

Virginia Aviation History Project



The Lafayette Escadrille by Linda Burdette

The Wright Brothers flew in December 1903. They sold their first military aircraft to the U.S. Army in 1909. Among others, including people like Glenn Curtis and Billy Mitchell, the Wrights believed that aircraft would be a major combat multiplier for armies in the future. Unfortunately many others were equally adamant that aircraft could never be used successfully in warfare. Among the naysayers were none other than Scientific American magazine which stated in 1910 “To affirm that the aeroplane is going to ‘revolutionize’ naval [sic] warfare of the future is to be guilty of the wildest exaggeration.” And in 1911, General Ferdinand Foch, Professor of Strategy at the Ecole Superiure de Guere opined “Aviation is fine as a sport. But as an instrument of war, it is worthless.”

However in July 1914, a mere five years after the Wright Military Flyer became the first military airplane in the world, the entire world changed, especially the world of aviation, because when the Great War began both the German and French armies fielded aviation units.

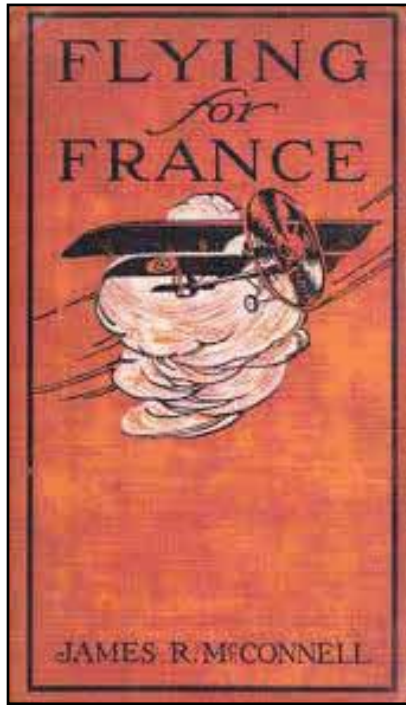
Although the American government maintained its neutrality until 1917, there were many Americans, especially those with family connections to France or other European countries, who were firmly dedicated to the Allied war effort. These feelings ran so deep that many young men and women traveled to France to volunteer in non-combat roles. Many

would have preferred more involvement in the war but the U.S. Constitution forbade American citizens from fighting on behalf of a foreign power. Many European countries, especially France and Spain, took advantage of this dedication and allowed the Americans to serve in non-combat roles.

Undeterred, they found two legal avenues. First, some joined the French Foreign Legion which was not considered an integral part of the French military and some joined the American Field Service, a volunteer organization which supplied ambulance and transportation support for French front-line soldiers. Inevitably some of the Americans, especially ones who already had flying experience, began to attempt to transfer to the French aviation units. In the meantime the American government had issued a waiver to the young people who wanted to fight for France and so they were not putting their citizenship in jeopardy.

The initial idea for the Escadrille came from Normal Prince and William Thaw. They envisioned an all-American Corps and found an ally in Dr. Edmond Gros, an American physician with a prominent practice in Paris and who also served as the Surgeon General of the American Field Service. Dr. Gros assisted with the plans and proved invaluable in his contacts with the French government to present the pilots’ proposal. Dr. Gros also recommended and approached W.K. Vanderbilt for funds for the Esca-

drille. Vanderbilt had been a significant, although silent, supporter of the American Field Service and again stepped up to help fund the fledgling Escadrille. The Commander of the Lafayette Escadrille reported later that soldiers in the French Army re-



ceived the equivalent of one cent per day for their subsistence and the Americans were very lucky that the Vanderbilt subsidized this amount. Otherwise the Americans' existence would have been much more Spartan!

