Saving the Legacy of the Lafayette Escadrille

World War I is remembered today chiefly for the horrors of trench warfare, gas attacks, and long stalemates punctuated by murderous waves of attrition. One romantic notion that persists, however, is that of the dashing young fighter pilots, flying high above the carnage in their newfangled biplanes and triplanes, urging their colorful machines up to do skilful single combat with the enemy. Much of that mythology grew up around the Lafayette Escadrille, a squadron of Americans who volunteered to fly and fight alongside France. They were darlings of the press, and their exploits made for front-page fodder around the world. Much of it was, indeed, mythology. While these fliers cut heroic figures in their helmets and flying scarves— their Nieuports and SPADs inspired a generation—the reality of aerial combat in World War I was far from glamorous. The raw, blowing cold in the open cockpit ripped at their faces, oil streamed from the engines, instruments were unreliable, guns frequently jammed, and the aircraft themselves were often fragile, prone to structural failure, and highly intolerant of battle damage.

While these pioneer aviators didn’t have to fight in the mud, accidents, injuries, and battle wounds were common, and a quarter of them gave their lives to the cause.

Their volunteer spirit was no myth, however. While some did come seeking adventure, many came because they could not continue to sit on the sidelines as America debated whether or not to enter the war. Some joined because they had family ties to France, some simply because “it was the right thing to do,” said retired Gen. T. Michael Moseley, Chief of Staff of the Air Force from 2005 to 2008.

Nearly 100 years after the unit’s founding, the principal monument to the Lafayette Escadrille is a memorial outside of Paris, off the road to Versailles. It is a victory arch inscribed with the names of World War I American and French aviators connected with this unique unit. Some of them are buried there in an underground crypt.

The memorial was poorly sited, however, and has suffered from chronic flooding and long neglect. It is in urgent need of restoration, and a group of modern airmen have taken on this task. The Lafayette Escadrille fought in many of the big campaigns during the war, performing reconnaissance missions, balloon-busting, and fighting for control of the skies. “It was the origin of what we today call air dominance,” Moseley said, and the mission was a crucial one for the Allied forces. Some of its members grew quite adept at employing this new instrument of airpower.

One was Gervais Raoul Lufbery, who racked up 17 air-to-air victories during the war, a total likely well short of his true achievement. Lufbery would certainly have been the leading American ace, outscoring [Eddie] Rickenbacker, ... if all his kills had been witnessed from the ground,” said retired Gen. Merrill A. McPeak, 14th Chief of Staff and now chairman of the American Battle Monuments Commission.

In World War I, “if you made a claim of a kill, it had to be witnessed by somebody,” but Lufbery scored many of his victories far behind German lines, McPeak said, so there were no willing witnesses to acknowledge them. “So he didn’t get credit for half of his kills,” McPeak observed. “This is a great story about an American who’s famous but maybe should be even more famous.”

Besides an impressive combat record, the members of the Escadrille left another, even more important, legacy. They developed maneuvers and tactics—one of them bearing Lufbery’s name and still used today—and served a crucial mentoring function for the American aviators who followed them when the US officially entered the war. As the combat-seasoned veterans, they passed their knowledge on when they were absorbed into the American Air Service squadrons, which had no prior air-to-air combat experience.

“These guys ... provided a nucleus of combat aviators at a time when we really needed them,” McPeak said.
The memorial in 1928, prior to its dedication. It was sponsored by a foundation formed by wealthy Americans who had sons or relatives in the unit.

They were “the fathers of American combat aviation,” asserted Moseley.

The Air Force 1st Fighter Wing’s 27th and 94th Squadrons trace their heritage directly back to the Lafayette Escadrille, Moseley noted.

Moreover, “if you put those Escadrille pilots in the same room with F-22 pilots” of those squadrons today, the conversation about tactics, formations, and maneuvers “would be understandable to both sides,” Moseley said.

ESCADRILLE AMÉRICAINE

The founders of the Escadrille were following in the footsteps of other Americans who had already joined the French war effort, either as ambulance drivers or combat infantrymen serving in the French Foreign Legion. In 1914, two Americans—Norman Prince and William Thaw, who had volunteered to fly with the French—developed the idea of an all-American squadron within the French air service. Like many other volunteers who would come later, Prince and Thaw were from wealthy Eastern US families, well-connected to monied interests in the US and in Paris, and they were soon able to get their idea before the French Minister of War, Ettiene Alexandre Millerand.

