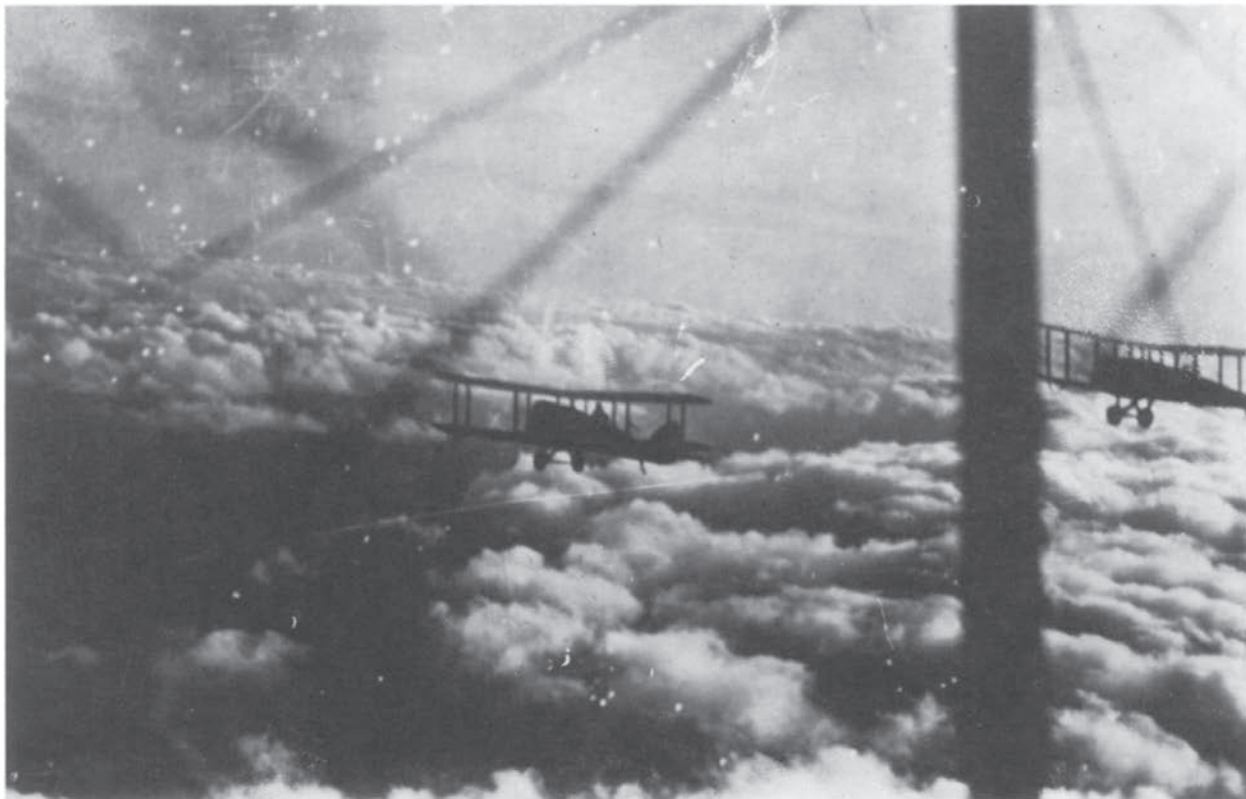


Montana's BIRDMEN



of WORLD WAR I

by Dennis Gordon

When the Armistice ended World War I in 1918, and the last Lewis gun to chatter at a German Fokker from the back of a biplane over France was silent, 8,000 U.S. flyers had seen action. Not quite 500 of those were observation pilots, whose intelligence and reconnaissance flying had been the only use for airplanes most military men could imagine before the war. But by war's end, legends of the more glamorous pursuit pilots were already growing. The observers were left behind in their shadow.

This is the story of the five Montanans who flew observation aircraft in the American Expeditionary Force. Their stories illuminate the spectrum of World War I flyers' experiences; those who arrived in France with minimal training or who were veterans of the 1916 Mexican Punitive Expedition; those who enlisted in French service before the U.S. joined the war; those who flew overlong hours because of manpower or airplane shortages; and those who were attacked in the air, crashed because their planes gave out, became prisoners of war, or achieved "ace" status. In covering the collective effort, historians have often failed to mention personal valor, such as that shown by Montanans Leonard Hammond, Jack Milburn, Robert A. Patterson, Benjamin Harwood, and William Belzer.

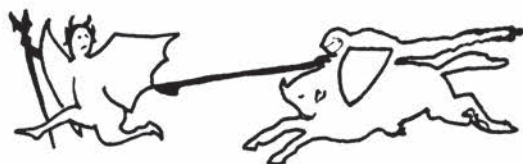


The U.S. air field at Toul, from the cockpit of an observation aircraft

Unless otherwise indicated, all photos courtesy of the author



For Montana, the first effect of that distant war in Europe was higher prices for crops that homesteaders were raising. But when the United States finally entered the war in 1917, the Selective Service erroneously estimated the state's population at almost twice its correct number. The result was a sad, and long-lasting, loss: out of an actual population of 496,131, Montana would lose a total of 3,443 residents in the war—proportionately more than any other state. Even though the draft quotas were set too high, some Montanans had already enlisted in foreign services before their own U.S. army joined the battle.



LEONARD HAMMOND was one such early enlistee. Born in Missoula November 24, 1884, into a pioneer family, he had attended Harvard and Stanford before enlisting with the French Ambulance Corps in 1915. He saw action in 1916 at Verdun and in the Oise-Aisne sector.

