

FOR APPLICANTS
FOR THE
WAR BIRDS
"SYNTHETIC ACES"

By EDWIN C. PARSONS

Booklet

No. 2

An Article Giving the True Facts and the Names of the Members of the Original Lafayette Escadrille. It Debunks the Hundreds of Impostors Who Claimed to Have Served With That Famous Fighting Organization and Establishes the Truth for All Time.

SYNTHETIC ACES

By EDWIN C. PARSONS

HUMAN nature is a funny thing. Hardly an original remark, but it's the only one that aptly explains the queer quirks in the make-up of certain people. Most of us are born with a definite amount of egotism or personal vanity, some greater, some smaller. There are very few folks who don't experience a little inner glow at seeing their names in print, who don't feel a bit of satisfaction at being momentarily raised out of the rut to bask in the limelight of publicity.

It raises them, however fleeting the instant, from the ruck of commonplace obscurity and sets them on a different plane from their submerged fellows. They gleefully haul out yellowed clippings, hoary with age, on the slightest provocation, to prove they have been worthy of notice. Much as they may deny it, they love the acclaim and applause of their friends and the public at large. It isn't a fault; it's just one of the strange quirks of human nature.

Let there be a particularly gruesome murder committed. Columns of publicity follow. The police are baffled. Suddenly, half a dozen people will pop up who voluntarily confess to the crime. The police trace their confessions down and find that they couldn't possibly have had anything to do with it. They are released with a severe reprimand. They sink happily back into the shadows, carefully preserving the newspaper accounts containing their names. They have had their moment. Their objective has been achieved. That's one of the strange quirks.

Another is the hero worship engendered by the world war, hundreds of men riding to glory on the reputation of dead heroes or highly publicized live ones.

Aviation being what it was, a glamorous new branch of the service, offered the most chances for individual heroism to be noted. Youngsters, to their own bewilderment, were raised almost overnight from the depths of obscurity to riding the crests as national heroes.

Is it any wonder that a host of imitators sprang up? Synthetic aces, deprived of the opportunity to win their own place in the limelight,

decided they would harm no one if they sought a little of the public acclaim? Certainly there was more than enough to go around. Just another manifestation of that same strange quirk.

But the wonder of it is, that it still continues almost unabated, perhaps even to a greater extent in the last five years than immediately after the war.

Lindbergh's exploit brought aviation so forcibly to the minds of the general public, that they began to realize that a war aviator was not a freak of nature. He was just a very human and oftentimes a very scared young man, trying his best to overcome an implacable foe in an unfamiliar element. But the glamor of his exploits still remained, enhanced by several motion pictures more or less realistically portraying his life and deeds of derring-do. As a consequence, a new crop of synthetic aces sprang up, enhancing the old.

Before America entered the war and for a long time after the armistice, the Lafayette Escadrille was the most highly publicized organization on the Front. After all, that was only natural, since they were the first organized group of Americans to enter the lists. Many were college youths, sons of prominent families. Added to that was the glamor of conquering the new element.

As a volunteer in a foreign army, each individual became a national hero. Their names were quoted again and again in dispatches. The name "Lafayette Escadrille" was as familiar to the general public as Joffre, Foch, or President Wilson. It has never really been allowed to die. The name is frequently seen in articles and fiction stories. It's quite natural then, with that romantic aura, that many synthetic aces should claim membership in that tiny organization. It's the name they know best.

If all the men I have known or heard about who claimed to have been in the Lafayette Escadrille were really members, they could easily have driven German aviation from the skies by sheer force of numbers. There wouldn't have been room on the Front for the rest of the French aviation.

Time and again, I have gone to towns or cities, met people and been introduced as a former flyer with the Lafayette. Almost invariably, some one would ask, "Oh, did you know Lieutenant Whoo-sis? He flew with the Lafayette."

I'd shake my head and say, "Sorry, I don't know the name." At first,

it used to make me rather peeved and I'd add, "I'm afraid Lieutenant Whoosis is mistaken, or perhaps you misunderstood. He was never a pilot with the outfit."

