks of night work, Eddie left the glass factory for a day job at the Buckeye Steel Casting Company. His workday lessened by one hour, and his pay increased to six dollars a week, every penny of which went home. Quickly young Eddie matured, losing interest in the Horsehead Gang, and spending his free hours fixing up the family home. And though the family income came almost exclusively from the weekly paychecks he earned, Eddie never thought of it as his own money. He was thrilled every Sunday during the summer when his mother gave him a quarter of his own, hard-earned money to enjoy a streetcar fare to Olentangy Park where the remaining 20 cents would buy him three amusement rides and a box of Cracker Jacks.

Eddie worked for three months at the casting company, then moved on to a job capping bottles at the local brewery, and then a job putting heels on shoes. The latter position not only provided the family income but gave the 14-year old boy a new trade that enabled him to improve the repairs he had been making for years on the shoes of his brothers and sisters.

When winter weather halted Eddie's Sunday trips to the park, he began using his free Sunday afternoons and twenty-five cents allowance for a more personal purpose. Eddie had always been interested in art but the small allowance wasn't sufficient for any *real* art training. So, Eddie turned towards sculpture, working for a local cemetery monument maker. At first, all he did was polish the stones with water and sandstone, but along the way, he learned some of the techniques the process of engraving demanded. Of all the accomplishments in his long life, the one that he said gave him the most pride, came during this period. Eddie carved out a large, white marble stone with the image of a Bible on it, the word "FATHER" at the top, and an inscription below. Today in a small church cemetery in Columbus, Ohio, visitors to the grave of William Rickenbacker can still see the greatest accomplishment of our Nation's greatest aviator of all time.

In his first two years of manhood, Eddie Rickenbacker matured rapidly through hard work, frugal living, and a deep sense of personal responsibility. Along the way, he developed an inner character that would enable him to become the All-American hero. His philosophy was simple:

- If it needs to be done, do it first, then ask for permission.
- Success comes through hard work.
- When you don't enjoy your work, find something else to do.
- No one owes you anything.
- Eddie, despite the family's poverty, the tragic loss of his father, or the difficulties of his day, never felt his family, his community, or his country owed him anything.

*"I have worked hard and lived under pressure since I was a boy; I always have, and I always will.*

## **Fast Eddie**

Eddie Rickenbacker is often remembered as a man with a fascination for fast cars and

airplanes. The



view is rather short-sighted. Eddie's interest

wasn't in the vehicle so much as it was with the power that propelled it. Perhaps this should serve those who remember Eddie as an example to remember the man, not so much for what he did, but for the character that drove him to become all that he became and to achieve all that he accomplished.

By the time Eddie was fifteen years old the internal combustion engine had become the focus of his attention. A serious accident laid Eddie up for several weeks, a period without work and without pay that might have caused a lesser man to pity his misfortune and fall into despair. For Rickenbacker, by his own admission, it was the most fortunate accident of his life. During those long weeks of introspection, Eddie Rickenbacker began putting direction to his future. When he had recovered enough to return to work, it was with a pay cut. For seventy-five cents a day he became an employee of Evans Garage, one of the city's first automotive repair businesses.

That same year Eddie enrolled in the International Correspondence School in Scranton, Pennsylvania, rising at 4 a.m. to complete his studies before going off to work. He wrangled a job at the nearby Frayer-Miller auto factory that was turning out one car a month, and soon a chain of events was set in motion that would make Eddie Rickenbacker a household name.

In 1906 Eddie rode with Lee Frayer in the Vanderbilt Cup Race on Long Island. By the time he was nineteen years old, he was a full-fledged racing driver, facing off against some of the most famous drivers of his day. In 1910 Rickenbacker placed first in eight races in Omaha. The same year he experienced his first racing accident at Red Oak, Iowa. In the years to follow, he would survive many more. In 1911 Eddie was a relief driver for Lee Frayer at a 500-mile race being held at Indianapolis, a track to which he would return again and again; a track he would one

day own.

When Eddie wasn't racing, he was tinkering with engines and selling cars. By 1914 a speed of 20 miles an hour was considered fast and dangerous on our Nation's new highways. That same year Eddie Rickenbacker was driving a Blitzen Benz over the sands of Daytona Beach to set a world record 134 miles per hour.

From 1906 until he ended his career as a race driver in 1916, Rickenbacker was the frontrunner against names like Ralph De Palma and Barney Oldfield. He attributed that success to his knowledge of engines, an understanding that helped him coax the very best out of each. Eddie could simply listen to an engine and diagnose its problems or gauge its potential. It was an ability that served him well not only as a driver but later, as a pilot.

The flashy young race driver found two new elements in his sport. The first was a middle name. Eddie had always thought the name "Edward Rickenbacker" was a little plain. He liked the look of the letter "V" and inserted it as a middle initial, then coined the name "Vernon" to go with it.

The other thing racing gave Eddie was a great sense of sportsmanship. Despite his enviable record, he quickly realized he couldn't win every time. Rather than lose his temper when things went wrong, he came to grips with the reality that you win sometimes, you lose sometimes. But whatever the outcome, you continued to smile.

### **Rickenbacker, German Spy**

The summer racing season of 1916 ended with the advent of winter, and the poor son of



Swiss immigrants had enjoyed his best year yet,

earning an incredible salary of \$35,000 a year. The name "Rickenbacker" was recognized in virtually every home in America. As the 26-year old racing celebrity boarded *St. Louis* for an Atlantic crossing to England, he had no idea just how many problems his famous name could create abroad.

