

Flying For France

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With the American Escadrille at Verdun

James R. McConnell
Sergeant-Pilot in the French Flying Corps

Book One, Dawn of Aviation Series



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Flying for France
by James R. McConnell
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To
Mrs. Alice S. Weeks

*Who having lost a splendid son in the
French Army has given to a great number
of us other Americans in the war the
tender sympathy and help of a mother.*

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Historical Notes

When World War I broke out in August 1914, aviation was still an infant. The Wright Brothers had made their first powered flight less than 11 years earlier. Aviation matured rapidly under the impetus of wartime needs. This global conflict marked the first large-scale application of airpower to affect the outcome of war. The men who became the first combat aviators, the first fighter pilots, and the first designated aces proved a colorful and individualistic lot. The missions they flew presaged the missions flown today by military pilots around the world—combat air patrol, close air support, strategic bombing, reconnaissance, and forward control of artillery.

Among the Allied combat aviation units, few have captured—and held—the public imagination like the famed Lafayette Escadrille. French officers trained and commanded these American pilots who proudly flew under the flag of France. Most already lived in France at the onset of hostilities and would quickly have

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responded to the French pleas to join their battle against German invasion. However, to do so would require relinquishing their American citizenship. To work around this problem, many joined the French Foreign Legion or the American Ambulance Field Service until officials worked out the details allowing them to join the French military outright.

Adventurers all, many of these Americans succumbed to the lure of aerial combat and found their way into the French Air Force in late 1915. While the initial cadre trained on Bleriot's and Nieuport's, rumors ran rampant about the possibility of an all-American squadron. Supported actively by French officials and, unofficially, by Americans with important connections, the rumors coalesced into a formal authorization in the spring of 1916.

Initially, the French designated the new unit the *Escadrille Americaine*, but the Germans protested since America remained officially neutral. In response, the French rechristened the unit the *Escadrille Lafayette*.

General Franchet d'Esperey officially welcomed the Americans to their new squadron at its first home base at Luxeuil-les-Bains on April 20, 1916. One month later, Kiffin Rockwell scored the unit's first combat victory, but far from its last. As the ranks of new American pilots swelled beyond the capacity of the Lafayette Escadrille, many joined other units that, collectively, became the Lafayette Flying Corps.

The French disbanded the squadron on February 18, 1918, when it became the first American pursuit squadron (flying the same French planes maintained by the same French mechanics). Its pilots had earned four *Legions d'Honneur*, seven *Medailles Militaire*, and 31 *Croixes de Guerre* and had shot down 199 enemy aircraft. A total of 180 Americans flew combat missions in French uniform, with 56 dying in combat, six in training accidents, and six from non-combat ailments.

Meet James Rogers McConnell

Born in Chicago, Illinois, on March 14, 1887, James was the son of Judge Samuel Parsons McConnell and Sarah (Rogers) McConnell. His paternal grandfather was a Union general during the Civil War, his maternal grandfather also a Chicago judge. In 1899, Judge McConnell move the family—two boys and two girls—to New York City where he became president of a large building contracting company and legal adviser for the Vanderbilts.

After his parents' divorce, James lived for several years in France with his mother and two sisters and became fluent in French. He suffered from arthritis while still a youth, an ailment that afflicted him later during WW I.

During one summer vacation in Chicago, James and a boarding school friend made the first-ever trip from Chicago to New York City by automobile, gaining quite a bit of publicity and popular attention. James attended the University of Virginia, intending to become a lawyer, and earned a reputation as a practical joker and unorthodox student. He sometimes donned full Scottish regalia and played the bagpipes around campus, annoying fellow students and University officials. Amid rumors of expulsion, James left the university in 1910 with no degree.

James briefly worked with Charles Chouteau Johnson, later also a member of the Lafayette Escadrille, in New York and then as an agent for a railway in Carthage, North Carolina, and a second lieutenant in the state's Army National Guard. In January 1915, James quit his job and went to France, where he joined the American Ambulance Field Service as a driver. In October, he earned the French *Croix de Guerre* for "courage and fearlessness worthy of the highest praise." Wanting to get more involved in France's battle for survival, he signed up for the French Air Force that same October.

This is where *Flying for France* begins. However, a few editorial comments seem appropriate.

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McConnell had signed a contract with Doubleday, Page and Company to publish his wartime story (which became this book) with a deadline in late autumn 1916.

