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Article Summary: Orville "Tubby" Ralston, born in Weeping Water, Nebraska, earned the Distinguished Service Cross in 1921. He was sometimes called "Nebraska's Forgotten Ace."

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Photographs / Images: Orville Ralston; Ralston in a Curtiss JN4 trainer, Camp Rathbun, Deseronto, Canada; Ralston practicing on the Lewis gun, Camp Borden, Canada, 1917; Harold G Shoemaker and Ralston in Dallas, 1917; Jarvis Offutt and Ralston while at Marske on the English Coast; Ralston with Fokker [mascot of the 148th US Aero Squadron], 1918; Captain "Tiny" Dixon, Ralston, and Lt Lawrence Callahan, Eighty-fifth Squadron; 180 Viper SE5 ad Eight-fifth squadron, RAF and Sergeant Ralph Brooks, mechanic from the 148th US Aero Squadron; Drawing "Fly a Hump!" … Flopwith Camel" from Second Army Air Service souvenir album; Pilots of "B" Flight, 148th US Aero Squadron: Lt Percy Cunnius, Lt Sidney Noel, Lt Elliott White Springs, Lt Lawrence Callahan, Lt Orville Ralston, and Lt Harry Jenkinson, Jr; Ralston during World War II; Orville Ralston's flying suit and other memorabilia
Called by Springs's successor, Lawrence Callahan, "a man who could be absolutely depended upon in any pinch" and possessing exceptional eyesight, Orville Ralston was the "two-seater expert" in the 148th "American" Squadron. According to the squadron history,

He could pick out a Hun two-seater, in spite of its elaborate camouflage, many thousand feet below. There are very few "blind spots" on a Hun two-seater, the pilot firing through the propeller and the observer swinging his gun quickly in a wide arc, covering every point except a spot just below the rear of the tail. The other spot is directly in front and below. To gain these points of vantage is a most difficult feat, but Lieutenant Ralston seemed to get there. As a result, he has earned for himself an enviable reputation.

In four months of war flying in both SE5s and Sopwith Camels, Ralston shot down five German planes and sent several others "down out of control." Awarded the Distinguished Service Cross in 1921, the United States's second highest award for valor, he is Nebraska's only World War I ace.

Yet Orville Ralston is also called "Nebraska's Forgotten Ace." Unlike his friend Jarvis Offutt of Omaha, who was killed ferrying airplanes from England to France, no air force base is named for Ralston. Nor is much said about him in World War I aviation histories. Orville Ralston lived too long to achieve the swift immortality of Offutt. Yet his death at forty-seven in a World War II bomber crash claimed Ralston at an age before most veterans have begun talking about the wars of their youth.
At the suggestion of his "folks at home," Orville Ralston began "a very informal and hastily written" diary, one that grew in length as the war progressed. Along with other sources the diary tells the story of a young Midwesterner who was both naive and brash, struggling to master an "exciting game." It also captures, in a timeless way, the bond between a remarkable group of young Americans and their British comrades, the "War Birds" of 1917-18.

Ralston was one of several Americans who served in Eighty-fifth Squadron of the Royal Air Force under the command of the RAF's leading ace, Maj. Edward "Mick" Mannock, about whom much has been written. Ralston also fought with the "White Triangles," the 148th "American" Squadron, alongside Elliott Springs and Lawrence Callahan, both of whom are subjects of recent biographies. Sometimes Ralston's diary clarifies the recollections of his comrades who reached old age. In other instances, refreshingly, it is at odds with the historical "record."

When the United States declared war on Germany on April 6, 1917, Orville Ralston was a second-year dental student at the University of Nebraska. A 1915 graduate of Peru State Teachers College, he was born in Weeping Water on September 9, 1894. Ralston was nicknamed "Wob" at Peru State because he "wobbled" from side to side when he walked. When he entered dental school at the University of Nebraska the ukulele-playing Ralston joined the Kappa Sigma fraternity there. Like many of his fraternity brothers, Ralston enlisted in the army after war was declared, reporting to the officers' training course at Fort Snelling, Minnesota, on May 13, 1917. Though he had an advantage over some of his peers for having served three years in the Nebraska National Guard, the path to a commission was keenly competitive. "Every fellow was on the jump," he wrote. "The worst thing I could imagine at the time was to be sent home as having failed to make good in becoming an officer."

