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Article Title: Orville "Tubby" Ralston, Nebraska's War Bird

Full Citation: William G Chrystal, "Orville 'Tubby' Ralston, Nebraska's War Bird," *Nebraska History* 76 (1995): 164-175

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1995Ralston.pdf>

Date: 3/28/2013

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."

Cataloging Information:

Names: Elliott White Springs, Orville Alfred Ralston, Lawrence Callahan, Jarvis Offutt, Edward "Mick" Mannock, Captain DeCosta, Jesse O Creech, Neil Goen, Eddie Rickenbacker, George H Doran, John McGavock Grider, Ralph K Brooks, Captain "Tiny" Dixon, Captain McGregor, Reed Landis, Ford Lauer, Robert Reese, William A Bishop, Harold G Shoemaker

Place Names: Peru, Nebraska; Weeping Water, Nebraska; Fort Snelling, Minnesota; Toronto, Canada; Camp Rathbun, Ontario; Taliaferro Fields, Fort Worth, Texas; Romsey, England; Valentine, Nebraska; Ainsworth, Nebraska; Wood Lake, Nebraska; Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

Keywords: *War Birds*; *Nocturne Militaire*, *Above the Bright Blue Sky*, Sopwith Camel' Royal Air Force; White Triangles; Nebraska National Guard; US Signal Corps; Seventeenth United States Aero Squadron (USAS); *Carmania*; DH4, DH9, RE8 [all bombers]; "Hat in the Ring Squadron" [Ninety-fourth Squadron]; Victoria Cross; RAF; D7 Fokker; 148th Squadron; Eighty-fifth squadron; Spad [fighter]; 304th Bomb Group; B-17

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

Orville, "Tubby" Ralston

In his popular 1920s stories about aerial combat in World War I, Elliott White Springs sometimes mentioned Orville Alfred Ralston (1894-1942). Few readers probably associated the Ainsworth, Nebraska, dentist with the pilot nicknamed "Tubby," who, in *War Birds*, crashed his "dud bus" on purpose in order to get a new airplane.¹ Nor did they realize that Ralston saved his flight commander's life by taking aloft an airplane wheel to communicate to Springs that one of his wheels had been shot away, and he would crash if he attempted to make a normal landing.²

In print, Springs's affection for Ralston is especially revealed through humor. Describing his one-wheel landing in *Nocturne Militaire*, Springs, tongue-in-cheek, claims "poor Ralston" was "in such a hurry to get back with the news and get the ambulance ready for me that he crashed badly in landing and wrote off the plane. His reputation suffered severely, and he got a good crack on the top of his head."³ In *Above the Bright Blue Sky*, a fictional character named "Tubby White" is "blind as a bat and has done lost what little guts he ever had," a jibe aimed at another "Tubby," Orville Ralston. Two pages later, however, Springs returns to the truth. The "blind" and "gutless" Tubby White leads an attack on a "Hun" two-seater, the hardest German plane to destroy. Though Springs's readers didn't know it, in real life this was the kind of action in which Ralston was a specialist.⁴

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Photo courtesy of author

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.⁵ 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.⁶

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."⁷ 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.⁸ 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.

Orville Ralston



"My first machine." Ralston in a Curtiss JN4 trainer, Camp Rathbun, Deseronto, Canada, July 1917. (NSHS-MS0233)

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.⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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 ukelele-playing Ralston joined the Kappa Sigma fraternity there.¹¹

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."¹²

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.¹³ 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.¹⁴

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-



Ralston practicing on the Lewis gun, Camp Borden, Canada, September 1917. (NSHS-MS0233)

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 be-

came 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"



Harold G. Shoemaker (aviator at left) and Ralston landed at Dallas while stationed at Fort Worth for training in October 1917. (NSHS-MS0233)

to college friends, and "Doc" to postwar friends, among the War Birds, for the rest of their lives, Ralston was "Tubby."²⁰

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

I meet the Earl's wife, daughter, son, and a lady cousin from Waddington. Stay for tea and telephone back to camp that I had a forced landing on account of engine trouble."

