



The Memorial to the Lafayette Escadrille at Garches, west of Paris. (Photo by Author)

A.E.F. COMBAT AIRFIELDS AND MONUMENTS IN FRANCE , WW1

By ROYAL D. FREY

INTRODUCTION

The Author was recalled to active duty with the U.S. Air Force in late 1961 and was stationed at Etain Air Base, France, about 12 miles east of Verdun. While there he made a tour of the World War I battle sites of interest, visiting many of the places used as aerodromes by the active American Squadrons. In particular he went to some of the gravesites of noted American airmen, providing some unusual facts about the memorials and the seeming neglect of certain of these. Remarkably, he presents evidence here which controverts certain myths which, by being told and retold over the years, have gained credence about some famous pilots.

The series of slides of his tour were shown by Lt. Col. Frey with his talk, the Annual Address at the 13th Annual Meeting of A.A.H.S. in San Francisco, 5 February 1972. The photos of the aerodromes usually included a view of the nearby town and a view of the airfield from both the ground and the air. This latter was made possible as he conned an L-19 from the Army at Verdun. Selected slides, and a revised and abridged version of his talk, are submitted here.

Lt. Col. Frey is currently Chief, Research Division, U.S. Air Force Museum. He is a professional historian with an MA in History from Ohio State University, was a civilian historian with various units except for periods of active duty with the Ohio Air National Guard, and has been Chief of Research at the Museum since 1959. A WWII P-38 pilot (credited with two enemy aircraft shot down) and P.O.W. at Stalag Luft I, Barth, Germany, he also served with the Air Defense Command in 1951 on P-84's, and has flown many types of airplanes including the P-47, P-51, C-47, B-25 and B-26.

At the outset I should say that I didn't speak their language when I went to Etain in 1961, and the peasants I encountered were somewhat suspicious of my French. Only with difficulty could I make myself understood. For example, I wanted in the case of a certain airfield, to know where the hangars had been located. Since I didn't know the word for "hangar," I was trying to ask, "Where was the house of the airplane?" — "Que lai maison del aeroplane?" The spokesman turned to me and, puzzled, asked me, "Haangair?"

There is little evidence in France today to show that the U.S. Air Service was ever there. Few, very few, monuments to American airmen exist, and there remains but one gravesite especially marked outside of the military cemeteries, and no plaques marking the sites of American bases. Later, I made a suggestion to the American Battle Monuments Commission that a plaque be placed at each site for identification. You can imagine how that went down! "Here's a crazy Air Force officer who wants to mark the sites of airfields used fifty years ago. Now, really!"

Anyone going to France should see the Lafayette Escadrille Memorial at Garches, just west of Paris. It was built in the late 1920's by funds donated by the French, and is rarely visited by Americans, but it is most assuredly a beautiful place. If one wishes to get inside, special arrangements must be made with the caretaker. In it the catacombs, built partly above and partly below the ground level, are in a large semi-circle with crypts containing the remains of the men who flew with the Escadrille. There are, unaccountably, a few men also buried there who flew with the Lafayette Flying Corps even though they were not a part of the Escadrille.¹

To mention a few of the remaining evidences of WWI Airfields, some of these are listed here with a map of their locations. Colombey-les-Belles was the location of the First Air Depot and almost every American airman who got to the combat area, called the Zone of Advance, went through Colombey. It is south of Toul, southwest of Nancy, and not even shown in most atlases. As the main supply depot of the Air Service, it was also where the airplanes were taken after the Armistice and demobilization had begun. There the mechanics removed the engines, stacked the airframes and burned them. Today the only visible evidence of the Depot is that part of the site which was leveled off for barracks and machine shops, to the south of the road west from Colombey.

