

FRANK LUKE—ARIZONA'S 'BALLOON BUSTER'

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WHEN IT COMES TO WAR heroes, none surpasses the daring exploits of Arizona's Frank Luke. Frank Luke was the first American aviator to receive the Congressional Medal of Honor. In just seventeen days and less than thirty hours in the air, he officially racked up eighteen confirmed and two probable victories. Unofficially, he probably scored higher. Captain Eddie Rickenbacker, America's top Ace in World War I, called him "the most daring aviator and greatest fighter pilot of the entire war."

Luke was born in Phoenix on May 19, 1897, the fifth of nine children. He attended Phoenix Union High School where he was captain of the football team. There was a rugged toughness about him. During one game, he scored the winning touchdown even knowing that he had a broken collarbone. He graduated in 1915 and went to work in the mines at Ajo. He quickly gained a reputation as a rough and ready fellow after participating in bare-knuckle boxing matches in the mining camp.

When war came, he enlisted as a private in the aviation section of the Signal Corps. He completed pilot training and was commissioned a second lieutenant. He shipped out to France on March 4, 1918 but it wasn't until late July that he was assigned to the First Pursuit Group, 27th Squadron. On his third day in the air, the young flyer engaged in his first combat and bagged his first victory.

He quickly became interested in German observation balloons. The balloons were the terror of infantrymen. From their aerial advantage, they could direct artillery fire down on the trenches. Aircraft were too light and radios too heavy for reconnaissance, so both sides used huge sausage-shaped gas balloons to communicate. The balloons were protected by flights of fighters and anti-aircraft guns on the ground, making them the most dangerous target a fighter pilot could attack.

Luke was fiercely independent and was



branded a maverick by some of his superior officers. On September 28, he went on an unauthorized mission, and even though he flamed another "gasbag," he was grounded and threatened with arrest. The next day, he was in the air again. He dropped a message to some American observers on the ground: "Watch 3 Hun balloons on the Meuse. Luke."

He got the first two, but his plane was hit. He attacked the third and flamed it, too. Then, under heavy fire and almost out of fuel, Luke's Spad wobbled toward home. On the way, he strafed a column of German infantry.

Luke landed his crippled plane, got out, and tried to run for cover in a wooded area but collapsed from his wounds. As the German troops approached, he drew his pistol and, in a brief gunfight, was killed. He was only twenty-one years old.

In just seventeen days and only thirty hours of flying time, Luke shot down fourteen balloons and four aircraft. The daring aviator scored eighteen victories flying just

ten sorties in eight days, a feat unequalled by any pilot in the war, including the storied German ace Manfred Von Richthofen, aka Red Baron.

Often in war, there's a thin line between a hero and a court martial for disobeying an order. When a maverick warrior like Luke disobeys orders or goes off on his own and subsequently becomes a hero doing a brave deed, it's pretty difficult for his commander to demand he be punished for his actions.

Luke was the epitome of the tough, reckless, undisciplined loner fighter pilot. Because of his bravery, he was the first American aviator to receive the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Today, his statue stands in front of the state capitol building. Luke Air Force Base, named for the famed aviator, is today one of the nation's most important fighter-pilot training bases.

The main character in the 2006 movie *Flyboys*, Blaine Rawlings, was inspired by Frank Luke, and the town of Lukeville, Arizona is named in his honor. **IN**