I was soon cured of that. The person would look at me disdainfully and answer, "Well, if you were with the Lafayette, you must have known him. He was with them so long and has so many medals. I'm sure Lieutenant Whoosis would never say a thing that wasn't so." The implication being that I was just a gosh-darned liar myself if I dared deny that the aforesaid Whoosis was top-cutter with the outfit. I often got a little hostile and made myself highly unpopular by my vehement denials of the veracity of native sons. I'd say, "Bring the lop-eared romancer (or words to that effect) around to meet me. We'll damn soon find out who's lying."

But somehow or other, I never got to meet these claimants for glory. They had other engagements that regrettably prevented a powwow about the good old war times. The people with whom I'd argued, however, were never convinced. As far as they were concerned, I was always the fake. Now, I simply say, "No, I don't know him, but I'd like to meet the so and so." And that ends it.

Frequently one of my friends will say, "I met a Lafayette Escadrille man last week. Name was Joe Zilch. I asked him if he knew you and he said, 'It seems to me I've heard the name.'" That's good for quite a chuckle.

I recall a woman asking me once if I knew a certain man, who claimed to be all sorts of a hero while flying with the Escadrille. He was another of the same kind, so I told her no, that he couldn't have been with the squadron. "But," she persisted, "don't you suppose he could have been with the Escadrille and you didn't know him?"

"Madame," I said, "have you a husband?"

"Yes."

"Any children?"

"Two young sons."

"See them every day and talk with them?"

"Why, of course."

"Well," I said, "you're no closer to them than we were in the Escadrille. We flew and fought side by side, ate, slept, gambled and did our drinking together month in and month out. Every man in the

outfit was just as well known to every other as your husband and sons are to you."

That seemed to be as convincing a proof as I could offer, and quite does away with "I think I've heard the name." Escadrille is merely the French word for squadron and we were just the same as any other French squadron. Sometimes we had as few as eight pilots on active service and sometimes our strength was eighteen. But in all, during the life of the Escadrille, from its inception to the time it was transferred to the American Army, we had only thirty-eight pilots, including those killed or incapacitated.

It might not be out of place to quote the names of those pilots here. They are the only ones who ever saw any active service in the Lafayette Escadrille, officially called N-124, later known as S-124. Should any one claim to have been an active member whose name does not appear on this list, he may well be classified as a synthetic ace. A star follows the names of those still alive.

Horace C. Balsley*, Stephen Bigelow*, Ray G. Bridgeman*, Courtney Campbell, Victor Chapman, Elliot Cowdin*, Charles Dolan*, James Doolittle, John Drexel*, Wm. E. Dugan, Jr., Christopher P. Ford*, Edmond Genet, Bert Hall*, James Norman Hall*, Willis B. Haviland*, Thomas M. Hewitt*, Dudley L. Hill*, Edward F. Hinkle*, Ronald Hoskier, Charles C. Johnson*, Henry S. Jones*, Walter Lovell*, Raoul Lufbery, Douglas MacMonagle, James R. McConnell, Kenneth Marr*, Didier Masson*, Edwin C. Parsons*, Pavelka, David Peterson, Fred Prince*, Norman Prince, Kiffen Rockwell, Robert Rockwell*, Rumsey*, Robert Soubiran*, Wm. Thaw*, Harold B. Willis*.

There were over two hundred more Americans enlisted in the French aviation who performed wonderful services for France, but for whom there was no room in the Lafayette Escadrille. They were farmed out in various French escadrilles. Their names and the records of their achievements are to be found in half a dozen books. Therefore, it's rather surprising that the synthetic boys attempt to make claims to glory on the reputation of these youngsters, when it's so easy to check up on them by a simple reference to the printed word. That's their big mistake.

The Dole prize flight a couple of years ago brought out one aspiring claimant to a majority in the Lafayette Escadrille. His name and picture appeared in all the papers, with big headlines telling of

his glorious achievements with the squadron. Needless to say his flight to Honolulu was confined to the newspapers.

Some of the wiser glory grabbers go in a big way for the R.F.C. and with the rapid turnover and strange intermingling of Canadians, English and Americans, they get away with it merrily in most cases. The smarter ones check up on various Fronts, battles, squadron numbers and airdromes, so they are rarely to be confounded. The dumber ones don't bother, but smart or dumb, they generally slip up somewhere along the line.

