

Seventy years ago this month, Lts. Alan Winslow and Douglas Campbell claimed the first official US victories in aerial combat.

The First Victory

AMERICA'S fledgling air arm was ready for a fight. The US had declared war on the Central Powers in 1917, but it would be another year before American aviators would go into battle on behalf of their own country. The volunteers of the Lafayette Escadrille had set the stage for participation by American pilots, and by early 1918, the Yanks were operating over France officially.

Lt. Douglas Campbell and Lt. Alan Winslow were on alert the morning of Sunday, April 14. As they began a hand of Russian bank (a card game) in the ready tent near the flight line, three aircraft lifted off from Gengoult Aerodrome on the first war patrol of the 94th Aero Squadron.

The early morning weather was poor. Visibility under the misty overcast, however, was reasonably good. Capt. David Peterson, the patrol leader, considered the weather too bad for flying, and he quickly returned to the field.

Circling the aerodrome and thinking Captain Peterson's airplane had developed engine trouble, Lt. Eddie Rickenbacker and his wingman, Lt. Reed Chambers, decided to continue the mission. They soon became lost in the overcast and were fired on by German anti-aircraft guns as they crossed over the enemy lines near Seicheprey. Both managed to return safely.

The 94th Aero Squadron had deployed to Gengoult Aerodrome near Toul, France, only days before. Many of its pilots were American-trained, but the squadron was also heavily leavened with French-trained combat veterans including the renowned Maj. Raoul Lufbery, who had already achieved fifteen victories while flying with the Lafayette Escadrille.

On April 7, the 94th had been designated an independent unit under the VIII French Army, and on April 13, the "Hat-in-the-Ring" Squadron, along with other US pursuit groups, had been made responsible for the sector extending from St.-Mihiel in the west to the village of Pont à Mousson in the east.

Prior to its arrival at Gengoult, the 94th had received an allotment of twenty-two Nieuport 28 C.1 pursuit planes. The airplane was nimble, and it would prove to be more maneuverable than the German aircraft it would encounter in this sector. With its quick-starting rotary engine and high climb rate, the Nieuport 28 could get into the air rapidly. More important, it was what was available to the Aviation Section of the US Army Signal Corps.

The Nieuport 28 was burdened, though, with several design deficiencies, including a propensity for the upper wing to shed its fabric covering when the airplane was

BY THEODORE HAMADY





"He was diving at about forty-five degrees, and I was behind him and above him but behind his tail . . . a streak of flame came shooting out of his fuselage near the motor. I . . . watched him . . . crash in a plowed field." So said Lt. Douglas Campbell about his first and America's second aerial victory. In this painting, Campbell, in his Nieuport 28, is following his victim (a Pfalz D.III) down. Meanwhile, Lt. Alan Winslow, who just saw his foe crash, pulls up in a victory pass (at Campbell's left). See the "ribbon chart" on pages 70 and 71, showing in detail the progress of the battle.

pulled out of a high-speed dive and frequent engine fires. Machine guns were also in short supply. On that first day of combat, the squadron's airplanes were fitted with only one Vickers machine gun that had been modified to .30-caliber.

The 94th Aero Squadron's aircraft still retained standard French camouflage colors and insignia, but each of the Nieuport 28s was prominently emblazoned with the "Hat-in-the-Ring" emblem on the fuselage. The device, symbolizing America's throwing its hat into the ring of World War I, had been suggested several weeks before by the squadron's medical officer.

The Battle Begins

The operations center at Gengoult Aerodrome was linked by telephone to the observation post at nearby Mount St.-Michel. That forward station was, in turn, linked to

