

Uniforms of The Lafayette Escadrille
& Lafayette Flying Corps
in the Collection of the Smithsonian
National Air and Space Museum



A Presentation by Charles Gosse
to the Mid-Atlantic Chapter of the
League of World War One Aviation Historians

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at the Steven F. Udvar-Hazy Center of the
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Kiffin Yates Rockwell



Rockwell joined the French *Légion étrangère*, the Foreign Legion, in August, 1914, the month war began. He is seen in action in January, 1915, in the above photograph.



Rockwell transferred into aviation in September, 1915, and spent seven months in training. In a letter to his brother, Paul, dated Sept. 19th, 1915, he wrote *"I have been to Bourges twice this week getting things. I couldn't find a ready-made uniform to suit me, so am having one made. It is black, with the broad red artillery stripes on the trousers and I think will look very nice. The kepi is black with red stripes, and then there is a police-bonnet, black with a red stripe."*



Seven months later his training was completed and he joined the newly-formed *Lafayette Escadrille* as one of its seven founding members on April 20th , 1916, at an airfield located in the *Franche-Comte* region, next to the resort town of *Luxeuil-Les-Bains*. He flew with the *Escadrille* for five months until shot-down and killed on September 23rd over Rodern.

VICTOR, CHAPMAN - ELLIOTT COWDIN W.M. THAW NORMAN PRINCE K. ROCKWELL 3887-1
BERT HALL LIEUT. DELNAGE J.K. MCCONNELL CAPT. THENAULT



He is seen here, second from right, with other members of the *Escadrille*.



And is seen again in this photograph, standing fourth from right. He is wearing the black uniform about which he wrote to his brother. From the left-hand side are Bert Hall, Bill Thaw, Georges Thenaut, de Laage de Meux, Kiffin Rockwell, unknown, Jim McConnell and Norman Prince



Here is the same group of pilots plus Elliot Cowdin, center, and Victor Chapman, far right, at the airfield at Luxeuil. Rockwell is the first from the left in his black uniform with red stripes.



Rockwell is seen on the right playing billiards in the backroom of the Pomme d'Or Hotel in Luxeuil in May of 1916 with Jim McConnell and Victor Chapman on the left along with Madame Voge, the hotel's proprietress.



This is the Pomme d'Or Hotel seen in a contemporary postcard



In this portrait and earlier photos, Rockwell is wearing the same uniform as the one in the National Air and Space Museum's collection. Curiously, in this photo there are eight buttons down the front instead of nine.



This is his black tunic in the Collection and it has nine brass buttons down the front.



The difference between the two is in the very last, bottom button.



Here both images are overlaid at the same scale so that a comparison can be made.



The bottom button is missing in the portrait photo.



Careful examination reveals a lighter color where the bottom button should be in the portrait photo suggesting that the bottom button fell off at some point and later sewn back on.





Rockwell's trousers are seen above in the Museum's collection. They were donated to the Museum along with his tunic, kepi, garrison cap and other items by his brother, Paul, in 1962.



The Lafayette Escadrille transferred from the very comfortable Luxeuil-Les-Bains to Bar-Le-Duc at the beginning of the summer of 1916 and then returned to Luxeuil on the 14th of September.



At 8 o'clock on the morning on September 23rd, Kiffin Rockwell and Raoul Lufbery took off together on patrol in their new Nieuport 17s. Lufbery suffered engine trouble and turned back but Rockwell continued on alone. He dove to attack an Albatros two-seater and was shot in the chest and killed, his aircraft crashing to the ground near to the town of Rodern.



8 Allée André Maroselli, 7

The Pomme D'Or is seen above in a recent photo.

Edwin Charles Parsons

Edwin C. "Ted" Parsons was born the same year as Rockwell - 1892 - and learned to fly in 1912. He was recruited by agents of the Mexican revolutionary Pancho Villa to purchase and ship a plane to Mexico and then train pilots to fly it. He was steered clear of continuing in this line of work by a German intelligence agent.

By December, 1915, he made his way to France having pretended to be a horse veterinarian in order to be taken on board a ship transporting horses to France for the war.

Parsons joined the American Ambulance Service in January of 1916 and served five months in the field. On June 1, 1916, he joined the French Foreign Legion as a conduit into the aviation service which he joined by month's end.



Although an experienced pilot, Parsons was required to undertake seven months of flight training. By the end of January, 1917, he joined the Lafayette Escadrille as their 21st member.



Parson's French horizon blue uniform is on exhibit today at the Museum's Udvar-Hazy Center. Parson is seen in the photograph in the background.