On the uneventful voyage, he met two friendly men who went to great lengths to engage Eddie in conversation, a pleasant diversion from the long crossing. The

unsuspecting race car driver was totally unprepared for the conversation that would engage him upon debarking at Liverpool.

"Rickenbacker," groused an English sergeant at customs. "What's your name?" Eddie was caught totally off guard, especially since the sergeant had just called him by name, but he patiently repeated it for the man. "What is your purpose in England?" the interrogation continued.

Rickenbacker started to explain his trip was for the purpose of purchasing British racing cars but was interrupted. After a fiery battery of questions, the American tourist was taken to a nearby cabin where he found the two gentlemen who had engaged him in so much conversation during the voyage. The British agents had a dossier on the American race car hero with the Germanic sounding name, which traced his ancestry all the way back to Germany. Rickenbacker was forced to remove all his clothing, which was then searched thoroughly. When at last the agents were convinced, he carried nothing dangerous, he was allowed to dress and then was returned to the ship. He was being denied entry into England, which was by now very much at war with Germany.

Rickenbacker was allowed to leave the ship on Christmas Day, but only under the watchful eyes of two British agents. It was the beginning of a "cat and mouse" *game* that marked his entire visit to England and then followed him home.

Before Rickenbacker came home when the United States entered the war early in 1917, he spent most of his time watching the airplanes of the Royal Air Force flying past his hotel window from their field near the Brooklands Speedway. During these days of inactivity, Rickenbacker became increasingly fascinated with the concept of aerial combat and wished he could himself mount an airplane to fight among this new breed of warrior.

On February 3, 1917, Germany declared unrestricted submarine warfare on the high seas, and all-American citizens abroad were given five days to leave. Rickenbacker, who had already been repeatedly interrogated, strip-searched, fingerprinted, and registered by British Intelligence, submitted himself to another 2-hour interrogation before he was finally allowed to sail for home.

Upon boarding the ship, he encountered an old friend who asked him, "Eddie, have you heard the news? We've got a big German spy on board. That's why the boat is delayed."

"Yes," Rickenbacker said with a laugh that was not entirely sincere, "That big German spy—that's me!"

Despite his shoddy treatment by the British, Rickenbacker firmly believed that the United States had ample reason and responsibility to commit itself to the war in Europe. On the return voyage home, he developed the political position he would espouse upon arrival: "The Three M's—Men, Money, Munitions," for the liberation of Europe.

He also thought often of the airmen of the RAF he'd seen in London and developed his own philosophy on the importance of airpower. Racecar drivers knew engines better than anyone and were well acquainted with risk. Rickenbacker's idea was to suggest an American squadron of combat aviators, composed of volunteer race car drivers. He was sure his circle of friends would quickly fill every available slot.

In the weeks before the United States declared war on Germany and the Central Powers on April 6, 1917, Eddie Rickenbacker was quick to urge his country to action in speeches wherever he went. Ironically, everywhere he traveled, he was followed by a shadow. The British government was still concerned about their *German spy*. The cat and mouse game became increasingly annoying, and Eddie was rapidly losing his sense of humor with the situation. He traveled to Cleveland. So did his shadow. Returning home to Columbus Eddie would walk down the street, only to see the reflection of the not-too-distant Intelligence agent in the store windows. On to Dayton, Chicago, and then out to the West Coast, the man and his tail traveled. While in Los Angeles Rickenbacker had finally had enough.

While walking down the street one afternoon, Rickenbacker deliberately baited his tail into close proximity, then ducked into an alley. The agent followed, too close on Eddie's heels to duck with the *German spy* stopped suddenly and turned on him. "When is your government going to learn that I'm not the Crown Prince of Germany?" Rickenbacker demanded.

"I was just going to tell you," the agent responded, "my government is now satisfied that you are all right. Thank you for the ocean voyage and the wonderful trip across your continent." And with that, the agent bowed and faded in the distance.

If the British government was frustrating to Eddie Rickenbacker, so too could be the



military

establishment of his own country.

Eddie was excited about the prospects of an American aero squadron composed of former racecar drivers. Already he had found a list of eager volunteers that included a Who's Who of the racetrack, the men knew and widely respected as the famous Ralph DePalma. Rickenbacker took his idea to the top, Brigadier General George D. Squier who commanded the Army's Signal Corps, the branch responsible for aviation. Rickenbacker laid out his case for the squadron, then was stunned by the response.

*"We don't believe,"* stated one officer, *"that it would be wise for a pilot to have any knowledge of engines and mechanics. Airplane engines are always breaking down, and a man who knew a great deal about engines would know if his engine wasn't functioning correctly and be hesitant about going into combat."* It was typical of the strange and twisted logic traditional Army officers would employ for the next two decades as military aviation fought for its place in the affairs of the world.

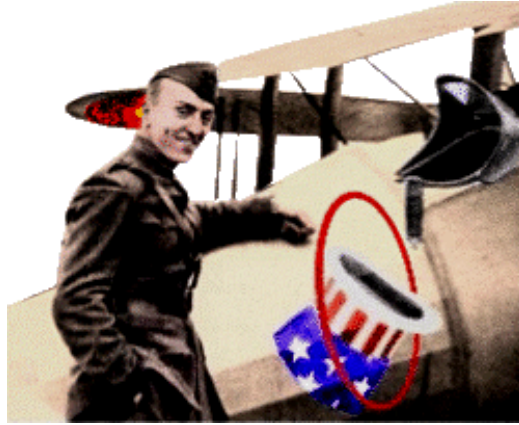
For his own part, Rickenbacker was determined to become an American fighter pilot, despite the fact that he had also learned in his meetings with the Signal Corps that the Army only recruited college graduates 25 years old or younger. (Rickenbacker had only attended school through the 7th grade, and was now nearly 27 years old.) Such obstacles never in his distinguished lifetime, could hold back Edward Vernon Rickenbacker. Somehow, we would find a way.

