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Rickenbacker America's Ace of Aces

By Arch Whitehouse

Many historians consider Capt. Eddie Rickenbacker the greatest air ace produced by the American services. In Great Britain, he is highly regarded as an air fighter, and his name is revered by those of his old enemies still alive in Germany.

A man's personal greatness and his degree of fighting skill are, of course, relative. Much depends on the weapons he uses and his theater of operations. Today a man may attain greatness aboard a supersonic fighter armed with rockets able to destroy an enemy a mile away. In World War II American aces ran up their scores flying 350-mph fighters armed with banks of .50-caliber machine guns. But Rickenbacker fought in an age that relied on two rifle-caliber weapons, 100-mph mounts, and a native ability to seek out and destroy the target. Such refinements as radar, automatic sighting, oxygen equipment, and aerial cannon were unimagined.

On the record, Rickenbacker scored twenty-six confirmed victories in only seven months of front-line flying – and more than two months of this time he was hospitalized after a mastoid operation. In combat Rick never suffered a scratch. He was hailed as “America's Ace of Aces,” and received a string of decorations, including the Congressional Medal of Honor.

To Rickenbacker's great credit he has never played the swashbuckling hero. As a result, in some ways it is difficult to record his war career. He had little flair for the dramatic, never wore the gaudy birdman garb.

Even now, Rickenbacker is something of an enigma, despite the fact that today he heads Eastern Air Lines, a pioneering and highly successful air operation. Few World War I air heroes made good in postwar aviation. Many aces came home after the Armistice to windup on the discard heap or to face trouble in senseless Roman holidays. Too many lacked the courage, or imagination, to face a difficult postwar world.

Rickenbacker had little of the boisterousness associated with the much-publicized hero. In this sense he was the antithesis of Frank Luke, the dashing balloon-buster who proved to be Peck's Bad Boy of the air over the Western Front. Nor had Captain Eddie the lighthearted *savior-faire* of his fellow flyers, Elliott White Springs, Doug Campbell, or Dave Putnam. And the bulldog ruthlessness of Raoul Lufbery would have been alien to Eddie Rickenbacker.

Daring but not foolhardy, Captain Eddie fought with the same cool intelligence with which he administered his unit – the 94th “Hat-in-the-Ring” Pursuit Squadron. He not only talked the pilots' language but, thanks to his racing-car background, was a better mechanic than any of the squadron's ground crew. But he had won mechanical proficiency the hard way.

Rickenbacker, born in Columbus, Ohio, on October 8, 1890, grew up with much of the reserve of a midwestern boyhood. His parents were of Swiss-German descent, and for months after the start of World War I, he had some difficulty living his heritage down. The family name had been "Rickenbacker" and had been anglicized to Rickenbacker.

When Rick was twelve, his father died. The day after the funeral, the boy's formal schooling ceased, and he wangled a job with the Columbus Glass Co. by saying he was fourteen and had working papers. He worked twelve hours a night, six nights a week, turning his weekly pay envelope of \$3.50 over to his mother. A nearby foundry offered him \$6 a week, and later a local shoe factory hired him at a \$4 raise. Eventually he drifted to a garage where he was to have his first brush with the internal combustion engine. That job was to influence his entire life.

Since his education had been limited, he took an engineering course through a correspondence school, and by 1910 was proficient enough to road test automobiles for the then-famous Locomobile Co. In those days even more than now, autos sold on their reputations for speed. Practically every company took aim on the existing speed marks in such racing classics as the Indianapolis five-hundred-mile race. Rickenbacker drove in three of the Indianapolis races, once pushed a Blitzen Benz to a record 134 mph. A prudent but fearless driver, Rickenbacker became respected as a highly competent racer.

