

This Day in History... October 8, 1890

Happy Birthday, Fast Eddie!

Eddie Vernon Rickenbacker was born on October 8, 1890, in Columbus, Ohio.

Rickenbacker's love of all things mechanical began in his childhood. He was 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. These included 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."



Eddie was one of the most famous race car drivers in the US.

Rickenbacker enlisted in the Army shortly after America entered World War I. He was among the first US troops to begin training in France in June 1917. Though he wanted to fly, he was passed 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 Congressional Medal of Honor.

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 race car 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 Airlines 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



Indianapolis Motor Speedway centennial stamp

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.



Issued for a new half-ounce rate for letters to countries other than Canada and Mexico.



Rickenbacker earned the Medal of Honor for attacking seven enemy planes over Billy, France, on September 25, 1918.

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