

4-1966

Interview no. 60

Major Edward F. Hinkle

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Recommended Citation

Interview with Major Edward F. Hinkle by Dale L. Walker and Doug Early, 1966, "Interview no. 60," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Major Edward F. Hinkle
INTERVIEWER: Dale L. Walker and Doug Early
PROJECT: _____
DATE OF INTERVIEW: April 1966
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted
TAPE NO.: 60
TRANSCRIPT NO.: 60
TRANSCRIBER: Leticia Olivas
DATE TRANSCRIBED: February 21, 1973

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Pilot with the Lafayette Escadrille during World War I.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Experiences during World War I.

30 minutes (3 3/4 tape speed); 14 pages.

Major Edward F. Hinkle
by Dale Walker and Doug Early
April, 1966

W: Did you know Rickenbacker before the war, after it, or during it?

H: After the war.

W: Did you know any of the American pilots that came into French aviation?

H: Not very many.

W: Did you know any of the other Lafayette Flying Corps members like Frank Baylis, Putnam, or any of those?

H: No, I don't remember.

W: Their squadrons, I guess, were a little far flung.

H: We didn't get to see them and we were not particularly anxious to. We didn't like the idea of their using the Lafayette name because, well, Paul Rockwell* said that all of these flying corps guys and the planes they were in, plus the Lafayette Escadrille, were more than the whole French aviation. There was about 200 of them all. We was housing them up there.

W: Major Hinkle, I wish you'd tell me as well as you remember what you felt the first time you got involved with German aircraft, or the first time you saw any--your first experience with the enemy.

H: Mostly fright.

W: Well, that figures. (Laughs)

H: Well, I met a very nice old lady on the steamer. See, after you've had a year at the front, you got a month in wherever you lived. I got a month in America. And then they figured the flying time, your travel time across the Atlantic. They allowed you 10 or 12 days to cross it instead of a week, so you got about five weeks leave. And one very nice old lady on the steamer said, "Sergeant, I should think sometimes you'd be frightened way up in the air all by yourself." I said, "Madam, I was

*Rockwell was brother to Kiffin Yates Rockwell, Lafayette Escadrille, who was killed in combat. Paul was then and is today official historian of the Lafayette Escadrille. Kiffin was one of the original pilots.

frightened all the time!" (Chuckles) No, if you get into a plane, you've got the fear of Germans, the fear of fire, and no parachute, open cockpit, and you're trying to fly 15 to 16,000 feet without oxygen, you're nervous.

W: What was the first enemy aircraft that you ever saw?

E: Yes, where was it? Do you remember? I'll bet you do, I'll bet you remember very well where you first encountered an enemy aircraft in the air.

H: The first field I was on was St. Just.

W: St. Just?

H: St. Just. That's south of Amiens. But when you're actually in sight of them, you forget all this stuff. Your one idea, you know, is to hit him. And you're not thinking very much, everything is instinctive. Just like boxing. You don't say, "Well, I'm going to put my foot here." It's just instinctive. Your one idea is to get behind him and either under or over his tail. If you're under his tail, he can't see you, he's got a blind spot.

W: What type of German aircraft were the first you ever encountered?

H: I don't remember the order they came on--the Taube.

W: That was the one that was shaped like a dove wing?

H: Yeah, the Taube was dove-wing. And the Halberstadt.

W: And a Pfalz?

H: The Pfalz, yeah. The Halberstadt was a hell of a good plane.

W: How about the Albatross?

H: The Albatross, yeah.

W: Well, those days when you were first engaged, the Germans presumably had the edge in the quality of aircraft. This is what most of the books and the authorities on aircraft insists, that pretty well to the end of the

war, the Germans did have superiority in quality of the planes, and that sort of thing.

H: I think that's why I claim that the Nieuport 28 was the finest...they call them pursuit planes; you call them attack, I guess.

W: Or fighters.

