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Fighting On Borrowed Wings: The Combat Experiences of Americans Serving with French and British Units During the First World War

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From its beginnings, aviation has captured the public's imagination. The fascination with flight continued into the First World War, as the pilots who took to the skies were quickly transformed into heroic and legendary figures. The newfound allure of combat aviation contrasted with the public's disdain and apathy toward the brutality of trench warfare. However, the popular desire to crown aviators as a new knighthood led to the growth of legends, often at the expense of truth and historical accuracy. The public perception of combat in the air is very different from the reality, which was experienced and reported by the pilots who participated in the air war.

Focusing on the reality of air combat requires a greater examination of the pilots themselves. The American experience in the Great War has been well documented in history, but there is one group that has largely been forgotten. Prior to America's entry into the war, there was a large number of Americans who enlisted in the air forces of Britain and France. The experiences of the pilots were markedly different from those of their countrymen who served in the United States' fledgling air service. There were also a number of important distinctions between those Americans who served under the French versus those who served with the British. The reality of these experiences, garnered from the memoirs, diaries, letters, and other primary sources from the pilots themselves, enables a more comprehensive understanding of these courageous pilots who remain unknown.

Additionally, it is important to remember the impact of this small group of pilots. The Americans who served in French and British units reached the front lines beginning in early 1916 and many remained with their units until the end of the war. A number of American pilots served with the French and British forces with distinction in their roles as fighter pilots, and many became "aces" with five or more aerial victories. The American forces did not even arrive in France until early 1918, and they did not make their first combat flights until April of 1918.^[1] The United States' forces were only at the front for six months before the end of the war. More importantly, a vast majority of the leadership of the newly-minted American air service came directly from French or British units. These men brought with them the tactics and leadership styles of the air in which forces they had served. The group of American pilots who flew under French and British command had a very large impact both in combat and in the creation of the United States Air Force. For these reasons, this paper will focus solely on their experiences.

There are a number of historical works that focus on various aspects of aviation during the First World War, but few go beyond the stories of well-known pilots. The "Red Baron" Manfred Von Richthofen, for example, is chronicled in scores of books and articles. However, there are only a few books which detail the lives of ordinary pilots in comparison to those who achieved mythical status. One of these works, *Legend, Memory,*

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and the Great War in the Air written by Dominick Pisano, takes a close look at the relationship between the reality and the perception of air combat. It explores the beginnings of the creation of heroic legends around pilots and examines how aspects of the propaganda continue into the contemporary context. Linda Robertson also examines the issue of myths surrounding pilots in her book *A Dream of Civilized Warfare*. In this case, myths and legends are seen as a way to "sell" the idea of airpower to the military establishment and the public. Robertson traces the early years of aviation and America's involvement in the Great War to show the evolution of air combat and the public's perception of aviation. My research into the area of myth versus reality has synthesized the ideas put forward by Pisano and Robertson. Because of the nature of the ground war, pilots were a natural choice for a new breed of hero. However, my work also looks at the effects of myth on American pilots, specifically the reactions of this group of men upon encountering various myths both overseas and at home.

The amount of historical writing on the stories of American pilots who served for foreign powers depends heavily on where they served. While the story of Americans who flew for the French-led Lafayette Flying Corps is very well-documented in books like *The Lafayette Escadrille* by Herbert Mason, the Americans who flew for the Royal Air Force (RAF) have been largely forgotten. Historian James J. Hudson writes, "unfortunately those American aces who flew only with the British in World War I are little known by the American public. It is for this reason that this book has been written."^[2] Hudson's book, *In Clouds of Glory*, is a collection of short biographies of more than twenty American aces that flew with the RAF during the war. It is one of few books which focus on the contribution of this group of pilots.

The thesis and research put forward in my work is a synthesis of many of the ideas previously examined by earlier authors. By examining the mythical status of aviation - how it originated and how the public understood it - the comparison to reality becomes much more striking. However, rather than examine the reality through the eyes of all pilots during the war, or even just Allied pilots, this paper focuses on a distinct group - Americans who served with the British or French forces. This subgroup has largely been ignored aside from a general listing certain aces' exploits. These men's experiences were extremely unique, and they certainly had a large impact in combat against the Germans.

However, these two groups were also very different from one another, as well as from their countrymen who joined the American Air Service. American pilots flying with the French did not classify themselves in the same category as American pilots who that flew for the American forces. The same was true of pilots serving for the Royal Air Force. These men were a group apart - separated by nationality from the comrades they flew alongside, but also separated from their own countrymen by a military commitment to a foreign power.

