His spectacular combat run lasted just 18 days before he flew into myth and mystery on his last mission.

The Legend of Frank Luke

By John T. Correll

Second Lt. Frank Luke Jr. with his biplane in the fields near Rattentout Farm, France, on Sept. 19, 1918.

The afternoon train on July 25, 1918 brought four replacement pilots for the American 1st Pursuit Group based at the small French town of Saints, 19 miles southwest of Chateau-Thierry.

One of them was 2nd Lt. Frank Luke Jr., 21, of Phoenix, who had won his wings six months earlier. He had arrived in France in March, completed his advanced training at the US Aviation Instruction Center at Issoudun, and spent several weeks as a ferry pilot at Orly Field outside Paris, awaiting an operational assignment. He was eager to begin his combat tour.

The armistice, which would end World War I, was three months away. Luke would not live to see it, but his actions during two-and-one-half extraordinary weeks in September would earn him a lasting place in history. In that brief span, he shot down 14 German balloons and four German airplanes. For a while, Luke was the most famous airman in America and the leading American ace of the war, promoted by newspapers in the United States as the "Arizona Balloon Buster."

In the final tally, he was the second-ranking US ace of the war and the first airman ever awarded the Medal of Honor.

The true story of Luke's exploits was soon engulfed by legend and myth. This was not entirely the doing of freewheeling writers of popular books and articles. Eyewitness accounts of Luke's death in battle on Sept. 29 disagreed about what had happened. Even the citation for Luke's Medal of Honor got the facts wrong. Ninety years later, historians are still trying to sort it out.

When he reported in at Saints, Luke was assigned to the 27th Aero Squadron, one of four squadrons in the 1st Pursuit Group. The 27th had been at

Saints for only a few weeks, having moved forward to be closer to the front lines. It had seen hard fighting during the German offensive that summer and would have a leading role in the battle for the St. Mihel Salient, which was about to begin.

The squadron was still flying Nieuport 28s when Luke arrived, but it was re-equipped a week later with the French-built Spad XIII, the best Allied fighter of the war and an able match for the best German fighter, the Fokker D.VII.

Luke was an excellent pilot. Earlier, at the School of Military Aeronautics in Texas, he had finished the course in seven weeks instead of the regular nine. He was the first in his class to solo. At Issoudun, he was at the head of the class in flying and second in gunnery.

However, his first days in the 27th Squadron gave no indication of the heroism to come. Anything but. Luke was self-confident and brash, but also driven by desire for fame and glory. He wrote to his sister, "I will make myself known or go where most of them do."

Luke, who had yet to fly a combat mission, alienated the veteran pilots in the squadron by bragging about how many Germans he was going to shoot down. He made it worse on a patrol in early August. He was part of a formation assigned to protect two Salmson reconnaissance aircraft but broke away to go chasing enemy aircraft on his own, later claiming that he had "engine problems." No one believed him. He became known in the squadron mess as "the Arizona Boaster." Luke claimed to have shot down a German airplane on Aug. 16, but there were no witnesses and his claim was not confirmed.

Luke had only two friends in the 27th: Lt. Joseph Fritz Wehner, with whom he shared a room, and Maj. Harold E. Hartney, the squadron commander. Hartney, a Canadian, was an ace with five victories in the Royal Flying Corps before he accepted an appointment to the American air arm. He was made a US citizen by Presidential order in September 1917, promoted to major, and assigned to command the 27th Squadron. Hartney was not a strict disciplinarian. He liked Luke and gave him a great deal of leeway. Luke also managed to build cordial relationships with a few pilots in other squadrons, including the rising star of the 94th "Hat in the Ring" Squadron, Edward V. Rickenbacker.

On Aug. 21, Hartney was promoted to command of the 1st Pursuit Group. The new commander of the 27th was 1st Lt. Alfred Grant, a strict, by-the-book officer who enforced military discipline. He expected pilots to stay in formation and fly as part of the squadron. Luke, who was determined to fight his war his way, was on a collision course with his squadron commander.

The front lines were shifting rapidly, and on Aug. 30, the entire 1st Pursuit Group relocated to Rembercourt, near Verdun, closer to the fighting. Flying from there on Sept. 12—alone as usual—Luke found and destroyed a German observation balloon, his first aerial victory. Keenly aware from the denial of his previous claim of the need for confirmation, he landed at an American balloon site and got written statements from two officers who bore witness to his shootdown.

