HOW IT WAS-1918

Leighton Brewer

(The author told his story in a taped interview early in 1961. He was one of five members of the 13th Squadron to stay with it through its combat career. He is the author of "Riders of the Sky", a long epic poem about AEF Pursuit Aviation. Professor at Boston University after the war.)

I finished up my training at Issoudun on the 1st of May, but there weren't enough Spads, so a number of us volunteered to go out with the 90th Squadron, which was flying Salmsons. It turned out that they didn't have Salmsons either, and they were flying old Sopwiths. We flew them around the field at Amanty, just practicing. These were horrible old airplanes, very slow, with 130 Clerget, and just held together—fitted—rather than fastened. I had my only accident in one. I'd been trained in fighters and, in landing, was used to gliding at a pretty steep angle, then leveling off, and with short wings, would settle down shortly. When I tried this with a Sopwith it simply floated all the way across the field. I saw two hangers looming up and went between one of them and a telegraph pole. I lost my right wings on the hanger, my left wings on the pole, and came to rest on a road, sitting in the fuselage.

We finally moved up with the 90th Squadron to Ourches and started operating. I'd only been there about a week or so when I got orders to go to the 13th Squadron. Freeman and I were the only two who ever got out of the 90th and into pursuit planes. We were only with them from the 15th of May to about the end of June. When we got to the 13th Squadron, there were only about five of us there; Charlie Biddle, Hobey Baker, Stuart Elliot, Harry Freeman and I.

We received our plane numbers pretty much in the order we arrived. Baker was number 1, Elliot was 2, I was 3 and Freeman was 4. Charlie Drew, a very brave boy who later lost his right arm and got a Distinguished Service Cross, was number 5. Alton Brody (of course we called him "Steve") was number 6. Charlie Biddle was number 0. George Fisher was the flight commander of the second flight, and his number was 7. A fellow named Henry Inglis, I think was number 8 and Henry Riley was number 9. Earle Richards was 11, and George Kull, 11 – he was killed on the 14th of September. Maury Jones, the third flight commander was 13; Guyon Armstrong was 14 – he was killed by Archie on the 4th of October. Hank Stovall, the leading ace of the squadron after Biddle, was 15; Jack Seerley, 16; Bob Converse, 17; and Dave Howe, 18. That was the original squadron.

These numbers were given to us in the order in which we arrived and didn't necessarily indicate what position we flew in the formation. We had six men to a flight, initially, but about the first of second week in August they added a seventh. The Flight Commander always led his flight, but the rest of us flew different positions in it in order to gain experience. When we flew with an odd number of planes we flew in a "V"; when we had an even number, the extra man flew a little above the "V", closing its rear.

The Spad was an awfully comfortable plane to fly, it had a large cockpit, and the heat from the water-cooled engine kept the pilot warm up to 5,000 meters. It was a wonderful plane to fight in, probably the best fighter plane developed during World War I. I had five different engines; the first two were very good and the last two, not so good. The first one lasted 60 hours; the second 40 hours when I cracked a cylinder over the lines and had to go back home. I had my plane fixed up to suit me. I have a pretty small hand and had a hard time squeezing both machine gun triggers at the same time. I had my mechanic turn one around to put them closer together. I had instruments placed just where I wanted them, and also had a piece of iron put under the seat.

I used a Ray-Soulte sight, too. Hank Stovall and I were the only ones that did –I didn't like looking through all the metal of the other kind. The Ray-Soulte was just two little red beads, mounted at the opposite ends of a bar and you lined up your target between them. Sort of automatically computed the right lead if it was lined up right. I was lucky in that my Spad would turn up 100 revolutions faster than anyone else's and I could always catch up with the formation if I got a little behind. I kept this Spad all the time I was with the squadron. It was the only one still going on November 11th that had been with the squadron was formed on July 1st. It was called "Old Three".

