

January 16th, 1918

Dear Pop,

Hello again, it seems like forever since I have last written home though it was just three days ago. I certainly hope this letter finds you well and of course send all my love to Mom. Oh, and I received the book you sent, much thanks! It will take some time to read, they keep us busy as the dickens you know! Rest assured upon finishing you will be the first to hear my thoughts. With regards to your letter accompanying the book, it appears not much has changed back home. Which is good in my opinion, I hope it remains untouched until I return. By the way you mentioned my old friend Jim got a job in an aeroplane factory in the city.¹ Grand! I know how badly he wanted to join the service with me, if only he could have kicked his old habit of smoking ten fags a day (that's what the British call them), he could have passed the lung capacity tests.² Well anyway give him my personal thanks for the work he's doing.



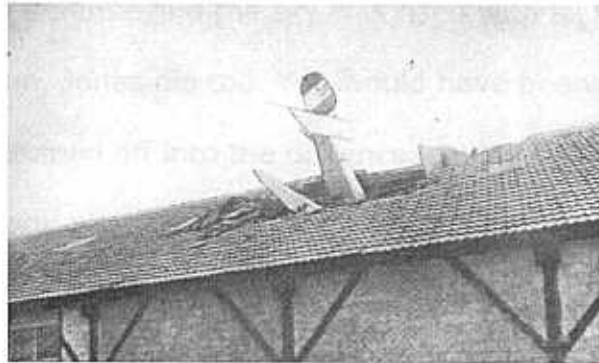
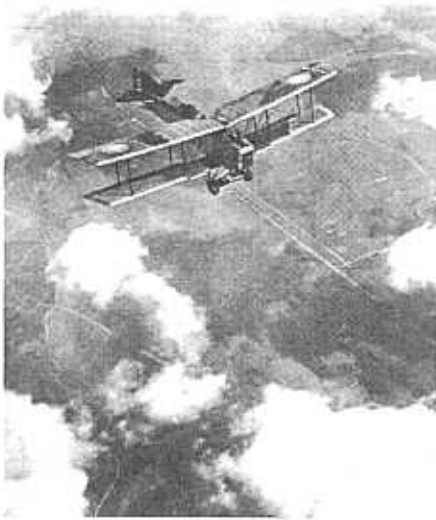
Well so much has happened over here it will be hard to tell of everything. But let me begin. The day after I wrote my last letter to you me and a few of my fellow aviators decided to ask for leave to Paris but we failed to get it. That was disappointing because I need a new pair of shoes and other necessities that are in short supply around the base³ (do not tell mother, she will just worry herself to death if she knew!). All flights

scheduled for the day had been cancelled earlier due to the terrible weather; we rarely fly when the wind is blowing so fast.⁴ We eventually settled down for a small poker game, and wouldn't you know it but that damned Lieutenant I keep telling you about came over and tried to break it up. Good old Roger was up to his old tricks and asked the brute if he wanted some candy to calm down. That set him so bad we all ran off leaving poor Roger to fend for himself.⁵ Honestly though that officer takes things to seriously, just between us men one of these days I'm going to give him a good punch to the nose!



The next day was grueling, as you might imagine, we were dragged out of bed at a quarter to six. We had our customary egg and toast,⁶ and the weather was good, just a little cloud cover and mist in the sky. I got in my plane, a fine machine as I think I have told you before. "Contact" the mechanic yelled, and I was off. Our squadron had received a request to protect a two-seated Salmson observation plane that would be embarking on a photographic reconnaissance mission over enemy territory.⁷ I tell you Pop my stomach turns every time we take off, but the once we hit 7,000 feet and the world stretches out below you like it does there's no better feeling in the world. There wasn't a Hun in sight that morning, and the mission went off without a hitch thank God. Upon our return one of my fellow pilots named Matthew crashed his biplane through the

roof of the camp bakery.⁸ He was found to be ok, but the cooks were quite dismayed as you might imagine.



The barracks hummed with activity that evening, nothing much to do. Then, without warning, a whole mess of Hun aeroplanes descended on our camp spraying our position with machine gun fire. You can not imagine the confusion that occurs when something like this happens. The warning signal came too late and we were not prepared, the Hun struck at our position repeatedly with machine guns and twenty pound bombs. All of our guns on the ground opened up and tried to hit them back, the tracers lit up the sky like you couldn't imagine.⁹ A RAF squadron showed up and after a while the Hun eventually broke off. Cal and Archie died in the attacks, we have lost so many good friends many have just become fatalists.¹⁰ Pop it is just easier accepting things like this when you believe everything is going to happen the way it happens, thank God my time has not yet come.