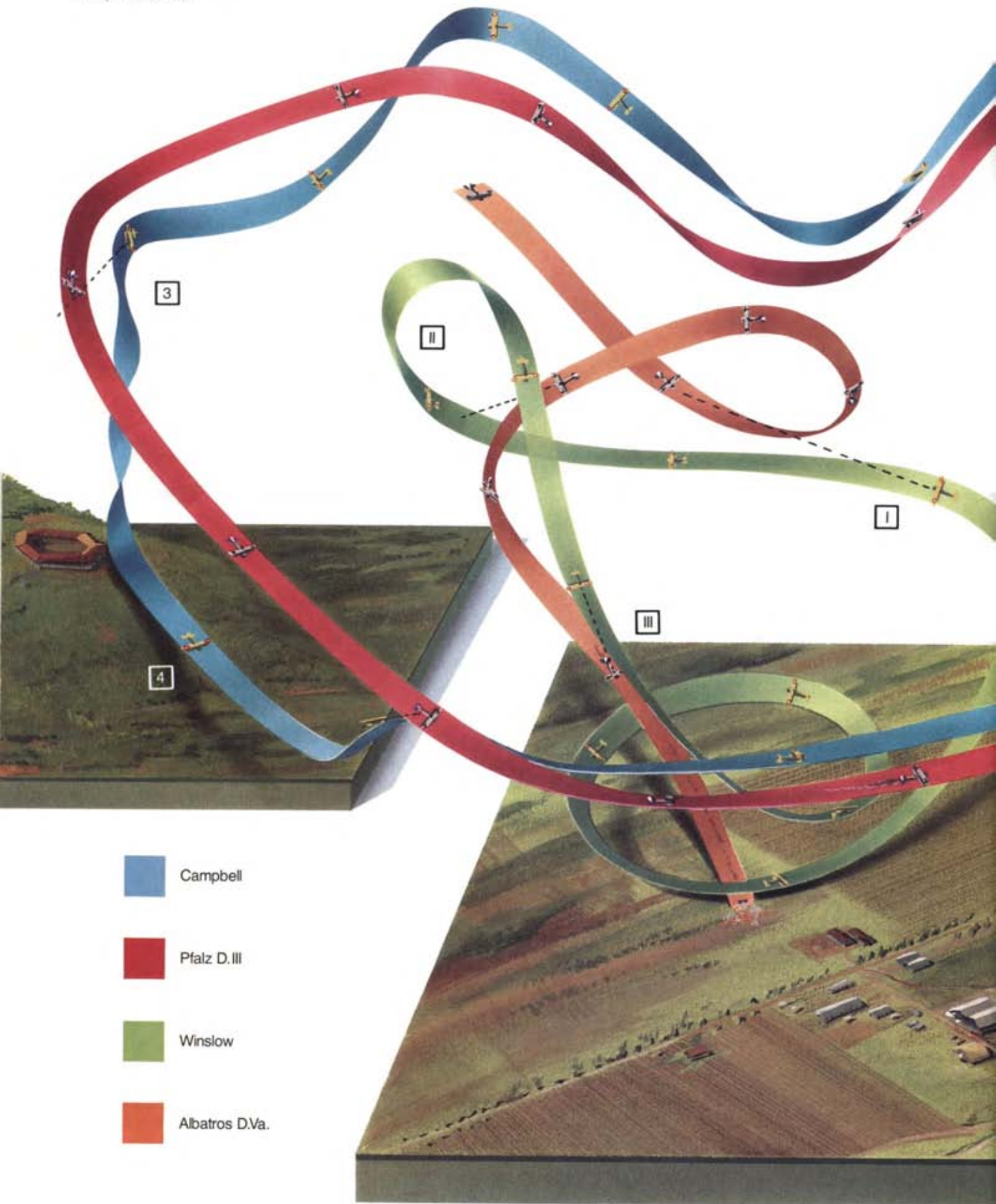
antiaircraft sector control centers at Commercy, Lironville, and Delourd running west to east along the battlefield.

At 8:45 a.m., Lieutenant Winslow was called to the telephone and was told by the squadron's information officer that the Lironville control center had reported sighting two German aircraft fifteen miles away flying in the direction of Gengoult Aerodrome.

These aircraft had been dispatched from *Jasta 64*, based at Mars la Tour, to attack the aircraft flown by Lieutenants Rickenbacker and Chambers when they had crossed German lines. The German pilots themselves had become lost in the weather. Lieutenants Winslow and Campbell were scrambled to meet the intruders.

In his diary, Lieutenant Winslow described what happened next:

" 'Doug' started ahead of me, as I



-  Campbell
-  Pfalz D. III
-  Winslow
-  Albatros D.Va.



