Lafayette Escadrille

Photo: Smithsonian

View of Lafayette Escadrille Nieuport XI fighters on the line at Luxeuil-les-Bains Aerodrome, France; circa 1916.

Who were the Lafayette Escadrille?
The Lafayette Escadrille was a French squadron made up of American volunteer aviators and French officers. The squadron allowed Americans to support the allied cause in World War I, prior to 1917. The name of the squadron came from Marquis de Lafayette, a French hero of the American Revolutionary War.

Beginnings of the squadron:
Norman Prince and William Thaw, both American pilots, were the first to set in motion the creation of a French air squadron composed of American volunteers. This idea later culminated in the creation of Escadrille Americaine with the combined efforts of Norman Prince, Edmund L. Gros of the American Hospital of Paris, Jarousse de Silac, and William Thaw, and with the unofficial support of U.S. Ambassador Myron T. Herrick. The French believed that this squadron would be beneficial for the Allied cause, so on April 20, 1916 they commissioned the squadron. The name of the squadron was later changed because of German objection; Count Johann Heinrich von Bernstorff, the German Ambassador to the U.S., pointed out that the name Escadrille Americaine contradicted the United States' neutrality in the war. Therefore, the squadron's name was changed to the Lafayette Escadrille. Due to the squadron's popularity and an extensive number of American volunteers, the Lafayette Flying Corps was formed just six weeks later to enable additional Americans to fly for the French Air Service. The Lafayette Escadrille was the original squadron within the Lafayette Flying Corps, which included other squadrons with American volunteers.

Interesting Facts:
- Thirty-eight American volunteers flew for the squadron.
- Most aviators in the squadron came from an upper class and Ivy League background. Thirty members of the squadron held college degrees or had enrolled in a higher educational institution. There were 9 Harvard alumni.
- Eleven of the aviators in the squadron were sons of millionaires.
- Only 9 of the 38 American volunteers in the squadron had prewar flying experience.
- The average age of the pilots in the squadron was 26 with ages ranging from 20 to 40 years old.
- Squadron ace Raoul Lufbery had 17 confirmed victories.
- Squadron co-founder Norman Prince is buried at the National Cathedral, in Washington, D.C.

Re-dedication of Memorial
U.S. Air Force F-22 Raptors from the 94th Fighter Squadron, which traces its lineage to the Lafayette Escadrille, fly over the memorial at the re-dedication ceremony on April 20, 2016.

American Battle Monuments Commission
This agency of the United States government operates and maintains 26 American cemeteries and 31 memorials, monuments and markers in 17 countries. The Commission works to fulfill the vision of its first chairman, General of the Armies John J. Pershing. Pershing, commander of the American Expeditionary Forces during World War I, promised that "time will not dim the glory of their deeds."

Lafayette Escadrille Memorial Cemetery
The Lafayette Escadrille Memorial Cemetery commemorates the birth of American combat aviation and serves as a symbol of Franco-American comradeship during World War I. The memorial cemetery was dedicated on July 4, 1928 and was owned by the Lafayette Escadrille Memorial Foundation until the site was acquired by ABMC in 2017.

The cemetery offers free guided tours on request pending staff availability.

American Battle Monuments Commission
2300 Clarendon Boulevard
Suite 500
Arlington, VA 22201
USA

Lafayette Escadrille Memorial Cemetery
5, Blvd. Raymond Poincaré
92430 Marnes-la-Coquette, France
TEL   +33. (0)1.87.15.85.32
GPS   N48 52.185 E2 13.036

Located inside the gates of the Domaine National de Sainte-Cloud public park. Open Daily at these times:
9:00 am to 5:00 pm daily except 25 December and 1 January

For more information on this site and other ABMC commemorative sites, please visit www.abmc.gov

May 2025

AMERICAN BATTLE MONUMENTS COMMISSION

Lafayette Escadrille Memorial Cemetery

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"Time will not dim the glory of their deeds."
- General of the Armies John J. Pershing

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LAFAYETTE ESCADRILLE

Two-hundred sixty-nine Americans flew with French squadrons during the course of the war. Of this number, only 38 were assigned to the Lafayette Escadrille (Squadron). The rest served in other units. Collectively, all Americans in the French Air Service were considered to be part of the "Lafayette Flying Corps," an unofficial designation. Many of these aviators transferred to American squadrons once the U.S. entered the war in April 1917. After the Armistice, Lafayette Flying Corps veterans worked with American and French leaders to build a memorial dedicated to those who flew with the French Air Service. The memorial would also serve as a final resting place for many of thier comrades who lost their lives during the war.
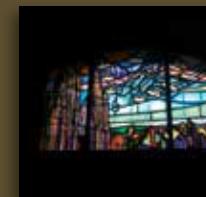
Dedicated on July 4, 1928, the memorial cemetery consists of an ornate central arch, half the size of the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, with a French inscription on the façade, and an English translation on the rear. The central arch is flanked by two open loggias which terminate in end pavilions. A reflecting pool runs the length of the memorial. Behind the memorial is a semi-circular terrace that forms the roof of the crypt below. Stained-glass windows in the crypt depict the major battles of the Western Front.

In the memorial crypt are 68 sarcophagi, one for each of the aviators of the Lafayette Flying Corps who lost their lives during World War I. Forty-nine of these aviators are entombed in the crypt along with two of their French commanding officers. The remainder rest in other locations, or their remains were never recovered.

By the early 21st century, decades of delayed maintenance on the memorial had led to structural damage, water intrusion and corrosion that required large-scale repair. Understanding its significance in the history of American military aviation, ABMC, through an agreement with the French government that included financial support, led restoration efforts in 2015 and 2016 in time for the 100th anniversary of the formation of the squadron. In January 2017 ABMC officially assumed responsibility of this site, making it the ninth World War I Commemorative cemetery managed by the agency.

Stained Glass Murals
Located in the crypt, thirteen stained glass windows, created by noted French artisans Frères Mauméjean, depict the significant operations the Lafayette Escadrille participated in.

Visitor Center
A visitor center located on the grounds of the memorial in the former caretaker's cottage tells the story of the Lafayette Escadrille and the Lafayette Flying Corps.

Reflecting Pool
Located at the front of the memorial, the reflecting pool and fountain are a unique feature of this memorial.

Arch
The roof of the arch is decorated with carved insignia of the 24 French Air Service squadrons that Americans flew with in World War I.

Crypt and Sarcophagi
Arranged in a semi-circle below the memorial is a crypt that houses 68 sarcophagi in niches along the wall, representing each of the 68 pilots who lost their lives during the war, along with two additional plaques for the two French commanding officers also interred here. Not all those memorialized are interred in the crypt.

Facade
The facade of the memorial is decorated with the names of the campaigns that the squadron participated in along with images of the squadron insignia, pilot's heads, and other symbolic iconography.

Engraving
The base of the arch is engraved with dedicatory statements along with the names of pilots from the squadron, arranged by the date on which they joined. It includes their awards and date of death.

Pilots pose in front of a Nieuport XI fighter.

Useful Information

DIMENSIONS: 12.35 acres

INTERRED: 51
(48 AMERICAN, 1 CANADIAN, 2 FRENCH)

DEDICATED: July 4, 1928

CRYPT TOURS ARRANGED THROUGH THE VISITOR CENTER LOCATED AT THE SITE.