Once the first American pilot was allowed to enter the ranks of French aviators,

many young Americans volunteered, including some who couldn't actually fly. This caused some issues as the French military leadership were already skeptical of these newcomers and the inconsistencies told by the American "pilots" made them question whether these young men were actually German spies! This situation actually arose from the pilots' eagerness. Early on, Thaw and two of his friends tried for acceptance into the French aviation corps. Thaw actually had a pilot's license and had flown a Curtiss, so when he was challenged to fly a French airplane, he could manage it without incident. Not so much for his friends. Bert Hall vowed that he was a pilot and could easily handle the French airplanes. When the time for his test came, he neglected to say as he sauntered to the aircraft that he'd ever been that close to an airplane at all. Incredibly he managed to leave the ground, but then he crashed headlong into a nearby

hangar. He was uninjured but the airplane was destroyed. Later a young American named Hardouin did the same thing. He claimed he was a pilot and had flown long distances in the States and was so adamant that the French instructors provided a plane for him to fly. He took off, climbed precipitously to 1,500 feet, and dove headlong toward the earth at full power. He made no attempt to control the descent or land the aircraft and the plane bore into the earth at full power. Unbelievably he came out of it with only a fractured knee, but the plane was in splinters. He later admitted that he'd never been in an airplane before.

When Bert Hall and James Bach were allowed to begin their flight training, they continued to have challenges and damaged and destroyed so many airplanes that the French leadership decided to investigate whether they were German agents sent to decimate the numbers of French aircraft. Nothing came of the inquiry and both were eventually allowed to enter the ranks of French military pilots. (Incidentally Bach, from St. Louis, Missouri, was the first American Prisoner of War held by the Germans. On September 23, 1915, his aircraft crashed behind enemy lines on a mission to deliver a saboteur / observer. He was taken prisoner by the Germans



Founding Members of Escadrille

and spent the rest of the war in German hands, only being repatriated after the Armistice.)

The Escadrille Americaine was founded on April 18, 1916, with a French Commander, Major George Thenault, French mechanics, French airplanes, and



Lafayette Escadrille pilots with a Nieuport 16, March 1916

American pilots. It was originally named the Escadrille Americaine until Germany complained to the American government that it evidenced a lack of neutrality on the part of the United States. The French government didn't want to create friction with the American government so they renamed it the "Volunteer Escadrille." But that name was unpopular with both the pilots, the sponsors, and the French citizens. So with typical Gallic aplomb, they finally decided to honor the German request but definitely made their point by naming the Escadrille (French for Squadron) after the most prominent Frenchman in the American Revolution, the Marquis de Lafayette. So the Lafayette Escadrille was born. The founding members of the Escadrille were Thenault, Victor Chapman, Norman Prince, William Thaw, Elliott Cowdin, Laurence Rumsey, Bert Hall, and two with connections to Virginia - Kiffin Rockwell and James McConnell.

The first planes were Nieuports and were fondly

called baby-Nieuports. The design had been completed only four months before the planes were issued to the Escadrille. The pilots were extremely proud of these machines; to fly a Nieuport meant that you were automatically considered an experienced pilot. The planes had 16 square yards of surface, an 8 HP Rhone rotary motor and could achieve a speed of 95 miles/hour. They had a Lewis gun fixed on the upper plane above the pilot and this gun would fire over the propeller. The pilots liked the relative accuracy of the guns, but not the fact that due to vibration, the guns jammed 75% of the time. The ammunition was contained in a drum which held 27 cartridges. By contrast, their adversary had a machine gun which could fire five hundred cartridges at a clip. Obviously 27 cartridges didn't last long in machine guns during an aerial fight and the pilots constantly found themselves needing to change the drum. It was a challenging task. First the pilot had to pull a lever to swing the weapon down

and if not careful, the wind would catch the weapon and throw it sharply backwards onto his skull. Then while wearing thick gloves and working with frozen fingers, the pilot had to insert the new drum with one hand as the other hand was used to fly the airplane and guard against a spin. There was also the danger of the wind catching the drum and carrying it away before it could be fixed in place. In that case, the drum was lost completely and one could only hope that if it hit someone on the ground, that someone would be the enemy. Eventually they received a Nieuport model equipped with a 500-round Vickers machine gun synchronized with the propellers. The rounds were timed to shoot between the revolutions of the propeller and the pilots were delighted with this. Soon the airplanes were adorned with the unit insignia. As further proof of their American roots, they chose a painting of the head of a Lakota (Sioux) Indian chief in full paraphernalia. This emblem was destined to become a symbol of courage and derring-do.

