

Robert Soubiran was attracted to aviation, adventure, and the camera.

The Lafayette Escadrille

Text by Tamar A. Mehuron, Associate Editor

Long before the US entered World War I, pro-France sentiment and lust for adventure caused many American volunteers to join French forces on the Western Front. This was especially true in the air. In April 1916, American pilots serving in the French army were gathered together to form a separate squadron—the Escadrille Americaine, which became the Lafayette Escadrille on Dec. 6, 1916.

Robert Soubiran, a French-born American citizen, served with the escadrille. He contributed not only his skills as an aviator but also his talent as a photographer, capturing on film some of the men, aircraft, and experiences of one of history's most famous military outfits.

We wish to thank Soubiran's daughters, Elizabeth Soubiran Lancer and Jackie Soubiran Rogers, for information about their father's work. The photos are from the Soubiran collection at the National Archives and Records Administration.

Below, Soubiran's camera captured the look of hangars at the Ham aerodrome in 1917. Outside is one of the squadron's Nieuports. Inside is a Spad.





Above, Sgt. Robert Soubiran poses with his Nieuport at the Cachy Aerodrome in 1916. Members of the escadrille adopted the Indian-head insignia as a symbol of the American fighting spirit. Soubiran himself was awarded the French Legion of Honor and the Croix de Guerre and later on commanded the US 103rd Pursuit Squadron, which absorbed many members of the Lafayette Escadrille after the US entered the war.

At left, four escadrille members plan a mission. They are (l-r) Walter Lovell, Edmond Genet, Raoul Lufbery, and James McConnell. In its nearly 23-month existence, the French-commanded squadron flew in combat over the length and breadth of the front. Its American pilots generated more than 3,000 combat sorties and are credited with 39 confirmed victories.

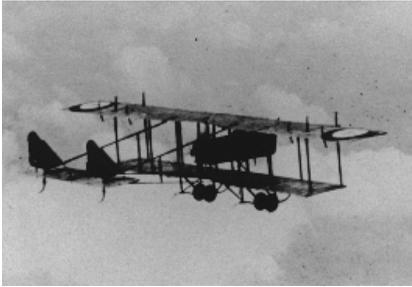
The squadron had a little bit of everything, including two lion cub mascots. This is Soda. (The other, of course, was Whiskey.) When members transferred to US units in February 1918, the lions were packed off to the zoo. Left to right: Sgt. Bert Hall, Lt. William Thaw, Adj. Dudley Hill, Sgt. Kenneth Marr, Sgt. David Peterson, Lufbery, Sgt. Kiffin Rockwell, Sgt. Ray Bridgman, and an unidentified Frenchman. (The Americans used French ranks, which included adjutant, a rank above sergeant.)



Funerals were a reminder, if any were needed, of the dangers faced in battle. Here, an American flag is draped over the coffin of Edmond Genet, killed in action April 16, 1917. Many of the unit's members are buried at the Lafayette Escadrille Memorial outside of Paris.

In this 1916 photo, Sgt. Frederick Prince Jr. stands beside his Baby Scout Nieuport. Note the aircraft is equipped with racks for balloon-strafting rockets.