The First World War marked the beginning of aviation as a combat method. Although a romanticized version of the story of pilots and air combat emerged during the Great War and in the years that followed, the reality was much different. Pilots understood that their work was dangerous from the moment they began training until the final days of the war. Describing the risks of combat, American pilot and ace Edgar Taylor stated simply, "it's all in the game."^[3] Taylor's words echo the feelings of many Americans who took part in the Great War in the air. Their unique experiences during the war contrast with the public's perception of fighter pilots at the time which was formed primarily by media coverage and propaganda. The correspondence and memoirs of pilots tells a much different story - one that does not include any mention of chivalry or fair play. American pilot Bogart Rogers wrote years after the war had ended, "the only people who fully understand the war in the air are the fellows who fought it."^[4]

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In order to understand the real experiences of American pilots, it is necessary to first look at the myths that have risen around World War I pilots. The changing nature of warfare during World War I left the public largely without heroic figures. There were no great leaders on horseback to rally the troops and win great victories. The conflict was dirty, dug deep into the mud of Northern France, and progress was measured in yards rather than miles. However, the public's thirst for courage and heroism soon became attached to the newest form of combat- aviation.

Fighter pilots took to the skies alone in their planes, engaging the enemy in combat which would end with one's death. The image created around these men was essentially a revival of the warriors of antiquity. The ideals of chivalry and gallantry were manifested in the public's view of the "knights of the air." The elevation of the aviator as a hero comes largely from the nature of the ground fighting during the war. Historian Anthony Pisano writes, "The nineteenth century notion of honor and chivalry in battle had been mortally wounded in the trenches along with the millions of men killed in the slaughter, but the aviator, who fought his battles hand-to-hand above the mass killing on the ground, was seen as a breed apart."^[5] The public came to rely on the pilot as the symbol of war they could understand.

From the very beginnings of air combat, fighter pilots were seen as heroic figures. The Germans were the first to celebrate their pilots. Kaiser Wilhelm personally awarded the Pour Le Merite, or "Blue Max," to pilots Oswald Boelcke and Max Immelmann in January 1916. The award was the highest military honor of the Prussian kingdom, and from this point on it was almost exclusively awarded to high-scoring German pilots. Consequently, fighter pilots became extremely popular in Germany, even appearing on collectible cards.^[6] The French government followed suit by mentioning successful pilots in nationwide press releases. The term "ace" comes from the French, as they would refer to pilots with five or more victories as "the ace of our aviation" ("*l'as de notre aviation*").^[7] The press attention garnered by pilots had an enormous effect on popular opinion, and the public invested their new-found heroes with the same qualities as the heroes of old.

The building of the image of the "ace" was not limited to the public. Military and political leaders also engaged in a kind of hero worship of pilots. British Prime Minister David Lloyd George waxed particularly eloquent, "The heavens are their battlefield; they are the Cavalry of the clouds. High above the squalor and the mud, so high in the firmament that they are not visible from the earth, they fight out the eternal issues of right and wrong."^[8] The language which George uses to describe pilots and their place in combat is of course, extremely romanticized, but the image he conjured up began to take on a life of its own. It is especially worth noting that George contrasts the pilot's battlefield in the "heavens" with the "squalor" and "mud" of the actual battlefields in France. There is no glory to be found in the struggle of the ground war. His attention is squarely focused on the "cavalry of the clouds," a new breed of warriors that embodied old ideals.

The reality encountered by the men who risked their lives in the skies presents quite a contrast with the romanticized notions. The public's vision of the great "duel" in the air between two equally skilled and chivalrous pilots is largely a creation of propaganda and the media. Fighter planes almost never worked alone, and in fact most dogfights involved several planes.^[9] Nor was it always a fair fight. One of the most decorated American pilots who flew with the Royal Air Force, Bill Lambert, described his experiences in his book, *Combat Report*. "I can honestly say I was scared and I think this applied to all of us up to the actual engagement with the enemy. From then on you thought of nothing but survival for yourself."^[10] Lambert's

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words clash directly with the public perception of sport or chivalry in air combat. For fighter pilots this was survival, plain and simple. Fair fights were not something that pilots would hope to find. In fact, pilots preferred situations where they could shoot the enemy "in the back when he wasn't looking, or bring odds of ten to one against him," as related by Bogart Rogers, an ace who fought with the RAF.^[11] To the men who were actually engaged in combat, things were much simpler and also much more brutal than what was told to the public.

As the legends grew during the war and even after it, many pilots tried to correct the inflated image of their activities. "Every time I hear someone speak of the war in the air as a gallant and romantic business, a modern counterpart of the chivalrous strife of old, I break right out laughing," wrote Rogers. "It was a cold, calculating, deadly occupation - sans chivalry, sans sportsmanship, and sans any ethics except that you got the other fellow or he got you."^[12] His view of combat was formed by experience as a pilot and later as a flight commander rather than from propaganda and the media. He refers in his book to the popular view of the ace as "sugar-coated," and goes into great detail as to why the "chivalrous" fighter pilot was never anything more than a myth. Rogers felt it was important to try and explain to the public what the reality of the fighter pilot really was. He wanted the world to understand just what these men went through. The stereotypes and symbols connected with pilots in the popular imagination meant nothing to him; real experiences were more important.