Villeneuve-les-Vertus was the airfield where the 1st Pursuit Group, comprising the 94th and 95th Aero Squadrons went into combat in April 1918.² Rickenbacker related that Lufbery took him and Doug Campbell along for that first patrol on March 18th when their Nieuport 28's did not have guns yet! The flying field at Villeneuve is flat, which is unusual since most of the airfields were built on the tops of hills. The present site still has some concreted areas. This puzzled me at first, because concrete was not used at airfields in WWI. Later I learned that the Luftwaffe used the same field during WWII, and those concrete stands were for FW-190's and Me.109's.

At Epiez, another field of the 1st P.G., has a bare spot where a shop or some kind of building stood, and the grass refuses to grow! At Gengoult Aerodrome, a little distance to the north of Toul, there are two hangars left from WWI. This base was, in 1962, being used by the U.S. Army as a transportation depot with tanks, trucks, weapons carriers, and even a hospital train stored there. There also can be seen the Hobey Baker Gymnasium. Army personnel did not know that the site had been a famous airfield over forty years before, and the name Hobey Baker had not the slightest meaning. Hobey, of course, was one of leading hockey players of his day and therefore already famous when he was with the 141st Aero Squadron.³ He crashed on takeoff and was killed at Toul on December 21st. A picture of him hung there in the Gymnasium.

The caserne building at Gengoult Aerodrome was still in use by the Army in 1962, and was where the 1st P.G. lived for a while. They were, in fact, quite surprised to have permanent barracks with indoor toilets and bathing facilities, which were rare indeed in the combat zone. There is also a small white building near the road to Toul which, according to Eddie Rickenbacker, is where James Norman Hall whiled away the bad weather days. He would sit there by the hour and write, and of course, Hall is better known as one of the authors of *Mutiny on the Bounty*.

To the west, about two miles from Gengoult Aerodrome, was a hospital area called Sebastopol. The general hospital building still stands, but, back of it, the wards are no longer. Doug Campbell was brought here with the explosive bullet in his back. Not far beyond was the temporary cemetery where a number of the aviators were buried, Raoul Lufbery, Billy Mitchell's brother, Bill Thaw's brother and so on. In 1919 the bodies were taken up by the Graves Registration Committee and moved to permanent military cemeteries.

The 1st P.G. moved to Touquin, south of Coloumiers for the Chateau-Thierry campaign of July 1918 and the Mirabeau Chateau, famous as one of the French country castles, was commandeered for the 27th Aero Sqdn by Hartney. Described by him in *Up and At 'Em*, Russ Pruden, the Supply Officer took it over for the 27th and they moved in, and some of the wingdingiest parties ever were held there. In my photograph of 1962 the angry Frenchman who owned the Chateau isn't shown, but he came running from his front door to demand why I was taking a picture of his house.

The 27th didn't have the Chateau for long, though; within a few days the British 5th Brigade with about 100 airplanes took over

the aerodrome at Touquin and the Americans moved about four miles nearer the front line, to Saints. Here they encountered that famous hotel which had been occupied by Arabs.⁴ And when the Arabs moved out they left something for the incoming occupants. The 1st P.G. was straightaway infected with cooties. That's an authentic bit of history.

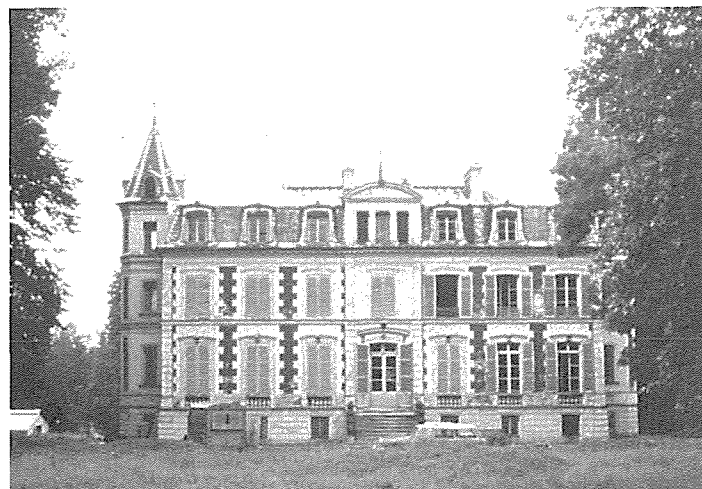
During the St. Mihiel/Meuse-Argonne Offensives the 1st P.G. was supposed to have been at Rembercourt but they were not. They were at Erize-la-Petite, and on top of a hill to the west of that village. Rembercourt happened to be the nearest town of such size to have a post office and a church. Two of the villagers of Erize took me out to the airfield site. They had been children in 1918 and, like most all of the peasants of eastern France, they remember with gratitude that the Americans came to flight alongside them. Not at all like the people of Paris today.

