

AFEHRI File 19-10

Research Materials/Source Documents  
ENLISTED FIRSTS

FILE TITLE: 1st American to Shootdown Five Aircraft in WW I - Private (later  
Captain) Fredrick Libby

Reviewed by:

AFEHRI Representative G. R. Akin date 27 DEC 97

EPC Representative J. E. De date 28 Jan 98

Scanner Operator Suzanne date 13 Feb 98

APPROVED BY: Gary R. Akin

GARY R. AKIN, CMSgt, USAF

Director

Air Force Enlisted Heritage Research Institute



*Frederick Libby (center) with Capt. Stephen Price (right)  
and unidentified man leaving Buckingham Palace  
after being awarded the Military Cross*

*Courtesy Ola Sater*

## ONE

### Capt. Frederick Libby

Frederick Libby was born in Sterling, Colorado, on 15 July 1891. Raised as a cowboy, young Libby had just turned twenty-three when World War I broke out. Libby was described as "stocky, slightly bandy; had jet black hair; unblinking eyes and reddish colouring . . . one would have traced a Red Indian pedigree if one had gone very far. He was very quiet, serious and unassuming."<sup>1</sup> Libby was in Canada when the war began and immediately joined the Canadian Army. After several months of training, he was shipped to France. The ex-cowboy found life in an ambulance unit in the rainy spring of 1916 to be "more than he could stand. When the Royal Flying Corps sent out a call for observers by circulating bulletins in the trenches, Libby jumped at the chance to get away from the rain, mud and muck."<sup>2</sup>

Libby was among the first to be accepted as a machine gunner-observer and was posted to No. 23 Squadron, which was then flying FE-2B two-seater pushers.<sup>3</sup> In the FE-2B-type machine, "the observer sat in front of the pilot in an open nacelle." Years later Libby described the dangerous situation:

When you stood up to shoot, all of you from the knees up was exposed to the elements. There was no belt to hold you. Only your grip on the gun and the sides of the nacelle stood between you and eternity. Toward the front of the nacelle was a hollow steel rod with a swivel mount to which the gun was anchored. This gun covered a huge field of fire forward. Between the observer and the pilot a second gun was mounted, for firing over the FE-2B's upper wing to protect the aircraft from rear attack. . . . Adjusting and shooting this gun required that you stand right up out of the nacelle with your feet on the nacelle coaming. You had nothing to worry about except being blown out of the aircraft by the blast of

air or tossed out bodily if the pilot made a wrong move. There were no parachutes and no belts. *No wonder they needed observers.*<sup>4</sup>

At the time Libby joined No. 23 Squadron of the Royal Flying Corps, "the possibility was held out that successful applicants would be made second lieutenants in the RFC after a probationary period. To Private Libby, this was a substantial inducement. He did not know that, at the time he volunteered, the life expectancy of an observer was a scant ten operational hours." On 15 July 1916, while flying his first mission as an observer, Libby and his pilot Lieutenant Hicks, along with another FE-2B crew, shot down a twin engine enemy plane in flames. After landing at Le Hameau, No. 23 Squadron's home airfield, Libby was greeted by Colonel Shephard, the wing commander, who grabbed his hand and pumped it furiously. Colonel Shephard commented "First flight, first fight . . . wonderful, wonderful. When they go down in flames, Libby, by God, they don't come back up again."<sup>5</sup>

Frederick Libby served with No. 23 Squadron until 4 August 1916 when he transferred to the FE-2B—flying No. 11 Squadron, also based at Le Hameau some ten miles west of Arras.<sup>6</sup> During the next three months young Libby, appointed a second lieutenant on 26 September 1916, became an aggressive gunner and observer in No. 11 Squadron. According to Arch Whitehouse, a noted air historian, by 27 August 1916 Libby had "racked up his fifth, which certainly made him the first American Ace in that war."<sup>7</sup> He, indeed, was the first American to shoot down five enemy aircraft in aerial combat. "Only the fact that he performed this feat as an observer instead of a pilot prevents his occupying the historic spot of first American Ace."<sup>8</sup> Even though there is still much debate over whether an observer really qualifies for aceship, Libby continued his combat success with No. 11 Squadron. On 14 September while on a photography mission he brought one hostile machine "down in smoke, another two driven down. Tracer ammunition could very easily be seen going into hostile machine."<sup>9</sup>

