



AIR SERVICE REUNION
June 1961



Above l. to r.
J.J. Smith (138th)
Clayton Bissell (148th)
Edw. J. Rickenbacker (94th)
Errol Zistell (148th)
Samuel Paul (138th)
Left -
Reed M. Chambers (94th)
Herbert M. Mason (R.F.C.)
Right -
Allen F. Bonnalie (7th AIC)
Below l.
James D. Adams (138th and
Clayton Bissell
Center - J.J. Smith and
Maxwell Kirby (5th P.G.)
Right -
John Carver (25th)



AIR SERVICE REUNION

Photographs courtesy of Herbert M. Mason, Jr., Associate Editor, True Magazine

The first reunion to which all combat veterans of the U.S. Air Service were invited was a long time in coming. Though there have been annual reunions of many individual A.S. units, some of which have met each year since WWI, there was never a reunion of the entire group of United States airmen who actually served over the lines in 1918. The term Air Service is itself exclusive, since it became so known in 1917 and was changed to Air Corps a decade later. And the total number of American combat veterans who served in the air in a front-line outfit, either U.S. or other Allied, is small — less than 2500, and this includes those who were in the direct service of our Allies.

This reunion started in New York City, late in 1960. This JOURNAL carried a report on the small gathering of airmen who checked into the Eastern Air Lines Headquarters on 2 December 1960 (Summer 1961, pp. 152, 153.) The men were there at the request of Royal Frey, then chief of the Research and Reference Branch of the Air Force Museum, and Capt. Alvin York, also of the Museum. The meeting was directly sponsored by Eddie Rickenbacker, Reed Chambers and Douglas Campbell. In addition to the honored guests there were Herb Mason, Jr., Associate Editor of True Magazine, Warren Shipp and James J. (John) Sloan, Directors of the A.A.H.S.

The purpose of the gathering was to aid the Museum in identifying the men shown in some three hours of motion picture film of Air Service activities, brought there by Frey and Capt. York. However, as the day wore on, and the enthusiasm grew, someone suggested that this should be an annual affair. Royal Frey was able to announce, by the end of the day, that a reunion would be held at Wright-Patterson AFB in the following June.

At that point your Editor was able to offer the services of Member J.J. Smith who, as we have described before, has made a career of finding the present whereabouts of Air Service veterans. (1) We suggested that J.J. could supply the names of most of the surviving A.S. combat veterans, which offer Frey eagerly accepted. Soon after our return to Grass Valley, J.J. Smith went to work and forwarded the names of almost 1300 men to Frey.

By May 1961 there were 1257 invitations sent out announcing the Reunion and Air Show to be held at Wright-Patterson on June 24th to 27th. 336 veterans attended, and a wonderful time was had by all. 83 letters were returned due to incorrect address or "un-

known", and 31 were marked deceased. Ralph B. Bagby, of the 88th Aero Sqdn., was killed in an automobile accident on his way to the reunion. The 135th Aero Sqdn. (Observation - D.H.-4's) had the most representatives present, 17 in all. And of the 45 active combat squadrons, all but the 8th and 155th were represented.

J.J. Smith was able to attend, and it is significant of the respect and esteem in which he is held, that when introduced at the opening banquet on Saturday, 23 June, the entire group of nearly 400 men present gave him a standing ovation. J.J. describes the reunion thusly,

"I arrived on Friday (morning) and spent a few minutes in the archives section, about 125 filing cabinets jammed with information on planes, including the first requisition for a plane part. They have a large assortment of pictures and maps, but I didn't examine them.

Heretofore the objective of the Museum has been on the material side. I am of the opinion that you have aroused their interest in the human equation, touched off at the primer reunion held in New York, which resulted in a decision to attempt a reunion at Dayton.

1257 names were..... Don Poler and Percy Hart had also called me and asked for names to send to the Museum.

I had expected to spend a day in the archives but the veterans kept coming in so fast that I spent all the time making acquaintances. We were given quarters in the visiting officers' building, two men in each room. John Dean of Los Angeles, and former member of the 138th Aero Sqdn., was my roommate. Col. Herbert M. Mason, Sr., and Col. Herschel McKee had the adjoining room. McKee was from Escad. 314, and had been a P.O.W., shot down 8 Feb. 1918, and had spent all his time away from the other prisoners at Munich. I had located Col. McKee recently in L.A. at 119th and Hoover. He had cut the insignia from the first German plane he shot down, and he took it with him to the Museum where they put it on display. McKee and Mason both served during WWII in England. Mason's son, Bill, Associate Editor of True, covered the events at the reunion with a photographer. He is preparing an mss. on the Lafayette Escadrille, will publish it next year.

The stock question among the groups was "Why haven't we had a reunion before?" And, "What can be

(1) See "Untapped Sources", JOURNAL of A.A.H.S., Vol. 4, No. 2 (Summer 1959) P. 141.



done to perpetuate this event?" Urged on by Mason, McKee, Dean, and Tarbox of the 139th, I drew up a preliminary draft for a constitution for such a group. This was on Friday afternoon. I spent Friday evening with Eddie Rickenbacker, Reed Chambers, Charlie D'Olive, Alton Brody, Livingston Irving, A.R. Brooks, Royal Frey and Maj. Bryant. The session lasted until 1:00 A.M., discussing future reunions.

Saturday was registration day at the Museum for the A.S. men, and they came in such droves it was impossible to greet them all as they entered. Gen. Clayton Bissell's first words, when he came in, were "Why can't we make this an annual affair?" I showed him the draft of the association which seemed to be what he too had in mind. We approached Maj. Bryant to ask if the Air Force would consider having the reunion as an annual affair. He seemed to doubt that the Budget Bureau would again approve such a large expenditure. We reported back to Rickenbacker and Chambers and they suggested a caucus be held to discuss forming the actual association.