With the understanding of the myths surrounding pilots in the war, it is important to look at the reality of combat flight in the Great War. Pilots had quite diverse experiences. The first military aircrafts were unarmed and used for observing enemy troop movements, but as planes became more common in the skies over Europe, pilots began experimenting with weapons to shoot down enemy aircraft. These first contests for air superiority quickly escalated with the introduction of scout or pursuit planes, which were specifically designed to shoot down enemy aircraft. Air-to-air combat became more common, and casualties among pilots on both sides increased dramatically. By late 1916 and early 1917, the air war was based on multiple-plane tactics, relying on formations of six planes (called a "flight") as the base unit of combat. Some dogfights would involve multiple flights from both sides, culminating in a huge aerial free-for-all with scores of planes. These new tactics marked the end of "lone wolf" pilots, as the sheer size of the forces involved made it virtually impossible to engage the enemy without backup.^[13]

In the rush to get new pilots to the front, both the French and British air services began accepting American volunteers even though the United States was officially neutral until the spring of 1917. Young Americans formed their decisions to join based on a number of factors, ranging from duty to a love of flying.^[14] Regardless of their reasons for joining the aviation sections, the Allied powers were glad to have a source of new recruits. France had always accepted Americans as part of its famous Foreign Legion, but did not allow them to become pilots until the formation of the all-American Lafayette Escadrille in April 1916. Many Americans soon transferred from the Foreign Legion or from the volunteer American Ambulance Service to the Escadrille. Americans who wanted to join the Royal Air Force could travel to Canada to sign up and begin flight training, although they risked their US citizenship by doing so. At the conclusion of the War in November, 1918, more than 300 Americans had flown with the Royal Air Force, and 265 served under the French Aéronautique Militaire.^[15]

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Americans who joined with the British and French forces began their experience as aviators by undergoing flight training, an especially dangerous process. Death or serious injury was an acknowledged risk of aviation in World War I, even in flight training. Training took place in Canada, England, France, and, in rare cases, in the United States. Once enrolled, pilots faced an array of difficulties. The lack of a standardized training system led to sometimes ineffective and inefficient training, while the demand for pilots on the front lines caused many to be rushed through training much too quickly. One such story was told by American Oliver LeBoutillier in an interview. "We came around, he [the British instructor] got out and he said, 'You are all right, take it up and fly it.' I said, 'I don't know anything about this engine business.' He said, 'Oh, you'll catch on to it.' . . . So I went way back, and I got the engines going... and before I knew it I was off the ground." LeBoutillier continued, saying, "I was getting scared, because I couldn't control this engine. I didn't know anything about it...I couldn't get down, and I crossed the whole big airport. So here comes up this great big stone, so I hit it wide open."^[16] LeBoutillier walked away from the crash unhurt, but many others were not so lucky. The extremely dangerous training system led some English infantry officers to refer to the Royal Flying Corps as "the suicide club."^[17]

Pilots quickly learned in training that their lives depended on flimsy machines, and even one mistake could mean death. "In a typical day (21 October 1917), C.H. Andrews recorded 17 crashes at his training squadron. One cadet was killed and five were injured seriously enough to be sent to hospital."^[18] Crashes were seen as an inevitable part of training, and it was not until the end of the war that steps were taken to improve pilot safety. Over the duration of the war, more than 8,000 cadets of all nationalities died in England and 129 died in Canada.^[19] The dangers of training helped to prepare the young pilots for the realities of combat - even one mistake could mean instant death.

The combat role of an American pilot flying for the British and French was largely determined by forces outside of his control. Because the German air tactics were defensive and German planes rarely ventured over French lines, the Allies were forced to adopt an offensive strategy and send their combat patrols over German lines. For Americans with the French and British, this meant that they would have to face German anti-aircraft fire as they passed over the trenches. Additionally, these tactics placed the Allies at a tactical disadvantage in their dogfights with the enemy. The Germans could simply dive back to their home aerodrome if a fight was not going in their favor and fight another day. Also, because they were inside enemy territory, the Allied fighters had to be on the lookout for attacks coming from literally every direction. German planes would frequently attack from high altitude with the sun at their backs, making it nearly impossible to spot the planes until it was too late.

Considering that most patrols would last about two hours, the exhaustion involved with maintaining a constant state of absolute alertness was both physically and mentally taxing. It is also important to note that most pilots made at least one patrol a day if the weather allowed, and as many as three patrols in one day, when necessary. The physical toll of these combat patrols on the pilots was enormous. American pilot William Russell described his experiences in combat in a letter home. "These various air performances have occupied my days for the past three weeks, and although it is for only four hours a day, it is quite tiring work. The strong wind blows in your face all day, and you are ever on the alert, continually watching like a hawk the move of every machine above, below, and around you."^[20] Pilots had to deal with mental as well as physical fatigue. Staying "on the alert" for hours at a time, twice a day, every day for weeks on end drove pilots to the breaking point. Describing a squad mate who had been at the front for ten months,

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Rogers wrote, "...later in the morning he collapsed... His nerves snapped with the twang of a broken flying wire and they sent him home for a long rest."^[21] The strain of this existence is almost impossible for civilians to understand and many pilots simply could not cope with this tremendous stress for long periods.

