

Piloti American! In Italia

An addendum, by Col. Phillips Melville, with supplementary notes by Allen W. Bevin, A.D. Farquhar and Randolph F. Hall
Col. Melville related the transition training, from Farman Caproni:

"The flying qualities of the Caproni Ca-450 did not differ greatly from those of the M-Farman except that the larger, heavier plane did not respond so rapidly to the controls as the smaller, more agile plane, and there were three engines instead of one to be handled. The configuration was similar in that the pilot sat in a forward-projecting nacelle, which in the case of the Caproni was wider to allow two pilots to sit side-by-side. The two-handed "scissors" at the top of the Farman control column in effect was similar to that in the Ca-450, thus the use of the latter came naturally.

"The speed differential between the two planes was only about 10 to 15 mph, and takeoff and landing speeds - assuming the Caproni was without a load — was not so different as to be readily noticeable. A noble characteristic of the Caproni was that little, if any, rudder was required when turning. The plane was so balanced that it turned at a rate commensurate with the degree of bank applied by the pilot, and thus steered much like an automobile up to the point where the elevators came into use to keep the nose level — in steeper turns.

"Of particular advantage was the "pensuti" airspeed meter which was useful in finding the optimum climbing speed, and for maintaining constant airspeed in level flight at night. There was a special takeoff technique for handling the three engines of the Ca-450. First, the throttle of the center engine was advanced part way to assure that the

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In "Piloti Americani in Italia" Col. Phillips Melville (*JOURNAL*, Winter 1973) described the instruction on Caproni biplanes as the final step toward becoming bombardment pilots for the Italian front. The following addendum was received too late to be inserted, concerning the transition from the Maurice Farman to the Caproni types. We also had brief accounts by Lts. Allan Bevin and A.D. Farquhar which portrayed missions over the Front after assignment in the last months of the War. Also, Member Randolph Hall forwarded the related piece concerning the training of American mechanics by the Italian factories at Milan which we have included here as a sequel to the Winter issue.

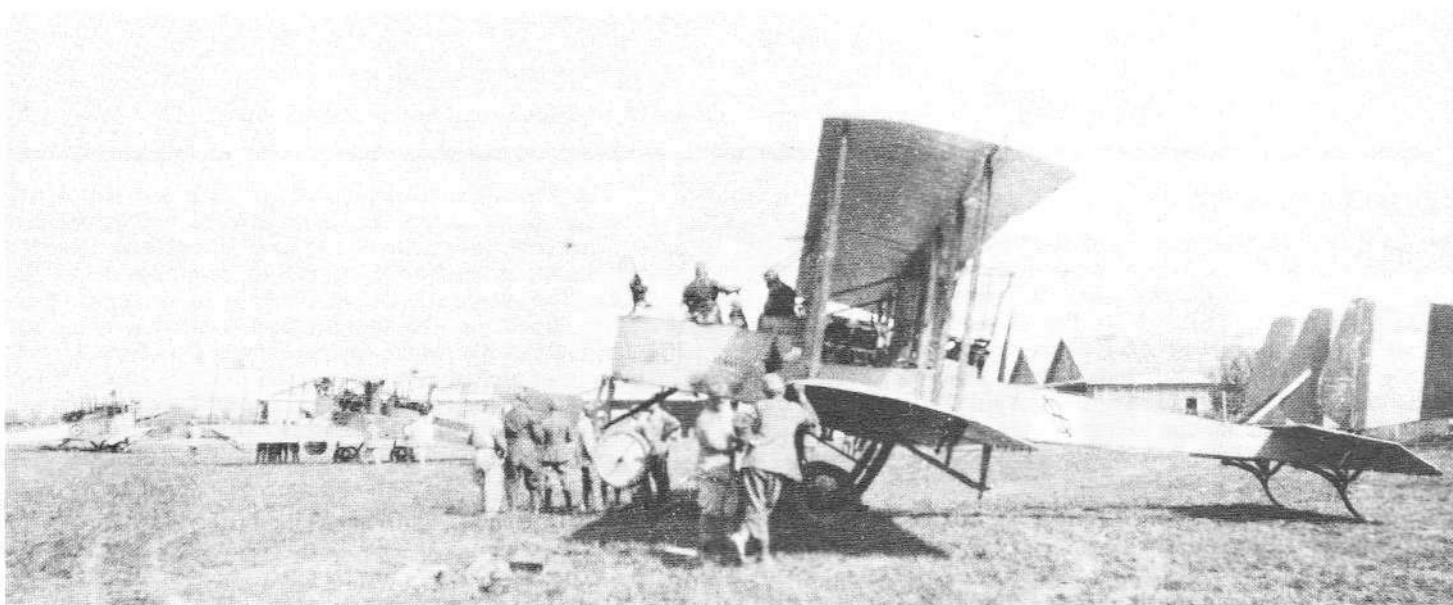
engine was running. The outboard engines were then opened to full throttle little-by-little in a manner which kept the plane running straight until the rudders were fully effective. With the tailskids off the ground and the plane in flying altitude, the center engine was then opened wide. This procedure was followed because, with tailskids on the ground, the propeller tips of the center engine were but a few inches off the ground and liable to damage by picking up rocks or debris thrown up by the outboard propellers.