The strangest experience I had was at a dinner party where I was taken by a friend. It was three years after the war. We were late in arriving. Introductions were mumbled. I sat across the table from a most presentable young chap whose name I never learned.

During the course of the dinner, war aviation was discussed. The presentable young man was listened to with avid ears by every one present, as he described various thrilling battles in which he had brought down several German aces. Evidently he was well known and very popular. I was informed in a low voice by my charming dinner partner that she was engaged to him and how proud she was of his exploits.

I asked her what army and squadron he was with. His yarns had a familiar ring. "Don't you know him?" she asked in amazement. "That's Captain X of the Lafayette Escadrille." I opened my eyes wide and drank in his stories with relish. He mentioned the names of several members of the outfit, most of them dead.

When he had finished, I asked him if he had known Ted Parsons. "Know him?" he answered. "Know him? I should say I did. Why, we roomed together for over a year." To my knowledge I had never seen the man before. To say I was surprised and delighted is putting it mildly. The man who had brought me looked at me curiously and opened his mouth, but I shook my head.

I don't claim to be any philanthropist, but I had learned forbearance and the young lady sitting beside me was altogether too charming to be disillusioned.

After dinner, I had a moment alone with Captain X. "I merely wanted to tell you, captain," I said, "how much I enjoyed listening to you and how delighted I am to have been your bunkie. We had some good times together, didn't we?"

The captain reddened. "W-what do you mean?" he stammered.

"Didn't you know me? I'm Ted Parsons."

The chap was really likable. He turned white as a sheet, then sort of braced himself and said quietly, "That was really sporting. Thanks a lot for not showing me up. Not that it matters, but just by way of explanation, I got washed out of pursuit and went into bombing. I had written back here that I was going in the Lafayette and the letter was published, so I just let people keep on thinking so. I needed this lesson. If you had told the truth, I never could have lived it down. Now I swear to you I'm cured."

He turned and left the room and I never saw him again. But the next day, a beautiful gold cigarette case was delivered to my hotel. There was no name on the card. Just the word "Thanks."

He hadn't done any real harm except to himself. In fact, none of the synthetic aces do any real harm. Still one does get a bit fed up, particularly when they try to cram bull down your throat. If they tell a story that's a bit doubtful with the attitude of take it or leave it, that's one thing; but where they insist on pulling raw ones and still maintain an air of genuineness in the face of convincing proof to the contrary, it's liable to rile an otherwise equable disposition.

When Billy Wellman, himself a real French army flyer with an enviable record of heroism, was selected to direct that classic motion picture "Wings," he took me along as technical director.

Among the extra boys who were chosen to take the parts of squadron members was a young man who called himself Captain C. He had his own uniform, an R.F.C. complete in every detail, a bad limp from a shattered leg and a number of medals. He quietly let it be known to the publicity man that he was the well known English ace, Captain C, with a record of twenty-two Germans and eight balloons officially destroyed. In one of his hot encounters with the Red Knight, he had been wounded by von Richthofen and sent crashing to earth. They had patched him up and brave laddie that he was, he had gone right back to bumping off Huns.

Instantly, he sprang into prominence. Newspapers and trade papers were filled with his pictures and exploits. He was the lion of the hour. Wellman was delighted that he had uncovered such a find among the extra ranks. Everyone liked and admired the brave Captain C. His record made mine look like an amateur's.

We were on location in San Antonio and I had a safety deposit box in the hotel vault. C came to me one day and asked if I could put his

medals in the vault. I agreed, glad to do anything I could for him. I gave him all the respect in the world. Among his medals was the French *Médaille Militaire*. I gave it hardly a thought at the time, although I should have.

The *Médaille Militaire* is the rarest and hardest to get of all French decorations and it has a certain peculiarity. It is never awarded to a commissioned officer, except to a general when he has every other decoration possible and then only on rare occasions. It must be won as a non-commissioned officer or private. To award a man such a medal in an Allied army, he would have to perform an act of such unexampled heroism involving France that his name would be emblazoned on the rolls of the Hall of Fame. It would be similar to giving the Victoria Cross to some one in the French Army, or the Congressional Medal to a soldier of the British.

