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World War I and Beyond

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WORLD WAR I AND BEYOND

In 1907 the Army issued specifications to the Wright brothers for a military airplane. With that act, the United States became the first nation in the world to recognize the military value of airplanes. However, the U.S. quickly fell behind other nations in the development of military aircraft and at the outbreak of war in Europe in 1914 we were woefully lagging. From the beginning of the war until America's entry in 1917, rapid advancements were being made by all adversaries in airplane design, construction, reliability, and performance. These advancements were the result of a quickly emerging view that the airplane was a formidable weapon rather than just a reconnaissance platform, and that control of the air was becoming increasingly advantageous to the outcome of the battle.

Military aviation visionaries in this country were loudly proclaiming the necessity of military aircraft to a deaf audience before the beginning of World War I and, with the outbreak of

the war, their shouts became intensified. Typical of their statements of the day was one that appeared in the November 21, 1914 issue of THE LITERARY DIGEST: "Aircraft is not only the most modern of weapons, but... is the most necessary weapon for America to have and improve, and the sooner America understands this little fact, and acts upon it, the better it will be for the protection of the American people in the future." Still only meager aviation advances were made in this country and when the United States entered the war on April 6, 1917, we possessed less than 250 aircraft and just over 100 pilots.

While no American designed aircraft fought in World War I, American pilots, flying French Spads, Nieuports, British DH-4s, and other aircraft, began a chapter in aviation history that will live in the hearts of American people for all time. Names such as Rickenbacker, Luke, Billy Mitchell, and many more blazed across newspaper headlines. By the end of the war, American pilots had destroyed 926 enemy airplanes while losing only 265.

Although American engineering produced no war planes, some 5000 British DH-4s were mass produced in this country, powered by our most significant technical contribution to the war effort, the twelve cylinder

Liberty engine.

When the war ended, there were 740 American built airplanes at the front, in addition to a number of Curtiss Jennys (used as training planes) in the states. With the decay of interest in aviation in this country following the war to end wars (the philosophy that prevailed), most of these airplanes were sold to individuals at a fraction of their original cost. In the time that followed, mail carrier pilots and barnstormers carried aviation's banner. Lindbergh's historic flight in 1927 boosted aviation interest and progress in this country, and in the next few years advancements occurred in sporadic spurts.

While many aviation achievements were being recorded, military aircraft progress and strength suffered until a series of small wars in the thirties waged by the Japanese in China, the Spanish in their own country (using German airplanes and tactics), and Italians in Ethiopia aptly demonstrated the vital use of air power. To those holding the reins of power in this country, the military necessity of air power became slowly obvious and, finally, late in 1938 an expansion of the U. S. Air Corps began... but as with the first World War, this country was relatively weak in air power at the onset of World War II.



Within days after Hitler effectively closed his back door by negotiating a non-aggression treaty with the Soviet Union, he began the lightning invasion of Poland. The date was September 1, 1939. England and France, honoring their treaties with Poland, declared war on Germany. Russia invaded Poland and two months later attacked Finland, and the race was on. It was to be two years before the United States would officially enter World War II. On December 7, 1941, Japan launched its brand of the Blitzkrieg against Pearl Harbor. The next day the U.S. declared war on Japan. Because of the mutual protection pacts signed by Germany, Italy and Japan, both Germany and Italy declared war on the United

States. On December 11, the U.S. officially returned the gesture and in a period of four days plunged from an uneasy peace into war on both sides of the globe.

Two articles have been chosen in order to capture the mood of the pilots and aircrewmembers who fought in both global arenas during World War II. The first article is a war diary of a pilot who was caught up in America's unpreparedness for war in the Pacific. It was copyrighted in the January 1957 issue of THE AIR POWER HISTORIAN and reprinted with permission of this excellent periodical which now bears the title, THE AEROSPACE HISTORIAN. The article points out the frustrations experienced by our combat airmen who were

engaging in a valiant struggle from an early inferior position of air strength.

Next comes a series of two related articles taken from a World War II fighter tactics manual published by the 8th Fighter Command on 30 August 1944. In these articles

you'll notice the mood has changed; it's now scented with the smell of victory that has come from vigorous pursuit of the German enemy into his own homeland. It's also indicative of the successes being scored not only in the European theatre, but also in the Pacific theatre of combat.

WORLD WAR 2 "a war diary"

By LIEUTENANT ROLAND R. BIRNN

Lt. Birnn recorded in diary form some of his impressions of the hectic activities, and frustrations endured, following the Japanese attack on the Philippines in December of 1941, and during the improvisation period in northern Australia in early 1942.

14 February 1942

Brisbane

Got to Charleville, gassed up and took off. Engine started missing, — Cut the throttle and landed. Had no brakes, — almost went through a fence. Engine was using excess oil and fouled up plugs. Wrong type plugs anyway. Am left behind.

20 February 1942

Charleville, Australia

Seventeenth Squadron arrived yesterday. Am going North with them today. Next stop, Cloncurry.

Arrived Cloncurry after flying over the worst country I've ever seen, — all desert with no check points. Lost two planes on the way up. Dengue fever is bad here — Hope I don't catch it.

21 February 1942

Daily Waters

Arrived here today. More desert but worse. Think we'll stay here a while, — they're having daily bombing raids at Darwin. Three days ago they almost wiped out Darwin with heavy raids — 50 bombers at a time. They caught B-24s, P-40s and Hudsons on

the ground. They know how to shoot down B-17s, — make frontal attacks.

22 February 1942

Daily Waters

This place is really a hole. Hasn't rained in months and the ground is baked. I'm sleeping on it. The temperature is always above 100°. The flies are horrible, — they don't bite, just cover you and crawl. Have to wear a face net, — but can't put

that over my food. No messing facilities, — food is bad. These Aussies just don't know how to eat, — no vegetables, no eggs, no taste.

We're losing our A-24s fast. Of the original 53 we now have only 22 that are flyable, — and this before we've had a day of combat.

24 February 1942

Daily Waters

Got a report the 91st Squadron

