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Frank Luke



The Arizona Balloon Buster

By [Stephen Sherman](#), Aug. 2001. Updated April 16, 2012.

Winner of the Congressional Medal of Honor, America's second ranking ace in World War One, Frank Luke epitomized the reckless, undisciplined, loner image of a fighter pilot. He went after the toughest targets, heavily defended German observation balloons.

In seventeen days in September, 1918, in just nine days of combat flying, ten missions, and only thirty hours of flight time, he shot down fourteen enemy balloons and four aircraft (seven planes according to some sources). A remarkable record.

Youth

One of nine children of German immigrants, Frank Luke, Jr. was born on May 19, 1897. He grew up in Phoenix, Arizona, which only counted 1500 inhabitants in 1880. He was a lively, inquisitive youngster, collecting tarantulas with his sister Tilla and birds' eggs with his pal, Albert "Pidge" Pinney. He grew up to be strong and good-looking, the natural leader of a trio - himself, Pidge, and Bill Elder. The three boys went hunting in the hills, or, on occasion, liberated melons, chickens, and other commodities from local farmers. Guns were a way of life and Frank was a crack shot, at birds, small game, and (on one memorable occasion) the senior class pennant flying atop the high school flagpole. But he had a soft streak; once, when hunting in the Superstition Mountains with Bill Elder, he got a buzzard in his sights, but then put down his gun, "Aw, let him go. He isn't harming us."

He played rough-and-tumble football against the Indians at St. John's Mission. During high school summer vacations, he worked the Cornelia copper mine in Ajo. It was hard work, with hard men. When the miners heard that the blonde teenager actually gave

dancing lessons, only Frank's pugilistic victories over characters like the Irishman Breen and "Battler" Haney from San Francisco saved his reputation as a tough guy.

World War One

Enlistment

The U.S. declared war on April 6, 1917. While business boomed at the copper mines (shell casings, etc.), Frank and Bill Elder spent that summer hunting in the mountains. But on Sept. 25, Frank Luke, Jr. enlisted in the Signal Corps' Aviation service and soon departed for flight training, first in Austin, Texas, then in San Diego. He passed the milestones of WW1 cadet training:

- First solo flight - Dec. 12, 1917
- Commissioned Second Lieutenant - Jan. 23, 1918
- Sailed from New York harbor - Mar. 4, 1918
- Arrived in France - by March 19, 1918
- U.S. Aviation Instruction center at Issoudun - April, 1918

France

Not long after arriving at Issoudun, he wrote a revealing letter to Bill Elder:

April 20, 1918.

DEAR PAL:

Received, two days ago, your letter of March 5 and was very glad to hear from you. Pidge and Perry, from what I hear, failed to get in. It seems that at the time they reached Los Angeles the War Department sent orders not to enlist any more for the aviation branch. I would have liked to have seen Pinney get in. He sure would have had to study, no bluff.

I just passed a double-seater motorcycle. One of the fellows was carrying a pilot who had run into a tree and smashed his head. Gee, it was a tough sight! His eyes were bulged out and his head was one mass of blood. He died a short while after reaching the hospital. The trouble was a bad fog came up just after he left the ground. He tried to land before it reached him but was too late, lost his way, and hit the tree.

Oh, boy, it's great to be up flying, practicing stunts, and looking down on the earth spread out beneath you. But there are always the new graves, in some of them fellows you knew; there because of a faulty machine or bad judgment. Well, boy, it may be me next but don't tell anyone what I have told you. I would hate to have my mother hear of it, because I tell her it is the safest branch of the service.

My address is on the envelope.
Your pal,
FRANK

Sandwiched right between descriptions of death and destruction, there are the words, "Oh, boy, it's great to be up flying, ..."

27th Aero Squadron

He joined the 27th Aero Squadron at Saints on July 25 along with eight other replacement pilots, among them Joe Wehner, a flier from Everett Massachusetts who had been suspected of being a spy because of his German background. The First World War chewed up fighter pilots quickly. These men were replacing losses that the 27th had incurred, and they soon suffered casualties themselves.

In the remaining days of July, the new fliers practiced formation flying with experienced pilots, flew their first combat patrols, and many of them (Frank included) encountered engine trouble and late returns to Saints. On July 30, Luke witnessed his first aerial combat casualty. The lull ended on August 1. Eighteen planes went up that morning, to protect two reconnaissance Salmsons. German Fokkers jumped them and cut them to ribbons. Six pilots of the 27th were lost that morning. Luke never got close to the German airplanes

The next two days of rain dampened spirits further. Then the squadron transitioned from their beloved Nieuport 28's to Spad XIII's. In time the Spads would prove to be good, fast, rugged fighters, but at first they suffered by comparison to the nimble little Nieuports. With a squadron full of new men and new equipment, they flew more test flights and mock dogfights in the first week of August. Starting on the 7th, they flew more combat patrols, 12 or more planes at a time.

