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American Aces in British Service



Sop with Camel and S.E.5a Pilots in World War One

By [Stephen Sherman](#), Aug. 2001. Updated April 16, 2012.

They have received far less attention than their countrymen in the French air service, but the Americans who flew with the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) shot down many more German planes. Of the 28 American aces in WWI who shot down ten or more aircraft, 22 flew with the British. Some, like [Fred Libby](#), volunteered as early as 1916, to fly with the RFC or the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS). But most joined in the final year of the war.

Mostly they flew the Sopwith Camel, the Royal Aircraft Factory (R.A.F.) SE5a, or the two-seater Bristol Fighter "Brisfit," although a few flew the uncommon Sopwith Dolphin, including [Fred W. Gillet](#), the most successful American to fly with the RFC.

In July 1918, two all-American squadrons, 17 and 148 Squadrons, began operating under control of the British Royal Air Force. These two squadrons produced thirteen aces, including [Elliott Springs](#) and [Field Kindley](#).

George Vaughn - 12

He trained with the Royal Flying Corps and flew in France with No. 84 and No. 17 Squadrons. He was credited with downing 12 enemy planes and one balloon. During the 1930's he served as Divisional Air Officer of the New York National Guard.

As he led his patrol near Cambrai in Sept. 1918, he sighted 18 Fokkers about to attack 5 Allied planes. He personally shot down two and his flight accounted for two more.

While still flying with the English NO. 84 Squadron, Vaughn shot down a balloon and a two-seater on the same flight. Alone, he pounced on an enemy advance plane supported by seven others and shot the advance plane down in flames.

He died at age 92, in 1989, one of the longest-living aces of World War One.

Reed Landis - 12

Reed Landis, who is credited with nine enemy aircraft and one kite balloon, received the bulk of his training and front-line experience with the Royal Flying Corps' Number Squadron, the same squadron that produced Mick Mannock and Captain G. E. H. McElroy, and from all accounts, Landis' complete score was run up while he was a member of this famous organization.

The son of Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis, the first commissioner of professional baseball, Reed was born July 17, 1896. By the time he was twenty years old he had enlisted as a private in the 1st Illinois Cavalry and served on the Mexican Border. Early in 1917 he transferred to the Aviation Section of the Signal Corps, and on completing his ground school tests was sent to England for flight training.

Because Landis' career with Number 40 Squadron has never been widely publicized, we know little of the actual details, but it is obvious that most of his active service flying was aboard S.E.5s with the British. Following this service, Landis was sent back to England and assigned to the U. S. 25th Aero Squadron which was then being formed. On its arrival in France it became part of the new 4th Pursuit Group, and Landis was promoted to the rank of major, but whether he took part in any front-line patrols as a member of the 25th Aero Squadron has not been made clear in any available history. However, he did receive Great Britain's D.F.C., and his own country's D.S.C.

After the war Landis was associated with American Airlines, and became a regional vice-president in 1940. For a time he was a consultant to the Director, Office of Civil Defense, and by 1942 was recalled to active duty with the Army Air Force, where he reached the rank of Colonel.

Fred Gillet - 20 victories; Sopwith Dolphin pilot

Another relatively unknown pilot, considering his score of 20 victories, was Frederick W. Gillet. He was born in 1895 and joined the RFC in 1917. After joining 79 Squadron in March, 1918, he did not shoot down any German planes for several months. He got three in August, eight in September, six in October, and four in November (including three on November 10). Fourteen of his victories were Fokker D.VII types.

Wilfred Beaver - 19; Brisfit pilot

He began his service with the RFC's 20 Squadron in 1917, flying the Bristol F.2B fighter. He rose to become a flight commander, won the Military Cross, and downed 19 German aircraft (the third-highest scoring American ace of WW1). He lived to the age of 89, dying in 1986. His Military Cross citation noted that he destroyed eleven planes in five months and also excelled in low altitude, ground support missions.

David Ingalls - 6; Naval aviator

The only U. S. Navy ace of World War I was David S. Ingalls, a native of Cleveland, Ohio, where he was born on January 28, 1899. He attended public schools in his area, and entered Yale University in 1916. While there he first took up flying by joining the university's flying club in which wealthy young students bought their own aircraft. So well was this organization run that before the United States entered the war, moves were made to incorporate the club into a military organization. Eventually, through the Appropriations Act of 1916 the Yale Unit, as it was listed, became part of the U. S. Naval Reserve, and finally the whole membership was ordered to Pensacola for further training.