"The Caproni was a strong and well-built airplane, and the author has never heard of one of them coming apart unless for an extraneous reason such as bursting of the center propeller. In flying apart this could cut the longerons of one or both of the adjacent fuselages, an extremely rare occurrence.

"We had a Sergeant Frank Giordano, who was a long-time friend and political crony of Congressman LaGuardia in New York, and when the latter proposed that he (Giordano) enlist in the Air Service and accompany him to Italy, he did so. With the grade of Sergeant at Campo-Sud he was very useful to Major Ryan, the Commandant of Cadets for, being bilingual, he served as interpreter in dealing with the Italians. Giordano also had another job, that of keeping the American Cadets out of trouble when they visited Foggia. They seldom got into difficulties with the authorities, but when they did, Sgt. Giordano generally got them out of it.

"On one occasion something had occurred and Capt. LaGuardia demanded of Giordano the name of the culprit.

Italian One-Knot Squadron the 13th Squadriglia, 4th Groupe, prepares for a raid from its base at San Pelagio, in Caproni Ca.450s. (Photo- Allen W. Bevin)



The Sgt. refused to give it to him. LaGuardia, angered by the refusal, threatened Sgt. Giordano with the guardhouse. The Sgt. Thereupon reminded the Captain that, in that case, he would be without a barber, for Giordano had been a barber in New York and continued to serve LaGuardia in that fashion at Campo-Sud. The outcome: the Sergeant did not go to the guardhouse and the Captain never learned the name of the offending cadet.

"We also had an item of historic interest. On June 28th, at San Pelagio, there took place a demonstration of the "Guardian Angel" free-fall parachute. Apparently sponsored by the British, it was for the benefit of the Commanding General, Italian Air Force, and other high ranking officers, Italian and Allied. A British Sergeant went aloft in a twin-engined Savoia-Pomilio and jumped from 250 meters. The jump was successful, though the Sergeant got badly scratched up by landing in a hedge of thorn bushes.

"The demonstration was not given with any thought that the parachute might be a means of saving lives of military pilots. The use contemplated was for dropping agents behind enemy lines. The contemporary Allied view seems to have been that if parachutes were provided for military pilots, they would be jumping when they ought to stay aloft and fight.. This incident was also witnessed by Lt. Allan Bevin, and a photograph of the event is shown here.

"I should point out that that masterpiece — "Bain de Soleil" - which was alluded to in the *JOURNAL*, Winter issue, Page 234, was done by Norman Sweetser who remarked this to me the other day. Apparently I overlooked him in the notes to the article, and I did not want to infer that I was the artist."

Col. Melville also forwarded a copy of the order sending the first twenty American pilots to the Front for combat from Foggia training. It read:

HEADQUARTERS EIGHTH AVIATION
INSTRUCTION CENTER AMERICAN
EXPEDITIONARY FORCES

Foggia, Italy, June 15, 1918.

Special Orders
No 76.

Par 1: Pursuant to telephone instructions from Captain F.H. LaGuardia, A.S.S.C. Representative in Italy, Air Service, U.S. Army, the following officers will proceed to Rome, Italy, reporting on arrival to Captain F.H. LaGuardia for active duty in war zone.