There is one marker, in memory of a pilot of the 22nd Aero Squadron, placed there by his family. John Giraud Agar Jr. made a forced landing in the Argonne sector on 20 October, and then crashed on takeoff after his airplane was repaired. The engine failed, and he died in the Bar le-Duc hospital the next day. So far as could be learned there are no monuments or markers established for WWI airmen by the U.S. government Agar's memorial marker is on the highway leading from Bar-le-Duc to St. Mihiel.⁵

In the British sector there were two complete American Squadrons, the 17th and 148th, but their Sopwith Camels, typewriters, trucks, tents, and everything else were British. The flying field of the 148th has been widely published, located outside of Dunkirk with a church nearby. When the British evacuated in 1940 either they, shooting at the Germans, or the Germans shooting at the Allies, blew the top from the steeple. That church still stands today. The 148th moved over to Capelle and then to Horseshoe Woods near Allonville, and to Remaisnil and then Baizieux. Remaisnil was probably the most pathetic village I saw in Europe, and is dominated by a concrete used by the Germans in WWII, with an Me.109 base nearby. There is very little left of the windmill at Baizieux, described on the 148th Sqdn. history by Taylor.⁶ Aside from the above there is no vestige of any American WWI bases in the northern sector of the entire battlefield.

At Sombrin, in contrast, the chateau used by the men of the 17th is standing yet, but don't believe that it looks like the beautiful chateau shown in the movies like *The Dawn Patrol* or *Hell's Angels*. Such residences confiscated by the military in that part of the battlefield were much more decrepit.

One of the most remarkable sites to be visited, because of its status today exactly as it was in 1918, is the cemetery at



Chateau Mirabeau, also known as Chateau de la Fortelle, at Touquin, commandeered by Hartney for the 27th Aero Squadron. (Author)



Looking westward over Colombey-les-Belles, south of Toul and the site of the 1st Air Depot, as it is today, contrasted with picture below. (Author) Field outlined in white. Arrow shows camera viewpoint of photograph below.

Bertangles, where von Richthofen was buried with full military honors in April. Though not American in connection, I went to the Somme valley and to almost the exact spot where von R. was shot down, and to the cemetery. Those who recall seeing the motion pictures of the burial ceremony may see the same brick posts and iron gates at the cemetery, and the same tree which stood there, larger now. Over at the airfield where No. 209 Squadron was stationed and from which Capt. Roy Brown took off for the fight on that day, the story is different. Looking across the field there are only some steel posts with barbed wire, and the little railway station near the aerodrome. Nothing else remains of the 1918 scene.

Raoul Lufbery was French by descent, and to the people of France and to the villagers of Maron, he was and will always be a Frenchman. With 17 enemy aircraft already to his credit, he was assigned to the 94th Pursuit Squadron and led the first patrol on March 18th. I had read much of Lufbery and wanted to see the actual location where his last fight took place. And this story was full of surprises.