Though only seventeen, Dave Ingalls was one of the club's best pilots, but he was not supposed to take part in any active duty with the original unit. However, he continued to fly whenever possible, and when a second unit was formed he proved that he had reached his eighteenth birthday, and he was accepted for active duty. He graduated from flight training as Naval Aviator Number 85.

After a series of training courses on both sides of the Atlantic, young Ingalls was assigned to an Allied naval base at Dunkirk in the middle of the summer of 1918 with practically nothing to do. There were no U. S. Navy squadrons, and certainly no aircraft for anyone to fly, but now and then he managed to keep his hand in, flying some old bombers.

First Encounter

Eventually his luck changed, and Ingalls was assigned to Number 213 Squadron of the RAF that previously had been Number 13 Squadron of the Royal Naval Air Service. He was given a Sopwith Camel and put in a week or more flying on regular patrols with the British. Becoming bored with the routine proceedings, David requested permission to stage a lone-eagle patrol, and the British CO gave his consent. Dave took off and flew straight into a small swarm of Fokker D-VIIs that had come down out of a cloud to welcome him.

The young American dived and headed for home, but three Fokkers had other ideas. For what seemed hours, they took turns shooting snap bursts at this singleton target. One by one they went in and poured Spandau lead into the Camel. All Dave could do was to keep in a tight right-hand turn . . . and pray.

Eventually, when the enemy planes must have run out of ammunition, the game came to its close and the Fokkers went home. The young pilot brought what was left of the Sopwith Camel down to a landing. Either the Camel was the greatest defensive ship in the war, or Dave was the most evasive pilot on the front.

First Victories

A few days later Ingalls found a German observation plane near the line, and, ignoring the wild spraying by the observer, calmly put his twin Vickers on the two-seater and shot it down in flames. A short time later he encountered another two-seater, a Rumpler, in the vicinity of La Panne, and without taking much notice of the sky in general, concentrated on putting his Aldis sight on the rear cockpit. Later Ingalls admitted he had become very careless. He should have checked the gunner first, for this one wasted no ammunition, spraying the Camel time and time again. Ingalls tried other tactics and approaches from different angles.

He nosed down with the idea of coming up from below in a sharp zoom, but in his anxiety overshot. The German pilot simply put on a jab of rudder and the gunner had a beautiful target. Tracers and armor-piercing rounds sizzled all around Dave's head, and ripped great holes in the fabric of his plane. The two aircraft passed each other, and Dave threw the two Germans a friendly wave, and then set about making another attack.

He made a feint to attack from the left, and the German pilot swung around to meet it. Dave then pulled a half roll and went in with both guns blazing. Two full bursts did the trick, and the enemy plane went down in flames.

Checking his position Ingalls saw that he had been carried far across the enemy lines by the prevailing wind, so he turned his bullet-scarred Camel and headed for home, whereupon enemy anti-aircraft gunners put up a display. The young American decided it would be much safer at a lower altitude, so he nosed down to risk machine-gun fire rather than the explosive three-inch stuff the big guns were hurling at him, and headed west at full throttle.

But machine guns can be as deadly as high-angle artillery. There was an ominous plop! and the rotary engine coughed and finally stuttered to a complete halt. Gasoline squirted from a punctured tank into Ingalls' cockpit. The guns below continued to chatter, and Dave was sweating out a very difficult situation. He reasoned that the end of his war was at hand, and decided to make as decent a landing as possible, but he switched on the gravity-feed tank, hoping for a miracle.

As the enemy landscape rose to welcome him, the gravity fuel began to trickle through. The Le Rhône engine spluttered and popped several times, and then bellowed into full power. Once again, David Ingalls returned with a Camel that had been shot to junk. Only a few flying wires remained intact, and there wasn't much taut fabric left to bear the weight of the fuselage, but Dave got back, and for the second time reported a victory over a Hun two-seater.

Bombing Varsensere

The RAF boys were delighted with this young fire-eater and kept him on, particularly since Number 213 had been assigned to give fighter escort to a formation of DH.9s that were to bomb a German aerodrome located at Varsensere. The enemy was concentrating fighters there to annoy the British and their bombers which were staging night attacks on vital strong points. The U. S. 17th Aero Squadron, flying Camels, was also assigned to this mission. All the Sopwiths were armed with 20-pound Cooper bombs.