Finally Ralston's persistence paid off. He received orders to Marsk for training in single-seat Bristol fighters, "a wonderful machine," he called it. He especially enjoyed dogfighting in Bristols, remarking, "It sure is exciting sport."



Jarvis Offutt (left) of Omaha and Ralston "have a real feast on whole wheat and sugar from home," while at Marske on the English Coast. Offutt was killed in a flying accident on August 13, 1918. (NSHS-MS0233)

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.

Ralston's "bomber" training was in demand, however. Hearing that he was about to be shipped to France to fly "the deadly DH9" in spite of his training in fighters, he talked his way into a job ferrying combat aircraft from England to France. It was a key step in his plan to join a scout squadron in France.

Throughout June 1918 Ralston ferried aircraft across the English Channel. Whenever possible, he visited old RAF friends (since April 1, 1918, the RFC had been called the "Royal Air Force") and the handful of Americans who were already flying in British squadrons in combat.

On July 6 Ralston took a chance. While in France, he called the commander of Eighty-fifth Squadron, RAF,

Maj. Edward Mannock, who assured Ralston he would do all he could to get him assigned to the squadron. It was a smart decision. "Mick" Mannock was a top scoring British ace. Not only did he have sixty-eight German planes to his credit, Mannock also had a knack for introducing young pilots to the dangerous "game" of aerial combat.²¹

The squadron Ralston hoped to join was first rate. It had been formed and led initially by William A. Bishop, a Victoria Cross recipient, who had been sent back to his native Canada to train new pilots.²² After the war Eighty-fifth Squadron, RAF, was among the best-known flying outfits to the American public, along with the Lafayette Flying Corps, American volunteers who flew with the French before the United States entered the war, and Eddie Rickenbacker's Ninety-fourth "Hat in the Ring" Squadron. Eighty-fifth Squadron's fame was the direct result of Elliott Springs's literary activity, particularly his "anonymous" diary of an "unknown aviator," *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."²³

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



"My war buss, 180 Viper SE5 at 85 Sqdn. RAF" and Sgt. Ralph K. Brooks, mechanic from the 148th U.S. Aero Squadron. (NSHS-MS0233)



Above: Ralston with Fokker, mascot of the 148th U.S. Aero Squadron, 1918. (NSHS-MS0233)

Left: Captain "Tiny" Dixon, Ralston, and Lt. Lawrence Callahan, Eighty-fifth Squadron, RAF, July 1918. (NSHS-MS0233)

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 shellhorn village, four beautiful little fat Chow pups, one large Wolfhound 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 still dives on. The speed is so terrific that I flatten out at 3,000 (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 wings," he wrote. But he had come through his first aerial combat unscathed. "Believe me, it was great sport and I was thoroughly crazed over the fight. It was lucky for me since I am so new at the game that a dogfight did not ensue for I would probably have gotten the worst of it then."²⁶

Though Ralston displayed an aptitude for aerial combat, he never forgot

he was a greenhorn, depending on the advice of others. "I am told to go slow in order to learn," he wrote in his diary. "Oh, how much a fellow realizes how little he knows about the game after he has been out here a while."

Two days after Ralston shot down his first enemy plane, "Mick" Mannock was killed by ground fire. That evening many of Mannock's friends from other

into him with both guns. He dived and 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, 1918.²⁹

The outgoing Ralston knew and liked most of the pilots in the 148th. He had trained with Jesse Creech and flown in combat with Lawrence Callahan. His aversion to the 148th wasn't personal. Ralston was

deathly 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. "I 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 make 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 fine. I only hope I will feel better and can learn to fly this soon



From Second Army Air Service souvenir album. Courtesy of author

squadrons gathered at Eighty-fifth Squadron to pay their respects and "cheer up all the boys of 85 with music, liquor and a 'hilarious' time." Ralston appreciated the camaraderie but was otherwise stoic. "I guess there is no doubt it will come to all of us in this game."²⁷