When the U.S. entered the war, Hammond returned home to be commissioned a first lieutenant in the infantry. After transferring to the Aviation Section, he left for France a second time in November 1917. Following some training in France, he was assigned to a French escadrille, or flying squadron, for further training and his introduction into aerial combat.

In June 1918 he joined the 91st U.S. Aero Observation Squadron, one of the premiere squadrons in the war, and soon made captain. Flying Salmsons decorated with their insignia of a knight chasing a demon, the 91st ranged deep and engaged the enemy in combat on 104 separate occasions during the war, shooting down twenty-one German machines in the process. But it paid the price, with thirteen men killed and eight wounded.

The day that Hammond would win his Distinguished Service Cross, September 15, 1918, was one of the squadron's most active. His citation catches only the highlights of events in the skies over Metz, in the long-disputed Lorraine district.

"While on a photographic mission," it reads, "his formation was attacked by a superior number of enemy pursuit planes. Notwithstanding that the enemy planes succeeded in driving off the protecting planes, he and his pilot, Lieutenant Diekema, continued on alone. Continually harassed by enemy air-



The 91st poses before a Salmson. Leonard Hammond is in center row, third from left. Pilot Diekema is front row, third from left. William T. Badham, another observer ace, stands fourth from right.

craft, they completed their photographs, and on the return fought their way through an enemy patrol and destroyed one of the machines."

Leonard Hammond was good enough with his Lewis guns to become the top observer ace, one of just three aero observers to win the distinction.¹ From behind his tourelle he shot down six enemy machines, one on the day he earned his Distinguished Service Cross.

After the war, Hammond engaged in lumber and shipping until his death in San Francisco in 1945. Today, his pilot, Willis Diekema, who also won his DSC that September day, lives in Michigan and still remembers Hammond's skills with his Lewis guns and that fall afternoon over Metz when "we did a good job on the Boche."

For observation aircraft like Hammond and Diekema's, the job wasn't finished until they returned with the photographic film. Thus, unlike those of bomber and pursuit pilots, their runs were necessarily two-way, with the return through whatever enemy traffic had been met on the way out. Such an encounter led to Hammond's decoration. Flying any aircraft over France in 1918 was a high-risk occupation, one that resulted in grim statistics. By the end of the war, one third of all who had flown were dead.

In training alone, 218 U.S. pilots and observers had been killed, and another 289 would die before the Armistice as a result of hostilities in the skies.

History has incorrectly portrayed the air war over France as one of dash and flair. The pursuit pilots, men like Eddie Rickenbacker and Frank Luke who often flew alone, stole the glory. But in reality, the combat mission was a grinding duty filled with moments of stark terror. The observer airmen distinguished themselves each day they went up to face the enemy, and more often than not, went unrecognized for their valor.

A total of 497 air service observers were involved in this hazardous duty. Fifty-five of them won the Distinguished Service Cross, the United States' second-highest decoration for valor. Three of those fifty-five were Montanans: Benjamin Harwood and William Belzer, along with Leonard Hammond.

During missions, the pilot, seated under the

1. To qualify as an ace, the airman had to down five enemy planes. Verification was required both from the air and by an officer on the ground. A large number of planes shot down were never credited because of lack of ground verification. America's other two observer aces were Lt. William T. Badham, 91st U.S. Aero Squadron, with five, and Lt. Arthur E. Easterbrook, 1st U.S. Aero Squadron, with five.

The observer, whose chest insignia was a half-wing, sat in the back cockpit. He had a variety of contradictory duties to perform. Besides seeing to artillery spotting, or running the aerial photography camera, he also had to protect the plane from attack and so was ever vigilant to air activity around him. His armament consisted of two synchronized Lewis guns mounted on a tourelle, or revolving mount-stand. From behind this device, he could fire at the enemy in all directions except under the fuselage or behind the tail, which would mean blowing off the tail assembly of his own plane. The enemy was well-versed on each plane type's vulnerabilities and sought to attack the blind spots.

Observation aircraft, which played a key role in the war, were neither as mobile nor as fast as the sleek pursuit ships. Two-seater biplanes such as the Salmson and the DeHaviland-4 lumbered along at 100 knots as they spotted for artillery, photographed enemy activity, flew cover in formation for the photo ship, and monitored enemy positions at the front. Their sluggish movement combined with their ground-oriented functions to make them especially vulnerable to "Archies," as the British called German anti-aircraft guns.

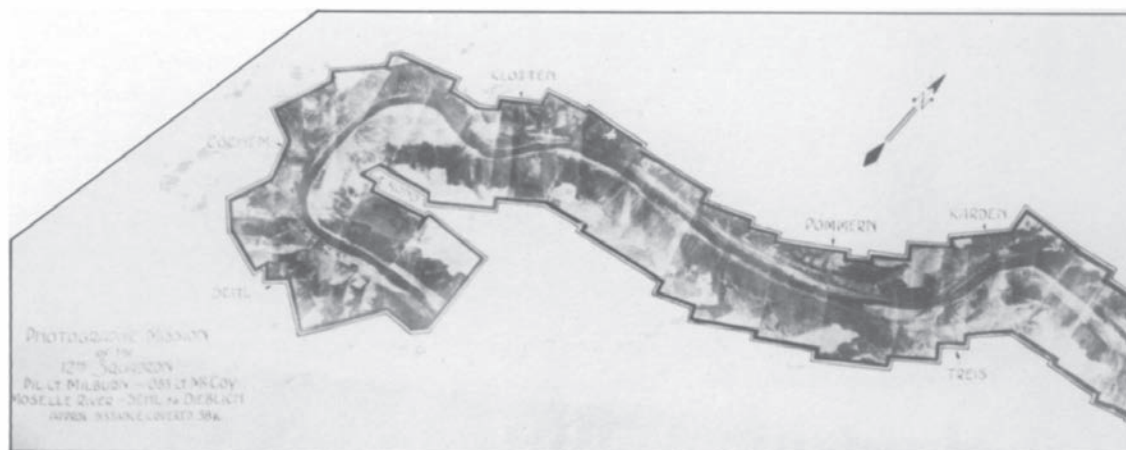
of sticking with a flaming plane and burning to death, or jumping free but with no parachute. When an observation plane went down, it caused double the toll in human life compared to pursuit planes, the fates of both pilot and observer going with it.