### **Rickenbacker, The Pilot**

Eddie Rickenbacker was ready for opportunity when in May he got the call informing him of the secret sailing of the first American soldiers for the shores of France. With only 24 hours to make his decision, he turned his back on a \$35,000 a year racing career to be among the first American force that would comprise the Three M's he'd spent weeks promoting. He sailed from New York as a Sergeant, assigned to duties as a driver, not the flier he longed to become. But he also knew that opportunities often started with a small door, that opened to greater entrances. With the same brash determination that motivated him to seek a promotion to Sergeant First Class on his first day, he would find a way to get into Army aviation.

John J. Pershing's Expeditionary Force arrived in France on June 26th, and Eddie

Rickenbacker dutifully



performed his role as a glorified

chauffeur. Contrary to the colorful media reports of the day, he never drove for General Pershing himself. He did meet and drive for another American officer that Eddie came to love and respect, and who influences certainly helped Eddie achieve his goals. The first time Rickenbacker met Colonel William *Billy* Mitchell who commanded the Army's Air Service, the officer's car had broken down. Quickly the engine-wise Rickenbacker had the Colonel back on the road, and thereafter Mitchell frequently requested Rickenbacker as a driver. When the time was ripe, Rickenbacker approached the Colonel with the subject of his desire to be a pilot.

*"Eddie," Mitchell asked him, "do you really want to fly?"*

*"Yes, sir," Rickenbacker responded. "Anybody can drive this car. I'd appreciate the opportunity to learn to fly."*

"I'll see what I can do," the great pioneer of American aviation promised. A few days later Rickenbacker received orders to report for the physical exam required for pilot training. The doctor who examined Eddie was an old friend who not only pronounced him physically fit to fly but wrote down Rickenbacker's birthdate as October 8, 1892. On paper at least, the would-be pilot was now under the Army's age limit of twenty-five. It was a magic number for Eddie. Seventeen days of training and twenty-five hours in the air netted him pilot's wings and a commission as a first lieutenant in the U.S. Army's Signal Corps.

With shiny wings on his chest and a silver bar on his collar, Lieutenant Rickenbacker now had to keep his part of a bargain that had helped him get into pilot training. In September he reported for duty as the engineering officer at Issoudun under the command of his old friend, Jim Miller.

The *German spy* suspicions never completely faded away. Indeed, shortly after arriving in France, Rickenbacker returned to his billets one day to find his roommate rifling through his belongings in search of anything that would expose the American soldier's loyalty to the Kaiser. At Issoudun Rickenbacker recruited a transportation

officer with the surname Spiegel. Ray Miller's adjutant was a man named Wiedenbach, and Wiedenbach's assistant was named Tittle. The Germanization of the field was competing when a new commander was assigned to the field to replace Miller, a Major named Carl *Tooley* Spaatz.

Rickenbacker took great joy in the fact that the field at Issoudun was run by five American officers named: Spaatz, Wiedenbach, Tittel, Rickenbacker, and Spiegel. A few months later Eddie wrote a letter to a friend back home wherein, in a joking manner, he replaced the "h" in his name with a "k". When word of that letter reached the American media, headlines proclaimed that the now-famous American Ace had changed the Germanic spelling of his name to snub the Kaiser. As a result, the name Rickenbacker was forever changed to Rickenbacker...not only for himself but for all the other members of the Rickenbacker clan.

The shiny pilot's wings and duty as the Issoudun Field's engineering officer were not the fulfillment of Eddie's dream, but a stepping stone to his ultimate goal of becoming a fighter pilot. Throughout the fall of 1917, he watched the new pilots arrive at the field for training and longed to be one of them. These pilots themselves had little use for the engineering officer, and Eddie Rickenbacker endured to some degree the snobbish deference later experienced by Frank Luke. Behind his back, these young Ivy Leaguers joked about their Swiss-German engineering officer who spoke with a thick accent and who had only a grammar school education. The five top officers at the field were often referred to as "the five German spies", though certainly not to their faces.

Unlike Frank Luke who withdrew when he underwent such acrimony, Lieutenant Rickenbacker took it in stride and maintained considerable respect for these young men who would soon be going into battle. His respect for them, however, couldn't prevent a little revenge now and then. The muddy airfield was strewn with rocks that often flew up to break the wooden propellers of airplanes as they taxied across the field. One day Lieutenant Rickenbacker requisitioned a hundred buckets and soon thereafter the field was filled with bright young college graduates bent over in the mud to pick up rocks. The chore did little to further endear Rickenbacker to his young charges, but their complaints were, in his own words, "music to my ears".

### **The Hat in The Ring Squadron**

In January 1918 the first group of American pilots at Issoudun completed their training and headed for gunnery school. Their departure was a sad moment for Lieutenant Rickenbacker, not because he realized that this was the last step before they would be thrust into combat, but because he was not going to be going with them.

