

Elliott White Springs, "warbird"

The March 1960 issue of Cavalier magazine ran a story, "Elliott White Springs: The War Bird Who'll Never Die" by William E. Barrett. Actually, Elliott Springs had already died (October 15, 1959). Barrett was really referring to the legendary Springs, the World War I ace who "was swagger and color and daring."

Springs, he said, had "so many contradictions in his character that even his closest friends forever doubted that they understood him."

A native of Lancaster, Springs was 20 years old, newly graduated from Princeton, when he enlisted in the Air Service, a newly organized group financed by Princeton alumni to train Princeton men for overseas service in Italy. Springs was the first man to enlist and was disappointed that the first training was learning to speak Italian.

He found that his officers had very little training or even book knowledge of the military. Prior to Princeton, Springs had graduated from Culver Military. Sergeant Springs quickly found that if an officer interfered with any of his projects, he "politely but firmly quoted Rule 113 or 124 of an imaginary manual to support his position and watched poker-faced, while the officer's assurance melted into weak acquiescence."

He became fast friends with John McGavock Grider and Larry Callahan. The trio became known as The Three Musketeers. The United States was not yet into the war so the three managed to get into the 85th Squadron commanded by a Canadian, Maj. Billy Bishop. They mastered the plane known as the S. E. 5.

The 85th Squadron flew across the English to France on May 22, 1918. Springs was eager to duel with German pilots. Too eager. He disobeyed orders and flew in search of combat. He ran into six German planes which raked his plane with machine gun bullets. Springs managed to survive but wrecked his plane when attempting to land.

The next day, following an apology by Springs, Major Bishop took him along with four others. Springs shot down his first German plane and wrecked his second one in as many days. Major Bishop said, "You have destroyed three of our planes and only one German so far. Which side are you fighting on?"

On June 18, Springs was flying patrol with his friend Mac Grider. The day was dark and gloomy. Springs always took the lead. He didn't see Grider's plane go down. Grider's body was never found. Grider left a diary behind. Springs found it when packing Grider's belongings to be sent back to America. He thought the diary was great but that it might hurt or worry some people. Springs talked it over with Larry Callahan and they decided to not send the diary home.

Back home in Fort Mill, Springs later used parts of Grider's diary and extended it past Grider's death to tell the story of war in the skies. "War Birds" became a famous book and has been published in many editions and read all over the English speaking world. He gave all the royalties to Mac Grider's family.

On June 27, Springs was badly wounded in combat when his gun ceased to work and a German bullet sent hot oil from a ruptured line into his face. His plane came down and when landing he hit the sandbags of a gun emplacement. The Vickers gun smashed into his face. The place broke up and Springs passed out. The doctors planned to send him back to England to recover. Springs escaped them in his pajamas and when he got back to his squadron found he had been appointed flight commander in a newly-formed American Squadron, the 148th.

On August 22, 1917, Elliott Springs shot down five German Fokkers and returned without a single bullet hole in his plane. He ended up with 12 official victories and ended the war as Commander of the Squadron and received the Distinguished Service Cross.