

The Literary Digest

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CAPTAIN ZINN FINDS THE GRAVES OF LOST AMERICAN AVIATORS

A DETERMINED little man with a mission that he chose for himself, and to which he devotes himself with almost religious fervor, is combing hundreds of square miles of the Great War's battle-grounds, behind what once was known as the enemy's lines. He is searching for the lonely graves of the lost fliers of the American Air Service. Captain Zinn is his name—Capt. E. W. Zinn, and it is particularly fitting that he should search out these American graves, for he assigned most of the American fliers to the planes they were to pilot, and to the stations from which many of them were to sail away never to return. *The Stars and Stripes*, official newspaper of the A. E. F., tells something of the personality of this determined little man, of his quests, and of his accomplishments:

It was Captain Zinn, a veteran of the French Foreign Legion and the Lafayette Escadrille, who, when eager young American aviators, fresh from their training-camps, reported for duty where the fighting was, assigned them to squadrons and each to a particular airplane. Thus it was that he came to know them all. He sent them to their stations. He knew what ships they would pilot in combat in the air, on bombing expeditions, on reconnaissances over the lines.

And now he seeks for those he sent out and who never returned. He asked that he might do it. If you talk to Captain Zinn about it, you know why he made the request. You know how he feels about that which he is doing. There is no mawkish sentiment about Captain Zinn.

But deep down within him Captain Zinn feels that he and no other should go out on the mission that now engages him. He has an interest that is intimate and personal.

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Already, Captain Zinn's quest has led him over the greater part of northern France and into Belgium and Germany. Through the torn fields and woods in the Verdun, Château-Thierry, St. Mihiel, and Meuse sectors he has gone. He has tramped through the Argonne to Sedan and sought in the mountains that encircle Metz and hide the valley of the Moselle. Wherever there was fighting in which the American Air Service participated, there has gone, or will go, Zinn.

Out of 150 missing American aviators, Captain Zinn already has definitely located and identified the spots where seventy fell and were buried. It has required many days of painstaking search and inquiry to attain this result.

Captain Zinn has found that in a great many cases American fliers were buried either by the Germans or by civilians with no mark of identification left on them.

The line of work in which Captain Zinn is engaged is one calling for unlimited patience and the ability to go into endless detail. His exploits read like stories of the investigations of a detective who starts with only the most meager facts from which he finally works out a solution of his problem. We read:

Many times he has come upon a grave with a rude cross on which was scrawled: "Unidentified American Aviator," or "Two Unidentified American Aviators." He has had to obtain positive identification by careful examination of air-service records, questioning of peasants and civilians who saw American machines brought down and deductions based on the information he gathered. In some instances it has been necessary to open graves to make sure.

To start out with, Captain Zinn has the records of squadrons, which show, for instance, on what date a missing pilot went out, what his mission was, over what country he naturally would go, and what kind of machine he had. Perhaps an attack by an overwhelming force or an accident or other circumstances forced the pilot off the course marked out for him. When he failed to return, only speculation as to

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where he fell could be indulged in. Unless the Germans notified his squadron of his death and the location of his grave, he became one of the men for whom Captain Zinn now seeks.

There was the case of young Kenyon Roper, of the 91st Aero Squadron. By a process of elimination of facts gathered, it was fairly definitely established that Roper had come down in the night between the lines. Captain Zinn questioned scores of peasant folk. Yes, they had heard that an American aviator had fallen, but they did not know where. There was what was left of his burned machine. But the search appeared hopeless. And then Captain Zinn heard that a small boy had a handkerchief that the dead flier had possessed. He found the boy. And the handkerchief. And written in indelible ink on the little piece of linen was the name "Kenyon Roper." It was easy then to learn from the boy where the grave was and to be sure that Kenyon Roper lay sleeping there.

Then there was the case of Lester Harter, of the 11th Squadron. He went out and his machine caught fire. Harter jumped, just as Major Lufbery did and as other aviators have done, and fell many thousand feet to his death. When awe-stricken peasants ran from the fields to his crushed body they found in his hand a scrap of paper, and on it was written in hurried, jerky letters, "Lester Harter."

Fearing lost identity among the dead, Lester Harter must have written his name on that piece of paper before he jumped from his machine.

Then there were Kinne and McElroy, of the 99th Aero Squadron. Only a piece of the tail of their machine was found. It was enough, tho, to show that it had belonged to their ship. Their plane came down in flames between Cunel and Nantillois. Both jumped. Days were spent in hunting for their bodies. One day their squadron commander joined in the search. He hunted for hours in a thick wood. And he gave up. He was standing on the edge of a covered shell-hole, discouraged. Some impulse caused him to stir the earth in the shell-hole with his foot. And there he found the body of young

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McElroy. Near by they later found Kinne.

There are many such stories that Captain Zinn can tell.

From the information he gathers, Captain Zinn writes personal letters to the relatives of the dead aviators, telling in simple words how and where they went to their deaths. His letters usually give the first true account of the manner in which the fighters of the air met their ends. Sometimes those letters destroy cherished hopes that the aviators reported as "missing" by the War Department might sometime, somehow, turn up. But it is better so, says Captain Zinn.

