

World War One Kiffen Rockwell and the Lafayette Escadrille Introduction

World War I was a military conflict centered on Europe that began in the summer of 1914. The fighting ended in late 1918. This conflict involved all of the world's great powers, assembled in two opposing alliances: the Allies (centred around the Triple Entente) and the Central Powers. More than 70 million military personnel, including 60 million Europeans, were mobilized in one of the largest wars in history.

More than 9 million combatants were killed, due largely to great technological advances in firepower without corresponding ones in mobility. It was the second deadliest conflict in history. The war is also known as the First World War, the Great War, the War To End All Wars or the World War (prior to the outbreak of World War II).

The assassination on 28 June 1914 of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria, the heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary, is seen as the immediate trigger of the war. Long-term causes, such as imperialistic foreign policies of the great powers of Europe, such as the German Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Ottoman Empire, the Russian Empire, the British Empire, France, and Italy, played a major role. Ferdinand's assassination by a Yugoslav nationalist resulted in a Habsburg ultimatum against the Kingdom of Serbia. Several alliances formed over the past decades were invoked, so within weeks the major powers were at war; as all had colonies, the conflict soon spread around the world.

Our program at Smith McDowell House centers on the use of aircraft in warfare, most specifically, the Lafayette Escadrille and member Kiffen Rockwell, who was an Asheville citizen.

The **Lafayette Escadrille** (from the French *Escadrille de Lafayette*), was a squadron of the French Air Service, the *Aéronautique militaire*, during World War I composed largely of American volunteer pilots flying fighters.



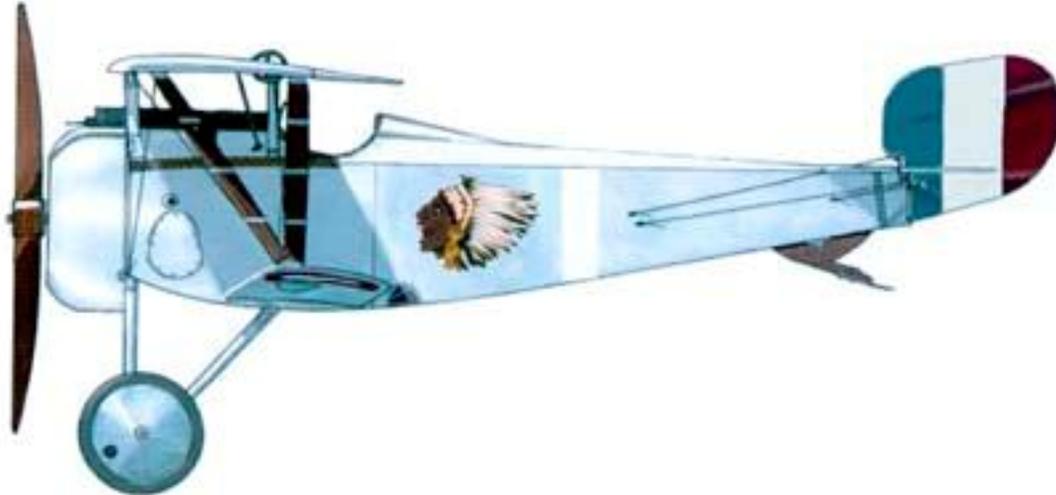
The squadron was formed in April 1916 as the *Escadrille américaine* (number 124) in Luxeuil prior to U.S. entry into the war. Dr. Edmund L. Gros, director of the American Ambulance Service, and Norman Prince, an American expatriate already flying for France, led the efforts to persuade the French government of the value of a volunteer American air unit fighting for France. The aim was to have their efforts recognized by the American public and thus, it was hoped, the resulting publicity would rouse interest in abandoning neutrality and joining the fight. Not all American pilots were in this squadron; other American pilots fought for France as part of the Lafayette Flying Corps.

The squadron was quickly moved to Bar-le-Duc, closer to the front. A German objection filed with the U.S. government, over the actions of a supposed neutral nation, led to the name change in December. The original name implied that the U.S. was allied to France when it was in fact neutral.

Their fighter aircraft, mechanics, and the uniforms were French, as was the commander, Captain Georges Thenault. Five French pilots were also on the roster, serving at various times. Raoul Lufbery, a French-born American citizen, became the

squadron's first, and ultimately their highest scoring flying ace with 16 confirmed victories before his squadron was transferred to the US Air Services.