As these World War I pilots honed their skills, they were virtually writing the book for aerial combat. They developed maneuvers never seen before to evade the enemy's fire. Not only the Lafayette Escadrille, but all the pilots, including the Germans, were testing the limits of their planes and themselves. They quickly discovered each other's weaknesses and blink spots and sought to develop maneuvers to exploit them. Thus were born loops, chandelles, barrel rolls, and hammer-head stalls. Practically all of the aerobatic maneuvers we marvel at in today's air shows were originally created as life-saving or life-threatening maneuvers in wartime. The pilots also learned the dangers of exceeding the limits of the aircraft. When the French pilots later received the Spads, they found that their aircraft were more capable than the German's in steep dives. If they could force the German pilots into a precipitous and fast dive, there was actually a high probability that the German plane would lose a wing. Eventually one of the flight leaders came up with the following code of fighting tactics:

1. Never attack without looking behind you.
2. Attack a single-seater from behind and above, then break the combat by a "chanelle" and always maintain a superiority of altitude.
3. Attack a two-seater by getting under its tail in the "dead" angle formed by the stabilizer, and stay there to prevent him taking you unawares.
4. Fly always waving around and break combat when expedient by a clever "renversement."



Nieuport 17

As noted before, two of the founding members of the Lafayette Escadrille had strong connections to Virginia. Kiffin Rockwell was born in Newport, Tennessee on September 20, 1892. His father, a Baptist minister, died at age 26 from typhoid fever and his mother moved the family to Asheville, North Carolina. Rockwell's grandfathers on both sides had fought in the U.S. Civil War and shared their war stories with young Rockwell, as well as teaching him fishing, hunting, and horseback riding. In 1908, Rockwell enrolled in Virginia Military Institute, but the next year transferred to Washington and Lee University, in Lexington, Virginia, where his brother Paul was already a student. Like many of the young men in the Escadrille, he wanted to see the world and in 1912 left school to travel to the Pacific Coast and Western Canada, eventually opening an advertising agency in San Francisco. He eventually joined Paul in Atlanta, but on August 3, 1914, after the outbreak of World War I, Kiffin and Paul both volunteered to assist France in the war with Germany. On August 7, 1914, they boarded a ship in New York City, traveled to Europe, and enlisted in the French Foreign Legion.

Both Paul and Kiffin were wounded during their time with the Foreign Legion. Paul's shoulder was injured so severely that he was invalided out of the Legion and transferred to the Allied Press Mission of French Army Grand Headquarters and worked as a war correspondent with the Chicago Daily News.

Incidentally when his brother joined the Lafayette Escadrille, Paul became one of their greatest supporters and was the source of many inspiring stories sent back to the U.S. Following Kiffin's recuperation from a leg wound which he suffered on May 9, 1915, when his unit of the Foreign Legion charged La Targette, he requested transfer to an aviation unit and so found himself in the Lafayette Escadrille. He quickly distinguished himself as an extremely competent pilot. Less than a month after the stand-up of the Escadrille, on May 10 1916, a beautiful clear day in all aspects, Rockwell was flying over the aerodrome, testing his aircraft and honing his skills. A dark line on the horizon suddenly seemed to come to life and rushed at the

airfield. A sudden storm had come seemingly out of nowhere and the dark line was a sun-deadening dust cloud raised by the cyclone. Mechanics and pilots on the ground could only watch as Rockwell struggled to control his aircraft which, according to The-nault, was thrown up and down "like a dead leaf." The wind

was so strong that despite the power of his engine, he made no forward progress and merely came down gradually like a helicopter. The mechanics made an educated guess as to where he would land and rushed to that spot. Rockwell brought the plane down in the midst of the crowd and a dozen hands grabbed the airplane – holding struts, wires, anything they could reach to keep the aircraft stable. Rockwell was able to exit the plane and both he and the plane came through the ordeal completely uninjured. It was by all accounts an amazing flying feat.

A week later, on May 18, 1916, Rockwell achieved the first victory of the fledgling Escadrille when he

shot down a two-man German observation plane over the Alsace battlefield. While cruising between Mulhouse and the Hartmannsweilerkopf, he saw a German biplane, fired a burst of five or six cartridges, and brought it down. He was the hero of the day and his feat was celebrated back at camp with a 20-year-old bottle of Scotch, which Paul sent from Paris.

