

Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

Assassin's Eyes

Two legendary American air force fighter pilots, both highly decorated aces, one from the first World War and the other from the Second, and both with strong ties to Indianapolis and the Memorial Day 500, were Eddie Rickenbacker and Ray Crawford.

Rickenbacker shot down so many of the Kaiser's aircraft, and Crawford so many of the Fuhrer's, that the pair became the most deadly instruments of destruction patrolling the wartime skies above no man's land.



A superstar pioneer racing driver, Eddie Rickenbacker entered World War 1 by enrolling in the Army Air Force. Quickly, he and his Spad made themselves perhaps the war's top assassins with 14 (or more) kills; by the armistice Rickenbacker was so much of a celebrity he was co-rated with America's favorite general, Black Jack Pershing.

The similarities between war and racing, were, to Rickenbacker striking: the airfields of France were like the racing pits at Sheepshead Bay in Wisconsin and Corona in California; the flight crews of the Lafayette Escadrille and Hat-in-The Ring machine gun squadrons maintaining his Spad,(which he'd taught himself to fly in two weeks) reminded him of his racing mechanics overhauling his Duesenbergs; and his gloves, goggles, and floppy cloth aviator's cap took Rickenbacker back to his dress for work in the Indy 500.

And there was also the intoxicating spirit of combat. It wasn't only deadly competition between Rickenbacker and the Germans, it was personal competition between himself and Luke, Putnam, Baylis and other aces for the distinction of destroying the most Fokkers, Rumplers and Halberstadts before World War 1 ended.

But after Luke, Putnam and Baylis got shot down and killed -- Luke survived his crash, then died shooting it out on the ground – only Rickenbacker was left to fight on.

And fight on he did. In October of 1918 alone he flew ten combat missions. In the first he set fire to an enemy dragon balloon. In the second, he mortally wounded a Halberstadt and blasted a Fokker. In the third, he blew up a Halberstadt and a Rumpler. In the fourth, he destroyed a Fokker. In the fifth, he pierced a second balloon. In the sixth, he downed two Fokkers that hit the ground, burning, in the same instant.

In his seventh sortie, he exploded a fifth Fokker and damaged a sixth. In the eighth, he claimed still another. In the ninth, he wasted two more. In the tenth, he took out a member of the elite von Richtofen squadron as well as his third balloon.

By then, the Kaiser was ready to quit fighting; and so, finally, was Rickenbacker.

Just as he fought, Rickenbacker, when racing on dirt, board, road, and bricked speedway tracks showed his rivals no mercy at all. Which explains why his record racing compares well with his highly decorated wartime one: throughout 1914, 1915, and 1916, only three rival drivers collected more championship points.

But breaking into racing wasn't easy.

He had to scrub floors, labor as a car salesman, and exhaust his small savings as a traveling flying daredevil before getting a real driving job in 1914 with the Duesenberg brothers.

The Duesenberg boys were still obscurely located in Des Moines, and calling their not-yet-distinguished racing cars "Masons", but when Rickenbacker joined the Cornstalk Circuit and upset Wishart's favored Mercer, at a gambling-ravaged 300-mile meet at Sioux City, the brothers suddenly tasted success.

Automobile racing during its first decades could turn murderous. Resuming battle with Spenser Wishart back in Illinois, at the Elgin road race, Rickenbacker rounded a curve and discovered the yellow Mercer on its back and Wishart dying on a stretcher made out of a barn door while elements of the Illinois militia barred a doctor from crossing the track because he lacked the proper credential.

Rickenbacker seemed invincible. Racing couldn't harm him, nor could the Kaiser and his air force, nor could a pair of plane crashes, the second of which occurred in the South Pacific, near the beginning of World War 2.

His B-17B sank so fast once it hit the water that he and the crew barely had time to inflate the life rafts. For three weeks, adrift and lost with no land in sight, he and six others sustained themselves on rain water, fish and seagulls. One man died. The others almost wished they had, too, owing to the way Rickenbacker (at 51 and the oldest occupant of the raft) ceaselessly hounded, berated and goaded them into staying alive.

A PBY Catalina flying boat rescued them on their 24th day on the water, off Samoa. Rickenbacker, who at the time was a special assistant to the Secretary of War, went on to New Guinea to have a powwow with MacArthur, one of the top dog generals of the Pacific theatre. Then he returned to Washington for additional accommodations and instructions.

Rickenbacker had been born Richenbacher – his family actually was Swiss – he altered the spelling during World War 1 because he thought it sounded a bit less “Hun”.

In business, as in war and racing, he took terrific chances and experienced hair-breadth escapes. Starting his own automobile-manufacturing company at the age of 33, he was out of business and a quarter-million dollars in debt at 35. Then, turning to aviation, he launched his own airline – Eastern – and as another sideline the man spearheaded the use of jets for commercial travel.

In addition to all his other adventures and activities, From 1927 through 1945 Rickenbacker owned the Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

On Memorial Day morning of 1933, the whole starting field threw a wildcat strike. Rickenbacker was a tall, erect man with a flat mouth and those assassin’s eyes. He had a violent temper. Upon angrily informing the strikers that if carried out their plot he’d close the Speedway forever, the hardness of his eyes made everyone believe him.

So the 500 ran as scheduled – but became such an horrendous bloodbath (one driver and two riding mechanics killed) that Rickenbacker, still angry, cut the purse by 30 percent, canceled the victory banquet, and, after paying the massacre’s survivors their stipends out on the sidewalk, told them to get lost.

Rickenbacker died in 1973, aged 82; Ray Crawford left at 80, in 1996.

Crawford’s combat theater in the Second World War was Africa, and as the 97th Fighter Squadron’s top-ranking fighter ace in his big P-38 Lightning, Crawford patrolled the

skies of the dark continent as if he owned them, which he did, getting six, or perhaps seven, enemy kills in 1943 alone.



When the war ended, the Air Force, needing an ace to test-fly its hot new P-80 Shooting Star, chose Crawford, who accepted and did a good job at the high-risk assignment.

In the 1950's Crawford became an amateur racing driver. Heir to the family grocery business, he could afford to buy fast cars. One of them was the Kurtis-Kraft sports car he took to Sebring, earning acclaim as the first

man to complete the dozen hours iron man, without relief driver help.

But, where he most wanted to be wasn't Sebring but Indianapolis, where he raced a pair of Meyer-Drake Offenhauser roadsters in three 500s. The Brickyard, however, was just too much race track for him. Crashing badly in 1959, his injuries were so serious decided not to race anywhere again.

Amazingly, back in 1954, the five-day, 2,000-mile-long open=road nightmare called the Mexican Road Race was, won by Crawford, the "amateur" defeating all the professionals.



He had purchased a duplicate of Team Lincoln's incredibly tricked-out Capri model stock cars, Mexico's perennial winners. But Team Lincoln agreed to the sale only if Crawford promised to keep out of the way of the way of its own hired guns Vukovich, Stevenson, McGrath, Faulkner, and Mantz.

Came the first of Mexico's five days most of the hired guns were sabotaged

and knocked out of the running by tank loads of mysteriously poisoned gasoline.

So, suddenly, Crawford's new orders from Team Lincoln were to blow off the powerful opponent Chrysler 300s and win Mexico.

He did. Crawford was modest; most really brave people are.

"Because I didn't want anybody thinking Ray Crawford was chicken," he'd replied to my question of why, after surviving all the risks of combat fighter and test-piloting he'd chosen to face even more deadly risks in the Mexican Road Race.

Ray Crawford chicken?? *Get serious. -JS*