Lt. Milburn joined the 12th U.S. Aero Observation squadron at Remicourt, fifteen or so miles behind the Argonne front. He had been in Tours where he was a flight instructor training U. S. Signal Corps observers. He requested duty with the 12th and accepted a transfer when a pilot vacancy occurred.

Milburn had graduated from Montana State College in Bozeman with a civil engineering degree. After school he took a job with the Anaconda Company's geological survey team. But then war had been declared with Germany and life had abruptly changed. In May of 1917, he had volunteered for military service.

Following ground school in Texas, Milburn arrived in Tours in mid-December. After twenty-five hours of flight time, he was accepted as a pilot in both the French and U.S. armies. He was commis-





Jack Milburn

sioned a second lieutenant in the Air Service on June 15, 1918, at Issoudun, the first and largest American flying school in France.

Late in October, the damp journey from Tours to join the 12th left Milburn chilled. When he arrived at 3 a.m., he was glad to be in out of the downpour. He reported in to the commanding officer, first lieutenant Robert Paradise, and sought out his new quarters. During introductions to his fellow officers, Milburn sensed a grim apprehension in the barracks.

The previous afternoon, one of the 12th's planes had been shot down on a photo mission, and there was no word yet as to the fate of the pilot, Lt. Sidney Beauclerk, and his observer, Lt. Bob Patterson.

The 12th Aero Squadron, whose insignia was an eagle clutching a bomb, had been engaged at the front since April 30, 1918, and its casualties had been appalling. Already seven aviators had been killed,

eight wounded, and four taken prisoner. Now the prospect of two more deaths loomed.

Milburn himself was soon to give his comrades such a scare, on his fourth mission over the lines. A broken crank shaft dropped him with his observer onto the battlefield. He was declared missing for two days before finding his way back to his squadron.

He returned that time, and at war's end he returned home to Montana, where he ranched with his brother for thirty-five years near Grass Range. Now retired, he lives in Billings.



ROBERT A. PATTERSON, the observer missing from the 12th when Jack Milburn reported in, hailed from Havre, Montana. Born in Brinkleyville, North Carolina, in 1892, he had joined the 3rd Minnesota National Guard in 1916 with fellow office workers from a wholesale grocery, and was soon on the Mexican Border "protecting the country from Villa," as he called it.

Patterson served six months in Texas then waited in the Great Lakes area to be called into service again, since war with Germany appeared imminent. When war was declared, he was called in as second lieutenant in Company A. At Camp Cody, in Deming, New Mexico, his infantry outfit was made the 125th Field Artillery, and Patterson became first lieutenant of Battery F.

Each AEF artillery outfit, by General Staff order, had to have three airplane observers attached

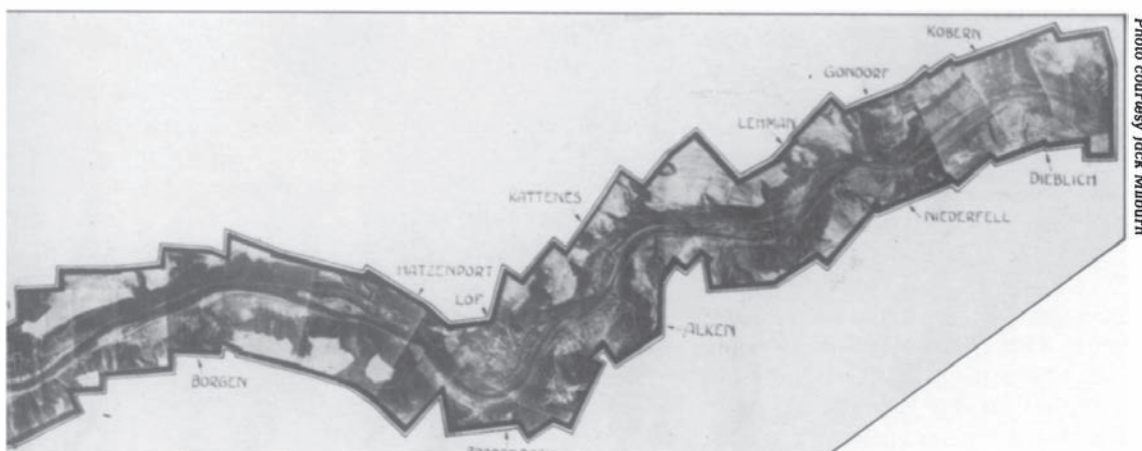


Photo courtesy Jack Milburn

to headquarters. The assigned officers in the 125th failed to pass their flight physicals, so the commanding officer ordered Field Artillery officers to report for physicals in alphabetical order until three qualified. Two officers from Battery F passed, and Bob Patterson was one of them. By the time he had packed his footlocker, he was on his way to Ft. Sill, Oklahoma, to train in artillery observation, one of the first to be schooled in that capacity.

Flight training followed two weeks of aerial artillery practice, directing fire on targets. The pilots training with the observers were inexperienced, and twenty aviators in Patterson's class were killed while banking their Curtiss biplanes back to the field at low flying speed.