When war broke out in 1914, Eddie happened to be in Great Britain on business with the Sunbeam Motor Co. The Sunbeam a popular racing mount of that day, had done well in the American Vanderbilt Cup event, and Rickenbacker wanted to represent the company on American tracks. But, unfortunately for Rick the British factory was converting to the wartime production of aviation engines, so the deal fell through. Rick's trip wasn't a total loss, for during his stay in Britain he caught the feel of the war, and at Brooklands, England's noted auto track, he saw some of the activity and training operations of the Royal Flying Corps.

When the United States entered the conflict in April 1917, Rickenbacker proposed that America form a special flying squadron composed of American racing drivers. The plan was turned down by Washington but Army representatives suggest to Rickenbacker that he give up his position as the nation's foremost racing driver and become General Pershing's staff driver. Rickenbacker thought the proposal over carefully and decided to accept, as a means of getting overseas fast and possibly into combat.

Once in France he found himself in a race against time. He argued his way into light training and after winning a commission in January 1918 took five and a half hours of instruction before being allowed to solo. He was an apt pupil because of his auto-track experience. An amazing judge of speed and distance, he had the racing driver's inherent trick of timing. And, because he was an outstanding mechanic, it was decided he would make a good engineering officer at the Issoudun replacement depot.

At Issoudun Rick was able to log flight time in several types of planes. Oddly enough he hated violent acrobatics in the air, but like many other new flyers, had to force himself to spin and roll the fragile trainers of the day. He repeatedly applied for a transfer to a combat outfit, and finally his persistence paid off and he was sent to an aerial gunnery school at Cazeau where for the first time he climbed where for the first time he climbed into a plane fitted with machine guns and live ammo. He put in several weeks doggedly practicing on ground targets or drogues fluttering from kite balloons.

One day he landed after a wearying gunnery drill, stared at the muzzle cups of his guns, and muttered: "I can see that aerial warfare is actually scientific murder." From that day Rickenbacker strove to fly scientifically.

Early in March 1918, the tall Columbus boy was posted to the nucleus of the 94th Pursuit Squadron, based at Villeneuve. It was then headed by Maj. Raoul Lufbery, who had become an ace with the famed Lafayette Escadrille. Others in the 94th included James Norman Hall (later, with Charles Nordhoff, to write *Mutiny on the Bounty* and other novels), Hamilton Coolidge, Jimmy Meissner, Reed Chambers, Douglas Campbell, and Harvey Cook. When Rickenbacker arrived, the 94th had lots of talent – but no airplanes.

Another month passed, and gradually the 94th was allotted a few second hand French Nieuports. Thus equipped, they moved up into the Toul sector.

Rickenbacker's first war patrol was flown with Lufbery. Nothing much of interest was logged, but Eddie saw some enemy balloons and caught the pungent smell of anti-aircraft fire. And he realized as never before that combat flying was no romantic game.

Unlike the younger members of the 94th, Eddie had no compelling desire to roar over the lines to plaster the Hun. He assayed the situation quietly and concluded that he had learned very little in flying school. He knew, by comparing his airmanship with that of Lufbery, that nothing he did was easy, smooth, or instinctive. His twenty-seven years warned him that in combat his mind would be fully occupied matching decision for decision and maneuver for maneuver with his enemy. He would have to make the right turns, loops, and chandeliers with the smooth precision of the bullfighter.

A study of Rickenbacker's patrol reports discloses that his victories were the result of careful planning. Once he spotted a quarry, he calculated the safest combat conditions. It took longer, but these precautions paid off. If Rick made a mistake during a fight he returned to his own side of the line and flew through the necessary maneuver again and again until he had mastered the problem.

Six weeks of front-line flying passed before Rickenbacker wrote his first victory report. Then nearly another month went by before he scored again. Till then, he was just another Air Service pilot. He had little color and was among the less spectacular performers of the 94th. His combat history also shows that, by persistently improving his acrobatic techniques, he gradually added the element of surprise to his attacks. But his first victory provided a hint of what was to come.