When a circular arrived from headquarters seeking the names of anyone interested in aviation, Ralston rushed to put his name on the list. "I had tried several times, by writing to Washington, to see if I could join the flying corps of our
army," he explained. "At that time I don't suppose there were more than ten men in the country who could fly and I believe they all owned their own machines."

Ralston was bitten by the flying bug. Every day after training ceased, he and a friend climbed to the top of a large Fort Snelling water tower, imagining what it would be like to be flying above the "beautiful Mississippi winding about with tree-clad hills on either side... It seemed to be the nearest thing to flying we could imagine. We kept this a guarded secret from the rest of the fellows as we were afraid to be kidded.

Ralston completed officers' training on July 8, 1917, and was part of the first American contingent transferred on detached service to the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) at Toronto, Canada. The United States had no aviation program to speak of when war was declared, and arrangements hurriedly were made with England and France to train American pilots. Though two groups of Americans, later immortalized as the "War Birds," sailed to England in the late summer and fall of 1917 for training by the British, Ralston's group was the first American contingent instructed by the RFC.

Ground school was held at the University of Toronto. "It seemed rather strange to be the first 'Yanks' in Canada who had come in Uncle Sam's uniform," Ralston wrote. "I know I felt embarrassed at the way in which we were watched by the cadets as well as the public in general. However, we were cordially treated by all whom we met."

At the university the Americans lived in old East residence. The ground school, conducted by British sergeants, consisted of classes in wireless, machine gun, and bombing, in addition to physical training and drill. Actual flight training was at Camp Rathbun, near Deseronto, a little town four hours from Toronto by train, close to the shore of Lake Ontario. "How horrified we were to see about seven crashes on the aerodrome," Ralston wrote. "It was not a welcome sight, but why worry?"

Ralston met his instructor almost immediately. "Captain DeCosta called me over and said, 'Borrow some goggles and crawl in.' The machine was a 'dep' [dual] control Curtiss, with about a 90 horsepower motor."

There was a moment's waiting until the prop had been turned over several times, then from the A.M. [aircraft mechanic], 'All clear, contact.' The mechanic flipped the prop and then the roar of the motor was quite deafening. After running her a little to warm up the engine, the Captain moved his hand and the chocks [chocks] were drawn away by the mechanic and we started to run along the ground to a suitable place from which to take off. After turning around and facing into the wind, the engine was opened up with a roar and the wind began to tear at my clothes like a hurricane. The next instant I looked over the side, we were off the ground and rising rapidly with no noticeable motion. We flew around over the aerodrome getting higher all the time. The country looked beautiful and reminded me of a huge map. Silver rivers looked like threads, the deep green forest, the blue lake with irregular landmarks, the white ribbon-like roads, the different colored fields, all seemingly geometrically shaped, the tiny houses and still smaller cattle as specks upon the green pastures. It was all so beautiful that I had hardly noticed the sensation of flying, for in fact we seemed to be sailing slowly through the air.

Ralston was the first in his group to solo after two hours and thirty minutes of instruction. After completing his training at Deseronto, consisting of five hours of solo flying and twenty landings, Ralston was sent to North Toronto to Leaside, for bombing and artillery observation, wireless from the air, and altitude and cross country flying. The final segment, aerial gunnery, was held at Camp Borden. "Time went rather slowly up here," Ralston wrote, "for we were paraded and had to attend lectures and gun practice and shoot almost every day." The Americans who successfully completed their training were organized into the Seventeenth United States Aero Squadron and ordered to Fort Worth, Texas.