Ralston shot down another Fokker D7 on August 22. The squadron, in three echelons, attacked nine Fokkers. "Our flight of five machines, led by Captain McGregor, attacked from the south," he explained in his "Combats in the Air" report. "The Huns immediately dived on our lower formation. . . I fired a burst into one who spiraled away. I then attacked another and got a short burst

Orville Ralston

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.³⁰

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 Hanoveranner, 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



Pilots of "B" Flight, 148th U.S. Aero Squadron: (left to right), Lt. Percy Cunnius, Lt. Sidney Noel, Lt. Elliott White Springs, Lt. Lawrence Callahan, Lt. Orville Ralston, and Lt. Harry Jenkinson, Jr. (NSHS-MS0233.)

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 Cattenienes.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

a.m. Captain Reed Landis, Lieutenants Callahan, Oliver, and I take up the four new SE5s of 25 squadron and do a last war patrol. We see nothing and have a fine flip as the machines are wonderful and run fine," wrote Ralston. "We 'high tone' the other squadrons down here by taking off in formation." With that "Tubby" Ralston's war, "hell on roller skates" as Elliott Springs once called it, was finally over.⁴¹

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.⁴²

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."⁴³

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, 1942.⁴⁴

Ralston completed officers' training school in Miami Beach in May. He was one of only a few officers commissioned a major: "[It] was evidently my previous 10 years military service that made their recommendation stick," he wrote Char-

lotte. "I feel good about that."⁴⁵

Ralston was sent to the Army Air Forces Intelligence School in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, for training as a group intelligence officer. Assigned to the 304th Bomb Group, later designated the Second Bomb Group, Ralston enjoyed military life, although he knew it was taking a heavy toll on his family. "I sometimes wonder if I should not have



Ralston during World War II. Courtesy of author

stayed at home with you," 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."⁴⁶

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 damned many more gadgets to look after."⁴⁷

Ralston hoped to visit his family be-

fore 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."⁴⁸ 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."⁴⁹

Notes

¹ [John McGavock Grider], *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.

³ Elliott White Springs, *Nocturne Militaire* (New York: George H. Doran Co., 1927), 268-71. Every time Springs related this story it changed.

⁴ Elliott White Springs, *Above the Bright Blue Sky: More About the War Birds* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1928), 204, 206.

⁵ Lawrence K. Callahan to Capt. L. W. Miller, Apr. 27, 1920, in MS0233, Orville A. Ralston Papers, Ne-

Orville Ralston



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)

braska State Historical Society, Lincoln (hereafter Ralston Papers). Callahan's letter supports the awarding of the Distinguished Service Cross to Orville Ralston.

⁶ W. P. Taylor and F. L. Irvin, comp., *History of the 148th Aero Squadron Aviation Section, U.S. Army Signal Corps, A.E.F.-B.E.F., 1917-1918*

(Lancaster, S.C.: Tri-County Publishing Company, 1957), 46. This valuable history is available from MAVAH, a division of Sunflower University Press of Manhattan, Kans.

⁷ George T. Shestak, "Nebraska's Forgotten Ace," *Sunday Omaha World-Herald Magazine of the Midlands*, Apr. 4, 1971, 7-8.

⁸ In James J. Hudson, *Hostile Skies. A Combat History of the American Air Service in World War I* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1968), Ralston is mentioned twice, in passing. In the history written by Lt. Lucien H. Thayer, *America's First Eagles: The Official History of the U.S. Air Service, A.E.F. (1917-1918)*, Donald Joseph McGee and Roger James Bender, eds., (San Jose: R. James Bender Publishing, 1983), the single reference to Orville Ralston (p. 257) reads "C. Ralston."

⁹ See Ira Jones, *King of the Air Fighters* (New York/London: Nicholson and Watson, 1935), and Frederick Oughton, *Ace With One Eye* (London: Frederick Muller, 1963).