In three months Patterson completed his flight training and then took gunnery training at Taliaferro Field near Fort Worth, Texas. He came down with the flu and almost missed his ship overseas.

The U.S.S. *Manchuria* landed at Brest, France, in late 1917. After three more months training in artillery and other forms of observation, Patterson asked for and was assigned to the 12th U. S. Aero Observation Squadron. He arrived at Givry, near Barle-Duc, just in time for the Meuse-Argonne Offensive. Patterson remembers his first trip over the front with the squadron commander.

"The battlefield below us was swarming with the small 'Whippet tanks,' and the road was jammed with retreating German artillery, and gas shells were bursting everywhere. Anti-aircraft shells were exploding on both sides of us and the squadron commander seemed to be enjoying them and I was very nervous. While up there we saw a terrific explosion on the other side of the German lines and it must have been a large ammunition dump. I was supposed to be writing all these incidents down on a report but I was too excited to do anything but look."

Patterson's next trip up was equally eventful. He and his pilot were jumped by five German Fokkers. As the pilot banked quickly and raced for Allied lines, Patterson opened fire with his Lewis guns. He watched his tracer bullets pierce the lead pursuit plane, but he failed to bring it down. Nevertheless, he and his pilot made it home safely, which was considered a victory for an observation plane.

On Patterson's next missions he was to observe and report on enemy artillery and troop movements, and to direct Allied artillery fire on the German artillery batteries then pounding the advancing 1st American Division in the Loire Valley. On other successive missions Patterson was to spot for attacking American units, whose rapid advancements often caused them to lose contact with the staff and put them in danger of rushing under the rolling barrage laid down to protect them. Patterson also engaged German observation planes while he reported on Allied troop movements and located enemy forces, wiring the information back to the command posts. He

remembers it as "exciting work because the whole battle would open up below us and it was so fascinating it was hard to concentrate on the plane we were protecting."

The 12th's mission on October 29 was to take pictures of German emplacements in preparation for a further Allied offensive. French intelligence reports warned that the enemy had been strengthening its air units in the sector opposite the 12th, and that the crack squadron formerly led by Baron Von Richthofen, now equipped with new fighters, would be opposing them. Patterson's mission, with four other craft, was to protect the photo plane. He was assigned to fly with pilot Lt. Sidney Beauclerk, who was so troubled by the mission that he visibly trembled as he entered the cockpit.

Lt. Beauclerk rendezvoused with the photo plane at 6000 feet. He guided his plane into the No. 2 spot, right behind and just to the left of the photo plane. The other Salmsons moved in around them to complete the triangle. Immediately after crossing the battle front, the formation drew heavy anti-aircraft fire. Patterson looked in vain for Allied fighter cover which was supposed to come from the 3rd Pursuit Group, but instead he spotted German fighters circling several thousand feet above them.

When the anti-aircraft fire stopped, Patterson swung his Lewis guns down. The cessation of enemy groundfire was an indication that the German pursuit planes must be very near. Suddenly a formation of Fokkers attacked the middle of Patterson's flight. He opened up on the leader and watched his tracers pierce the enemy craft. An instant later a dark blue Fokker attacked the under-belly of Patterson's plane, fired a burst into the Salmson, forcing the plane into a tight spiraling dive. The sudden descent pressed Patterson into the bottom of his cockpit. The centrifugal force was enormous, but he fought to regain his feet, managed to straighten up and glance at his pilot. Beauclerk's head was not visible above the rustling collar of his flight suit and Patterson realized at that instant his pilot had been killed and was slumped over the controls, jamming them.

Patterson knew death was imminent if he hit the ground plunging from 6000 feet. His only hope lay in clearing the controls. He unbuckled the belt holding him to the tourelle and clambered over the fuselage toward Beauclerk. Below, the ground raced up to meet the plane. A great feeling of despair overwhelmed the as yet unwounded young observer. Then all went black.

The October 29 entry in the Chronological Report of Operations for the 12th Aero Squadron reads ". . . Miscellaneous: 1 plane from the 12th, Lt. Beauclerk, Pilot and Lt. Patterson, Observer, on protection flight for photography mission failed to return. Time: 3:55—."

Sixty years have not dimmed fellow Montanan



Bob Patterson

Jack Milburn's memory of how the squadron he had just joined got word of Beauclerk and Patterson's fate. When the remaining four planes in Patterson's flight returned to the Airdrome, their film was developed. As was often the case, the mission showed to be a costly failure; the film proved useless. The four planes were sent aloft to reshoot the sector, and carried a message with them tied to a red streamer to be dropped to the Germans, asking the fate of their two comrades.

Not long after this repeat mission was completed, a Fokker triplane streaked over the squadron and dropped the reply in a can tied with a red streamer. In such instances, certain courtesies were observed, and the Americans held their fire on the German aircraft. Milburn remembers how "the pilot got smart and started showing off," performing Immelmans and other aerial acrobatics.² That sealed his fate. Word had not reached the French anti-aircraft batteries to hold their fire, and they shot down the hapless German. While he was being taken pris-

2. A turn named after Max Immelmann, a German ace, who is credited with the maneuver, a sudden high swoop up then a flip backward with the aircraft.

oner, other squadron members raced out onto the runway to pick up the can that held news of the fate of their fellow aviators. The message was terse and grim. "Pilot killed. Observer wounded, but alive."

It had been a one-in-a-million chance, but Patterson had become the only U.S. observer to survive from a drop of 6,000 feet with his pilot killed. Coming to from his blackout, he sat up suddenly to the sound of artillery shells bursting nearby. His plane lay 20 yards away, scattered across the battlefield. Five huge soldiers in field grey encircled him, smiling; their collar insignia indicated they were members of the Prussian Guard. Lt. Patterson thus became one of 145 U.S. aviators made prisoner of war in World War I.