Millerand was not enthusiastic at first, but changed his mind when he saw the tremendous attention and sympathetic press bestowed on his American fliers when they went home on leave in 1915. The attention lavished on the Escadrille produced the desired effect: Volunteers soon began to stream from America, far more than could be accommodated by the small squadron. Soon, the Lafayette Flying Corps (originally the Franco-American Flying Corps) was created and its 270 or so members parsed out to other French air service units. These included new volunteers as well as Americans who had served in other squadrons or in bombarding units.

Funding was provided by big names in the American financial world, such as J. P. Morgan and William K. Vanderbilt, who had extensive properties in France, had lent the French government considerable amounts of money, and wanted to see the US enter the war to assure an Allied victory.

The Escadrille were absorbed into the US Air Service; the French support personnel were replaced by the 103rd Aero Squadron.

The Lafayette Escadrille Memo—which also honors the follow-on Lafayette Flying Corps—was dedicated in 1928 by a foundation that took on its perpetual care. The foundation was “endowed by some very wealthy, mostly East Coast monied families, who had sons or relatives in the Lafayette Escadrille, which … had some very prominent people in it,” said McPeak. However, the endowment was invested

Soon after, the Escadrille Américaine was formed, bringing together American pilots who had been serving in various squadrons throughout the French air service.

There were initially seven members of the unit. It officially stood up in April 1916. At the request of the US, its name was changed to Escadrille des Volontaires after Germany protested that the neutral US was sending soldiers to fight in the war. The name Lafayette Escadrille became official in January 1917.

The Escadrille eventually comprised 38 American pilots and four French officers, including their commander, Capt. Georges Thenault. Together they scored 39 confirmed combat victories and 100 more unconfirmed kills over some 3,000 combat patrols in just short of two years of flying. Ten of the original 38 were killed in combat.

The First African-American Fighter Pilot

Among those who saw combat flying in World War I was Eugene Jacques Bullard (shown here with his pet monkey, Jimmy), an African-American who was living in France and had served (and been seriously wounded) in the French infantry. For his service, he was awarded the Croix de Guerre and Médaille Militaire. In 1916, he volunteered to join the French air service and trained first as a gunner and then as a pilot. Though he asked to join the Lafayette Escadrille, it was no longer accepting new pilots when he became qualified. Instead, he became a member of the Lafayette Flying Corps and served with French flying units, completing some 20 missions.

Bullard was officially credited with one kill and scoring up to five unconfirmed kills. When the US entered the war, Bullard was the only member of either the Lafayette Escadrille or Lafayette Flying Corps not invited to join the US Air Service, because it only accepted white men.

In the post-World War I years, Bullard was a musician in the Paris jazz community and owned a nightclub called “L’Escadrille.” In World War II, he agreed to serve France as a spy; fluent in German, he eavesdropped on the Germans who frequented his nightclub. He later volunteered to serve with a French infantry unit, but he was badly wounded and left the service.

Bullard eventually moved back to the US, and while he was considered a hero in France, he was practically an unknown in his native country. In 1954, the French government invited him to participate in ceremonies commemorating the 40th anniversary of World War I and in 1959 named him a national Chevalier, or Knight.

In 1960, during a state visit to the US, French President Charles DeGaulle insisted on meeting Bullard, who was at that time working as an elevator operator in New York City. Bullard died the following year.
mostly in stocks. “Almost immediately, along came the market crash,” McPeak said, and as a result “the foundation, which holds title to the property” and is responsible for maintaining it, “has been running on empty for a long time.”

The condition of the memorial came to Moseley’s attention in the early 2000s, when he was contacted by then-Commander of US Air Forces in Europe, Gen. Gregory S. Martin.

