

# Le Musee de L'Amitie Franco - Americaine

LE MUSEE DE BLERANCOURT

By GARY FISK

An out-of-the-way museum in France contains some items of interest to the serious student of the Lafayette Escadrille, and is one seldom heard of in this day. Le Musée de Blerancourt was established to cement the bond of friendship between the people of the Aisne Department and America. It is a French National Museum, having been donated to the French people by American women headed by Miss Anne Morgan.

While there are no airplanes on display, the several relics of WWI aviation are rare enough to justify a visit by any WWI aviation buff visiting France. Chief among them is the framed piece of fabric bearing the insignia of the Lafayette Escadrille cut from Harold Buckley Willis' Spad destroyed on landing on 21 May 1917. The fabric is light tan in color and measures about 20 x 30 inches. Harold Willis' own personal marking, a wide diagonal green bar, runs through the background. This is one of the few original N.124 insignias remaining.\*

A French tricolor flag measuring about 17 x 24 inches is framed and hangs on the wall inside the Museum. It was signed by many American pilots, some of which are: Steve Bigelow, Nat Duffy, Ted Parsons, C.E. Fauntleroy, Thomas G. Cassidy, Chris Ford, R. Soubiran, G. De Freest Larner, H. Clyde Balsley, and those of French officers Commt. Brocard and Capt. Georges Thenault. Since it is framed only one side can be studied. A small description is typewritten into one corner of the white bar of the flag:

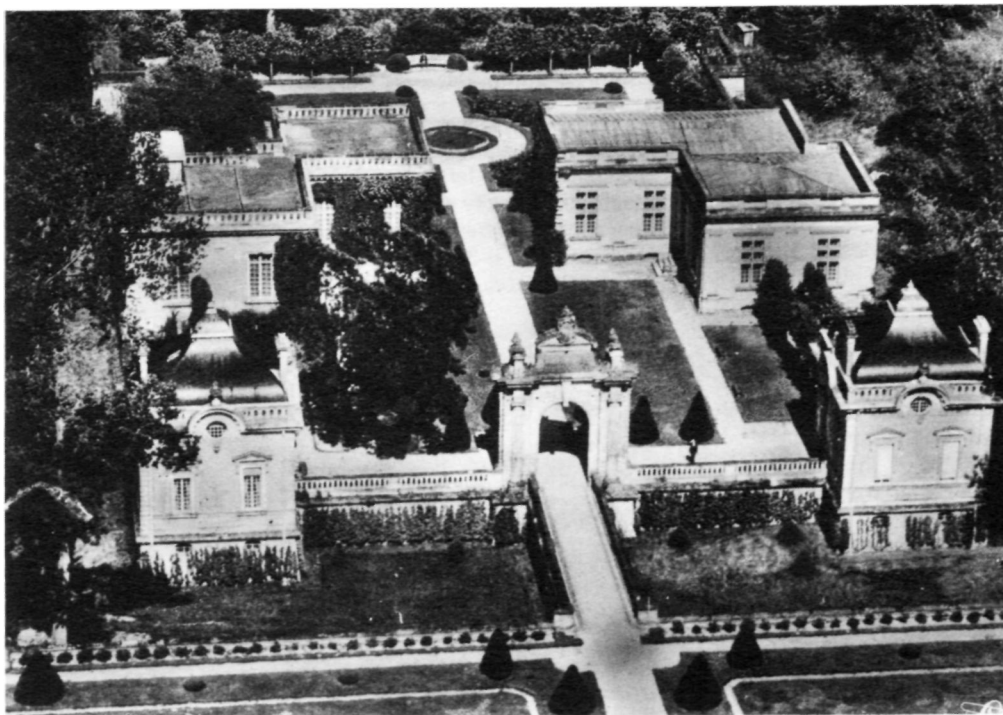
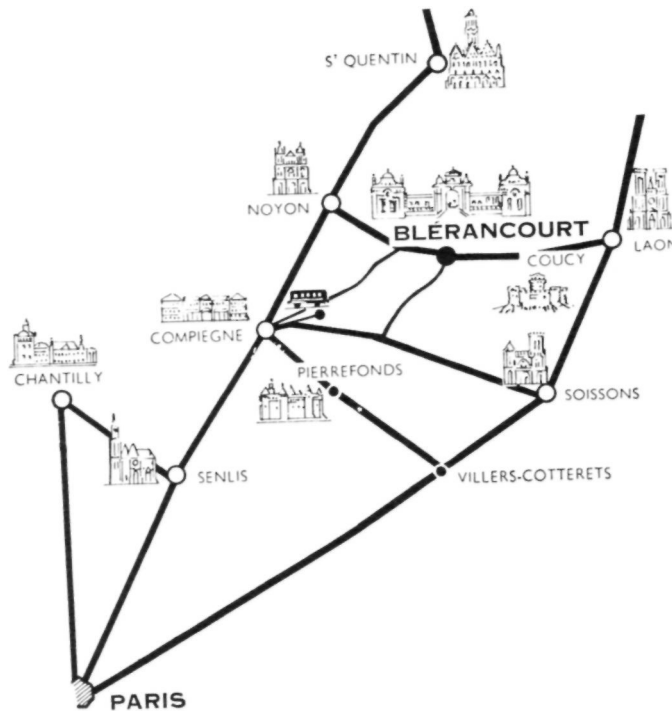
"Property of Charles Kerwood. Carried by the Second Regiment of the French Foreign Legion. Given to the owner by Charles - Tiny - Trinkard, killed Thanksgiving Day, 1917, over Toul."