On page 42, McConnell mentions being sent to the hospital due to a “lame back resulting from a smash-up in landing.” There is far more to this tale. On this August 1916 mission, McConnell, Kiffin Rockwell, and Norman Prince had flown until past sunset to drive off enemy reconnaissance aircraft during a battle near Fleury. McConnell’s engine quit and he attempted to land between the flare pots that outlined the closest airfield. He apparently misjudged distance in the dark, overshot the field, and crashed into some trees, which tore off the wings. His lap belt kept him in the cockpit as the Nieuport slammed nose down into an embankment and low telephone wires sliced through its vertical stabilizer. Although he continued to fly for almost a week, the pain increased until he needed help to get dressed and had to use a cane for walking. Captain Thenault sent him to the hospital at Vitry-le-François on August 26, despite McConnell’s protests. After a month of recuperation, his back injury seemed little improved. He wrote to a friend, “It seems to be getting well and then flop, she drops back to first condition. If it doesn’t build up soon, I am going to tell them I am well.”

On September 27, he continued recuperating at the Paris home of his friend Mrs. Alice Weeks (to whom he dedicated this book). He spent the next 45 days resting and working on the book, finally rejoining the Escadrille on November 11. He missed his publisher’s deadline, writing to Mrs. Weeks on December 11 that “Between a bad cold, the general cold, and the fact that Whiskey chewed up my fingers, I have been unable to write.” (Whiskey was the squadron’s mascot, a lion cub.) Another pilot, Dudley Hill, finally delivered the manuscript to the publisher during a stateside leave.

Vicious cold descended on the front lines in January and February of 1917, the “worst winter since 1870” he wrote to Mrs. Weeks on February 7. The cold aggravated his back and reinvigorated his childhood arthritis. Thenault returned him to the hospital in mid-February, shortly before publication of his book, which received

favorable reviews and helped many readers understand the realities of the war in Europe.

Typically, McConnell ignored the doctor's warnings and headed back to combat, crippled or not. He had to enlist the aid of other pilots to dress and the aid of his mechanics to lift him into the cockpit. He could barely turn his head . . . something critical to a combat pilot's survival. In a letter to his publisher, he expressed gratitude for his first royalty check (861 francs) and noted that he hoped to transfer to the American air service as soon as American combat units reached Europe. However, he died on a combat sortie on the eve of his 30th birthday. The book's final chapter (a collection of letters added for the second edition) tell that story.

The American Church in Paris hosted a memorial service for James Rogers McConnell on April 2, 1917. Attendees included the US Ambassador, members of both the Lafayette Escadrille and American Ambulance Field Service, and three young French women who each thought she was his fiancée. McConnell had become the University of Virginia's first student to die in WW I and, despite never receiving his degree, the school erected a statue in his honor fittingly titled simply Aviator. His body now rests in a crypt at the Lafayette Escadrille Memorial in Versailles, France.

McConnell's story, written during his service in the Lafayette Escadrille, vividly illustrates the life of a World War I combat pilot with all its triumphs, failures, and loss of friends. Reading it, you can only reach one conclusion—he and his squadron mates fought because they truly believed in the rightness and necessity of the cause.

This book, the first volume in our planned Dawn of Aviation series of reprints, is an historic document and rightfully deserves preservation for future generations of Americans.

Walt Shiel
Publisher

Introduction

One day in January, 1915, I saw Jim McConnell in front of the Court House at Carthage, North Carolina. “Well,” he said, “I’m all fixed up and am leaving on Wednesday.” “Where for?” I asked. “I’ve got a job to drive an ambulance in France,” was his answer.

And then he went on to tell me, first, that as he saw it the greatest event in history was going on right at hand and that he would be missing the opportunity of a lifetime if he did not see it. “These Sand Hills,” he said “will be here forever, but the war won’t; and so I’m going.” Then, as an afterthought, he added: “And I’ll be of some use, too, not just a sight-seer looking on; that wouldn’t be fair.”

So he went. He joined the American ambulance service in the Vosges, was mentioned more than once in the orders of the day for conspicuous bravery in saving wounded under fire, and received the much-coveted *Croix de Guerre*.

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Meanwhile, he wrote interesting letters home. And his point of view changed, even as does the point of view of all Americans who visit Europe. From the attitude of an adventurous spirit anxious to see the excitement, his letters showed a new belief that any one who goes to France and is not able and willing to do more than his share—to give everything in him toward helping the wounded and suffering—has no business there.

And as time went on, still a new note crept into his letters; the first admiration for France was strengthened and almost replaced by a new feeling—a profound conviction that France and the French people were fighting the fight of liberty against enormous odds. The new spirit of France—the spirit of the “Marseillaise,” strengthened by a grim determination and absolute certainty of being right—pervades every line he writes. So he gave up the ambulance service and enlisted in the French flying corps along with an ever-increasing number of other Americans.