Teamed with James Norman Hall, Rick encountered a German Albatros over Pont-à-Mousson. Waiting until Hall went up into the sun, Rick went headlong into what became suddenly an enemy formation. Hall came down out of the glare and made one Albatros break right to evade him. Rick anticipated the move and shot the German down cold. Hall moved in smartly to cover Eddie's tail.

Rickenbacker was never happy about his second kill. He took off with Reed Chambers, but they became separated in the clouds. Patrolling over Toul, Commercy, and Nancy at high altitude, Eddie came on three Albatroses. Hoping they would cross into the Allied area, Rick stalked them, but the German anti-aircraft guns put a smoke marker on him so he had to attack over the woods at Montsec. Forgetting his normal caution, he went in too fast. He got his man, but in pulling out he lost much of his upper-wing covering and was fortunate to make it back to his own line.

Rickenbacker's third victim, on May 22, provided tragic drama. Again flying with Chambers, Rick agreed to take a newcomer to combat, a Lieutenant Kurtz, over the line to give him some experience. The Americans met three Albatros D-IIIs, which attacked first. The three Nieuports evaded the German scouts, turned the tables, and began chasing the D-IIIs back toward Germany. Over Thiaucourt, Rick spotted one of the Albatroses making a climbing turn toward Kurtz. With a quick *vrille* (half-turn), Rickenbacker got on the Germans tail and downed him. But not before the Albatros had fatally damaged Kurtz's plane, which spun out of control and crashed in flames.

Timing played an important part in Rick's fourth victory. He and Doug Campbell found a pair of Albatros two-seaters escorted by four Pfalz fighters over Mars-la-Tour. Rick and Campbell had a 2,000-foot advantage on the enemy planes. They moved into the sun and waited for the German to cross the Allied lines. Once the Nieuports started their dive attack the Albatroses turned for home. The Pfalz escorts covered them until they were safe over Thiaucourt, and the two Americans wondered what the next move would be.

The Pfalz pilots faked leaving the two-seaters, and Campbell rose to the bait – and missed. But Rickenbacker played it cozy and continued to stalk the Jerry fighters. Both sides played this game cautiously, but when a lone Albatros moved out of its formation – again, obviously, as bait – both Rick and Campbell struck so fast the Pfalz pilots had no chance to intercept them. Later Rickenbacker was given credit for the kill, though Campbell had fired a few rounds, too.

Rick became an ace on May 30, 1918. His fifth victory came during an escort show when two flights of Nieuports had gone out to bring in a formation of British two-seater bombers. Rickenbacker had asked permission to go along as a free lance.

As the Nieuports approached the incoming de Havillands, they were suddenly attacked from below. One Yank scout fell away, out of control. Rick spotted the two Albatroses, which had made the climbing attack and turned to intercept them. His first burst nailed one, and then, in a very un-Rickenbacker way, he hurtled on down to chase the other. This nearly caused a repetition of his lost-wing-cover episode, but he recovered in time to drive off another Albatros that was annoying Jimmy Meissner.

A short time later the 94th Squadron turned in their dainty Nieuports for the more rugged and faster climbing but less maneuverable Spad.

By now his superiors recognized Rickenbacker as a very dependable officer, and he was made a flight commander. Now he had five pilots to worry about, but he accepted the added responsibility in good spirit. Those who served with him remember Rickenbacker for his leadership and his concern for their safety. Had he been able to play the free-lance role longer, he would doubtless have run up an even more impressive score – one that would have ranked him with the top German and British aces who had many more months to compile their victories.

But Rickenbacker had other handicaps. Shortly after becoming an ace, he caught a severe cold, which resulted in an ear infection. The ailment necessitated a mastoid operation, and as a result he was grounded until September 14. He was out of combat more than fifteen weeks, and few who knew Rick's condition believed he would ever fly again. However, once he recovered and got back into action, he managed to score almost daily until the war ended on November 11.