1st Lieut. C.M. Young,
1st Lieut. P.C. McGilvery,
1st Lieut. Norton Downes,
1st Lieut. Frank Lambert,
1st Lieut. Gilbert Bogert,
1st Lieut. Donald G. Frost,
1st Lieut. LeRoy D. Kiley,
1st Lieut. John Park,
1st Lieut. William H. Potthoff,
1st Lieut. Raymond P. Baldwin,
1st Lieut. Harold F. Hota,
1st Lieut. W.S. Wilson,
1st Lieut. Willis S. Fitch,
1st Lieut. Nathaniel G. Robertson,
1st Lieut. Alexander M. Craig,
1st Lieut. Ira W. Galehouse,
1st Lieut. Gesta N. Johnson,
1st Lieut. Allen W. Bevin,
1st Lieut. Arthur M. Beach,
1st Lieut. Kenneth G. Collins,

The travel directed is necessary in the military service.

By order of Captain Fleischmann,
Morgan Belmont,
2nd Lt., A.S.Sig.R.C.
Adjutant.

'Editor's note: Col. Melville, also an accomplished artist, has two paintings hung at the U.S. Air Force Academy, one of the sinking of the *OSTFRIESLAND* in 1921 and the second of the endurance flight of the *QUESTION MARK* in 1929. His painting of "Ca Giulio Cesare," which was the Caproni Ca. 3 flown by him in the New York-Toronto International Race of 1919 (*JOURNAL* Summer 1972), has now been placed in the Caproni Museum in Italy.

A sense of the period and the events happening late in the War on the Italian Front may be gained from the following account by Lt. Allen W. Bevin, one of the first twenty officer pilots assigned to the Front, as mentioned in the list above, went to the 13th Sqdn., 4th Group. He describes raids on Austrian targets:

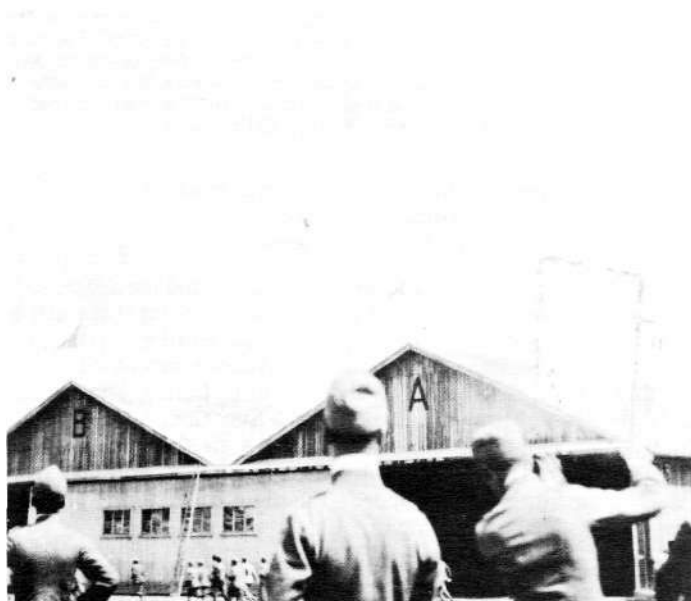
Raid on Ammunition Dump at Conegliano

June 22, 1918

By **Lt. Allen W. Bevin**

"There is something weird about getting out of bed in pitch blackness at 3:00 in the morning, riding to the camp in the darkness, cold and fog, knowing that you have to go out on a bombardment mission. When we got to camp it was still misty, so we had to wait. At 6:00 we were given the signal, and at 6:05 we started our motors and soon were off. At 400-meters we turned in the fog, and just as we straightened out we came above the clouds. It was a wonderful sight to see the whole squadron often machines come out of the clouds, all in formation. The clouds

Demonstration of the British "Guardian Angel" parachute at San Pelagio, Italy, 28 June 1918. (Allen W. Bevin)



Below left, Lt. Allen W. Bevin, and right, Lt. A.D. Farquhar, pilots trained at Foggia for the Italian Front. (Courtesy of Col. Melville)



were like huge lumps of gold, or more like a town all covered with snow with the sun shining down and making the buildings all golden. We picked-up our defense planes later, and just then I had my first view of Venice, a very beautiful sight. As the clouds obscured most of the landmarks, we steered by compass. We got nearer and nearer to the lines and just as we came up to them there was a break in the clouds and I saw the Piave and the pontoon bridges, observation balloons, shell craters, and lines of trenches. Just ahead I saw a few black-and-white puffs of smoke of the A.A. of the first barrage. We twisted and turned and dove, and in that way got through three barrages without one shell bursting near enough to hurt. When we got 20-km over the lines we found our target, dropped our bombs, and took some photographs. Then we zig-zaged back, passing again through the barrages. This time a shell burst just under our right wing, tipped us up, and put a hole in the wing but didn't effect us otherwise.