His pleas to Major Spaatz were fruitless. The commander of the field at Issoudun



felt Rickenbacker was too important to the work being done to train these new pilots. Once again, the impetuous Eddie Rickenbacker found his own means of creating opportunity. Battling a cold and fatigued from his recent work, he was able to convince the school surgeon that he was ill. After two weeks of recuperation at the hospital, Rickenbacker returned to point out to Major Spaatz that the field had run perfectly well without him.

"I'm onto your little game, Rickenbacker," Spaatz said bluntly. Then he paused, smiled, and continued, "If your heart's set on going to Cazeau (the location of aerial gunnery school), you're no damn good to be around here. So good luck."

Two months later Rickenbacker reported for duty at the new 94th Aero Squadron under the command of Major John Huffner. The 94th and 95th were the first all-American fighter squadrons to reach the front lines, and would certainly be the first to see combat action. Joining Rickenbacker as a charter member of the group were pilots Douglas Campbell, James Meissner, Edgar Tobin, Edwin Green, Hobart Baker, and Joseph Eastman. The excitement of the group was heightened by the presence of one more officer, the legendary Major Raoul Lufbery.

On the morning of March 6, Major Lufbery announced the first flight and selected two eager pilots to join him: Lieutenants Rickenbacker and Campbell. It was the first mission by American pilots of an all-American fighter squadron over enemy lines. Fortunately, the mission was flown without incident or combat...fortunate because the French Nieuport airplanes that took off from the aerodrome at Villeneuve fifteen miles from enemy lines were unarmed. The American fighter squadrons had airplanes, but their guns hadn't yet arrived.

When the mission was complete and Rickenbacker and Campbell shared their experience with the other excited pilots, they talked of all the German Archie they had seen, but not a single airplane had shared the skies with them that morning.

"You sure there weren't any other airplanes up there today, Rick?" Lufbery asked with a chuckle.

"Not a one!" Eddie replied.

"Listen," Lufbery said, not in contradiction but more like a father preparing his son for the future, "one formation of five Spads crossed under us before we passed the lines. Another flight of five Spads went by about fifteen minutes later, five hundred yards away. Damn a good thing they weren't Boches. And there were four German Albatrosses ahead of us when we turned back and another enemy two-seater closer to us than that. You must learn to look around." Then Lufbery walked over to Rickenbacker's plane and poked his finger through a hole in the canvas of a wing,

then another in the tail, and yet another that had been punched through both wings only a foot from the cockpit. The lesson was not wasted on Rickenbacker or any of the other young pilots. They were fortunate to learn from a veteran like Lufbery, and over the following weeks, they continued to hang on his every word.

Two days later Rickenbacker's old friend Captain James Miller, commander now of the 95th Aero Squadron, led the first full squadron patrol over enemy lines...again albeit, without armament. Miller was forced by engine problems to land at Coigny and hitch a ride back to the aerodrome. Returning on March 10 to Coigny, he picked up his repaired Nieuport and flew to Coligny to replace it with one of the newer Spads. Flying his new airplane over the Rheims sector, he was attacked by two German planes and shot down behind the lines, the first American casualty.

The following day Lieutenant Paul Baer of the 103rd, who would hold the title *Ace of Aces* after Major Lufbery before being shot down himself, shot down an enemy aircraft in the same vicinity, giving the new American 1st Pursuit Group its first victory.

During this period while the men of the squadron were awaiting the arrival of machine guns for their Nieuports, the pilots often flew with their French counterparts just to gain experience. They chaffed at the bit for the armament that would allow them to engage enemy planes and hid their lack of weapons from the French who would have been horrified to learn the American aviators who accompanied them couldn't fire a shot in combat. It was also during this period that the men of the squadrons sought ways to distinguish themselves from each other.

As the men of the 94th Aero Squadron kicked about ideas for a Squadron logo or insignia, Major Huffner suggested using the quickly recognizable red, white, and blue stovepipe hat of Uncle Sam. Flight Surgeon Lieutenant Walters reminded the men of the custom of throwing one's hat into a ring as a call to battle. Thus, was born the famous "Hat in the Ring" emblem, and former architect Lieutenant Johnny Wentworth was tasked to withdraw it. Over the following days, the new logo began appearing on each of the airplanes of the 94th Aero Squadron. In late March and the early days of April, the *Hat in The Ring* challenge gained some *teeth* with the arrival, at last, of machine guns. Armed and ready for war, on April 7 the squadron was moved to Toul, eighteen miles from the scene of the ground war.

For years American pilots had flown with the French, even become Aces. Since the formation of the 1st Pursuit Group, there had been all-American patrols, even victories, and losses. But the first official COMBAT patrol ever flown by the precursor to the United States Air Force occurred on April 14 when the newly armed Nieuports of the 94th Aero Squadron took off from the aerodrome at Toul.

At 6 a.m. that morning Captain Peterson and Lieutenants Eddie Rickenbacker and Reed Chambers took off for a 2-hour patrol. Standing by at the field were Lieutenants Douglas Campbell and Alan Winslow. Rickenbacker prowled the fog-shrouded skies looking for trouble, the bright red, white, and blue emblem shining from the fuselage of his own Neuport. To his disappointment, no German pilot accepted the challenge and he returned empty-handed. He was writing his after-action report when the field phone rang...two enemy airplanes were approaching Toul. Before he could don his own flight, suit, and climb into the cockpit, Campbell and Winslow were airborne. Minutes later a single-seater Pfalz crashed in flames near the aerodrome, victim to Lieutenant Campbell's guns. Lieutenant Winslow drove the other enemy craft, an albatross, out of control and down to the ground. They were the first two victories scored by an All-American Squadron and set the pace for the historic events of the following months of the war.

