

# THE LITERARY DIGEST

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DEEDS OF CAPTAIN RICKENBACKER,  
WHOSE MIDDLE NAME IS "VICTOR"

**CAPT. EDWARD VICTOR RICKENBACKER**, the American "ace of aces" in aviation, winner of the Distinguished Service Cross, the Legion of Honor, and the *Croix de Guerre*, victor in many thrilling combats above the clouds, and, before he took to wings, famous as a dare-devil automobile racer, confesses that he had his moments of trepidation, just like everybody else, when he first started to do stunts in the sky. He thus begins his own story in *United States Air Service*, the official publication of the Army and Navy Air Service Association:

An officer who had the job of giving preliminary examinations to the young men who wanted to fly once complained to me that two answers to his well-meant questions got to be exasperatingly common. The first was to the effect that the candidate didn't know anything about aviation, but had always dreamed of doing it. The second came when he was asked if he knew the names of any of the men who were piloting fighting airplanes over in France. Usually, according to this officer, he said "Eddie Rickenbacker," and stopt there.

The examiner was sure it proved that the average American youth read the sporting page of the newspaper more carefully than the front page. A racing automobile-driver's name caught his attention even in the war-news, and stuck—and I got the benefit. If it had been a baseball-player it would have been the same way.

I mention the matter here because, as it happens, when I started in I was like those boys. I knew nothing about aviation and had only dreamed about it. I went over to France as a chauffeur after trying to get up a flying unit which the Government refused to be interested in for reasons that I now see were entirely good, tho I did not see it so clearly then. Once over there, I would not let them rest until they gave me a Lieutenant's commission and sent me to Tours to see if I could learn to fly.

I learned pretty fast. Long practise in driving a racing-car at a hundred miles an hour or so gives first-class training in control and judging distances at high speed and helps tremendously in getting motor sense, which is rather the feel of your engine than the sound of it, a thing you get through your bones and nerves rather than simply your ears.

All this is part of the physical equipment of handling an airplane, and it makes a

*Rickenbacker*

lot of difference if the fellow with the stick knows how to make a turn at one hundred miles an hour or to allow for passing another fellow at twice that. The proof of this is that after a five and a half hours' duel with an instructor they let me solo. But because I was a good mechanic and knew about motors they sent me to Issoudun to be engineer officer. Being engineer officer, I never had any regular advanced flying training according to rule. But I took up a ship whenever I could and learned that way.

I remember when I thought it was time to try a *vrille* or tail-spin. I knew what I was supposed to do. I knew you put the stick over and crossed the controls, but I'd never seen anybody do it. I went up about 12,000 feet, got off some distance from the field, and flew around there for every bit of thirty minutes trying to get up my nerve to try the trick, but too scared to begin.

At last I said to myself: "What's the matter with you? You've got to do this," and threw the stick. She went into the spin all right, but I had her back to neutral after just one whirl, and I tell you I was glad when she righted. Next day I went out and it took twenty minutes to make up my mind to try again. It was only on the third day that I went at the job with any confidence and let her do a real spin.

That is still more or less the way I feel about doing a new stunt, after all the flying I have done at the front since. When you try a new thing you are never quite certain how the machine will behave, and tho you may have confidence in your ability to get out of anything as long as you have the altitude, there is a sort of hesitation both in the machine and in you. The trouble is you do not know what the strains will be on either.

The next thing was to get away from Issoudun. The men who had to stick over on this side as flying instructors know how hard it is to get away from a field when they've got you tied down to a job there. Those fellows are the ones that have my sympathy, because they have done the work and missed the credit. They have stayed home—and not really home, either, but in some particularly hot place down in Texas, most likely—stayed there and made aces when they were themselves the stuff of which aces are made, and but for the luck of it would be, a lot of them, coming back here now with as many ribbons and decorations and Huns to their credit as any one of us.

Instead, they have stuck on the job full of dangers and responsibilities with little chance of promotion and none of fighting or of fame. And the better they were the more certain they were stuck, because pilots had to be trained in a hurry, a very large number of pilots, and the very best men were none too good for the task of training them.

*Rickenbacker*

I was not an instructor over there at Issoudun. But even an engineer officer in France could not afford to be too good. I do not think I was. Still, when I asked to go to the front the C. O. said I could not be spared.

So I conspired with the medical officer. He does not know it yet, but I did. I got myself sent to the hospital for two weeks and at the end of that time I went to the C. O. and told him that it had been proved that I wasn't indispensable—because the other fellow had done the job better than I had. He could not deny it, and he let me go.

In this way he found his chance to try his luck as a fighting pilot. And Captain Rickenbacker remarks that he has had it extraordinarily; moreover, that every man who has been flying at the front for any length of time and is still alive has had good luck, for, he continues:

Fighting in the air is not a sport. It is scientific murder. The men who have learned their trade go at it that way, and as long as they do go at it that way they have an excellent chance to accumulate victories and survive, nevertheless.

The experienced fighting pilot does not take unnecessary risks. His business is to shoot down enemy planes, not to get shot down. His trained eye and hand and judgment are as much a part of his armament as his machine gun, and a fifty-fifty chance is the worst he will take, or should take, except where the show is of the kind that either for offense or defense justifies the sacrifice of plane and pilot.

It is not the old hand and the expert flier and air-fighter who gets another of the same sort. Both are wise and shy birds. You will see a couple of that kind meet now and then over the line, and watch them circling experimentally around each other. The next thing you know, each has sized up his antagonist as just as good or better than himself, and both have sheered off and are flying away to look for a more promising victim. What each is hunting for is an enemy who can be pounced on suddenly unawares and a getaway made before his comrades are on the victor's tail.