Since practically all pilots in the R.F.C. were officers and C claimed himself as such it was more or less difficult to understand how he could have rated the *Médaille Militaire*.

Captain C began to talk a lot about himself and his exploits. That was another tip off if we'd been smart enough to see it. It's mighty hard to get a real hero to say anything about himself. It isn't false modesty, but the realization that whatever little part he's played has been so small in the general scheme of things and in comparison to what others have done, that he doesn't want to talk about it. He knows the real heroes are those who are peacefully sleeping on the battlefields where they fell.

Eventually, we got to working with planes and Captain C didn't show up so well. Things were a bit strange to him. He was taken up for a hop by one of the army flyers and handed the stick. The ship wobbled all over the sky and the pilot was forced to take over to prevent a crash. C alibied that his leg bothered him and he hadn't had his hand on a stick for so long that it was hard to get back.

Then he was asked to taxi a ship and immediately performed all sorts of intricate gyrations, including the well known ground loops of the student aviator. Some way, he explained, he seemed to have lost his touch. From then on, he was relegated to riding in the rear cockpit of a bomber, out of all harm's way.

He still persisted in forcing his yarns down our throats and those of every one he met. He certainly impressed young girls almost to the point of tears. He loved his publicity. Suspicions were rife that all

was not well, but any one hates to doubt a man who might really be the goods.

Then he went back to Hollywood and attempted to get on another picture as technical director on the strength of his uniform, medals and publicity yarns. The producer of this picture happened to be a canny man. He wanted to reassure himself. He sent word to England to look this hero up. Word came back that there was no such man on the rolls of British aviation. He was totally unknown, as were his twenty-two Boche and eight balloons.

The chap was a complete and utter fake, yet he still insists on trying to force his story on people, breaking out his uniform and medals at the slightest excuse. There are always a crop of newcomers to believe him.

From all information we have been able to garner, the boy was a stable sergeant and his shattered leg came from a kicking horse. Medals he had none. He might have gotten away better for some time, if he hadn't claimed the *Médaille Militaire*, but like so many other synthetic heroes, he didn't know and slipped up on one apparently unimportant point.

Sometimes, just by being regular fellows, they are allowed to get away with it. An author friend of mine, a well known contributor to WAR BIRDS, wrote me not long ago concerning a chap he knows. "There is a synthetic R.F.C. ace who has wowed them in this country. His picture, in uniform, has been in various air mags. He has made talks, has held flying jobs, attended air shows and autographed pictures. He is a good Indian. Anybody would like him and he has gone over great, so I won't mention his name. But he was an officer's batman in the R.F.C. and that is all the acehood he got. "An' 'ow wull yer 'ave yer towst, sir?"

Then there was an R.F.C. "ace" of my acquaintance who went over big for a long time. He could fly like nobody's business. Had every English medal except the V.C., one or two French and Belgian, to say nothing of Roumanian and Serbian. The name he used was that of one of the best known English aces, with an official record of some thirty-eight German ships destroyed.

Charming personality, plenty of money and conversed in the accents of a well born Englishman. There seemed to be no question of his genuineness. One night at a dinner party at the house of a titled Englishman who had often entertained the brave Major M—, the host

produced a clipping from the London *Times*, giving a full account of the death of that same Major M while testing a racing ship at Calshot. War record, medals and description fitted perfectly the man who was sitting at the table.

The false Major M rose from the table in a dignified manner, merely said "Sorry" and left the house. Last I heard he was driving a taxi in San Francisco. He had been unfortunate in picking the name of a man who was still in the public eye and unfortunate enough to get himself bumped off.

Not all these synthetic aces are wholly to blame. Sometimes they are unwittingly carried into the thing without realizing where it's leading. Witness the case of a young man, very prominent in Southern California civilian aviation. He has done yeoman work, giving freely of his time and services.

For several years, he was looked upon as one of the boy heroes. His right arm was off at the shoulder and the right side of his face a mass of horrible scars. The story was that he was shot down horribly wounded and a fire in the German lines after a valiant struggle in which he downed two or three Boche. He told a vivid tale. Then some one discovered that his record wasn't on file and went to him. This boy really had something. It took the same kind of intestinal fortitude to do what he did, as it would have taken to do the things he was reputed to have done.