The success of that day was further highlighted the following morning when Brigadier General Liggett, Commander of the A.E.F.'s First Army, personally visited the men of the 94th Aero Squadron. Joining him was the Chief of Army Air Service, Colonel William *Billy* Mitchell.

The excitement of that first combat patrol, coupled with the double victory of Lieutenants Campbell and Winslow was quickly tempered by two weeks of frustration for Eddie Rickenbacker and the other would-be aces of the 94th Aero Squadron. In the weeks before that first *Hat in The Ring* victory, impatient weeks of waiting for machine guns for the squadron's Nieuports, Lieutenant Paul Baer of the 103rd Aero Squadron claimed four victories. On May 21 the famed *Red Baron* was shot down and killed, and two days later Lieutenant Baer got his fifth victory to become the first ace of the American Army Air Service. (This distinction is often erroneously credited to Eddie Rickenbacker.)

In the matter of intra-squadron rivalry, the 103rd now had 14 victories compared to the 94th Aero Squadron's two victories from April 14th, and besides Lieutenant Baer's role as the first American Ace, Major William Thaw of the 103rd had three victories and Captain James Hall had two.

On the same day, Baer became an ace Major Lufbery did his best to raise the score for his squadron when he attacked an enemy biplane, only to return empty-handed after firing just five rounds. The 94th Aero Squadron's Nieuports had received their guns, but all too often the pilots still found themselves flying unarmed. Time after time the guns jammed at the most inopportune moment. This mechanical failure was second in severity only to the tendency of the canvas covering the Nieuwpoort's wings to shred when the plane was put into a steep dive. Both equipment handicaps were frustrating; either could be fatal.

## First Blood, April 29

The pilots of the *Hat in The Ring* Squadron poked their heads out the door of their quarters at 6:00 a.m. to check the weather. Since Major Lufbery's aborted mission six days earlier it had rained almost incessantly. For several days, not a single mission had been mounted. Once again, disappointment hushed the normal banter of the eager pilots over breakfast.

Shortly after noon the sun finally broke through the clouds, and hope mounted for some activity. Rickenbacker was scheduled for an afternoon flight with Captain Hall who had been transferred from the 103rd shortly after his second victory. The captain's experience and combat record had impressed Rickenbacker, and he was excited to be teamed with the man who had become a friend and mentor. They were standing by in their flight suits when, at five o'clock, a call came through from French headquarters at Beaumont to alert the pilots at the aerodrome that an enemy two-seater was heading their way. Five minutes later the two American pilots were airborne and weaving among the scattered clouds looking for the intruder.

Rickenbacker spotted it first, a small moving speck in the distance. He dipped his wings towards Captain Hall to get his attention, then darted back and forth towards the enemy aircraft to point his flight leader in the proper direction. The frustration continued to mount as Captain Hall kept flying straight ahead towards enemy lines, instead of breaking off to pursue the distant invader. Finally, Rickenbacker broke away. He'd go after the enemy airplane alone.

Coaxing his engine to maximum speed, Rickenbacker sped closer towards the distant airplane, carefully maneuvering his own biplane for maximum tactical advantage in the attack. The enemy plane stayed its course, apparently unaware that it was now practically in the gun sights of the American pilot. Rickenbacker smiled to himself. The French observers who had phoned in the report had been wrong, it wasn't a two-seater. It was a large, three-seat plane with big guns pointing in all directions.

Rickenbacker closed in, zooming upwards for the kill, his finger tensing on the triggers of his own guns. The fuselage was directly in front of him. This was going to be all too easy. Squinting across the nose of his Nieuport he prepared to release a deadly volley when his eyes noticed the circular cocarde painted under each wing. No wonder the big airplane hadn't been concerned about his presence. It was a French airplane!

Rickenbacker cursed his folly as he veered away. No wonder he couldn't get Captain Hall to break away. The veteran pilot must have realized the distant speck was an ally. Now he probably was laughing his head off at Rickenbacker's *rookie* mistake.

Scanning the distant skies over the German lines, Rickenbacker searched for Captain Hall. In the distance, he could see the unmistakable puffs indicating Archie beyond the lines. The German ground forces were shooting at something in the air, and that something could only be Captain Hall. Rickenbacker quickly sped in that direction. As the range closed, he found his mentor, calmly doing acrobatic maneuvers over the German batteries, dodging their sharpshooters and taunting them to waste even more ammunition. Captain Hall was, in Rickenbacker's opinion, the epitome of the American fighter pilot.

As Rickenbacker's Nieuport approached, Hall veered away from the enemy fire to join his partner. Apparently, he had been waiting for Rick to realize the error of his earlier zeal, and had been amusing himself more than a mile inside the enemy territory with his loops, barrels, sideslips, and spins directly over the heads of the gunners on the ground. Now Captain Hall changed direction and began climbing into the sun. Rickenbacker followed close behind, surmising that the veteran had a good reason for the maneuver. Minutes later he realized his assumption was indeed correct. An enemy scout was flying towards the duo's position, and this time the sleek lines of a German Pfalz were unmistakable.

The enemy plane was on a course that would take it directly into the path of the two Americans and Rickenbacker hung close to Hall, hidden by the fading sun to the west. When Captain Hall put his plane into a dive on the Pfalz below, Rickenbacker wisely stayed above to cut off any attempted retreat.

