

The American Fighter Aces Association
Oral Interviews
The Museum of Flight
Seattle, Washington

Frederick Libby (Part 5 of 8)

Interviewed by: Eugene A. Valencia

Interview Date: circa March 1962

Abstract:

In this eight-part oral history, fighter ace Frederick Libby is interviewed about his life and his military service with the Royal Flying Corps during World War I. In part five, he discusses his time as an observer in France and his pilot training in England. Topics discussed include missions and difficulties during the Somme Offensive, his receipt of the Military Cross at Buckingham Palace, and his pilot training at Wantage Hall and RAF Waddington.

The interview is conducted by fellow fighter ace Eugene A. Valencia.

Biography:

Frederick Libby was born in the early 1890s in Sterling, Colorado. He worked as an itinerant cowboy during his youth and joined the Canadian Army shortly after the outbreak of World War I. Deployed to France in 1915, Libby initially served with a motor transport unit, then volunteered for the Royal Flying Corps. He served as an observer with No. 23 Squadron and No. 11 Squadron, then as a pilot with No. 43 Squadron and No. 25 Squadron. Scoring a number of aerial victories during his RFC career, he became the first American fighter ace. Libby transferred to the United States Army Air Service in 1917 and was medically discharged soon after for spondylitis. As a civilian, he went on to embark on a number of business ventures, including founding the Eastern Oil Company and Western Air Express. Libby passed away in 1970.

Biographical information courtesy of: Libby, Frederick. Horses don't fly: The memoir of the cowboy who became a World War I ace. New York: Arcade, 2013.

Restrictions:

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Transcript:

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Frederick Libby (Part 5 of 8)

[START OF INTERVIEW]

00:00:00

[Tanks and aircraft during the Somme Offensive]

EUGENE A. VALENCIA: Captain Libby, I'm sure that we overlooked a number of highlights of the 1916 era that I'd like to ask you to, oh, possibly reminisce a bit before we go into the '17 era, if you would be so kind, sir.

FREDERICK LIBBY: I'll be glad to do that, Commander. One thing that particularly impressed me, while I had mentioned in our conversation yesterday, something about the first time the tanks went over, which was in September the 15th, 1916. We were detailed for low flying and strafing of the Hun roads and also to make a count and observe what happened with the tanks and what results they had obtained. As it was the first time the tanks went over, I was only able to count some 40, although there were at least 1,000, 1,500 well back of the lines and which were evidently, to the Huns or anyone else, at the time they were congregating all this stuff for their attack. But one of the tanks particularly, I noticed, went across, just reached the Hun land, and began to spin around. And evidently his gear jammed. He couldn't control it.

EAV: Hmm.

FL: [unintelligible] I noticed it was sideways in our trenches. He'd got in there sideways. He couldn't go ahead or down or anything else. He was there. And another I observed that was in a shell-hole on his nose, and he was there. He needed a crane or something to get him out. He couldn't go up or down or couldn't move. [unintelligible] what success that small effort of the first tanks had was very doubtful, but it seemed that it was new to the German infantry, naturally, and it was new to our infantry and, similarly, very new to some of the boys driving those tanks.

But the thing that was conspicuous by its absence was the Hun aircraft. There were none of them. There were a few stragglers off back, but while we were flying low and doing all the strafing, that was something unusual because always in the past we had one fight after the other. But there were two days, the 15th and 16th, there was just no air fighting at all, and this was on the Somme, where things were really tough. And this was quite understandable because, on the morning of the 17th, B Flight—Captain Price [Stephen Price] and I having breakfast—we learned the sad news that our C Flight of 11 Squadron was completely wiped out by Boelcke [Oswald Boelcke] and his crowd. And in addition, they got two of our best scouts, D.H.2s, in this same attack. They had just barely crossed

over into Hun Land when Boelcke and his gang tied into them with the new Albatros VII, which was the first time it had appeared on the front. And it was a faster ship and shooting through the prop, and it was naturally a much faster plane than we had and was an entire surprise to our crowd. From then on, the Hun had a great advantage in the air with this ship.