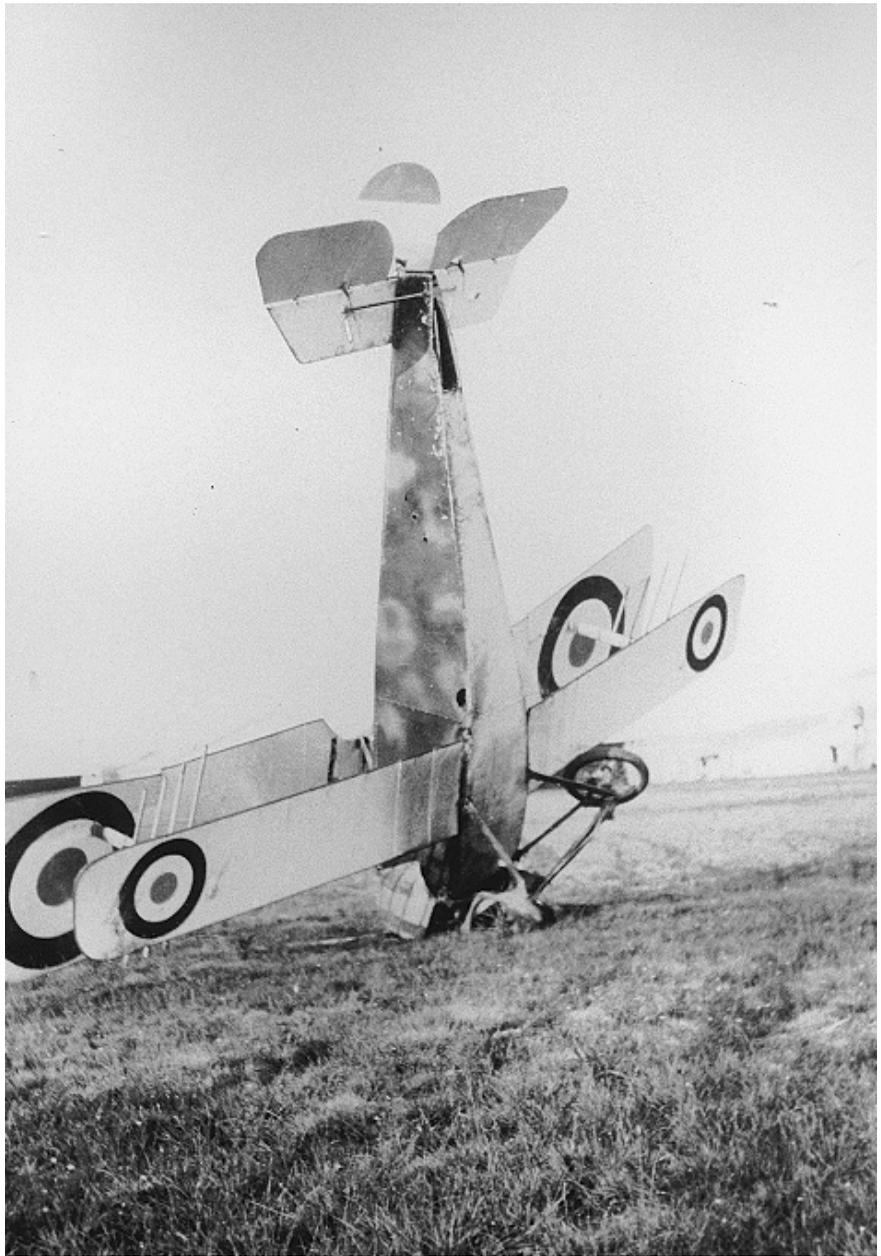




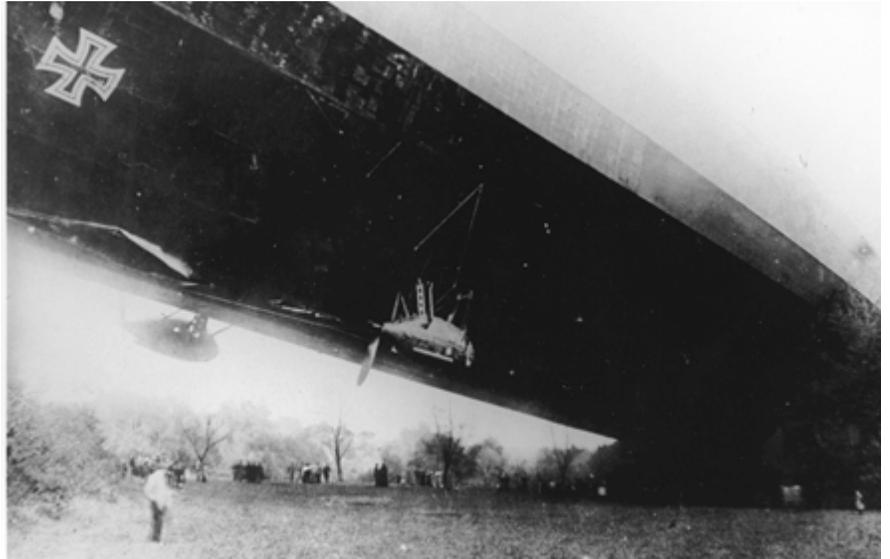
A Maurice Farman aircraft flies above the clouds.

As shown at right, crashes sometimes left aircraft in odd positions, as is the case with this Nieuport's nose-first attitude.

