



The Contract Flyers of World War I

By Ann Jocelyn

With war raging on the other side of the world, Charlie Meyers left his home in Brooklyn and headed for Canada. Not to avoid a military draft, but to go and fight. The United States had not yet entered World War I, and Meyers, a young flier during the dawn of military aviation, wanted to battle the enemy. So he offered his flying and mechanical skills to Canada, which was already deeply in combat as part of the British Empire, and was promptly assigned to the Royal Flying Corps in England.

"Charles W. Meyers was not a tall man. He was, in fact, rather short. One comes to realize this only in retrospect, because you would never notice it in his presence," Joe Christy and Leroy Cook wrote in *American Aviation: An Illustrated History* (McGraw-Hill, 1994). "There was something about Charlie—an indefinable something that caused the world to stand aside while he passed. He was a man of courage and talent; he was a man of the sky."

Meyers had designed and flown his own gliders as a teenager and worked for a small aircraft manufacturer. In 1916, at age 20, with about 12 hours of flying time under his

belt, he volunteered for the U.S. Army Signal Corps, which had a 40-plane fleet. The army didn't need him. So Meyers went to Canada. His 12 hours in the air were more than almost anyone alive had at the time, and the Royal Flying Corps commissioned him as an officer after he flew another 105 minutes. Meyers spent the rest of the war in England as an instructor for British and American pilots.

Other Americans volunteered to help France. They were American pilots and crew who flew for foreign militaries in time of war, but few people ever called them "mercenaries." Though far more served with the British, it is the American volunteers in France who have become better known in history.

American volunteer pilots served in the French Air Service from the beginning of World War I in 1914. In April 1916, two Americans, Edmund Gros and Norman Prince, persuaded Paris to recruit American volunteers into a single unit, the *Escadrille Américaine*.

Gros, a physician from Princeton, headed a nongovernmental organization (NGO) called the American Ambulance Service, which ferried wounded French soldiers and civilians

◀ *American volunteer aviator Charlie Meyers in his Canadian Curtiss Jenny biplane. Meyers bought this aircraft as military surplus to open a flying school after World War I. Photo by Roland Waller.*

from battlefields. As Jon Guttman wrote in *SPA124 Lafayette Escadrille: American Volunteer Airmen in World War I* (Osprey, 2004), Prince was from a wealthy industrialist family with an estate in France, and the young man developed a strong attachment to the country. He had already learned to fly and when the war broke out in 1914, Prince and a friend thought of setting up an all-volunteer American aviator force to fight for France. Early in 1915, he sailed across the Atlantic, brought his idea to a skeptical French War Department, and joined the Foreign Legion.

One of Prince's aviator friends, Frazier Curtis, was wounded and ultimately discharged from the French Army. He introduced the American escadrille concept to Gros, who helped persuade the French military to accept the idea. Other American fliers had thought along similar lines. Part of the purpose of an American escadrille, Gros and Prince reasoned, was to generate publicity and inspire Americans to persuade President Woodrow Wilson and Congress to abandon neutrality and aid the French and other allies.

The name *Escadrille Américaine*, however, posed a problem for the United States, which was not in the war at the time. Germany had filed a diplomatic protest with Washington. So the flyers took the name of the French general who had been so valuable to the American Revolution, the Marquis de Lafayette, and they became famous as the Lafayette Escadrille.

Prince and others recruited young, new volunteers as well as a few seasoned American aviators already flying for France to join the Lafayette Escadrille. The commander, ground crew, Nieuport aircraft, and even some pilots were French. The Americans wore French military uniforms. Deployed in time for the Battle of Verdun, where they were both admired and criticized for a "cowboy" mentality, the small squadron's core group of 38 pilots shot down 41 enemy planes during the war and lost nine of their own men.

A total of 265 Americans served in a larger Lafayette Flying Corps, which supported the Lafayette Escadrille and prepared the volunteers to join other French units. Overall, 63 volunteers in the Lafayette Flying Corps reportedly died during World War I.

In the big picture, the Lafayette Escadrille's military contribution was modest. After the U.S. joined the war, the Lafayette Escadrille was placed under American command as the 103rd Pursuit Squadron of the U.S. Army Air Service, with its French Nieuports and crew transferring out to American aircraft and mechanics.

Credit for the Lafayette Escadrille's fame in popular culture goes to veteran William A. Wellman of Brookline, Massachusetts. His father, he said, "didn't have enough money for me to become a flier in the regular way, through private lessons." So in 1915, at age 19, Wellman joined the French Foreign Legion to become an aviator.

Wounded in France, Wellman returned to Massachusetts, where he campaigned for citizens to enlist in the war effort and to support the American Red Cross. He wowed a group of freshly minted U.S. Navy aviators taking courses at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, prompting one, Ensign Roland W. Waller (a cousin of Charlie Meyers, serving in England), to lament in a letter to his sweetheart that the military couldn't speed him more quickly to fight in France.

Wellman moved to California, and in early 1918 the U.S. Army Air Corps recruited him to train new pilots in combat air tactics. Wellman went on to become a successful movie director and producer, developing the military genre with such huge productions as "Wings" (Paramount, 1928), about World War I fighter pilots, and giving future superstar Gary Cooper one of his first movie roles. "Wings" was the first film to win an Oscar for Best Film.

Wellman's last film, aptly titled "Lafayette Escadrille" (Warner Bros., 1958), was about his old unit. The movie featured a new actor who would go on to make many successful military pictures, Clint Eastwood. Nearly a half-century later, the movie "Flyboys" (Twentieth Century Fox, 2006) would take inspiration from Wellman.

The American volunteer pilots' combat experience proved invaluable to the United States once Congress declared war in 1917. The United States had no seasoned combat pilots as it went into World War I. David Putnam of Massachusetts, a descendant of Revolutionary War General Israel Putnam, had joined the French Air Service at age 18 and was already an ace by the time he flew for Uncle Sam. Flying with the U.S. 139th Aero Squadron in September 1918, Putnam met his end at the hands of German ace Georg von Hantelmann.

Meyers, who had been working as a mechanic for the British Royal Flying Corps, transferred to the U.S. military in 1917 as a seasoned technician to keep American war-planes flying. ■

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