

## Courage, Heroism, Valor

Throughout his life, Eddie Rickenbacker overcame seemingly insurmountable obstacles to become a national hero and a major figure in American aviation.

BY JOHN L. FRISBEE

SOME of us think of *courage* as a quality that enables one to face the trials of life with firmness and resolution, *heroism* as an act performed in the face of danger but not necessarily in battle, and *valor* as extreme heroism in combat. If these are reasonable distinctions, the life of America's leading World War I ace is a text in all those virtues.

Edward V. Rickenbacker was born in Columbus, Ohio, in 1890. When he was thirteen, his father was killed in a construction accident. Young Eddie quit school, never to return, for a series of twelve-hour-a-day jobs to help support the family. He soon found his niche in the infant automobile industry. At seventeen, he was in charge of testing the Columbus Buggy Co.'s new models, some of which he helped design.

The path to success in the industry was the risky business of racing. Rickenbacker became a race driver while still in his teens and rapidly rose to national prominence. In 1916, his last year of racing, he won \$60,000 in prizes—worth many times that in today's dollars.

The US entered World War I in April 1917. Rickenbacker applied for pilot training, but was past the age of twenty-five and lacked a college degree. A friend arranged for him to join General Pershing's staff

as a sergeant driver. Contrary to legend, Rickenbacker never drove for Pershing, but he did drive for Col. Billy Mitchell, who was impressed by the young man's skill, mechanical knowledge, and determination to become a pilot. Mitchell arranged for Rickenbacker to enter flying training with the understanding that he would then be assigned to the American flying school at Issoudun, France, as engineering officer.

The school's commander, Maj. Tooley Spaatz, finally gave in to Rickenbacker's continual requests for combat and sent him off to the new 94th "Hat-in-the-Ring" Aero Squadron to fly obsolescent Nieuports. He completed his first combat mission on April 14, 1918, and won his first victory two weeks later. By the end of May, he was an ace with six confirmed. Then came nearly three months in and out of hospitals with an ear infection.

September was a turning point. The squadron began receiving Spads to replace their Nieuports, and Rickenbacker was given command of the 94th. Early the next morning, September 25, while on a solo patrol, Rickenbacker attacked a pair of two-seater photo planes escorted by five Fokkers. After downing one Fokker and scattering the others, he went in on the photo planes, under steady fire from their rear-seat gunners. In a running battle, he shot down one of the two-seaters before the Fokkers could rejoin the melee.

For that mission, Rickenbacker was recommended for the Medal of Honor. The recommendation, lost in the confusion of demobilization, was not approved until twelve years later. On November 6, 1930, President Herbert Hoover presented the Medal to Eddie Rickenbacker, still a national hero and probably the best-known veteran of the late war.

During October 1918, Rickenbacker's last month of combat, he shot down eleven more German planes and three balloons to end the war with twenty-six victories in less than six months of action—the top American ace until he was overtaken by Dick Bong in the Pacific in April 1944.

In the postwar years, Rickenbacker became an executive in the automobile, and later the aviation, industry. When his automobile company was forced out of business by the industry giants, Rickenbacker refused to file for bankruptcy and personally paid off the large sums owed his creditors.

Early in 1941, while president of Eastern Air Lines, Rickenbacker was gravely injured in a crash. He was not yet fully recovered when Gen. Hap Arnold and Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson sent him as a troubleshooter to every theater of war and to the USSR. One of the greatest tests of Rickenbacker's leadership came in October 1942. The B-17 in which he was traveling from Hawaii to Australia was forced to ditch at sea. Rickenbacker assumed leadership of the seven Air Force men who drifted with him for twenty-four days in liferafts, surviving on rain water and the few fish they were able to catch. The will of his companions to persevere was kept alive by Rickenbacker, who bullied, cajoled, encouraged, and prayed with them. All but one made it. After he and his men were rescued by the Navy, Rickenbacker completed his mission for Secretary Stimson.

For most of his remaining years, Eddie Rickenbacker continued to be a leading figure in American aviation and an inspiration to those who knew him. He died July 23, 1973, to the end a man of courage, heroism, and valor. ■