

Charles Lindbergh learned to fly here. The atomic-bomb-carrying *Enola Gay* was built here. Less known are the stories of early airplane builders, the first nighttime airmail flight, races and stunts, and a dozen World War II air bases. Gathered from the collections of the Nebraska State Historical Society, these are the photos and stories of Nebraska's long love affair with aviation.



Vince Goeres has volunteered at the Nebraska State Historical Society for twenty years. His passion for aviation began when he learned to fly at sixteen, and continued through his long career as a banker in his hometown of Lincoln, Nebraska. Along with aviation, Goeres's great loves include sailing, bike riding, woodworking, and gardening.

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Here is a sample of what you'll find in *Wings Over Nebraska*. This excerpt contains the contents page and Chapter 3. The 176-page book contains more than 200 historic photographs and sells for \$19.95. Contact the Nebraska State Historical Society's museum store at 402-471-3447.

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# WINGS OVER NEBRASKA

## Historic Aviation Photographs

BY VINCE GOERES

WINGS OVER NEBRASKA - HISTORIC AVIATION PHOTOGRAPHS

By Vince Goeres



with Kylie Kinley and introduction by Roger Welsch



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Nebraska State Historical Society Books

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Cover: Gary Petersen of Walton, Nebraska, flies past Chimney Rock in his 1942 Waco UPF-7 in September 2009.  
Photograph by Tom Downey, Downey Studio.

Opposite: Lt. Paul Wagner and Sgt. Encil Chambers prepare for Chambers's 1921 record jump of 22,200 feet  
(see p. 59). Later, at the 1921 American Legion convention in Kansas City, Chambers set a new record  
with a jump of 26,800 feet.

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The Lincoln Playboy was designed with the goal of making a marketable small plane. This Playboy is manned by Victor Roos and his wife in 1931. RG2929-303

# ORVILLE RALSTON, NEBRASKA'S WWI FLYING ACE



**D**uring World War I, Nebraska produced only one flying “ace,” a pilot with five or more confirmed victories in aerial combat. His name was Orville A. Ralston. Born near Weeping Water in 1894, he graduated from Peru State Teachers College in 1915, and was attending the University of Nebraska Dental College when the United States entered the war.

Upon enlistment, Ralston received flight training in Canada, Texas, and England before joining the Royal Air Force's famed Eighty-fifth Squadron in France on July 10, 1918. The squadron was flying the famous S.E.5 under the direction of squadron leader Major Ed Mannock, legendary for his seventy-three victories. On September 5 of that year, Ralston was transferred to the 148th Squadron in the United States Army. The 148th squadron was then flying Sopwith Camels, slower than the S.E.5s but more maneuverable. Ralston did not care for the Camel, but he learned to fly it well. He was an aggressive pilot eager for dogfights. During his time in the army he kept a journal that is an excellent account of his training and combat experience.

## Entry of July 24, 1918

Weather fine but a few low clouds. McGregor, a great flyer and wonderul [*sic*] pilot from New England, has been put on for “A” flight commander and he is a fine leader. We leave about 5:15 for offensive patrol. We drop our bombs near Armentiers



in Hunland. Soon after, our lower formation with Capt. Roudall leading, is attacked by six Huns (Fokker biplanes). We are in the top formation with McGregor leading three of us. We take the Hun by

complete surprise because they are diving on our lower formation and everybody commences firing at close range on the machines. 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 [rounds of ammunition] into him, as my Vickers has jammed, he turns slightly and goes into a vertical dive. I follow at a terrible rate of speed and fire my remaining shots from the Lewis drum. He still dives on. The speed is so terrific that I flatten out at 5,000 ft. and see the

Hun go down vertically into the ground. In the meantime I pick up my formation and see Huns spinning and dropping in all directions. These Hun machines are sure beautifully colored in green and black and some with white tails. Such beautiful streamlining of body is certainly marvelous. When we got home, after I had been struck by archie [German anti-aircraft fire], a terrific jolt but I was not hurt, we find McGregor got one crashed and one out of

Above: Orville A. Ralston was Nebraska's only World War I ace. He had five victories and several probables. RG2929-351

Opposite: Lt. Orville Ralston while serving with the 85th Squadron of the Royal Air Force. Later, he served with 148th Squadron U.S.A. RG2929-348



control, Lomgtom [sic] got one, and Randall claims one. So—we got four Huns crashed and two out of control, not a bad mornings work by any means. 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 dog fight did not ensue for I would probably have gotten the worst of it them [sic]. My machine was struck partly by Hun shrapnel from the ground and had three large holes in the wings, but luckily no serious damage done. In the evening McGregor led us out again, we drop our bombs and fly all over up and down between Nieppe Forest and Ypres but see only three Huns going for home at a high altitude, probably 21,000 ft.