First of all, the official history states that he was brought down in flames, jumping from the airplane at 2,000 meters (that's about 6,000 feet).⁷ Then there is an official French book, printed in 1957 in commemoration of Franco-American friendship, which gives an account stating, "...on 19 May, during a new battle a bullet hit the gas tank of his plane which burst into flames."⁸ Even Rickenbacker's account, written after the war and admittedly from his recollections of what had been said of the tragedy, is wrong. Statements by pilots of the 1st P.G. that they saw him fall in flames cannot be correct (unless, of course, they were visiting girls friends that day in Maron), for Maron is some 12 miles from the base at Toul. Major Hartney's account of fighting in WWI, good as it is, was also written many years later, and he

repeated the 6,000 feet story, stated that Lufbery was impaled on a picket fence, and that the villagers were still making pilgrimages to the grave of Lufbery "when he arrived." The evidence, and eyewitness accounts, present a different story.

The final story to end all stories, however, was written by a well known "aviation writer" only several years ago who said that the two-seater (that Lufbery was fighting) set Luf's plane on fire, the flames started licking back along the fuselage and Lufbery climbed out on the turtledeck back to the stabilizer and hung on with his hands until the flames licked his face and he couldn't stand it any longer and he jumped for the creek!

I came to the town of Maron on the Moselle River, about six miles southwest of Nancy (and not north as reported by some), and found the home of the Mayor and the stone marker in memory of Lufbery. The marker was erected there in 1919 when Col. Frank P. Lahm, then commander of the 2nd Army Air Service, took up a collection from Luf's friends and had it made. It was not placed in front of the house where Lufbery fell because Lahm felt that it would be taken care of better if in front of the Mayor's house. The two people in the picture shown here are of Mssr. Louis Perneau and his wife, Mdme. Perneau. He is the grandson of the Mayor of 1918, and he still takes care of it, polishing it everyday. Mssr. Perneau told me I was probably the only American to visit there since the Great War with more than just a morbid curiosity to see the picket fence "where Lufbery was impaled." He pointed out the spot where Lufbery fell and while he did strike the fence and came to rest about five feet away he was not killed by it. There was a wound in the left temple which they believed was made by a bullet, but a review of the autopsy report revealed that Lufbery died of a massive cranium fracture as he hit the ground. Contrary also to what has been written, his body was not immediately taken to the town hall but to a small military infirmary. When soldiers arrived at his body they thought there might be a spark of life and only later, at the infirmary, was it determined that he was dead. Then his body was taken to the town hall and covered with flowers.

I obtained signed affidavits from people who watched what happened that day in 1918. Lufbery leaped, or fell, from an airplane which was *not* burning, nor even smoking at the time he left it. He was dogfighting with the two-seater over the village of Maron at an altitude of 2,000 to 3,000 feet. The two-seater was giving him a rough time; they were turning first one way and then the other. Lufbery pulled away, then returned. The witnesses stated that his airplane quite suddenly flipped over and two things came out. One was Lufbery and the other was a cushion. The airplane rolled upright and headed south in a dive. Immediately before it hit it looked as if it were trailing smoke, but it did *not* burn until after it hit. Lufbery fell in the garden in Maron and the cushion fell on the bank of the Moselle River.

Two boys, returning from Catholic Mass on Whitsunday, were the first to get to Lufbery. (The 'old lady' in whose garden he fell,

The 1st Air Depot as it was in mid-August 1918. (Morlan album, courtesy of Robert T. Smith)



and who received the notoriety for being first was not). One person was there already, an elderly man who was as deaf as a stump, and he did not realize that a fight was going on overhead, nor that Lufbery fell about fifty feet from him. The two boys George Oudenot and Rene Commenville, saw the dogfight and when they got to him, there was no burn on Lufbery's body. The mother of one of them was tending cattle on the bank of the River and she picked up the cushion and took it home. It is, apparently, a kneeling cushion, perhaps from a church. It was given to me then, on my visit in 1962, and is today in the Air Force Museum. It still has the sand imbedded in it just as when they gave it to me, and there is no char or burn on the cushion.

The photograph shown here was taken looking south-southeast, with the Moselle River in the lower right and the road to Toul coming out of the foreground. The railroad is between the river and the road. Lufbery's Nieuport 28, headed south in a dive, crashed about one-half mile beyond the house where he fell. By conjecture we can fill in a part of the details of the event.