On the morning of the attack the weather was generally dull, but not too much so. The bombers and their escort flew above a low cloud layer and roared on through a clear sky without being annoyed by antiaircraft fire, but the minute they went down through the clouds, antiaircraft shells, machine-gun fire and flaming onions came up to greet them.

The big ships flattened out and roared at their targets. In no time the field was a blazing inferno. Not to be deprived of the fun, Dave Ingalls nosed down sharply and headed for a lineup of aircraft. Then, just as he was about to reach for his bomb-release toggle, he looked up and gasped. Not ten feet above him were the wheels, undercarriages, bomb racks and muddy bellies of the DH.9s. He had but a fraction of a second to kick his rudder and whip his ailerons into action, hoping to clear the deluge. Even so, he saw two blue-banded 100-pounders slip past his wing tip as he turned away. He cleared off long enough to get his breath and then nosed about until he spotted a repair shed. He could see the big bombers reforming and turning back, but he still had four Coopers in his rack.

He zigzagged about until he was sure of his target. The whole area was festooned with smoke and flame, but he managed to release four Coopers and saw them spatter among some sheds and stacked supplies. He then nosed up for some altitude but by the time his altimeter needle was showing one thousand feet his engine quit cold. He rammed the stick forward to avoid a stall and a spin, and then found he was sliding back toward the burning aerodrome.

He juggled with the switch, and manipulated the two levers of the rotary's primitive carburetor. Gradually, three cylinders picked up, others backfired. Then some semblance of a proper sequence opened and the Le Rhône gradually burst into full power. A few ground guns sprayed him with machine-gun fire, and Dave had to screech for cloud cover. He worked his way into the clear above and was joined by another Camel pilot, who, it turned out, had come back to see what had happened to the young American.

So together they headed out over the North Sea, hoping to turn inland later and land at Dunkirk, but just when they were enjoying a sense of relief a German two-seater came out of the murk over Ostend. They knew they should have been satisfied with their day's work, but the two Camel pilots thought they would have no trouble with this "sitting duck."

Ingalls put in the first burst just as the two-seater darted back into the murk, and he followed it with both of his guns sparkling and spitting at the faint outline of the enemy plane. Then the mist suddenly thinned and both planes came out into a clear area. Dave exchanged shots with the observer, and then saw the two-seater fall off on one wing and disappear into another bank of clouds, dragging an oily streamer.

All the Allied aircraft returned to their fields. A large gasoline and oil dump was destroyed, six Fokker biplanes were set on fire on the ground and two totally destroyed by direct hits by bombs. One large Gotha hangar was set afire and another seriously damaged, and many living quarters were set afire by phosphorous bombs, and burned for hours.

Balloon Hunting

Following this raid David Ingalls was promoted to flight commander, and to celebrate he took a six-ship flight across the lines to look for enemy balloons. Three were found, two on the ground in their beds and one aloft. Ingalls took the one in the air and set it on fire while his flight mates attacked the two on the ground.

Bomber Escort

Over the next few weeks Number 213 was busy escorting DH. bombers on raids aimed at Zeebrugge, Ostend, and Bruges, and, generally speaking, the Camels had little trouble, but on one occasion when Ingalls had his flight at 15,000 feet he saw four Fokker D-VIIs heading in, looking for trouble. He watched them carefully, and then noted that they seemingly were holding off, apparently waiting for stragglers. Ingalls wanted to hare off and engage, but his orders were to stay with the bombers.

This cat-and-mouse act went on for several minutes, but when the Fokker leader made a move to edge in closer, that was all Dave needed. He nosed over sharply, and saw that the German leader intended to dare him to keep coming on, but as the two machines headed for each other, it was the Fokker pilot who gave ground, taking his D-VIIs with him. Back they went to their original position well away from the Sop Camels.

Ingalls obeyed the instructions, and watched the bombers drop their eggs. He also saw one of the DH.s hit by antiaircraft fire and realized that the bomber would have to relinquish its position in the formation, and that would be all the Fokkers were waiting for.