H: Fighters. That was the finest fighter of any country during the war, and I can prove it. You see, you could take that plane with the rotary engine, and you could go right up like this to your ceilings; unless a 28 has a ceiling of 20,000 feet, then you go steady and never stop. Now with a Spad /you could go/ to about 10 to 12,000 feet. A Spad was lighter, faster. After that, the Nieuport was faster. The Spad, you could go up about 1,000 meters, about 3,000 feet, then you had to fly level for about a minute or your engine would heat up. You had to go upwards step by step. And coming down, the engine would cool off, and you'd have to do the same way.

Now, this rotary engine, you could dive from as high as...no matter how high you were, you could dive all the way down--never any bother with heating or cooling. Then you could cut your ignition and stop your engine, or if it stopped accidentally, you had to dive about 500 feet, and you /could/ turn the propeller and start. You couldn't do that with a Hispano engine, any water-cooled engine. So you could start your dead engine, go straight up or straight down, and you could go four or five thousand feet higher than the Spad. That's why I say it was the better plane.

W: Did the Spad have a Hispano engine?

H: Yeah.

W: And the Nieuport had the Le Rhone?

H: Rhone and Gnome.

W: Rotary engine.

H: The 28 had a Gnome--200 horsepower, and that was faster.

W: What was the level speed of the Nieuport 28--the top speed? About 110, 120?

H: I don't really... I know in 1913, I went up to Reims. They were having an aviation meet and the Nieuport won the speed record. That was a stripped plane, strictly for the racing, and that just topped 60 miles an hour.

E: They had it souped up, I think,

H: The first planes I flew, I don't think they went much over 45. And then as they kept increasing the horsepower, and that's when you get a round fuselage instead of a box. I think you probably did maybe 70 miles, I don't know. There's one thing else with speeding. I don't make any difference how fast it is--you compared to the German plane.

W: When you met enemy planes in those days, it was pretty much personal contact; this is close contact type of fighting, so much unlike the situation now where you launch an air to air missile and can knock that enemy plane down miles away. But there you could pretty much see the color of the enemy pilot's eyes, couldn't you, on an occasion like that?

H: Oh, yes. We were instructed not to open fire further than a hundred yards. If you did it, you're supposed not to fire until about you're within 30 yards.

W: Thirty yards. That's closing...

H: Of course, if he saw you and began maneuvering and shooting at a hundred yards or more, why, you had to shoot back. But that was normal--a hundred yards maximum, and 30 yards if possible.

W: Major, if you did get the desired position under his tail, was there any

spot along the botton of the fuselage that you aimed for--under the pilot's seat, or the engine?

H: You just aimed up into the plane. See, every third shot was a tracer. It had magnesium in the tail. But at any distance that magnesium would burn out of course, and it made a white streak. They burn out and then the bullet would begin to keel or tumble or go off in any direction. Got out of balance, you see.

W: How about pilots in an engagement of this sort? This is so very close, I suppose you could see very clearly what was happening. When you had hit a plane, for instance, and disabled it or its pilot, you had a chance to see very, very close what was happening, probably for only a second.

H: You could see smoke coming out all over like that. Or maybe shoot off part of a wing, and he'd start to fall.

W: You know, I wanted to ask you also about the machine guns you were equipped with. The early Nieuports had a machine gun mounted on a brace that fired above the propeller.

H: On the upper wing, not over the top of the propeller. You could only shoot up at them. Then they had one that went off at an angle, about like this. It would miss the propeller, you see. So you'd get this way and shoot up or sideways. Those machine guns had these round drums with 47 or 94 cartridges in the circle this way.

W: Were these the ones that were always jamming?

H: No, they... See, the Germans always had better machine guns from start to finish. And they all had about 250 rounds, and you were shooting 47 shots against the guy with 250. He could really squirt the hose at you. We were only supposed to shoot pum-pum-pum, pum-pum-pum, because

as you shoot it jerks the muscle up and after three shots, you're shooting over the target. You have to push your plane down, you have to aim the whole damn thing.

W: You have to aim the whole plane.