While he was still unconscious, a German doctor had bandaged a bullet wound in Patterson's head and cleaned the blood from cuts around his eyes and upper cheeks. He was able to walk to the first-aid station, and was given a tetanus shot. But he soon grew quite ill, both as a result of his wounds and from the 6,000-foot fall. He spent three days in agony in a field hospital, thinking he would die. German medics tended him, bathed and rubbed him, and he started to recover. When the pilot who shot him down came to visit, Patterson drew on his high-school German to converse with the flyer. His condition worsened and he was moved into a Catholic hospital at Montmedy, France, until the Allied offensive grew closer, when he was transferred to Karlsruhe, Germany, and held in a barracks with other captured Allied flyers.

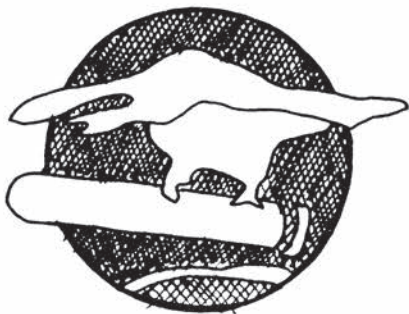
The question of how he had survived the crash remained unanswered until Patterson's arrival back in France on a hospital train. His conversation with a pilot who had been on the same mission helped to fill in the details. After talking with Lt. Burdette Wright, he wrote the following in his P.O.W. report:

"Our ship went into a nosedive and came out into a spiral with the wings practically perpendicular to the ground. The engine was wide open and we spiraled down into the ground, the ship striking the ground on its wing, the fuselage shot ahead but held together which probably accounts for my escape."

In a letter to a friend in 1971, Patterson wrote:

"I thought at the time that the fighter plane had followed me down and shot me while I was struggling to get to the controls, but I am sure now that I got hit while falling through the barrage or possibly from the ground because I was keeping track of the ground coming up until the bullet hit me."

Bob Patterson's memory of the day he was shot down hasn't faded. He also remembers the kindness with which he was treated at the hands of the enemy and still speaks of them as "real gentlemen." Bob returned home to Havre following the war and still lives there after retiring from business in 1960.



BENJAMIN HARWOOD had served with the 12th Aero Squadron before Patterson and Milburn. Wounded when Fokkers attacked his observation plane in July 1918, he was reassigned to headquarters of the Chief of Air Service, 1st Army Corps, after recovering.

Harwood, born in Helena in July 1891, was the son of Edgar Nelson Harwood, a justice of Montana's first State Supreme Court. After graduating from high school, Ben entered Yale University in 1910 and took a Ph.B. in 1913. He received his LL.B. degree from Harvard Law School in 1917. While in attendance, Harwood enlisted in the Massachusetts National Guard as a private, was commissioned second lieutenant in the Field Artillery and served six months on the Mexican border.

In September 1917 he sailed to France as first lieutenant in the 102nd Field Artillery, 26th Division. In November he joined the Air Service and trained as an aerial observer with a French escadrille until May 1918, after which he was attached to the 12th U.S. Aero Observation.

Assigned to the 1st Corps, the 12th reached the front at Ourches on May 3rd, and saw sustained combat while on observation in the Toul Sector, at Chateau-Thierry, St. Mihiel, and on the first and second Meuse-Argonne offensives. The 12th had three confirmed victories over the enemy.

The hours were grinding and long for the 12th U.S. Aero. As Ben Harwood noted in a letter to his family dated July 21, 1918, ". . . calls for aero work

came in fast succession, and we were not a full corps of airmen, so our day's work was about eighteen hours long. . ." Casualties began to add up as a result of heavy enemy activity and because of "a half-dozen 'crashes' that ruined that number of airplanes."

On July 5, 1918, Harwood earned the Distinguished Service Cross, Purple Heart, and Croix de Guerre near Chateau-Thierry. The official citation states that: "He volunteered, with another plane, to protect a photographic plane. In the course of their mission they were attacked by seven planes (Fokker type). He accepted the combat and kept the enemy engaged while the photographic plane completed its mission. His guns jammed and he himself was seriously wounded. After skillfully clearing his guns, with his plane badly damaged, he fought off the hostile planes and enabled the photographic plane to return to our lines with valuable information."

The citation fails to catch the real feeling of the mission and subsequent engagement as precisely as Harwood's letter of July 21 to his parents.

"On July 5th an urgent call came for photographic views of certain terrain across the enemy lines. It was arranged that our squadron photographer's airplane should be accompanied by a patrol of five or six American chasse [pursuit] planes for protection. And for further protection of our photographer and assurance of his doing a good job, two more protection planes were assigned to the enterprise; one of these to be manned by myself as observer, and Mr. Fred Luhr as pilot. When we left the ground and joined the photographer's airplane, the rest of the supposed protection patrol failed to join us, so we proceeded on our way for the photographic project.

"It was a dangerous expedition, in the region where Boche air patrols were numerous, coming through the air like flocks of vultures 'to get' observation airplanes.³ But we had to have those photo-

Photo courtesy Jack Milburn



Jack Milburn, left, with observer Dell H. McCoy of Miller, South Dakota. McCoy wears the belt hooks that attached to the tourelle during flight, and held the observer in his cockpit.

graphs. That was the urgency which pressed us on in our perilous mission, without protection or proper strength. You may be sure we were aware of our peril, and watched with caution and vigilance appropriate to such circumstances."