Two of the Fokkers nosed down toward the cripple, but the aerial gunner in the DH kept his head and held the Fokkers at bay with a bracket of twin-Lewis guns. Ingalls then dropped away to give a hand, leaving his flight to carry on without him. He moved in close and caught one Fokker before the pilot knew he was in the area. The second D-VII was so busy trying to get past the aerial gunner's fire, Ingalls was smack on its tail before he was spotted. But he became anxious with this second target and missed. The Fokker went into a half roll, nosed over and wound into a tight spin. There was no chance to catch up, and Dave cursed his luck and overanxious maneuvering.

He stayed with the faltering DH.9 although three more Fokkers came down to pick it off. This was difficult as it entailed a savage rearguard action until the British bomber was safely across the line, but though he did not down any of the new attackers, Dave did have the satisfaction of seeing the bomber wallow into its own area.

Ingalls' flight was continually in action, and on another occasion knocked down three of the much-vaunted D-VII Fokkers. After that the Camels of Number 213 Squadron were assigned to low-level attacks in support of the Belgian offensive that began on September 28, 1918. This historic push was staged between Ypres and the North Sea and resulted in an advance of more than four miles along that front.

During this advance Ingalls' flight spent hour after hour, attacking with 20-pound Cooper bombs and then harrying the enemy along the roads with machine-gun fire. During one of these forays an interesting incident was logged. Ingalls had been harassing road transport when he came upon a German wagon driver whose vehicle had become stuck in a mud hole. Dave had dropped his bombs along that road, driving marching troops to cover, and then went to his guns, firing on troops and motor transport, but when he returned he saw that the same lone driver was still doing his best to get his wagon to high ground. As the Camel roared over Dave saw that the two horses were frantic with fear, so he held his fire and circled the spot. He watched the driver carefully unhook the team from the whiffle- tree of the wagon and then guide them away from the road. When Dave looked again, the driver had his horses under some trees and was stroking them, trying to calm their fear. Dave passed over once more, but his guns were silent; he just waved to the man under the trees and roared back to his field.

The End of the War

On October 1, 1918, Ingalls was sent back to England where he was to help organize a squadron of U. S. Naval pilots, but the work was unrewarding and seemingly wasteful. However, while he was in London, King George V awarded him the British Distinguished Flying Cross, and later American authorities pinned on their Distinguished Service Medal, but while all this took place, the war ground to a close and the Armistice was

signed. In the six short weeks in which Dave had been at the front he had downed five enemy planes and one kite balloon.

Back Home

When he returned home Dave went back to Yale to study law and play on the varsity football team. He took a post-graduate course at Harvard and then practiced law for two years. In 1925 he became a member of the Ohio Legislature, and in 1929 was appointed Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Aviation by President Herbert Hoover, and for a number of years he personally flight-tested every plane adopted by the U. S. Navy.

Yale's hockey rink is named in honor of David Ingalls.



Field Kindley - 12

The U. S. Air Force base in Bermuda, established during World War II, was named for Field E. Kindley, a native of Gravette, Arkansas, where he attended school. Later his family moved to Coffeyville, Kansas, and there Field became a motion picture projector operator. He enlisted in the Aviation Section of the Signal Corps in May 1917 and took his ground courses at the University of Illinois. Along with a number of others, he was sent to Great Britain where he received the standard Royal Flying Corps training courses, after which he was assigned to the U. S. 148th Aero Squadron with which he served until the Armistice. Kindley was quickly named flight commander of "A" Flight, to relieve Lieutenant Bennett Oliver who was taken ill and had to be sent to a hospital. Kindley destroyed the first enemy machine credited to No. 148 and over the next four months raised his score to an even dozen, tying Elliott White Springs. The British were the first to recognize his ability and awarded him their Distinguished Flying Cross. Later his own country honored Kindley with the Distinguished Service Cross. Before the Armistice he was made a squadron commander. Early in 1920 Kindley was killed in a flying accident at Kelly Field, Texas.

Fred Libby - 14; cowboy, first American ace

The first American airman to become an ace in World War I was a little-known adventurer, Frederick Libby, a native of Sterling, Colorado. The interesting feature of Libby's career is that though he actually shot down twenty-four enemy aircraft he is credited officially with only fourteen. The first ten Germans to fall before Fred's gun, though completely eliminated from further combat, were not recognized by the American Fighter Aces Association, because the man from Colorado was only an NCO observer at the time.