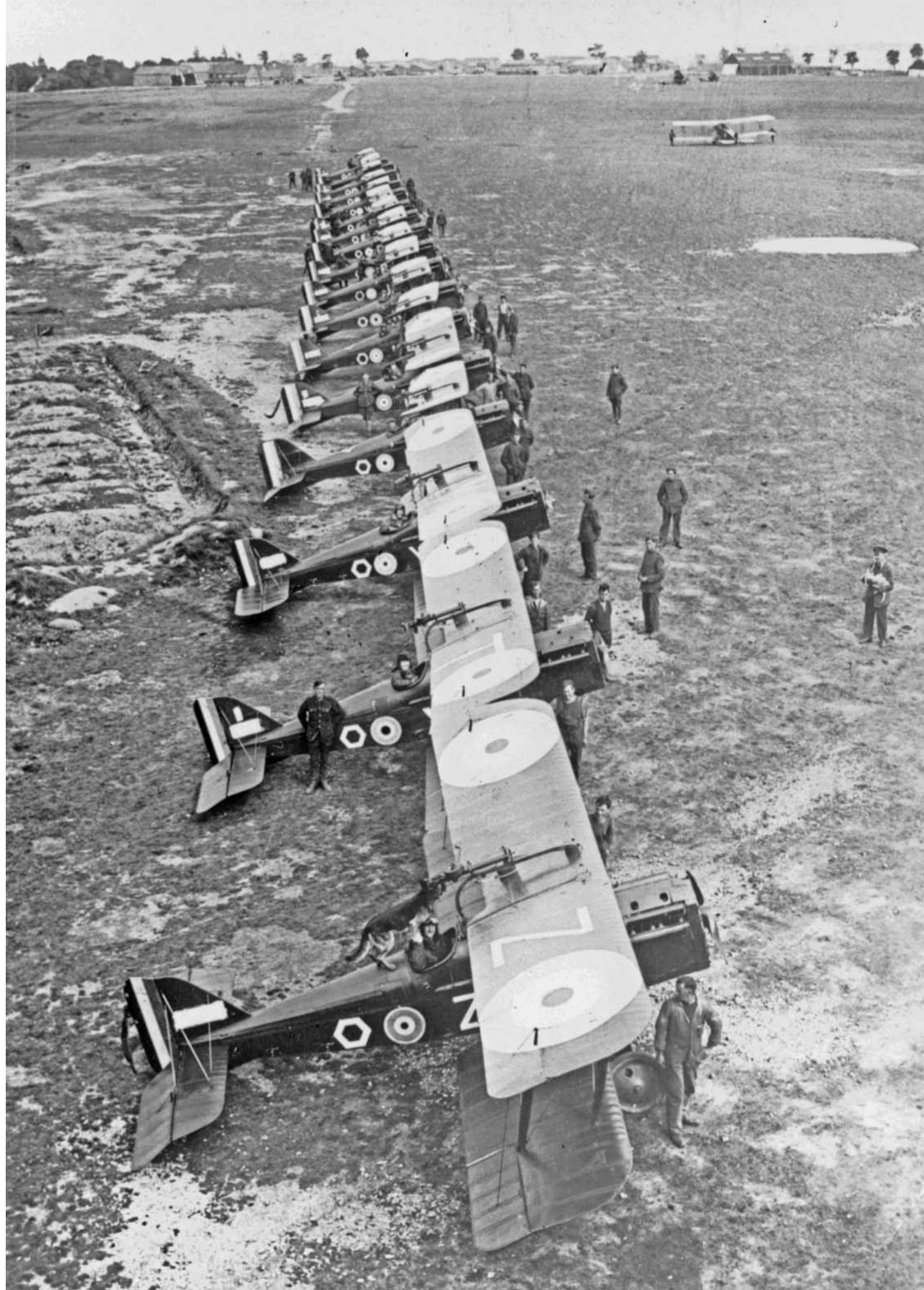
Lieutenant Ralston was credited with five confirmed victories, though he listed seven and likely had at least ten. He was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross in October 1918 for his “combat success and daring” in leading a flight over the Western Front.

After the war, Ralston returned to the University of Nebraska Dental College, where he took his degree. From 1920 to 1936 he practiced dentistry in Ainsworth, Nebraska, before moving to Valentine in 1937. Ralston reenlisted in 1942, at age forty-eight, and was commissioned a major in the Army Air Forces. On December 30, 1942, Ralston was on his way home for a family reunion when the plane in which he was hitching a ride crashed near Great Falls, Montana. He and ten other men died in the crash.

A World War I Distinguished Service Cross similar to that awarded to Orville Ralston. Courtesy of the National World War I Museum.

“B” Flight of the 148th Pursuit Squadron, United States Army, taken near the River Somme in France, 1918. Pictured left to right: Lt. P. Cunius, Lt. Sid Noel, Lt. Elliott White Springs, Lt. Callahan, Lt. O. A. Ralston, Lt. Harry Jenkinson. Elliot White Springs went on to write the popular book *Diary of an Unknown Aviator* as well as other books. He was a successful author and businessman. He succeeded his father in the family business, Springs Cotton Mills, and quadrupled the business’s worth in his lifetime. RG2432-5





Orville A. Ralston in a JN-4 training plane at Camp Rathbun, Canada, in 1917. RG2432-11

In this much-reproduced image, a line of S.E.5s of the 85th Squadron line up for inspection. This famous squadron was at one time commanded by Maj. W. A. (Billy) Bishop and Maj. Ed Mannock, renowned British pilots who shot down 72 and 73 enemy planes, respectively. Note the dog on top of the plane nearest to the camera. RG2432-1-214



The control stick from Ralston's Sopwith Camel. He carved a notch for each enemy plane he shot down. NSHS 10091-15