We flew around for a week or so and then went on our first flight over the lines about the 10th. It was a very peaceful trip, really, since the Toul sector was so quiet then. We had a chance to learn the terrain and get experience in judging distances and seeing things in the air without having to worry about the Germans–we were really a very lucky squadron that way. Charlie Biddle led our first flight. He was a wonderful commanding officer. He had been with the Lafayette for a year, had shot down two planes and had been wounded–a piece of shrapnel in his knee. He was still limping a little when he came to the 13th. He was an ideal commander; whenever there was a really tough mission, he would always lead it

himself. Five of us went over the lines and we saw a Rumpler, but it was too far away to do anything.

Initially we had the 103rd and the 139th with us. A little later the 103rd went over to the Third Pursuit Group and we had the 22nd and 49th squadrons along with the 13th and the 139th in the Second Pursuit Group. Our Group Commander was Davenport Johnson. He was a good fellow--very decent. He occasionally flew with the Group, although that wasn't his job. We never operated on a scale larger than a squadron. Frequently the whole Group was out at the same time, but operating at different levels.

Our mechanics were very good and conscientious men. They would often work all night to get our planes right for us. I had three very good ones–very reliable and hard-working. Some of those fellows signed up thinking they were going to get flight training. That was one of the best things about our squadron–there was a lot of "esprit de corps", even on the part of the enlisted men who didn't get the glory. Having a splendid C.O. like Biddle, one of the very best, we had a great advantage over some of the other squadrons.

We used to take off whenever we were ready, or if everyone was ready, at the same time, in order of side numbers. We would meet at 1,000 meters over some designated spot, assemble the formation, and then start climbing as we approached the lines. Most of our flights were high ones, 3,500 or 5,000 meters, except when we were strafing infantry, or whenever we had low clouds. Actually I flew on the highest patrol by the American Army in World War I. Our flight went out on the 7th of September, with Freeman leading, followed by Elliott, Drew, Brody and myself. We sighted a group of German planes on their side of the lines at about 5,000 meters and started climbing to get above them. We climbed...and they climbed...until we got up to 21,500 and they couldn't quite make it. So, we crossed over and hopped them. Didn't miss oxygen much, but I felt very bloated. That's another thing–You couldn't eat too much breakfast before a high patrol or you'd swell up a lot.

As far as living conditions at the field, there were some very fine stone barracks which made very good quarters. They were right on the edge of the field, so that whenever we had a four o'clock patrol they would awaken us at three. We'd get breakfast and be on the flight line at twenty minutes until four to warm up our planes and to get our instructions. We were scheduled both for regular patrols and for what was called an 'alert', which means sitting down at the field for a certain number of hours. If they called up and said that a Boche had just crossed the lines at such-and-such a place, three of us would go after him. There was an operations tent that had a stove in it. Sgt. Waller, who wrote the history of the 13th, sat at a little desk and took orders on the telephone. If it was raining, we sat inside; if it wasn't, we sat outside on the grass and Hobey Baker read "Dere Mabel" to us.It was very pleasant in that sector in the summer. The weather was good and we could go swimming in the Moselle in the afternoons..and go into town at night and see the Red Cross girls. When the St. Mihiel show started, the fun was over!

The offensive opened on the 12th of September and it was a very foggy day. We went out at about 400 meters, strafing infantry. I didn't happen to fly on the 13th, but that was another very bad day. It was also the day that the German Air Force arrived. The St. Mihiel fighting really began on the 14th of September–that was the first good day. On the 14th we were given a low patrol, 2,500 meters, and we were flying this when we were attacked by a bunch of red-nosed Fokkers. We lost four planes within one minute! I was flying between a couple of men who were shot down, but I only got one bullet in the tail of my plane. The first indication that I had of the thing was seeing a red Fokker with a white fuselage, standing on its nose and spraying the fellow in the back of me with bullets. Two Fokkers with red wings and noses, and white fuselages, came down on us and they shot down the men on each side of me. Charlie Drew, George Kull, Buck Freeman and "Steve" Brodywere all lost. Drew was very badly wounded, Kull was killed, and the other two were prisoners. The next day Hank Stovall led a group of five or six of us and we caught this circus climbing up and we got three of them.