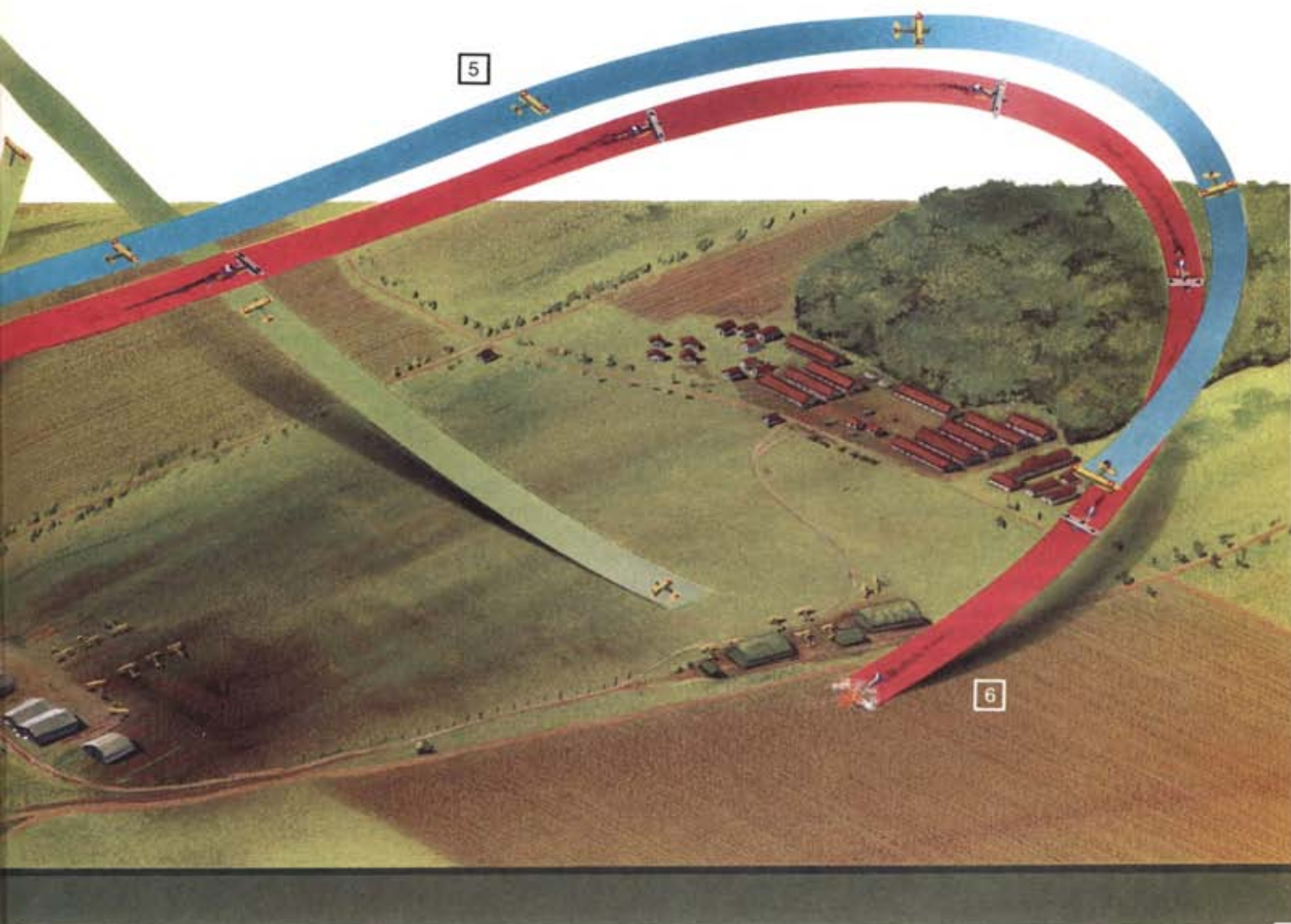
America's first World War I air battle took place over the 94th Aero Squadron's aerodrome near Gengoult, France, on April 14, 1918. Lt. Douglas Campbell and Lt. Alan Winslow, flying in Nieuport 28 C.1s, downed two German planes in an engagement that lasted only ten minutes. Here's how the action progressed:

1. Lieutenant Campbell takes off first and waits for Lieutenant Winslow to take off and assume lead of the formation.
2. Campbell banks right (in order to see Winslow, who has taken off and has already begun his engagement), when he is fired on by the pilot of a Pfalz D.III.
3. Both pilots jockey for position, and

Campbell gets his first shots at the German from below and to the left of the Pfalz.

4. Campbell's Nieuport stalls and drops to within 100 feet of the ground near the observation post atop Mount St.-Michel. With power restored, Campbell climbs at a steep angle and begins firing at the Pfalz. The German plane catches fire.
5. After Campbell fires about fifty rounds at the German, the Pfalz dives, and Campbell — now behind his foe — follows him down.
6. The Pfalz, now burning furiously, crashes 100 yards behind the 94th's hangars.