The first major action seen by the squadron was at the Battle of Verdun, being posted to the front in May 1916 until September 1916, when the unit moved to 7 Army area at Luxeuil. The squadron, flying the Nieuport scout, suffered heavy losses, but its core group of 38 was rapidly replenished by other Americans arriving from overseas. So many volunteered that the Lafayette Flying Corps was formed, many Americans thereafter serving with other French air units. Altogether, 265 American volunteers served in the Corps.



On 8 February 1918, the squadron was transferred to the US Army Air Service as the 103rd Aero Squadron. For a brief period it retained its French aircraft and mechanics. Most of its veteran members were set to work training newly-arrived American pilots. The 103d PS claimed a further 49 kills up until November 1918.



The history of the Lafayette Squadron is the story of one of the most unknown but most glorious episodes of World War I. In August 1914, when war broke out between France and Germany, young American citizens were residing in France. Many of them came from wealthy families, living a life of luxury, participating in competitions with their yachts or airplanes. A statement by the Swiss writer, Blaise Cendrars, appeared in the French newspaper "Le Figaro" calling on all foreign residents to enlist in the French army.

All those adventuresome young Americans were ready to fight for France in order to defend its freedom. But all was not as simple as it seemed. The United States was not involved in the war against Germany and any American citizen serving in a foreign army would lose his constitutional rights and citizenship. The young men decided to pay a visit to the U.S Ambassador in Paris who found a solution in suggesting that they should either enlist in the French Foreign Legion or enlist in the Ambulance Corps. No sooner said than done.

William Thaw of Pittsburgh, PA, one of the first Americans to learn to fly, offered his services as a pilot for the French army a few days after hostilities started. His offer was refused, and instead he enlisted in the French Foreign Legion.



Raoul Lufbery, of Wallingford, CT, who had been a mechanic for Marc Pourpe, a famous French air pioneer, also tried to enlist in the French air service, but was refused and settled for the Foreign Legion. These two men were not alone, as 21 other Americans destined to become La Fayette Flying Corps pilots joined the Legion. After training for a few weeks, the volunteers went into the trenches and it was not until December 1914 that William Thaw, James Bach and Raoul Lufbery were allowed to transfer to the air service. In 1915, they were joined by **Kiffm Rockwell**, **Victor Chapman**, **Bert Hall** and Paul Pavelka, some of whom had been wounded in the spring of that year. By then other volunteers had arrived from America and were able to enlist directly in the French Air Force. Among these were **Norman Prince**, Dudley Hill, Clyde Balsley and **James McConnell**.

Meanwhile, a movement began to get all the American pilots together into one squadron. French military authorities did not take kindly to the idea at first. The concept was spearheaded by Thaw, Prince and **Elliot Cowdin**. Endorsed by many French and American civilians in Paris, such as Doctor Gros of the American Hospital, and with the aid of Gaston Menier, a senator, Monsieur de Sillac of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and General Hirschauer, an all American unit was authorised in the spring of 1916.



At first named "l'Escadrille Americaine", the name was changed to l'Escadrille La Fayette following a German diplomatic protest to the U.S Government. Two French officers, Captain Georges Thenault and Lieutenant Alfred de Laage de Meux were named to command the seven Americans selected. They were, along with Prince, Thaw and Cowdin, Victor Chapman, Kiffin Rockwell, James McConnell and Bert Hall.

The new squadron was organised at Luxeuil-les- Bains near the front on the edge of the Vosges mountains. The first American pilots to arrive were officially welcomed into their newly created unit on April 20th 1916 by General Franchet d'Esperey. They were joined by Clyde Balsley, Dudley Hill, Chouteau Johnson and Raoul Lufbery a few days later.

The first victory of the Squadron was won by Kiffin Rockwell, on May 20th, 1916. He shot down a German two-seater observation plane at the foot of the Hartmanns-willerkopf, in Alsace. The squadron was then ordered to Verdun where the mightiest battle of the war was raging. On May 24th, the entire American squadron took part in a pitched battle with a superior force of German aeroplanes. Thaw, Rockwell and Chapman were wounded. Thaw's arm was broken and he was forced to enter a hospital. Chapman's and Rockwell's wounds were facial; They had themselves bandaged and continued their work over the front. Clyde Balsley was so badly wounded that, after over a year in a hospital, he was discharged, but, unfortunately, he was permanently crippled.



The first four pilots to arrive at the front with the American squadron were also the first four to die. Victor Chapman was killed in aerial duel over the Verdun battleground on June 23rd", 1916. Kiffin Rockwell was slain in a fight with an enemy plane, on September 23rd, 1916.