I remember seeing a Fokker, with Stovall's Spad right behind him, so I tipped up and sprayed right in front of him so that he had to go through my fire as well as Stovall's. The Fokkers all had red noses and wings, but some of them seemed to have white fuselages, and others had gray. Our squadron met them a third time–I wasn't along then–and they shot down another two of our fellows, Brodie (the other Brodie in our squadron) and Stivers. That was on the 1st of October, I think. On September 23rd, just before the Argonne offensive opened, we flew up to Belrain, on the Verdun front. We had been at Toul all through the St. Mihiel battle. After the start of the Meuse-Argonne offensive, we had to be in the operations tent almost every daylight hour. It was a period of great activity for our squadron. We did a lot of escort work, and that was pretty dirty.

When you had a high patrol, 5000 meters or so, that was swell–you could pick and choose. When you had to stick around near some photographic plane though,with half the German Air Force above you–it was rough! We were sent out to meet bombers several times. The Germans used to let them come through and then hop on them as they were returning, so they would order us to meet the bombers on their return

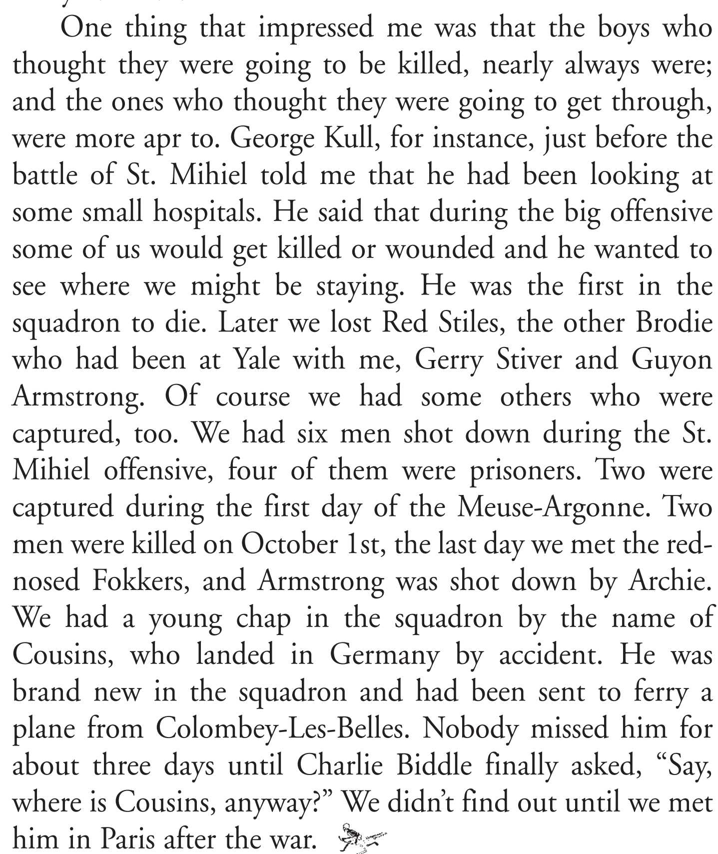
trip. On one or two occasions we couldn't find them. It's extraordinary how large the air is up there sometimes.

Carl Spaatz flew with us for a week or so. He was a Regular Army Major then, rather hard-boiled, but very fair. I remember having to come up before him once or twice. On the first occasion he asked me if I knew what the maximum penalty for my offense was, and I said, "No." He said, "It's death. Don't let it happen again." Another time I had gotten into some trouble with some Field Commander for flying out of bounds, and he recommended that I be sent to a bombing squadron as punishment. When I told Spaatz that I wanted to fly a Spad at the front, he signed an order, over this Commander's head, passing me on to the next field. Before the Argonne offensive started, Major Spaatz showed up at the squadron one day. He said that he had three weeks leave and wanted to spend it getting some practical experience. He asked to be assigned to the squadron and be considered as a "Lieutenant" while he was there. He was put into the first flight (which was mine) and I flew several missions with him.