However Rockwell's courageous service was destined to be short-lived. Only four months later, on September 23, 1916, Rockwell was shot in the chest by an explosive bullet and killed instantly. He and another pilot, the Ace Lufbery, were on patrol and each attacked a German plane, but Lufbery's machine-gun jammed immediately. Lufbery escaped the attack

and managed to reach friendly lines before he landed, but Rockwell decided to go out on a solo run. This was very dangerous, but completely in keeping with Rockwell's character. He was a born fighter, and determined to honor the soldier's legacy of his grandfathers. He saw a single two-seater German airplane

and dived at it. Unfortunately he was hasty and did not plan his attack as carefully as he might have otherwise. He placed himself in range of the enemy machine gunner and was shot in the chest by an explosive bullet and killed instantly. His airplane continued its dive at full speed and at about ten thousand feet, a wing broke off. Lufbery, on the ground, could only watch as his compatriot died.

Rockwell's funeral on September 25 was attended by all the citizens of the town and the townspeople stripped their gardens bare for flowers for Rockwell's bier. The people of France revered these young pilots and mourned the loss of each one. The pilots were



Wreck of Rockwell's plane



Lafayette Escadrille Insignia

the romantic darlings of the war effort. At that time, the government strictly controlled the identification of individual soldiers by the news media. Normally only the names of the most seasoned and successful generals were published. But they made an exception for the pilots. Their names, pictures, and exploits were of enormous interest to the people, including back home in America. They found themselves feted and celebrated everywhere they went. And when one perished, the population felt it deeply.

The second member of the Escadrille Lafayette who had been educated in Virginia was Jim McConnell. Like many of the members of the Escadrille, James Rogers McConnell was from well-to-do beginnings and had quite a bit of wanderlust. He was born in Chicago, the son of Judge Samuel Parsons McConnell, and during his childhood, his family also moved to New York City and Carthage, North Carolina. He attended private schools in Chicago, Morristown, N.J., and Haverford, PA. In 1907, he enrolled in the University of Virginia, remaining for two years undergraduate and one year in law school. Well-liked and somewhat of a prankster, he was the founder of the aero-club, an assistant cheerleader, and a member of Beta Theta Pi. Of particular note is that he was the “King of the Hot Foot Society”, a distinction which would follow him later when he painted a large red footprint on the side of his Escadrille airplane. In 1910 he decided against a career in the law and withdrew from the University, return-

ing to Carthage where he worked as the land and industrial agent of the Seaboard Air Line Railway and as secretary of the Carthage Board of Trade. However he was deeply aware of the shadows of war gathering in Europe and when the war began in 1914, he (along with many other American youth) became convinced that America could not sit out this war as a neutral party. Deciding to take the initiative, in January 1915, he sailed from New York to join the American Field Service. He drove ambulances at the Western Front for a while, earning distinction (and a Croix de Guerre) for his courage under fire while rescuing wounded French soldiers from the line of fire. But in 1916, he

decided to apply for aviation and so became one of the founding members of the Escadrille Americaine. While Rockwell came to the Escadrille via the French Foreign Legion, McConnell arrived as one of Dr. Gros’ recruits from the American Field Service.

Early in his career with the Escadrille, McConnell suffered a back injury during a landing incident and during his convalescence wrote “Flying for France”. At their last meeting, Marcel, his French girlfriend, would later reminisce that McConnell was very aware of the deaths of his friends and he quietly said “I suppose I will be the next to go.”

That sentiment turned out to be prophetic when McConnell was brought down by two enemy planes on March 19, 1917, during the German retreat in the Aisne. It was the week of his 30th birthday. He had been flying a patrol with Edmond Genet and between Ham and St. Quentin they were attacked by several German planes. While fighting with an airplane firing incendiary bullets, Genet lost sight of MacConnell. Wounded and with serious damage to his plane, Genet had to flee, but still couldn’t locate McConnell and hoped that he had broken contact with the enemy. Genet made it back to friendly lines, but MacConnell never turned up. For three days, the unit hoped that McConnell had merely been forced down elsewhere or at worst had been taken prisoner. But as the Germans began to retreat, the Escadrille received word of an airplane crash in former German

territory. Thenault traveled to the site and verified that it was McConnell's plane. A local woman witnessed the crash and said McConnell had been shot down. She wasn't able to approach because the German's swarmed over the scene taking all they could, even his boots. He was buried in an apple orchard on the farm where he fell. The family that owned the farm deeded the location of the grave to his father

Even when fighting in France, McConnell wanted to maintain his connection with Virginia, especially the University. As well as the red foot painted on his airplane, he clearly spoke fondly of his time there. A memorial plaque in France includes his name, birth and death dates, branch of service, the details about his French medal Croix de Guerre for his service, and that 'he was an alumnus of the University of Virginia.'



