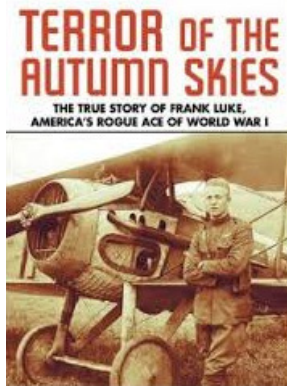


Book Review – Terror of the Autumn Skies – The True Story of Frank Luke, America’s Rogue Ace of WWI
by Blaine Pardoe

Review by Chris Hope, Master CFI



100 years ago this month, a relatively minor member of the European Monarchy was assassinated in a relatively unknown location. And the result of

that moment set a new course in world history for the next 100 years. Because of the various alliances between European countries, nearly all of Europe was drug into the war. Four years later, after he ran on the statement that “He kept us out of the war”, Woodrow Wilson committed US troops. The end of the war set the stage for WW II, which set the stage for the Cold War that followed. So even though the US was a late-comer to the event, we have been affected as much as anyone. So I thought that it might be interesting to look for something this month regarding the air battles of WW I.

In my mind, there are only two men to look for. The first is Eddie Rickenbacker, the “Ace of Aces” during that period, the man who went on to run Eastern Airlines. But the other man, the first American Ace of the war, is not nearly as well known.

Blaine Pardoe has helped to rectify that situation.

When war broke out, the United States was pledged for neutrality. Neither the populace nor the politicians had any stomach for entering a conflict that seemed to have no bearing on the US. That feeling ended in late 1917 when the German government declared that all seagoing vessels were fair game. And, at about the same time, Germany attempted to ally themselves with Mexico, attempting to induce Mexico in to invading the US southwest and reclaiming the area that the US claimed after the Mexican war.

So war breaks out, and newsmen are clamoring for a hero. There were no good stories in the trenches. The stories of bravery and romance were with the pilots. American pilots had been fighting with the French and the English for some time, but when the American Expeditionary Force formally entered the war, so did the American “Air Force”.

The life span of a fighter pilot was measured in weeks and months. And Frank Luke was no exception. Frank arrived in France in the late summer of 1918, saw his first combat in early September, and was dead by the end of the month. In that time, however, he became the stuff of legends.

During September, 1918, and in the years following the war, Franks’ exploits grew. There were innumerable “eyewitness accounts” of this flying, and of his last flight.

There were many women who claimed that they were his finance. Blaine Pardoe has dug through all of the facts and the misinformation to provide a straight-forward, but still exciting account, of the man's life.

No one disagrees that Frank Luke was an exceptional pilot. And no one disagrees that he could be hard to get close to. He was a loner, and while he was not a braggart, he did have a way of stating his intentions that rubbed his fellow pilots the wrong way.

For example, when he first joined the 27th Squadron in the late summer, he observed an American plane that had been shot down. From the damage, it was obvious that the Germans had gained the advantage, coming in from the rear. And of course, nearly all planes that were shot down were shot down from that position. Frank Luke's response? "No one will ever get behind me like that." And an attitude that implied that he was better than his squadron mates, coupled with a continuing to habit of flying off on his own, did not endear him to his peers or his superiors.

There was no argument about his bravery nor his ability however. The most dangerous flying of the war was balloon busting. Observation balloons were tethered, and would seem to be easy targets. However, they were ringed by anti-aircraft fire and protected by friendly aircraft.

Officially, Frank Luke was credited with 18 victories in his one month of activity, including four balloons. On the day that he was shot down, he is credited with two aircraft and three balloons within a period of about ten minutes. With a record like this, and a personality that begged for investigation, he was a natural for a myriad of stories in the years following his death.

Frank Luke was born and raised in Arizona, and that is where we find his monument – in front of the state capital in Phoenix. But more telling, and a more lasting honor, is the nearby Air Force base named in his honor, the base where still today, every USAF fighter pilot trains.

Blaine Pardoe's story does him justice.

Chris loves to read, write, and fly, but not necessarily in that order

You can reach him at: Thehopeschris@gmail.com

And here are more favorites: www.ChrisHopeFAAFlightInstructor.com/books/books.html