While Ralston and his peers trained in Canada, the U.S. Signal Corps and the Royal Flying Corps were jointly building several airfields in Texas. The agree-
Orville Ralston

ment between the two countries specified that the "Taliaferro Fields" in Fort Worth were to be under the control of the RFC. The Signal Corps "was to provide all aeroplanes and necessary operating supplies for the training in Texas, while the Royal Flying Corps was to supply all the guns, wireless and other instructional equipment." The benefits were obvious. British and Canadian pilots could train, year around, in excellent weather. And Americans would gain "from instruction by and association with officers and men who have had practical experience at the front." 15

Unlike the "War Birds" who trained in England in the fall of 1917 and were immortalized in print by Elliott White Springs, little is known about the first American contingent in Canada. Fortunately, Ralston listed the first sixteen Canada-trained graduates in his diary. Eight of them (Ralston included) reached Fort Worth on October 15, 1917, forming the Seventeenth United States Aero Squadron (USAS). They were followed two weeks later by the other eight, organized into the Twenty-second United States Aero Squadron. 16

Of the original sixteen, seven were killed during the war, five of them in combat. In addition to Ralston one of them, Jesse O. Creech (later Ralston's squadron mate in the 148th USAS), became an ace, credited with eight German aircraft. 17

Ralston was named commander of Flight "C" in the Seventeenth USAS. Stationed at Hicks Field, one of three airfields comprising the "Taliaferro Fields" (the other two were Everman and Benbrook), Ralston led his men in unboxing, assembling, and painting their Curtiss JN4 aircraft. Soon they were airborne, flying within a radius of forty miles from Hicks. "People in Texas had never seen aeroplanes before except at Camp Kelley or fairs, so you can imagine how we were treated when we would land at towns," Ralston wrote. "Hundreds would come out, flock around the machine whenever we would land near a town. Often we had meals out and met many swell girls... I think Creech and I were the first aviators to land at Denton and Dallas. We became quite proficient at running off and visiting neighboring towns."

Though he ranked as a flying cadet, Ralston also served as an instructor during this period. Not surprisingly, when especially bored he liked "to take a new man up for his first ride and do stunts. He will invariably turn green," Ralston wrote. On December 3, 1917, Ralston finally received his long-awaited commission as a first lieutenant. 18

The Seventeenth USAS was the first of the Texas-trained units to depart for England, leaving for New York on December 19, 1917. Boarding the Carmania on January 9, the squadron reached England without incident on January 23, 1918, and went into a Royal Flying Corps Rest Camp at Romsey. 19

Ralston probably got the nickname "Tubby" after reaching England. The solidly built Peru State football player was not chubby. A fellow 148th pilot, Clayton Bissell, said "Tubby" was an "affectionate" nickname, while squadron mechanic Neil Goen explained, "He was more stocky than fat." Though he remained "Orville" to his family, "Wob"
It took more than a month for the RFC to decide how to employ the American pilots who were arriving in England in growing numbers. On February 19 Ralston wrote in his diary that the "17th is split up." The mechanics were sent to several RFC squadrons for on-the-job training. Half of the pilots were to be trained as pursuit pilots, while the others would learn on bombers. Eventually, all the Americans would join RFC squadrons. Ralston was ordered to Salisbury to fly two-man DH4, DH9, and RE8 bombers, but his heart wasn't in it. From the first Ralston scrapped to obtain a transfer to single-seat pursuit or "scout" aircraft and became "rather discouraged." To relieve the monotony of flying aircraft he didn't enjoy, Ralston occasionally made a "forced landing." Even English royalty was fascinated by airplanes and brash young aviators. "I fly over Salisbury and look for a good landing place," he recorded in his diary. "I land in the courtyard of the Earl of Radnor's castle, a most magnificent huge old stone castle on the river Avon."