They also at that same time came out with a Halberstadt and very much improved. And also with a Roland. All their ships from then—I would say that the month of September and October were two of the toughest months that the Royal Flying Corps ever had. And of course, that was continued on into 1917, with their improving their ships all the time. But the fact that they more or less caught us with no ships of any kind to compete with that, except just courage and guts is what kept the Royal Flying Corps together. And I've seen those pink-cheeked English boys come over there, 18 and 19 years old, with just ten hours flying, just able to get off the ground and head toward the Hun Land. And if the Hun didn't get them on the first attack, I've seen them tie right into those German ships just like an old-timer. And with their courage, it was really an honor and a privilege to be with the Royal Flying Corps under those conditions with those fellow kind of people.

00:04:37

[Ground crews and losing C Flight]

EAV: Captain, what was the attitude of the ground crews?

FL: My ground crew was most wonderful. I mean, there is nothing—and there's never been any tribute paid to those boys such as they deserve anywhere because the ground crews that we had were really dedicated. They worked all hours of the night. When the ship would come back all shot to pieces and those fellows would work all night and morning to get the ship off the ground. And when you left for the air or combat, you never—and I never in my life had anything happen that could be blamed on the ground crew. They sent you in the air with the best equipment possible that they had. I mean, everything was working order. And as far as the gun sergeant and the gun crews, those guns were perfect. Their ammunition had been weighed and tested and measured, and the guns were in perfect condition. Your engine was and your whole ship. Those fellows were—the ground crews were the most wonderful bunch of fellows. And they felt the grief whenever their pilot—and they all took pride in their pilot. And if you happened to be a stout fellow or had a little bit better luck than the rest of them, they admired you right to the very end.

I can remember one particularly [unintelligible]—this was in '17. I'm flying a Sopwith Strut-and-a-Half, and my sergeant rigger and fitter took a great pride in this. We had a 130 Clerget engine, and they had dialed it all up and they'd worked on it and they'd taken

sandpaper and on the cowling they'd put figures. And they glistened, and it was white, and it was something wonderful. And it was a wonderful ship. And they dolled us all up. So that very afternoon, when they turned it over to me, I wasn't flying. I was going over to 40 Squadron to have tea with a bunch of boys. And I flied over there and parked it up out of the way, up close to a hangar. And when I come out to get my ship, one of their boys taking his first flight, a new pupil—new pilot, just come from England, taking his first flight—in getting off the ground, he didn't get off the ground, but he landed right square on my ship. And my ship was a complete write-up. That cured me. I never had anything done to my ship after that. I flew them just as I got them. As long as they were mechanically right, that was it.

EAV: Well, getting back to '16, I imagine there was a great deal of grief on that particular day that we lost C Flight by the ground crews.

FL: Well, it was a horrible—we were due to go into the air at 9:00. Price gathered his pilots around and the observers and told us all to stick right together, not to—we were fighting in formation. And we were going to have a tough time, there's no question about that, but to stay together. And the thing is, about that particular time, the British, hurt by this terrible—it was the worst defeat that the Royal Flying Corps ever had suffered. We used to lose maybe three pilots, three ships, in a formation we go over—out of six. But we had never lost a complete formation before. And there had been times when only two of us got back. But this was something that hurt the GHQ, the General Headquarters, in our wing. So they threw everything into the air they had, regardless of superiority of the German ships. But we expected—and we did—but they had scouts in ours, so we went over expecting to get a first thing, the minute we hit the lines we tied into, but—

EAV: Well, Captain, getting back to the ground crews again, you mentioned earlier that they were out—[overlapping/unintelligible]—

FL: Well—when I noticed, Price and I were getting ready to take off this particular morning at 9:00 to go over and do battle, and we were going over on an offensive patrol, over to tie into them and do fight. That's what we were going for. It wasn't reconnaissance or anything else. But I noticed all the ground crew of C Flight—and that means the mechanics and the riggers and the sergeant, the corporal—all standing out there. And there's a grief in their face, without tears, that just is unbelievable, that men could feel so terrible about—and watching the sky, hoping against hope, hoping to God that somewhere their pilot and their observer would get back.

