

Insignia of The Lafayette Escadrille 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

September 24th , 2011

at the Steven F. Udvar-Hazy Center of the
Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum

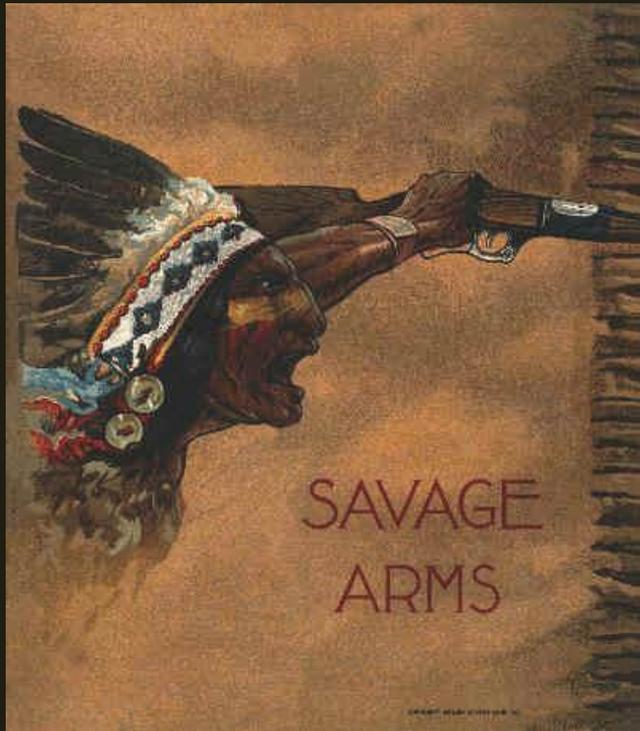
gossec@si.edu



The Lafayette Escadrille took to the air in April, 1916, and flew for 22 months to January, 1918. The fuselages of its aircraft were painted with two distinct unit insignia known as the *Seminole Head* and then its replacement, the *Sioux Head*. The only known example of the Seminole Head is in the collection of the *Musée de l'Air et de l'Espace* at Le Bourget, France. It was conceived shortly after the squadron moved to Cachy on the Somme front in October, 1916.



The idea of an insignia related to the American Indian may have been suggested by the insignia already used on the side of American Field Service ambulances serving in France in 1915.



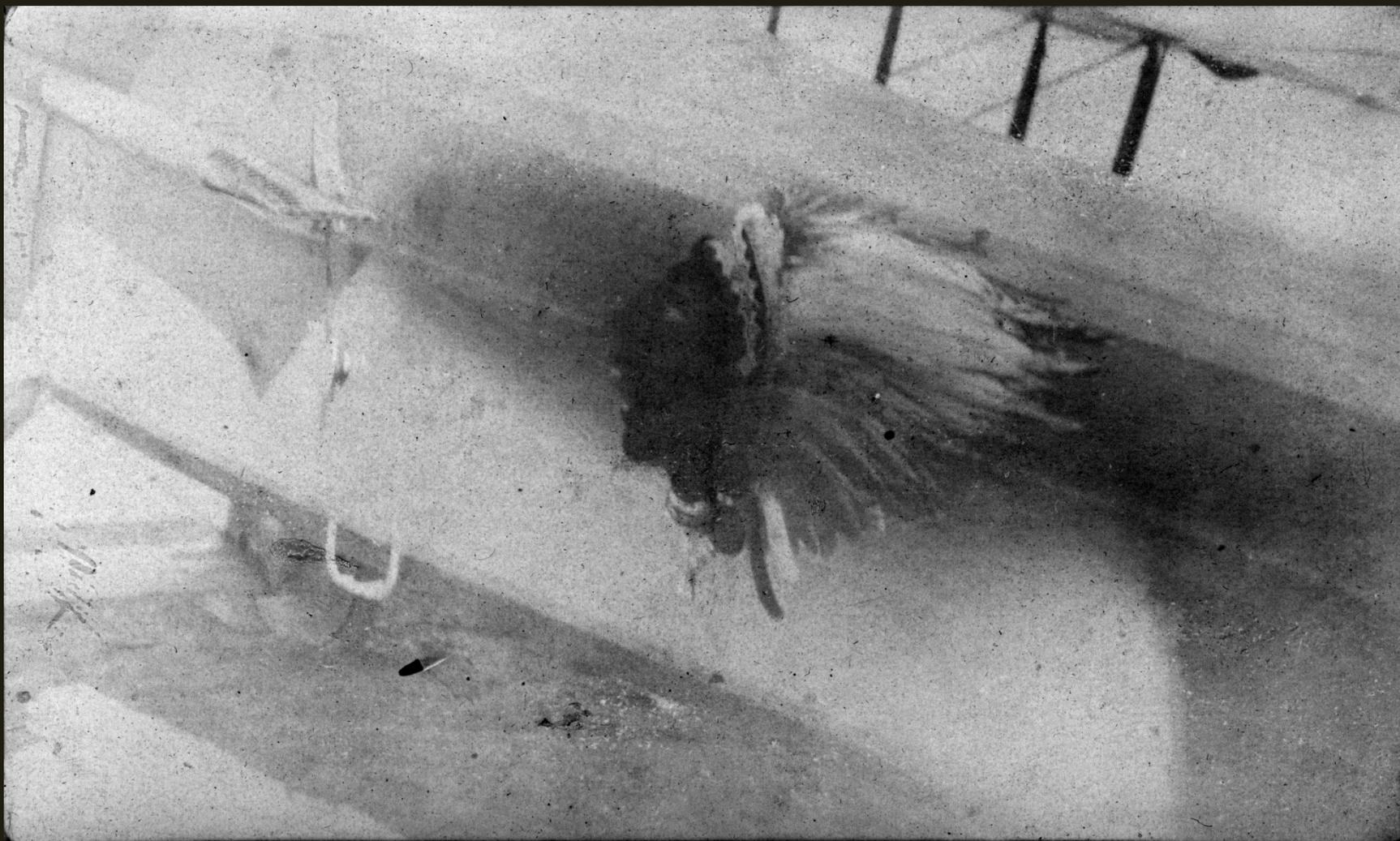
The actual design, itself, was based on the trademark found on ammunition crates of *Savage Arms*, an American company supplying Lewis Machine Guns and ammunition to the French. The company's catalog from the period is shown above next to the French museum's insignia, which has been flipped horizontally in order to facilitate comparison.



