Letters From the Front

DAUPHIN BOY TELLS HOW YANKEES ARE LEARNING TO FLY FIGHTING MACHINES

Just how much is to be learned by American flyers who are now practicing for the air battles that are to come, is vividly explained in the latest letter received by Mr. and Mrs. Charles E. Shaffer, of Dauphin, from their son Walter J. Shaffer, now in France. Young Shaffer has progressed far enough to try flying the wonderful little Nieuports without an instructor. His letter follows:

Avord, France,
October 31, 1917.

Dear Mother:

After several days' delay I got through the second class of double-command and this morning the tester finished me with three rides. They sure are speedy things up at this school. I told you how quick I was sent through the first class—only four rides—well, I only got that many in the second class. I had a wonderful moniteur, though a man with a sense of humor, something rare indeed among French moniteurs. Rather, I should say, he was not so excitable, like the majority of other teachers, who threaten to go through the top wing, so excited do they get in telling one how rank one's flying is.

Of course, we are aware of the fact, but it is not very pelasant to have it rubbed in. This moniteur was different, and when you came down and landed and the machine had coasted to a stop, he throttled the engine down, turned around in his seat and springing a smile containing a perfect set of teeth, he quietly explained in his few words of English, where your mistakes were made then it was "aller" (pronounced alley), meaning hurry, and away we shot down the field and up in the air again. The first time we came down to land though, I made such a bone-headed mistake, that even he got excited, and I don't wonder because I was nosing "her" straight for Mother Earth.

You see I had been used to a Candron which take their own gliding angle when the engine is stopped.

A Nieuport is different though, and if let do as it pleases when motor is dead, will head straight for the ground. Of course, I didn't know this but I soon found it out. So when he cut the engine, the control, which I had been holding with two fingers suddenly became awful heavy and wanted to go forward. How was I to stop it? So not understanding this queer action, I let it go forward, with the result that we stood right on our nose and added about 30 miles more onto our original 100.

Then it was that the merry moniteur turned around, gave me a piercing look that would have shriveled a less hardy man, and began spouting French at an enormous rate. All this took but several seconds, and seeing that I did nothing to correct the drive, he finally pulled it up himself. I made the landing and then he explained that the Nieuport was a nose-heavy airplane and had to be held up when the engine was shut off. Having got the hang of the thing we did no more sensational acrobatics, but it did surprise me the weight that seemed to be on the other end of the stick when we came down. It really seemed that I was holding up the moniteur, who set so watchfully in the front seat. After four trips he declared me "tres-brien," which sure did surprise me, and I was still more surprised when he told me I made all the landings myself, because I had thought he helped with every one.

Picks Stones

On account of the congested condition of the central field near the camp they had moved the second class to a large field some distance from the camp, to which we were taken in a truck. Having finished with me, the chief pilots of this field started me with the others to picking stones off the field, and it amused me to think of where I had done that hateful job before. Only this time it was not because it prevented the corn from coming up and made hoeing hard for tired little boys, but because the stones cut the tires, which is rather dangerous when one lands going 100 miles an hour or more. I did not mind though, for wasn't I bound for the solo class—that is, if I passed the tester. The next day, which was yesterday, did not make me very happy because I had a lazy moniteur—a little shrimp of a man who thought more of talking than our anxiety to finish up. And there we sat all day long, and it was a beautiful day, listening to this little chump's aimless chatter and watching our more fortunate comrades going past us. Not a thing did that moniteur do all day, and we Americans sat there keeping the grass warm and our feet cold, getting madder and madder every minute.

The First Up

Naturally, by the end of the day we were a pretty grouchy crowd, and this morning when the captain of the school made a little speech and told us if we did not get through in a specified time we would be shipped down to Pau, anyway, given a 110-horsepower 18-meter Nieuport and sent up to do acrobatics, anyway our tempers were not improved any. Why didn't he talk to the moniteurs? I was first on the list and he took me up. I made an awful landing the first time and I thought my chances were all gone, but he gave me two more and pronounced me "finis," so I will probably get a chance to fly a Nieuport alone this afternoon.

How They Eat

So far we have not had "tripe" at the "ordinair," but their methods of feeding us would certainly not meet with your approval. Merely watching them cleaning off the table with a moist broom and letting the crumbs, which are pretty large at times, on the floor where they fall, would shock your housewifely instincts. I might tell you that we wash our table tools in the soup and dry them with bread, but you might be reading this at the table. Last night, though, I had a queer and somewhat startling experience when I was awakened by a rat promenading across my face. Believe me, if he thought he was on Fifth avenue, he must have thought a German bomb was exploded under it, because I sure rose up and reached for a shoe suddenly. Unfortunately, though, I could find nothing to throw at it, but a little later I heard my moonlight excursionist gnawing away at some wood above me somewhere. I thought probably he was enjoying my candle, having grown tired of moonlight. He must have like the change, too, because in the morning about fourteen centimes' worth of my ten-centime candle was missing, and when I reached in my coat pocket for my breakfast of war bread I realized where the noise of gnawing wood came from, for it was all cleaned out. He must have been a young rat, because he didn't tackle the crusts. Neither did I. So I went without breakfast and in this manner passed my test for solo work. Do you wonder I made a bad landing the first time? Have to go to class now.