Lafayette Escadrille Memorial in France

and local families tended it. In 1928 he was finally moved to rest with his fallen friends in the Lafayette Memorial at Marnes-la-Coquette, France.

McConnell was the last American aviator killed before the U.S. declared war on Germany and the first UVA alumnus to die in the war. Incidentally, Edmond Genet was the first casualty after the U.S. entered the war. He blamed himself for James McConnell's death and requested the first patrol after. He said he was "after blood now in grim earnest to avenge poor McConnell." He dedicated himself to being more reckless in order to kill more Germans. Unfortunately he died in April 1917 when his aircraft was brought down by anti-aircraft artillery and his plane went into a corkscrew dive at full power. He crashed about 300 meters from where McConnell had died.

On April 6, 1917, the U.S. declared war on Germany and that was the beginning of the end for the Lafayette Escadrille. The American Air Service was entering the fray and wanted the American pilots consolidated under them. The Escadrille passed out of existence on Feb 18, 1918, and was absorbed into the American Air Service, specifically the 103rd Pursuit Squadron. It was the first American pursuit squadron on the Western Front.

Some commentators have belittled the accomplishments of the Escadrille, describing their verified downing of 40 enemy planes as substantial but not outstanding. However as Thenault points out in his book, the French authorities were very strict about confirmed kills. Unaccustomed to the rigors of aerial combat, they required a kill to be verified by a witness on the ground. Who carries a ground observer to a dogfight? So Thenault contends that the actual number of enemy aircraft destroyed far exceeded the official number.

However the impact of the Escadrille was much more far-reaching than the destruction of the enemy. The news of the courageous exploits of these young men went around the globe, and certainly had an enormous impact on American public opinion and their support for the French cause. As much as any other factor, the thought of brave young Americans dying at the hands of the Hun united the public behind the government's decision to enter the war.

Finally, the Escadrille along with the other aviation services, put to bed once and for all the question of

whether aviation could be used as an instrument of war. Aviation had arrived, and was there to stay.

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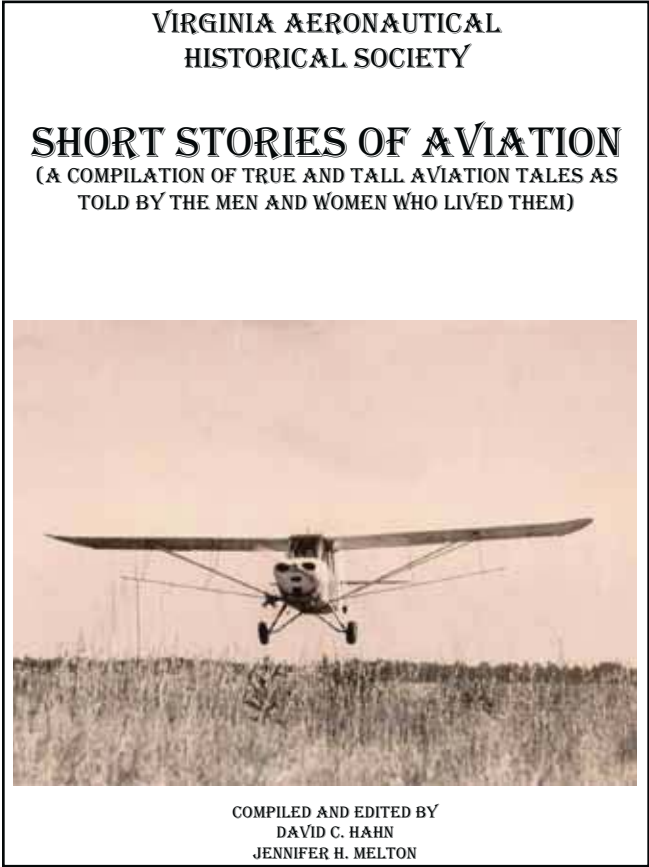
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