H: That's how you'd shoot--pum-pum-pum, pum-pum-pum. And one of those shots would be a tracer and you could see where it was going. But the Germans could just turn the hose on you.

W: After the machine gun was developed that fired through the propeller, synchronized with the propeller, this was belt-fed ammunition then, was it not?

H: Well, it started back there and went through the gun, had an elastic rope like you use on the pulley weights, you know. They'd pull this thing through. That wasn't such a hot idea.

E: Where did the cartridges left over from after firing go?

H: Well, they just shot out.

E: They shot out the side?

H: Shot out the right-hand side. The trouble we had...I have someplace the specifications for the brass in the American cartridges. That's what we were shooting. I don't know whether it was Remington or Winchester or what. You know where the cartridge tapers down where the _____ goes? Well, right behind that taper it would split and it would leave this little end in, and the next cartridge would come in and the whole damn thing would jam. And you had to land and take a ramrod and a mallet and pound this damn thing out.

W: The cartridge case would split.

H: Yeah, the brass case. It would stay in the barrel, and the next one would

jam in it.

W: I suppose those were 30 caliber Lewis guns.

H: Yeah. But there wasn't enough copper in the brass. It was too brittle. And then they varied. /We/ used to take a box of cartridges and a gun barrel and try each cartridge /to make/ sure that /they/ dropped in smooth.

W: Really?

H: Yeah. And discard the others. You had to pick out about 100 rounds or whatever you'd shot off. I mean, you just couldn't take a box and...

W: Weren't very standardized, were they?

H: No, they were poor cartridges. They would have jammed in any kind of a gun.

W: What happened on a patrol? Near the end of the Lafayette Escadrille's time on the Front, during the big battles when the Germans were trying to achieve air supremacy and you were flying so often there on patrols, do you recall any of the significant actions then at that particular time and how they developed? What was the pattern then? What normally happened when you took off on one of those things?

H: Well, I'll tell you. /When/ you took off, you had two hours and ten minutes worth of gas.

W: And that gave you a little bit of latitude?

H: Well, you had a two-hour patrol, and ten minutes of gas to get back home. That's provided the mechanics didn't get laxy and not fill up your tank. See, they had to climb up a ladder and take these cans and dump them in, and they'd get tired of climbing up.

I had an awful escape--narrow escape. I was out by myself and I couldn't see any action at all, nothing was going on. So after about an

hour and a half, I thought it was just a waste of time and I'd go back. So I started back /to/ the field and I got about from here to _____ hospital and the engine went dry. That would've happened five miles into Germany normally, you see, and they hadn't filled the damn tank. So I lit in this field and after a while some planes came over and they saw I was down. /I/ was okay. I was standing on the ground and pointing towards the motor. Then they sent out a truck and all they had to do was to fill up the gas tank. And I took off and flew into the field. Of course, the captain gave the mechanics hell. Nothing ever happened.

W: I noticed that Philip Flammer has a very fine book, a pretty good job of digging...

H: Which one's that?

W: The doctor's dissertation here that Philip Flammer did*.

H: Oh, yeah. That's the best book.

W: He did quite a bit of work on that, didn't he? A lot of work.

H: He flew to Detroit twice and talked about the thing for quite a while.

W: He credits you with two unconfirmed kills in that book in there. What were the circumstances?

H: Oh, I don't remember particularly, I just reported a fight. I couldn't always even recognize the make of the plane. I _____ from about 2 or 3 miles away, and I'd say it was a German plane north of the village of so-and-so, and then you look up at the clock on the upper wing /and it said / 2:15. And when you came back you put that in the report and then try to find somebody who had seen you.

W: Were they single-seater aircraft, the ones you engaged?

H: One was a two-seater and one was a single-seater. Then there were four _____

*The book is titled Primus Inter Pares (First Among Equals), Yale University.

others that were doubtful. I followed them down pretty close to the ground; I didn't actually see them hit. I don't know whether they crashed or...

W: Were there any others, Major, that you reported that you felt pretty sure were hit?