It was during the St.-Mihiel drive in September that Eddie finally got back into stride. The weather was bad, but on the fourteenth, Rick and Chambers went over on a strafing mission and brought back some important information on the progress of the battle. While across the German line they were attacked by members of Baron Manfred von Richthofen's "Flying Circus." By stunting their heads off to escape, the pair not only broke clear but somehow cut off a German Fokker and with a short snapshot, Rick shot it down.

The episode for which Rickenbacker was to receive the Congressional Medal of Honor took place on September 25, the same day he was named Squadron Commander of the 94th. On single patrol over France, Eddie spotted two Halberstadts and was about to go after them when he caught sight of five Fokkers directly above them. Changing his course, he went up into the sun, nosed over fast, and caught one of the Fokkers. Instead of zooming on the clear, he flew through the Fokkers formation and tackled the two seaters beneath. Rick's first burst put the leader down in flames, though the rear gunner peppered the Spad.

The next day Rick had another hairy experience. His flight was ordered to attack some balloons that were spotting for the opening of the Argonne drive. He had Cook, Chambers, Taylor, Coolidge, and Palmer with him. Rick's plan called for three Spads to take on one of the two balloons between Brabant and Dun. His flight potted both balloons before Eddie himself could fire a shot, so he went after another he remembered seeing near Damvillers. But it just wasn't Rick's day for balloons. He found someone else had already torched this new target, so he sipped into a cloud to try to trap an unsuspecting Jerry. To his amazement he found himself flying wingtip to wingtip with a Fokker. They turned together, exchanged shots, made a few maneuvers, and finally Rickenbacker scored with a long burst that raked the German's fuselage.

Almost immediately the Hisso engine on Rickenbacker's Spad began to vibrate badly. He watched the German go down, then turned his attention to his own problem. He headed for home, but the engine continued to act up, and he barely made it. On landing he found the German had shot a piece off his propeller.

And so the war went for Captain Eddie – a balloon on September 28, another on October 1, a Fokker and a Halberstadt the next day, and an L.V.G. and a Rumpler on October 3. He bagged another balloon on October 9, a pair of Fokkers on the tenth, a balloon on the fifteenth, a Fokker on the twenty-second, another the next day, and still another pair of Fokkers on October 27. His last two victories bringing his string to twenty-six, came on October 30, when he downed an enemy balloon and a final Fokker.

Then came the Armistice. Rickenbacker took his homecoming and his hero's welcome calmly – and went back into the automobile business. A company was established to make a car called the Rickenbacker. On its radiator shell gleamed the old 94th Squadron's insignia – the Hat-in-the-Ring trademark. It was a good car but produced at the wrong time, and Eddie Rickenbacker found himself head of a bankrupt firm.

He became President of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway Corporation, and, while with the Cadillac Division of General Motors Corporation, he was active in the company's purchase of the control of Fokker Aircraft. Fokker, of course, was the brilliant Dutch aircraft designer, Tony Fokker, twelve of whose fighters Rickenbacker had shot down. Subsequently General Motors took control of the fledgling Eastern Air Lines, and in 1934 Rickenbacker was made General Manager. Four years later Rickenbacker raised the money to buy Eastern from General Motors, and today he is Chairman of the Board and General Manager of Eastern.

One episode, in 1942, during World War II, brought Rickenbacker's name dramatically back into the news. A plane on which he was a passenger was forced down in the Pacific Rickenbacker and six other survivors sat it out for a harrowing twenty-one days on an open raft. Their story of courage and endurance of unrelenting faith that they would be rescued, has become a classic. And through this ordeal while the whole world waited for news, Rickenbacker, characteristically, in his quiet way, once again demonstrated the stuff of which heroes are made. – End

About the Author

A veteran writer of aviation fact and fiction since 1927, Arch Whitehouse is a native of England who came to the US at the age of nine. During World War I, he served as a combat flyer, was twice decorated, and won a battlefield commission. During World War II, he volunteered for service and flew with the RCAF on North Atlantic patrols. Later, he went into Normandy with a Navy LST and moved with the troops on to Paris. He has written several books.