EAV: Well, Captain, do recall the weather that day, sir?

FL: Hmm?

EAV: Do you recall the weather at that particular time?

FL: The weather that day was beautiful. There was no question. We went off in the morning. The morning was beautiful. And we went up on a beautiful day. And that is December the 17th of 1916. Price and I and our other ships went over. And believe it or not, there was lots of action and a lot of fighting. Our scouts were getting plenty of action. But we never had a battle. And Price was full of fight, and he was sore. We stayed a full half-hour longer than we were supposed to. Four hours. He stayed over there till the very limit of our petrol, hoping to get a fight. But they never tied into us. Not one Heinie. We never got close enough to shoot at one or nothing. [unintelligible].

[recording stops and starts again]

0:10:02

[Receiving the Military Cross at Buckingham Palace]

EAV: Captain, one of the most interesting things, of course—I asked earlier—the King’s reaction in Buckingham Palace, seeing you for the second time. The first time, as you recall, you were told to report to the hangar in your best uniform. This time, you’re escorting the King on a mission, which he landed some 15 miles from the line. And this was the second time. Can we spend a little more time at that Buckingham Palace award, sir? It’s certainly something that I know that our many American listeners have never heard of.

FL: Well, Gene, I would like to tell you, if I may, about the receiving of that decoration, which was very impressive to me, even at that young date. And as I grow older, it becomes more so because it was a very unusual and a very, very, we might say, pompous ceremony. The morning of the 12th—and we were to be decorated on the 13th—my pal, pilot Captain Price, flew me to be at the Savoy Hotel at 10:00 on the morning of the 13th in my field uniform, and that we were to be decorated at 10:00 on the morning of the 13th. So he said we would take a cab from the Savoy Hotel over to Buckingham Palace. Price, being an Englishman, he was very thrilled and more impressed, naturally, than I was because I didn’t know too much about the formality and didn’t realize how important an event it really was. But he said as we started to get into the cab, “Now, Libby, let me give the cabby instructions,” and said, “I’ve been waiting about a hundred years to do this,” which didn’t mean anything to me. So when he got in, he said to the cab driver, “Buckingham Palace, James.” [laughter]

Well, now, if he thought that was going to surprise the cabby, he was sadly mistaken because the first thing the cabby said to him was, “What gate, sir?” And that slowed Mr. Price up a long way. But he finally wound up by saying, “Well, we’re going to be

decorated.” And the cabby, naturally, being an old head, knew which way. And he said, “That is the big gate, sir.” So to the big gate we go. When we’re there, why, they stopped us, naturally. And, you know, the guard stuck his head in, asked us what we were doing there and why, and we told him. So the big gate was thrown open and in we went.

We dismissed the cabby at the door. And as we went in, we’re immediately surrounded by very colorful gentlemen in the wigs—the naturally traditional gray, powdered wigs with the short pants and the very thrilling coat that they wore, slippers, buckles. They took our coat—British warmer and our caps, and we were escorted over to a colonel. And from him, through those deep rugs—and we had a chance to observe the height of the ceiling and the drapes, which were tremendous—we were introduced to a brigadier general, who briefed us on the formality we were to go through and how to proceed and when our names were called. We were taken into the large reception room, where we were turned over to—our brigadier general had a man who pinned a pin with a sharp point right over our ribbon, our Military Cross ribbon, so that His Majesty would have no difficulty in attaching the cross to it.

