Captain "Eddie" Rickenbacher, Former Omaha Race Driver and Ace of U. S. Aces, Tells His Own Story of His Experiences

By CAPTAIN EDWARD V. RICKENBACHER, D. C. S.
Legion of Honor—Croix de Guerre.

An officer who had the job of giving preliminary examinations to the young men who wanted to fly once complained to me that two answers to his well-meant questions got to be exasperatingly common. The first was to the effect that the candidate didn't know anything about aviation but had always dreamed of doing it. The second came when he was asked if he knew the names of any of the men who were piloting fighting airplanes over in France. Usually, according to this officer, he said "Eddie Rickenbacher" and stopped there. The examiner was sure it proved that the average American read the sporting page of the newspaper more carefully than the front page. A racing automobile driver's name caught his attention even in the war news, and stuck—and I got the benefit. If it had been a base ball player, it would have been the same way. I mention the matter here because, as it hapens, when I started in I was like those boys. I knew nothing about aviation and had only dreamed about it. I went over to France as a chauffeur, after trying to get up a flying unit which the government refused to be interested in for reasons that I now see were entirely good, though I did not see it clearly then. Once over there, I would not let them rest until they gave me a lieutenant's commission and sent me to Tours to see if I could learn to fly.

Learned Pretty Fast.

I learned pretty fast: Long practice in driving a racing car at a hundred miles an hour or so gives first-class training in control and in judging distances at high speed, and helps tremendously in getting motor sense, which is rather the feel of your engine than the sound of it, a thing you get through your bones and nerves rather than simply your ears. All this is a part of the physical equipment of handling an airplane, and it makes a lot of difference if the fellow with the stick knows how to make a turn at 100 miles an hour or to allow for passing another fellow at twice that.

The proof of this is that after five and a half hours dual with an instructor they let me solo. But because I was a good mechanic and knew about motors they sent me to Issoudun to be engineer officer. Being engineer officer, I never had any regular advanced flying training according to rule. But I took up a ship whenever I could and learned that way.

I remember when I thought it was time to try a vrille or tail spin. I knew what I was supposed to do. I knew you put the stick over and crossed the controls, but I'd never seen anybody do it. I went up about 12,000 feet, got off some distance from the field and flew around there for every bit of 30 minutes trying to get up my nerve to try the trick, but too scared to begin. At last I said to myself, "What's the matter with you? You've got to do this," and threw the stick. She went into the spin all right but I had her back to neutral after just one whirl, and I tell you I was glad when she righted. Next day, I went out and I took 20 minutes to make up my mind to try again. It was only on the third day that I went at the job with any confidence and let her do a real spin.

That is still more or less the way I feel about doing a new stunt, after all the flying I have done at the front since. When you try a new thing, you are never quite certain how the machine will behave, and though you may have confidence in your ability to get out of anything as long as you have the altitude, there is a sort of hesitation both in the machine and in you. The trouble is, you do not know what the strains will be on either.

The next thing was to get away from Issoudun. The men who had to stick over in this side as flying instructors know how hard it is get away from a field when they've got you tied down to a job there. Those fellows are the ones that have my sympathy, because they have done the work and missed the credit. They have staid home—and not really home either, but in some particularly hot place down in Texas, most likely—staid there and made aces when they were themselves the stuff of which aces are made, and but for the luck of it would be, a lot of them, coming back here now with as many ribbons and decorations and Huns to their credit as any of us.

Instead, they have stuck on the job full of dangers and responsibilities with little chance of promotion and none of fighting or of fame. And, the better they were, the more certainly they were stuck. Because pilots had to be trained in a hurry, a very large number of pilots, and the very best men were none too good for the task of training them. I was not an instructor over there at Issoudun. But even an engineer officer in France could not afford to be too good. I do not think I was. Still, when I asked to go to the front the C. O. said I could not be spared.

So I conspired with the medical officer. He does not know it yet, but I did. I got myself sent to the hospital for two weeks and at the end of that time I went to the C. O. and told him that it had been proved that I wasn't indispensable—because the other fellow had done the job better than I did. He could not deny it and he let me go.

That gave me my chance to try my luck as a fighting pilot. I have had extraordinarily good luck. Every man who has been flying for any length of time at the front and is still alive has had good luck. It is scientific murder. The men who have learned their trade go at it that way, and as long as they do go at it that way they have an excellent chance to accumulate victories and survive nevertheless. The experienced fighting pilot does not take unnecessary risks. His business is to shoot down enemy planes, not to get shot down. His trained eyes and hand and judgment are as much a part of his armament as his machine gun and a 50-50 chance is the worst he will take or should take, except where the show is of the kind that either for offense or defense justifies the sacrifice of plane and pilot.