War Birds, serialized in Liberty Magazine before being published by George H. Doran in 1926. A Princeton graduate and heir to a South Carolina cotton fortune, Springs was in the second group of "War Birds" shipped to England in September 1917. His friendship with two other young Americans, Lawrence Callahan of Chicago and John McGavock Grider of Arkansas, is the heart of the book. War Birds is a curious mixture of fact and fiction. Grider, presumably, is the "author" of the diary of the "unknown" airman. But his authorship was probably limited to a few entries at the beginning of the book describing the "three Musketeers" (i.e. Springs, Callahan, and Grider) journey to England. Springs completed and subsequently published the "diary."  

Orville Ralston, who is mentioned several times in War Birds, probably never met John McGavock Grider, who was killed on June 18, 1918. Ralston was, however, well acquainted with Callahan and Springs, though Orville
served with Springs only later in the 148th “American” Squadron—the British designation for one of two American squadrons fighting alongside the RAF.24

Ralston joined Eighty-fifth Squadron a few days after Elliott Springs was transferred to the 148th “American.” At Major Mannock’s insistence, he took over Springs’s job as squadron bartender.

Ralston loved the camaraderie shared by everyone in the squadron, and described one evening’s affair:

There was singing, instrument playing, story telling and a lively time furnished by the talented members of the squadron. Two great kegs of beer were near at hand and everyone was “quaffing” beer. There are all kinds of pets about—an old nanny goat that just gave birth to twins, a small kid taken from some deserted shell-torn village, four beautiful little fat Chow pups, one large Wolfdhound and a black Collie dog, cats and every imaginable sort of pet. Late in the evening we sat around the anteroom smoking, singing, and I finally got out my old uke. Whiskey toddies were frequent and we sang and played around with Major Mannock as happy and boyish as the worst of us.25
If Eighty-fifth Squadron played hard, it is equally clear its pilots flew hard. Ralston was assigned an SE5a and given a few days to practice gunnery before making his first patrol over "Hunland." From then on, Ralston was in the thick of it. Not only was he shot up by "Archie," British slang for antiaircraft fire, but by small arms fire from soldiers in the trenches. On July 24, 1918, less than two weeks after joining Eighty-fifth Squadron, he brought down his first German.

Six D7 Fokkers attacked Eighty-fifth Squadron's lower formation. Ralston was flying in the top formation of four SE5s. "We take the Hun by complete surprise because they are diving on our lower formation," he wrote in his diary.

I fire at close range at a Fokker that spins out of my line of aim, so I let him go and attack another from behind and to the side. After firing nearly a whole drum of Lewis into him, as my Vickers has jammed, he turns slightly and goes into a vertical dive. I follow at a terrible rate and fire my remaining shots from the Lewis drum. He diverts on. The speed is so terrific that I flatten out at 5,000 [feet] and see the Hun go on down and vertically into the ground.

Ralston was lucky. "My machine was struck partly by Hun shrapnel from the ground and had three large holes in the upper formation. . . . I fired a burst into him with both guns. He dived and I followed until at 3,000 feet he flattened out, when I fired about 50 rounds into him. His right extension of his top plane flew into pieces, and he went into a spin and crashed."28

Against his wishes Ralston was transferred to the 148th "American" Squadron on September 6, 1918. Ralston had done well in Eighty-fifth Squadron—two enemy aircraft destroyed and one driven down out of control. He wanted to remain there, flying the reliable SE5, but there were now enough American pilots in France to form separate U.S. squadrons. All American pilots were ordered to join U.S. units by September 12, 1918.22

The outgoing Ralston knew and liked most of the pilots in the 148th. He had trained with Jesse Creech and Lawrence Callahan. His aversion to the 148th wasn't personal. Ralston was deadly afraid of the rotary engine Sopwith Camel, with which the 148th was equipped.

"Still hold that I will crash and I really am afraid I cannot fly them," Ralston wrote the day he joined the squadron. Told he would be transferred to bombers unless he made good, Ralston launched a Camel and made "an awful show."

The next day he tried again. "The petrol and oil fumes make me very sick. I am a bum landing and feel more inclined to be afraid of the machine," he noted. But Ralston wasn't ready to quit. "I want to try to make good here for all the fellows are real boys and I like the RAF system line. I only hope I will feel better and can learn to fly this soon.
without any accidents."