¹⁰ Burke Davis, *War Bird. The Life and Times of Elliott White Springs* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987) and Marvin L. Skelton, *Callahan, The Last War Bird* (Manhattan, Kans.: MAVAH Publishing, 1980).

¹¹ Orville Ralston's obituary, *The Republican*, Valentine, Nebr., Jan. 8, 1943; Orville Ralston to Paul Hansell, Jan. 26, 1940, in possession of Dr. Robert O. Ralston (hereafter ROR) gives additional biographical details. An undated typewritten note by Charlotte Ralston, found in one of Orville Ralston's war diaries held by Janet Ralston Johnson (hereafter JRJ) relates the first version of how Ralston got his nickname. Ralston's nephew, Dr. David H. Mickey of Lincoln, Nebraska, in a May 8, 1995, note to the author remembers his "Uncle Wob" offering a different explanation. As a young man, Ralston was impressed by stories about the Industrial Workers of the World, "The Wobblies." His strut and nickname, Dr. Mickey recalls, were inspired by the IWW.

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

¹² 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.

¹³ Form No. 612, A.G.O., Aug. 14, 1917, Ralston Papers.

¹⁴ Hudson, *Hostile Skies*, 24-45, and Thayer, *America's First Eagles*, 9-52, 247-49, give 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

than 200 cadets to be immortalized as the "War Birds" had arrived in England to begin primary flight training." Royal Flying Corps programs in Canada and the United States are discussed in George A. Drew, *Canada's Fighting Airmen* (Toronto: Maclean Publishing Company, 1931), 237-305, and H.A. Jones, *The War In The Air*, Vol. V (Oxford: Clarendon, 1935), 464-68.

¹⁵ Drew, *Canada's Fighting Airmen*, 293, 295.

¹⁶ The eight from the Seventeenth Squadron were Ralph D. Gracie, Minneapolis, Minn.; Oliver P. Johnson, New Orleans, La.; Ralph Snoke, Los Angeles, Calif.; Jesse O. Creech, Washington, D.C.; Walter Jones, Minneapolis, Minn.; Harold Shoemaker, Ridgetown, N.J.; Charles France, Millard, Nebr.; and Orville Ralston. Those in the Twenty-second Squadron were Paul Lowden, Troy, N.Y., Lawrence Roberts, Wilmington, Del.; Lawrence Hoover, Washington, D.C.; E. T. Comegies, Washington, D.C.; Jarvis Olfutt, Omaha, Nebr.; Rowland Blessley, Minneapolis, Minn.; George Siebold, Washington, D.C., and August L. Grimm, New Jersey. Ralston Diary, May 25, 1917.

¹⁷ Ralph Gracie, Harold Shoemaker, Lawrence Roberts, E. T. Comegies, and George Siebold were killed in action. Walter Jones was killed in a Texas training accident and Jarvis Olfutt, for whom Olfutt Air Force Base is named, was killed while ferrying an airplane from England to France. Creech is mentioned in Hudson, *Hostile Skies*, 212, 217-19, 228, and 309.

¹⁸ Form No. 525, Adjutant General's Office, "Honorable 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.

¹⁹ Jones, *War in the Air*, 466; Ralston Diary, Jan. 23, 1918.

²⁰ Maj. Gen. Clayton Bissell to Charlotte Ralston, June 25, 1964; Neil M. Goen to Charlotte Ralston, Mar. 20, 1964, ROR. 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."

²¹ Ralston Diary, Febr. 19; May 8, 10, 18, 21, 29; July 6, 1918. Mannock's genius is discussed by Lawrence Callahan in Callahan, *The Last War Bird*, 72-75.

²² Bishop's story is told in William Avery Bishop, *Winged Warfare* (New York: George H. Doran, 1934).

²³ Davis, *War Bird*, 103, explains that Springs

wrote *War Birds*, echoing Lawrence Callahan, quoted in Callahan, *The Last War Bird*, 80-81. "Springs wrote it," Callahan recalled. "Grider, 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."

