

## **First World War claimed lives of local aviators**

Far from being the hoped for “War to End All Wars,” World War I presaged the coming mechanized horrors of the 20th century. Most significantly, it was the first major conflict in which the skies became a battleground. Aircraft were used for photo reconnaissance, artillery spotting, bombing runs and aerial dogfights to determine who would control the “wild blue yonder.”

Three flyers killed during the First World War are buried in McLean County, although none died in combat. All the same, their stories speak to the dangerous and often deadly world of early aircraft design and military flight training. Two were killed while training and the other while piloting an experimental aircraft. The fatal crashes occurred in Canada, Texas and Long Island, NY. One aviator flew under the Canadian flag, another Old Glory, and the third the French tricolour.

With Veterans Day this Wednesday, it’s an appropriate time to remember those who lost their lives as pioneer “flyboys.”

Lee J. Roebuck was the very first McLean County resident to die in the “Great War.” He initially attempted to join the aviation branch of the U.S. Army, but was rejected at Jefferson Barracks, MO, due to a heart defect. A second chance came when Canadian air corps recruiters signed up Roebuck in Chicago.

On October 20, 1917, the wings of his Canadian-made Curtiss “Jenny” trainer folded midair during a training flight at Camp Mohawk in Ontario (this type of Jenny was grounded when several more fatal crashes occurred the following year). He was laid to rest at Scogin Hill Cemetery southwest of Bloomington, with both Canadian and American flags draping his coffin.

By chance, flyers from Roebuck’s airfield came through Bloomington on November 16, 1917, a little less than one month after his death. The “tawny clad birdmen” (as The Pantagraph called the Canadian pilots) of the 42nd and 43rd wings of the Royal Flying Corps were traveling south by train to Texas, and they stayed long enough to parade through downtown.

“Jauntily clad in khaki, carrying canes or swagger sticks, and wearing the Scotch cap of the British soldier, the sky pilots swung along in soldierly fashion, alternately cheering and singing,” reported The Pantagraph. The contingent included the internationally known performer Vernon Castle, who with his wife Irene popularized such ragtime dances like the Grizzly Bear and the Fox Trot. The English-born Castle joined the Canadian air corps and flew some 300 combat missions before returning to North America as an instructor. Three months after passing through Bloomington, Castle was killed in a training mission at Benbrook Field, TX.

On the afternoon of May 10, 1918, Bloomington resident Lt. Louis Eddy Davis plummeted to his death on a training run in Texas. The crash, due to structural failure of his Curtiss Jenny, occurred 18 miles from Ellington Field where Davis was a Reserve Military Aviator (R.A.M.). He was the son of H.O. Davis, the president and managing editor of The Pantagraph.

During Davis' funeral, flyers from Chanute Field in Rantoul circled Bloomington and dropped wreaths over his Evergreen Memorial Cemetery gravesite. The Bloomington American Legion post organized in the fall of 1919 under the name of Lt. Davis.

The third fatality occurred on April 27, 1919, when an experimental aircraft flown by Lt. Allington Joyce Jolly broke up in flight at a private airfield on Long Island. Although this accident occurred some five months after Armistice Day, the fact that Jolly was on active duty flying a plane designed for military use makes him, in a way, an eleventh hour casualty of the war.

Jolly had just returned stateside from the ravaged Continent, having survived "all the horrors and dangers of the war." He was the second pilot to die flying a plane known as the Christmas "Bullet," the brainchild of the reckless aircraft designer Dr. William W. Christmas. The Bullet, generally regarded as one of the most ineptly designed planes in aviation history, featured flexible upper wings, miniature lower wings and a strange fin and rudder assembly.

Allington Jolly is buried at Cropsey Cemetery in the northeast corner of McLean County.

In France he drove a staff car for Gen. John J. Pershing and others before becoming a flyer, attaining the rank of captain in the French air force. He trained pilots as observers over the frontlines, and served as the chief of air service personnel at a base in Tours. The French government awarded Jolly the Croix de Guerre (War Cross).