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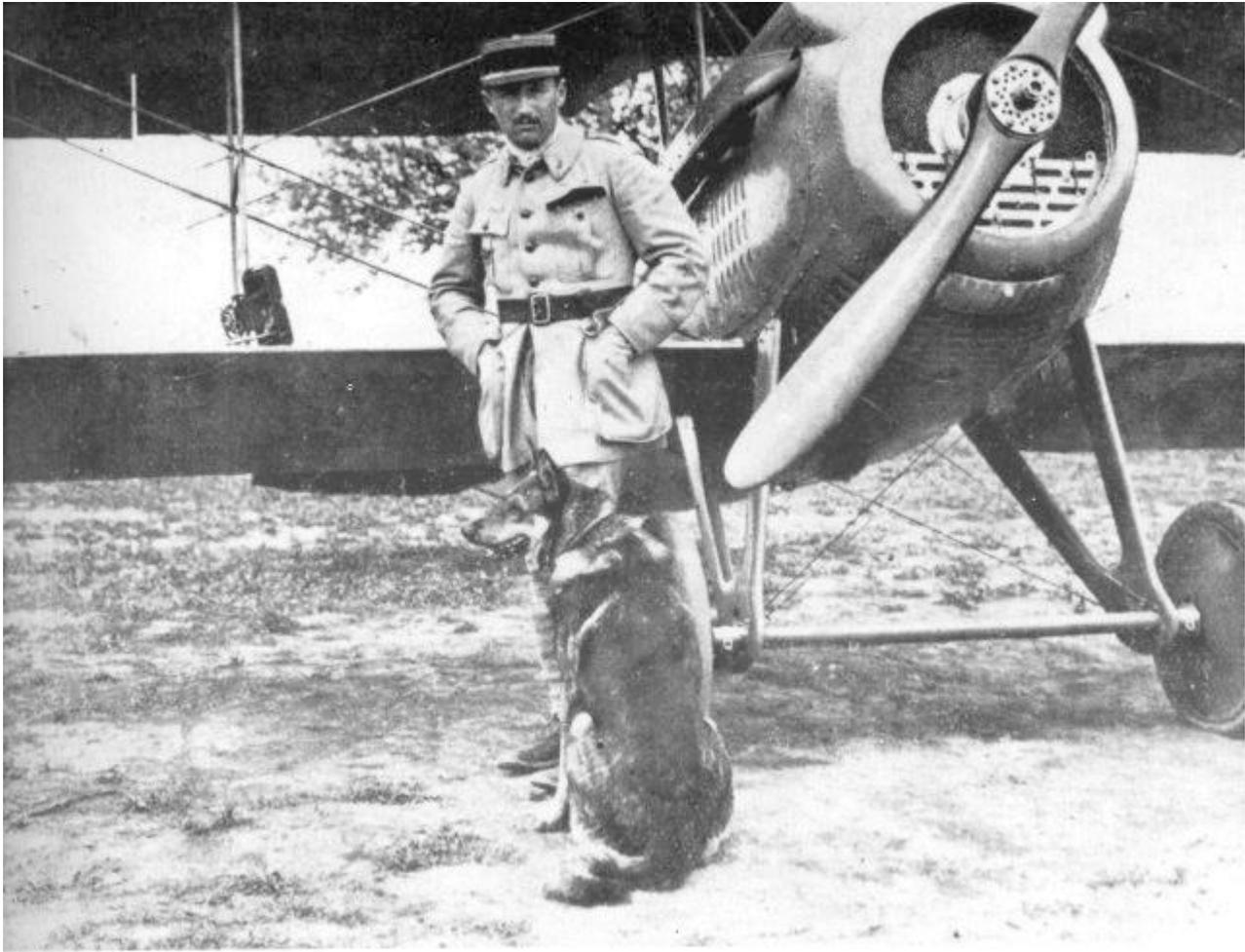
Norman Prince was mortally injured in an aeroplane accident on October 12 , 1916. James McConnell was brought down by two enemy aeroplanes on March 19th, 1917, near Ham during the German retreat in the Aisne. James McConnell was the last American aviator killed by the enemy before America's entry into the World War. His comrade Edmond Genet was the first American flier to die after the United States declared war against Germany , shot down by anti-aircraft artillery on April 17th, 1917, not far from where McConnell fell.

During 1916 and 1917, other American volunteers continued to arrive, so that in spite of heavy losses, the ranks of the La Fayette Escadrille were never depleted. The overflow of newly trained American pilots was sent to other French units. As a result the La Fayette Escadrille became part of a much larger organisation called the Lafayette Flying Corps.