H: As I said, there were four I didn't know about. Four or six, I don't remember.

W: You're pretty sure of the two, though?

H: Oh, yeah. I know damn well they were going down in flames; they were completely out of control, the pilot was slumped down. They'd usually fall forward on the stick, and go into a dive.

W: Well, these were so far behind German lines that you couldn't get confirmation on them?

H: No, nobody on the ground could see that far away.

W: Were they behind German lines, these two?

H: Oh, yeah. I don't remember seeing but one German plane inside the French line. Whether or not you could find them was the goal.

W: Was that their general rule, to fly behind their own lines? Was it the German set-up to fly only behind their own territory?

H: Yeah. Sometimes if you were flying an observation plane, you could find a German pretty close to the lines down low.

W: Taking pictures?

H: That was sort of a nasty job because if you went down too close to the ground, you got every damn thing on the ground shooting at you. At Saint Quentin--let's see--Ham was here and Saint Quentin was straight East of it, and that's the direction we took off. And we'd go over Saint

Quentin maybe at three, four thousand feet and begin the patrol. And every time you flew anywhere near the center of Saint Quentin, you got a battery of six-inch guns shooting at you. They put them right out in front of the cathedral because they knew the Franch wouldn't bomb on account of the cathedral.

W: The Germans that you did battle with, let's say of the two unconfirmed killed which Flammer credits you with, I'm interested in the personal contact. What happens in a typical case of that kind?

H: Well, you watch the tail--you don't watch the pilot--and you see the rudders or the elevators move.

W: And so you're with them, then.

H: Yeah. This Frenchman, Dorme, that I consider one of the very best of the French, I saw him one time on the field just for fun. He bet this fellow a thousand francs he'd get on his tail, and the other pilot wouldn't even know he was there. And Dorme got right under, and this fellow flew all around, he came back and he said, "I didn't see Dorme." (laughter) And it was all right over the field, and, hell, about 100 people saw him--for twenty minutes right under his tail.

And then there was a hell of a good manuever. You were watching this German and you saw the rudder, you start into a left-hand turn. You kick your rudder, but didn't use your stick--it was just like an automobile skidding--then you're on his tail.

E: Did you meet any of the French aces? You were telling us about one man with the wild cab ride.

H: Oh, that was Navarre. /There was/ another fellow named _____. I knew him very...we were very pally. He was an ace, but not one of the top aces.

W: _____?

H: He was in another squadron with Navarre. I told you when the Germans put a 100,000 marks reward on him, he painted his plane red so there wouldn't be any doubt about it.

E: Right.

H: And I told you about the time he flew all one day after he chased this policeman up and pushed him against a building?

E: Yeah. (Laughs)

H: He didn't get out of that plane. He'd stand up and pee over the side. (Laughter) Eat a sandwich and drink a glass of port while they were gassing him up again, and then away he'd go again.

W: The damn fool just got tired, huh?

H: He flew from about 8:00 in the morning till night and never got out of the damn plane. And never could find a German! And when he finally came back, there were the gendarmes waiting for him.

W: Still waiting.

H: That was Navarre. They credited him with one of the greatest feats of saving the French aviation. In the great 1916 offensives, the Germans had such a hell of a flock of planes there that it was almost suicide to fly. And finally the French pilots, they knew that they were going to be killed if they went up in the air, and they were all ready to mutiny. And Navarre went down there and he went up and knocked down two, three Germans, and said, "You see how simple it is? Come out with me and I'll show you." And they all got their morale back, and so he saved the whole morale of all of the aviators around there. And then he gets killed after the war. He's flying, comes in to land on this field, and some son

of a bitch taxies right out in front of him. And he tried to dodge him and crashed.

W: Didn't this same thing happen with Courtney Campbell one time, turning in front of somebody that was landing?

H: No, he got his lower left wing shot, and that broke off. And finally it folded back and he was thrown into this side-step. Finally that piece pulled off and he managed to land in a beet field.