Rickenbacker has related how Lt. Oscar J. Gude of the 94th took off to intercept the two-seater, fired all his ammunition without result, and came back, and that Lufbery took off in Lt. Davis's machine which had been readied for flight. Possibly he failed to fasten his seatbelt. Whether he jerked at the controls for some reason, or a control wire was shot and parted, no one will ever know. Regardless, the airplane flipped on its back and Lufbery fell, intentionally or unintentionally. I have been told by men of the 1st P.G., who were at Toul that day, about Luf's jumping from a burning airplane. Recently LeRoy Prinz of the 27th, who was also there, told me — and he is the first man of the 1st P.G. to ever say it to me — 'Why, Hell you couldn't have seen Lufbery jump from a burning airplane from Toul.'

The Frank Luke story also has some inaccuracies which are now revealed by the research done at Murvaux in 1962. The village of Murvaux is about 20 miles north of Verdun, in a shallow valley on the east side of the Meuse River.⁹

The picture printed here shows the village of Murvaux in the center background, two rows of trees, the one on the left by the creek by which Luke died, and a white building on the right, known as La Maisonette. The hill on the left is called Cote St. Germain. Luke was apparently at the same level or slightly below the tops of the hills on both sides, and German machine guns (probably, since the French reports called them automatic rifles) were firing at Luke from these heights. On the left in the foreground, is the slight rise on which Luke landed his SPAD.

Rickenbacker did not have the documents concerning Luke at the time of his writing in 1919, so wrote that Luke's SPAD had never been found. Hartney, though, who wrote in 1940, did have, and repeated the claim that Luke opened fire on German troops with his automatic after he landed. He also cited the affidavit of the citizens of Murvaux stating that, "...he had gone fifty yards and,



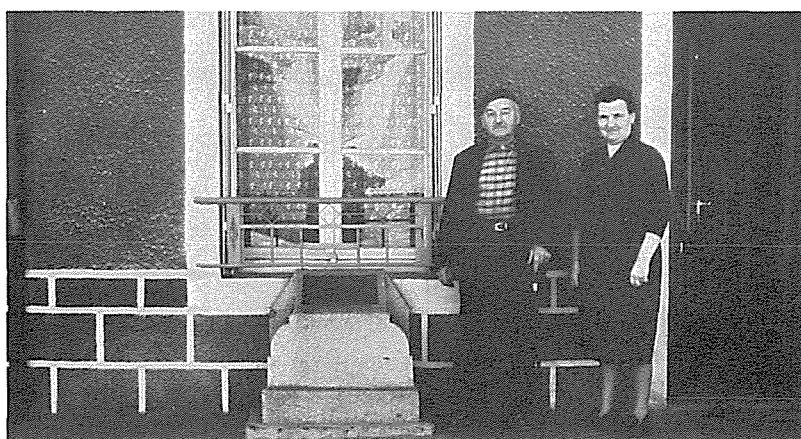
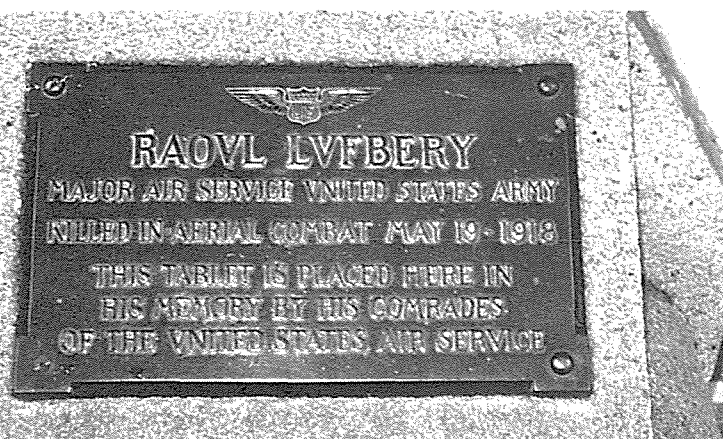
Maron village, on the Moselle River, looking south-southeast. Lufbery fell at 1. Town Hall is at 2. His airplane crashed at 3. (Author)