Both Wise Birds.

It is not the old hand and the expert flyer and air fighter who gets another of the same sort. Both are wise and shy birds. You will see a couple of that kind meet now and then over the line and watch them circling experimentally around each other. The next thing you know, each has sized up his antagonist as just as good or better than himself and both have sheered off and are flying away to look for a more promising victim. What each is hunting for is an enemy who can be pounced on suddenly unawares and a getaway made before his comrades are on the victor's tail. The obviously inexperienced pilot is the game the scientific air fighter goes after, and the majority of victories are won that way. But on the other hand, it is the novice who usually gets the famous ace by doing at some moment the unexpected thing. He rashly attempts or blunders into a manoeuver which is dead against all the sane rules and that is something against which the master of the game has not provided and is not forearmed. Sheer foolhardiness or plain clumsiness has done what skill and experience could not do. Or else accident does it, engine trouble, a jammed machine gun, or an oversight. I remember an incident which might easily have made an end of me.

His First Hun.

An approved method of attack was to dive out of the sun at the rearmost boche of a Hun formation, shoot him down if you had the luck, chandelle or spiral upward and dive again at the next tailender. I tried the trick once and got as far as the first act on the program, but I had shut off my pressure and forgot about it, and when, after crashing my first Hun, I tried to regain my altitude, the Spad refused to climb. I had to go into a roll which got my gravity feed into action, but by that time the boche were all coming at me in a bunch with their guns spitting. There was nothing for it but to dive with full power, which in the case of a Spad means going down at the rate of about 300 miles an hour, and fortunately we were pretty high up. With half a dozen Huns after me, I went down 8,000 feet that way, and though I had some trouble getting her out of the dive, I managed it and got away in spite of the fine target I made.

"Dropping Out."

This narrow escape may be used to bring out a point illustrated by the case of the doughboy who got tired of marching and dropped by the roadside. An officer ordered him to get back to his place and added that he had better be glad he was in the infantry, because if he had been in the air and dropped out he couldn't get back. Flying is one of the safest jobs in the army as long as you do not drop out. If you do drop out, you are a dead man and dropping out means, usually, that you have made a mistake or let go of your grip.

There have been stories about the recklessness of the American flyers, and no doubt they went for the Hun wherever they could get at him and some took very long chances, but on the front as I saw it, the American aviators in this regard came between the French and the British. The French were inclined to be cautious as a settled military policy of getting the best results with the least expenditure of valuable lives and costly planes. The British were foolhardy as a matter of principle and morale, because they found that they got the best results with their people in that way. Compared with the French, playing their own game in the way they had settled down to it toward the end of the war, our men seemed reckless. Compared with the British they seemed cautious. But, of course, the three systems had nothing to do with the courage of the three nations or of individual Frenchmen, Englishmen or Americans. The French and English had each worked out a method of scientific murder that did the job. We were working out ours with the experience of both to help us and the methods of both to choose from. The result was, generally, a sort of compromise.

The Flyer's Age.

Right here I may mention as a matter of interest, that in point of maturity for this work, the Englishman of 18 is about even with the American of 22. Our men are generally at their best as flyers between the ages of 22 and 26; the English are best between 18 and 22. I have been asked why, and I think it is due to differences in early education in the two countries rather than to anything directly connected with the British and American practice of training flyers.

Returning for a moment to the stories of recklessness on the part of our aviators, there were men like Frank Luke, whose record is one of the brightest glories of our air service and who gave his all, his life, to the cause. Luke's 18 Huns include 11 balloons, and to get a balloon you have to go through the anti-aircraft and machine gun barrage and the flaming onions they send up to protect it. Getting a balloon is so much more difficult than getting a plane, in fact, that the Germans credit a pilot with two victories for every balloon brought down.

Luke from the beginning was a wild man in the air. He would take off and playfully do a series of loops within a few hundred feet of the ground. That sort of thing was strictly forbidden in my own squadron. Men and planes are too valuable and too difficult to replace at the front to be risked unless there is real reason for the risk. But after a run of hard luck such as came along sometimes—when we had lost a lot of men and the spirits of the others were beginning to show the strain, I used to go out myself and do all sorts of stunts right out in front of them. It had a surprising moral effect. The men said, "Anyway, they haven't got Rickenbacher's goat." On the next sortie they went up full of pep and snap and ready to go anywhere and do anything.

Hat-In-Ring Squad.