W: There was quite a few fields around there, wasn't there? As many times as you had to make a forced landing, it's pretty happy that you had some fields to land in, wasn't it, that it's agricultural country?

H: I've had forced landings in plowed fields, I had to land across the furrows. Another time I landed in a hole in the forest and had to take the wings off to get it out of the forest. (Laughter) My nose was sticking right between two trees. How I got in there, I don't know; but no pilot in the world could've flown out of that thing. It was a place maybe twice as big as this /house/ here.

W: Did your plane ever get crippled during an engagement?

H: No, nothing serious. At Nieuport, Gynemer's plane was called Old Charlie, Vieux Charles. That's in a museum in Paris today. It has over 300 bullet holes in it. Of course a whole /Tot of/ going through the wing didn't make any difference.

W: It must have whistled, though.

H: Unless it hit a strut, had to break a spar. Anti-aircraft--we never bothered with that at all. The way to dodge the anti-aircraft was not to do this, but to change altitude. You see, those shells had a nose; you twisted it to regulate the height and it would explode. So they had to

change that all the time. And it wasn't dangerous beyond a hundred yards. So that's as far as you could hear this; unless you hear this hard knocking sound, why you'd pay no attention. Then you began to slowly do this. You kept on about your business, you didn't dodge around like that. Lots of pilots tried to do that and they'd dodge this way. And then the next bunch, you'd see this battery of four guns, and he'd run into four explosions over his head, because when they had to change the shell, it was above you or below you. All explosions of a shell comes out sideways, only 20 per cent go up or down. _____ on the nose then the back of his plane would just drop down. It didn't go through it, it just fell in behind his seat. No, the danger wasn't from anything but the other pilot--the German pilot.

Some of these books by Archie Whitehouse...in his book, he speaks about the wings pulling off. I never heard or saw any case where the Nieuport's wings pulled off. That was all just nonsense. And here's another thing, the Spad was difficult to maneuver to the right, and to the right you had to fight that torque. So the Spad was very poor maneuvering to the right, and the Nieuport was just as easy to maneuver to the right as it was to the left. And the English Sopwith, many pilots were killed while trying to do something to the right. Turning a Sopwith to the right, the damn thing went out of control. The Nieuport never did, I say to you. It could out-maneuver, outclimb, at high altitudes it was as fast--all these things. That's why I say it was the greatest plane, greater than the Spad. Of course, the American aviation, they were fighting in packs--six or eight planes together always. And with us, 99 per cent of the time he was all by himself. The only time we had a lot of planes in the

air was when the captain had to fly two hours a month to keep his flying pay. And he damn near /took/ every plane that would go up in the air with him. I remember once we went up, he had eight planes to protect him. And we just went up and flew around the Germans but never went near, and it was just like riding around in an automobile for two hours and never saw a goddamn thing. And he stayed very close to the line.

W: I guess that's why Thenault was not credited with any victories.

H: I think he'd gotten two, and not with /our/ squadron. Before he came he had credited two. We nearly had this celebrated bombing captain, Happ. That son of a bitch would keep on for his objective if there wasn't a goddamn thing behind it. Maybe a big squadron, maybe a dozen planes-- but he just kept on going. He'd lose everybody, but he was going to that place and back. A couple of times, we flew protection for him, and that's /why/ he liked us, because he never lost a plane when we were protecting him. That was a dirty job, though. He went up and destroyed the mauser factory. That's why we hated to have him around--he always asked protection from us. But I'm glad he didn't...that was the first one we thought was going to be commanding the Lafayette, and God knows there wouldn't be any of us left if he'd been the commander! (Laughter) So they decided. I don't know what changed him, but he came awfully close. /At/ the last minute somebody switched to Thenault. I would say that Thenault never ran the slightest danger from anything during the war. As I say, he only flew once a month for two hours, and then as I say he had the whole gang behind him.

W: Is Thenault's book on the Escadrille a pretty good book?

H: Well, it has a lot of good information, like the roster and different dates and stuff like that. It's in my drawer.