

This Day in History... July 23, 1973

Death of WWI Ace Eddie Rickenbacker

On July 23, 1973, Eddie Rickenbacker died in Zürich, Switzerland.

Rickenbacker was born on October 8, 1890, in Columbus, Ohio. Rickenbacker's love of all things mechanical began in his childhood, partly inspired by his father's words, "a machine has to have a purpose." His experiments and fearlessness led to several near-death experiences early in life, including a run-in with a horse-drawn carriage and an accident while riding a cart down the slope of a mine.

Rickenbacker dropped out of school at age 13 following his father's sudden death. He took odd jobs to support the family and eventually enrolled in a correspondence course in engineering. His love of automobiles led Rickenbacker to take a job in a machine shop. Before long he began racing their cars. Rickenbacker then competed in the Indianapolis 500 four times, earning the nickname "Fast Eddie."

Rickenbacker enlisted in the Army shortly after America entered the war and was among the first US troops to begin training in France in June 1917. Though he wanted to fly, he was looked over, as they preferred men with college degrees. Because of his mechanical abilities, Rickenbacker was assigned as the engineering officer of the 3rd Aviation Instruction Center, but he practiced flying in his free time. Once he convinced his superiors that he had found a qualified replacement engineering officer, Rickenbacker was allowed to get his wings and was assigned to the 94th Aero Squadron.

Rickenbacker flew his first mission on April 6, 1918. He shot down his first plane later that month and achieved ace status in May when he shot down two planes in one day. For shooting down five planes in a month, he was awarded the French *Croix de Guerre*.

Rickenbacker was promoted to captain by September and given command of a whole squadron. In the coming weeks he shot down several more planes and highly defended observation balloons.

By the end of October, Rickenbacker shot down 26 aircraft (22 planes and 4 balloons), the most of anyone in the US Air Service. In fact, his record stood for nearly three decades. He logged 300 hours of combat flight time, more than any other US pilot during the war. Rickenbacker also received a record eight Distinguished Service Crosses and years later was awarded the Medal of Honor.



Indianapolis Motor Speedway centennial stamp

Rickenbacker returned to America after the war and went on a Liberty Bond Tour. As the most famous aviator in America, he was offered movie roles and a number of opportunities to cash in on his fame. Instead, he started his own car company, aimed at providing racecar technology to consumer automobiles. Though his cars were the first to feature a four-wheel brake system, the company ultimately went bankrupt.

In 1927, Rickenbacker bought the Indianapolis Motor Speedway and initiated a number of improvements. A decade later he took over Eastern Air Lines and used that position to institute changes to commercial aviation. He picked up mail routes, helped develop new plane designs, and promoted flying to the public. In 1935 Rickenbacker added comic strip creator to his credit, when he helped write *Ace Drummond*, which followed the life of an aviator.

During World War II, Rickenbacker provided his knowledge and services, visiting European Allies and assessing their operations. He encouraged Americans to join the war effort and promised that Eastern Air Lines would provide men and equipment as well. While on an inspection trip in October 1942, Rickenbacker was shot down over the Pacific. He and seven others were rescued after floating in a rubber raft for 24 days. Rickenbacker continued to travel for inspections and other missions throughout the war, eventually earning the Medal for Merit (a civilian award similar to the Legion of Merit).

Rickenbacker continued to head Eastern Air Lines until 1959. He spent his final years traveling with his wife and speaking out about future technologies. While in Switzerland in search of medical care for his wife, Rickenbacker suffered a stroke and then contracted pneumonia, dying on July 23, 1973.



This stamp pictures Rickenbacker and a French Spad XIII, similar to what he flew during WWI.

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