Unlike many of his squadron mates, Parsons did not transfer into the U.S. Air Service once America joined the war. He decided, instead, to stay with the French and was assigned to Spa 3, the famous *Les Cigognes*, The Storks. Eventually his score of confirmed victories would total 8 aircraft destroyed.



Parson's kepi is on display at the Museum's building on the National Mall.



And, while not on display, the Museum also has Parson's breeches.



After the war, Parsons joined the FBI and then opened his own detective agency. Later he was an actor, writer and technical director on several Hollywood war films. He even had his own radio show. Parsons is seen above in a publicity photo for that show wearing his old uniform.



This is the same uniform donated by his family to the Museum in 1977.



At the outbreak of World War II, Parsons joined the Navy and rose to the command of LST Group 41 and directed their assaults on Okinawa and the Philippines. By war's end, he had become a Rear Admiral and is shown in that capacity in the above photo.

Harold Buckley Willis



Harold B. Willis sailed for France in 1914, served in the American Ambulance Service and joined the French Foreign Legion in June, 1916, as a conduit into the flying service, just as Parsons had done. Willis joined the Lafayette Escadrille on March 1st, 1917, as its 25th member and served for five months before being shot down and made a prisoner of war.



Escadrille Lafayette - N. 124 - Es personal insignia from my first 150 hp Spad
issued to me at Cappy (Somme) March 1917 - crashed landing in storm at Ham Picardy May 17. BBW

Two months after joining the Escadrille, Willis wrecked his Spad VII at Ham and salvaged this insignia from the side of his aircraft.



Willis is seen here in an ascot which he would frequently wear. The pilot sitting in front of him is France's revered ace, Georges Guynemer.



On August 14, 1917, Willis went on patrol with Parsons as his flight leader. The flight took off from the Escadrille's airfield at Sénard. It tangled with pilots from Jasta 16b based at Spincourt. In a ferocious dogfight, Willis went to protect Parsons' tail and was shot down over Dun-Sur-Meuse either by Max Holtzem or Ltn Wilhelm Schulz, both of Jasta 16b.



Willis had a small problem when he crash-landed: he was only wearing green-striped pajamas and two sweaters beneath his flight suit. Parsons knew this and returned to Sénard, bundled-up Willis's "uniform, boots, cigarettes and money" and dropped them at a likely spot behind the German lines with a note addressed to a *Lieutenant* Willis. Willis was a Sergeant at the time but Parsons was hoping that by fooling his captors into thinking Willis was an officer he would receive better treatment. The ruse appeared to work. Second from right, Willis is seen above in one of the many prison camps he would visit in 14 months of captivity.



He eventually ended up at the POW camp at Villingen in Germany. US Navy Lieutenant Victor M. Isaacs escaped with Willis in a break-out from Villingen on October 5th, 1918.



They hid during the day and walked south at night and reached the Rhine at Waldshut after 4 days. “Wearing only trousers, their money and papers strung about their necks,” they swam 600 feet to the other bank of the Rhine and Switzerland. The Swiss police put them on a train to Berne where they remained until October 17th and then, with money from the American consulate, left for France by train.



On his return to France, Willis found that he had been promoted to a Sous-Lieutenant and awarded the Medaille Militaire. His French horizon blue tunic is seen above.



His awards eventually included the Legion d'Honneur, Croix de Guerre with 5 citations and the Medaille des Evades.



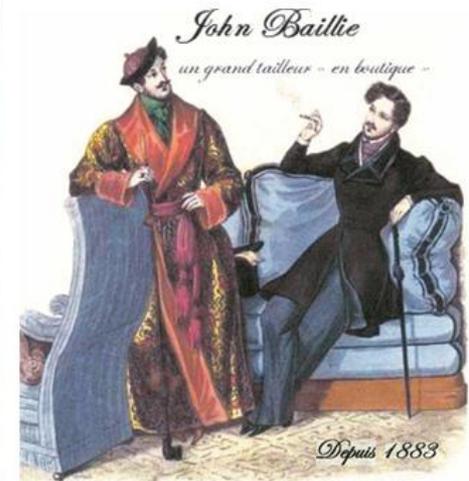
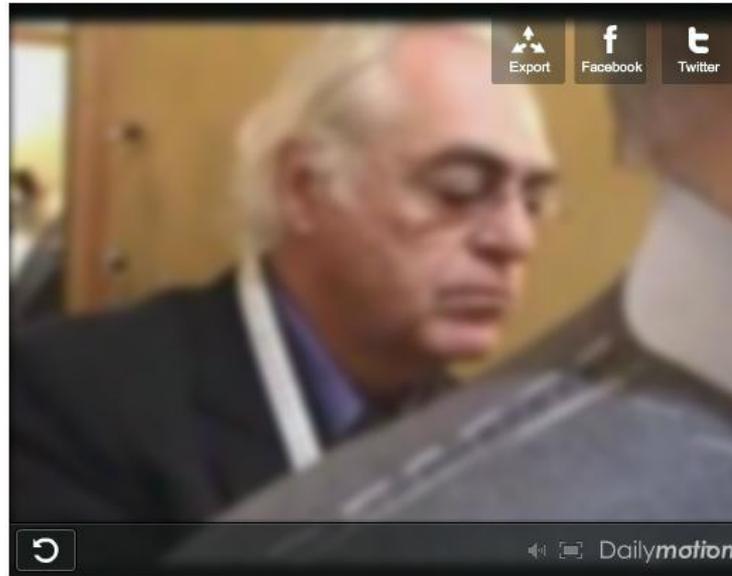
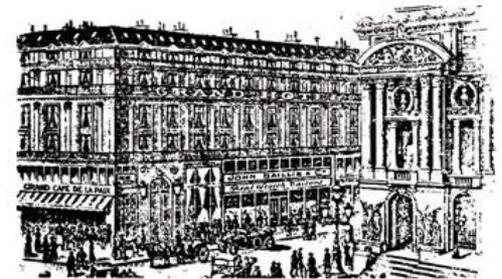


