

PROLOGUE

Some day they will return with honor . . . not all, but some . . .

—Brochure from Fred Zinn's Memorial Air Show,
Battle Creek, MI, 1962

As an author you sometimes are granted the privilege of ensuring that some of our priceless history is not lost. Such is the case with Frederick W. Zinn. It is a story of how our nation treats its honored dead. How our military helps families come to terms with their loss speaks volumes about who we are as a people. The quest to locate and bring home the dead or their possessions from war is almost as compelling as the story of the wars themselves. This was something that Fred Zinn understood more than most people. We are defined by how we honor those that have died for us.

In doing research for this book I spent a day with my daughter copying Zinn's extensive files at the National Museum of the United States Air Force at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio. While waiting in the lobby for our escort I glanced up at the carved Airmen's Creed etched in stone for visitors. The last stanza of that creed struck me the most, "I will never leave an airman behind . . ." It dawned on me, at that very moment, that I was writing about the man that line was based on. The entire concept of not leaving an airman behind was started by Frederick W. Zinn. In a time before Crime Scene Investigation, before DNA testing, a lone man who wandered the fields of France, Italy, and Sicily searching for missing airmen and ensuring they were brought home. Such a man deserved a book about his mission—a mission that continues on to this day.

The World War I, the Great War, was a meat grinder in terms of human death. The war devastated a generation of young men in Europe. The numbers alone tell the story; 8.5 million were killed, another 21 mil-

lion wounded, and 7.7 million were made prisoners of war. The war began in 1914 under the belief that it would only last a few months. Four and a half years later it had consumed millions of people and laid the foundation for another, even more devastating war. It was a war that ushered in the U-boat, combat aircraft, poison gas, mines, flamethrowers, rapid-fire artillery, and an array of weaponry that was geared to kill, maim, or cripple.

There are no statistics as to how many men survived the entirety of the war, but those numbers are woefully small. Weapons technology saw to that, combined with the deadly stalemate that trench warfare brought to the Western Front. Of the men that enlisted or were mobilized in 1914, only a few thousand were still in fighting trim in 1918. Most of the combatants that followed were newer recruits that had joined the war effort after the conflict started. Of those seasoned veterans that survived the entire duration of the war, almost all bore the scars of their wounds and memories of the most horrific conflict up until that time.

Air warfare had its own breed of carnage. Just over a decade after the Wright Brothers flew at Kitty Hawk, aircraft had been turned into weapons of war. Crude at first, these weapons resembled box kites with clunky engines and machine guns. In the early years of the war, pilots and observers that went into the skies more often fell victim to their planes falling apart than to enemy fire. When Anthony Fokker introduced an interrupter gear for the airplane, allowing a machine gun to easily fire through a spinning propeller, the war in the skies became even more deadly.

The life expectancy of a pilot was around three weeks at the front. Young men, primarily the best and brightest college students or recent graduates, started volunteering to join the fledgling U.S. Air Service (USAS), as well as the Royal Flying Corps and the French Air Service (Aéronautique Militaire). The fate of those that did not survive was as lethal as those men locked in a tug-of-war over the trench lines but was made more glamorous to the public because of the machines they flew. Pilots and observers were seen as gallant knights of the air in a war that lacked romantic imagery. In reality it was a brutal duty that prematurely aged the select few aviators that developed the skills necessary to survive.

Not all of the heroes were aces . . .

One of the most deadly duties a man could assume in a cockpit was that of aerial observation and photography. In this role planes with a pi-

lot and an observer would fly over enemy lines to secure images of troop movements and artillery placements and assist in adjusting artillery barrages. The observer would handle a bulky wooden camera and take images of the ground below while the pilot tried to avoid enemy pursuit planes. Later in the war observers worked with wireless sets, communicating to artillery batteries to guide their shots on the entrenched targets thousands of feet below. This was done from an open cockpit, exposed to the freezing winds, often under fire.

Anti-aircraft fire—known as “archie”—was trained on the observation airplanes intent on blasting them out of the skies. Such aircraft were prime targets for enemy pursuit planes and were often seen as easy victories. It was a fear-filled job. In open cockpits at five to ten thousand feet, the thin, bone-chilling air made every movement painful and difficult. Explosions from anti-aircraft shells tossed a steady hot rain of blasted iron at the highly flammable aircraft.

When a plane was shot down more often than not the crew was killed. The airplanes were made of spruce and thin tubing covered with painted canvas shrunken with dope. Even a rough landing on the friendly side of the lines could kill a crew and turn the flimsy airplane into a jumble of flaming wreckage. Parachutes had been developed, but the U.S. Army Air Service did not issue them out of fear that pilots and observers might bail out at the first sign of battle—costing the government an expensive airplane. For the duration of the Great War, the United States would worry more about the cost of replacing an airplane than about the lives of the crew.

Combat patrols were flown over the other side of the battle front, and those planes that did not return were listed as missing in action. For the aviators that were shot down, unless their fates were witnessed, hope remained that they might have landed and been taken prisoner. The German Army Air Service often notified the Allies of captured airmen by dropping messages. Some wounded pilots and observers did not survive their medical treatment after being captured.