Initially the mission proceeded without incident while the photographic plane shot twelve plates, then changed position to film a new strip of terrain. But by then enemy anti-aircraft had bracketed the ship, and high-explosive shells ripped the air around the Salmson. Harwood, ever vigilant for enemy aircraft, spotted dim trails of exhaust in the sun's rays. He immediately read this warning sign that there were "Huns" in the air, that they were about to set a trap.

"This interesting little sign was a warning of the Boche airman's favorite trick in his aerial performance. It is to have a bunch of enemy airplanes trail along above and circle about an intended victim, simply to attract and occupy his attention, while their so-called 'Ace' companion approaches unobserved from far above, in the path of the sun's rays, until favorable position is reached, to dive down and destroy the surprised and unprepared quarry."

An airplane swooped down from the sun, confirming Harwood's suspicions. When it closed to within six- to eight-hundred meters, Harwood fired toward it as a warning to identify. Satisfied that the plane was in fact the enemy, he informed his pilot, Lt. Fred Luhr, who immediately juggled for position as Harwood limbered up his Lewis guns. He fired no more than twenty rounds before the guns jammed tight. Luhr, aware of what had happened, "maneuvered to shake the Boche" while Harwood struggled to clear the jam.

The enemy, in a speedier, more maneuverable craft, caught up with the Salmson, and fired two hundred rounds around and into Harwood's defenseless plane. Explosive bullets tore through Harwood's flightsuit and blew off his goggles. Shrapnel struck his neck, chin and eyebrows, and blood momentarily blinded him until his wounds froze over. Still fighting desperately to clear the jam, Harwood managed to get the left gun operating, and squeezed a burst into the pursuing Fokker, but the gun jammed a second time.

"Further effort to make our guns work was fruitless. I had to tell Fred it couldn't be done, and that it was up to him to shake the Boche by maneuver; and suggested that he 'beat it to the right of the sun, and look for the river.' The river was our landmark to get out of Hundom, and reach our lines, if our plane held up."



Ben Harwood

With the Fokker in hot pursuit, Luhr used every maneuver in his repertoire to shake the enemy fighters. But he now flew at a marked disadvantage. One of the Fokker's bullets had pierced the Salmson's gas tank and had struck an engine cylinder.⁴ Luhr watched the path of the enemy's tracer rounds spewing from its machine guns, and thus managed to dodge the course of his fire. As Harwood noted in his letter:

"It was a terrific ride at a speed of about 160 miles per hour, which tore loose everything moveable in our fuselage, and gave me such a bouncing that only by means of my stout belt attached to the gun tourelle was I able to stay with our airplane."

By now the Salmson had lost too much altitude to reach the Allied landing field. A forced landing on the river valley remaining the only choice, Luhr chose the nearest wheat field. Knowing they would need help once they were down, Harwood tried to signal American troops swimming near a railroad bridge, but they misinterpreted his gestures and merely waved to the stricken craft.

Harwood estimated the Salmson's speed at 100 miles an hour when its wheels first made contact with the wheat field. The stalks grabbed the landing gear like giant hands. The plane nose-dived and began somersaulting.

Stunned, the bloodied observer found himself dangling upside down off the belt attached to the tourelle. Gasoline from the punctured tank saturated his riddled flight suit. But his chief concern was for his pilot, "who had exhibited such game spirit, and marvelous resolution and skill, in piloting us through the day's adventures."

3. *Boche*, the French derogatory term for Germans, dates from World War I and derives from *tête de caboche*, or cabbage head.

4. Unlike the DeHavilland, the Salmson had a safety feature unique to its design. The gas tank was encased in rubber, which prevented it from exploding when hit with an incendiary round.

Luhr rolled out of the plane "dazed and limp, but uninjured," although his head-rest had been shot away. Forty bullet holes riddled the plane. Harwood examined his wounds and found eighteen bullet holes in his flight suit. He was transferred to the nearby hospital where he was X-rayed and his wounds tended.

"A night at the hospital with a much appreciated bath and good sleep put me in condition to join my squadron's work the next morning. And Fred Luhr was even more fit for duty the following day."

In spite of what Ben Harwood told his parents in his letter, he was hardly fit for duty. But he knew if he remained in the hospital and failed to answer reveille, he would risk transfer out of the 12th. His camaraderie with his fellow aviators and his loyalty to the squadron forced him to try to go back to the airstrip next morning despite his wounds and considerable loss of blood.

While convalescing as he indeed needed to, Harwood was able to read about his exploits in the AEF newspaper, *The Stars & Stripes*. A reporter had picked up the incident and had featured it on the front page of the July 12, 1918, issue under the title headline "Ten Boche Bullets Nicked This Flyer. But Seven of Them Only Went Through Lieut. Harwood's Clothes."

Once Harwood had truly recuperated, he was attached for duty as Liaison Officer in the Headquarters of the Chief of Air Service, 1st Army Corps. On Sept. 3, 1918, he became Liaison Officer of the Corps Observation Wing, 1st Army, serving during the St. Mihiel and Argonne offensives. Already cited for extraordinary heroism, he was now cited in the General Orders "for exceptional devotion to duty." On Nov. 11, 1918, by command of General William Mitchell, head of Air Service, 1st Lt. Harwood was cited for his "rare tactical conception, splendid devotion to duty, unostentatious tact, and untiring energy," which caused the 1st Army Air units "to operate and function efficiently and to the satisfaction of the Commander at all times."

This was just one of several citations to come to the young officer. He was promoted to Captain of Air Service in February 1919, and while attached to the Division of Military Aeronautics, Washington, D.C., he wrote, at the direction of General Mitchell, the *Tactical History of Corps Observation Air Service A.E.F.* Also while under General Mitchell's command, he drafted both House and Senate bills to create a Department of Air and Aeronautics which were subsequently rejected by the 66th Congress in their 1919 session. (Not until September 1947 would Congress act to make General Mitchell's dream a reality.)