While on an offensive patrol at 10,500 feet on 10 October, Libby and his pilot Lieutenant Harvey drove down a hostile aircraft out of control.<sup>10</sup> One week later, Second Lieutenant Libby and Capt. S. W. Price, his pilot, sent an Aviatik down out of control.<sup>11</sup> Three days later, Libby and Captain Price dived on a hostile aircraft and fired "two double drums at close range. The

hostile machine was seen going down steeply and sending out a great amount of smoke and was subsequently seen by several of the No. 11 formation pilots on the road between Douchy and Ayette."<sup>12</sup>

During his assignment to No. 23 and No. 11 Squadrons, Lieutenant Libby was credited with no less than ten aerial victories, and on 26 September he was awarded the Military Cross "for Conspicuous Gallantry in Action. As an observer, he with his pilot attacked 4 hostile machines and shot one down. He has previously shot down 4 enemy machines."<sup>13</sup> On 8 November 1916, Libby returned to the United Kingdom for pilot training at the School of Aeronautics located in Reading.<sup>14</sup>

On 18 April 1917, after the completion of his pilot training, Fred Libby was posted to No. 43 Squadron, then flying Sopwith two-seaters. This squadron was based at Auchel.<sup>15</sup> According to one source, Lt. Libby's

aerial victories as a pilot began on the very day he arrived for duty with his new squadron—he shot down an enemy Albatros fighter in flames near the French town of Messines. Libby's squadron leader, Major Sholto Douglas (an Air Chief Marshal of the Royal Air Force during World War II), confirmed this victory.<sup>16</sup>

On 6 May 1917 Libby and his observer, Lt. J. L. Dickson, sent a hostile aircraft crashing into the vicinity of Petit Vimy.<sup>17</sup> Late in the afternoon on 23 July, while on patrol, Lieutenant Libby and his observer, Lieutenant Pritchard, intercepted three Albatros scouts near Lens. Libby's combat report stated, "when on the same level, attacked E.A. [enemy aircraft] again with front gun following him down to about 3000 feet. E.A. was evidently hit as he was doing a series of stall spins then going into nose dives. Was last seen at about 1000 ft Northeast of Lens." This kill was confirmed as decisive by others in the No. 43 Squadron formation.<sup>18</sup> On 26 July Libby was appointed a flight commander in No. 43 Squadron and was promoted to captain.<sup>19</sup>

In early August 1917 Captain Libby was transferred to the DH-4—flying No. 25 Squadron. The DH-4 two-seater, powered by a 240 horsepower engine, was capable of a speed over 120 miles per hour at sixty-five hundred feet and approximately 110 miles per hour at fifteen thousand feet. It was armed with one Vickers and one Lewis machine gun. Many of the later models of the DH-4 were powered with the famous 400 horsepower "Liberty"

engine. Perhaps the greatest weakness of the De Havilland aircraft was its vulnerability to tracer machine-gun fire and its likelihood of becoming a "flaming coffin." On 9 August 1917 Captain Libby and his observer, 2nd Lt. O. H. Hills, drove down an enemy two-seater "apparently out of control." Later on the same day, Libby and Hills were credited with an Albatros. Four days later, the ex-Colorado cowboy was "credited with an LVG."<sup>20</sup>

At 5:20 A.M. on 14 August 1917, Libby and Hills, while on a line patrol from Hulloun to Scarpe, spotted a German DFW two-seater doing artillery observation over the town of Lens. Libby

dived on the hostile machine and opened fire at close range, firing about 40 rounds. He then turned the machine enabling his observer, 2nd Lt. Hills, to fire a drum at point blank range. The hostile [aircraft] was seen to stall, then go into a nose-dive and was last seen falling vertically in a nose dive at about 700 feet east of La Bassée, a heavy ground mist then hid the machine from view.