First Claim

On August 16, Luke claimed to have shot down a German plane. He couldn't identify the type or location, and many of his squadron mates promptly dismissed the claim as braggadocio. In his memoirs,

The confirmations came in, all of them. Frank Luke was now the leading American ace. Rickenbacker was five victories behind him. Luke had a total of fourteen victories: four planes and ten balloons. Thirteen of his conquests were won in a single week, during which there were two days - September 13 and September 17 - on which he did not fly. On the eighteenth alone he had bested five of his enemies.

Late that night, General Pershing received a military telegraph: Second Lieutenant Frank Luke, Jr., Twenty-seventh Aero Squadron, First Pursuit Group, five confirmed victories, two combat planes, two observation balloons, and one observation plane in less than ten minutes.

By all accounts, Frank Luke was disconsolate; Joe Wehner, his only friend, his protector who had saved his life more than once, was dead. But he was the "Ace of Aces," America's best at that moment. The pilots of the 27th threw a dinner in his honor. Perhaps all the acclaim didn't seem like much, coming at the cost of Wehner's death. Major Hartney decided that Luke needed a rest and on the 19th sent him to Paris for R&R. It didn't help much.

A terse reticence crept into the letter Frank wrote his mother on September 25 - his last letter home. It follows:

<u>September</u>	<u>25,</u>	<u>1918.</u>
<u>DEAR</u>		<u>MOTHER:</u>
<u>I have not written for some days now on account of being so busy, as no doubt you have already heard. This is only a line to let you know that I am O. K. Now, mother, remember that I have passed the dangerous stage of being a new hand at the game, so don't worry, for I now know how to take care of myself.</u>		
<u>Love</u>	<u>to</u>	<u>all,</u>
<u>FRANK.</u>		

No word of Joe Wehner. No attempt to tell with honest, deserved pride of his victories. No pouring himself out on paper. He could not find expression even for his mother, and when a man becomes that self-contained there is a bad fall and a reckoning at the end of the road.

After six days in Paris, the restless Arizonan returned. "There wasn't anything to do." Its cafes, its women, all of its excitement held no attraction for him. He had devised a new technique to attack balloons while lounging at the Hotel Chatham.

While Luke was in Paris, the 27th squadron's activity diminished - a few days with no patrols, other days with just one unremarkable patrol. One important development - 1st Lt. Jerry Vasconcells moved B flight to an advanced airdrome just south of Verdun, an alert field enabling pilots to touch down or refuel or take-off much closer to the lines. Like Luke, Vasconcells may have chafed until the martial rigidity of Capt. Grant and welcomed the opportunity to get out from under.

Frank continued to regard himself as a balloon buster, and awaited the assignment of a flying mate to continue the twilight assaults he and Wehner had inaugurated. Lieutenant Ivan A. Roberts of South Lee, Massachusetts, was detailed to fly with him, and on September 26 they made their first dual flight. Frank claimed a victory over an enemy combat plane, a conquest he describes tersely in the ensuing report:

September 26

Lieutenant Frank Luke reports:

On patrol to strafe balloons in vicinity Consenvoye and Sivry I attacked with two others [a third plane had joined them after they left the airdrome] a formation of five Fokkers. After firing several short bursts, observed the Hun go down out of control. While at 100 meters I was attacked by two E. A. so I did not see the first E. A. crash.

I turned on the other two who were on my tail, getting on the tail of one, but guns jammed several times and after fixing both could only shoot short bursts on account of the several stoppages. One confirmation requested. The last I saw of Lieutenant Roberts, who was on this patrol with me, was in combat with several Fokkers in the vicinity of Consenvoye and Sivry.

On his first return to combat, Luke had lost another flying partner. Roberts was seen to crash in German territory, but thereafter no authentic chronicle of his movements is available. Late in 1920 Captain Grant received a letter which purported to tell of Roberts capture, imprisonment, escape and death. The writer, one "Jack LaGrange, M.D." was unknown to the American Legion and the letter was regarded as unreliable.

Now Luke had lost his second flying partner. The known facts and the sources suggest that he went into a funk, a suicidal urge to go up by himself, and shoot down enemy balloons until he was killed. Of course, that is just what happened.