The far-sighted general thought highly enough of Harwood's devotion to duty to recommend him for a Distinguished Service Medal. In recognition of his exemplary service, Harwood was elevated

to major and was bestowed the rating of Junior Military Aviator by Act of Congress before his discharge in 1919. As a final accolade, he received the Aero Club of America's coveted War Medal.

Following his military service, Harwood became involved in business management in Paris, then in New York and in Baltimore until 1925, when he was admitted to the Montana bar and set up a legal practice in Billings. He later served as Yellowstone county attorney, as counsel to the U.S. Indian Irrigation Service, and was a member of the Montana legislature from 1925 to 1936. From 1936 until January of 1960, he served on the bench in Montana's Thirteenth Judicial District. Since his retirement, he has maintained a private law practice in Billings.



WILLIAM BELZER of Glasgow served with the 135th Aero Squadron in France. When he met up with Ben Harwood of the 12th, it was not overseas or in the chaos of the war—but rather over a quiet fishing stream back home in Montana, many years later.

William Belzer learned to operate a machine gun as a sergeant of G Company with the Montana National Guard. Born in Ackley, Iowa, on Nov. 4, 1890, he was a young man when he, his parents, and four brothers moved to Glasgow. He planted permanent roots in the state, and enlisted in the Montana National Guard in 1915 in Glasgow. After serving in the Mexican Border Campaign with General Pershing in 1916, he was recalled to service in March 1917 when war was declared. Commissioned a second lieutenant in a machine gun company of the 163rd Infantry, Belzer landed in France on January 1, 1918. He joined the Air Service in late February, and after taking two months training with the escadrille at Belfort, he was assigned to the 135th U.S. Aero Observation Squadron.

The 135th chose the Statue of Liberty as its insignia. It was the first squadron to use the American-made Packard V12 Liberty engine in the DeHavilland-4, better known as the "flaming coffin." The gas

tank was situated between the pilot and observer, and if struck by an incendiary bullet, it would explode, engulfing both aviators in a fiery tomb. Another negative feature, as Jack Milburn remembers, was that the plane's exhaust was at the pilot's elbow, constantly releasing noxious fumes and a deafening roar from the engine.

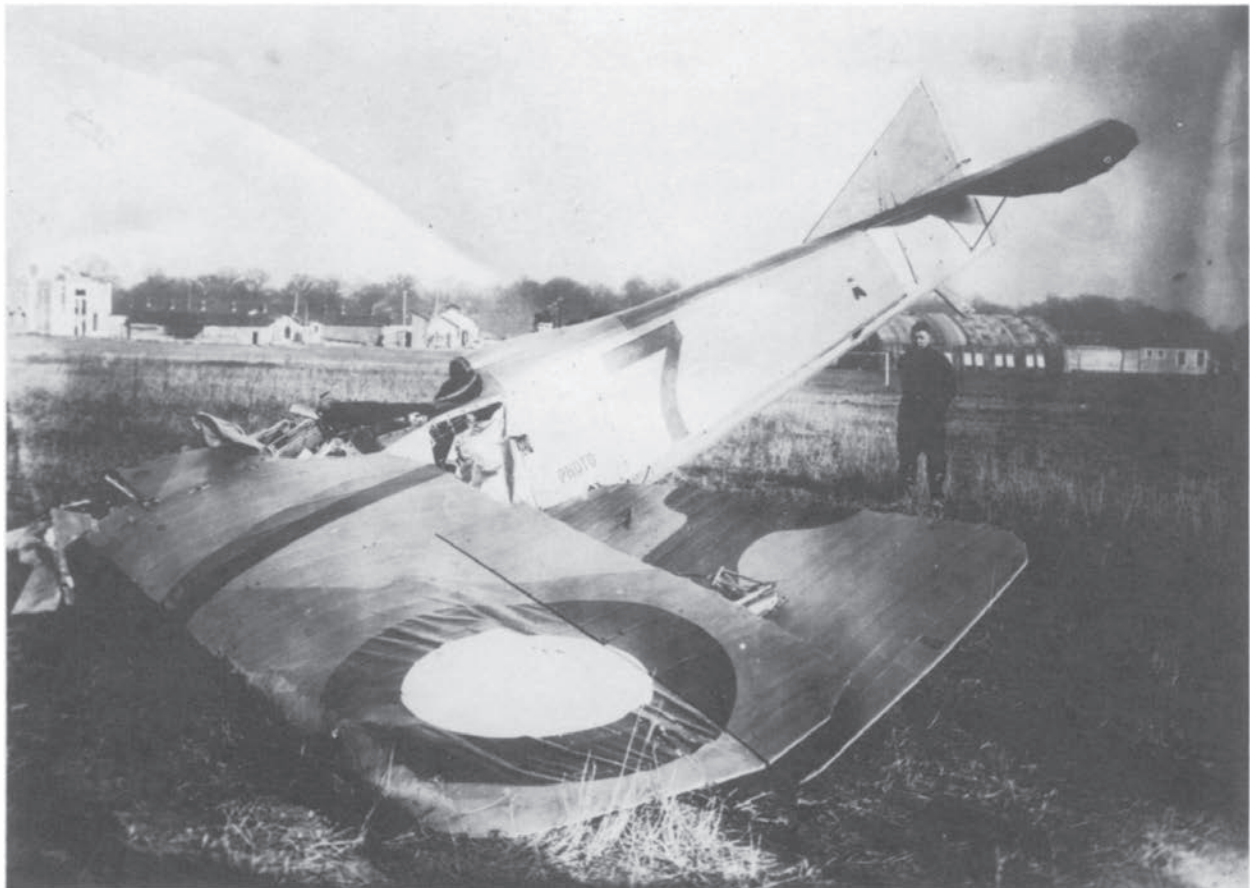
The 135th saw considerable combat from July 28, 1918, onward, partaking in the operations preceding and during the St. Mihiel Offensive (September 12-16) and the Meuse-Argonne First and Second Offensives (September 26-November 11). The Squadron brought down eight enemy aircraft, but suffered five killed and two wounded in the process. Seven men won the DSC, three posthumously. Among the four who won the DSC and survived were Bill Belzer and his pilot, Wallace Coleman, in action over Jaulny, France, September 12-13, 1918. Belzer's citation reads:

"On Sept. 12 Lieutenant Belzer, observer, and First Lieutenant Wallace Coleman, pilot, while on an artillery surveillance mission, were attacked by an enemy plane. They waited until the enemy was at close range and then fired 50 rounds directly into the vital parts of the enemy machine, which was seen to disappear out of control. The next day Lieutenants Belzer and Coleman, while on a reconnaissance mission, were attacked by seven enemy aircraft. They unhesitatingly opened fire, but owing to



Bill Belzer

The wreck of an (unidentified) observer plane.



their guns being jammed were forced to withdraw to our lines where, clearing the jam, they returned to finish the mission. Their guns again jammed, and they were driven back by a large patrol of enemy planes. After skillfully maneuvering they succeeded in putting one gun into use and returned a third time, only to be driven back. Undaunted, they returned a fourth time and accomplished their mission, transmitting valuable information to the Infantry headquarters."

Lt. Belzer's flight log entries, in less military phraseology, illustrate the activities of those days.

"Sept. 12, '18. Awakened at 4:45 A.M. and my first trip started at 6:30 and lasted until 8:20. Much excitement. One fight close up with an Albatross scout. Second trip with Lt. Fleet. Our infantry surely making progress. Now have advanced about six kilometers. More Boche but no fights. Infantry still moving forward. Dead tired tonight and I fly early tomorrow. Clouds only about 1000 feet and flying very difficult. Three of our planes are missing. Lt. Coleman Pilot.

"Sept. 13, 1918. One trip on Infantry Liaison and it sure was terrible. Clouds only five hundred feet high. One short flight but arrived home O.K. The clouds very low and flying almost impossible and I've sure had some horrible time. No word of our missing planes. They are Lt. Bowyers and Johnson, Fuller and Brookhart, Suiter and Morris. Some rumor about that two of them are in the hospital, but no confirmation. Lt. Guernsey Pilot.

"Sept. 14, 1918. Most exciting trip I have had so far, having been attacked no less than three times by seven German machines. Each time my guns both jammed and I was forced one time to within about 150 feet of the ground. I was a happy human when I crawled out of the cockpit and put my feet on solid earth again. Two hours. Lt. Coleman Pilot."

Following the war, Belzer returned to Montana and a career in investment management. He died in Missoula in 1969. He was an avid outdoorsman, and whenever the opportunity arose, he and his wife, Elinore, headed for a favorite fishing hole. One particular day as he stood by the stream, another fisherman stopped to chat. Their conversation ultimately touched on the war, where they found they had a shared experience. They spent the afternoon reminiscing, ignoring wives and family for that day, remembering the battles of 1918 and the days when each won his Distinguished Service Cross.

Although focusing closely here on Montana's observation pilots, we do not forget this state's other World War I aviators. They include the pursuit pilots: Kalispell's George Campbell, who flew with the 141st, and Butte's Howard Johnson of the 638th, who survived a horrible smashup in England. There is bomber pilot Cyrus Gatton of Bozeman, who flew twelve missions with the French and thirteen with the 11th U.S. Bombardment Squadron and was shot



down and killed over the Saily Valley only five days before the Armistice. Bruce C. Hopper of Billings and Forest Longeway of Great Falls were both veterans of many combat missions, and, like Gatton, winners of the Croix de Guerre.

World War I, in many ways, was battle by trial-and-error as all branches of the military sought to develop new fighting techniques fast enough to keep up with new technological inventions. Flyers felt the cutting edge of these rapid changes especially keenly. Aviation itself was still largely experimental. General flying methods and techniques for handling individual plane types were being invented daily—



Bill Belzer poses in the observer's fighting position: standing inside the tourelle, Lewis gun at the ready. To right of wings, note small propeller of the wind-driven plate-changing mechanism for the camera.

in life-and-death combat situations. It can't be said that Montana's birdmen were more courageous than the doughboys fighting in the trenches below them (sixty other Montanans won Distinguished Service Crosses for acts of heroism in France), but their records seem to say they led a charmed life. Viewing their separate stories honors them while giving an insight into the common experiences of American Expeditionary Force soldiers. *M*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND HIS SOURCES

Dennis Gordon, a writer living in Missoula, is Co-founder of the National Doughboy Historical Society, and has co-authored and edited two books on World War I. He is currently compiling a book on U.S. campaigns into Russia in World War I, and continuing research for a book on Montana Air Servicemen in that war.

In researching this article, the author interviewed Mrs. Elinore Belzer, Benjamin Harwood, Jack Milburn, and Robert A. Patterson, and was permitted access to Belzer's war diary and Harwood and Patterson family letters. Distinguished Service Cross citations are quoted from War Department, doc. 18a: *American decorations, list of awards of Congressional Medal of Honor, Distinguished-Service Cross, and Distinguished-Service Medal, awarded under authority of Congress, 1862-1926* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1927).