I felt relieved to get back over our own lines. We glided down to about 200-meters and came back over Treviso, Padua, and lots of smaller towns. At 200-meters the country did look beautiful, all fresh and green and well laid-out. Truly a lovely country. On the way back our right motor leaked water, so we throttled it down and flew on the other two. The rear gunner climbed out "on the wing and looked it over nonchalantly. During the bombing he climbed all over the machine, up on the tanks and every place until I thought he'd fall off or blow away. We had been careful not to bomb the town because there were Italians still living there. All the bombs hit the dump, — as the photographs showed — destroying it completely and there was nothing but a mass of smoke and flames to tell where it had been. No bombsights were used, and yet from 2800-meters every bomb had hit the target.

"Speck" Kiley's pilot, a fine chap, but wild and funny as the duce, about twenty years old, wanted to tell Kiley in English that the bombs had hit the mark. So right in the middle of a barrage he unbuttoned his coat, found a tiny pocket dictionary, looked up a word, and yelled in Kiley's ear "HIT!" Kiley's pilot even came all the way home so low that he zoomed over the church-steeple, bridges, trees and houses. We landed, made-out our report, and the Major having taken our pictures, we went back to Battaglia for breakfast. We were gone for one hour and forty-five minutes, and my ears are still ringing from the noise."

Raid over Passarella
July 2nd. 1918

Awoke at 4:15 and dressed hurriedly and at 4:45 were at the field. 5:05 saw us taking-off, nine of us in formation. We were the next to last to leave, and first over the target. Climbed to 2500-meters but clouds over the target forced us to come down under them and bomb from 1,000-meters. Going through thick clouds, knowing when you come out you will be directly over the battle, was a queer sensation. It was very dark under those heavy, black, quiet clouds. I could see smoke everywhere and flashes from the guns, most of them mounted on barges in the canals that abound in that section. The ground was pitted by shells, and looked like a person after a case of smallpox. Shrapnel was flying wild, and I saw many bursts but heard only one. I knew that machine-guns must be shooting at us from the ground but couldn't hear of course. Our machine and the Major's were the only two below the clouds. All the rest were above at 1800-meters, or so. With those bombs went the lives of a good many Austrians, I suppose. When you can't see the effect of the destruction of human life, it isn't so terrible. Two enemy machines were sighted but they didn't bother us. Returning we crept along just under the clouds until we neared Venezia where we raced a train back from about 100-kilometers. The plane practically flew itself. A glorious return in the bright morning sunlight over the green, well-ordered country. We were first to land.

Raid over San Dona di Piave
July 16th. 1918

Up at 4:50 and at field at 5:30 in cameon. Started off at 6:00 I in the right hand seat, so I had command of the machine, the Sergeant as the other pilot. Went to Gazza for our escort, then Quinta, but none showed up, so we went over near San Dona di Piave. The barrage was terrible and I heard bursts all around us. We piled off our "manifestini" over Motta and San Stina di Livenza and started back. The other machine was far away and consequently all the batteries focused on us. The barrage was awful and I would have attempted to turn around except I was busy with the pressure which was acting up badly and kept my head in the carlinga where I only heard the bursts and didn't see all. Those black bursts were nasty-looking things. Came back through the same awful barrage and on the way saw two escort planes way behind our lines. Our "elicetta" (small propeller in slip-stream to pump gas to gravity tank) had been hit and didn't work, we came all the way back on the other. Several times our motors nearly died, but each time we saved them by nosing-down. Finally landed and made our reports. Ken Collins in the other machine, landed later at Ferucci. They had landed at Malcontento with a bum motor. A piece of shrapnel came up through the carlinga — took a piece out of the edge of Collin's shoe and glanced off the ring on his finger. In bed by 12:00.

Editors note:

The "Manifesta" noted above were the small propaganda leaflets dropped by the scores of thousands. Approximately 5 x 6-1/2 inches, and printed on very thin paper, they were thrown out by the handful to scatter in the air, hopefully falling near the population below. The translation of one of the surviving specimens is as follows:

ITALIANS OF THE FRIULI
del Veneto e del Cadore.