| | | | | |
|--------|----------|------------|------|--------|
| 5-1-17 | de Fange | Entrainant | 161 | 15" |
| | Chau | Entrainant | 1950 | 15" 30 |
| | Silber | Adjudant | 238 | 15" 20 |
| | Laville | Entraîné | 1617 | 15" |
| 6-1-17 | Chau | Entrainant | 1950 | 11" 30 |
| | Johnson | Entraîné | 1902 | 11" 30 |

A brass plate on the frame encircling the French museum's fabric states that it was removed from an aircraft flown by Raoul Lufbery. Lufbery is seen above standing in front of an early model Spad VII with the serial number S.238 which he flew from 5 January to 24 April 1917.

(Photo courtesy of Alan Toelle)



Lufbery's Spad is seen again in the above photo, taken on the same occasion but in this view the entire insignia can be seen.

(Photo courtesy of Alan Toelle)



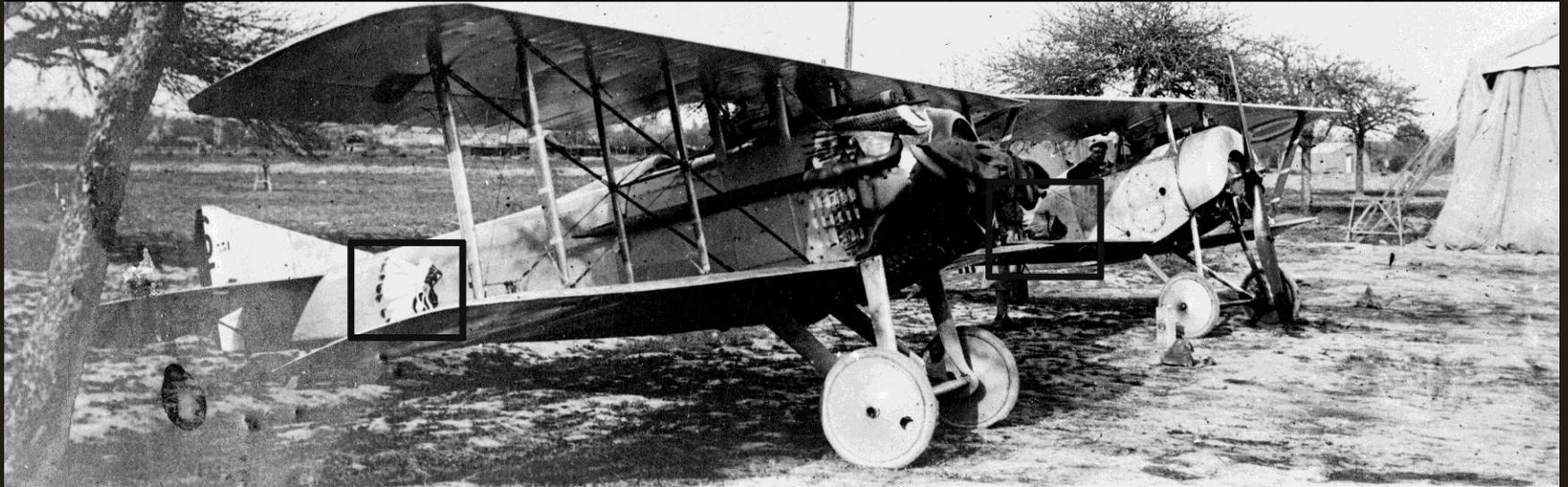
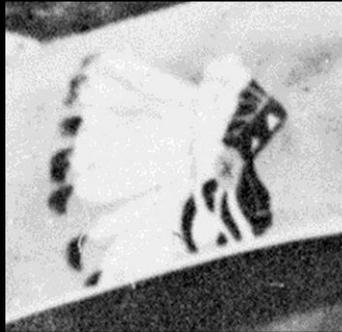
The French museum's example and the photo are compared above and match exactly; the French museum's example was cut from the fuselage of Lufbery's Spad VII S.238 .