So in a very short space of time, we were called to go in and Price went first. And the procedure was that we would go in through a large door. The King was at the left as you go through, standing there, and as you go through and get opposite him, you stop, do a left wheel, bow, and then step up to him. It’s about four steps. And the Cross is brought in on a pillow, a very plush pillow. And so he picks it up and pins it on you—or attaches it to the pin, which is in your tunic. And then if he wishes, why—[sneezes]—he either talks to you or congratulates you, shakes your hand, in my instance. He knew I was American. He shook hands with me and thanked me for my service, which I appreciated very much. Then you step back—

EAV: Captain, would you explain that pin, sir? I think that’s very interesting.

FL: Well, the pin is—it’s a pin that hooks into your tunic and then it turns up. It’s in the shape of an S.

EAV: Oh, yeah.

FL: And the pin that sticks in naturally sticks in your tunic, and the S part is up.

EAV: Ah.

FL: So that he attaches it and makes it—in other words, he doesn’t have to fumble around and attach that. That is done so that he can do it without any trouble to him because, after all, he always has a full day and he’s a pretty tired man. So when you step back to where you started from, then you make a right turn and walk out the door. And as you go out the

other door, opposite the door you came in, one of the boys in the powdered wig grabs your Cross of your—and your pin and takes it. And you go on around to where you came in, the cloak room, and where your British warmer and your cap is. And by that time, your Cross is around there in a very beautiful box, a very beautiful, elaborate box, all ready for you. And I wouldn't call it a box, though. I'd call it a case, as a matter of fact.

EAV: It should be.

FL: It is. And it is very beautiful, very heavily lined.

EAV: Captain, let me, for our own edification—what was the Military Cross generally given for, sir? I know you were the first American—

FL: Well, the Military Cross is given only for combat, only in combat.

EAV: I see.

FL: You don't get the Military Cross for continuous good service or anything of that kind. You have to be in combat. And in ours, it was for engaging—in other words, engaging and destroying enemy aircraft. And I've forgotten the first words that went with it, but that is the reason it was given to us, for continuously engaging and destroying enemy aircraft. The Military Cross is only given to officers. For enlisted men, they have the Military Medal over there. But the Military Cross is given only to officers and is for actual engaging and actual combat. You could get it in the trenches for something beyond the call of duty, going over and destroying, or anything of that type.

EAV: Is that ranked just below the Victoria Cross?

FL: That is right. The DSO is a great medal. The DSO is the finest. But the DSO, anyone can win the DSO as long as he's an officer. He gets that for 20 years of good service or something. Distinguished Service Order, that's what it is.

EAV: Wonderful, wonderful honor.

FL: But the Military Cross is something that I am extremely proud of, and I'm more so as I go on.

EAV: Captain Libby, how many British citations do you have?

FL: Well, I—you speak of citations. I have the Military Cross, but we had citation after citation, you know, for our services. And those come from—some from General Haig [Douglas Haig] and some from General Trenchard [Hugh Trenchard], as we—in our

combat and things that we had over there, bringing down a Hun, or it might be a congratulations to all our Air Corps or to our squadron particularly. Our squadron had one after the other of citations from General Trenchard and also from General Haig at that time.

00:18:21

[Pilot training in England]

EAV: Captain Libby, I know that we all—and I'm certainly exhilarated, talking to a double-double-ace aerial victor in combat—I think it's so much more difficult as an observer to get this number of aircraft. But we're all anxious to see your reaction and the transition between a flexible type and a difficult type of combat into where you're a part of the weapon itself, that of a fighter pilot. We're very interested in this transition, sir. Could you please tell us when you completed flight school and was assigned to a squadron?

FL: Well, I was very anxious to get on. You see, we had been flying pushers, and in a pusher fighter, the observer is entirely responsible for all fighting. The pilot has a tough row to hoe. He depends altogether on his observer, and he has to be something superior to be a fighter pilot. And that is why this Captain Price—I want to say this—was the greatest F.E. fighter pilot I ever knew that flew the ship. He never shot a gun in his lift, never discharged a gun. But to sit there with me as his only protection, you have to admire him. And he always had a grin on his face, and there was nothing—anyway, if there was ever any fear in his heart, it was never shown.

