The Literary Digest
May 17, 1919

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 miles of 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 re-
turn. The Stars and Stripes, official news-
paper 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 Ameri-
ad aviators, fresh from their training-
camps, reported for duty where the fight-
ing 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 reconna-
issances 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 re-
quest. 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.

OldMagazineArticles.com
AMERICAN AVIATORS

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
AMERICAN AVIATORS

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 handker-
chief that the dead flier had possest. 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 Luberry 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,
erky 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 Kimme 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 Nan-
tillois. 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, dis-
couraged. Some impulse caused him to stir
the earth in the shell-hole with his foot.
And there he found the body of young
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.