"The Gazzette of Veneto" of the 5th of May (1918) published that the Austro-Ungarian Government has asked a neutral power to demand from the Italian Government to send the most urgent food; and that the Italian Government had refused.

La 'Gazzetta del Veneto' a paper of the traitors is lying like always. No neutral power has ever made such a demand from the Italian Government. The truth is that the Italian Red-Cross, fully in accordance with the Italian Government sought desperately to help, but that the Austrians never wanted to guarantee the arrival of such foodstuff for the Italians and to you people solely. To us we had asked for such guarantees it does not answer. They want to keep this food for themselves and not give it to the Italian brothers. Never believe what the Austrians say.

Remain patient, careful and faithful.

We think only of you, we work for you only.

Another account of the night bombing operations conducted by the American pilots in Italian squadrons comes from Lt. A.D. Farquhar (courtesy of Col. Melville). Lt. Farquhar went to the 6th Squadron, XIth Groupe in early July 1918. He later became the first American casualty on the Italian Front, being wounded slightly on August 17th, but returned to action a week later. (See JOURNAL, Winter, 1973, p. 241)

Night Bombing Over the Mountains
August 25, 1918
By Lt. A.D. Farquhar

Back at Camp. We have had our evening meal and are speculating on making a bombing raid, as it is clear overhead and there will be a full moon. The decision will depend on the weather report from the forward observers in the mountains. When received it is favorable and we are summoned to the Squadron Office. The Captain reads the Order from the "Commando Supremo." The target is Romagnano Camp airfield near Rovereto in the valley of the Adige south of Trento. Six of the squadron planes will take part. The assignments are announced; the time of take-off; and the recognition signal for the night.

Out on the field the planes are being prepared for the mission. The bomb load will consist of two of the 75—Kilo incendiaries,

and six or eight of the 25-Kilo size. We shall also be dropping "manifestini" propanganda sheets. The mechanics are going over the engines and from time-to-time one roars into life as it is tested at full throttle. Orderlies appear with their pilot's flying gear and help them into these bulky garments, as it will be cold up there at bombing altitude over the mountains. As the time of take-off nears, the planes, manned and with engines warmed-up and running, await the crucial moment.

Suddenly the motors of the Captain's plane come to life with a roar and the plane moves forward leaving a trail of incandescent carbon pouring from the exhausts. Headed toward the searchlight on the far side of the field, which has been pointed aloft to serve as a beacon, it gathers speed rapidly and lifts off. We see it flash as it passes through the beam of the searchlight, and then disappear in the darkness. Now it is our turn. Open the center engine part-way to make sure it is running. Then each of the others a little at a time — to keep headed straight — until wide-open. Then the center wide-open with a rush, and in a few moments we are airborne on a great adventure.

Circling the field as we climb, while satisfying ourselves that our motors are performing well, we now see the countryside spread out in the glorious moonlight. The Adige river winds away northward, bathed in silver where the light strikes it. Away to the West are the dark waters of Lake Garda. Below are scattered farms, villages, and white roads. We follow the river northward as we climb, flashing our recognition signal when we pass over the light of an observation post. Presently we see two lights that have been set to give us a true North — South line, by which we check our compass. Now we are approaching the dark belt that is the "no-man's-land" of the mountain region. Our mechanic climbs into his exposed position in the machine-gun turret, for in the bright moonlight Austrian fighters may venture aloft. He has already removed the safety wires from our bombs so that they will explode on contact with the ground.

The mountains are now close at hand, and searchlights are waving to-and-fro, and we see the flash of guns and the bursts of anti-aircraft shells. We are now at bombing altitude well above the mountains which are clearly seen in the moonlight, and because the mountain on the right is a veritable nest of batteries, we swing to the left to cross at a point where the opposition will be less formidable. Far in the distance we see a lighted spot which we know must be Trento. Just as we pick it up the lights wink-out. A raid alarm has reached the city and someone has pulled the switch that controls the electric power.