The spirit which pervades them is something above the spirit of adventure that draws many to war; it is the spirit of a man who has found an inspiring duty toward the advancement of liberty and humanity and is glad and proud to contribute what he can.

His last letters bring out a new point—the assurance of victory of a just cause. “Of late,” he writes, “things are much brighter and one can feel a certain elation in the air. Victory, before, was a sort of academic certainty; now, it is felt.”

F. C. P.

November 10, 1916.

Chapter I

Verdun

Beneath the canvas of a huge hangar mechanics are at work on the motor of an airplane. Outside, on the borders of an aviation field, others loiter awaiting their aerial charge's return from the sky. Near the hangar stands a hut-shaped tent. In front of it several short-winged biplanes are lined up; inside it three or four young men are lolling in wicker chairs.

They wear the uniform of French army aviators. These uniforms, and the grim-looking machine guns mounted on the upper planes of the little aircraft, are the only warlike note in a pleasantly peaceful scene. The war seems very remote. It is hard to believe that the greatest of all battles—Verdun—rages only 25 miles to the north, and that the field and hangars and mechanics and aviators and airplanes are all playing a part therein.

Verdun

Suddenly there is the distant hum of a motor. One of the pilots emerges from the tent and gazes fixedly up into the blue sky. He points, and one glimpses a black speck against the blue, high overhead. The sound of the motor ceases, and the speck grows larger. It moves earthward in steep dives and circles, and as it swoops closer, takes on the shape of an airplane. Now one can make out the red, white, and blue circles under the wings which mark a French war-plane, and the distinctive insignia of the pilot on its sides.

“Ton patron arrive!” one mechanic cries to another. “Your boss is coming!”

The machine dips sharply over the top of a hangar, straightens out again near the earth at a dizzy speed a few feet above it and, losing momentum in a surprisingly short time, hits the ground with tail and wheels. It bumps along a score of yards and then, its motor whirring again, turns, rolls toward the hangar, and stops. A human form, enveloped in a species of garment for all the world like a diver’s suit, and further adorned with goggles and a leather hood, rises unsteadily in the cockpit, clammers awkwardly overboard and slides down to terra firma.

A group of soldiers, enjoying a brief holiday from the trenches in a cantonment near the field, straggle forward and gather timidly about the airplane, listening open-mouthed for what its rider is about to say.

“Hell!” mumbles that gentleman, as he starts divesting himself of his flying garb.

“What’s wrong now?” inquires one of the tenants of the tent.

“Everything, or else I’ve gone nutty,” is the indignant reply, delivered while disengaging a leg from its Teddy Bear trousering. “Why, I emptied my whole roller on a Boche this morning, point blank at not 15 meters off. His machine gun quit firing and his propeller wasn’t turning and yet the darn fool just hung up there as if he were tied to a cloud. Say, I was so sure I had him it made me sore—felt like running into him and yelling, ‘Now, you fall, you bum!’”

The eyes of the poilus register surprise. Not a word of this dialogue, delivered in purest American, is intelligible to them. Why is an aviator in a French uniform speaking a foreign tongue, they mutually ask themselves. Finally one of them, a little chap in a uniform long since bleached of its horizon-blue color by the mud of the firing line, whisperingly interrogates a mechanic as to the identity of these strange air folk.

“But they are the Americans, my old one,” the latter explains with noticeable condescension.

Marvelling afresh, the infantrymen demand further details. They learn that they are witnessing the return of the American Escadrille—composed of Americans who have volunteered to fly for France for the duration of the war—to their station near Bar-le-Duc, 25 miles south of Verdun, from a flight over the battle front of the Meuse. They have barely had time to digest this knowledge when other dots appear in the sky, and one by one turn into airplanes as they wheel downward. Finally all six of the machines that have been aloft are back on the ground and the American Escadrille has one more sortie over the German lines to its credit.

Personnel of the Escadrille

Like all worthwhile institutions, the American Escadrille, of which I have the honor of being a member, was of gradual growth. When the war began, it is doubtful whether anybody anywhere envisaged the possibility of an American entering the French aviation service. Yet, by the fall of 1915, scarcely more than a year later, there were six Americans serving as full-fledged pilots, and now, in the summer of 1916, the list numbers fifteen or more, with twice that number training for their pilot's license in the military aviation schools.

The pioneer of them all was William Thaw, of Pittsburg, who is today the only American holding a commission in the French flying corps. Lieutenant Thaw, a flyer of considerable reputation in America

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