On September 9, 1918, Ralston’s twenty-fourth birthday, Callahan returned from leave and soon helped Ralston over his fear of flying the quirky aircraft. "We have a good talk over things in general and I decide to fly them and stick it out at all hazards," he wrote.35

It didn’t take Ralston long to master “old Mr. Camel” once he made up his mind. Six days later, on September 15, Ralston shared in bringing down a two-seater Halberstadt and in driving "down out of control" a Hanoveraner, another two-seater.31 On September 22 he fired into two Fokkers, driving one down out of control. "I did not see the first crash but I feel sure I hit the pilot for he kept in the slow spin for so long," Ralston wrote in his report.32

On September 26 Ralston left formation because of engine trouble. "Near the lines at 5,000 feet I met a Bristol fighter giving the signal for E.A. [enemy aircraft] sighted," Ralston explained. "I joined the Allied machine and upon turning back, I saw three Camels being driven down by five Fokkers. Another formation of Fokkers were above. Although engine was defective, I attacked one E.A. on the tail of a Camel and drove him down. At 3,000 feet he disappeared in the clouds but I followed closely."33

In his diary Ralston explained that following a Fokker into the clouds was "risky business for we might collide. However, I knew old ‘Mick,’ Major Mannock, used to do it so I thought I would try." Ralston’s gamble paid off. "Upon emerging below the clouds I saw E.A. a short distance ahead and below me. There were also four Fokkers not far off, coming in my direction. I opened fire at very short range and saw E.A. pull up, turn to left and make one complete spiral and crash. . . . By this time the four Fokkers were very near, coming around a cloud. I was then attacked by all four E.A., but managed to dodge through and escape in a nearby cloud."34

Ralston was recommended for the Distinguished Service Cross for coming to the aid of his beleaguered flight, though he didn’t receive the award until 1921.35 Elliott Springs, in a supporting letter wrote, "Upon returning to the Aerodrome, I examined Lieutenant Ralston’s machine and found that one cylinder was cracked so that it had no compression. I consider that his return to the fight under these circumstances and the subsequent maneuvering an act of unusual daring and courage."36

"Tubby" Ralston brought down another Fokker a week later, just before going on leave. "I fired about 50 rounds from in front and to one side," Ralston reported, sending the enemy aircraft into a "slow spiral with smoke coming from his machine." Continuing in a slow spiral, the dark green Fokker with a white tail crashed near the railroad at Cantenienes.37 Following leave in England, Ralston engaged in his final scrap with the enemy on October 25, firing into a two-seater he last saw "1,500 feet high, still diving and well in enemy territory."38

Ralston missed the big squadron "ambush" on October 28, when pilots of the 148th shot down seven Germans, "because the C.O. thought I had done too many shows lately."39 As it turned out, Ralston would get no more chances to fight. The 17th and 148th “American” Squadrons were transferred from British to American control. The pilots were learning to fly Spad fighters when the Armistice was declared on November 11, 1918.40

Ralston did, however, fly a last war patrol. He and two other pilots accompanied their friend, Capt. Reed Landis, commander of the Twenty-fifth U.S. Aero Squadron, on a flight just five minutes before the Armistice took effect. Landis needed the patrol so his squadron could end the war as officially “operational.” "About five minutes to 11.00
served in the Air Service Officers' Reserve Corps from 1923 to 1928, attending summer camp in Kansas City in 1925 and school in Miami Beach in May. He was Ainsworth in 1937, and he started a practice in Valentine about a year later. An avid hunter and fisherman, Ralston enjoyed life in the Nebraska Sand Hills. Called an "air circus."43

After his discharge from the army in March 1919, Ralston returned to Nebraska. To earn money for his final year of dental school, he spent the summer touring the Midwest with the Redpath-Horner Chautauqua. Not only did Ralston share his war experiences, using airplane models built for that purpose, he also discussed the mechanical improvements in aircraft and their commercial potential.44