²⁴ Ralston is mentioned in *War Birds* on 234-35, 264, and 274.

²⁵ Ralston Diary, July 10, 11, 1918.

²⁶ Ibid., July 24, 1918.

²⁷ Ibid., July 20; 26, 1918.

²⁸ Army Form W. 3348, "Combats in the Air," Eighty-fifth Squadron, Aug. 22, 1918, Ralston Papers.

²⁹ C. M. Grove, commanding No. 85 Squadron, RAF, to officer commanding 148 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."

³⁰ 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 "Floppith Camel, the Hospital Hound's Delight!"

³¹ Combat Report No. 33, "Combats in the Air," Sept. 15, 1918, Ralston Papers.

³² Combat Report No. 46, Sept. 24, 1918, Ralston Papers.

³³ Combat Report No. 50, Sept. 26, 1918, Ralston Papers.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Adjutant General E. C. Harns to Orville A. Ralston, Sept. 7, 1921, Ralston Papers. Ralston's citation reads, "For extraordinary heroism in action on September 26, 1918. Having engine trouble he signaled his flight commander, left his formation and started for the lines. Shortly afterwards his engine picked up and he decided to rejoin his formation. He found three of them engaged with seven Fokker biplanes over Bourlon Wood. Seeing that one of our machines was hard pressed and in distress, Lieutenant Ralston instantly went to its assistance and drove one Fokker down into the clouds below. He followed directly behind the enemy machine and as they came out of the clouds, at a height of 3,000 feet, opened fire again on this Fokker at fifteen yards range. The enemy machine

made one complete spiral and crashed northwest of Bourlon Wood. Four more Fokkers now attacked Lieutenant Ralston but he managed to get back in the clouds and return safely to our lines, as did the rest of his flight."

³⁶ Elliott Springs letter, Apr. 12, 1920, Ralston Papers.

³⁷ Combat Report No. 62, Oct. 3, 1918, Ralston Papers.

³⁸ Combat Report No. 63, Oct. 25, 1918, Ralston Papers.

³⁹ Ralston Diary, Oct. 28, 1918. This action has been described by James J. Hudson, "Ambush Over No Man's Land, The 148th Aero Squadron's Big Day," *Cross and Cockade* (Winter 1981), 344-48.

⁴⁰ Ralston diary, Nov. 1, 1918, describes the journey of the 17th and 148th Squadrons from the British sector to Toul in cattle cars.

⁴¹ Ralston Diary, Nov. 11, 1918; *War Birds*, 274. The last combat flight of the war by the four SE5s has been vividly described in Callahan, *The Last War Bird*, 62-63, and in James J. Hudson, "Interview with Reed Landis, One of the Top American Aces of World War I," James J. Hudson Papers, Special Collections, U.S. Air Force Academy Library, Colorado Springs, Colo., Series 8, Box 7, F. 5, No. 8, 40-1. 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 materials for this essay.

⁴² Undated Redpath-Horner Chautauqua clipping, ROR.

⁴³ 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.

⁴⁴ The date of Ralston's departure is established in a "Statement of Service," NA Form 13041 (Rev. 4-90) from the National Personnel Records Center, 9700 Page Avenue, St. Louis, MO 63132-5100. "Major Ralston called to aviation service," *Cherry County News*, Valentine, Nebr., Apr. 16, 1942.

⁴⁵ Orville A. Ralston to Charlotte Ralston, Apr. 15, 1942, ROR.

⁴⁶ Ibid., Nov. 4, 1942, ROR.

⁴⁷ Orville A. Ralston to Robert O. Ralston, Dec. 9, 1942, ROR.

⁴⁸ *Omaha World-Herald*, Jan. 1, 1943.

⁴⁹ Robert A. Reese to Charlotte and Robert O. Ralston, Febr. 23, 1943, ROR.

Edward "Mick" Mannock



Major Edward Mannock in a snapshot by Orville Ralston. (NSHS-MS0233)

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."