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From the Papers of Eddie Rickenbacker, Box 91, Library of Congress.

AN ACE'S FIRST COMBAT: MARCH 1918

Eddie Rickenbacker

Notes on War Experiences

U.S. Army flyer Edward Rickenbacker (1890–1973) quickly became an "Ace" at the beginning of his World War I service, downing five enemy aircraft, and by the end of the conflict he was the "Ace of Aces" among Americans, responsible for the demise of twenty-six. A successful race car driver who had dropped out of school at thirteen to work due to the death of his father, he was unlike most American military pilots of the era, who tended to come from Harvard, Yale, Stanford, or other prestigious colleges. Indeed, Rickenbacker's self-taught knowledge of mechanics and engineering almost kept him out of the cockpit, so valuable were those skills to keep planes flying. During World War II Rickenbacker, who had become president of Eastern Air Lines in 1938, flew on official government missions to Europe and Asia to inspect American aviation operations. He barely survived one such trip in 1942 when the B-17 his party was flying in strayed off course and had to ditch in a remote region of the Pacific. For two weeks the U.S. Army and Navy searched in vain for the plane and survivors, and the press had reported Rickenbacker's death. His wife begged the military to continue looking, however, and miraculously a ship-based Navy floatplane found the emaciated and injured men on the twenty-fourth day. The Navy pilot heroically landed his small, two-seat craft amidst the waves, placed the most injured man in the empty second seat, lashed the other survivors to the plane's wings, and then taxied some forty miles back to his ship.

The "Notes on War Experiences" that follow describe Rickenbacker's first flight in search of enemy aircraft during World War I under the watchful eye of his mentor in aerial combat, the ace Raoul Lufbery (in May 1918 Lufbery would jump to his death from his burning aircraft). Published here for the first time, they are taken from a longer typescript now in the Library of Congress. Rickenbacker had little confidence in his literary abilities, so when asked to produce a war memoir, he gave this rough but vivid document to a ghostwriter, Laurence La Tourette Driggs, whose much-embellished version was published in 1919 as *Fighting the Flying Circus*.

It was on March 6th, 1918, after several days awaiting the weather to permit several of the boys, who were at Paris, awaiting to take back planes which would be used in our long expected and anticipated flight over the front. The Squadron, at this time, was to be equipped with the Nieuport, Type 28, with the Monosoupape motor, which was considered one of the best chasse planes to be on the front. Out of sixteen of the boys, who started from Paris, six arrived. Four crashed upon landing on the field. The other six had forced landings for numerous reasons and minor troubles between Paris and our Camp, which, at the time was Villeneuve-les-Vertus.

On arriving at the Camp, I found several of my friends, including the 94th Aero Squadron of enlisted personnel, which had arrived to prepare for active duty. Having been considered a casual Flying Officer on the front up to the time of my return, I was given orders to report to Major Huffer, who was then in command of the 94th Aero Squadron, which consisted of several boys having just transferred from the French Air Service into the American.

It was on the 8th day of March, after having flown in two planes which belonged to other boys who had run out of gasoline and were forced to land some distance from the Camp, had turned over upon landing, and decided it was impossible to fly their planes further, that I returned to the Camp with same and found that Major Raoul Lufbery, the most famous of American fliers was attached to the Group as General Instructor to those of us who aspired to follow in his footsteps. After days of preparation and organization, I awakened one morning to find that my realization and dream was about to come true. That was a flight over the German lines and a look at enemy territory. Lieutenant Douglas Campbell and myself were to have our planes in condition at 8:30 sharp, as Major Lufbery was going to lead us into the air zone of battle over the Champagne sector. It was 8:00 o'clock sharp, when I advised my mechanics to push out the plane, get my flying equipment ready, as Major Lufbery had left explicit instructions that we would be fully attired for flight at 8:15 sharp, the punctuality of which we realized was one of his most greatest assets. Naturally enough, all of the boys in the Squadron were on deck, wishing us well, and wondering what they would do with our equipment and personal effects, should we fail to come back. It must be admitted that the feeling we experienced, the excitement these parting jests caused us to realize more than ever the seriousness of the mission which we were about to perform.

At 8:15 Major Lufbery was at the hangar, finding us fully attired, ready to accompany him. After a few brief instructions to Lieutenant Campbell, he walked over to the plane in which I was seated, stating just what I was to do in case of being attacked or attacking an enemy plane. Of course, I listened in an awe-standing manner at these instructions, as never had I felt that such a cold thing as death was staring me in the face. He then strapped himself securely in his plane, with orders that we start our motors in advance to his and immediately that he took off, that we were to follow, this being 8:30 sharp when I left the ground in close pursuit of Lieutenant Campbell.

