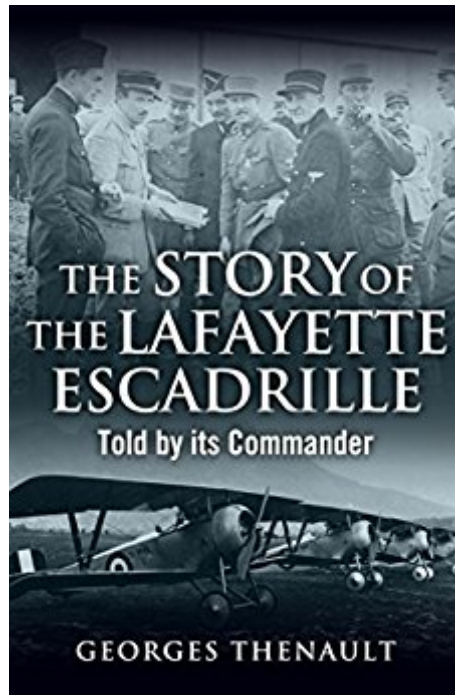


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The Story Of The Lafayette Escadrille: Told By Its Commander



Synopsis

In April 1916, the creation of the American escadrille was decided. During the next twenty-one months this aviation squadron was to be seen over every important battlefield, with its men fighting and dying for France. George Thenault's fascinating history of the Lafayette Escadrille covers from its very inception to the end of the war. Many Americans living in France at the outbreak of war in 1914 wanted to fight for the country that they saw as the founder of Liberty, and some of those men were pilots. But with the French army only having 80 planes the Americans were initially rejected from joining the air force and instead had to sign up with the Foreign Legion. It was only after months of persuasion that some of these intrepid Americans were given control of France's planes and later, under Thenault's command, they developed their own squadron. They were immediately thrown into the thick of the fighting above the pockmarked land of the Western Front. Thenault provides vivid descriptions of his brave pilots which included Norman Prince, the Rockwell brothers and the ace Raoul Lufbery. Some of these pilots were rather eccentric, for example William Thaw who when in Paris bought two lions, named Whiskey and Soda, which became the escadrille's mascots. Flying their Nieuports, they were fighting at the very beginning of military aviation and were instrumental in pioneering new battle techniques. Their life expectancy was not long and many who had joined at the inception of the escadrille did not make it through until the end of the war. Thenault's extremely personal account covers all aspects of this squadron in World War One, from their activities on the ground to their dogfights in the air. It is a truly remarkable read. Eventually with the United States joining the war the Lafayette Escadrille was disbanded and a number of its members were inducted into the U.S. Air Service as members of 103 Aero Squadron. George Thenault's *The Story of the Lafayette Escadrille* was published in 1921. His book gained widespread American public recognition. In May 1922, he accepted an assignment that began an eleven year diplomatic service in the Embassy of France in Washington, D.C.. Promoted to Lieutenant Colonel in 1933 following successful completion of duties as Military Attache for Aeronautics at the French Embassy in Washington DC, he returned to France and continued his military services with the French Air Army. He died in 1948.

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Customer Reviews

I'd actually love to have this in the French it was so very obviously originally written in - it is more a short poetical memoir than a "history" in any real sense of the word; I can often sense a rather lovely French original behind the often poor English translation (of which more below). Georges Thenault has none of the war-weary cynicism that became fashionable in the twenties and thirties, for him the war - and the sacrifice of liberty, health, sanity, and life itself in the defence of a beloved homeland is a pure and beautiful thing. While we are reading him we too can believe, even those of us older and wiser in the ways of the world. There is really very little serious historical information - and almost no technical information whatsoever. but then this is not what the book is about. For Therault, the squadron is his boys, and this story is intensely one of the young American volunteers, seen through rose coloured eyes by someone more inclined to love than to judge. The Lafayette Escadrille was not an outstandingly successful unit in terms of aerial victories, in fact it was mainly employed in close escort of the French bombers, involving little opportunity for easy "kills" and, from the beginning, distressingly high casualties. Few punches are pulled, for all Therault's indulgent excuses - the Americans of the Escadrille come across as irresponsible and untruthful, and in other ways very badly disciplined: as well as brave but all too often overconfident and foolhardy. For Thenault all this is excusable, even noble, but not every reader will necessarily feel so indulgent. With a few notable exceptions, who survived long enough to become the aces of the squadron, they were also very poor fliers.

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