But I always wanted to, as soon as we could—I knew they were making and getting out—in fact, we had one or two. Of course, we had the Nieuport over there, and there was a SPAD. Just a few—we didn't have—the British didn't have at the time. But they had a few Nieuports. And there was a Sopwith Pup out, which was a tractor. And I was wanting to get onto those single-seaters with a gun shooting through the prop, where I could handle it myself. So that is the thing that was my ambition. And when I was recommended to go back and take my wings, they gave me—I was supposed to go—they gave me two months' leave to do nothing—that's November and December—to enjoy life.

But on January the 1st, they gave me two more months, which I was supposed to take, two more months at the school at Redding—Reading, rather—just outside of London, Wantage Hall, where they had a thousand men in training, which started on January the 1st of 1917. They were to be whatever they were to be—pilots, observers, or whatever they were—they were just—just been gazetted officers. They were not cadets; they were officers. And those fellows were to go through a ground school of [eight?] engines, map reading, bombing, rigging, fitting machine guns. All the things that I had already been

through the hard way and started in from the first day and what I thought I was going to have when I joined the RFC. So for me, it was a breeze, and I concentrated strictly—because the commanding officer at Reading knew all my history, and I was the only observer, only qualified officer, that had been in action in this group of a thousand.

And they gave it to me. I think it was more of a rest or something than anything else because I concentrated on the Vickers gun, which—formerly, I had been using the Lewis as an observer. But the Vickers was the gun that was synchronized to shoot through the prop, and your front gun. And I concentrated on it and the Rolls-Royce engine and a couple of the rotary engines. Of course, the map reading and the rest of it I had had and it was not necessary. But I only enjoyed four weeks of that. And it had been raining, raining very hard, and I hadn't missed anything as a prospective pilot in training because they couldn't train, it had been raining so hard.

But one morning, I was called into the commanding officers and told to report to Waddington Airfield for training as a pilot. So reporting to Waddington in the morning, I met a Darsy, a Captain Darsy, who had been in my squadron overseas in 11 at one time. And his eyes had gone haywire, and he had been sent back over to England as an instructor. But he assured me that he would give me the first chance at a first day that the rain would allow us to qualify on a Grahame-White pusher. Now, the Grahame-White pusher was about as near nothing as one could fly. It would just barely stay afloat over the airdrome. You're warned to never turn it near the ground. It had an 80-horse Gnome engine and never to try to turn it if you stalled—I mean, the engine quit—just to land it, if it was in a tree or wherever it was; put her down. But Darsy said he would take me up and give me the first chance.

So the next day was fairly clear, and I—out to the hangar. They wheeled out one of the Grahame-Whites, and the two of us climbed in. It was a dual control. So he takes it off, and I take over after we get up a ways. Not too high, probably 1,000 feet. And we fly around the airdrome a couple of times, and we land. And he takes her off again, and we—off and around the airdrome. And we land, and he said, "Well, it's all yours, Libby," and steps out. And he says, "Just don't—"

EAV: For goodness sake.

FL: "Just two times around there." He said, "You take her on now." And he said, "Don't turn her near the ground. And get in some time. Maybe you can get your five hours in today," which was the qualified amount of hours that I had to do in that particular ship before I went to a faster-type ship. And on that I would do five hours. Well, having been an observer, I had the advantage over any man who was green coming into the game. I had no fear of the ship to start with, although I had never handled a rotary engine. This 80-

horse Gnome was a rotary. It was very simple. So I had no trouble taking off because, thanks to my friend Price, I could have flown an F.E.2b without any instructions. But I took off and got upstairs. But before I land—he said, “Make a few landings and go around and get used to it.” I got up a ways, and I experimented with the controls and the engine a while, fiddled around, and made my landing, which was very easy. I had no difficulty. To make a long story short, I finished my five hours that day just as the rain started. So—

EAV: What was the day like, sir, during that five hours?