Enter the Dragon

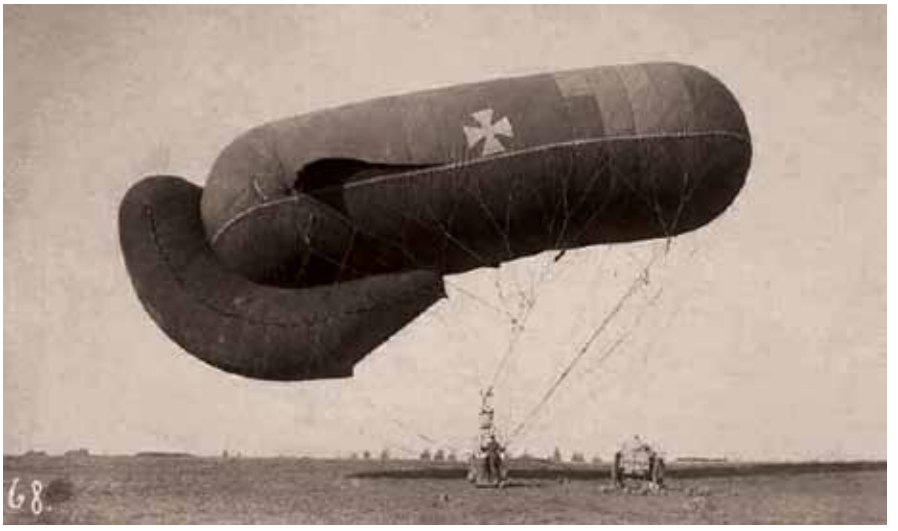
Both sides in World War I used observation balloons to correct artillery fire against enemy trenches. The big sausage-shaped German balloons were called Drachen ("Dragon") and were organized into Ballonzug (balloon companies or detachments). The credit for shooting down a balloon was the same as for an enemy airplane.

Attacking tethered balloons may sound like shooting fish in a barrel. In actuality, it was more dangerous and difficult than attacking airplanes or targets on the ground. The Drachen were heavily defended with anti-aircraft cannons, machine guns, and infantry small arms. The German guns, with an effective range of 12,000 to 14,000 feet, were lethal against approaching airplanes. Phosphorus AA rounds, called "flaming onions," burned as they rose in the air, and could set airplanes afire. The Spad, built of wood and doped fabric, offered no protection even against small-arms fire. The balloons were filled with hydrogen but they were not easily destroyed. A pilot might have to attack several times before setting the balloon afire.

The balloon threat loomed large in the minds of American soldiers. "The enemy balloons, although they did little actual good to their troops, were a source of constant irritation to our ground troops," said Col. William Mitchell, commander of the Air Service combat forces. "If a soldier on the ground saw any hostile aircraft in the sky, no matter how impotent it might be, he at once conceived the idea that, as a result, the enemy could direct his artillery fire against the reserves that were coming up from behind to help him."

Mitchell ordered Hartney's 1st Pursuit Group to attack and destroy the German balloons. In an excess of optimism, Hartney assured Mitchell that his pilots would destroy every balloon in the German line. Each squadron picked designated pilots for the task. The prescribed tactic was to send two airplanes, one high to protect the other and the lower one flying along close to the ground to attack at dusk or at night. The 27th Squadron chose Luke and his friend Wehner for the balloon mission. Sometimes Luke attacked alone, sometimes with Wehner flying his wing.

In the next two weeks, even Luke's worst enemies would have to admit that they may have misjudged him. Luke had a big mouth and he resisted military discipline, but two qualities he



Tethered balloons such as this one were heavily defended by German ground forces and anti-aircraft weapons. Shooting one down was no easy task.

Maj. Harold Hartney (shown here as a lieutenant colonel), Luke's squadron commander and later his group commander, was fond of the brash young pilot and took pains to protect him from the heated tempers of the other members of his squadron.

had in abundance: courage and combat flying ability.

Luke bagged two balloons on Sept. 14, diving on one of them six times before it went down. The next day, he shot down three more balloons. With six confirmed victories, he was now an ace. On Sept. 16, Mitchell came to Rembercourt, where Hartney had Luke and Wehner stage an exhibition for him. Two German balloons were visible on the horizon. The pilots told Mitchell they would destroy one at 7:15 p.m. and the other at 7:19. They took off into the dusk, and the explosions lit up the evening sky within seconds of the promised times. Mitchell was impressed.

On five occasions, Luke returned with so much battle damage that he had to use a new airplane for the next mission. Sgt. Jesse Saunders, a mechanic in the 27th Squadron, said that Luke "had more guts, more skill, and less sense than any man I ever saw." Lt. Jerry C. Vasconcells, a much-respected senior pilot in the squadron, had a different interpretation. "It isn't courage exactly," he said. "He has no imagination. He can't imagine anything happening to him. He thinks he's invincible. If he ever finds himself, he may be almost as good as he thinks he is." Some members of the squadron may have changed their minds about Luke, but most still held him in contempt.