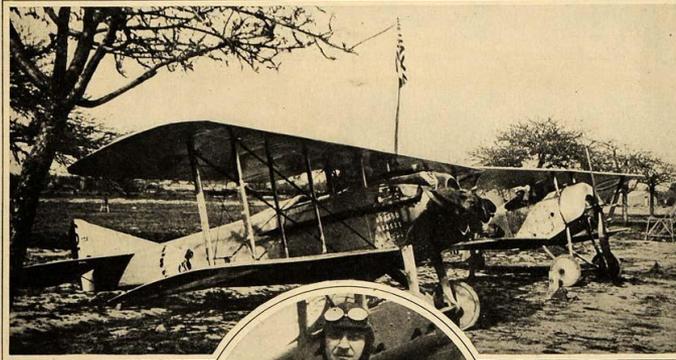
One of the escadrille's French mechanics, a Corporal by the name of Suchet, is credited with actually painting the design onto the escadrille's aircraft.



The Seminole Head design was not popular with all of the escadrille's pilots. Edward F. Hinkle would comment that it looked less like an Indian warrior and more like an "Old woman with a drooping bonnet."

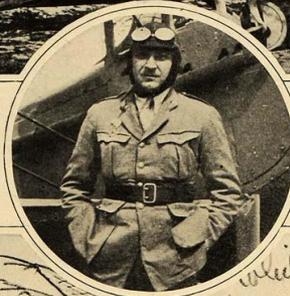


Hinkle and fellow pilot, Harold Buckley Willis, developed a new design meant to be more warrior-like, the *Sioux Head*. In the above photo, the new design is seen on the Spad VII in the foreground while the *Seminole Head* is seen on the Nieuport in the background. Note that the face of the Sioux Head has not yet been filled-in.

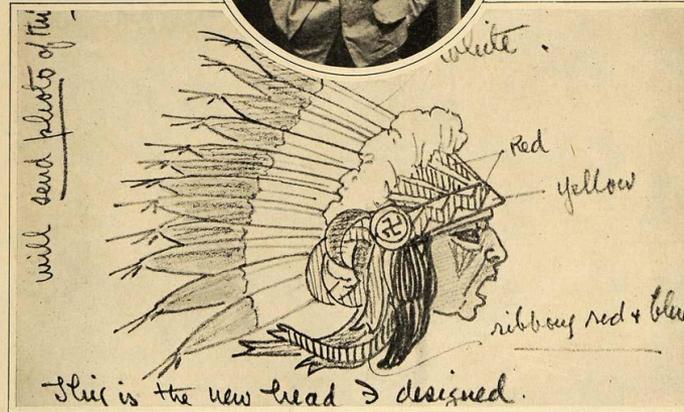


Underwood & Underwood

American troops are fighting in France. The aviators are making that fact just as obvious as possible. Corporal Edward F. Hinkle, of the Lafayette Escadrille, formerly of Cincinnati, was the first man to carry the American flag over the French lines. He designed the Indian head, below, which



the Escadrille has adopted as its symbol. Above are two American planes in full war paint. The Indian head is on the sides of each machine, the rudders are decorated with red, white and blue stripes, and on the upper surface of the planes is the red, white and blue circle, field and star. Their nationality is plain



International Film

Corporal Hinkle's original design and directions for the Escadrille Indian head, enclosed in one of his letters home

Hinkle included a sketch of the design in a letter home in June of 1917 which was printed in the July 7, 1917, edition of the popular *Harper's Weekly*.



