



The pilots that made up the Aero Squadrons of World War I were, with certain exceptions, educated elite, largely from the Ivy League colleges. From an initial cadre of about 24 men, the 13th Aero Squadron produced three men who wrote books. The best known is *THE WAY OF THE EAGLE* by Squadron Commander Charles J. Biddle. Late in his life Stuart Elliot wrote a book *WOODEN CRATES & GALLANT PILOTS*. The following material is taken from Leighton Brewer's book – *RIDERS OF THE SKY*. The book is a combination of fact and fiction, written in free verse. In the Foreword to his book he writes, "where the truth is definitely known I have tried to adhere closely to the truth..." And, "It has been my desire to portray truly the spirit of those times; to bring back to the men who shared that life a picture of it, and to honour the memory of those who went to fly in France and did not return." Early in the book Brewer tells about the early training to be a combat pilot. The extract below picks up where Brewer joins the 13th Aero and gets his SPAD. In the text Brewer calls himself Bob Wainwright.



Leighton Brewer

RIDERS OF THE SKY

Leighton Brewer

Extracted from Chapter VI

Bob Wainwright walked up to a kingly plane:
It was a Spad – a Spad; the very name
Rang in his heart like the clear silver call
Of some celestial trumpeter at dawn
Blown when a band of giants issue forth
From the grim gates of Jotunheim to storm
Valhalla. And this Spad, his very own;
Two hundred and twenty horsepower. He stepped in
To a cockpit roomy as a racing car's
And bright with shining instruments. 'Coupe!
A corporal grunted as he wound the 'Éclair'
In three half-turns; then 'Contact' and the stick
Twitched like a catbird's tail.

They try again.

The big Hispano sputters and then spins
With steady purr, four hundred to the minute.
Bob felt the linen quivering with life
And hidden power, wanting to be free:
The short straight stubby wings with leading edge
Keen as a sword-blade – built for speed, she was,
And double-wired. They leaned against his struts
And blocked the wing-tips as he raced the motor,

And the nine-inch thick propeller thrashed the air.
The needle to six, eight, ten hundred jumps;
She coughs, she spits, she hesitates until
The high-speed jets come in, and then roars up
To twenty-two hundred and fifty. He waved them back.

This was the magic moment he'd awaited
For ten long months. Like a sled hitched to a sleigh
On well-packed snow and drawn by strong swift horses,
Bob felt the pull, his back pressed hard against
The wicker seat, and his Spad cut through the grass
As a salmon darts down a long reach of river
When first he feels the fly. But loath to leave
The ground, he thought, as the field kept flying past
And no more sign of rising than a penguin.
He shot a nervous side-glance at the throttle;
It was only halfway open. He jerked it wide.
Then with a sudden burst as if expelled
From some great catapult she forward leaps
And takes the hedgerow with a single bound,
Up, up, up like an eagle.

The June sky, a hemisphere of pearl spun with fine threads
Above, was buoyant in the sunbright morning;
No bumps at all, and swiftly soared that Spad
Up to ten thousand feet in just eight minutes.
More sensitive to the joy-stick than a Nieuport:
The slightest touch would turn her; but the rudder
Smaller and less treacherous than the one
He had learned to treat with care at Issoudun

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Where one imprudent kick on the cross-bar
Might mean a dull procession to slow music.
Speed rather than maneuvering was her forte:
On the level none could outrace her. You could roll
And loop her – she was strong – and out of control
Sink fast in a lazy spin. With twenty-metre
Wing-surface she could reach the thin mare's tails
That slid across the ceiling, and furthermore,
She'd keep your feet warm in that icy ocean
That takes the dawn patrols. Then, like the osprey
That shuts its wings and falls, down, down she drops,
And skimming the mile-long field at swallow speed
Grounds with a 'vaseline' landing.

Bob strolled back to the barracks, where he found a
French lieutenant gesticulating, jabbering some news:
'Le grand Americain est mort' – Lufbery:
The leading killer of the Lafayette,
Who seventeen times in single combat sent
The Maltese Crosses down; one with Bill Thaw,
And Norman Prince, and Hall, and Victor Chapman,
And Rockwell, and the rest of those whose names

Are of the Escadrille as much a part
As Caesar's is of Rome; the foremost Knight
Of that bright band of Galahads and adventures
Who, ere their country was embroiled, had come
To France to pay a debt long overdue,
And, by the side of that same former foe
With whom their fathers fought, now joined all three
Against a giant enemy. No more
Would comrades hear his eager invitation
'Come on, boys, let's go out and hunt them Boches.'
The Heinic-queller, keen and calculating,
Trapped in a flaming Nieuport, just dropped out:
There was no sense in being burnt to death.

So 'Luf' went to his rest at Luxembourg
In the soldiers' cemetery; the well-known words
Pronounced in accents clear by Chaplain Billings,
Who from the warmth and comfort of his study
At Groton, where his Sunday morning breakfasts
And open fires made many a schoolboy's heart
Glad when the north wind breathed its wintry breath
Over New England's cold hills, came to France

To do his bit; and with staunch faith and humour
Many a sick and sorely wounded soldier
Served, and many an aviator buried.

Squadron 13, and the first to fly
'Two-twenty' Spads, From Colombey-les-Belles
Bob Wainwright drove his plane down the long valley
Where bordered by high hills the slow Moselle
Swings round the old walled town of Toul; and there
A huge rectangle hemmed in by the road
To Dieulouard and dark green canvas hangars
And Sebastopol stone barracks basked in the sun.