Luke's biggest day was Sept.18, when he scored five victories in less than 10 minutes. Over St. Mihel, Luke dropped down to destroy two balloons while Wehner circled above. Almost immediately, they were engaged by Fokker D.VIIs. Luke shot down two of the German airplanes but he and Wehner were separated in the swirling battle. Headed home, Luke encountered a Halberstadt observation airplane and shot it down southeast of Verdun. However, one of the Fokkers, flown by a leading German ace, shot down Wehner, who was killed.

Fame Calling

Luke now had 13 confirmed victories, putting him ahead of Rickenbacker, who had eight. Luke's five victories became front page news in the *New York Times* Sept. 20. The Phoenix Chamber of Commerce cabled congratulations. Luke took off and landed when he wanted to, and often left the field or was absent without leave. "Luke was flagrantly flaunting this position as the Ace of Aces," said historian Blaine Pardoe in *Terror of the Autumn Skies.* Hartney protected his star pilot.

Hoping to give tempers some time to cool, Hartney ordered Luke away from the squadron for five days of leave. When Luke returned on Sept. 25, he resumed his familiar habits, flying off alone to hunt balloons without permission and without filing a flight plan. On Sept. 28, he shot down another balloon and a Hanover CL ground attack airplane, raising his victory total to 15. Instead of returning to Rembercourt, he landed at the French field at Cigognes and spent the night. He later gave his usual reason: "engine trouble."

Luke returned to Rembercourt the next morning, Sept. 29, and was confronted by Grant about where he had been. A row ensued. Luke claimed to have permission from Hartney to fly when he pleased and specific authorization to fly a balloon busting mission that day from the squadron's advanced base at Verdun. It was not true, but Hartney covered for him again.

Hartney had a problem. As historian Stephen Skinner has said, "The loss of the United States Air Service's top scorer to an insubordination charge would be a public relations nightmare." Furthermore, Hartney was under pressure from Mitchell to rid the sector of German balloons as he had promised. Still, Luke's behavior had become too notorious to ignore, and Hartney had a duty to support Grant.

Grant decided to force the issue by grounding Luke with a written order that would be difficult for Hartney to avoid supporting. Luke took off without permission before the order could be drawn up. Grant called the field at Verdun with instructions to hold Luke if he showed up. Luke did indeed turn up at Verdun, where Vasconcells, commanding the squadron's B flight, was in charge. The order to hold Luke was superseded when Hartney arrived at Verdun that afternoon. Hartney chided Luke a bit, but Luke was allowed to go balloon hunting again that evening, with Hartney's tacit approval.

Luke took off shortly before 6 p.m. He passed low over the US 7th Balloon Company at Avocourt, where he dropped a message weighted with a piece of metal and with a white streamer attached. It said: "Watch for burning balloons. Lt. Luke." He wanted confirmation for any balloons he might shoot down.

With that, he flew east, across the Meuse, then swung northwest along the German balloon line. At 6:38 p.m. near Gremilly, he attacked a Drachen that failed to ignite but fell to the ground with hundreds of bullet holes in it. Minutes later, he found and attacked another balloon, which exploded. Witnesses confirmed a third balloon destroyed near the small town of Murvaux just before 7 p.m.

Nothing further was heard from Luke. He did not return from the mission that night. He was declared missing in action and nothing more would be known of his fate for months. Rickenbacker retook the lead in aerial victories to be the top-scoring American ace of the war. The armistice on Nov. 11 ended the fighting.

On Nov. 20, Grant, prodded by Hartney, nominated Luke for the Medal of Honor. Luke was promoted posthumously to first lieutenant. At this point,

Luke's story crossed over into the realm of mystery and myth. What happened on that last day has been the subject of speculation, exaggeration, disagreement, and doubt ever since.

It was not until January 1919 that details about Luke's death began to emerge. A graves registration unit located the remains of an unknown aviator killed Sept. 29 in Murvaux. The airman was subsequently identified as Luke.

Early reports, filed by officers who spoke no French, quoted local inhabitants as saying the aviator had killed 11 Germans in a strafing attack, was shot down, and then fought on the ground until he was killed. An affidavit signed by 14 citizens of Murvaux was later called into question when it was discovered that villagers had lined up to sign the document on the back side without turning it over to see what it said on the front. Another officer, who did speak French, reinterviewed the witnesses, who told him that no shots had been exchanged. Yet another visiting American officer reported that Luke, using two pistols, had killed seven Germans. There is also doubt about how much the village people could actually see, since the action occurred 100 yards to a quarter-mile away, near sundown.