My own squadron, the Ninety-fourth (Hat-in-the-Ring), had a fine record. We were the first American squadron in the game; we had the first ace and the highest record of air victories of any American squadron at the end of the war, and finally, we had a chance to go into Germany at the head of the American army, which was a magnificent climax to the unit's active career and an experience not to be forgotten by any of us—flying over those cities and castles and vineyards along the Rhine that we had been thinking of as the distant goal of all the fighting that went before.

Some of the men who have been flying over there in France came back saying they are fed up and have had enough of the air. But I do not think I am one of them. The sky means something to me it never meant before. When I look up and see the sun shining on the patch of white clouds up in the blue, I begin to think how it would feel to be up somewhere above it, winging swiftly through the clear air, watching the earth below and the men on it no bigger than ants. I rarely go to church except with my mother when I am at home, to show that a plain Nebraska raising has not been wasted on her boy but there is something spiritual—I don't know what else to call it—in the feeling you get up there. At least it seems so to me, though somebody suggested that it was just, in a magnified form, the feeling of superiority, or exaltation, or whatever it is, of the man on horseback or in a swift automobile as he looks down, as he sweeps past, upon the man on foot.

To Continue Flying.

At all events, I expect to keep on flying and I expect a part of the future of flying to lie in the scope it gives to the initiative of the American boy in the sort of thing that hunting used to mean to him in the days when there was hunting close at hand for almost every boy, and that sport in many forms still means to him and always will mean to him. Whatever happens or does not happen in the way of the commercial expansion of aviation, flying will always have the sporting element, and military aviation, which, through the fortune of war, is so much in advance of other forms of flying, must be kept alive and strong as the backbone of the others.

In a very real sense, the future of aviation in this country is in the hands of the men who have been trained to fly in the army, who have mastered the art either on fields on this side or at the front, not without paying a heavy price for it in the lives of comrades just as good but not so lucky as themselves.

John P. Tarbox, executive engineer of Curtiss Engineering corporation, says airplane stabilizers are needed and will be produced soon in such form as to make airplanes of great commercial value.

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Major James A. Meissner, D. S. C. (8 Huns); Major General William L. Kenly, Director of Military Aeronautics; Captain Edward V. Rickenbacher, D. S. C. of Omaha, Neb., (26 Huns) and Captain Douglas Campbell, D. S. C. (6 Huns), photographed in front of headquarters, Division of Military Aeronautics, Washington, D. C. Meissner, Rickenbacher and Campbell were all members of the 94th Aero squadron whose badge was the Hat-in-the-Ring.

French People Indignant Over Delay of Indemnities

France, With a Deficiency of $10,000,000,000, Finds Herself in Situation Which Recalls the "Greenbacks" in America After the Civil War; Her Credit Is Good But the Franc Is Weak Abroad and at Home.

By NABOTH HEDIN.
Staff Correspondent of Universal Service.
(Special Cable Dispatch.)

Paris, March 15.—The French slogan today is "Peace and Pay." "Germany must pay first," resounds or stares from every tribune, signboard and newspaper. Mass meetings are held and resolutions are sent to the Chamber of Deputies demanding that before the French taxpayers are saddled with new burdens Germany must pay for the damages it has caused.

The French budget has been more than tripled and there is a $10,000,000,000 deficiency which must be raised forthwith. The Chamber last week voted to have 3,000,000,000 francs additional paper money printed. This makes a total of 36,000,000,000 francs of paper money in circulation as against less than 6,000,000,000 before the war. Economists argue the excessive circulation of paper money is responsible for raising the prices.

The situation recalls the "greenbacks" in America after the civil war. French credit is good, but there is no denying that the franc is weak both abroad and at home.

The rising prices make the situation of many people desperate, especially that of salaried men and women. Last Sunday employes of the government who are underpaid joined labor unions as a means to raise their incomes. Applied to America, this is as if the American government employes joined the federation of labor or the I. W. W. for concerted action.

The French capitalist class is worried by talk of confiscation of one-fourth of everybody's property to pay the war deficit.

France looks with anxiety toward the discussion at the Quai D'Orsay Saturday of the reparation problem. For the amount which Germany is to be sentenced to pay is a vital question for France. Returning soldiers do not like to pay for the war which they have won.

The fresh activity of the peace congress in fixing the preliminary treaty of peace pleases the French who consider the congress has not paid sufficient attention to Germany.

The Paris Midi says editorially:

"Mr. Lansing declares we have arrived at a critical point in the world's affairs, and that we ought to have peace without delay. The American secretary of state is a thousand times right and it is not French opinion which contradicts him.

"Nobody here understands why we have been waiting ever since November 11—or 123 days—to say: 'These are the new German frontiers, these are the future German military effectives, these are the debts Germany must pay.'