Another one of the difficulties facing pilots in combat did not come from the enemy, but from the military leadership of France and England. Allied pilots were never issued parachutes, even though various designs were available in early 1918. "Germany and its allies, on the other hand, developed practical compact parachutes for their aviators by the spring of 1918."^[22] Although the Allies did have parachute designs for the crews of observation balloons, they never produced a model which could be used by pilots. The lack of parachutes was especially deadly when considering that planes of the time were covered in highly flammable canvas and fires were common when machine gun rounds hit the aircraft. If a plane caught fire, the flames would spread quickly over the aircraft. This left pilots with two options - an extremely painful death through incineration, or jumping to their death. American ace Raoul Lufbery, a veteran pilot and former member of the Lafayette Escadrille, had his aircraft set on fire by enemy machine gun rounds, and "like so many other World War I aviators faced with a fiery death, he chose to jump from the flames and fell to his death."^[23] Parachutes would have saved countless lives, and many of the pilots themselves were outraged that they were not issued to all who flew in combat.

In addition to the rigors and dangers of daily patrols, pilots also had to contend with the numerous physical problems caused by flying in an open cockpit. Unlike modern aircraft, World War I-era fighter planes did not have enclosed cockpits or pressurization. The pilot was exposed to the elements with no protection. Extreme cold posed a major problem. As pilots gained altitude, the temperatures would drop very quickly. This was not only uncomfortable, but could lead to injury if the pilot did not protect himself. Captain Alvin Callender recounted one patrol in a letter home: "I felt my hands and feet were going to freeze off. One fellow did get his face frozen. . . His face from the forehead down is all black and blue and swollen up."^[24] The open cockpit also created other problems when flying at high altitude. Without pressurization, a pilot would be subject to a number of physical problems, such as altitude sickness, hypoxia, and barotrauma.^[25] The simple explanation behind these illnesses is the difficulty in obtaining oxygen at altitude. The symptoms - such as dizziness, nausea, vomiting, drowsiness, sluggish thinking, dimmed vision, and loss of consciousness - would have been extremely dangerous for pilots. In a situation where every fraction of a second can mean the difference between life and death, suffering from any one of these symptoms could have been catastrophic.

The rigors of combat did not cease when the planes returned to the hangers. The strain continued on the ground. "The fliers lived an abnormal life in which death and disaster were their daily diet. The exhaustion and nervous energy was tremendous."^[26] As a result, pilots turned to different coping mechanisms in an attempt to deal with the stress so that they could continue to function in combat. These included the acceptance of a doctrine of fatalism, adopting a layer of callousness regarding comrades killed in action, and widespread alcoholism among pilots.

"Most fliers, I think, were fatalists. It was the only doctrine that would hold water... You simply decided that your destiny was predetermined and inevitable, and ceased worrying about what might happen to you. When your time came... there was nothing you could do to stop it."^[27] These beliefs were shaped largely by the reality of combat aviation. There was a large factor of luck involved in who lived and who was killed.

Life or death often hinged on a fraction of an inch or a split second. Rogers relates the story of a pilot who was nicked on the nose by a machine gun round during a dog fight to explain this point. "If the bullet had hit three inches farther back - aloha."^[28] The pilot avoided death by a fraction of a second. In such a situation a pilot knew that he had little control over his fate. E.M. Roberts, an American who served with the RAF in France, said that, "there is a saying among flyers: 'If you stick to it long enough you're bound to get it.' And the saying is all too true as the casualty records show."^[29] Pilots saw death all around them on a daily basis, and by accepting the possibility of their own demise, they were able to continue on with their work.

Another way that pilots dealt with the stress of combat was through callousness. When a comrade was killed, pilots sought to minimize the emotional strain of the loss. One way they did this was by trying to shift the blame on to the man who had been killed. "If your best friend was shot down you masked a breaking heart by declaring he was a damn fool who should have had better sense. . . It was his fault and it served him right!"^[30] While this tactic seems cold-hearted, one must remember that pilots serving at the front lines had to deal with this kind of loss on a regular basis. If a comrade was killed during a morning patrol, his fellow pilots would still have to go out and complete the evening patrol. There was no time off for grieving. "So they put the blame on the deceased and almost kidded themselves into believing they didn't care."^[31] This allowed the men to try and continue on with their work as if nothing had happened.