The enemy pilot saw Rickenbacker first and pulled back on the stick to begin a rapid climb for battle. Suddenly Hall opened up with his own guns, and the German pilot realized for the first time that the odds were two-to-one against him. He lost all his heart for the fight and started to turn for home. It was exactly what Rickenbacker expected, the move he had positioned his Nieuport to prevent. As the Pfalz went into a steep dive, Rickenbacker was on his tail and lining up his guns. When he was within 150 yards, he pulled the triggers, sending a stream of deadly bullets into the enemy airplane's tail. This time there were no jams as the machinegun hammered the Pfalz. Rickenbacker pulled out of his dive and leveled to watch as the doomed enemy circled slowly out of control and crashed into the forest below. Captain Hall had his third victory, Rickenbacker his first. More importantly, the 94th Aero Squadron had moved two notches closer to the 103rd Squadron's impressive tally.

World War I aerial victories were counted differently, depending upon which allied nation a pilot flew for. The earliest pilots flew either for the French or the British. British pilots used a fractionalized counting system (if two pilots shot down one airplane or balloon, each got a half of the victory); while the French

counted a downed airplane or balloon as a full victory for each person involved. If two, 2-seater French airplanes (with both a pilot and observer in each) combined to shoot down one enemy aircraft, each man in each plane was credited with the victory (4 credits for one downed enemy).

When the U.S. Army Air Service began operation, its squadrons opted for the more liberal French count. Under this method, the Pfalz shot down by Captain Hall and Lieutenant Rickenbacker on April 29th counted as one victory for each. By extension then, it also counted as two victories for their squadron.

During World War II the Army Air Corps reverted to the WWI British model of fractionalizing each victory. Under that system, two pilots involved in a single shoot-down would each get credited with a half victory.

### **In Pursuit of First Place**

At the beginning of May 1918, all but one of the 19 American aerial victories had been scored by either the 103rd Aero Squadron (14 victories) or the 94th Aero Squadron (4 victories). The only Ace among them remained Paul Baer. Over the following 31 days, the pilots of the *Hat in The Ring* were determined to try and become the leading squadron in the new Army Air Service.

The month started on an ominous note when Major Lufbery and Lieutenant Rickenbacker teamed up for the first mission of the new month. The only victory scored that day would be the loss of an American airplane, not that of an enemy. When the engine on Lufbery's Nieuport failed, the American Ace of Aces (he had achieved 16 victories with the Lafayette Escadrille), crashed and rolled. Fortunately, the Major survived unscathed.

The following day Lieutenant James Meissner was flying with a 3-plane patrol when he and his comrades attacked three enemy bi-planes. Meissner netted the fifth victory for the 94th Aero Squadron, but almost at the loss of his own life. Following his vanquished foe in a steep dive, the entire left, and upper wing of his Nieuport was stripped of its canvas while he was well beyond friendly lines. Only Meissner's skill as a pilot enabled him to carefully nurse his airplane across the lines to crash in friendly territory.

On May 3 Captain David Peterson and Lieutenants Chapman and Loomis engaged five enemy scout planes. Loomis' machine guns jammed, though the intrepid pilot continued to engage the enemy as if he were still armed in order to render some confusion to the dogfight. Captain Peterson scored one victory as did Lieutenant Chapman, though the latter victory was unconfirmed. Worse, before the battle ended, Chapman was shot down. Later that same day, Lieutenant Winslow was taking off for a mission when his

engine failed, causing him to crash. In the first three days of the month, the 94th had scored two confirmed victories while losing two aircraft to mechanical failure and a third to enemy bullets.

On May 5 the 1st Pursuit Group headquarters was established at Gengault, France where the 95th Pursuit Squadron arrived after aerial gunnery school, and the 94th Aero Squadron was moved to the new aerodrome. From that date on the two squadrons remained together throughout the war, and the competition for a first-place became a 3-way race between the two squadrons of the 1st Pursuit Group and the 103rd Aero Squadron (3rd Pursuit Group).

Calamity continued to detract from the *Hat in The Ring* Squadron's efforts to overtake the 103rd for the first place. Two days after moving to the aerodrome at Gengault, Captain Hall and Lieutenants Rickenbacker and Eddie Green attacked three enemy scouts near Preney. Rickenbacker destroyed a Fokker monoplane, though it wasn't confirmed or credited until six months later, and Green shot down an enemy Pfalz that was never confirmed or credited. Captain Hall dove on an enemy Fokker so intent on the victory he did not notice the fabric stripping away from his wings. The problem was compounded when a dud anti-aircraft shell further damaged his wing, and the popular pilot and well-known American author crashed behind the lines. Wounded, he was taken prisoner. He survived the war to write again, penning the popular book Mutiny on the Bounty, among others.

During yet another flight that same afternoon, Major Lufbery shot down an enemy scout plane (unconfirmed). Returning from a mission, Lieutenant James Meissner hit a hole while taxiing across the field and flipped his Nieuport over. By the day's end, none of the 94th's three victories had been confirmed or credited, and the squadron had lost two aircraft and one veteran pilot. The 1st Pursuit Group's 147th Aero Squadron also suffered its first casualty on this day when Private Henry Black, a member of the ground crew, was struck by lightning and killed.

