

This Day in History... March 21, 1916

The Lafayette Escadrille

On March 21, 1916, a group of mostly American pilots formed the Escadrille Américaine. Later named the Lafayette Escadrille, they flew several high-profile missions that encouraged more Americans to join their ranks.



This stamp was issued in 1919 to celebrate the end of World War I.

After World War I began, many Americans wanted to join the war effort. Among them were Dr. Edmund Gros and Norman Prince. Gros founded the American Hospital of Paris and the American Ambulance Field Service. Prince was a pilot flying for France.



The escadrille was named for the Marquis de Lafayette, "a hero of two worlds."

Prince and William Thaw volunteered to serve in the French Foreign Legion and dreamed of forming a squadron of American pilots to help in the war effort. With the help of Dr. Gros, they convinced the French government to form a unit of American volunteer air fighters. They hoped this squadron would convince the United States to join the Allies.

On March 21, 1916, the Escadrille Américaine (Escadrille N.124) was formed. Command by Captain Georges Thénault, it had seven pilots initially – Prince, Thaw, Victor E. Chapman, Elliot C. Cowdin, Weston Hall, James R. McConnell, and Kiffin Rockwell. The squadron was soon moved closer to the front. In December, the name of the unit was changed when Germany accused the US of breaking its neutrality agreement. The Lafayette Escadrille was named for Marquis de Lafayette, a hero of the French and American Revolutions.

The escadrille consisted of 38 American pilots, with French airplanes, mechanics, uniforms, and commanders. It first saw action on May 13, 1916, at the Battle of Verdun. Five days later, Kiffin Rockwell scored the unit's first aerial victory. Their first casualty came a month later when Victor Chapman was shot down. The unit's highest-scoring ace was Raoul Lufbery, with 16 confirmed victories.



The escadrille painted a profile of Sitting Bull on the noses of their planes.

As word spread about the squadron, other Americans were anxious to join. The Lafayette Flying Corps was formed as part of the French Foreign Legion. On February 18, 1918, members of the squadron were inducted into the US Air Service's 103rd Aero Squadron bringing an end to the Lafayette Escadrille. A total of 224 Americans were part of the unit, with 51 dying in combat and 11 from other causes. Fifteen were taken as prisoners of war and 11 were aces – having shot down five or more enemy aircraft.

In 1932, Amelia Earhart was made an honorary member of the escadrille following her famed solo flight across the Atlantic. The escadrille also participated in World War II.

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