- I. Meanwhile, Lieutenant Winslow's portion of the battle begins immediately after he takes off. He fires at an Albatros D.Va. The German pilot reverses and comes out firing at Winslow.
- II. Winslow climbs, enters a right-hand spiral, and comes down behind the German. Winslow opens fire and disables the engine of the Albatros. The German fighter goes into an uncontrolled dive.
- III. The Albatros pilot tries to regain control near the ground, but cannot. He crashes in a field across the road from the 94th's aerodrome. Winslow makes a victory pass and then climbs to see if Lieutenant Campbell needs any help.



was to meet him above a certain point at 500 meters, and then take the lead. . . . I was at about 200 meters, when straight above and ahead of me in the mist of the early morning, and not more than a hundred yards away, I saw a plane coming toward me with huge black crosses on its wings and tail. I was so furious to see a Hun directly over our aviation field, that I swore out loud and violently opened fire.

"At the same time, to avoid my bullets, he slipped into a left-hand

sharp turn by the wreck, to make sure he was out of commission, then made a victorious sweep down over him, and climbed up again to see if 'Doug' needed any help with the other Hun—for I had caught a glimpse of their combat out of the corner of my eye."

Lieutenant Winslow's kill was an Albatros D.Va, a fairly new aircraft type to the war. The aircraft, flown by *Unteroffizier* Simon, had the red and black stripes of *Jasta 64* on the horizontal tail surfaces.

titude when Winslow got into the air. He was to lead, and when he reached 200 meters, I was getting into position behind him. It was quite misty.

"All at once he turned, and I saw him chase a plane that wasn't more than 300 meters high. *It had black crosses on it!* I heard him shoot, and they both went out of sight under my wings. I banked up ninety degrees and turned, to get a view below so as to go help Winslow if necessary, and it was lucky I did, for just as I turned I heard the pop-pop-pop of a machine gun behind me, and there was another Boche shooting at me.

"For some reason I thought his tail was turned toward me as he shot, and the thought, 'Biplane [two-seater], keep under him,' flashed into my brain. He turned out afterward to be an Albatros [actually a Pfalz D.III] monoplane, but I had guessed wrong, and instead of getting above him, which would have been easier, I kept below him, maneuvering so as to try to get under his tail without letting him point toward me, [*i.e.*, a head-on pass] or get a shot at me from a broadside [*i.e.*, from the rear-seat gunner.]"

Near Disaster

At this point, Lieutenant Campbell was to the left of the German aircraft while the enemy plane was in a turn. The American pulled up sharply to fire. Immediately, Lieutenant Campbell's aircraft stalled and fell to what he described as "within 100 feet of the ground." Lieutenant Campbell had "forgotten about the ground" during the excitement of combat. As he recovered from the stall, he then found himself flying in the same direction as the German aircraft directly above him.

"It took over a minute to maneuver into a position behind and under his tail without exposing myself to his fire (I thought), but finally found myself right under him. Then I pulled my nose straight up into the air and let him have the bullets, and I think he got some in his motor, for I saw some tracers hitting his nose.

"The next thing I knew, he was diving at about forty-five degrees, and I was behind and above him but behind his tail. Then I got a good aim, pulled the trigger, and held on to it. Two or three tracers hit him,



Lt. Douglas Campbell stands next to his Nieuport 28 C.1 at the 94th Aero Squadron's field near Gengoult, France. Lieutenant Campbell was the first American-trained pilot to score a victory, and he later became the first American-trained ace. Mr. Campbell is now ninety-one and lives in Connecticut. He still has a piece of the fabric covering from his first victim's aircraft.

reversement, and came down, firing on me. I climbed, however, in a right-hand spiral and slipped off, coming down directly behind him and on his tail. Again I violently opened fire. I had him at a rare advantage, which was due to the greater speed and maneuverability of our wonderful machines.

"I fired twenty to thirty rounds at him and could see my tracers entering his machine. Then, in another moment, his plane went straight down in an uncontrolled nose-dive—I had put his engine out of commission. I followed in a straight dive, firing all the way.

"At about six feet above the ground, he tried to regain control of his machine, but could not, and he crashed to earth.