On the day of the Argonne offensive, our squadron was given the patrol at 5000 meters, the choice spot because you were above everybody. The entire squadron went out at six in the morning. Charlie Biddle led the first flight, which was the lowest of the three. I was on one wing and Major Spaatz was on the other. Guyon Armstrong led the third, and there were five or six planes from the second flight also. It was still quite dark and we could see about seven towns on fire as the Germans were pulling back north of Verdun. Down below us we could see the great coil of the River Meuse, covered with fog. Verdun was pretty well fog-shrouded, too. We crossed the lines near Verdun and then turned east, just about sunrise. We flew along the front for a few miles and then saw a flight of about seven German planes, just inside their own lines about 500 meters below us and flying west. They were meat for us,so we let them pass, then we turned around to attack out of the sun. Charlie Biddle went down on the tail man and shot him down, but he went down so fast that he came up again in front of the leader. By this time they had turned back towards their own lines. I had a gun jam and pulled up for a second to clear it, and when I looked around again I couldn't see anybody. A couple of minutes earlier the sky had been full of airplanes streaming tracer bullets.

I flew around for a little bit and then saw another Spad and attached myself to it. It was Biddle. We started back towards our lines at Verdun, when suddenly Charlie turned around and flew back into German territory. I didn't know what he was doing, but I went also. Soon I saw another Spad fighting off two enemy Fokkers, the Spad was getting lower and lower and further and further into Germany. It was Major Spaatz. Biddle dove down on one of the Germans and sprayed him with bullets, and he pulled out and the other fellow ran, too. We went home–getting the most fearful shellacking from the Archies stationed at Verdun. I don't know whether we had made the Germans mad, or what, but that was the worst Archie that I had ever seen–great flaming bursts on all sides of my airplane. I thought that my plane would be riddled, but when I got back home I discovered that it wasn't even scratched.

In October, we would see an enemy on almost every flight. I guess I had a total of 75 flights over the lines and engaged the enemy perhaps 15-20 times. Our average time on each flight mission was about an hour and three-quarters—the Spads had fuel for about two hours flight. On October 18 we sighted a group of black-and-white striped aircraft which we thought at first to be Fokkers. When we got a little closer though, I saw that some were two-seaters. I should say that there were about four Fokkers and two of the two-seaters. The stripes were diagonal, across both wings and fuselage. I think that our last big fight was on the 4th of November. After that date the Germans were scarce in the air--you would have to look for them.



One thing that impressed me was that the boys who thought they were going to be killed, nearly always were; and the ones who thought they were going to get through, were more apr to. George Kull, for instance, just before the battle of St. Mihiel told me that he had been looking at some small hospitals. He said that during the big offensive some of us would get killed or wounded and he wanted to see where we might be staying. He was the first in the squadron to die. Later we lost Red Stiles, the other Brodie who had been at Yale with me, Gerry Stiver and Guyon Armstrong. Of course we had some others who were captured, too. We had six men shot down during the St. Mihiel offensive, four of them were prisoners. Two were captured during the first day of the Meuse-Argonne. Two men were killed on October 1st, the last day we met the red-nosed Fokkers, and Armstrong was shot down by Archie. We had a young chap in the squadron by the name of Cousins, who landed in Germany by accident. He was brand new in the squadron and had been sent to ferry a plane from Colombey-Les-Belles. Nobody missed him for about three days until Charlie Biddle finally asked, "Say, where is Cousins, anyway?" We didn't find out until we met him in Paris after the war.