Anti-aircraft observers saw the German plane going down pursued by the DH-4, but the ground mist prevented them from seeing the actual crash. Nonetheless, the squadron considered this a victory for Libby.<sup>21</sup>

At 12:15 P.M. on 15 August, Libby and his observer attempted a photographic mission in the Cambrai area. Unfortunately, the weather proved unsuitable for photography, but the DH-4 crew sighted a hostile aircraft a little northwest of Cambrai and immediately attacked it at about seven thousand feet. "Libby fired 60 rounds with front gun and, on machine coming into range of observer's gun, 2nd Lt. Hills fired 40 rounds into it. The enemy machine was followed down and was last seen nose diving to the ground by Boquet St. Quentin." The DH-4 received heavy anti-aircraft fire from guns on the ground, and "flaming onions" were sent up in great numbers, in groups of five. Libby and Hills managed to "recross the battle lines safely, however, at 4000 feet."<sup>22</sup>

Some thirty minutes later, after bombing gun positions north of Courrières, a DFW two-seater was observed at about six thousand feet. Libby "dived after it, firing about 50 rounds at long range, when the enemy disappeared in the clouds." A German Albatros was then observed at about four thousand feet over Lens. The American "dived on it and fired about 50 rounds with

the front gun, 2nd Lt. Hills, his observer, also fired as the DH-4 followed the hostile machine down. This scout was seen to turn over on its back and crashed near a block of red houses near Vendin Le Vieil."<sup>23</sup>

Although Captain Libby continued to fly combat missions for No. 25 Squadron until 15 September 1917, he was not credited with the destruction of any other German aircraft during this period. He did, however, inflict damage on several enemy planes. On 17 August he and his observer, Lt. O. H. Hills, fired several rounds into an enemy two-seater "when a quantity of white smoke was observed coming out of the hostile machine, which immediately dived east. Both pilot and observer considered that the engine of the machine was badly damaged."<sup>24</sup>

At 9:15 A.M. on the next day, Libby and Hills fired about a hundred rounds from their front and rear guns into an enemy observation plane. Apparently, the German was not seriously damaged, for "the hostile machine turned east and made off at great speed."<sup>25</sup>

Shortly after the United States entered the war, Frederick Libby was presented with an American flag by one of his squadron mates. His commanding officer suggested the Colorado cowboy cut the flag into strips and use it as streamers on his plane. "The idea was that the flag would be carried over the German lines every day by an American pilot, thus signifying to the enemy that the United States was in the war."<sup>26</sup> When Libby, at the request of Gen. Billy Mitchell, left the RFC on 15 September 1917 and joined the American Air Service, he took the flag with him. On his return to the United States, the Aero Club of America auctioned off the flag at a Liberty Loan drive at Carnegie Hall. The historic flag brought some \$3,250,000 into the Liberty Loan coffers, but Libby contrived to retain possession of the relic.<sup>27</sup>

Libby's transfer to the U.S. Air Service was, in the view of General Mitchell, much needed because of his great combat experience. After his participation in the Liberty Loan drive in the auction of 1917, he was assigned to No. 22 Squadron, U.S. Air Service at Hicks Field, Texas. Unfortunately, Libby became very ill "from a circulation and spinal impairment, and soon thereafter was found to be permanently disabled and medically unfit for further military service." Indeed, Frederick Libby "remained a cripple for the rest of his life, and on 9 January 1970 he died at

Los Angeles, California—an almost forgotten American hero of the First World War.”<sup>28</sup> He never flew combat for the American Air Service. Consequently, he is considered to belong in the category of those Americans who performed as combat fliers only with the British.

Even though Frederick Libby is not accepted as the first American to become an ace by the august American Fighter Aces Association because he scored his first victories as an observer, he was indeed the first to shoot down five enemy planes. According to several sources, Libby shot down ten planes as an observer and fourteen more as a pilot for a total of twenty-four.<sup>29</sup> Bruce Robertson, in his book *Air Aces of the 1914–1918 War*, lists Captain Libby as having fourteen kills. Most combat reports and official documents seem to credit him with seven victories as an observer and seven more as a pilot for a total of fourteen kills.<sup>30</sup> Whatever the real score was, there is no question Frederick Libby, the Colorado cowboy, was one of the top American aces of the first great air war.