There was a big dinner of the Southern California Aviation crowd, of which he was secretary and for whom he had done such fine work. After the dinner, with a word of introduction from the president, he got up in front of all that crowd of his admirers and in a low, steady voice admitted that he was a fake, that his arm had been shot off and his face scarred in a shotgun accident while hunting, long before the war.

After the war, when aviation hero worship was rampant, some one had started the story that he had been wounded as an aviator overseas. He was intensely interested in aviation and thought that was a good way for more attention to be paid to him, so he let the story ride. It was a chance for him to forge to the top in flying circles. Then, when he was pressed for details, he commenced to tell the story himself, embroidering it as he went along. He told it so often, that by a species of self-hypnosis, he had almost begun to believe it himself. He apologized for everything and left the room in a very dignified manner.

His courage in facing the gang made such a favorable impression

that after he went out, as a result of the discussion that followed, when his previous services were taken in consideration, he was reappointed secretary and I believe, still holds the position.

But the synthetic ace business is not entirely confined to those who were not in aviation or never saw the Front. There are more than a few of the other kind, who are just as bad or worse.

There was a young American who joined the French Army in 1917 and after five months training in the schools went to the Front, where has stayed less than fifteen days and spent less than six hours over the lines, with Escadrille Spad 155.

He committed the unforgivable sin, deserting a French comrade in a flight and let the other man go to his death. The cowardice was seen by another combat patrol who were roaring full motor to the rescue, but who unfortunately arrived too late.

Being an American and about to transfer to the American Army, he was not court-martialed. He left the escadrille the same day and went to Paris, where he put on an American uniform. Then he was re-assigned at his own request to his old squadron, but the pilots refused to receive him and the French captain ordered him out of the officers' mess.

Then this youngster got himself transferred to America. Immediately upon arrival, he found himself a ghost writer and proceeded to write a hair-raising tale of his bravery on the Front, which was published by the *Saturday Evening Post* under the title of "Aces Up." In it, he recounted every experience and every legend which was current on the Front, ascribing them all as actual fact happenings to himself. Included were several spine-tickling encounters with the famous Baron von Richthofen, whom he vanquished in utter defeat.

These stories came to the attention of the French captain and one of this synthetic ace's American squadron mates. In view of his record at the Front, they filed a vehement protest. The *Saturday Evening Post* published an apology some time later, in which they stated they had been misled into believing that the young American was what he claimed to be and regretting their mistake.

A book has been published within the last few years, written by one of my own Lafayette Escadrille mates in collaboration with an American aviator. In it he recounts all his own thrilling adventures, which

up to the time he left the Escadrille in December of 1916, are based on actual fact.

It would have been fine if he had stopped there. But he had to go on and write a lot of cheap clap-trap, which has no factual foundation. The flyer in question returned to America by devious routes and means in 1917. In his book, he states that he returned to active duty in France on the S.S. *Rochambeau*, leaving New York the eighth of January, 1918, landing at Le Havre.

It so happens that I was on leave in America at the same time and returned to France on the *Rochambeau*. We left New York the tenth of January, being delayed two days in sailing and instead of Le Havre, went directly to Bordeaux. My comrade failed to check up on those little details.

Since he never returned to France during hostilities his yarn necessarily becomes very vague as to details of dates, places, etc., and his own accomplishments, after his alleged return. Seems strange that he couldn't have let well enough alone and written just what he had to write about that was the truth, instead of trying to cram a lot of synthetic stuff down the throats of the public.

The prizewinner, when it comes to synthetic acehood, is a book published in 1928, written by a purported member of the British Independent Air Force. His picture in full R.A.F. uniform, with medal ribbons galore, appears on the title page, together with the modest information that he became an ace after ten days on the Front. Not bad for a bomber.

The whole thing is an exquisite laugh from start to finish and an insult to the intelligence of the readers. It's impossible to conceive how a man could write such a bunch of rubbish in the first place and in the second, how he could have found any one to publish it.

This man never bothered to check up on ships, places or anything else as far as I can determine. I don't believe there's a reader of *WAR BIRDS* from the youngest to the oldest, who couldn't write a smarter book and one more nearly genuine. Every air-minded youngster in the country could spot the fallacies in an instant.