when seeing the Germans coming toward him still had the strength to draw his revolver and defend himself . . . A moment after he fell dead following a serious wound he received in the chest." The affidavit was also signed by Cortine Delbart and Voliner Nicholas as the ones who had placed the body of the aviator on a wagon and took it to the cemetery. The affidavit stated that Luke "... apparently was wounded by a shot from a rapid fire canon. From there he came back over Murvaux and still with his guns he killed six German soldiers and wounded as many more."

"There" refers to Milly, where he burned the final balloon. According to Rickenbacker's very popular account, Luke dropped a message saying he would burn the two balloons at D-2 and D-4 (map positions), and then straightaway did so, but never returned.

In Murvaux in 1962 I found three of the men who had signed the affidavit of 1919, Gabriel Didier, Auguste Cuny, and Leon Herny, and I showed them a photograph of Luke, since through the years I had heard some discussion as to whether it was really Frank Luke who died at Murvaux. My showing gave them the first time ever to see a photograph of him, and they called the other villagers around to show them the famous pose of Luke with his SPAD. I left a copy of it with them, and have the other, signed by them on the reverse side, stating that this was indeed the pilot of the airplane killed there on the evening of 29 September 1918. They gave me, in turn, a photo of Luke's grave as it was shortly after his burial and before removal to Romagne Cemetery.

The Lufbery tablet at Maron, reads: "Raoul Lufbery, Major, Air Service, United States Army. Killed in aerial combat May 19-1918. This tablet placed here in his memory by his comrades of the United States Air Service." At right, Mssr. and Mdme. Perneau by Lufbery marker in front of their house.





The village of Murvaux, at left center. Frank Luke circled beyond the village and came back to land at 1. (left). He crawled or stumbled down the slope



to the trees at 2. and died of wound. Right, Mssr. Hervieux, at spot where Luke died. Hervieux helped his uncle take Luke's body to village.

According to the best evidence now available, Luke did fly eastward up the valley toward Murvaux and somewhere along here, after he had circled to the east of the village and headed back west, he received a shot in the chest, entering in front and coming out on the left in back. Dr. Brian Flanagan, when at Wright-Patterson AFB in 1962, conferred with me and stated that a man could survive such a wound, if the bullet had not hit a vital organ, and would possibly drown in five to ten minutes as his lungs filled with blood. As Luke headed west he must have seen the open space and, realizing he would have to get down, throt-

tled back and landed.

His airplane came to a halt on the slope about 150 feet from the line of trees at the creek, left the cockpit, and stumbled or crawled down a path. This was at dusk, and visibility was now rather limited. The German troops had seen him land from the hill, and they came down, probably running, to the airplane. They found no one in it. The pilot was gone and they carefully followed a trail of blood down toward the creek. No one had seen Luke leave the airplane.