Moseley recalled that Martin had attended a ceremony at the memorial and was embarrassed in front of his French hosts by its condition. Moseley, then the head of Legislative Liaison, worked with members of Congress such as Rep. John P. Murtha (D-Pa.) and Sen. Daniel K. Inouye (D-Hawaii) to get “a couple million dollars” appropriated to fix the memorial up. Civil engineers from USAFE made a site assessment in conjunction with counterparts from the French Defense Ministry, and there was additional money donated from the Mona Bismark Foundation, which promotes Franco-American artistic joint ventures. “And we did it,” Moseley said, but the work done was only cosmetic. Though the monument was cleaned, profound underlying problems were not addressed.

The memorial was built on land with a high water table; water intrusion is chronic, walkways pond; the crypt frequently floods; and “stalactites” have formed on the limestone ceilings. “It needed a long-term plan,” Moseley said.

MAKING IT HAPPEN

Resolved to do something permanent to address the monument’s condition, when he became Chief of Staff, McPeak tried to get the American Battle Monuments Commission to take the site over and properly care for it. However, the ABMC “said, ‘Under no circumstances will we accept this,’” Moseley reported.

The ex-Army leadership of the ABMC “knew that the Lafayette Escadrille was not an American combat unit, and therefore its monument was ineligible for government assistance,” Moseley said.

McPeak explained that “the Lafayette Escadrille stood up in April 1916. And therefore, it predates our entry into the war and therefore, technically—legally—is out of the ABMC sphere.”

He agreed with Moseley’s assertion that the Escadrille memorial was not a high priority for previous ABMC plans, where both sides will pay half the restoration costs. “Now, if you track back and try to establish milestones from that, we’re already late getting it started,” McPeak said. “I’d like to have it done” in time for the centennial, he said, because “I’m sure the French will schedule something in April.”

The Lafayette Escadrille Memorial has been running on empty for a long time, said Jerry L. Hester, chairman of the Lafayette Escadrille Memorial Working Group. According to the study, the monument and grounds are to be rehabilitated in a two-phase approach. Phase 1 will simply stabilize the monument, make physical repairs to the stonework, roof, and a broken fountain, and create an underground to “keep the water out,” Moseley said. It will involve a cleaning of the monument, blackened by air pollution from nearby Paris, and scaling the stonework to be more resistant to pollution in the future. Air-conditioning and ventilation will be added to the crypt to control humidity and prevent plastered areas from flaking off.

“When we get it done, it’ll be safe and secure and in very good shape for another hundred years,” McPeak asserted.

Phase 2 would be more ambitious. Hester said it will involve some kind of interpretive facility or visitor center, plus “it needs a parking lot and pedestrian paths and things like that,” including highway signage to steer people to the site and “unattended but fast-response” highway signage to steer people to the site and “unattended but fast-response”

Hester noted that Ross Perot Jr. donated $125,000 to print brochures for the fund-raising effort, and the finances have been arranged so that any money donated to restore the memorial will not be “canceled” with any of the other ABMC funds, meaning they can’t be spent on anything else. On the French side, the money will be collected and held by the Lafayette Escadrille Memorial Foundation, “based in Paris, and they in turn will turn the funds over to the ABMC,” McPeak explained.

The World War I Centennial Commission is planning some events in the United States, as a “living history” to keep the memory of the Lafayette Escadrille flying, and possible US participation in the 2017 Bastille Day parade in Paris. However, due to the sequester, the Defense Department has not been able to support participation in any of these events until there is more clarity on what funds will be available to support them. A fly-in of World War I vintage aircraft is slated for this September at the National Museum of the US Air Force in Dayton, Ohio.

However, the Lafayette Escadrille Memorial “will be the US Air Force’s primary memorial in Europe for the World War I” commemoration, Hester said. “There’s no other memorial there.” The Lafayette Escadrille Memorial has already been selected to do the architecture and engineering work.

“Hester, who is also a commissioner for the US World War I Centennial Commission, said it will cost about $500,000 a year to maintain the memorial. Money will be raised for this purpose, and McPeak said he thinks the US government may eventually contribute to the restoration efforts (though the request has not yet been made), especially if the restoration is privately funded and the foundation demonstrates that it can raise money.

“My vision of it... [is this is a public-private partnership],” McPeak stated. He said he’s certain the money can be raised—and quickly. He doesn’t want to ask Congress for money “until I can demonstrate we have support behind us in the private sector.”