The label to his tunic is stamped "7 NOV 1918," three weeks to the day from when he left Switzerland by train with Isaacs . Apparently, this is the tunic which he purchased in Paris on his return from captivity. He would have needed a tunic because he was still a serving member of the French military and had to be in uniform to report back to his unit. Four days later on Monday, November 11th, 1918, the war ended, however.



JOHN BAILLIE

1883



1 Rue Auber
5 Place de l'Opera
Paris - France

Tel: +33 1 47 42 49 24

The tailor who made Willis's tunic in 1918, JOHN BAILLIE & C^o, opened his shop on the Rue Auber across from the famous Paris Opera House in 1883. The firm JOHN BAILLIE is still in business at the same address today.





Willis donated his complete uniform to the Museum in 1963. His trousers do not have a tailor's label but all of its buttons are marked MACDOUGAL & CO PARIS with the exception of two buttons.



One of these two mismatched buttons may provide a clue to the history of these trousers.



It is located on the rear left pocket and stamped “DEUTSCHE MODE” with two six-sided stars. This type of button was made in Germany during the First World War; later buttons with this name no longer carry the six-sided star because it came to be regarded as a Star of David in an increasingly anti-Semitic post-war Germany.

These may be the pants Willis wore in his escape from Villingen and swim across the Rhine; it's hard to imagine why else they would have a period German button.



After the war, Willis became one of the foremost American ecclesiastical architects. He went back to France at the outbreak of World War II with Paul Rockwell and, together, they tried to start a new Lafayette Escadrille but fled Paris as the German tanks rolled in - they were too late. Parsons had been approached by them to help but had been warned-off by his old employers, the FBI. Willis did manage to form an American Ambulance Service, however, and is seen above in the uniform of that service.



Willis returned to America, joined the Air Force and was successful in convincing the government to transfer 12 Curtiss P-40 Warhawks to the Free French Fighter Group GC II/5 based in North Africa; these aircraft are seen above with the old Lafayette Escadrille insignia emblazoned on their fuselages.