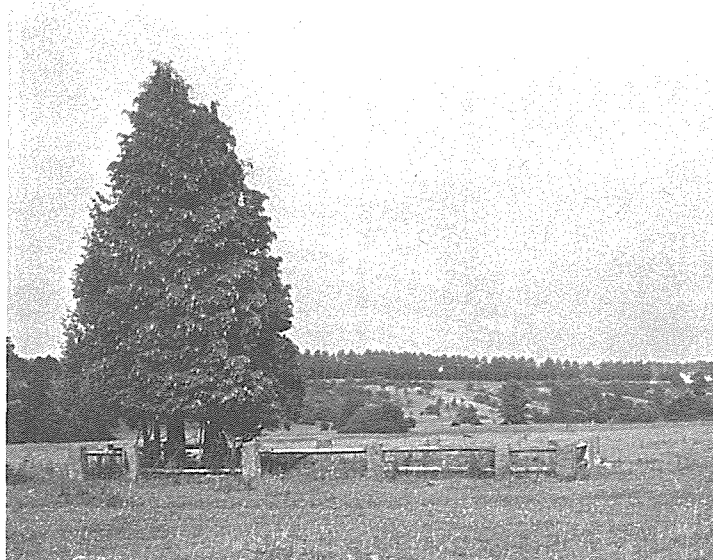
Now I hate to change fact to fable, but whenever you read that Luke fired at the German troops and they returned the fire, killing him, remember that it is not true. According to the French people to whom I talked in 1962, three of whom had signed the affidavit of 1919, Luke stumbled or crawled to a spot near the creek and as the troops came toward him he was apparently lying on the ground. He raised himself on one arm and fired at the Germans with the service automatic, and *before* the Germans could locate the source of the gunshot and shoot at it, Luke fell back on the ground, dead.

Frank Luke was buried in the cemetery at Murvaux. The man shown in the accompanying photograph, by the creek, is Charles Hervieux, who accompanied his uncle, Voliner Nicholas and the other villager, Cortine Delbart, when they took a horsecart out to the location of Luke's body and brought him in for burial the next morning. Mssr. Hervieux told me of the American with the fair complexion, with the short blond hair, and the bright blue eyes. Luke died with his eyes open, according to him.

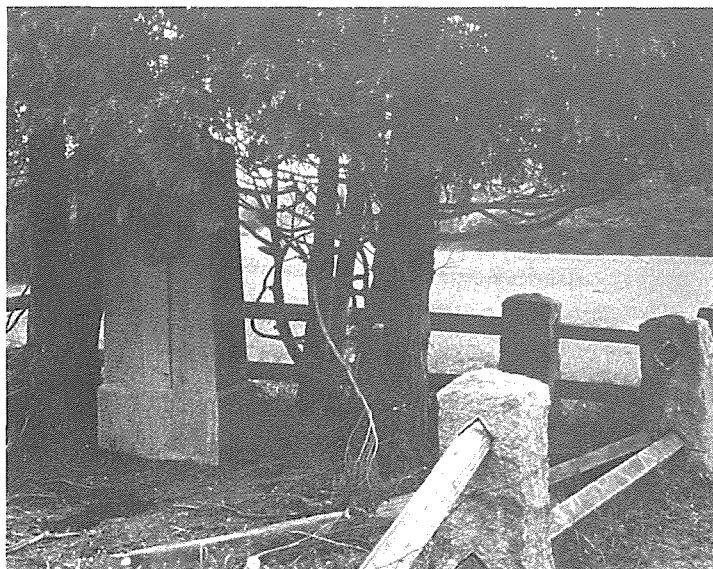
A German Army captain had been killed near Murvaux and was buried in the cemetery, temporarily. Some time later he was taken up and returned to Germany for permanent burial, but the grave was not filled in. In fact, it was partly filled with dirt which had washed down in the rains. After all, there was a war on and why fill in a grave. Luke was buried in this shallow grave, thus, when the Graves Registration Committee exhumed his body in early 1919 to take to Romagne, the winter freeze had preserved it.

The marker erected in memory of Frank Luke by the 388th Fighter-Bomber Wing, USAF (Etain AB) in 1957, one of very few markers dedicated to airmen of the U.S. Air Service in France, states: "Memory of Lt. Frank Luke, Balloon busting ace of WWI, who, critically wounded, landed his SPAD 700 yards north and was killed by German small arms fire, 29 Sept. 1918. Ici le 29 Sept. 1918, sous le feu des mitrailleuses ennemies, tomba Frank Luke, héros de l'aviation alliée. Inst. 29 Sept. 1957 - 388 Ftr Bmr Wg. Etain."