After graduating from the University of Nebraska as a Doctor of Dental Surgery in 1920, Ralston married Charlotte Hanna, also a 1920 university graduate, and established a dental practice in Ainsworth. He was active in community and veterans' affairs, serving as town councilman, mayor, and head of the local American Legion post. Ralston served in the Air Service Officers' Reserve Corps from 1923 to 1928, attending summer camp in Kansas City in 1925 and participating with other World War I aviators in what a local newspaper called an "air circus."45

Inheriting a ranch near Valentine, "Doc" Ralston and his family left Ainsworth in 1937, and he started a practice in Valentine about a year later. An avid hunter and fisherman, Ralston enjoyed life in the Nebraska Sand Hills. When the United States was plunged into World War II, however, Ralston returned to the Army Air Corps on April 14, 1942.46

Ralston completed officers' training school in Miami Beach in May. He was one of only a few officers commissioned a major: "[I]t was evidently my previous 10 years military service that made their recommendation stick," he wrote Charlotte, "and do my share at the old office... . That probably would have been the smart thing to do, but I hated so much to think that I was too old to help out if I could."47

As the Second, a B-17 heavy bombardment group, prepared for overseas deployment, Ralston sometimes accompanied his commanding officer, Col. Ford Lauer, on squadron visits. Once, Ralston wrote, "The Colonel let me fly the plane about half the time as his co-pilot. Was lots of fun and just like old times only so darned many more gadgets to look after."48

Ralston hoped to visit his family before going overseas. On December 30, 1942, he hitched a ride on a B-17 heading east from Great Falls, Montana, on a routine training flight. The bomber was scheduled to land at the Ainsworth, Nebraska, Army Air Field. At about 2:30 P.M., Mountain Time, the bomber went down eleven miles south of Musselshell, Montana, killing all aboard. "The plane had all but cleared a rolling slope when it struck," a local newspaperman reported. "From gouges made in the earth the plane apparently bounced once, then slithered about 100 yards before bursting into flames."49 It was a tragic story, repeated hundreds of times during World War II. Ralston's funeral was held in Valentine, and he was buried at Wood Lake.

Orville Ralston should rightly be honored as Nebraska's only World War I ace, one of the "War Birds." And like so many others from his native state who responded when the United States was attacked in 1941, he didn't calculate ahead of time what it might cost him personally. Hoping to "help out," Ralston went.

"Tubby and I talked a bit about this war coming up for each of us again," wrote Robert Reese to Charlotte Ralston after Ralston's death. Reese was a friend from the first war who met Ralston again at the intelligence school in Pennsylvania. "I know that it was his idea that the danger involved was worthwhile—that life could not be hoarded when our cause was in peril."50

Notes

1. (John McGavock Gilder), War Birds: Diary of an Unknown Aviator (New York: George H. Doran Co., 1926), 234-35. Except for a few paragraphs, Elliott Springs was the author of the "diary.

2. Ibid., 264.


4. Elliott White Springs, Above the Bright Blue Sky More About the War Birds (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1928), 204, 205.

5. Lawrence C. Callahan to Capt. L. W. Miller, Apr. 27, 1920, in MS0233, Orville A. Ralston Papers, Nebraska State Historical Society.
Orville Ralston's flying suit; the control stick, gunsight, and trigger device from his Sopwith Camel; and the national insignia removed from a downed German plane. (NSHS Collections)

Orville Ralston


6 The author gratefully acknowledges Janet Ralston Johnson, Dr. Robert O. Ralston, and Dr. David H. Mickey for their assistance with his research.

7 Form No. 612, Adjutant General’s Office, certifying that Orville Ralston was “Honorably Discharged from the Provisional Training Regiment,” dated Aug. 14, 1917; certificate, Nebraska Adjutant General’s Department, indicating “Orval A. Ralston” was discharged from the Nebraska National Guard at Auburn, Nebraska, Apr. 24, 1915, both in the Ralston Papers; Orville A. Ralston diary, May 25, 1917. This, and subsequent quoted references to his ground and flight training were written after the fact, all under the date “May 25, 1917.” The original diary is in the possession of JRJ. A microfilm copy is in the Ralston Papers.