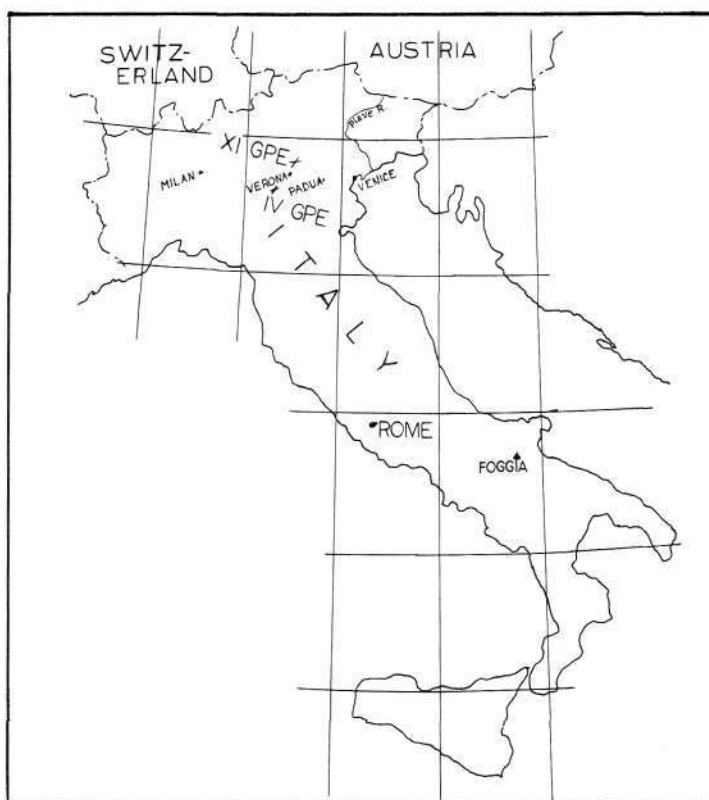
Suddenly the nacelle of our plane is bathed in blinding light. We are caught in the beam of a searchlight. A quick zig-zag and we are out of it leaving a frustrated Austrian to probe the sky in vain. We are now in the vicinity of our target and search in all directions for it. The observer is the first to spot it, and points it out ahead. The large open space is readily distinguishable in that mountainous and wooded country, and although the hangars are camouflaged, they are outlined by shadows. Our approach is across the field toward the hangar line and the Italian pilot beside me is leaning over the side of the nacelle with his hand on the bomb-release lever, judging the moment for releasing the bombs, — as we have no bombsight that is usable at night. Suddenly, he jerks the lever and a string of bombs fall away. Anxiously we look down to see where they strike. It seems an interminable time until we see an explosion. It is one of the large incendiaries and has struck in the center of the field. It will start no fire there.

The next bomb is closer to the hangars, but does no damage. But the third — the other of the two large bombs — bursts at the edge of the line of hangars, and because the light from its explosion lingers it must have started a fire. We are now aware of gun flashes below and several shell bursts are seen but none are close. We continue straight ahead to confuse the gunners and then turn back to drop the remainder of our bombs. Near the field a search-

light picks us up momentarily but moves on before we are discovered. Our bombs go down. Almost immediately the plane seems to go "limp" and the motors slow down. Instantly we realize that in the excitement of bombing we have allowed the fuel pressure to drop. A valve is turned and the motors again resume their full-throated roar — the sweetest music that a pilot can hear.

Now it is "Homeward Bound" for us. Without a bomb load the plane responds more readily to the controls and dodging searchlights is mere play. As we recross the mountains anti-aircraft shells burst here and there, but the gunners must be firing in a haphazard fashion for none of the bursts are close. Before we realize it we have recrossed the no-man's-land and are again on our side of the lines. Our mechanic now leaves his windy perch in the gun-turret and finds shelter in the nacelle. We punch the observer in the back and he turns around with a grin.

Now we commence a long, shallow dive toward home. During our absence a bank of clouds has rolled in from the southeast, but we spot the slender pencil of our beacon through a break and dive below the clouds for our approach to the field. Making sure that no other plane is near, we turn in for a landing over the searchlight that illuminates the landing area. On the ground as we taxi toward the hangars, another plane is coming in over the landing light. It seems extraordinary, but we hadn't seen another plane throughout the entire flight although we had taken-off, and landed, in close sequence. All planes return safely though one is late in doing so and causes some anxiety. The pilot explains with embarrassment that he had become lost among the clouds, and had turned back to pick-up the river to orient himself and locate the field. As my Italian companion pilot as "Plane Commander" renders his report, I linger briefly to exchange experiences on the raid, then walk to the villa a short distance from the field toward Verona, in which we are quartered. As I enter this "home away from home" I realize that I am tired. It is good to crawl under the mosquito net into bed. It is satisfying to have accomplished what we had been sent out to do, and as I review the events of the night, the visions — like the lights of Trento — suddenly wink-out, and I sleep.