"We must act quickly and the French do not understand why there is such delay. We have persistently shouted here—and the French press generally has done so—that the first subject for the conference to tackle was the question of Germany. Now we are finally getting there. Indeed, it is 'getting there' to announce that Germany is in peril through lack of activity for her factories and supplies for her markets. It is clear that when the supply ships enter the boche ports the question of the new frontiers will be settled in a sensible fashion. It is clear that the debt Germany owes us will be known then and that she will recognize that pledges are not to be promised but given."

Though the French peace delegation now openly shares the American view regarding the necessity of supplying Germany in order to avoid anarchy in that country, Chauvinistic sections of the French press make ironical references to Secretary Lansing's insistence on this subject.

The government inspired press has abandoned this attitude.

As regards the repeated implications that the society of nations project delayed the conclusion of a preliminary peace, I am able to state on authority that this is entirely false. The league project did not in the slightest delay the formulation of the military, territorial, naval and fiscal terms to be imposed on Germany.

Separate commissions were appointed for these subjects and they have been working independently. While it is true that the league of nations commission had its report ready first, thanks to long night sessions under the propulsion of President Wilson, the other commissions have been working unhampered by the league plan and would not be ready until now even if the league of nations had never been planned.

Briefly, those who try to make the league project the "goat" for the delay, know not whereof they speak.

Omaha Boys at Camp Mills Waiting to Be Returned to Homes

Eighteen Omaha boys were among the total of 2,163 officers and men who sailed on the Steamship America February 10 from Marseilles and arrived in New York March 2. The men now are at Camp Mills awaiting to be mustered out of the service.

The Omaha boys are:

Davey, Harold W.	Richison, Ralph E.
Dickson, Tilden W.	Ridgway, Roy D.
Esslin, Earl E.	Rockwell, Louis H.
Johnson, Walter O.	St. Clair, Lynn R.
Montmorency, F. L.	Shannon, Edward O.
Osborne, Robert G.	Shropshire, Clyde C.
Pane, Angelo	Stebler, Arthur A.
Penny, Frank F.	Thompson, L. H.
Peterson, Walter G.	Vanderford, F. G.

Beatrice Reports Big Real Estate Deals During the Past Week

Beatrice, Neb., March 15.—(Special.)—George Zager, a farmer living near DeWitt yesterday purchased the old Griggs farm of 200 acres south of that place of W. W. Barmby for $240 per acre. Mr. Barmby a year ago purchased the same farm from Mr. Griggs for $140. This shows an advance of $100 an acre during the last year. The farm is well improved.

Glen Watson, young son of Mr. and Mrs. E. H. Watson of this city, died last evening of pneumonia after a brief illness.

The Beatrice Poultry association held its annual meeting and elected these officers: President, Julius Neuman; vice president, T. B. Fulton; secretary-treasurer, D. O. Kassing; superintendent, S. A. Seymour. The dates for the next show and the selection of the judge will be made later.

Word was received here of the death by influenza of Mrs. Clara Heiliger, which occurred at her home at Holyoke, Colo. The deceased formerly lived at Plymouth, to which place the remains will be taken for burial. The deceased was 23 years of age and leaves no family except her husband.

Heavy showers, the first of the season, fell in this section of the state. The ground is in excellent condition for spring seeding and winter wheat never looked better at this season of the year. A number of farmers are at present engaged in selecting their seed corn for this year.

P. R. Andersen of Filley has purchased the quarter section farm of Carl Sorensen near that place for $26,400.

Judge Wray of York, Neb., addressed a small crowd at the high school last evening on the new welfare ordinance, which was recently passed by the city commissioners. A petition signed by the required number of voters was recently filed with the commissioners requesting them to call a special election for the purpose of submitting the proposition to the voters, but the commissioners decided not to call an election, so the ordinance will not become effective until 1920. Judge Wray is president of the welfare board at York, which has successfully looked after theaters, public dances, etc.

C. of C. Committee to Urge Changes in Blue Sky Law

Changes in the Nebraska Blue Sky law will be proposed by a committee of the Chamber of Commerce, named by Francis Brogan. This committee comprises Messrs. W. E. Rhoades, chairman; Yale C. Holland, Chas A. Goss, W. S. Weston and Thomas A. Fry.

L'Alliance Francaise Will Meet at Mrs. Martin's Today

The members of the French Alliance will be entertained at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Charles W. Martin, 632 South Thirty-seventh street this afternoon at 4 o'clock.

Dr. F. J. Despecher will give an illustrated lecture on Versailles.