Harold Buckley Willis



David McElvy Peterson



Raoul Lufbery



Raoul Lufbery

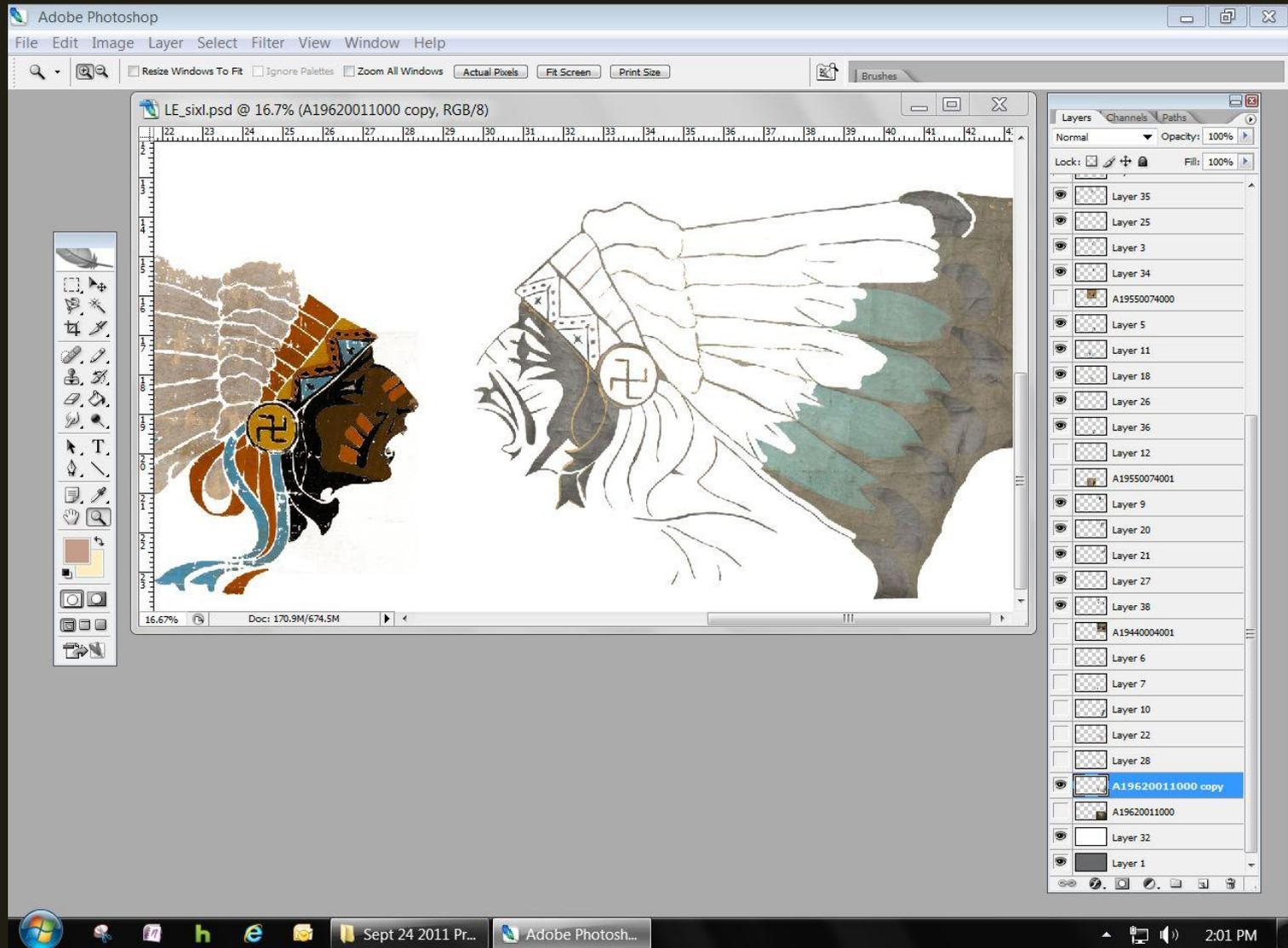


Edgar Tobin or Drummond Cannon



Robert Soubiran

The National Air and Space Museum has six original pieces of squadron insignia from the *Lafayette Escadrille* and its successor, the United States Air Service's *103rd Aero Squadron*.



