

A Man for His Time

The pilot for whom Luke AFB was named is a unique figure in the history of air warfare.

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FRANK Luke ranks second to Eddie Rickenbacker among American aces who flew with the Army Air Service in World War I. He was the first airman to be awarded the Medal of Honor, but in several respects, Luke is least typical of the fifty-eight Air Force men who have earned that distinction in four wars.

Luke earned his wings at Rockwell Field, Calif., in January 1918. When he showed only mediocre ability during operational training in France, he was assigned the unglamorous task of ferrying planes to the Front. For a young man motivated by a lust for personal glory earned in combat, that was a bitter blow. He compensated by constant bragging about his skill as a pursuit pilot and by flouting regulations.

The final German offensive kicked off on July 15, with American pursuit squadrons suffering heavy losses. On July 26, Lieutenant Luke was sent as a replacement to the 27th Aero Squadron of the 1st Pursuit Group. He immediately alienated the old hands by bragging about his untested ability.

On August 1, during his first patrol, led by squadron commander Maj. Harold Hartney, soon to become group commander, Luke left the formation to go off on his own. Turning a deaf ear to Hartney's lecture on air discipline, Luke repeated that performance in his next two missions, once claiming an unconfirmed victory.

None of the squadron's flights wanted the unreliable Luke. He was an outcast with no friend other than Lt. Joseph Wehner, a quiet young man who was intrigued by Luke's unorthodox behavior. Luke asked

Major Hartney to let him fly solo patrols, and Hartney, apparently seeing some potential in the unruly pariah, agreed.

By September 11, Frank Luke's search for glory remained unrewarded. That evening, he heard some of the pilots talking about the most dangerous of targets—tethered enemy observation balloons. Each balloon site was surrounded by a ring of anti-aircraft guns and a second ring of heavy machine guns and protected by pursuit planes stationed at nearby strips. The pilots agreed that they would attack a balloon only if ordered to do so. Immediately Luke knew he had found his path to fame.

He persuaded Joe Wehner to fly cover for him the next day when he intended to—and did—explode his first balloon. Heading for home base to post his victory claim, Luke left Wehner without cover as the latter attacked another balloon, a pattern that was to continue so long as the two flew together.

Luke and Wehner soon concluded that the best time to attack balloons was at dusk, when the big bags were being hauled down. On September 18, Frank Luke had his best day, shooting down two balloons, two Fokkers that attacked Wehner and him, and one German observation plane to become the leading Air Service ace. Wehner, with eight victories—second only to



Balloon-busting World War I pilot Frank Luke flouted regulations, but scored eighteen victories in as many days.

Luke—was shot down that day and died in a German hospital.

Luke's arrogance mounted with his victories. Several times he landed at French fields to spend the night. On September 29, after still another AWOL episode, his new squadron commander, Capt. Al Grant, grounded his fifteen-victory pilot. Luke's response was to fly to an advance field where he planned to refuel and attack three balloons reported near Murvaux.

Grant phoned the field commander, ordering that Luke be placed under arrest. By coincidence, Group Commander Major Hartney landed moments after Luke and, not knowing the circumstances, approved Luke's request to hit the balloons.

While Hartney watched, there were three explosions in the gathering dusk, just as Luke had predicted. Grant is reported to have said that when Luke returned, he would court-martial him, then recommend him for the Medal of Honor.

Luke never returned.

The details of Luke's death were not known until after the war. His Spad had been damaged on one pass at a balloon, and perhaps Luke had been wounded. He may have shot down two of the Fokkers that pursued him in the twilight. Certainly he machine-gunned German troops near Murvaux, then landed in a field and was surrounded by enemy soldiers. Luke drew his pistol and killed three Germans before he was fatally shot in the chest.

Eddie Rickenbacker called Frank Luke "the greatest fighter who ever went into the air." He was a fighter to the end. Arrogant, self-centered, and undisciplined, Luke probably would have been a failure in later wars, but in the freewheeling days of the baptism of air combat, he earned a niche for himself in the history of military aviation with eighteen confirmed victories in as many days.

He was, indeed, a man for his time. ■