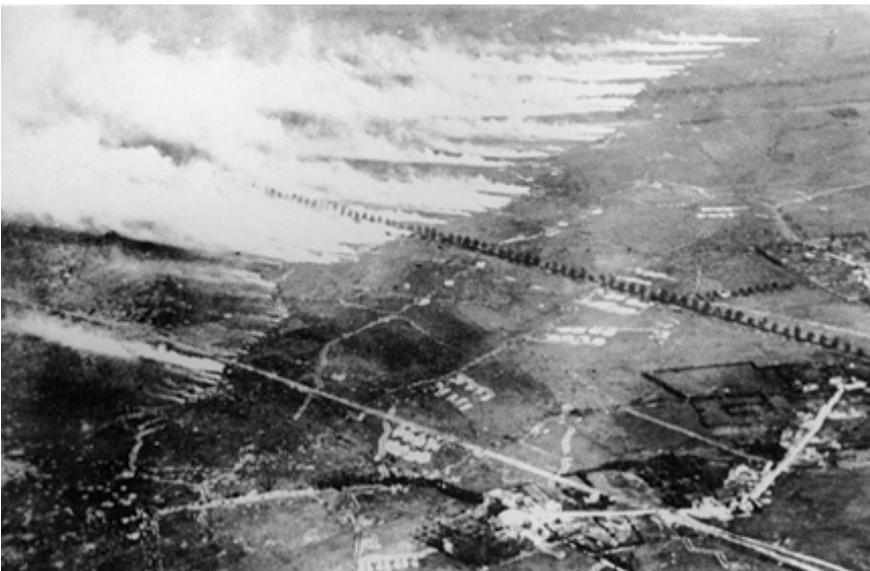
The Spad biplane below suffered an engine failure and flew headlong into a barracks.



Though this Morane aircraft (in photo above) suffered massive damage, its pilot walked away from the crash unharmed.



High-flying German zeppelins terrorized cities. In these photos, Soubiran records images of a zeppelin that has been brought down and rests precariously in a stand of trees. The photo at right offers a clear view of its engines and some sense of its size.



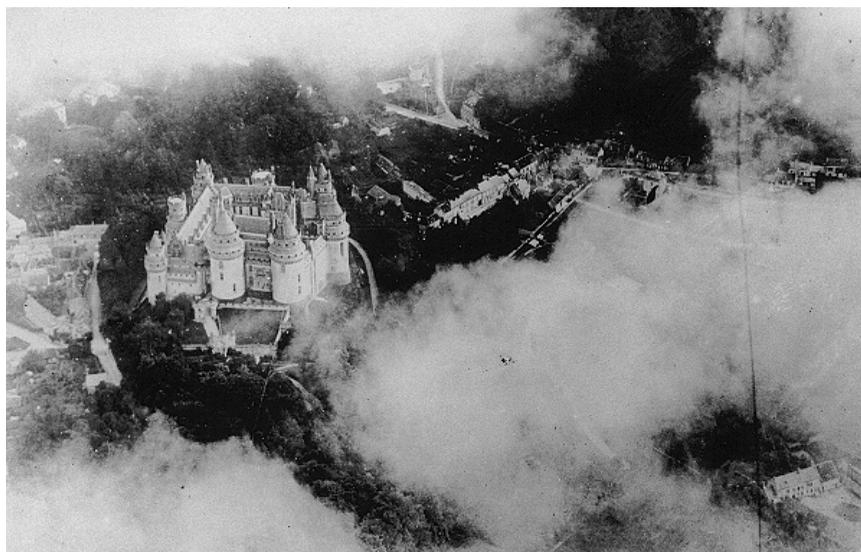
Gas! In this rare aerial view of an actual gas attack, lethal agent sweeps over the Western Front. Mustard, chlorine, and other poisonous gases were among the most horrific weapons of the war, though notoriously unreliable. In this photo, France has launched an attack against German positions.

This sugar refinery at Ham was destroyed by Imperial German forces retreating in the face of a combined French and British offensive in the winter of 1917.



Even amid the general devastation of modern war, Soubiran found grace and beauty. He snapped a postcard-perfect photo (right) of a castle during a brief parting of clouds.

In the photo below, Allied troops surround and inspect a German Rumpler, which was forced down and captured while on a 1917 reconnaissance mission.



A Nieuport, a graceful but nimble aircraft, is shown in flight over the front, below.



This Nieuport flown by Sgt. Andrew Campbell (second from right) lost its lower left wing at 3,000 feet and landed in a beet field. With Campbell are (l-r) Robert Soubiran, Sgt. Robert Rockwell, an unidentified man, Capt. Georges Thenault (French), and William Thaw. ■