The "isolated grave" of Capt. Hamilton Coolidge, 94th Aero Squadron, erected on the spot where he crashed on 27 Oct. 1918 near Grand Pre. The next day Rickenbacker, Chambers and a Chaplain, under a white flag,



walked into No Man's Land, dug the grave and buried Coolidge. German troops, dug in along the slope at rear, fired not a shot. At right, his grave in disrepair in 1962. Cows have knocked down the railing. (Author)

There is no truth to the story that Luke was not given a Christian burial service. Through a lead by Patrick Carisella I located the German officer then in charge of a balloon company at Murvaux. Herr Engels has written me three times since 1962 and has affirmed that he did read the burial service for Luke from the German Army manual. The French villagers could not have seen the burial service, for they were not allowed to attend and were at least 150 feet away, in the street.

Now I would like to call your attention to the only isolated grave of an American WWI aviator yet remaining in France outside of a military cemetery, that of Hamilton Coolidge. Referring again to Rickenbacker, he related how he and the flight surgeon, Dr. Walters, Reed Chambers, the Lieutenant of infantry who had located the fallen body of Coolidge, and the Chaplain of the infantry regiment, made their way to the body. They buried their buddy with proper service, and left the grave with flowers and a marker. Coolidge had fallen when his airplane was struck in the air by an artillery shell and he came to earth but a few yards behind the American lines near Grand Pre.

In 1962 I made my way to the village of Grand Pre, west of Verdun and in a bend of the Aire River, and found Coolidge's grave about a mile to the east, about the same distance from the road. Possibly this was the first visit by an American since shortly after the end of the War, and I found it after walking through marsh and cow pasture, with the attendant hazards of each. With a red crayon I marked the inscription on the tombstone so it would photograph more clearly.

After the War the Coolidge family arranged to have the tombstone and small wooden fence with stone posts erected. It is still an "isolated grave," the only one yet remaining in France not under the control of the American Battle Monuments Commission.

With respect due to the man who died for his country, attention should be given to putting the gravesite back into decent condition. Further, a means should be found to maintain it in future years, and to that end it is suggested that an endowment be set up, with the proceeds to be paid to the Mayor of Grand Pre each year. Instructions should be given for the care of the gravesite to this responsible authority.

As a Member of the Society, I will welcome discussion with anyone interested in joining this effort.

The Author

NOTES AND REFERENCES:

1. The Lafayette was the small group of aviators in French Escadrille N.124, whereas the Lafayette Flying Corps referred generally to some 600 pilots and observers of the U.S. Air Service who were assigned to fly with French squadrons.
2. Edward V. Rickenbacker. *Fighting the Flying Circus*. New York: Frederick A. Stokes Co., 1919.
3. John Davies. *The Legend of Hobey Baker*. Boston: Little Brown & Co., 1966.
4. Harold E. Hartney. *Up and At 'Em*. Harrisburg (Pa.), Stackpole Sons, 1940.
5. Added data supplied by J.J. Smith from extensive files concerning WWI Airmen. The official *American Armies and Battlefields in Europe*, prepared by the American Battle Monuments Commission and issued by the Government Printing Office in 1938 gives information concerning Air Service activities or memorial locations and graves, hence these must be discovered by research.
6. Taylor, William P. and Irvine, F.L. *History of the 148th Aero Squadron, Aviation Section, Signal Corps, A.E.F., 1917-1918*. Lancaster (S.C.): Tri-County Publ. Co., 1957. (100 copies).
7. Gorrell Report, Volume E-12, 94th Aero Squadron, Records Group 120, National Archives.
8. *Fraternité D'Armées Franco-Américaine: Revue Historique de L'Armée*. Special Issue, Paris, Ministère de la Guerre, 231 bd. St. Germain, Paris (VIIe), 1957. p. 90, 91.



The author, Lt. Col. Royal D. Frey (standing) presented the Directors Award of the American Aviation Historical Society to Col. John A. Macready at Annual Meeting, February 1972. Mrs. Macready at left (Jerry Edwards)