



# ACE TO ADMIRAL

*The Life of Edwin C. Parsons*



In the spring of 1968, a magazine assignment allowed me to spend an afternoon in Florida with a hero of two nations and two world wars.

Retired Rear Admiral Edwin Charles "Ted" Parsons was waiting for me as I drove from St. Petersburg, just south of Sarasota, to the village of Osprey and the Parsons estate. We talked over big minty glasses of iced tea on a sunny glassed-in porch, lush with potted plants and flowers. A short, stocky, white-maned, ruddy-faced figure in cargo shorts and pullover shirt, Parsons was a lively interview—a writer's delight.

The occasion for the magazine article was the 50th anniversary of the end of the "Great War," as he and all veterans of World War I called it.

Born in Holyoke, Massachusetts, in 1892, Parsons' father was an insurance executive, a field Ted opted not to enter after graduating from New Hampshire's Phillips Exeter Academy. Drifting west, afoot and fancy-free in Southern California, he had a chance encounter with aircraft design pioneer Glenn Curtiss, and learned to fly in 1912 at Dominguez Field in Los Angeles.

What followed was what Parsons called, "my Mexican caper," in which he was engaged to take one of Curtiss' biplanes from El Paso, Texas, to central Mexico—the country was in the midst of its great revolution—to train a few of Pancho Villa's soldados to fly. He was given the Mexican rank of capitán and paid \$200 a month in gold.

The caper lasted a year but Parsons considered the whole episode ignominious. He saw nothing of the Mexican Revolution and escaped back to El Paso, and then home to Massachusetts,

just in time to read President Woodrow Wilson's warning that war had erupted in Europe and Americans must remain neutral in thought and deed.

"I wasn't interested in neutrality," he told me.

"I had war fever from the get-go, felt sympathy for underdog France, and I needed to dodge my father's pressure that I join him in the insurance trade. So, I found a berth on a Cunard liner, which was steaming from New York to St. Nazaire with a cargo of 2,200 horses."

He loved retelling what followed. "I lied about my qualifications," he said with a big grin, "got hired as an 'assistant veterinarian' and spent the voyage ankle deep in horse effluent."

While serving in an ambulance unit in the Soissons region, about 60 miles northwest of Paris for a few months in early 1916, Parsons learned several Americans had found their way into the French Service Aéronautique. He eventually wrangled a transfer to aviation training at Buc, near Versailles.

From there, the veteran flyer was assigned to the newly-organized Escadrille Lafayette, a squadron of American volunteers forming in the Vosges Mountains a full year before the United States entered the war.

Despite a drooping eyelid, chronic tonsillitis, a maimed little finger and

"the evil effects of too much bug juice and too many cigarettes," Parsons said he "miraculously passed muster" and adapted quickly to the Nieuport 17s and Spad XIIIIs of the squadron. He became a dependable, deadly pursuit pilot who chose to remain in the French air service after the Escadrille Lafayette was disbanded in February 1918. As a member of the storied Groupe de Cigognes

squadron, he earned the coveted distinction of "ace," with eight confirmed enemy aircraft destroyed. In addition, Parsons said he was "morally certain" he shot down another seven.

His decorations included the Croix de Guerre with eight palms, the Belgian Croix de Guerre, the Médaille Militaire and the Croix de Léopold. In 1962, 44 years after his exploits, the French government awarded him the Legion of Honor and the Médaille de la Marne.

Following postwar careers as an FBI agent and a private detective, he worked as a technical consultant on the films *Wings* (1927) and *Hell's Angels* (1930). He also worked as a film and radio actor and prolific pulp magazine writer before he returned to military service.

Parsons joined the Navy Reserve in 1934 and later signed up for active duty following the attack on Pearl Harbor.

During World War II, he served aboard aircraft carriers, commanded seaplane tenders and took part in the Solomon Islands campaign, including the Guadalcanal battle. Parsons was awarded a Bronze Star and other decorations for his service as LST (Landing Ship Tank) Group 41 commander during the Battle of Leyte Gulf in the Philippines in October 1944 and Okinawa the following summer.

He died on May 2, 1968, just two months after my visit with him. He was 75. Parsons' grave at Arlington National Cemetery lies just across the path from the John F. Kennedy Eternal Flame. ★

—Dale L. Walker of El Paso, Texas, has been a freelance writer for over 50 years. He is a past president of Western Writers of America, Inc., and has written more than 20 books, specializing in American history, biography and journalism.