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New England Pilots In The Lafayette Flying Corps

by William F. Hanna

The Lafayette Flying Corps was the name given to a group of American pilots who flew with the French Air Service during World War I. More than 200 Americans became expatriates, for a time at least, in order to try to qualify to fly the latest French fighter planes against the Germans. By war’s end the 180 who succeeded were serving in 93 French squadrons. Although most later transferred to the U.S. Air Service, it was their days in the Lafayette Flying Corps—and its most elite squadron, the Lafayette Escadrille—which recalled the fondest memories among survivors.

From the beginning the Lafayette pilots were seen as something special. Even as the war continued, foreign correspondents filed stories from remote French airfields which portrayed these pilots as knights of the air, daredevil Lancelots who laughed in the face of death as they fought the sinister Hun. This glorification escalated in the two decades after the war, a period which saw the rapid growth of both the aviation and motion picture industries, as well as new threats from Germany. By the eve of the Second World War the Lafayette men had become the stuff of folklore.

Of the 180 Americans who flew with the Lafayette, 30 had lived all or part of their lives in New England. An examination of their careers will show that, although they did share certain attributes like courage, self-confidence and love of adventure, they were indeed a mixed crew, difficult to classify and largely indifferent to the glamour of knighthood.

Of these 30 New England pilots who joined the Lafayette Flying Corps, almost two-thirds were at the Front in some capacity before America entered the war in April, 1917. Fourteen were already flying for the French and several others were members of the French Foreign Legion or the American Ambulance Field Service.

Edwin C. Parsons, of Springfield, Massachusetts, as one of the last surviving members of the Lafayette, was asked what had prompted Americans to join a war in which their country was not yet involved. "Motives were as varied as the men themselves," he wrote. "Some sought adventure, others revenge, while a pitiful few actually sacrificed themselves in the spirit of purest idealism."

While it seems certain that all three of the elements mentioned by Parsons—adventure, revenge, idealism—motivated every Lafayette pilot at some time, certain fliers do stand out as good examples of each. For instance, Norman Prince, of Prides Crossing, Massachusetts, was certainly an idealist. Thirteen of the 30 New England pilots were college men, and Prince was one of 9 who had attended Harvard. When war broke out in Europe he was a successful Chicago lawyer with every expectation of a long and rewarding legal career. Yet Prince was fascinated by the struggle taking place overseas and decided to play his part in it. He began by taking flying lessons at his own expense and under an assumed name. Since his grandfather had once been mayor of Boston, young Prince wanted to avoid notoriety. He was 28 years old in January, 1915, when he sailed for Europe, hoping to persuade the French government to accept a squadron of American pilots in the Service Aeronautique. After months of delay and frustration the efforts of Prince and others were rewarded when the Lafayette Escadrille was born.

Oliver M. Chadwick, of Lowell, Massachusetts, was just 25 years old when he enlisted in the French Foreign Legion in January, 1917. A graduate of Phillips Exeter Academy and Harvard College, he had trained as a lawyer at Harvard Law School and was beginning life as a promising young attorney when the war broke out. Moved by what he saw as the heroic struggle of the Allies, Chadwick walked away from his legal practice and went to Canada to offer his services. Rejected because of his American citizenship, he returned to the States and enlisted in the Massachusetts National Guard. After a four month tour of duty in Mexico, he, like Norman Prince, learned how to fly an airplane and then sailed for France. After a short stint in the Foreign Legion he was accepted by the French Air Service.

Another idealist in the Prince-Chadwick mold was Harold Buckley...
Willis, of Boston, a 1912 graduate of Harvard College who had trained as an architect. After spending two years in the Massachusetts National Guard, Willis enlisted in the American Ambulance Field Service in February, 1915, and six months later was cited for his rescue of wounded while under fire. Willis was awarded the Croix de Guerre with Star, but by this time he had been accepted by French Aviation and was on his way to becoming one of the most famous pilots of the Lafayette Escadrille.

Along with the idealists, New England certainly sent its share of adventurers to the Lafayette Flying Corps. Two such men were Herman Chatkoff and Frank Baylies. Chatkoff had made his way from his home in Maplewood, Massachusetts to Brooklyn. In August, 1914, he left his car washing job and went to France to enlist in the Foreign Legion. When asked about his previous military service, Chatkoff replied that he was a veteran of five years with the Salvation Army. A dark, brooding man, his murderous temper suited him well for trench warfare on the Western Front, where he served as a rifleman for almost two years before entering the Lafayette Flying Corps in 1916.