Later, after being given a commission and becoming a pilot, the British credited him with fourteen "kills," and Libby is so recognized in the lists of fighting airmen.

Fred Libby, unquestionably, was an excellent aerial gunner for he downed ten enemy aircraft in a very few weeks. By August 27, 1916, he had racked up his fifth, which certainly made him the first American ace in that war. Considering his record and length of service, he can claim to be the least known of all American aces.

When Libby received his commission and finished his pilot training, he was posted to a British single-seater (Number 43) fighter squadron with which he served from May until September 1917. In that period of time he was credited with fourteen kills and awarded the Military Cross.

Fred Libby once wrote in the late 1960's, "I am ten times as proud of my observer's wing as of my pilot's insignia. Anyone can be taught to fly a plane, but not everyone could be a good observer and live through those days when a pilot's life depended entirely on his observer. Take a look around and you'll find very few observers who flew from 1915-17."

General Billy Mitchell manipulated a few strings, and had Fred transferred from the R.F.C. to the U. S. Air Service as experienced pilots were much needed, but to Fred's concern he was not welcomed warmly in Washington where he was sent to contribute his wide knowledge. In the first place the question arose as to whether he was still a citizen of the United States, although this question was never raised about those who had volunteered and served with the French. Next, it was questioned whether he was entitled to wear U. S. Air Service wings. With that Fred was ready to give up and return to the R.F.C. Only Mitchell's support kept him with the American forces. This may explain why so many Americans who were flying with the British felt no compelling desire to transfer to their own air service.

Tragically, Libby's military career was cut short, not by enemy bullets, but by illness. He suffered circulation and spinal impairment after returning to the States and joining the U.S. Army Air Service (USAS). As a result, he was left a cripple for the rest of his life. True to form, however, Libby remarked upon resigning from the USAS: "What I am going to do, I don't know, but I want to be free to do it, if only selling pencils on the corner."

His autobiography

Because of his personality and natural leadership, Springs was in September 1917 elected to head a small band of American aviation cadets sent across the Atlantic to continue their training in England. With nothing much in hand but a few solo hours on the primitive Curtiss Jenny, this hapless group soon learned they were expected to take over the cockpits of real wartime airplanes. For a short time they were lectured by a number of United States armchair warriors who had never flown a patrol or even heard a shot fired. At best, it was a bewildering situation.

Springs' unit was something of a Lost Battalion. They were neither fish nor fowl; they were not officers or noncoms . . . just aviation cadets with no real standing. At Oxford where they had been unloaded, they gradually realized they were getting nowhere, so Elliott wired home for money, took his group to London, put them up in a second-class hotel, and outfitted them with uniforms of his own design. For the next week or so they lifted London out of the gloom of war with their antics in the theaters, the hotel lobbies, and the night clubs of that period. Needless to state, Elliott was able to obtain plenty of champagne or whiskey, and there is one story that it was he who taught London society the art of making several types of cocktails.

Sergeant (?) Springs made the most of his chances during this boozy crusade, and one evening induced some British staff officers to take over his legion and train them at a special RAF station. In fact, they were soon turned out as first-class war pilots, but their capers during this session would fill a large book. Most of them survived the course and some of them proved to be ranking aces.

As for Springs, he was first noted by Colonel Billy Bishop, the Canadian ace who at that time was organizing Number 85 Squadron. Two other Americans, Lawrence Calahan and John Grider, were also accepted. Bishop's squadron went to France on May 22, 1918, and settled down at a field a few miles below Dunkirk. Springs received valuable instruction from Bishop and scored his first triumph on June 5. Three more enemy aircraft fell before his S.E.5, and then on June 27 he himself was shot down and only just managed to glide into his own lines. He cracked up badly and spent some time in a nearby hospital.

When he was next ready for action he was ordered to report to Number 148 Squadron of the U. S. Air Service. This came as somewhat of a shock to Elliott who by now was quite at home with the RAF, and had almost forgotten that he had originally joined up in the United States. He liked his British companions, and felt, as did many others, that he owed Great Britain a debt for the training that had been provided, but the order stood. He was equipped with the American stiff-collared uniform, and given a Sopwith Camel, instead of his beloved S.E.5. The transfer had some compensations, for he was made a flight commander and promoted to captain. As may be imagined, this squadron was made up of many other Americans who had trained and served with the R.F.C., or the RAF.