By August 1917 the La Fayette Escadrille had won four Legions of Honor, seven Medailles Militaire and thirty one citations, each citation accompanied by a Croix de Guerre. American

pilots in the other squadrons were also winning their share of medals.

Flight lieutenant Thenault was the only officer to be in command of the Lafayette Escadrille. Promoted Major after three years of aerial battles, he left the front to take charge the headship of the flying school in Pau. Excellent fighter pilot, he was credited with seven victories among which four confirmed. Much more important was the fact that he perfectly succeeded in creating and commanding the squadron which will become the core of the first American fighter group.



The Capitaine Thenault and his dog Fram in front of a Spad



The La Fayette Escadrille ceased to exist on February 18th, 1918, when it became the first American pursuit squadron, "S103". It kept its French planes and mechanics. Out of some 265 American volunteers in the French Air Force 225 received their wings and 180 flew combat missions at the front in French uniform. Fifty one pilots were killed in action, six were killed in training accidents and six more died from illness. The American flyers were credited with one hundred and ninety nine victories.

Most of the dead of the La Fayette Escadrille and the La Fayette Flying Corps were buried in military cemeteries scattered along the front in France, Belgium and Italy. In February 1921, a committee was organised to search for a fitting single resting place for the fallen. A number of sites were considered in Champagne and near Verdun, but abandoned because of the distance from Paris. A large lot in the park of Villeneuve l'Etang at Marnes-la-Coquette was offered by the French government and was accepted by the committee, which began to plan a proper memorial monument.





Captaine Georges Thenault of the French Air Service, the commanding officer of Squadron N-124, the first American volunteer squadron which would become the "Lafayette Escadrille."

Founding of the Lafayette Escadrille

No single individual can be credited with creating the Lafayette Escadrille, but rather it was the result of the combined efforts of some idealistic young American men, some prominent Americans living in France, and a few farsighted French officials.

Two Americans who envisioned a squadron made up of American flyers were Norman Prince and William Thaw. Upon the outbreak of the War, both volunteered for service with the French Foreign Legion; and since both were licensed pilots in America, they transferred to France's Service Aeronautique in 1915.

During 1915, Prince, Thaw and some prominent Americans, particularly Dr. Edmund Gros and Jarousse deSilac of the French ministry of foreign affairs joined forces to promote the formation of an American volunteer squadron.

The French saw an American group as an excellent way to generate support in America for the Allied cause.

In April 1916, a separate American squadron designated as N (Nieuport) 124 was established. Joining Prince and Thaw were five other Americans: Victor Chapman, Elliot Cowdin, Weston (Bert) Hall, James McConnell, and Kiffin Rockwell.

The designation N-124 was soon changed to Escadrille Americain, but the Germans objected to this name since America was not officially in the War. In response to this protest, the name was changed to Lafayette Escadrille in December 1916.

The original Lafayette Escadrille had 38 American pilots under the French commander, Captaine George Thenault. Lieutenant Alfred deLaage de Meux served as executive officer.



Norman Prince from Massachusetts, was one of the Americans who was instrumental in establishing the Escadrille.



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Uniforms and Insignias

Upon completion of his flight training, the student pilot was awarded the badges of a pilot brevet, the wings and star, and his corporal's stripes.

The style and color of his uniform was a matter of the pilot's individual personal preferences.

As the illustration shows, the colors of tunics varied from sky blue to navy blue and black, and pants were usually riding breeches, a carry over from the cavalry days. Head gear was either the traditional French military "kepi" or forage overseas cap. High boots or oxfords with "puttees" were usual footwear.



[William Thaw of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, one of the founders of the Squadron and served as its American Commander.](#)

The air service uniforms carried on the older military tradition of colorful uniforms.

Note the Lafayette Escadrilles' famous lion cub mascot, "Whiskey," in the illustration and in the photo of Thaw.

Profile of a Squadron: Who Were They?

The Lafayette Escadrille, "The Lafayette Squadron," was made up of only 38 American Volunteers. Approximately 170 other Americans served in various other French squadrons, and as a group, these men were designated the Lafayette Flying Corps. Of the original 38 aviators:

- 28 had served in France in some capacity
- Seven of the 28 had served in the French Air Service
- 23 were from the Eastern states, nine were from New York and two from the West
- Average age was 26 - ages ranged from 20 to 40 years
- Eleven were sons of millionaires
- Thirty held college degrees or had enrolled in a higher educational institution. Harvard had nine alumni in the squadron
- Nine had prewar flying experience