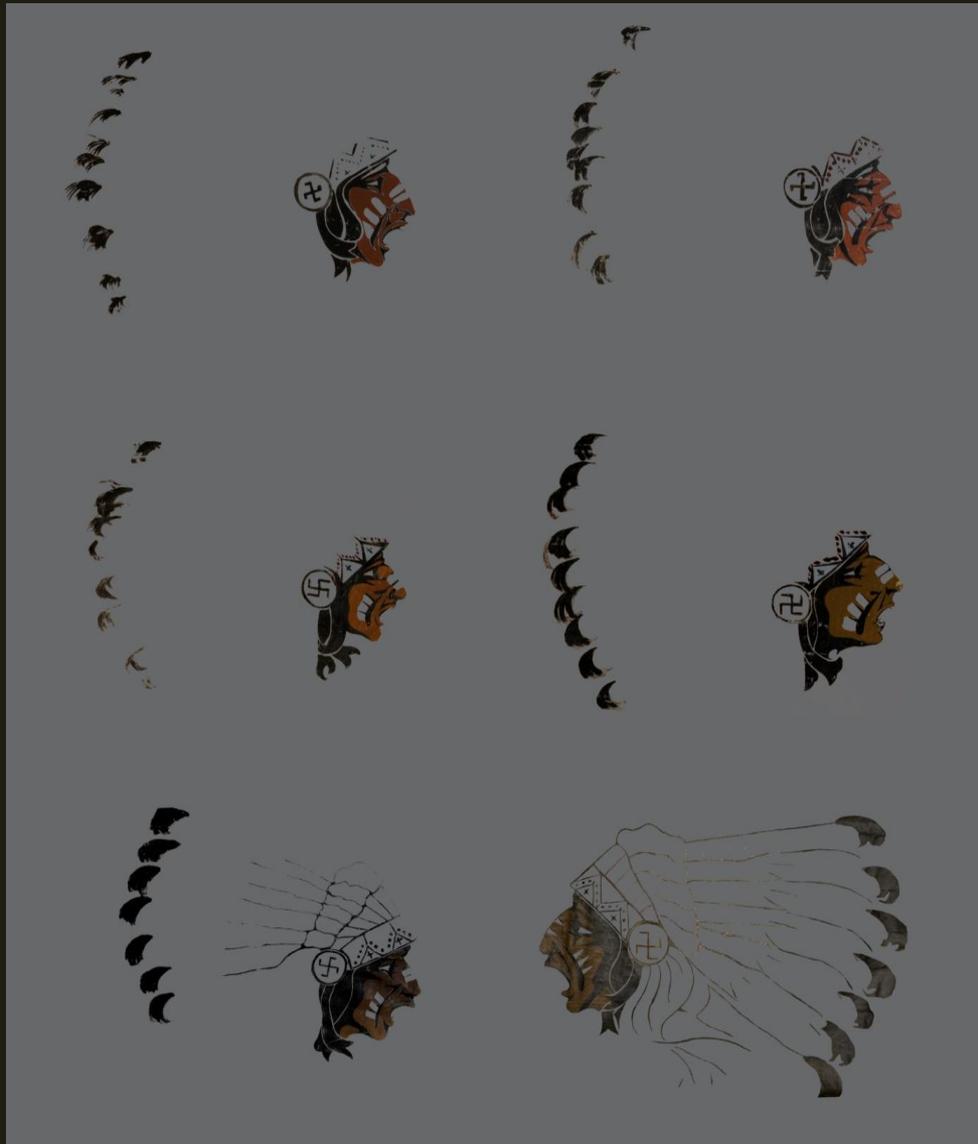
High-resolution photographs of these examples were edited in order to remove and then bring back various components of the Sioux Head design. This painstaking process revealed patterns and colors common to each hand-painted insignia.



In the above photo, the fabric on which the insignia was painted has been digitally removed.



When only black paint is observed, the characteristics of the face are especially evident, such as the rendering of the eye, mouth and war-paint as well as the ribbons of the head-dress.



The color of the faces is consistent.



A lighter red is used for the cloth holding together the ends of the feathers and two red ribbons which dangle from the head-dress, seemingly blowing backwards as the airplane bearing the insignia moves forward.



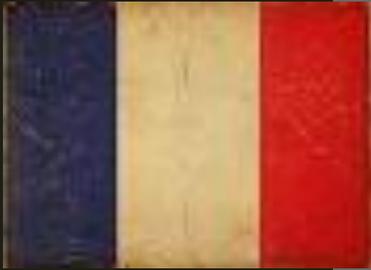
Yellow is used to highlight the beadwork on the band of the head-dress as well as its round disk bearing a good-luck symbol.



The red ribbons of the head-dress are complimented by two blue ribbons and this blue color is picked-up again in the band of the head-dress.



The blue color also adds stature to the feathers of the head-dress.



Finally, white paint is added to fill-out the feathers and accent the eyes. The blue-white-red pattern was meant to emulate the French flag when observed from a distance .



Willis



Peterson



Tobin
or Cannon



Lufbery via
Thaw



Lufbery via
Smith



Soubiran

After Willis's death, Hinkle took sole credit for the design of the *Sioux Head*, minimizing Willis's role to simply that of fashioning a template with which the design could be easily replicated. Willis – who was to become one of the foremost ecclesiastical architects in America after the war – likely played a much bigger role in the design than Hinkle would credit him with.

The similarity in the way in which the face was rendered suggests a template was used though not always followed.



Harold Buckley Willis



David McElvy Peterson



Raoul Lufbery



Raoul Lufbery



Edgar Tobin or Drummond Cannon



Robert Soubiran

Each of these six examples has its own, specific history.

Harold Buckley Willis



Harold Willis donated his insignia to the museum in 1963. In addition to the Escadrille's insignia, Willis added a personal recognition symbol to the sides of his Spad's fuselage in the form of a green diagonal stripe.



In addition to donating the insignia from the right side of his aircraft to the Smithsonian he donated the one from the left side to the *Musée National de la Coopération Franco-Américaine* in France.



In order to discover if, indeed, a stencil was used in the application of the insignia, a photo of the French museum's example was reversed above and placed on top of a photo of the Smithsonian's example.



The French museum's example was then made slightly transparent so that details of both insignia could be compared.



The transparency was then increased so that details of both insignia were equally viewable. The insignia are almost exact mirror images of each other just as one would be able to accomplish using a stencil on one side of the fuselage and then flipping it over to use it on the other side.