Our first banquet, Saturday, was at the Museum. Three bars quenched the thirsty veterans. A sort of pandemonium reigned until the M.C., Maj. Bryant, called the group to order and made introductions of the President of the Dayton Chamber of Commerce, Gen. Frank P. Lahm, Gen. Benjamin Foulois, Gen. Carl Spaatz, and then Capt. Rickenbacker. Frey also received an appreciative round of applause, and introduced me. All that came out of me was, 'I thank each of you for this honor you have accorded me and share it equally with those who are as deserving of as much credit as you have given me.' As I wrote to you before, you were the only one who had given recognition to the individual member of each combat squadron.

Rickenbacker then made a short speech and announced there was a matter of business at hand. He appointed Gen. Bissell as temporary chairman, who in turn appointed me as temporary secretary. Bissell then read the proposal for the creation of the association, and the constitution and by-laws, which were adopted.

A slate of directors was nominated: Rickenbacker, Bissell, Sewall, Vaughn, Brooks, Law and Ames. Up jumped Roland Neel (99th); "I want an observer on this board. It seems damn funny that only pilots were named to run this outfit." Bissell asked him to name an observer and he said, "I want my good friend, Harry L. Wingate, of Pelham, Georgia, to serve as a director." Wingate agreed to serve. It was then discovered that Wingate was not an ob-

server, but a pilot. In the uproar and hilarity that followed someone moved that the meeting adjourn.

Thus the business meeting closed, and it seems just as well that it ended that way; so many were opposed to an association that would be limited to combat units only. As you know, there were many fine aviators retained at the training bases in the U.S., France and England.

After the dinner we had time to become reacquainted with former comrades, and I found many with whom I had corresponded. It was a great privilege to meet so many at one place and time.

Sunday luncheon was served at the civilian club. Johnathan Winters was M.C. and did an excellent job imitating the exhaust sounds of many types of planes. Busses then took us to the flight line for the Air Show. They said over 200,000 people had come to the show, and particularly to see Frank Tallman, Charles Gebhart, Cole Palen, Maj. Wm. Redeen, and "Bevo" Howard put the old planes through some exhibition flights. The "Thunderbirds" gave a performance after the "oldies" quit.

Back in the Museum we continued our examination of the WWI insignia and pictures. I invited A.A.H.S. Members Ross Fenn, Hugh Wynne, and Al Kropf to dinner at the officer's club, where we met with D'Olive again.

On Monday morning they took us again in busses to the SAC base to witness a demonstration emergency air raid drill. Crews are kept on 24 hour alert and the security measures at the base are very strict.

A group of us met again in the conference room of the officers' club to discuss possible prospects of attempting to create a reunion association. But at the dinner that night a proposal to submit the idea to the men present failed to materialize when the banquet program was inadvertently terminated without form.

As for use of the facilities at the Air Force Museum again next year (1962), it is too soon to expect an announcement from the director."

The above account was written by J.J. Smith on 3 July 1961. In the intervening nine months since then it has become apparent that the current mission of the Air Force Museum does not encompass such activities, as described elsewhere in this issue. Further, it would seem that the Museum should not, indeed, cannot accept the personal records of aviators such as albums, diaries, orders, etc. See Pres. George Hardie's Editorial on Page 64.

WWI AERO SQDN. ASSOCIATION NOTES

Capt. Neil M. Goen, USAR (Ret.), Secy-Treas. of the 148th Aero Squadron Association mailed out the Association's Bulletin No. 32 in December last.

The latest 148th Sqdn. roster lists 151 current active members and only 12 of the original 253 squadron personnel not located, a remarkable record of association over the nearly 43 years since WWI. The other 110 were reported deceased, either killed in action or died since 1918. The names of the 12 unlocated are: (with city of last address in parentheses)

Benjamin, Walter R. (Columbus, O.)
Bjorklund, Arvid T. (Seattle, Wash.) or Bjerklund or Borklund
Hart, Raymond W. (Detroit, Mich.)
Harris, John (Clinton, Iowa)
Howell, George L. (Sunbury, Pa.)
May, William A. (Watsonville, Cal.)
McNamara, Bernard J. (Waterbury, Conn.)
O'Connell, James (Bryn Mawr, Pa.)
Schon, Harry W. (Cresco, Iowa)

Sosanko, Anthony (Charleroi, Pa.)

Staudt, Henry E. (Kerrville, Tex.)

A.A.H.S. Members, being so widely spread throughout the world may aid in locating some of the above men. Check local phone directories for similar names and forward a postcard to either Capt. Goen at 14 Gardenia St., Melbourne, Fla. or John J. Smith at 5714 Rimpau Blvd., Los Angeles 43, Calif.

Other WWI Aero Sqdn Associations:

14th Balloon Sqdn: Glen R. Johnson,
3012 E. Rahn Rd., Dayton 40, Ohio

17th Aero Sqdn: Rodney Williams,
P.O. Box 123, Watertown, Wisc.

27th Aero Sqdn: Ray F. Durant, 1237 Versailles Ave.,
Alameda, Calif.

90th Aero Sqdn., Leland M. Carver, 121 Esplanade,
San Clemente, Calif.

138th Aero Sqdn: Joseph Lafond, 4248 Washington Blvd.,
Chicago, Ill.

139th Aero Sqdn: Clarence O. Paetz, 2630 E.
Newberry St., Appleton, Wisc.

141st Aero Sqdn: Arthur R. Dodds,
2010 Garrison Rd., Las Cruces, N.M.

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