

Luck and Death: WWI Pilots and their Superstitions

Air & Space Magazine

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Combat pilots during World War I confronted death on a daily basis. At the start of the conflict, pilots took potshots at each other with pistols or shotguns, or even threw things at the enemy from open cockpits. By war's end, the machines and tactics had evolved enough that airplanes became efficient killing machines.



In 1918 France, the 13th Aero Squadron painted a skeleton on the side of their SPAD, a stark reminder of their own mortality. (US Army)

It was not uncommon to watch a friend—someone with whom you had shared laughs and drinks just a few hours before—plummet to a burning death. Only inexperienced pilots believed they were invulnerable to being shot down. All it took was one mistake at the wrong time. It could be something as simple as a poor night's sleep, indigestion, or a hangover—anything that distracted the attention. With the odds so often against them, pilots on both sides needed something to level the playing field. They needed a healthy bit of luck.

Many pilots imbued both animate and inanimate objects with a magical power to affect their fate. Whether real or imagined, it didn't matter—if a pilot believed something was lucky, it could make the difference between confidence and bad morale. Some fliers pictured themselves as instruments of death. Skeletons, skulls, and Grim Reapers were common on

WWI aircraft, suggesting that even as they faced their own mortality, the pilots hoped to exact retribution on the enemy before their own number came up.

The Knight of Death



Frenchman Charles Nungesser was the archetypal ace. His flamboyant personality, taste for fast cars, danger, and women made him appear larger than life, and he finished the war with 43 official victories. Nungesser marked all of his airplanes with his trademark “Knight of Death” symbol: a black heart containing a skull and crossed bones, coffin and candles.

After the war, he and Francois Coli were in a race with Charles Lindbergh to make the first transatlantic flight. Before their attempt, Nungesser had a smaller version of his lucky war emblem painted on the fuselage of their Levasseur PL.8 biplane, L'Oiseau Blanc. On May 8, 1927, the pair of French aviators took off from Paris, but disappeared shortly afterward over the North Atlantic. After Lindbergh made his successful crossing less than two weeks later, he commented to the French people at Le Bourget field that he was saddened by their loss. Here's a gallery of some of the more colorful superstitions from the Great War.

“Old Charles”



French ace Georges Guynemer named his Nieuport 11 Le Vieux Charles, or “Old Charles” — why, we don’t know. When he upgraded to a better aircraft, Guynemer took the name with him, in the hope of transferring his (so far) good luck to to the new plane.

Unlike Nungesser, Guynemer was quiet and self-effacing. “Old Charles” seems to have been kind to its pilot, as Guynemer downed 53 enemy aircraft, while his planes stopped more German bullets than any other ace on either side. But his luck ran out on September 11, 1917, when he was shot down on a combat mission. His most notable quote: “Until one has given all, one has given nothing.” Guynemer’s SPAD VII—shown here—is preserved in the Le Musee de L’Air in Paris.