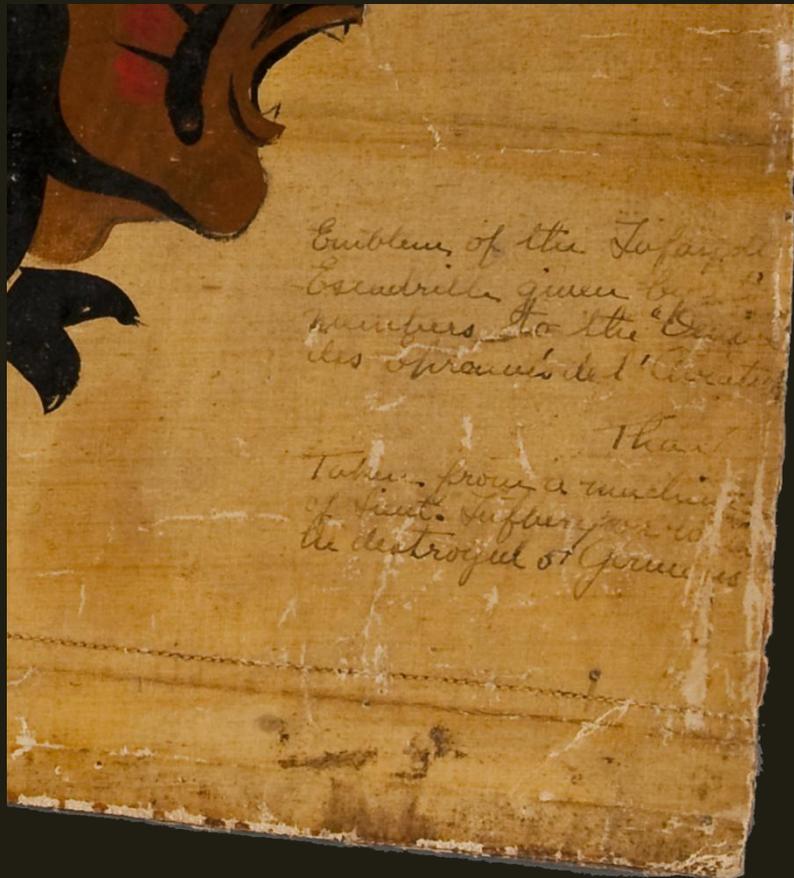
This donation was mailed to the Museum in 1941 by a man named D.S. Peterson with a Washington, DC, address but no explanation of who he was or how he came by his fabric. Seventy year's later, an old city phonebook yielded his full name and the 1930 census and some shoe leather did the rest.



The donor was Denton Strongman Peterson, the younger brother of Lafayette Escadrille pilot David McElvey Peterson (shown above) who survived the war but died in a plane crash in 1919 when his younger brother was just 13 years old.



Handwriting on this example states that the fabric was cut from the airplane of Escadrille pilot Raoul Lufbery. It is signed by Bill Thaw and Thaw's signature matches other known examples.



*Emblem of the Lafayette
Escadrille given by the
members to the "Oevre
les Epravei's de l'Aviation"*

