

This Day in History... February 5, 1918

First U.S. Aerial Victory

On February 5, 1918, US pilot Stephen W. Thompson shot down a German aircraft, making him the first person in the American military to shoot down an enemy plane.

Born in Missouri, Thompson was a senior at the University of Missouri when the US entered World War I. His school then announced that seniors that joined the military before graduation would receive their diplomas in June. So Thompson enlisted in the Army and went for training at the Coast Artillery Corps. On the train there, he saw an airplane flying overhead for the first time.



*From the Celebrate the Century
– 1910s Sheet*



*This stamp was issued for
the 100th anniversary of
the end of World War I.*

Thompson was fascinated by aviation and visited a flying field near his training center. He got to ride in a plane, and after that decided to apply for the Air Service. He was accepted and joined the US 1st Aero Squadron as an observer.

In February 1918, Thompson's unit had yet to begin their combat operations, but they would occasionally visit a nearby active French bombardment squadron. On February 5, Thompson and a fellow member of his unit visited the French squadron, who were preparing to go on a mission. One of the French observers became ill and Thompson and the other American pilot were invited to join in the mission in his place.

After conducting a bombing raid over Saarbrücken, Germany, they were attacked by German Albatross D.III fighters. During that fighting, Thompson shot down one of the German planes. He was the first member of the US military to shoot down an enemy plane (American members of the Lafayette Escadrille had shot down German planes earlier in the war, but they were serving as part of the French military).



*This stamp was issued
to celebrate America's
victory in WWI.*

For his victory, Thompson received the Croix de Guerre with Palm from the French government. That May, Thompson was assigned to the 12th Aero Squadron. Then in July, he was conducting artillery spotting near Chateau-Thierry. His plane came under attack by four German planes. Thompson succeeded in shooting down two of them, but one of the other fighters shot his gun, disabling it. They also hit the pilot in the stomach and Thompson in the leg. The pilot managed to land the plane before dying from his wounds.



*This stamp was issued in 1997
for the 50th anniversary of the US
Air Force.*

For several years, Thompson didn't receive official recognition for the first victory, because he wasn't serving with his own unit at the time. In 1967, the National Museum of the US Air Force helped him to get that official recognition. They also have his uniform on display to honor his role in history.

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