

Lufbery's Last Flight

Although he was not the highest scoring ace of the First World War, Raoul Lufbery was certainly among the most respected. As long as military aviators fly, he will be remembered as the originator of the defensive maneuver called the Lufbery Circle.

He was born Gervais Raoul Lufbery on March 14, 1885 in France. His mother died when he was one year old and after that he was left with his grandparents to grow up while his father remarried and moved to the United States. Raoul went to work as a young lad and every spare bit of money he could save, he sent to his father in America, hoping that one day there would be enough money accumulated to cover his passage to America to be reunited with his father. It didn't quite work out that way. His father used the money to establish a business but even after achieving a degree of prosperity, he never attempted to send for the son he had left in France. The young Lufbery finally succeed in going to America but although he expended considerable effort to find his father, it was not to be - his father was in Europe furthering his business interests. Finally, the young Lufbery tired of waiting began his restless traveling which would continue for the rest of his life.

He went to Cuba, returned to New Orleans, and wound up in San Francisco where he joined the U.S. Army. He was sent to the Philippines where he participated in the putting down of the native rebellion.

After his Army service, he drifted around the Orient where he met Marc Pourpe and formed an association which was to last until the death of Pourpe in the first months of the war. Pourpe was quite a famous aviator at the time and was in the process of trying to get his Bleriot around the world. Lufbery became his friend, and mechanic, and in the process, learned to service the Bleriot completely; engine, rigging, fabric repair, etc. They were back in France when war broke out.

Pourpe volunteered for the Aviation Service, for which he was admirably suited, but his military career was short-lived; he was killed in December of 1914. Lufbery immediately put in for flying training and although his early attempts were barely acceptable, eventually he came to be recognized as a very good pilot. In 1916 at the age of 31, he joined Escadrille N. 124, a newly formed squadron then known as the Escadrille Americaine, soon to be changed to the Escadrille Lafayette. As a veteran among neophytes his advice and opinions were eagerly sought by the young American pilots, but he was basically a loner. And as the war wore on he became more and more withdrawn and reclusive.

With the declaration of war by America there was an effort to bring experienced pilots into the U.S. Air Service and by the end of 1917, the Escadrille Lafayette was disbanded. Lufbery was induced to join the U.S. Army Air Service as a major, a move that was considered to be a serious mistake by some of his squadron mates. Perhaps his new high-ranking superiors resented the respect and deference that he was shown; it was not a happy time for Major Lufbery as he languished in a desk job at the training center at Issoudun. At last he was released to join the 94th Aero Squadron in March of 1918.

The 94th at that time was a cadre of inexperienced pilots fresh from the States, equipped with a few cast-off Nieuport 28's without any guns. The pilots however, were nothing if not eager to get into the fighting. One of them, Eddie Rickenbacker

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considered it an honor to be in Luf's company and took every opportunity to learn as much as he could from the expert. Finally the 94th got their guns and were sent to a front-line airdrome near Toul.

After seeing so many of his French and American friends killed in the air action, his own turn finally came suddenly and unexpectedly on 19 May 1918. About mid-morning a German observation plane appeared over the 94th's airdrome and a new Lieutenant was ordered up to shoot it down. It was the poor fellow's first combat and he only succeeded in using up all of his ammunition with no noticeable effect on the Albatross. Lufbery, watching the encounter from the barracks, became impatient and decided to take a hand. Leaping on his motorcycle, he tore off to the airdrome and although his own aircraft was being worked on, got into the first Nieuport at hand and was soon attacking the heavily armored, lumbering Albatross. He pressed in so close that the rear gunner could hardly miss him. He didn't. A bullet pierced his fuel tank and his aircraft was engulfed in flame. One of the squadron pilots, LeRoy Prinz, watching with the other pilots was stunned to see the cockpit momentarily obscured by a ball of flame. Lufbery tried the standard tactic of sideslipping to keep the flames off of him but it was too late. He climbed out of the cockpit on to the aft fuselage in a vain attempt to get away from the inferno, straddling his aircraft like a horse. But eventually it became too hot to bear, and at 200 feet, he jumped although he wore no parachute.

He landed in the front yard of a cottage belonging to the shoemaker of the village of Maron. He came down on a picket fence, one of which pierced his throat as it broke off. The shoemaker's wife managed to get his body off of the fence and pulled the wooden stake from his throat. She and her daughter covered his charred remains with flowers from the garden until people came from the field to recover his body.

On the following day LeRoy Prinz returned to the spot with his camera, determined to preserve the event for history as well as he could. He found the bloody stake still lying in the yard where the good woman had tossed it. He picked it up and asked the woman to hold it as he posed her in front of the broken fence where Lufbery had met his death. In the accompanying historic photo, a copy of the one taken that day by Prinz, the picket appears to be wrapped in a cloth, probably because it was blood-soaked and distasteful to handle. The young men peer out from the photo innocently, oblivious of being captured by the camera for all time in an historic picture.

At the time of his death, Major Lufbery was the highest scoring ace in the U.S. Army Air Service. He was officially credited with 17 confirmed victories although his comrades speculated that he actually had more than twice that number.

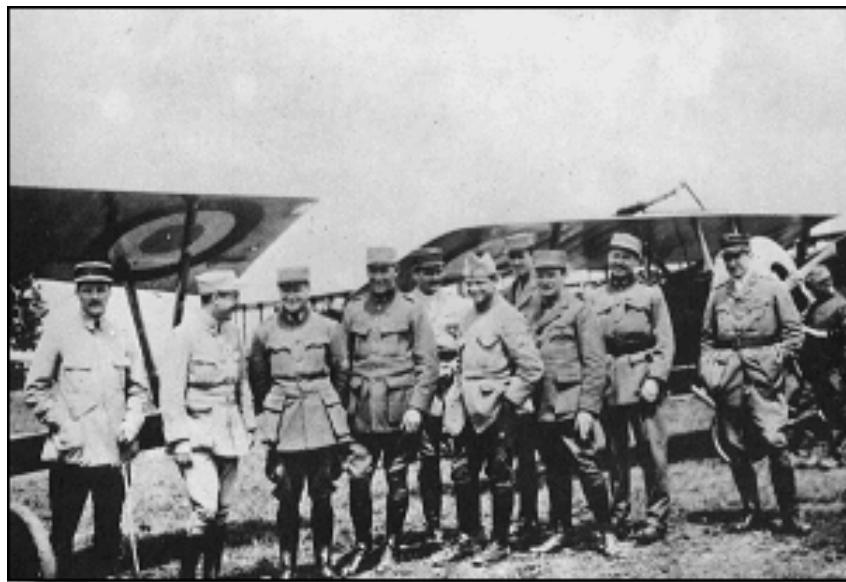
LeRoy Prinz kept the photo, along with an astonishing array of other memorabilia in a special room in his house. Fortunately, he gave it to his friend, Jim Brooks shortly before his death.

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A Collection of Pictures of Raoul Lufbery from the Internet



Major Raoul Lufbery



**Pilots of the Lafayette Escadrille
Raoul Lufbery is 5th from the right**