After yesterdays ordeal we were intent on seeking revenge. We suggested a volunteer strike on the Hun, believe me Pop, pilots responded with renewed enthusiasm.¹¹ Some of our planes were in bad shape from yesterdays attack but the majority had been well protected. Mechanics were working round the block to get the others repaired but we decided not to wait. We secured permission to attack a Hun

observation balloon and we took off. Striking a balloon is usually a simple matter. We have one plane scatter the enemy crew manning the defensive guns, a second plane set the balloon on fire, and a third go after the parachuting observer.¹² The plan went well at first, the balloon didn't stand a chance and was soon engulfed in flames. Then out of nowhere a squadron of Hun came to its defense and the sky was filled with all kinds of hot metal as we engaged. Billy got a Hun, Jones did too. You would have been proud of me, I gave another such a licking that it sped off into the distance leaving behind a thick trail of smoke. I'm still not sure how many we got but I know we lost Fred, and Brian almost lost control of his biplane when a piece of his wing was shot off and blew right across his face giving him quite a scare and dazing him for a moment or so.¹³



Upon our return many planes had more than a few holes in them, and one man threw up the second he got both feet on the ground, as is the usual case.¹⁴ Do not think less of me Pop but I rejoice at every Hun I send to Hell, they deserve it for starting this whole mess! My hand shakes even as of writing this letter to you, tomorrow we are scheduled to escort a bombing raid deep into Hunland, weather permitting. I find myself in a constant cycle of dread and eagerness at the prospect of returning to the skies. Such is the life I chose when I enlisted though, and perhaps it is best to end my letter here (No point in crying about it now I suppose). Hope I am making you and Ma proud, do keep writing and send some more books.

Love,

Ernest Hitchens

P.S. I have to get started on my letter to Judy now...honestly thinking of her is the only thing that keeps me going sometimes.

¹ War Department, *Report of the Secretary of War, 1918: Volume I*, Washington Government Printing Office, 1919.

² Hamilton M. Wright, "Who Make the Best Aviators? Invasion of the Air by the Right Kind of Man Interfered with by the Wrong Kind," *Current Opinion* 65, no. 2 (Aug. 1918): 107, <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=230591531&sid=2&Fmt=2&clientId=8991&RQT=309&VName=HNP>.

³ Walt Brown Jr., ed., *An American for Lafayette: The Diaries of E. C. C. Genet, Lafayette Escadrille* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1981), 84.

⁴ Walt Brown Jr., ed., *An American for Lafayette: The Diaries of E. C. C. Genet, Lafayette Escadrille* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1981).

⁵ John M. Grider, *War Birds: Diary of an Unknown Aviator* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1926), 82.

⁶ John H. Morrow Jr. and Earl Rogers, eds., *A Yankee Ace in the RAF: The World War I Letters of Captain Bogart Rogers* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996), 175.

⁷ Norman Archibald, *Heaven High, Hell Deep: 1917-1918* (New York: Albert & Charles Boni Inc., 1935), 150.

⁸ James N. Hall, *High Adventure: A Narrative of Air Fighting in France* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1929).

⁹ John M. Grider, *War Birds: Diary of an Unknown Aviator* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1926), 244.

¹⁰ James R. McConnel, *Flying for France: With the American Escadrille at Verdun*, (Garden City: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1917).

¹¹ Norman Archibald, *Heaven High, Hell Deep: 1917-1918* (New York: Albert & Charles Boni Inc., 1935), 174.

¹² Norman Archibald, *Heaven High, Hell Deep: 1917-1918* (New York: Albert & Charles Boni Inc., 1935), 175.

¹³ Walt Brown Jr., ed., *An American for Lafayette: The Diaries of E. C. C. Genet, Lafayette Escadrille* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1981).

¹⁴ Hamilton M. Wright, "Who Make the Best Aviators? Invasion of the Air by the Right Kind of Man Interfered with by the Wrong Kind," *Current Opinion* 65, no. 2 (Aug. 1918): 107, <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=230591531&sid=2&Fmt=2&clientId=8991&RQT=309&VName=HNP>.