One of the most widespread things that pilots used to cope with combat stress was alcohol. Both the RAF and French Air Force made alcohol available to pilots in the mess tents after the day's patrols had been completed, or as Rogers described it, "when the day's work was done the evening's drinking commenced."^[32] Alcohol was seen as a way for pilots to relax and relieve the stress that had accumulated over the course of several hours in the sky. "Strong drink and lots of it was a boon and salvation to the aviators. Show me a good, stout-hearted, cool, dependable air fighter, and I'll show you, nine times out of ten, a hard drinker... It let them relax, it enabled them to forget and it made them sleep."^[33] Alcohol was a way to escape the hardships and emotional anguish that came with life as a combat flyer. Pilots would often fly two patrols a day, two hours each, every day for weeks on end. "They were in the front line every day, week in and week out. The end of a day's work found them in an abnormal physical and mental condition," Rogers wrote. "They'd have to do the same thing tomorrow. They were tired and jumpy - so they drank - and the liquor made them normal."^[34] Any means to distract them from the reality of combat - of death, injury, and tremendous emotional loss - was welcome. Even a momentary escape from the combat mentality, the brief return to "normal," was very important in maintaining the mental stability of pilots.

With this basic understanding of the realities of combat, one can at least get an idea of the hardships facing pilots as they went about their daily lives at the front. These realities were instances in which Americans serving with both French and British units had very similar experiences. However, there was also a number of experiences that were unique to each nation. These ranged from the obvious, such as language problems for pilots in French units, to more hidden issues, such as how victorious pilots were recognized. These aspects of pilot experiences show how different life was for pilots serving with either force.

For Americans who wanted to volunteer for a foreign power in World War I, both before and after the United States formally entered the war, the French Flying Corps was the most well-known option. Over the course of the war, hundreds of young men traveled to France to receive training as pilots and to serve on the front lines alongside French aviators. The first Americans to join the French were gathered into a single French

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squadron in April 1916, which was named the Lafayette Escadrille. As more Americans volunteered for service, the French began to place them in all-French squadrons, but these American pilots were collectively known as the Lafayette Flying Corps. The experience of these young pilots was a nearly unique one, as they left their homeland to fight under the flag of another nation and were surrounded by leaders and comrades who did not speak their language. This situation produced a group identity separate from that of Americans serving under the US or British flag during the War.

American pilots arriving in France had to deal with a number of issues, and one of the most pressing was that of language. While some had a basic understanding of French, many of the pilots in training were unable to speak or comprehend the language at all. This is especially important when one remembers that the Americans were trained by French officers, most of whom could not speak English. Alan Nichols, an American pilot who joined the French Foreign Legion in order to receive his training described his flight instructor: "We have been assigned a moniteur (instructor)... He is very agreeable and an excellent flyer, but he doesn't speak English. This bothers some of the boys a bit."^[35] Understanding the basic commands was a major problem for the new pilots, especially considering how dangerous flight training could be. A slight mistake could result in a crash, injury, and even death, not to mention a severe reprimand from the French officers. American Stuart Walcott related a story in which he was accused of banking his plane too sharply and three of his instructors rushed out to berate him. Walcott had a basic understanding of French, but he stated, "...then all three started arguing at once at me and I spelled [spoke using] all the French I knew."^[36] The experience soured Walcott on the French, especially as he believed that his maneuver was safe. However, without a way to communicate with his superiors, he was unable to give his opinion of the situation.

It was difficult for pilots to feel integrated with their French comrades when they were fundamentally separated by the language barrier. Nichols recalled a large meeting with the new flight school leader in which "... he delivered a long speech in French while three or four hundred Russians and Americans listened. I suppose the Frenchmen understood."^[37] The school that Nichols is referring to was located at Avord in France, and it was home to a large number of American pilots. The fact that the head instructor would insist on speaking French when only a small number of pilots could have understood him is quite telling as to the attitudes faced by American volunteers in that country. They were expected to learn and adapt to French ways as the French were not going to adapt to or accommodate them. For pilots who were placed in all-French squadrons, the feeling of isolation was even greater. Stuart Walcott expressed his gratitude that his unit was stationed close to the all-American Lafayette Escadrille. "The Lafayette, 124, is of our group and have adjoining barracks which makes it very nice for us lone Americans in French escadrilles."^[38] Just being able to speak English with a fellow countryman was seen as a huge thrill for pilots who had been stationed with French-speaking comrades. It allowed pilots a slight connection to the home they had left behind, and it gave them a connection to others who shared the same experience of serving under the French.