Hartney wrote "[Luke] came to me and pleaded to be allowed to operate independently from [Vasconcell's] field. His CO, Capt. Grant, was frantic at his inability to control Luke's activities. Almost every pilot in the Group had had a crack at the balloon over Bethenville. But it was still up. While Grant and I were discussing the advisability of letting Luke operate as a lone wolf out of the Verdun field, Frank went out all by himself ... on Sept. 28 and burned up the Bethenville balloon in its nest." A telling statement.

September 28

Lieutenant Frank Luke reports:

I flew north to Verdun, crossed the lines at about five hundred meters and found a balloon in its nest in the region of Bethenville. I dove on it firing both guns. After I pulled away it burst into flames. As I could not find any others I returned to the airdrome. One confirmation requested.

Hartney and Grant were in a quandry. Luke, evidently the only man in the group crazy enough and skillful enough to destroy important enemy targets was acting without orders and according to his own plans. Again the sources are confused, but apparently Luke filed his brief Combat Report with Grant late in the day on the 28th, and then took off in a Spad to spend the night with a French unit. To be precise, he was AWOL - and had taken government property! On the morning of the 29th, Grant demanded that Luke be arrested and brought under control.

Luke landed at the advanced field near Verdun on the 29th. Late that afternoon, with Hartney and Vasconcells, he took off, alone and unauthorized. He flew over an American balloon company near Souilly and dropped a note reading, "Watch three Hun balloons on the Meuse. Luke."

The End

More than any other, Luke's final flight is shrouded in confusion and disagreement. It is reasonably certain that he attacked the three balloons over the Meuse and was engaged by the Fokkers covering it. He burned the three drachen; American Balloon Headquarters confirmed those victories. According to the residents of Murvaux, he also shot down two of the German fighters. (These victories are not included in his confirmed total of 18.) He crash-landed near Murvaux and was killed in a gun battle with German soldiers.

For three months, nothing was known of Luke, except that he had disappeared. Not until January 3, 1919, when the following letter was written, did the American military authorities have definite word of his death:

FROM: Graves Registration Officer, Neufchateau Area No. 1.

To: Chief of Air Service, A. P. O. [American Post Office] 717.

SUBJECT: Grave, unknown American aviator.

1. Units of this service have located the grave of an unknown aviator killed on Sunday, September 29, 1918, in the village of Murvaux.

2. From the inspection of the grave and interview held with the inhabitants of this town, the following information was learned in regard to this aviator and his heroism. He is reported as having light hair, young, of medium height, and of heavy stature.

3. Reported by the inhabitants that previous to being killed this man had brought down three German balloons, two German planes, and dropped hand bombs, killing eleven German, soldiers and wounding a number of others.

4. He was wounded himself in the shoulder and evidently had to make a forced landing. Upon landing he opened fire with his automatic and fought until he was killed.

5. It is also reported that the Germans took his shoes, leggings, and money, leaving his grave unmarked.

<u>CHESTER</u>	<u>E.</u>	<u>STATEN,</u>
<u>Captain</u>	<u>of</u>	<u>Infantry,</u>
<u>G. R. S. Officer.</u>		

Although everyone at air headquarters believed this had to be Luke, General Pershing ordered a General Headquarters staff officer to investigate. The Distinguished Service Cross, issued on Captain Grant's recommendation, already awaited Luke.

The staff officer's report reads:

Report of Unidentified Aviator

1. This officer was killed at Murvaux (five kilometers east of Dun-sur-Meuse on Sunday, September 29, 1918. The Germans stripped him of all identifications, but Captain McCormick of the 301st Graves Registration Unit, stationed at Fontaine near Murvaux, ... stated concerning the death of this aviator, that he exhumed the body, that it was a man of medium height, heavy set, and with light hair. On his wrist he found an Elgin watch No. 20225566, which was under the sleeve of his combination and which the Germans ... had evidently missed. . . .

2. The village people of Murvaux told Capt. McCormick that this aviator first shot down three German balloons and two German planes, then descended low over the ground and killed eleven Germans with either hand bombs or machine gun bullets. While flying low his plane was hit from the ground and he himself was apparently wounded.

3. He made a successful landing, got out of his plane, and when the Germans called on him to surrender, he replied by drawing his automatic and opening fire, thus standing he defended himself until he was killed.