3rd Air Service Mechanics Reg't Detachment at Milan with Eng. Gianni Caproni.

(Courtesy of Randolph Hall)

Randolph F. Hall, whose previous article, "The Cunningham Hall Aircraft Corporation," was presented in the *JOURNAL*, Volume 16, Summer 1971, pp. 90-97, was sent to Milan with 100 Americans to become familiar with the Caproni airplane. He forwarded this brief note of the Air Service Contingent.

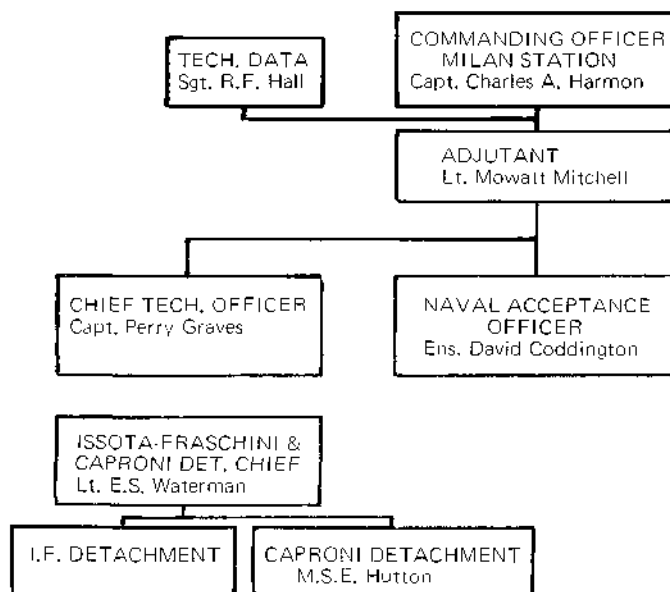
**U.S. Air Service Contingent at
Milan, Italy, World War I**
By Randolph F. Hall *

Less known than the story of the Italian conducted flight program at Foggia was a contingent of U.S. Air Service personnel stationed at Milan near the end of **WWI** to become familiar with the 3-place Caproni biplane bomber with its central nacelle and twin fuselages. It was expected that quantities of this airplane would soon come into service. It was normally powered by three Isotta Fraschini V/6 engines totaling about 600 h.p. but also was to be available with three FIAT A/12 engines of greater h.p. Its span was 77 ft., length O.A. 41 ft., and height O.A. approx. 13-3/4 ft.

The photograph presented here shows a company of the 3rd Air Service Mechanics Regiment with Eng. Gianni Caproni (later Count Caproni) in front of one of the bombers. On his right (left in the picture) is Master Signal Electrician S.E. Hutton and to his left is Lt. E.S. Waterman. These and other photos were given to the writer by Mr. Caproni.

The Organization Chart shows the general set-up of U.S. personnel at the Milan Station. The Mechanics Company reported to the Caproni plant while the Commanding Officer, Capt. Charles A. Harmon, Adjutant Lt. Mowatt Mitchell and Sgt. 1/C R. F. Hall occupied an office in the city, making trips to facilities as required. The latter had served previously under Capt. Harmon, Chief Inspection Officer, at the American Aviation Acceptance Park No. 1, Orly, France, where airplanes were supplied under contracts with Allied Governments, as a chief NCO to obtain data and prepare reports.² After Capt. Harmon was assigned to the Milan Station, Sgt. Hall was ordered there on detached service.

When the war ended, being alone on detached service, he was sent to Rome and completed the Caproni report, which was submitted to Maj. Butterfield, Technical Dept., Paris, before receiving orders to return to France.



As this goes to press we received the news that Randolph Hall died at his home on March 24, 1974.

NOTES RE: DETACHMENT AT MILAN:

1. The 1st and 2nd Motor Mechanics Regiments of the Aviation Section Signal Corps, U.S. Army, were also with the A.E.F. but probably assigned duties other than pertaining to aircraft or absorbed by other outfits.
2. Because of recorded pre-service experience with airplanes and their design, Randolph Hall was given unusual assignments, e.g.: after the Armistice to prepare a final report on inspection procedures, etc. at Orly; also later to instruct a course in airplane design at the A.E.F. University, Dijon, Beaune, France, for which he prepared the text.