The Medal of Honor nomination, submitted the previous November, was still working its way through the system when the barrage of reports from Murvaux hit Air Service headquarters in France. There, a junior officer rewrote the nomination. The revised text of the citation made only passing reference to the content of the original write-up, the high-risk missions in which Luke destroyed 18 enemy airplanes and balloons. The new emphasis was on the last day in Murvaux, where Luke, supposedly pursued by eight German airplanes, killed six Germans on the ground in a low-level attack, made a forced landing, and "surrounded on all sides," drew his pistol and "defended himself gallantly until he fell dead from a wound in the chest." On that basis, the Medal of Honor was approved and presented on May 29, 1919 to Luke's father in Phoenix.

The story has been told many times, usually with embellishments and errors. One version had Luke killing 11 Germans in an epic gun battle. An article in *Air Force* Magazine in 1955 claimed that Luke was attacked by 10 Fokkers, which he fought for "a full five minutes," shooting down two of them. The version of events currently posted on the Internet by the US Air Force says Luke was wounded in an air engagement with Fokkers, but instead of returning to base for medical care, he continued on to other targets, crash-landed at Murvaux, drew his pistols instead of surrendering, and "was killed in a gun battle."

The facts of Luke's last hours have been established with reasonable certainty, thanks to the work in the 1960s of Royal D. Frey, chief of the research division at the Air Force Museum, and especially the research of Skinner, who spent years studying original documents, visiting the area, and analyzing the evidence in relentless detail for his book, *The Stand: The Final Flight of Lt. Frank Luke Jr.,* published last December.

How It Happened

It was still daylight when Luke reached Murvaux, 37 miles north of Verdun. Sunset on Sept. 29 was at 7:06 p.m., with twilight until 7:38. The little town lay in a valley running east and west, with a small stream, Bradon Creek, flowing through it. On the north side of the valley was a high hill, the Cote St. Germain, which bristled with German guns.

Luke's last target was Ballonzug 35, a mile west of Murvaux and 109 yards beyond the western end of the big hill. The Drachen was tethered at 1,312 yards.

Luke approached from the east, on the north side of the hill, which he used as a screen. To attack, he crossed over the western tip of the hill and bore down on the Ballonzug. As he cleared the crest, every gun in the area opened up on him. Luke flew unharmed through the defenses and set the balloon afire on his second pass. Then he flew eastward along the south side of the Cote until he reached Murvaux and got his bearings. Just beyond the village, he turned and headed back west. The big hill was now on his right.

At that point, his luck ran out. He was hit and mortally wounded in the air by a machine gun on the Cote, firing from above him and to his right. (It is often claimed that Luke was shot down by gunners at the balloon site. The Ballonzug 35 batteries, on the ground shooting upward, could not have inflicted Luke's wound, which was inflicted from above. Also, the balloon site was two miles west of where Luke's airplane came down, headed west.)

Luke was hard hit. He landed his Spad in the valley, ran toward Bradon Creek, and collapsed 221 yards from his airplane. He had one sidearm, a 1911 Colt semiautomatic with seven rounds in the clip. He probably fired three shots. It is possible but not likely that Germans returned fire. The big gunfight, as imagined, did not happen. According to Skinner's reconstruction of events, Luke began his attack on the balloon at 6:55 p.m. and died at 7:04.

The next day, Luke was buried in a shallow grave near the village church. His Spad was dismantled and hauled away by the Germans. After the war, Luke was reburied in the American Meuse-Argonne Cemetery, 10 miles from Murvaux. In addition to the Medal of Honor, he was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross and the Italian War Cross.

Luke has not been forgotten, either in France or in the United States. In 1957, the 388th Fighter-Bomber Wing put up a monument to Luke just west of Murvaux. It deteriorated in the ensuing years, but was restored in 2000.

Luke Air Force Base is named for him, as is the Frank Luke Chapter of the Air Force Association in Phoenix. His statue stands on the grounds of the Arizona state capitol. In 1930, the American Society for Promotion of Aviation named Luke America's greatest air hero. The Air Force Academy Class of 2010 chose Luke as its class exemplar. His old squadron, the 27th, is still active at Langley AFB, Va., and was the first combat squadron to fly the F-22 fighter.

"No one had the sheer contemptuous courage that boy possessed," Hartney said. "He was an excellent pilot and probably the best flying marksman on the Western Front. We had any number of expert pilots and there was no shortage of good shots, but the perfect combination, like the perfect specimen of anything in the world, was scarce. Frank Luke was the perfect combination."

The highest praise came from Rickenbacker, who declared Luke to be "the most daring aviator and greatest fighter pilot of the entire war." Rickenbacker noted Luke's unsurpassed combat effectiveness—18 victories in only 10 sorties flown on eight different days—and said, "No other ace, even the dreaded Richthofen, had ever come close to that." ■

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