FL: Hmm?

EAV: Was it overcast?

FL: Well, this day was overcast. Yeah, it had been raining like today. It was an overcast day. It was a bad day. I mean, it was not so bad we couldn’t fly. You could just fly and that was all. It was an overcast, cloudy day. I flew around, just around the airdrome, around the—

EAV: What type of field was it, sir? I mean, a normal layout? Was it a meadow-type field or a—

FL: No, no. This field had been cleared off. They had some of the biggest fields there for training. They had taken this Waddington, it was enormously good—you had all of the cockeyed places to land in the world. After you got off of that place they had cleared, then you had grass meadow field land, but all kinds of it. They had a big space. They had to have for the guys that they were training, believe me.

But I finished just as the rain started that evening, and I immediately was transferred to a Lincoln, where I was to go on a Sopwith, which was a tractor with a 130 Clerget. And that was a Strut-and-a-Half Sopwith, a two-seater. Of course, they had no one in the back seat when I soloed. But fortunately, I was able to get in one hour the next day on this Sopwith and the feeling or the difference—

EAV: Captain, I’d like to go back a bit. I think this is amazing. Before you went around for your five hours, it was just a—actually, a touch-and-go that your instructor made with you before he turned you loose in the solo at Waddingham [likely meant “Waddington”].

FL: That’s right.

EAV: So probably a half-hour flight before you were turned loose.

FL: Oh, I wasn’t over there—we only made two circles over the airdrome because he knew me and he knew I had been an observer and he knew that [unintelligible]. But it was a

dual control, and in fact, the minute we got off the first time, he let me take it over because it was a dual control. And I—

EAV: Well, that's still amazing.

FL: Having been an observer and had the tough fighting that I had and been in the air, I was air [inclined?], knew all about the air. I felt the air didn't worry me at all. I wasn't like a new man who had never been up in the air. I had been in the air plenty of times, and I had the feel of the air. And of course, the control didn't worry me at all. And the landing, it was amazing, of course. Something about landing and flying. There's two things that a man had just as well give up if he don't have. His vision, of course, naturally, is first. But the next thing it—the first thing is judgement of distance. I mean, to have that, that is one thing that I had. I never had—even in the worst circumstances, I made good landings in the trenches. I can tell you about some where I landed right in the trenches, and I made good landings. I didn't kill myself. That's a good landing, where you don't kill yourself. That's what I'm talking about.

EAV: [overlapping] Well, I just want to go back for a minute.

FL: But that—

EAV: That is amazing.

FL: As I say, I wasn't there a half-hour. We wandered around that airdrome twice and let me get the feel of that thing. And we only made two landings. Of course, he made both those. I didn't take the landing, but—

EAV: [overlapping/unintelligible].

FL: Yeah, he just climbed out and said, "She's all yours, Libby." But getting back to this Sopwith, the most pleasant, happy feeling I ever had in my whole life was to get into this Sopwith and taxi it out. The Sopwith Half was no—you understand, there was no instruction in the Sopwith. I had no pilot in that. I'm all alone. Now, I'm soloing alone. I've soloed on a Grahame-White, so I'm all on my own with this, you understand. This is a 130 Clerget in the Sopwith, and I've just been told how to handle that. And it's got a beautiful control on it. And the ship is light.

But the difference is this. Just a minute, I taxied it out, and when I opened that throttle, that thing was in the air before I knew it. I was a hundred feet in the air before I realized that I was in the air. Now, I'm—this is the truth. I look around and see that [unintelligible] there, and I said, "Brother, I'm going places." And I straightened it out then, even. But she had so much power. You had that surplus power that did away with that danger. You were not just—had flying speed, you had all kinds of it. You had all that

extra. And as far as I found later, you could pull a Sopwith right up on her tail and she'd keep going. It would take a lot. It finally would side-step back down on you, but it would take a long time.

EAV: Well, that was certainly a grand transition for the first flight.

00:30:30

[END OF INTERVIEW]