

Assassin's Eyes

Eddie Rickenbacker found the similarities between racing and war striking. The airfields of France were like the racing pits at Sheepshead Bay and Corona; the flight crews of the Lafayette Escadrille and Hat-In-The-Ring machine gun squadrons maintaining the Spad he'd learned to fly in two weeks reminded him of racing mechanics overhauling his Duesenberg; and his gloves, goggles and floppy cloth aviator's cap took Rickenbacker back to his dress for work at Indianapolis. There was also the intoxicating spirit of competition. It wasn't only deadly competition between Rickenbacker and the Germans, it was personal competition between himself and Frank Luke, David Putnam, Frank Baylis and other aces for the distinction of destroying the most Fokkers, Rumplers and Halberstadts before World War 1 ended. And after Luke, Putnam and Baylis got shot down and killed – Luke lived through his crash but died shooting it out on the ground – only Rickenbacker was left to fight.

Fight on he did. He flew 10 combat missions in October 1918. In the first, he set fire to a dragon balloon. In the second, he mortally wounded a Halberstadt and blasted a Fokker. In the third, he blew up a Halberstadt and a Rumpler. In the fourth, he destroyed a Fokker. In the fifth, he pierced a second balloon. In the sixth, he downed two Fokkers that hit the ground, burning, in the same instant. In the seventh, he exploded his fifth Fokker and damaged a sixth. In the eighth, he claimed still another. In the ninth, he wasted two more. In the tenth he took out a member of the elite von Richthofen squadron as well as his third balloon. By then, the Kaiser was ready to cease fighting; so was Rickenbacker. His 14 kills, combined with a dozen earlier ones, made him the greatest instrument of

destruction flying the French skies. He won the Congressional Medal of Honor, the Legion of Honor, the Distinguished Service Cross and the Croix de Guerre.

Decades afterward, in his memoirs, Rickenbacker wrote of once getting chased across no man's land by five Fokkers, all firing at him at once. The Germans hunted Rickenbacker with the same zeal the Allies brought to chasing Manfred von Richthofen, the Red Baron, and for the identical reason: Rickenbacker was a celebrity. Indeed, thanks to his superstar status as an automobile racing hero, Rickenbacker may have outranked John "Black Jack" Pershing as the most famous American fighting in World War I.

Breaking into racing, though, wasn't easy for Rickenbacker. He had to scrub garage floors, labor as a car salesman and exhaust his small savings as a traveling daredevil before getting a real driving job, 1914, with the Duesenberg brothers. The Duesenbergs were still obscurely located in Des Moines and calling their not-yet-distinguished cars Masons; but when Rickenbacker joined the Cornstalk Circuit and upset the favored yellow Mercer of Spencer Wishart at a gambling-ravaged 300-mile meet at Sioux City, the brothers suddenly had a success. Resuming battle with Wishart over in Illinois, at the Elgin road race, Rickenbacker rounded a curve and discovered the Mercer on its back and Wishart dying on a stretcher made out of a barn door while elements of the Illinois militia barred a doctor from crossing the track because he lacked the proper credential.

Just as he later fought, Rickenbacker, when racing on dirt, board, road and speedway tracks, possessed no apparent fear. Throughout 1914, 1915 and 1916, only three rival drivers collected more championship points.

He seemed invincible. Racing couldn't harm him, nor could the German Air Force, nor could a pair of plane crashes, the second of which occurred in the South Pacific near the beginning of World War II. His B-17B sank so fast once it hit the water that he and his crew barely had time to inflate life rafts. For three weeks, adrift and lost with no land in sight, he and six others sustained themselves on rain water, fish and sea gulls. One man died. The others almost wished they had, too, owing to the way Rickenbacker, at 51 the oldest man in the raft, ceaselessly hounded, berated and goaded them into staying alive, until a Catalina flying boat rescued them on the 24th day, off Samoa. Rickenbacker, who at the time was a special assistant to the Secretary of War, went on to have a powwow with Douglas MacArthur in New Guinea then returned to Washington for additional accommodations and instructions.

Rickenbacker was born Rickenbacher – his family was Swiss – then altered the spelling during the Great War because he thought it sounded Hun. In business, as in racing and war, he took terrific chances and experienced hair-breadth escapes. Staring his own automobile manufacturing company at the age of 33, he was out of business and a quarter-million dollars in debt at 35. Turning to airplanes, he did far better. Not only was he able to launch his own airline – Eastern – but he also spearheaded the use of jets for commercial travel. “I’ll fight like a wildcat until they nail the lid of my pine box down on me,” he promised, but when his heart at last gave out in 1973, when he was 82, he passed quietly.

As a sidelight to all his other adventures, Rickenbacker, from 1927 through 1945, owned the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. On race morning of 1933, the drivers in the starting field attempted a wildcat strike.

Rickenbacker was a tall erect man with a flat mouth and assassin's eyes. Upon informing the would-be-strikers if they carried out their plot he'd close the place forever, the hardness of those eyes made everybody believe him. The 500 ran as scheduled. (1995)

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