On May 8 Lieutenant Paul Baer of the 103d had a double victory, destroying two enemy airplanes after a 10-minute dogfight and boosting his tally to seven victories. The next day the 94th Aero Squadron destroyed two more aircraft, but once again it was their own. Captain Kenneth Marr and Lieutenant Thorne Taylor landed at the field from opposite directions and in the confusion, collided head-on sending both airplanes spinning. Fortunately, both pilots walked away from their shattered Nieuports.

The *comedy of errors* was not confined to the 94th. On May 10th the 147th squadron, which had suffered its first casualty less than a week earlier to lightning, received its first type XXVIII Nieuports. Upon landing, one of the new airplanes

sank in a mud hole, destroying the undercarriage. Two days later Lieutenant James Healy crashed on landing, destroying another of the new Nieuports. Though injured, once again the pilot survived.

During that second week of May, many missions were flown, and enemy aircraft attacked. Rickenbacker and two other pilots of the 94th engaged an enemy Fokker near Thiaucourt on May 11, but the results were inconclusive. On May 13 Lieutenant Campbell shot down an enemy single-seater while well inside German territory. The victory went unconfirmed. Finally, on May 15, things began to improve. Captain David Peterson shot down two German biplanes raising the 94th's tally to 8 (not counting Rickenbacker's unconfirmed victory of May 6th) and becoming the first pilot in the 94th to get a double victory in a single day. In the afternoon Captain Peterson, Captain Hall (MIA), and Lieutenants Rickenbacker, Meissner, and Charles Chapman (KIA) were presented the French Croix-De-Guerre for their earlier victories. After an impressive ceremony, Rickenbacker joined Major Lufbery and Colonel Billy Mitchell

in a 20-minute air show for the crowd. After the ceremony, the new *hero* of the 94th, Captain Peterson, was transferred to the 147th Aero Squadron. Two days later he gave his new command its first aerial victory.

If the awards ceremony had been intended as an incentive, it certainly worked. When the ceremony was over Lieutenant Meissner grinned at Rickenbacker and said, "I feel that 'Hate-the-Hun' feeling creeping over me. What do you say to go up and getting a Boche?" Rickenbacker was more than ready and the two took off shortly thereafter. They even found and attempted to engage two enemy aircraft, but returned empty-handed at the end of the day.

On May 17th Rick went hunting enemy airplanes with a vengeance. Climbing to a chilly 18,000 feet he shook off his discomfort to circle the skies well inside the enemy lines, crossing into Germany as far east as Metz. Patiently he clung to the ceiling as he scanned for a target. As the morning wore on, so too wore Eddie's deliberate patience. Down to less than an hour of fuel, disappointment began creeping in when at last he noted three German Albatrosses take off for reconnaissance over the French lines. Rick remained high above as the three aircraft spread out, then pushed the stick forward to begin his dive on the trailing airplane. Without even checking his speed, he estimated that the dive had granted him as much as 200 miles per hour (top speed for the Nieuports was close to 120 mph). Without wavering, he kept the nose pointed at his enemy and, when at last the quarry noted the hunter and went into his own steep dive, Rickenbacker stayed his course. Closing within 50 yards, Rickenbacker pulled the trigger and watched a stream of flaming bullets pierce the enemy airplane's back seat. The German pilot slumped over the controls and continued



his dive to its conclusion on the ground.

Determined to follow his victim towards the ground, Rickenbacker maintained his own dive to the last minute, then pulled back on the stick. There was a loud crash and for the first time, he became aware of his own precarious situation. Looking to his right he was horrified to see that all the fabric of his upper wing had been ripped away. The Nieuport rolled to its side, then began its own tailspin to doom. The other two German airplanes dove in to apply the coup de grace. Bullets whined around the cockpit as Rick fought the controls. He didn't begrudge the enemy for attacking his already wounded airplane, though he later said he was critical of their bad judgment in wasting ammunition on a plane that was already destroyed. Perhaps at last the enemy pilots recovered their good judgment, for with the Nieuport continuing to spin earthward, they, at last, broke off contact to continue their mission.

Having dropped 15,000 feet in a matter of minutes, Lieutenant Rickenbacker watched the ground spin dizzily towards him and wondered if he would survive the crash to have his shattered body imprisoned by the Germans below. From less than 3,000 feet he could see people on the ground, watching his demise. The stick fought his hand as he tried to control the floundering Nieuport when, with a total disregard for the consequences, he pulled open the throttle. The sudden burst of speed suddenly leveled the airplane, and the rudder began responding to the stick. The enemy airplanes had vanished in the distance. Now it was only Rickenbacker and his desperate attempts to climb. It proved useless, with the wind whipping through the barren right-wing he could only manage a semi-level flight at low altitude. Then the German Archie began, and explosions burst around him.

At under 1,000 feet, the Nieuport slipped across no man's land and into allied territory. With the engine running wide open, Rick came in for a landing. The Nieuport pancaked to the soft mud, destroyed beyond repair, but miraculously, Eddie Rickenbacker walked away. Almost as amazing, the dead pilot of the Albatross he had nearly given his life to destroy had fallen across the stick of his own in such a way that the doomed enemy plane had also glided across the lines to crash in France. Eddie's victory was verified, his third downed airplane (his second confirmed kill).

Despite such problems, the tide was turning for the young American pilots. The day after Rickenbacker's near-fatal combat mission, Lieutenant Doug Campbell attacked an enemy bi-plane near Verdun. When the *Hat in The Ring* pilot's guns jammed after a few bursts, the intrepid airman bluffed his way through a series of aerial maneuvers until he had cleared his guns to score his own second victory. Campbell caught up to his friend Rick the next day when he scored his third, again only after his guns jammed on the first assault and he had made a series of courageous maneuvers while working to free up his weapons.