However, not every problem of acceptance originated with the French. Americans who were under French command also had to deal with the fledgling US Army Air Corps, which began arriving in France shortly after the United States entered the war in April of 1917. As opposed to the Lafayette Flying Corps members, who worked their way up through the French ranks before becoming officers, members of the US units were promoted to officers as soon as they finished flight training. This was not well received by Americans who

had been in France for months. Stuart Walcott commented on the situation: "They are officers of the USA and live as such, which incites in me much envy as I am still a mere corporal of France and treated with no more than my due - not quite as much I sometimes think."^[39] Walcott had been in the country much longer than these men, enduring the hardships of training and living, yet still a "mere corporal." To see his countrymen immediately given the respect and prestige of officers without any experience was difficult to deal with. But, the distinctions also applied to the way the soldiers lived.

Even though all were Americans, the US Army men were treated much better than their countrymen who served under the French. Alan Nichols described the scene in a training school mess hall: "...we notice that the (US) Army men have butter and milk and very good bread, paid for by the United States. That doesn't bother us, but it is a little embarrassing to sit at one end of the table, when the butter and bread and milk stop halfway and when the men on the other end have been in the service less time than we."^[40] The effect of such an embarrassing situation would have created at least a modicum of resentment among those Americans sitting on the French side of the table. However, the situation got worse for these men a few days later, when the American units decided not to allow their countrymen to eat in the same barracks with them. "We Legion men have been shoved out of the American dining room and now eat with the Frenchmen in a dingy floorless barrack."^[41] Even though the Lafayette Flying Corps members had been in the country much longer than their American counterparts and had much more training and flight expertise, they were not afforded the respect they expected. The resentment that many would come to feel towards the US Army pilots would shape the experiences and identity of those who still served for France.

The overall effect of these experiences on the pilots cannot be overstated. American volunteers gave up everything they had to join the French cause, and once enlisted they faced hardships at every turn. And it is perhaps because of the difficulty of these experiences that the Lafayette Flying Corps members developed such a strong group identity. Their experiences brought them together and formed a bond that lasted through the end of the war. Of the 67 men who were killed while members of the Flying Corps, 66 were interred in the Lafayette Memorial in Paris, which was established in 1928.^[42] The American volunteers who were brought to France by the Great War were joined by more than just the Lafayette name. They were connected by their common experiences and identity.

American pilots who joined the Royal Air Force during the Great War had a much different experience than their countrymen who flew with the French. The British military culture was markedly more rigid and concerned with decorum, and Americans who flew with the British became keenly and quickly aware of this. An example of this was the British Army's refusal to denote pilots as aces until after they had shot down at least six planes, unlike the requisite five acknowledged by all other nations. The episode showed a decided contrast between the military establishments of the French and British armies. Because of these differences, American pilots who served with the British were conscious of their identity as members of the RAF and were quick to rebuke anyone who associated them with the French.

The issue of ace distinctions is emblematic of the British Army's approach to publicity for aviators. The Germans had heaped praise and adulation on their most decorated pilots, even printing collectible cards with pictures of the pilots on them similar to baseball cards. The French also tapped into aviators as a source of "positive propaganda," and began to create posters and other items with images of successful pilots.^[43] The British aviation command, however, refused to allow the names of their successful pilots even to appear

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in the press until late 1916. Describing the actions of the military, historian Linda Robertson claims that "the British were more reticent, and never adopted the practice of always mentioning in military dispatches pilots who had shot down a set number of planes..."^[44] Some in positions of high command viewed the praise of individuals as improper, especially considering the number of British soldiers killed in the ground war. They saw the elevation of individual pilots as being disrespectful to the huge numbers of unheralded dead and wounded of the infantry war in France.

While pilots were given military awards such as the Military Cross or the Distinguished Service Order, they were never categorized or publicized based on their number of aerial victories. Some members of Parliament did try to distinguish certain pilots by mentioning them in speeches that would then be printed and distributed to the public, but these instances were rare. The cases when individual pilots were awarded medals were also seen as opportunities to laud the exploits of individual pilots, but the scale of publicity never came close to that of the French or Germans. The pilots as a group, however, were certainly idolized by the public, as can be seen in Lloyd George's speech which labeled them as the "cavalry of the clouds" and the "knighthood of the war."^[45] Aviators as a whole were viewed very positively by the British government, although it still refused to honor individuals.

Americans who were serving with the Royal Air Force were acutely aware of the situation in England. In response to a letter from his family, American pilot Alvin Callender responded, "quit telling me to be an 'ace.' Because we don't have those kind of things in the British Army."^[46] The "ace" term had gained popularity in the United States following the multitude of reports on the Lafayette Flying Corps and its American members. In order to garner support for the war among American readers, there were a large number of articles printed in the US which spoke highly of the American volunteers in France. In his letter home, Callender proceeds to describe to his family how the ace system worked and he also included a bit of a jab at the French as well. "Five [aerial victories] would make me an 'ace' if I was in the French flying corps (Thank God I'm not), but as I'm not a French pilot I'll never be an 'ace.'"^[47] Because the French flying corps was so well publicized in America, Callender's family automatically assumed that their son could also garner the accolades of being an "ace" fighter pilot. The realization of many Americans in the British forces that they would not be able to achieve the fame or public adulation that was afforded to their French allies led many pilots to resent and in some cases to try and poke fun at the French.