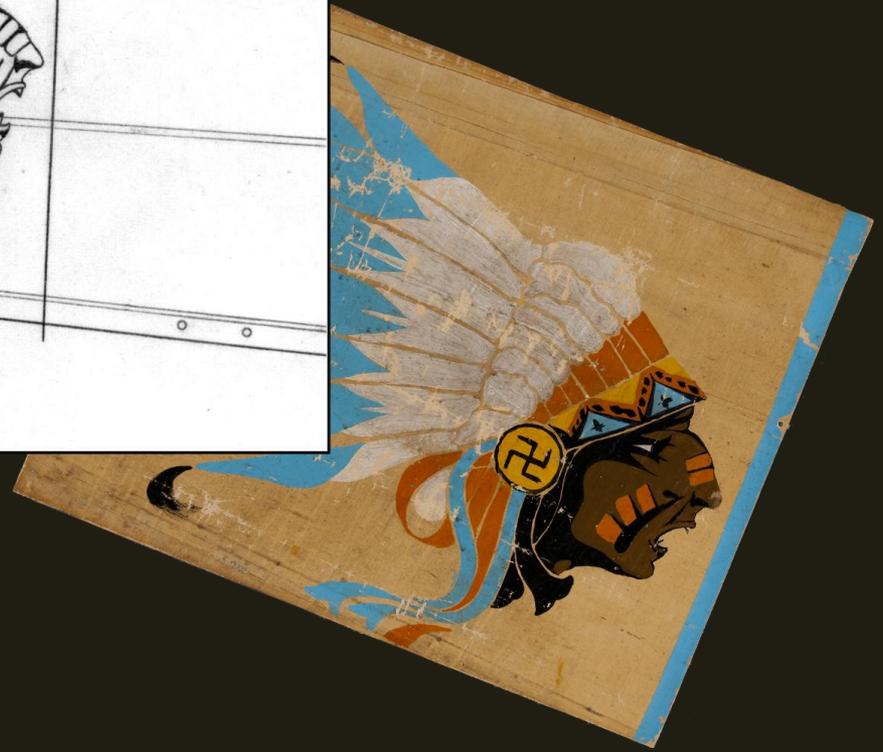
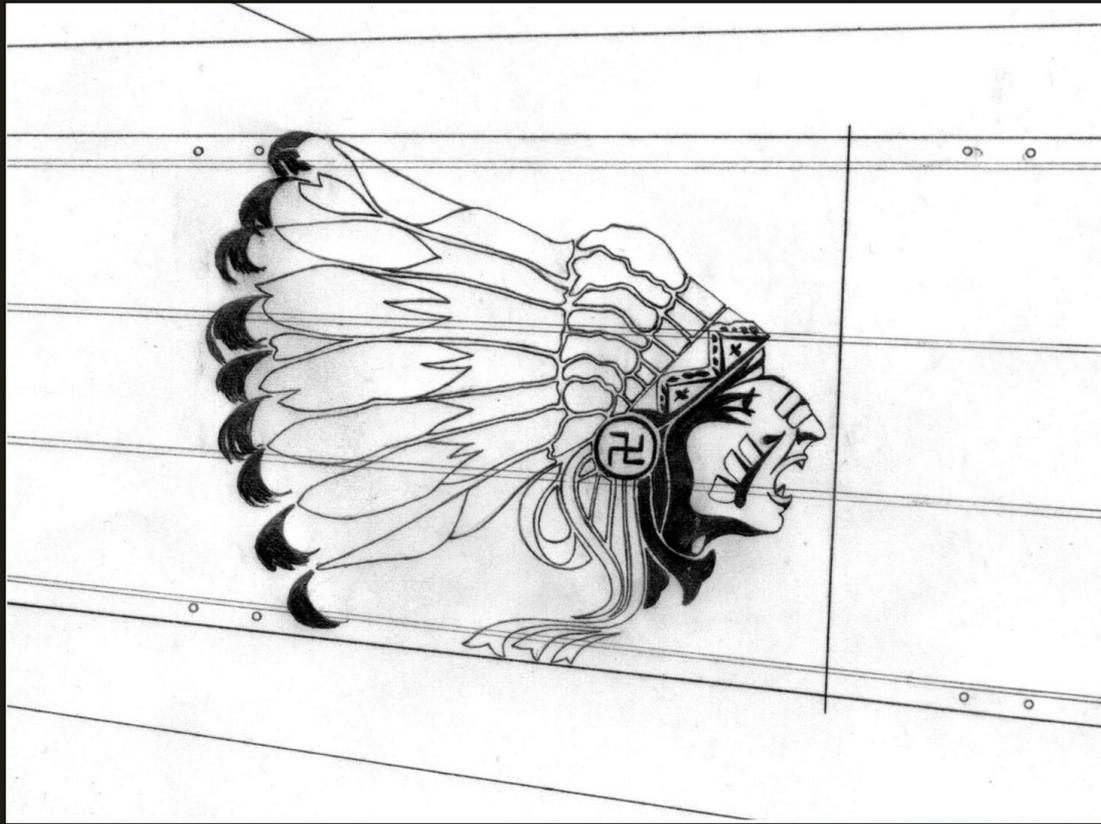
Thaw