Unreliable engines, fragile wings, and temperamental machine guns made fighting the German pilots difficult. The Nieuport 28 was fast and maneuverable, but its other drawbacks had caused the French and British air services to reject it. The fact that these airplanes were then passed off on the new United States Air Service reflects much of the greatest battle the early American combat pilots faced, not aerial combat against armed Germans, but a political war for recognition in the traditional halls of the U.S. military. Airpower was not seen as an important factor by American military war planners. A squadron would be formed on paper, then wait for weeks for the arrival of airplanes cast off by other air services, and then have to fly unarmed while awaiting a requisition of armament.

The French, the British, and the Germans worked hard to improve their airplanes, their weapons, and their aerial tactics. American pilots were assigned to squadrons, provided cast-off machines and materials, and were expected to survive on their intrepid spirit alone. Before the war, Rickenbacker had been stunned by the Army's response to his attempt to build a squadron from the ranks of race car drivers. It had been scoffed at, largely because the Army felt knowledge of engines would be detrimental to a pilot and temper their zeal in battle or make them hesitant to fly if an engine sounded less than up-to-par. Such sheer idiocy went even further and was more deadly. Rickenbacker always claimed he was happy to see a parachute unfurl beneath one of his victims. His war was against machines, not men. French and British pilots were also often known to have parachuted to safety from a shot up an airplane. American pilots didn't even HAVE parachutes.

### **Eddie Rickenbacker** **Fighting the Flying Circus**

The tragedy that befell the 94th Pursuit Squadron on May 19 brought Rickenbacker face to face with the parachute issue. While Doug Campbell was bagging his third victory, two German 2-seaters were engaged in a dogfight near the aerodrome with two green American pilots. When it appeared that the enemy aircraft would escape the novice Americans, it was more than Major Lufbery could stand. The now-famous pilot jumped into a nearby airplane and gave chase.

Lufbery made one round of the two machines as the ground crews watched from the distant American aerodrome. Suddenly he veered away as if to clear a jamb in his guns. Looping back into battle, enemy rounds raked his airplane, puncturing the fuel tank. The ground crews watched in horror as the flames spread, and Major Lufbery slid back along the fuselage of his burning plane towards the tail. Moments later, from a height of about 1,000 feet, America's first Ace of Aces leaped from his nearly incinerated Nieuport. The plane crashed in a field near a river, and it was later speculated that Lufbery was trying to leap into the water from that height himself.

Instead, his body plummeted to earth to fall on a picket fence. If the great Ace had possessed a parachute, he might well have survived that day. The following morning, he was buried in the Aviators Cemetery at Sebastopol, France with full military honors.

At one point during the summer, Rickenbacker confronted a major at Air Service headquarters in Paris regarding the parachute matter. He was told that the parachutes were too large and heavy for the small fighters. Rickenbacker knew this was not true, the Germans had developed parachutes small enough for their pilots. "Rickenbacker," the Major finally stated coldly, "if all you pilots had parachutes, then you'd be inclined to use them on the slightest pretext, and the Air Service would lose planes that might otherwise have been brought down safely." It took all of Rick's willpower to keep his temper from exploding at that.

The death of Major Lufbery was a severe blow to the psyche of the men of all three active American pursuit squadrons. Somehow the intrepid young men rose above it. To Lieutenant Paul Baer of the 103rd was bequeathed the title *American Ace of Aces*, and on the day, they buried an aerial legend, Baer added to his own enviable record by achieving his eighth victory. The next day, Rickenbacker got his fourth (third confirmed) and Baer shot down his ninth... and last, enemy plane. Baer had been *Ace of Aces* for but two days before he was shot down, wounded, and captured. His title, a deadly one to be sure, passed on to Lieutenant Frank Bayliss, an American pilot with the French Escadrille of the Cigognes, Spad 3. Bayliss would achieve a total of 13 victories before he was killed on June 17.

By the end of May, the two squadrons of the 1st Pursuit Group were competing fiercely for the first place. The 95th Pursuit Squadron ended the month with fourteen victories, the 94th with eighteen. On the next-to-the-last day of the month Rickenbacker got his fifth confirmed victory to become the second American Ace of the war, and the following day Lieutenant Campbell got his fifth, making the *Hat in The Ring* Squadron the only American squadron with two Aces. The 103rd Pursuit Squadron of the 3rd Pursuit Group still held first place in the victory category with 21.

Despite all the problems with airplanes, guns, and weather, in the first 10 weeks on the front, the three American Aero Squadrons had claimed 53 victories over the enemy.

During the month of June, the action slowed down somewhat. For Rickenbacker, his 6th victory (5th confirmed) achieved on May 30th would be his last for three and a half months. The 103rd kept its lead intact though only achieving three victories for the month. The 94th crept closer after four victories though the 95th managed to muster only one. The new *pretender* for the crown appeared to be the newly arrived 27th Aero Squadron. Recognizable for the eagle with spread wings painted on the side of their

Nieuports (claimed to have originated on the side of an Anheuser-Busch Beer Wagon), the *Eagle Squadron* managed thirteen victories.

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[Persian Gulf War](#)

[Vietnam War](#)

[Korean War](#)

[World War II](#)

[World War I](#)

[Civil War](#)

[Spanish American War](#)

[Mexican-American War](#)

[War of 1812](#)

[American Indian Wars](#)

[Revolutionary War](#)

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