4. The description of this aviator by Captain McCormick, and the fact that Lieutenant Luke dropped a note to a balloon company that day stating that he was going to shoot down the balloons which were shot down, make it almost certain that this officer was Second Lieutenant Frank Luke, Air Service, whose nearest relative is Frank Luke, 2200 West Monroe Street, Phoenix, Arizona.

5. If the Air Service wishes to check this case it is suggested that a representative of the Air service be sent to Murvaux and obtain sworn statements from the French people of that village.

Officers of the Rembercourt Field drove to Murvaux, and obtained the following sworn statement from some of the citizens of that village:

Affidavit by residents of Murvaux

"The undersigned, living in the town of Murvaux, Department of the Meuse, certify to have seen on the twenty- ninth day of September, 1918, toward evening, an American aviator, followed by an escadrille of Germans, in the direction of Liny, near Dun (Mouse), descend suddenly and vertically toward the earth, then straighten out close to the ground and fly in the direction of the Briere Farm, near Doulon, where he found a captive balloon, which he burned. Following this he flew toward Milly (Mouse), where he found another balloon, which he also burned, in spite of an incessant fire directed against his machine. There he was apparently wounded by a shot fired from rapid-fire

cannon. From there he came back over Murvaux, and with his machine gun killed six German soldiers and wounded many more.

Following this he landed and got out of his machine, undoubtedly to quench his thirst at a near-by stream. He had gone some fifty yards, when, seeing the Germans come toward him, he still had strength to draw his revolver to defend himself, and a moment after fell dead, following a serious wound received in the chest. Certify equally to having seen the German commandant of the village refuse to have straw placed in the cart carrying the dead aviator to the village cemetery. This same officer drove away some women bringing a sheet to serve as a shroud for the hero, and said, kicking the body:

"Get that out of my way as quickly as possible." The next day the Germans took away the airplane, and the inhabitants also saw another American aviator fly very low over the town, apparently looking for the disappeared aviator.

Signatures of the following:

<u>Perton</u>	<u>Leon Henry</u>
<u>Rene Colin</u>	<u>Cortlae Delbart</u>
<u>Auguste Cuny</u>	<u>Gabriel Didier</u>
<u>Henry Gustave</u>	<u>Camille Phillipe</u>
<u>Eugene Coline</u>	<u>Voliner Nicholas</u>
<u>Odile Patouche</u>	<u>Vallentine Garre</u>

Richard Victor Gustave Garre

The undersigned themselves placed the body of the aviator on the wagon and conducted it to the cemetery: Cortlae Delbart, Voliner Nicholas

<u>Seen</u>	<u>for</u>	<u>legalization</u>	<u>of</u>	<u>signatures</u>	<u>placed</u>	<u>above:</u>
<u>The</u>		<u>Mayor,</u>		<u>AUGUST</u>		<u>GARRE,</u>
<u>Murvaux,</u>			<u>Jan.</u>			<u>15,1919.</u>

[Seal of Murvaux]

The German version of Luke's death closely follows the French. Lieutenant B. Mangels, who after the war resided in Muenster, commanded the balloon company controlling the last two balloons Luke vanquished, and directed the machine-gun fire that gave Frank his death wound. For some time there was a controversy between Lieutenant Mangels and Lieutenant G. Roesch, who commanded an antiaircraft battery near the balloon; but Roesch has admitted that it was Mangels' machine gunners who brought the Balloon Buster down.

On September 29, one of Lieutenant Mangels' balloons was aloft northwest of Murvaux on the western slope of the Cote St. Germain. This was balloon Number Thirty-five of the Fifth German Army. A short distance away, over Briere Farm, hung balloon Number Sixty-four, the second bag Luke shot down on his last flight. As Frank's plane dived for the third sausage, Mangels, who was on ground duty, personally directed a concentrated

machine-gun fire against the Arizonian's plane and is certain he registered on the pilot's body. Learning a few minutes later that Luke had crashed beyond Murvauz, Mangels hurried to the scene, but found Luke dead when he arrived. Mangels, the first officer to arrive, was able to identify the body as Luke's through an English citation for shooting down nine balloons.

Legacy

He received the Congressional Medal of Honor, and Luke Air Force Base was named in his honor. And the name "Frank Luke, the Arizona Balloon Buster" remains one of the most revered in the pantheon of American aviation heroes.

Sources

For most aces, their stories and the sources are fairly straightforward. But some pilot's stories, like Frank Luke and [Pappy Boyington](#), are filled with controversy, disagreement, and uncertainty.. "What really happened" depends on whose version you're reading. Over eighty years after the events, many parts of Luke's story will remain unknown. Different versions will persist.

- [The Aerodrome](#)