Frank Baylies represented the other side of the coin. The mild-mannered son of a successful New Bedford businessman, Baylies graduated from the Moses Brown Preparatory School in Providence and then went to work for his father. He was one of a few young men of his time who could drive an automobile, and he was a familiar sight as he piloted the family car through the narrow streets of New Bedford. The story goes that Baylies became fascinated by reports of the heroism of American ambulance drivers on the Western Front, and in February 1916, at the age of 20 and against his parents’ wishes, he sailed for France to join them. Fifteen months later, after surviving heavy fighting on both the Western and Eastern Fronts, and after having been awarded the Croix de Guerre for valor under fire, Baylies was accepted into the Lafayette Flying Corps.

One of Frank Baylies’ closest wartime friends was Ted Parsons. This Springfield native was a graduate of Phillips Exeter Academy who had dropped out of the University of Pennsylvania. After completing pilot training in the U.S., Parsons had gone to Mexico in 1913 to try to teach Pancho Villa’s men how to fly airplanes. In December, 1915, he sailed for France as a member of the Ambulance Service. He was with this group for four months before being accepted by French Aviation, which assigned him to the Lafayette Escadrille in January, 1917.

Another adventurer was Paul Pavelka, a poor boy who had run away from the family farm in Madison, Connecticut when he was only 14 years old. The youth had gone west, and at one time or another had worked as a cowboy, a cook in a sheep camp, and a nurse. While still a boy he had gone to sea and had once walked across the South American continent after his ship was wrecked. Forever after called “Skipper” by his friends, Pavelka enlisted in the Foreign Legion in November, 1914, and was bayonetted during hand-to-hand fighting in June, 1915. He transferred to the French Air Service the following December and became a member of the Lafayette Escadrille in August, 1916.

While Norman Prince fought for his ideals, and Paul Pavelka sought adventure, Raoul Lufbery wanted only vengeance. Born in France of French parents in 1885, Lufbery saw his mother die and his father emigrate to Wallingford, Connecticut. The boy was left in the care of his grandmother and was put to work in a chocolate factory. He faithfully sent his wages to his father in Connecticut and, at age 19, finally decided to join the old man in America. After circuitously traveling through much of Europe and North Africa, he finally arrived in Wallingford in 1906, only to find that his father had sailed to Europe a short time before!
The boy waited in Wallingford for nearly two years, but his father never appeared. Indeed, they were never to see each other again.

On the road once more, Lufbery went to San Francisco, spent two years as a soldier in the Philippines, then traveled throughout India and the Far East. In 1912 while in Saigon he met Marc Pourpe, a noted French aviator who was giving flying demonstrations. The two young men struck up a friendship, and the following months were the happiest of Raoul Lufbery's life as he and Pourpe toured the Far East together.

In the summer of 1914 they returned to France to prepare for yet another trip to the Orient, but were caught up instead by the war. Pourpe enlisted in the Air Service and Lufbery signed on as his mechanic. Three months later Pourpe was shot down and killed, and the Germans thereby caught up instead by the war. Pourpe's death, however, for after joining the Lafayette Escadrille in May, 1916, he shot down 3 German planes in one week, and thereafter his name became famous among American newspaper readers.

Early is 1918 Lufbery accepted a transfer into the U.S. Air Service with the rank of Major. After a short stint as a desk jockey he was back in the cockpit as the commander of the 94th and 95th Aero Pursuit Squadrons.

New England's second ace was Frank Baylies. He was a member of Les Cigones, The Storks, one of France's most illustrious flying groups. When, in November 1917, he joined this hard-nosed squadron on the Flanders Front, he remembered that as a boy in New Bedford he had been ashamed of himself for shooting at birds in the forest. Ironically, throughout the rest of that winter and into the following spring and summer Baylies became one of the most relentless of Allied hunters. As Les Cigones moved south along the Western Front, he claimed 12 confirmed kills and several more unconfirmed.

The third New England ace was David E. Putnam, of Brookline. After leaving Harvard in his sophomore year, Putnam attempted to join the U.S. Air Service but was rejected because of his inexperience. He then sailed for France aboard a cattle ship and enlisted in the French Air Service in May, 1917.

Like Lufbery and Baylies, Putnam was fearless in combat and sometimes took what appeared to be hopeless chances. On one occasion, for example, he single-handedly attacked 18 German planes, shot down the leader and escaped unharmed. On June 5, 1918, during the second Battle of the Marne, Putnam shot down 5 German planes in 5 minutes. He had destroyed 11 enemy planes before he was 20 years old.

The New England aces accounted for the destruction of at least 40 enemy aircraft. Twelve other New England pilots were credited with shooting down a total of 20 German planes. Norman Prince had 3, as did Sereno Jacob of Westport, Connecticut, and George Turnure of Lenox, Massachusetts. Walter Rhino, of Vineyard Haven, bagged 2, as did William A. Wellman of Cambridge, while seven pilots each shot down 1 German plane.