Air battles were fought at devastatingly close range, often measured in the tens of yards. There was no protection beyond linen and thin pieces of wood—with many aviators killed by machine-gun bullets. The dead that were shot down were often buried hastily by enemy troops, often with little ceremony. Pursuit pilots, the hunters of enemy aircraft, often met the same fate as the two-man crews; often riddled with bullets, they dropped into crumpled piles of debris. The bullets that didn't kill pi-

lots or observers outright shattered and shredded the airplanes themselves. Sometimes their graves were marked with their shattered propellers, names etched in crudely with a bayonet or knife; sometimes a makeshift wooden cross was erected with an identity disk hung on it. Many times the graves were simply noted by the infantry troops that had performed the burials, recorded in regimental records as a mere footnote if at all. Some shallow graves were destroyed under the barrage of artillery shells that ripped and tore the landscape or disappeared due to simple erosion, destroying forever the traces of the men or their machines.

This was the world from which Frederick William Zinn and his unlikely lifelong quest for locating and returning missing airmen emerged.

Like so many heroes, he has been overlooked by history. The names that Americans tend to remember from World War I are almost iconic—Eddie Rickenbacker, Raoul Lufbery, Alvin York, and Frank Luke Jr.—names held to an almost heroic status. The name Zinn is not usually on that illustrious roll call, although it deserves to be.

Fred Zinn was fortunate in the course of his life because his efforts, his life's work, touched the families of many men both during his lifetime and beyond his death. It is doubtful that he thought about the impact he would have on others, on bringing some measure of closure to thousands of people through the system he established. Fred was not a man given to contemplation of destiny or the soothing of his own sense of worth.

Regardless of his intentions, his work lives on today. The U.S. National Archives, keeper of the nation's treasures and documentation, will tell you that every year the Missing Air Crew Reports that Fred designed and implemented are among the most requested documents by surviving family members. People ask for them because these documents, more than any other, provide a glimpse into the last moments of the life of a loved one who died for our country. These documents are a tangible link to a family's past, of heroic deeds so often forgotten, of men longing to be remembered if only one more time.

Ultimately, for Fred Zinn, his life's work was all about the families. He sought to give them closure, to end their sleepless nights of wonder and worry. He would be most proud of the work that the Joint POW/MIA [prisoner of war/missing in action] Accounting Command (JPAC) does every day in the far-flung corners of the world, bringing home the missing service personnel lost in wars. In this regard, the work he began con-

tinues on, and Fred would be pleased that many of the recommendations he made decades before were finally being implemented.

In his life he was a student, a businessman, and a civic leader. He valiantly fought in the trenches of the Great War as a member of the elite French Foreign Legion—the original band of brothers. Fred was a published writer and journalist. He flew with the Lafayette Flying Corps, and some of his closest lifelong friends were members of the illustrious Lafayette Escadrille. He was the first American aviation combat photographer, flying with the French Air Service. He served in the Lafayette Flying Corps and the U.S. Air Service. He dabbled in civil engineering and was a father and grandfather. In later life he was a spy for the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), a politician, and an icon of his small Michigan community.

Through it all he was a seeker, one of many that searched for and recovered the remains of missing aviators. He had the distinction of being the first person to conceive of the idea that missing men could be found, identified, and brought back to the arms of their country and the hearts of their surviving families. He pioneered the concept of never leaving a man behind, today a mantra of all the military branches. Every branch of the service in some way reflects the ideal of not leaving comrades behind even when they have fallen in battle. This is part of his legacy.

Fred Zinn never wrote his autobiography and rarely spoke in public about his exploits as some of his peers did. What little I have gleaned about him indicates that he was more interested in the missing men he searched for than bragging about his own life—so I decided to honor that in the writing of this book. Between each chapter of Fred Zinn's life I have provided the story of a missing airman that he either found or never located. The invaluable researcher Jean Armstrong, who assisted on this book, helped me re-create Fred Zinn's list and cross-reference a number of sources

The selection of these men was somewhat complicated. With dozens to choose from, many were selected because of their stories either in death or with the families after their demise. I wanted to ensure a good geographic distribution of personnel from across the United States. I also wanted to choose men that had been found and some that still remain missing so that their stories would be told. With the exception of one aviator, I tried to select men whose stories up until this point have

never been told. I wanted this book to present a chance for these men, most of whom were obscure footnotes in aviation history, to get a chance to stand in the limelight that they so richly deserved. Some of the men were from the same squadron, and I selected them to show how their lives were so often entangled.

Reading the stories of each of the aviators, you will notice that several of them occur on September 29, 1918. I picked these in particular to show that on any given day of the war there was a great deal of fighting all across the Western Front and that the losses oftentimes crossed each other. There is nothing special about September 29, 1918; in fact, it was quite an ordinary day in the war. I wanted to show how all the individual stories of the missing men were somehow woven together.

There are more World War I than World War II aviators in this volume, and this is also with purpose. After the Great War, Fred Zinn was able to personally oversee the search for each airman. It was his personal pursuit and a solemn responsibility. In World War II, however, the numbers were staggering. Fred recovered dozens of airmen, often in groups of two to seven. Records of his individual searches are scant given the sheer number of men shot down. The World War II pilots I have included are those for which his personal notes are extensive.

In the last chapter, "Final Fates," you will find postscripts for many of these men. Oftentimes what happened after their deaths was as compelling and moving as the story of their demise. You are invited to flip to the back of the book to learn the final fate of these brave men as you finish each of their unique stories.

In the book I have used the original ranks for French and German troops. These often contradict the source material articles, where Americanized versions of the ranks are listed. The French term *caporal* is akin to *corporal*, for example. Where these materials are quoted, I have left the text as it originally appeared. The German ranks are listed as they appeared in the source material as well.

These stories all began in the dusty crossroads town of Galesburg, Michigan, along the banks of the Kalamazoo River, a place intertwined with the muddied and bloodied battlefields of France. The common link was a studious, almost frail-looking man on a quest that never ended. To understand him best, you have to understand the men he hunted . . .