The fact that RAF pilots often tried to point out the distinctions between themselves and their French counterparts is another unique aspect of their experience. This was likely fueled by the lack of acknowledgment in Britain and the widespread publicity of the French pilots and air force. The American pilots serving with the RAF often expressed a feeling of their own superiority over the French, and in some cases resentment and jealousy. Americans who served with the British had no qualms about poking fun at the French. Bogart Rogers claimed, "There was no place in the air service for grand-standers. Except with the French, who characteristically made an unnecessary to-do over the most trivial achievements..."^[48] This statement drips with sarcasm, but it also seems tinged with a bit of jealousy and resentment. Since Rogers had served with the RAF, his assessment of the French and their celebration of individual pilots was undoubtedly colored by his experiences. Even though Rogers had achieved ace status with six aerial victories, he never got the same amount of attention and respect as other pilots who served with the French and American forces. The military cultures of the British and French air forces were extremely different and this played a major role in shaping the relationship between pilots.

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The experience for an American pilot serving with the British in the First World War was a very unique one. They did not have to deal with language and communication problems like their countrymen who served with the French, but their role did carry an array of challenges. One of the most intimidating issues facing pilots was the possibility of losing their citizenship. Historian James Hudson writes, "because many of the young American flyers felt they might lose their American citizenship by joining the British air forces, they sometimes listed their birthplace or citizenship as Canadian or English."[\[49\]](#) Issues such as these are what made the experience of this small group of pilots so distinct from others who served during the war.

Americans who served in the RAF did so largely anonymously, even after the end of the war. This stemmed in part from the British attitude towards individual accolades, but it was also due to the lack of recognition of Americans who served in the RAF. Although a number of books and movies center on the experiences of Americans serving with the French, there are only a small number of books which even mention those Americans who flew with the British in the First World War. However, their contributions to the war effort were certainly important. Of the American pilots who were part of this group, "no less than twenty-eight became aces. In fact, of the twenty-three Americans who scored ten or more victories, some thirteen flew only with the British air squadrons."[\[50\]](#) These men were extremely successful throughout the war as fighter pilots, owing in part to their experiences of training and serving alongside their British comrades in the RAF.

The decision to enlist in a foreign nation's air force and fly fighter planes was certainly not an easy one to make, yet hundreds of young Americans did. Many of the first to sign up were young American men who were already in Europe during the war. This included men who were part of the French Foreign Legion, the American Ambulance Service, and British Infantry forces. Some of these men had traveled to Europe at the outbreak of war in 1914, while others came later as the war continued.

Prospective pilots came from a wide variety of backgrounds and their reasons for transferring to aviation were very different as well. For members of foreign infantry forces, aviation was seen as a way to escape the slaughter of the trenches, a safer occupation which guaranteed at least an increase in prestige and respect. The dirty and muddy battlefields on which they fought day in and day out seemed a world away from the gallant aviators who passed far above the trenches on their patrols. However, for the men driving ambulances, they viewed aviation as a way to get into the fight. Many of these men became disillusioned with their work as ambulance drivers, feeling that others were making major sacrifices in the fighting while they stayed back in a relatively safe position. There was a feeling of guilt for these men and they viewed aviation as a way to join the fight and to know for sure that they would not be looked down upon after the war had ended. Although both groups had different reasons for joining, the aviation was a popular destination for those who were unhappy with their present situation and dreamed of a change to the gallant and romantic world of the pilots.

For those serving in the infantry during the First World War, aviation was certainly seen as a means to escape the brutal and incomprehensible life of the trenches. For Americans who had joined the French Foreign Legion, like Edmond Genet, the choice became clear with the advent of the Lafayette Escadrille. Genet served with the Legion from January 1915 until January of 1917 and during his service he had taken part in a number of offensives against the Germans.[\[51\]](#) Genet had seen thousands of his comrades and friends die on the front lines and this had a major impact on his decision to join the French aviation. In a

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passage in his diary, Genet wrote emphatically, "The aviation corps is my one hope for happiness in these next months of war if I can get into it. God help me!"^[52] After years in the trenches, Genet was well aware of the dangers and likely knew that his time would eventually come. That is why he greeted the possibility of transfer to the aviation with such hope. "Received order to change to Aviation Corps tomorrow. Thank God! In my 7th heaven of delight."^[53] This passage from Genet after hearing of his transfer again shows why a ground soldier would apply to become a pilot. The chance to escape the trenches was greeted with unfettered enthusiasm.