"I darted down near him, made a

Back in the Air

Lieutenant Campbell described his part in the air battle to his parents the next day in a letter, in which he wrote:

"Our squadron started regular patrols and alerts yesterday. Alan Winslow and I were on schedule to be on alert from 6:00 to 10:00 a.m. At 6:00, we had our planes wheeled out, and tested the motors to make sure they were running OK. The first two and a half hours were slow, but then things began to happen so quickly that we could hardly keep track of them.

"At 8:45, the telephone rang, and the message was that two Boche planes had been sighted some fifteen miles away, headed our way. At 8:50, I took off and had made a round of the field at 500 meters al-



"That afternoon, my wrecked Hun plane and the charred result of 'Doug's' good work were exhibited in the public square of the town," notes Lt. Alan Winslow, who recorded the first aerial victory for America. This photo shows Lieutenant Winslow (center) with his prize, an Albatros D.Va, after the battle.

and after about fifty rounds had been fired, a streak of flame came shooting out of his fuselage near the motor. I ceased firing, and watched him land and crash in a plowed field, his plane a mass of flame and wreckage.

"The pilot had had sense enough to unfasten his belt, and was thrown clear of the machine, escaping with some bad burns and broken bones."

Mr. Campbell, who is ninety-one and living in Connecticut, still retains a portion of the silver-gray fabric of his first victory. The piece was recovered from the wreckage by fellow squadron member James Norman Hall and was presented to then-Lieutenant Campbell. The Pfalz D.III was flown by *Visefeldwebel* Wronieke.

After observing the crash of his adversary's aircraft, Lieutenant Campbell made one complete circuit of the field—he needed to calm down—and then landed.

Joy on the Ground

Both encounters had taken place within view of the other pilots and men of the aerodrome, including members of a French observation squadron that occupied the south side of the airfield. Many of the citizens of Toul had also witnessed the combat. Their reaction was immediate and unrestrained. In Winslow's words:

"The whole camp was pouring out, flying by on foot, bicycles, sidecars, automobiles, soldiers,

women, children, majors, colonels, French, and American—all poured out of the city. In ten minutes, several thousand people must have gathered.

" 'Doug' and I congratulated each other and my mechanic (Sgt. Beerbower), no longer military, jumping up and down, waving his hat, pounded me on the back instead of saluting, and yelled, 'Damn it! That's the stuff, old kid.' . . . All had seen the fight. One woman, an innkeeper, told me she could sleep well from now on and held her baby up for me to kiss. I looked at the baby, then felt grateful to my major, who pulled me away in the nick of time. . . .

"That afternoon, my wrecked Hun plane and the charred results of 'Doug's' good work were exhibited in the public square of the town, surrounded by an armed guard, and overlooked by a French Military Band. It was also a great day for the townspeople and has had a good morale effect. You can imagine it, when you realize it took place above their roof tops . . . and that they were able to see the whole fight.

"The Americans were indeed welcome in the town now, and 'Doug' and I can buy almost anything half price. An amusing inci-

dent was this—the fight was so near to the earth that bullets were flying dangerously all about the ground. No one was hurt, save a French worker in the field, who received a hole through his ear from one of my bullets and is very proud of it."

It was a tribute to the skill of the American pilots, the effectiveness of the early warning system, and the nimble Nieuport 28 that the entire combat lasted only ten minutes—five minutes to get into the air once the alert had been received and another five minutes to send both of the enemy planes crashing to the ground.

Two days later, Lieutenants Campbell and Winslow were decorated by the French with the *Croix de Guerre with Palm*, and both were mentioned in the General Orders. Both would later receive the US Distinguished Service Cross for other actions.

The events of April 14, 1918, had great significance for the new arm of the American Expeditionary Force. Lt. Alan Winslow was credited with achieving the first victory for the 94th Aero Squadron, and Lt. Douglas Campbell was recognized as the first American-trained pilot to score a victory for what would soon become the Army Air Service (Lieutenant Winslow had been trained by the French). Lieutenant Campbell would later become the first American-trained ace.

These dramatic victories were only the first of many that were to follow for the Hat-in-the-Ring Squadron. The significant accomplishments of the 94th were soon recognized in a letter of commendation from First Army Corps Air Service Commander Col. William "Billy" Mitchell, who said the unit had "fulfilled every desire and laid a foundation for the future development of pursuit aviation which will be an example for all to follow."

The 94th Aero Squadron still exists today as the 94th Tactical Fighter Squadron, now based at Langley AFB, Va. The unit flies the Nieuport's far-distant descendant, the supersonic F-15 Eagle. ■

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