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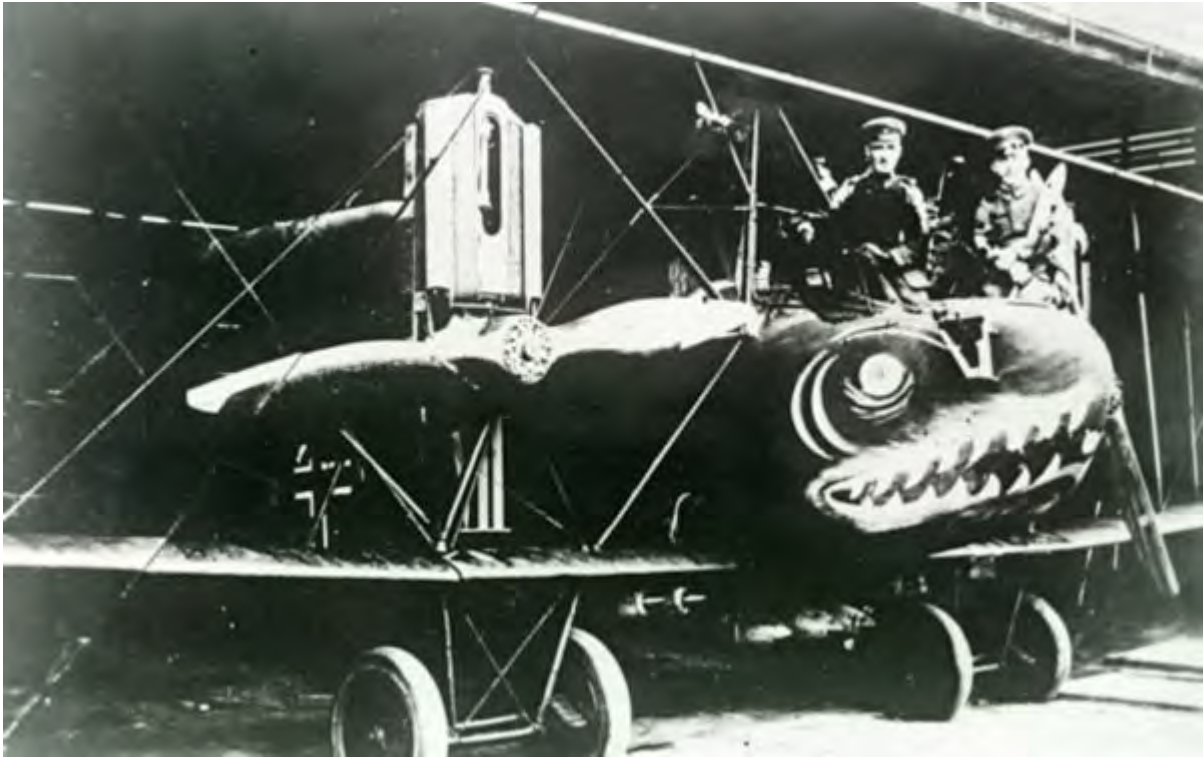
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The First "Angry Birds"



Some WWI pilots, like this German bomber crew, gave their aircraft a distinctive “face,” the more menacing the better. Werner Voss, a close friend of Baron Manfred von Richthofen (the “Red Baron”), painted eyes on the front of the cowling of his Fokker Dr1 triplane. Before that, Voss had painted a heart and swastika on his Albatros D III for luck. In September 1917, six British aces flying S.E.5 a’s—including James McCudden—finally shot him down.

Squadron Mascots



Some flying squadrons had animal mascots, some of which brought good luck, and some of which didn't. Pictured here is Whiskey, one of two lion mascots (the other was named Soda) of

the famed Lafayette Escadrille, a unit of mostly American pilots who fought for France. Whiskey had been bought in Paris for 500 francs. At the suggestion that he would have to be caged, Escadrille member Jim McConnell responded: "Why put him behind bars? He'll see all the bars he needs travelling with this mob."

Raoul Lufberry (pictured) taught Whiskey a trick that never failed to get a good laugh from the squadron: He would place the lion just around the corner of a barracks when visitors were on the base. When an unsuspecting soldier or guest would stroll past, Lufberry would signal for the lion to roar out of his hiding place and throw his paws over the shoulders of the hapless victim. Whiskey would then bare his fangs and raise his head to the heavens with his mouth open. Lufberry said he was laughing.

Monkey Business



Eugene Bullard—the first African American to fly for the allies—had what was considered the final word in good luck: a monkey. Here Bullard poses next to his Nieuport 24 with “Jimmy” sitting on his arm. Bullard served with the Lafayette Escadrille and is credited with assisting in the shooting down of one or two German aircraft. After the war, he opened a jazz nightclub in Paris called “L’Escadrille.” Among those who frequented the club were Louis Armstrong, Josephine Baker, and French ace Charles Nungesser.

Edwin Parsons and His Cat



Unable to find a lucky monkey in spite of a desperate visit to the Paris Zoo, Escadrille member Edwin Parsons settled instead for the talisman of a stuffed black cat, which he wired to the struts of his SPAD. Parsons would not fly without it, and claimed that after one dogfight, the cat actually took a bullet for him (he discovered it “bleeding” sawdust). After his plane was destroyed in a bombing raid, and the lucky stuffed cat along with it, Parsons refused to fly until he returned to Paris to find another one. This Austro-Hungarian crew settled for painting a black cat on their A.E.G. G.III

The Red Baron



Baron Manfred Von Richthofen scored 80 aerial victories during the war, and painted his airplanes red partly to frighten his enemies. The Red Baron was extremely superstitious—never flying without his lucky scarf and jacket—but finally was killed during aerial combat in 1918. Richthofen was given a dignified funeral by the allies (above) with full military honors.