For other soldiers, simply seeing pilots flying over the frontlines was enough to make them want to transfer to aviation. The obvious advantages, such as not being stuck in a muddy and filthy trench, outweighed the disadvantages of the aviation sections. Although pilots faced extremely dangerous conditions, as outlined earlier, the negative aspects were relatively unknown to those outside of the aviation units. E.M. Roberts, an American serving with the British infantry, wrote:

I envied the flyers. Here was I in mud up to my knees either in the trenches or on the roads and getting very little out of war but lots of hard work. The other fellows were sailing around in the clean air while I had to duck shells all the time and run chances of being caught by the machine guns and snipers. Of course, the aviators were also being shelled, but they never seemed to get hurt."^[54]

Roberts' perception of the role of a pilot was informed largely by myth in a manner similar to how the public viewed aviation. He saw only the positives of aviation, not the negatives. With his existence dominated by life in the trenches, taking to the air represented a welcome change.

The final group of prospective American pilots was made up of those serving as ambulance drivers with the American Ambulance Service (AAS). Many of these men had signed on to work out of prestigious American universities as a way to participate in the war effort, even though the United States was officially neutral at that point. The units that were sent to France were equipped with retrofitted Ford Model T ambulances, supplied by the American automaker. American volunteers underwent brief training in France before they went to the front.

The job of an ambulance driver during World War I was not easy and it certainly was not safe. The ambulance units were stationed close to the front lines so they could pick up casualties and quickly evacuate them to the rear. Members of the ambulance services were often subject to artillery shelling, just as the members of the infantry were. However, for ambulance drivers, there was a definite feeling of disconnect from the soldiers they served. The drivers were not soldiers. They did not carry guns and they did not have to participate in attacks. This led some men to resent their position as mere ambulance drivers. They wanted to have a greater impact on the fighting, and many turned to aviation.

For members of the American Ambulance Service, the opportunity to get into a direct combat role offered validation among their comrades. No longer would they be noncombatants, instead they would be among the most respected and well-known units in the military. American Alan Nichols commented on his situation when writing back home to his family: "...it doesn't seem to be enough for some of us, to be merely driving ambulances, while our fellows come marching in to go to the trenches, so some of us are taking steps to enter the Franco-American Aviation School."^[55] Life as an ambulance driver did not compare to that of a pilot, because "...when an aviator does something he does something. When I get thru [sic] I'll never have

to worry about whether I did my share or not."^[56] The American ambulance drivers wanted to do their share of the work.

The final topic in which the French and British trained pilots differed is, appropriately, the final stop for many of the pilots during the war: the grave. The distinctions between British and French military cultures extended even into the realm of death, as funeral ceremonies for Americans in each service were very different. These differences reflect the distinctions that held true for nearly every aspect of combat.

As one of the first American pilots killed flying with the French, Victor Chapman was given an elaborate state funeral by the French government. At a time when hundreds of thousands of French soldiers were being killed in the trenches, Chapman's funeral showed just how exceptionally pilots were treated in comparison to ground troops. Edmond Genet described the funeral in a letter home: "The service was short but practically all of the American colony of Paris attended. Also most of the aviation fellows and the American Ambulance chaps were there with the Ambassador and Consul-General and their respective staffs."^[57] The funeral service for Chapman was an extremely important event for the French, as they felt the need to honor an American who fell in service of their nation.

The funeral of American RAF pilot Alvin Callender illustrates the other end of the spectrum. Callender had served in the RAF for a number of months, rising to the position of flight leader. He had eight aerial victories. After Callender was shot down in October of 1918, he was quickly buried alongside the wreckage of his plane. Bogart Rogers, who was in Callender's unit, remembered visiting the gravesite with two other members of the squadron. "The grave was beside a little farmhouse and not marked at all. We put up the cross and then sodded the top and built a little border or brick around the edges. It was a solemn party that came home."^[58] This is certainly a far cry from a public funeral in Paris attended by hundreds of countrymen and dignitaries. Callender was laid to rest with only a handful of his closest comrades there to witness it.

Though there are a number of points of distinction between Americans who volunteered to serve for the British and the French, there is a common thread in their service. These men sacrificed heavily, some paying the ultimate price, in order to fly over the skies of France in the Great War. Each man had his own personal reasons for enlisting, but once they were a part of the air war, the difficulties faced were very similar. The men had to deal with the harsh realities of combat, and then struggle with personal demons and fears once they reached the ground. By examining the personal accounts - the diaries, letters, memoirs - of the pilots themselves, their lives become much more tangible to the modern audience. It is all too common to associate accounts from the First World War as irrelevant to contemporary studies because it occurred more than ninety years ago. However, closer examination reveals these pilots to be an amazing and dynamic group. These men shaped the course of air warfare in Europe, and many would later go on to leadership positions in the fledgling United States Air Force. Their contributions, many of which were based on their experiences under the French and British command, would form the foundation for American air services. The success of American air power throughout the years following the First World War can certainly be traced back to the intrepid volunteers who flew for the French and British. Even for those men whose names

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have largely been forgotten, their legacy continues.

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