After leaving the field, he headed directly towards Rheims, climbing apparently for all he was worth. Unfortunately, my plane was not as good as his and Lieutenant Campbell's, the consequence being that on our arrival over the city of Rheims, I was considerable in the rear of the formation. However, I will always believe to my dying day that Major Lufbery was able to read my thoughts, even though he was a kilometer away, as invariably, the moment when I thought he had entirely forgotten that I existed, he would suddenly virage around and in a very few seconds again be only a few hundred meters from me, as much as to say, "Don't worry, my boy, I have my eye on you."

It was with great difficulty that I tried to perform the same maneuvers which Major Lufbery seemed to perform with comparative ease. After being on the lines approximately thirty minutes, sailing between Rheims and the Argonne Woods, I finally realized that Mother Earth was still beneath me, as up to that time I was pre-occupied by trying to maintain my position and always to keep within shouting distance of our worthy leader, that I had entirely forgotten the fact that Mother Earth was somewhere underneath. And such a spectacle that appeared before my eyes when I finally dared to look from the dizzy height of 15,000 feet, at which we were then flying.

The lines in this sector were quite old and had been more or less the same for nearly three years. Naturally, to me there was nothing but old battered trenches, trench works and billions of shell holes for six or eight kilometers on either side. Having regained my equilibrium of mind and body to such an extent that I was able to appreciate just what was taking place, the terrible realization of sea-sickness came to me, as never was there a ship on the high seas which pitched and rolled as the "Baby Nieuport" did at such a dizzy height, while trying to perform the maneuvers and follow the Major. Consequently, I decided to fly straight in order that I may put off the ordeal of really becoming sick in the air, as to me that was the most terrible confession of weakness a new aviator could experience, especially on his first time over. It was after a few moments of such direct flying, that I was horribly startled by an explosion, which, to me, seemed only a few yards off and to my rear, the concussion of which caused me to roll and pitch worse than I realized was possible. Almost instantly there was a succession of four of these explosions to follow. Naturally enough, I looked behind to see what it was all about, fearing that some unknown, hitherto unheard of fate awaited me. All I could see was five black puffs of smoke, which proved to be archie shells and having come from the most of famous of German anti-aircraft batteries, which were well known to all Allied Aviators who had flown this sector. For the benefit of those who do not know, this Battery was located just across the line, north of Suippe, as it is unnecessary to mention the location to those who have flown over same. Of course, I was horrified and scared to death to find that the air-craft shells were bursting so terribly close, as all young aviators are led to believe and schooled in the fact that they are the least dangerous of any anti-air defense existing.

Never before and never since have I quite appreciated the value of having an Allied plane or friend near at hand, as hardly had the first shell exploded, Major Lufbery had reversed directions and was along beside me, maneuvering as before and to me each maneuver was a word of encouragement and acknowledgement that he realized there was no danger or trying to convince me there was none. We continued, of course, with the patrol of this sector, until our gas was running low and the Major decided it was time to return home. Descending gradually in the direction of our Camp, we arrived there two hours after the departure, with every officer and enlisted man awaiting us, with open arms, wanting to know the details of our first ride and experiences, which they were soon to realize.

After descending from our planes, the Major approached Lieutenant Campbell and myself and asked what we had seen. Naturally enough we both admitted, practically at the same time, that as far as we were concerned there had never been an enemy or allied plane within sight, when the Major gave us his customary chuckle and said "I thought so. They are all the same." Naturally enough, we did not understand the meaning of this remark, so we asked him what he had meant by same, to which he stated that there were two formations of five Spads each which had passed directly under us, not over 500 meters, at 15 minutes apart. Also that he had seen four enemy Albatross planes at a distance of approximately four kilometers, and one enemy biplane about three kilometers in Germany, about 1500 meters high. What was more natural than for us to stand aghast at such information, and at the time I could have positively sworn that Lieutenant Campbell's thoughts were the same as mine, that being that the Major was stalling a bit in order to prove our terrible inefficiency.

It was only after weeks of experience on the front that we realized how true his statements were, that no matter how good an aviator, how good his eye-sight, it was impossible for a new man to have what is so commonly known as the vision of the air on his arrival at the front. It was then that he looked over to my plane, saying, "How many shrapnel holes have you." Certainly it seems astounding to me for such a statement to come from a man whom we all respected so much. Nevertheless, after close inspection, I was horrified to find one piece of shrapnel had entered my tail, another had gone through the outer edge of my wing and a third directly up thru both wings, not over a foot from my body. You can imagine my surprise at this spectacle, and as the boys who were there to see same often remarked afterwards, they did not realize that it was possible for a human being to turn as pale as I was for the next thirty minutes, and only after a week had passed, without the Major requesting me to accompany him again, did I realize how true it was what the boys had said.

typescript, November–December 1918