\* Although the Lafayette Escadrille continued to be designated as N.124 for months afterward the transition to Spads was completed by early Summer 1917.

Chateau de Blerancourt, now the Museum, begun in early 17th Century. Right, the whiskey bottle on display, "The Famous Lafayette Escadrille Brand."

"Famous Lafayette Escadrille Brand" is on the label of a whiskey bottle in one of the display cases. Apparently their "home brew" was complete to the label on the bottle.

Under the roster of members of the Lafayette Escadrille on a wall above a display case is a Maxim 08/15 machine from the two-seater brought down by Thomas G. Cassidy on 2 June 1918. Somewhat rusty but otherwise in good condition, it was donated to the Museum by Cassidy. There are also



nearby two telescopic aircraft gun sights, four French uniforms, two of them aviator type, and a citation reading:

"Date: Jan. 23rd, 1918. Lafayette Flying Corps No. 80. In recognition to the services rendered to France and her allies for the cause of humanity, this certificate has been issued to Serg't. Carter L. Ovington who served during the European War in the capacity of Volunteer in the French Aviation.

Thereby in a measure repaying the great debt which America owes to France and contributing to the victory of Liberty and Civilization over military Autocracy and Barbarism."

Several small oil paintings by the artist, J.F. Boucher, grace various wall locations. Some of those recognized were: Rene Fonck's Spad at Hetomesnil, June 1918; a Liberty-powered DH-4, August 1918; and French aviation personnel, Capt. D'Indy, Commandant Menard, Capt. Desevin, and Capt. Peralda.

Last of all, there are numerous photographs of the Lafayette Escadrille pilots, mechanics and airplanes on display in various cases around the Museum.

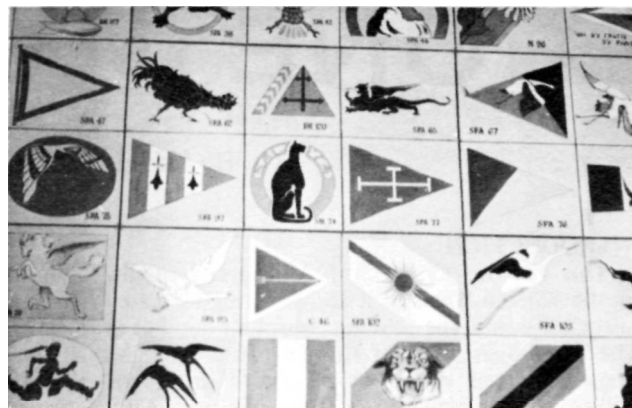
The Museum buildings themselves are quite old, the main portions dating to the late 1600's. Blerancourt was begun in 1612, was sacked at various times and rebuilt, and added to piece by piece in the years following WWI by Miss Anne Morgan and her friends, Mrs. Murray Dike and Mrs. Vanderbilt. These women had, in early 1917, begun a campaign of protection for the civilian population of that area.

Following the War the recent remembrances and relics of the American Field Service, The Lafayette Escadrille, American Volunteer Corps, American Ambulance Corps, Rockefeller Foundation, War Relief Clearing House, American Committee for Assistance to the Wounded, and of the American Civilian Assistance Committee were gathered together. The collections were enlarged with many mementos of American-French cooperation dating back to the American Revolutionary War and, when it became large enough, was donated in its entirety to the Government of France.

Blerancourt lies between the main roads from Paris northeast to the cities of Noyon and of Laon, and approximately halfway between those two. It is a small town, about 65 miles or 109 kilometers from Paris, easily locatable on a Michelin Map (No.56) at the intersection of Routes D-6, N-334 and N-335.

All photographs courtesy of the Author.

Below, N.124 insignia from Harold Buckley Willis' Spad VII.



The insignia of many French squadrons are painted in full color on one wall of the Museum.



Roster of personnel of the Lafayette Escadrille with Thos. Cassidy's captured machine gun.



Among the many photographs in cases around the walls are pictured the funeral of Norman Prince, above, (with part of control stick) and of Lufberry's Nieuport 11, and individual and group photos of members or those associated with the founding of the Escadrille.