The obviously inexperienced pilot is the game the scientific air-fighter goes after, and the majority of victories are won that way. But, on the other hand, it is the novice usually who gets the famous ace by doing at some moment the unexpected thing. He rashly attempts or blunders into a maneuver which is dead against all the sane rules, and that is something against which the master of the game has not provided and is not forearmed.

Sheer foolhardiness or plain clumsiness has done what skill and experience could not do, or else accident does it: engine trouble, a jammed machine gun, or an oversight. I remember an incident which

*Rickenbacker*

had the luck, *chandelle* or spiral upward, and dive again at the next tail-ender. I tried the trick once and got as far as the first act in the program, but I had shut off my pressure and forgot about it, and when, after crashing my first Hun, I tried to regain my altitude, the *Spad* refused to climb. I had to go into a roll which got my gravity feed into action, but by that time the *Boches* were all coming at me in a bunch with their guns spitting.

There was nothing for it but to dive with full power, which in the case of a *Spad* means going down at the rate of about three hundred miles an hour, and fortunately we were pretty high up. With half a dozen Huns after me, I went down eight thousand feet that way, and tho I had some trouble getting her out of the dive, I managed it and got away in spite of the fine target I made.

Flying is one of the safest jobs in the Army as long as you don't drop out. If you do drop out, you are a dead man, and dropping out means, usually, that you have made a mistake or let go of your grip.

Regarding the relative fighting qualities and policies of the airmen of different nationalities, Captain Rickenbacker says:

There have been stories about the recklessness of the American fliers, and no doubt they went for the Hun wherever they could get at him, and some took very long chances, but on the front, as I saw it, the American aviators in this regard came between the French and the British. The French were inclined to be cautious as a settled military policy of getting the best results with the least expenditure of valuable lives and costly planes. The British were foolhardy as a matter of principle and morale, because they found that they got the best results with their people in that way.

Compared with the French, playing their own game in the way they had settled down to it toward the end of the war, our men seemed reckless. Compared with the British, they seemed cautious. But, of course, the three systems had nothing to do with the courage of the three nations or of individual Frenchmen, Englishmen, or Americans. The French and English had each worked out a method of scientific murder that did the job. We were working out ours with the experience of both to help us and the methods of both to choose from. The result was, generally, a sort of compromise.

Right here I may mention as a matter of interest that in point of maturity for this work the Englishman of eighteen is about even with the American of twenty-two. Our men are generally at their best as fliers between the ages of twenty-two and twenty-six; the English are best between eighteen and twenty-two. I have been asked why, and I think it is due to differences in early education in the two

countries rather than to anything directly connected with the British and American practise of training fliers.

Returning for a moment to the stories of recklessness on the part of our aviators, there were men like Frank Luke, whose record is one of the brightest glories of our Air Service and who gave his all, his life, to the cause. Luke's eighteen Huns included eleven balloons, and to get a balloon you have to go through the anti-aircraft and machine-gun barrage and the flaming onions they send up to protect it. Getting a balloon is so much more difficult than getting a plane, in fact, that the Germans credit a pilot with two victories for every balloon brought down.

Luke from the beginning was a wild man in the air. He would take off and playfully do a series of loops within a few hundred feet of the ground. That sort of thing was strictly forbidden in my own squadron. Men and planes are too valuable and too difficult to replace at the front to be risked unless there is a real reason for the risk.

But after a run of hard luck such as came along sometimes—when we had lost a lot of men and the spirits of the others were beginning to show the strain—I used to go out myself and do all sorts of stunts right out in front of them. It had a surprizing moral effect. The men said: "Anyway, they haven't got Rickenbacker's goat." On the next sortie they went up full of pep and snap and ready to go anywhere and do anything.

My own squadron, the 94th (Hat-in-the-Ring), had a fine record. We were the first American squadron in the game; we had the first ace and the highest record of air victories of any American squadron at the end of the war, and, finally, we had a chance to go into Germany at the head of the American Army, which was a magnificent climax to the unit's active career and an experience not to be forgotten by any of us—flying over those cities and castles and vineyards along the Rhine that we had been thinking of as the distant goal of all the fighting that went before.

In spite of all the dangers he has experienced and all the disasters he has seen, aviation has not lost its fascination for this prize flier of our new brood of eagles; for he says, in conclusion:

Some of the men who have been flying over there in France came back saying they are fed up and have had enough of the air. But I do not think I am one of them. The sky means something to me it never meant before. When I look up and see the sun shining on the patch of white clouds up in the blue, I begin to think how it would feel to be up somewhere above it winging swiftly through the clear air, watching the earth below, and the men on it, no bigger than ants.

I rarely go to church except with my

*Rickenbacker*

mother when I am at home, to show that a plain Ohio raising has not been wasted on her boy; but there is something spiritual—I don't know what else to call it—in the feeling you get up there. At least it seems so to me, tho somebody suggested that it was just—in a much magnified form—the feeling of superiority, or exaltation, or whatever it is, of the man on horseback or in a swift automobile as he looks down as he sweeps past upon the man on foot.

At all events, I expect to keep on flying, and I expect a part of the future of flying to lie in the scope it gives to the initiative of the American boy in the sort of thing that hunting used to mean to him in the days when there was hunting close at hand for almost every boy, and that sport in many forms still means to him and always will mean to him.

Whatever happens or does not happen in the way of the commercial expansion of aviation, flying will always have the sporting element, and military aviation, which, through the fortune of war, is so much in advance of other forms of flying, must be kept alive and strong as the backbone of the others.

In a very real sense, the future of aviation in this country is in the hands of the men who have been trained to fly in the Army, who have mastered the art either on fields on this side or at the front, not without paying a heavy price for it in the lives of comrades just as good but not so lucky as themselves.