8 Burke Davis, War Bird, 247-49, gives a good overview of flight training programs in England and France. Hudson, 33, indicates “the first group of fifty-three American cadets arrived at the British School of Military Aeronautics in Oxford in early September, and by October 1, most of the more

11 Drew, *Canada's Fighting Airmen*, 293, 295.


12 Ralph Gracie, Harold Shoeemaker, Lawrence Roberts, E. T. Comegies, and George Siebold were killed in action. Walter Jones was killed in a Texas training accident and Jarvis Offutt, for whom Offutt Air Force Base is named, was killed while ferrying an airplane from England to France. Creech is mentioned in Hudston, *Hostile Skies*, 212, 217-19, 229, and 309.

13 Form No. 525, Adjutant General's Office, "Innocent Discharge from the United States Army," discharged Ralston as a flying cadet on Dec. 3, 1917, and announced his commission as a first lieutenant. Ralston Papers.

14 Jones, *War in the Air*, 466; Ralston Diary, Jan. 9-23, 1918.

15 Maj. Gen. Clayton Bissell to Charlotte Ralston, June 25, 1916; Neil M. Gann to Charlotte Ralston, Mar. 20, 1914, RAL. Ralston's friendships can almost be dated by the names people called him. Indeed, during World War II, he was called "Orville" by new military acquaintances. Only those who knew him from World War I used the nom de guerre "Tubby."  

16 Ralston Diary, Feb. 19, 1918, May 8, 10, 12, 21, 29, July 6, 1918. Mannock's genius is discussed by Lawrence Callahan in *Callahan, The Last War Bird*, 73-75.


18 Davis, *War Birds*, 103, explains that Springs wrote *War Birds*, echoing Lawrence Callahan, quoted is *Callahan, The Last War Bird*, 80-81. "Springs wrote it," Callahan recalled. "Ginder, and I can remember it very clearly, when we started off on the boat, said he was going to keep a diary. So he started keeping the diary but he got so busy with many things that he wrote, I would say, about the first ten pages in War Birds and that's all."

19 Ralston is mentioned in *War Birds* on 234-35, 264, and 274.

20 Ralston Diary, July 10, 11, 1918.

21 Ibid., July 24, 1918.

22 Ibid., July 20, 26, 1918.


24 C. M. Grove, commanding No. 85 Squadron, R.A.F., to officer commanding 143 American Aero Squadron, Sept. 5, 1918, Ralston Papers. Grove's letter states that Ralston "has never flown a rotary engine of any kind, and I consider that if it is essential that he should fly Camels he should be given a period of training."

25 Ralston Diary, Sept. 6, 7, 9, 1918. Ralston's aversion to the Sopwith Camel was shared by many other pilots. In the Second Army Air Service's souvenir album, produced in France and in the author's possession, there is a mock advertisement for the "Flopwith Camel, the Hospital Hound's Delight!"


27 Combat Report No. 46, Sept. 24, 1918, Ralston Papers.


29 Ibid.

30 Adjutant General's Office, "Innocent Discharge from the United States Army," Ralston Papers. Ralston's commission as a first lieutenant dates from July 6, 1918, NA Form 13041, Rev. 3, 1918. Neither account confirms Ralston's involvement in the "raid," though Hudson speculated that Ralston was the third pilot from the 148th Squadron. The author thanks Duane J. Reed, chief, Special Collections, U.S. Air Force Academy Libraries for his assistance in obtaining source material for this essay.

31 Undated Redpath-Homer Chautauqua clipping, RAL.

32 Official Statement of Commissioned Service, July 31, 1942, Ralston Papers. ROR has several clippings, one of which, "Heroes at Richards Field Tell of War Hair Raisers," is dated Aug. 5, 1925.