*Taken from a machine
of Lieut. Lufbery in which
he destroyed 5 Germans*

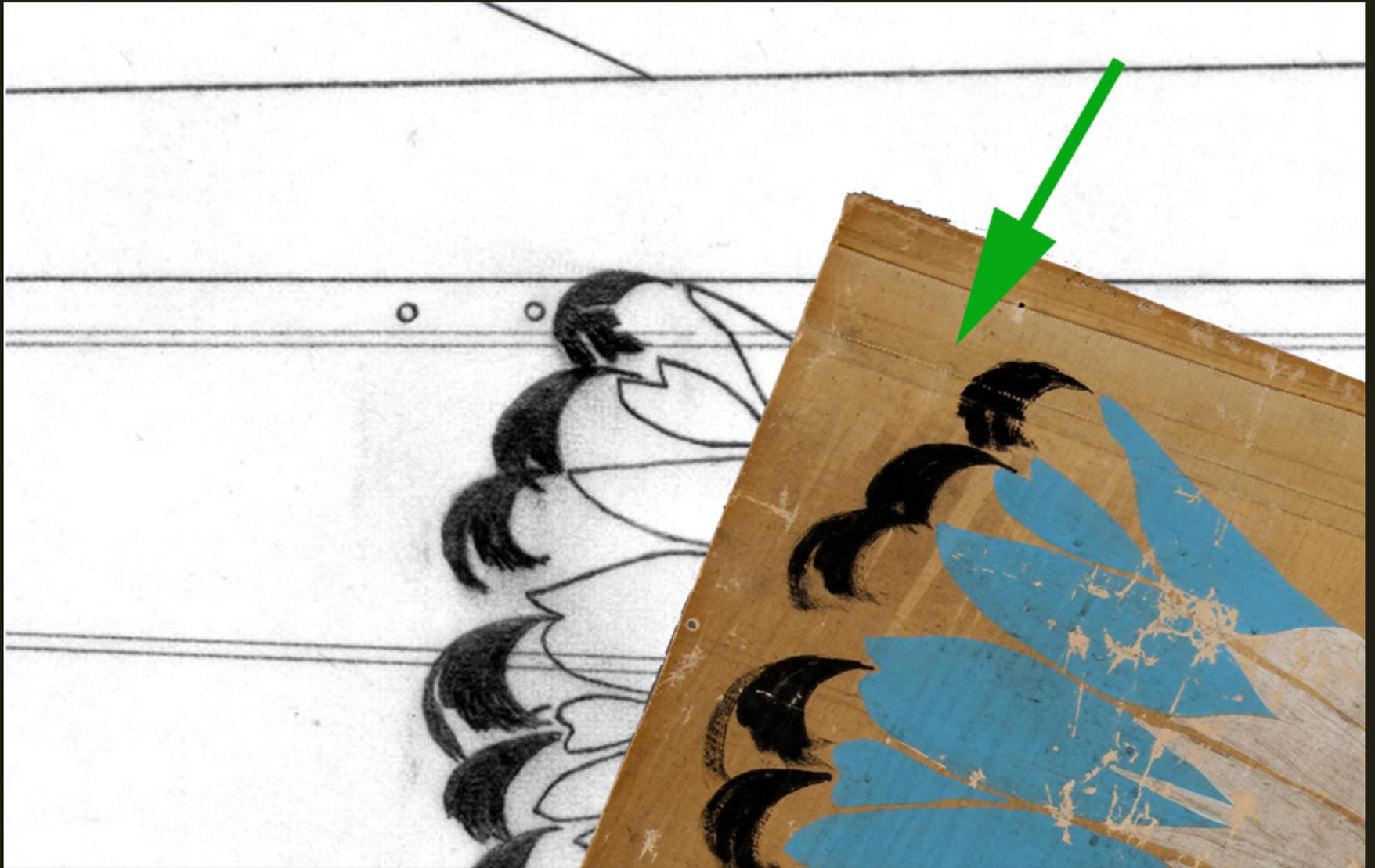
Thaw apparently meant to write "Oeuvre des Eprouvés de l'Aviation." Un homme *epruvé* is a man who has suffered through many trials. Thaw seems to be making a small joke .



This example was donated by Milton Smith who was a mechanic – and later pilot - with the U.S. Air Service's 103rd Aero Squadron into which many of the Escadrille pilots transferred. Smith states that he cut this insignia from the side of one of Lufbery's aircraft after it was written-off by a French inspector.



A researcher named Alan Toelle has compared deformations in the fabric to full-scale drawings of Spad VII aircraft.



Bolts in the aircraft longerons pressing up against the stretched fabric leave small deformations which help to locate *exactly* where the insignia was painted on the fuselage.

Edgar Tobin or Drummond Cannon



This provenance of this example was unknown until an exhaustive comparison was made between it and photos of aircraft of the Lafayette Escadrille and 103rd Aero Squadron.



Alan Toelle made an exact match with a DeMarcey-built Spad VII delivered in the Spring of 1918 to the 103rd Aero Squadron which was piloted either by Edgar Tobin or Drummond Cannon.



The insignia is compared above to the insignia in the photograph.



The match is exact.



In this close-up we have fitted it *behind* the mechanic sitting in front of the airplane.



Robert Soubiran served in both the Escadrille and the 103rd Pursuit Squadron. His wife donated this example after his death in 1962.



This photo shows one of Soubiran's Spad VII aircraft and the complete, seven foot long piece of fabric which his wife donated.



Here is the fabric completely overlaid onto the side of the fuselage.



The match is unmistakable though the serial number in the photo appears to have been repainted and moved forward by about a foot at some point after this photo was taken.



*The Regents and the Secretary of the
Smithsonian Institution*

*request the honor of your presence
at the presentation of the*

*Journal de Marches et Operations
of the Lafayette Escadrille*

by

George Spencer Thenault

to the

Smithsonian Institution, National Air Museum

and the opening of a new

Lafayette Escadrille Exhibit

Friday morning, April 19, 1963

eleven o'clock

Arts and Industries Building

Jefferson Drive between Ninth and Tenth Streets, SW.

This invitation admits bearer and guests

(over)

Much of the Museum's Lafayette Escadrille collection came from the Escadrille's members, themselves, in the early 1960s in preparation for an exhibit held in 1963. As the exhibit program above announced, at the opening of the exhibit the widow of the French commander of the Escadrille, George Thenault, donated the unit's two-volume *Journal De Marches et Operations* to the Museum. These volumes were digitally scanned and made available to the public in February, 2012, at the Internet Archive web site, archive.org



The insignia viewed during this presentation is carefully stored away from light in a purpose-built, temperature- and humidity-controlled, secure room at the Smithsonian.