He found his place in the squadron dining-hall:
There was Charlie Biddle, Philadelphia lawyer,
A Captain and the C.O., with a cane and limp
From wounds received in Flanders when he fell
In No-Man's Land, thence to crawl back at night
Through shell-holes and barbed wire. Well versed in war,
He had downed three Boches and fought a year on the front.
There was Hobey Baker, blond like a Greek god,
Fresh from the Lafayette for flight-commander;
There was Charlie Drew who meant all that he said;
There was lantern-jawed Buck Freeman who hissed out
His words from the side of his face; crap-shooter, he
Would win three months' pay at a single session.
Stu Elliott was there, the hardy owl
Who flew without a helmet. Murray Guthrie
And Jerry Stivers, pals from training-school
But eager to do business with the Boches;
And 'Laddie' Brewer who liked to go to bed
At eight o'clock, and as mess-officer
Was hailed until a diet of canned crab
Too oft repeated change of sentiment
Provoked, and so another was elected.

There was Dave Howe from Burlington, Vermont –
Newspaper correspondent, somewhat fond
Of philosophic argument, who oft
Would burn his candle far into the night;
And Bob Converse from Rochester, who'd steal
A side-car or the Captain's Cadillac
To comb the country-side for souvenirs
Or take a Red-Cross lady for a ride.
There was Guyon Armstrong of Memphis, Tennessee,



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And Hank Stovall of Stovall, Mississippi;
 A good bird-dog and cotton planter, he,
 With a keen eye for black-crosses in a dogfight
 Or for knocking Fokkers off a fellow's tail.
 Good-natured George Kull, friend of countesses;
 He flew a natty Spad named 'Helen Air';
 'Cy' Presley, former student of Theology,
 Then steeple-jack and painter of tall chimneys,
 Who could play a piano, banjo, fiddle, flute
 Or harp, for rhythm through his fingers flowed
 As wind through flying wires; and McAteer
 From Arkansas, who chose 'snake-eyes' for his
 Insignia; Hugh Ellis, adjutant;
 And Bob Wainwright, now at the front at last
 Flying a Spad: it was the mountain-peak
 He had aspired to climb. But like a youth
 Who fondly gazing upward yearns to reach
 That pinnacle which from the level plain
 Seems loftiest, and after months of toil
 Arrives at last upon the coveted height,
 Only to hear the voice that lured him thus
 So long, now whisper in his ear 'Behold!'
 And turning toward the far side he discerns
 Uprising from a sightless canyon vast
 Cloud-splitting walls of granite crowned with snow –
 'These are but foot-hills; yonder are the ranges.'
 So Bob began again at new beginning.

Beside his squadron on the field at Toul
 Was the 139th, to which belonged
 Dave Putnam, who American ace of aces
 Became when fiery Frank Baylies went down
 In flames on the French front. And there also
 Was the Lafayette, re-christened the 103rd,
 From Flanders back with Bill Thaw, and a remnant
 Of former members; and among them Tobin,
 Who docked the Kaiser's count three in one hour;
 'Gene' Jones, who never heard of fear; lived only
 To fight and love: there was damn little loving,
 But he got his fill of fighting ere he fell
 Under the coughing guns of some Boche ace;
 And George Turnure, who in ten months of action
 Had seen enough to satisfy his lust
 For thrills. Then there was he who ruled the roost –

'Jam' Johnson, group commander and a colonel,
 But with sense enough to let the boys alone.

Bob was assigned to Flight One with Stu Elliott,
 Buck Freeman, Charlie Drew and Hobey Baker.
 He read the order posted on the board:
 '17:00 o'clock to 18:45
 Patrol of five planes from the 13th Squadron,
 From St. Mihiel to Bey at five thousand metres.'

They found their Spads lined up in echelon
 Facing the wind, the engines spinning slowly;
 And Hobey Baker said, 'There's just eight minutes
 Before we take off, fellow. We will form
 At a thousand metres over Mont St. Michel,
 Flying in left-hand circles. Have a care
 When you criss-cross on the turns to keep close up;
 And if we sight a Boche, don't start to shoot
 Till you can read the number on his rudder.'

Bob strolled to where his Number Three was panting
 In short quick breaths like a dog on a hot day;
 Banged on the stabilizer, felt the wires –
 They were tight as tournament gut; so he slipped on
 His combination-duster, gloves and goggles
 And mounted into the car. There was his map,
 The lines drawn in red pencil; the bright row
 Of clocks and dials with indicators trembling.
 He grasped his 'manche a balai'; made the motor
 Hum with a healthy music, and was off
 Like a big cock-pheasant, first to take the air.

The afternoon was hot and full of pockets,
 And to keep his engine cool Bob climbed her slowly
 And circled round the appointed place, until
 Buck Freeman, and then Hobey Baker, hove
 Into sight, his white-edged Number One distinct
 Across the top wing; then the rest arrived,
 And they straightened out with noses pointing northward.
 For fifteen hundred metres the air was like
 A stoke-hole's breath, but gradually abating;
 Till at four thousand bracing and delicious
 As after winter's first snowfall; and when
 Their altimeters registered the height
 Appointed, polar as the eternal frost.

(To Be Concluded in November)