33 The date of Ralston's departure is established in a "Statement of Service," NA Form 13041 (Rev. 4-38) from the National Personnel Records Center, 9730 Pope Avenue, St. Louis, MO 63122-5100, "Major Ralston called to aviation service," *Cherry County News*, Valentine, Neb., Apr. 16, 1942.

34 Orville A. Ralston to Charlotte Ralston, Apr. 15, 1942, ROR.

35 Ibid., Nov. 4, 1942, ROR.

36 Orville A. Ralston to Robert O. Ralston, Dec. 9, 1942, ROR.

37 Ornsby World-Herald, Jan. 1, 1943.

38 Robert A. Reese to Charlotte and Robert O. Ralston, Feb. 23, 1943, ROR.
Edward "Mick" Mannock

Among Orville Ralston’s mementos donated to the Nebraska State Historical Society by Charlotte Ralston is a small leather case containing Ralston’s snapshot of Maj. Edward Mannock, commander of Eighty-fifth Squadron, RAF. Above the photograph Ralston stitched two ribbons to the case on which several “bars” are attached (in RAF slang, “barnacles”). These ribbons and bars signify multiple awards to Edward Mannock of the Distinguished Service Order and the Military Cross.

On the back of the photo Ralston wrote, “Major E. Mannock. Had a credit of 71 Huns when he was killed in action the morning of July 26, 1918, S.E. of Forest of Nieppe, near Cassel. He was shot down by concentrated M.G. [machine gun] fire from the ground since he went so low in shooting down a Hun two-seater in flames. Many of the fellows who knew him in the RAF all agree that he was the most wonderful leader the RAF or any air corps ever produced.”

Ralston wasn’t exaggerating. “Mick” Mannock, posthumously awarded Great Britain’s highest decoration for valor, the Victoria Cross, officially downed seventy-three German aircraft, making him the leading British ace of the war. He was also universally regarded as a great combat leader.

An unlikely hero, Mannock was practically blind in his left eye from childhood. He resorted to trickery when taking his aviation flight physical, covering the bad eye twice with different hands and reading the eye chart perfectly.

Mannock was born on May 21, 1889, in Brighton, the son of an enlisted soldier in the Second Inniskilling Dragoons, who later deserted his family. Poverty propelled him to work at an early age. He was a shop boy for a grocer, a barber’s helper, and a clerk for the National Telephone Company. When World War I began in August 1914, Mannock was an employee of the English Telephone Company in Turkey.

Interned as an enemy alien, Mannock spent months in Turkish prisons and camps. Released through the efforts of the Red Cross, he finally reached England by way of Bulgaria, Syria, and Greece. First joining the Royal Army Medical Corps, Mannock transferred to the Royal Engineers and eventually to the Royal Flying Corps.

Mannock was slow in learning how to fly, and in his first aerial combats he was so awkward he was almost accused of cowardice. Once he got the hang of it, however, he displayed a remarkable aptitude for war flying. Lawrence Callahan, a friend of Ralston’s in Eighty-fifth Squadron, RAF, and later in the 148th United States Aero Squadron, explained that Mannock had “tremendous tactical ability,” and “his own original idea about how things should be done.” Unlike William A. Bishop, Victoria Cross recipient and first commander of Eighty-fifth Squadron who Callahan characterized as a loner, Mannock “contributed to the science of aerial warfare, often using his own plane as bait to draw the enemy into an ambush.”

Above all, Edward Mannock “was a very brilliant pilot. He could fly a plane on the very edge of stability and going into a spin but not do it,” Callahan recalled. “He could make it turn shorter and do more things with it than most people.”

Mannock welcomed "Tubby" Ralston to his squadron in early July 1918. Ralston enjoyed the "happy and boyish" major. According to Ralston’s diary, Mannock seemed to share a side of himself with the young Nebraskan that few others saw. Although some remembered Mannock as a bloodthirsty killer in aerial combat, Ralston had a different perspective: “He never killed with the sort of lust some fellows have. Many times I have heard him say how he hated to kill the poor devils, but did it only to help end the terrible war.”