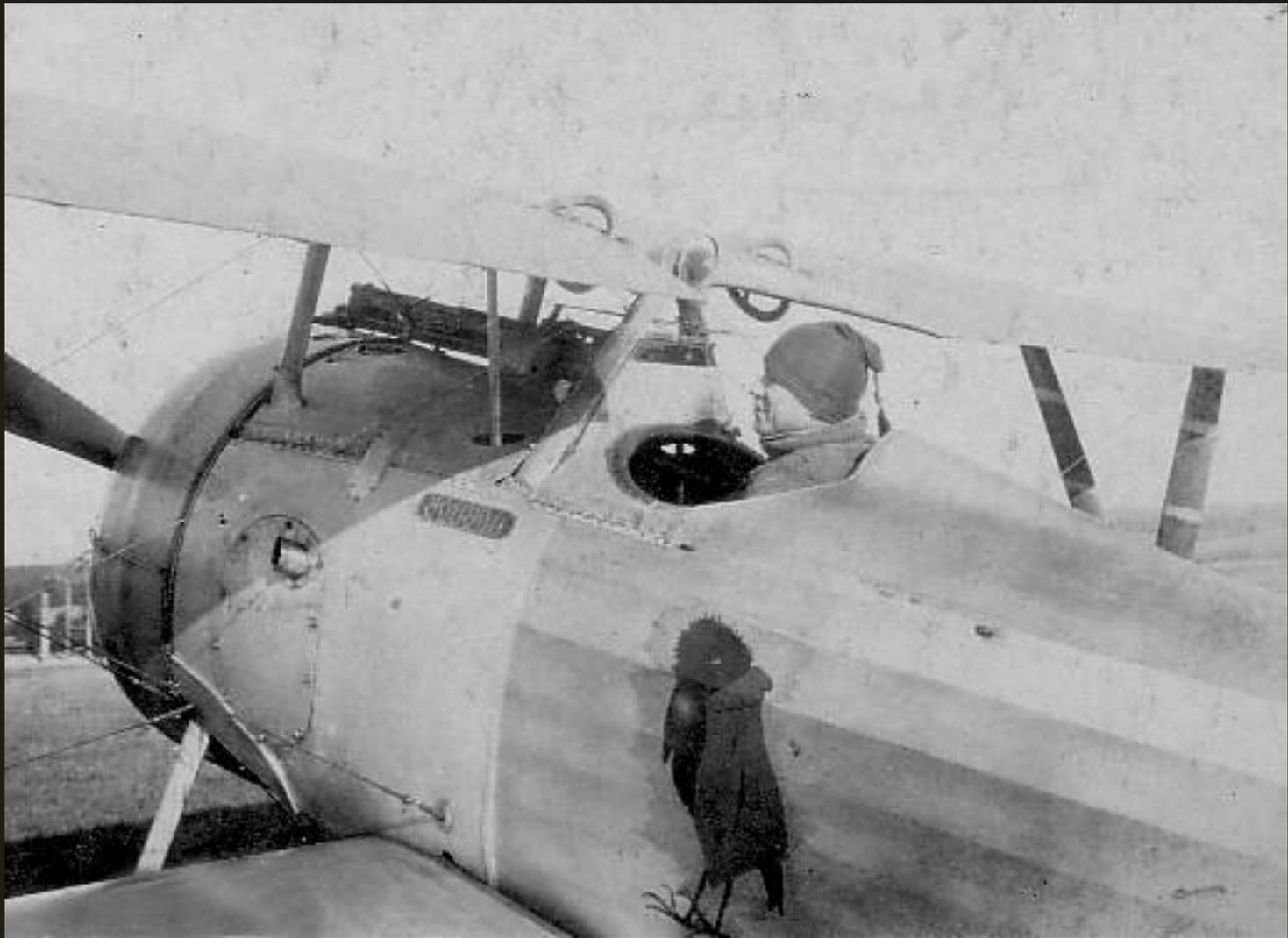


The French Air Force continues to honor the memory of the Lafayette Escadrille with a squadron named after it flying the Dassault *Mirage* 2000N and carrying its Indian Head insignia. They fly from an airbase at Luxeuil-Les-Bains.

Walter John Shaffer



While the Lafayette Escadrille was a specific squadron in which 38 American pilots served, the term *Lafayette Flying Corps* refers to the 269 American volunteers who flew in French squadrons prior to America's involvement in the war.



Walter John Shaffer was one of them, flying first with Escadrille Spa 156 from January 1 to June 1, 1918. The insignia of this escadrille is shown in the photo above.



Shaffer donated this insignia cut from one of his aircraft to the Museum along with his uniform in 1978.



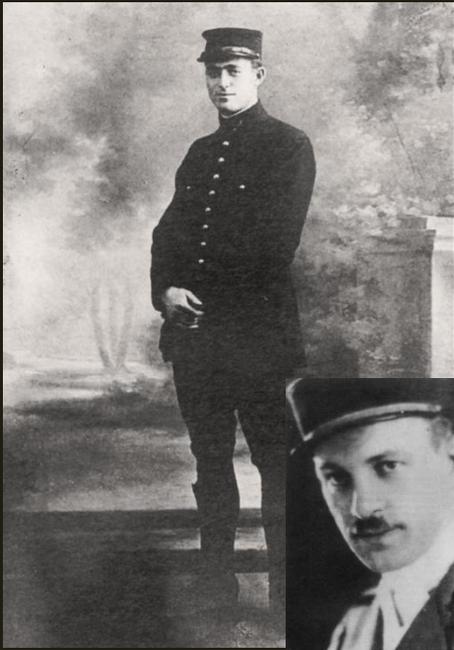
Shaffer transferred to Spa 38 on June 1, 1918, and flew with them until brought down by ground fire south-east of Laon and taken prisoner on October 3rd, 1918; he was diving on a German *saucisse* 12 km behind enemy lines at the time. He did not escape but the war ended shortly thereafter and he was repatriated.



His horizon blue uniform is shown above.







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