Any student of World War I aviation must be impressed by what a deadly business it was. Although small and frail, the fighter planes routinely cruised at altitudes approaching 20,000 feet. Patrols, usually consisting of squadrons of 3 or 4 airplanes flying in formation, would range high over enemy lines searching for their German counterparts. Once engaged, the fighters would break formation and dive to an altitude below 10,000 feet, where most air battles were fought. Reaching speeds which approached 120 miles per hour, the fighter pilot would try to position his own plane behind the tail of the enemy, and in a burst of machine gun fire shoot him from the sky.
killing range of the machine guns was only 60 to 90 yards, so sudden and violent death from bullets, incineration or mid-air collision was always a possibility.

A pilot's time at the Front was usually measured in weeks or months rather than in years. The Lafayette Flying Corps lost 55 pilots killed in action, including 6 New Yorkers. Three other New Yorkers were killed in the line of duty or died as a result of the war.

Norman Prince was the first casualty. After taking part in 122 aerial engagements over 15 months, he was killed returning from a night mission when his plane crashed into a high tension wire hidden by the darkness.

Oliver Chadwick, the young Harvard lawyer who had learned to fly back in the States so as to be better prepared to fight the Germans, was killed in action on August 14, 1917. He had been at the Front for only 18 days.

Paul Pavelka served with the Lafayette Escadrille for about six months before being transferred to the Eastern Front. An expert at night fighting and an adventurous lad, he was assigned to an escadrille in front of Salonica. On November 12, 1917, while off-duty, he was accidentally killed when a cavalry horse which he was riding fell on top of him.

On May 19, 1918 the American "ace of aces," Raoul Lufbery, calmly stepped away from his burning plane high over the small French town of Maron. He died in a flower garden below, thus keeping his promise that he would never burn to death in a crippled plane. Lufbery's death turned public attention toward Frank Baylies, the new "ace of aces," who did not appreciate the constant requests for interviews, photographs, autographs, etc. He was, he confessed, "embarrassed as the devils" by all the fuss. He found the new demands placed upon him to be an "awful nuisance."

Baylies had decided against transferring to the U.S. Air Service and intended to finish out the war as a member of Les Cigones. He had been joined by Ted Parsons, by now an experienced combat pilot and Lafayette Escadrille veteran. Baylies and Parsons often flew together, and on June 17, 1918 Parsons watched in the distance as Baylies' plane crashed in flames. Baylies, 21 years old, was dead after just seven months at the Front.

David Putnam, "ace" successor to Lufbery and Baylies, had accepted a transfer to the 134th Squadron of the U.S. Air Service. He too was killed in action, on September 13, 1918, two months short of the Armistice and three months shy of his twentieth birthday.

Of course most of the Lafayette Flying Corps boys made it home safely, and a few New Yorkers even gained prominence after the war. Ted Parsons, for example, finished the war with 8 victories. After the Armistice he entered the U.S. Navy and finally retired with the rank of rear admiral.

Harold B. Willis had been shot down and captured in August, 1917. After 3 unsuccessful attempts, he escaped across the border to Switzerland and arrived in Paris in time to toast the Armistice with his Lafayette friends. After the war he lived in Boston and was among the leaders of an effort to organize a second Lafayette Escadrille for service in World War II.

Herman Chatkoff gained notoriety of a different sort. He had been at the Front for a little over a month when he was critically hurt in an airplane crash while showing off for his friends. He spent the rest of the war in a French hospital and later, after the Armistice, was confined to a mental institution. Neither the French nor the American government would take responsibility for Chatkoff, and in the words of one writer, he lived for 13 years as a man without a country. This sad spectacle was finally ended in 1931 when President Hoover signed a bill granting Chatkoff $100 per month and perpetual care in a Veterans Administration hospital.

Two other New Yorkers who served with the Lafayette deserving of mention are William A. Wellman and Charles H. Dolan. After leaving his Cambridge home Wellman joined the American Ambulance Service and in June, 1917, enlisted in French Aviation. He was at the Front for about three months and in that time shot down 2 German planes. After the war Wellman became a successful Hollywood producer and director. He won an Academy Award in 1926 for his classic aviation film Wings. In 1958 he directed a Warner Brothers film entitled The Lafayette Escadrille, which portrayed the American pilots as roustabout playboys. This movie attracted the wrath of Ted Parsons, Charles H. Dolan and other former Escadrille members. Wellman, feeling the sting of their criticism, later admitted that he felt "terribly ashamed" of the film.

It is interesting that Wellman clashed with Charles Dolan, because this last surviving member of the Lafayette Escadrille was an appropriate representative of so many of the New Yorkers who flew for France. One of Dolan's grandfathers had lost a leg in the Civil War and the other had been killed with Custer. Before enlisting Dolan had studied electrical engineering at M.I.T. Only one German plane had fallen under his guns, but he had been at the front for eighteen months, a long time for such a hazardous duty. Dolan's last service was rendered in July, 1967, when, as its only surviving member, he represented the Lafayette Escadrille at the dedication of its monument at Luxeuil.