For the amusement of my readers, I quote some of the passages that gave me the biggest laughs. Here is something really unique in the way of avoiding fire in the air. So simple, no one else ever seemed to think of it.

"It was at the battle of Zeebrugge that I had my first experience in being brought down by the enemy. I was up about two thousand feet when a shell hit my machine and set fire to it. In an instant I realized what would happen to my observer and myself if we continued flying against the wind. I immediately turned my machine and flew with the wind, in the meantime pointing the nose of my machine downward, making for the sea below at about two hundred miles per hour . . . The only bad result from this little mishap was a slight cold . . . Shell hit me, setting fire to machine while flying into the wind over the Mole. Saw flames spreading over machine, changed course and flew with the wind. By doing this I had the advantage of the wind blowing the flames from us, saving pilot and observer from being burned alive."

A really hair-raising deed came several days later. ". . . but I gave him and his old machine everything I had in my machine gun and shot him out of control. Something made me follow this fellow to earth. It was a foolish thing to do, for we were *forbidden to land in German territory unless we had to*. However, I forgot that order and when his machine crashed I landed safely not far from him. I went over to the wrecked machine and pulled him out. He was unconscious. I was sure he was one of Germany's best aviators and wanted to know who he was, so I put him across the petrol tank *in front of me*. I rose from the ground all right and headed for home, which I reached safely. Every one was surprised at what I had done."

This yarn has a moral. Never drop bombs on submarines. "A few days afterwards . . . I noticed the wake of a submarine . . . I put my powerful glasses to my eyes and distinctly made out one of Germany's latest submarines lying peacefully on the sandy bottom. I circled around it and then let go three of my bombs. I literally blew that sub out of the water and as I saw it rise above the surface I let go two more and one of them must have hit it, for a terrific explosion occurred. However, I was not certain that I had hit it, for the destroyer was close by and it had also seen the sub appear above the surface of the water and fired at it. The two shells that it fired exploded and sent a spout of water higher than I was flying and it struck my machine and broke off the two wings, and in a few seconds I was in the Irish sea, much to my disgust."

The following tale proves that the ace was really a high flyer. Figuring on a gliding angle of ten to one, the gentleman was up quite a way.

"I followed him eighty-seven miles toward Berlin before I downed him . . . I don't want any one to think I am bloodthirsty, but I'll admit

that I shot round after round at him when I was certain that his machine was completely out of control and certain death was his when his machine struck the ground. . . . However, I had gained my ends, namely getting the fellow that my comrades had said was too slippery for me. The moment I was sure I had downed him and was heading for home, I knew that I had not enough gasoline in my tank to take me home. When I was within *eighty* miles of my airdrome my gasoline supply gave out and *I was forced to use the instruments in front of me at a moment's notice.* I immediately put the controls in position so as to volplane in a safe direction toward my aerodrome and landed within *two miles* of it. I totally wrecked the machine and received a few cuts and bruises."

The tale of a stirring encounter with his implacable foe, Baron von Richthofen.

"As usual, the little red machine that led the squadron that was approaching contained the Baron himself, and as I made head-on at him he must have recognized me. I am ashamed to say that I fired several rounds at him and the only thing he did was to wave the German flag, again showing his contempt for us."

The ace seemed to forget that the Baron von Richthofen met a hero's death on April 21st, 1918.

"I think the last six weeks the Allied airmen had before the war ended were the hardest of their fighting careers. . . . I had almost daily encounters with the Baron and his squadron, but his hideous machines were almost a thing of the past. Of course, I was losing some of my machines also, but I kept the edge on the Baron in nearly every encounter I had with him."

Could anything be more amazingly funny? But as I said, these synthetic aces don't really do any one any harm except themselves. However, they must have some awful moments of self disgust, when and if they ever stop to think.

Questions for your entrance examination to the *War Birds* are based on information in this and pamphlets Nos. 1, 3, 4.

No one will wear the *War Birds* wings or carry the *War Birds* card who does not know of, and respect, the things that make up the life of a sky warrior. There is an examination to be passed before you qualify—and it is not an easy examination. But, when you have passed it, you will know the glory of really "belonging." Your wings will not be a mockery—they will stand for something tangible and you will have won the right to wear them.

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