Unmannerly Pets

I am not the only one that is bothered with the rats. They love others just as much. Several nights ago my friend Van Fleet, who sleeps across the aisle, was awakened by a noise on the shelf above his head. It seems two rats had discovered a jar of jam he was looking forward to eating for breakfast. One rat acted the hog and crawled inside the jar. The other, getting jealous, pushed rat and all off the shelf, much to the dismay and surprise of Van, who had just been awake long enough to know the meaning of the noise and was feeling around silently on the floor for a shoe, when noise, jam and rats landed on his face. That sort of spoiled the party, for the rats at least, not to mention ruining Van's beauty and religion. The next night they calmly climbed in his suitcase and helped themselves to his chocolate. I think I'll adopt one as a mascot. They are so nervy one has to respect them. One even went so far as to eat through a pair of trousers to get some war bread.

Four Rides

Had four rides alone this afternoon and found it very easy; in fact, I enjoyed it. So did the moniteurs in charge, for they were the most amusing Frenchmen I ever hope to meet. All Frenchmen are actors, of course, but these two took the cake with their pantomime of how scared a Frenchman looked when he took his first ride. And then when a Russian made a getaway that looked like a black snake doing a figure eight and evidently forgot how to turn the machine when he did get in the air, many and amusing were the remarks of these two, one wanting to know whether he was going back to Petrograd, since he kept in a straight line so long. And then when he finally did begin to turn some five miles away, the other wanted to know which front he was bound for. The imitation of how the Frenchman looked and what he did on his breath-taking getaway was by far the funniest. He imitated so exactly the protruding eyes, the nervousness of his hands and feet and finally his actions while in the air. I really was sorry for the fellow, but could not help laughing at his ludicrous imitation.

Psychology of Flying

The French seem to have the psychology of flying down pretty pat, because a better place for two such men could not be found, for they made light of everything that might have been tragic. In this way our mind was taken off the things that one must forget—a probable smash. We Americans had a most amusing time and were ready to declare these two moniteurs the finest fellows in France. First we were with one of them (a stockily-built man who had a monocle made of a wire and strutted around affecting an Englishman), who gave us one ride and watched us very closely—how we acted in getting in, how we got off the ground and our landing—if we passed him we were sent over to the other funny man, a big six-footer with twinkling blue eyes.

The Americans are supposed to pick the art of flying up quicker than the Frenchmen, so we only got one ride where the Frenchmen require three. Having such a reputation, the four Americans were lined up and sent up one right after another, the moniteur being afraid the Frenchmen would break the plane up after he saw one of them give an exhibition of a serpentine dance getting off the ground. My turn came real quick and, having learned from my comrades how to manage the engine, away I went, came down, made a fair landing, and was surprised when the moniteur came up, shook my hand heartily and said, "Good pilot," in his broken English, and sent me over to the tall boy, who soon gave me a machine which a French lieutenant had just finished driving. From the way he landed he nearly finished the whole machine, leveling off some twenty feet up and pancaking down, thus hitting very hard and bending the axle. Lieutenant or not, I called the big boy's attention to it, so I would not be blamed for making a bad landing. He promptly "bawled" the Frenchy out, and then gave me some directions in French. I dont understand French, but I got the point of that, thankk you, because he used his hands quite freely to explain what would happen to me if I did not get the machine off in a straight line or tried any grandstand stunts either ignorantly or on purpose while in the air. He punctuated the whole conversation by an eloquent gesture toward the class of "J-cats" nearby, to which I would be sent in case of failure, a threat that did not fail in its effect to make me more careful, for they are big double-motored Candron machines with an enormous spread of wing. I sure would feel disgraced if I was sent on them. Furthermore, I doubt if I could run one, as I have trouble enough thinking about regulating one motor, let alone two. However, I got away to a good start, into the air and found it very easy, much easier, in fact, than flying a Candron.

Easy Work

There was none of that muscular effort required which is so much in demand while flying a Candron, and the ease with which I ambled right along was surprising, considering how little I had to worry about. Gee, but they are light little machines, and one does not mind their terrific speed of 100 miles—the next class travels 125—in fact, one hardly notices it until one comes down to land and then one realizes how fast these Nieuports travel. Not only the air is full of planes, but when coming down to land more trouble arises, as machines are landing and running along the ground in every direction, so one has to keep all his wits about him and steer a course clear of obstacles. Seeing a Nieuport and a "J-cat" all in a heap as you come rushing earthward is not what you might consider conducive to one's peace of mind, but that is one of the things you are supposed to forget. I have a fairly good forgetter, so it don't bother me. Maybe you would call it confidence, for I have that. Anyway, listening to and watching these two comical moniteurs made me see the amusing side of these little incidents. I remember distinctly coming down one time and seeing a Nieuport upside down. It presented such an amusing spectacle that I mentally compared it to a diseased chicken with its toes turned up.

About that time I noticed one of those ugly-looking "J-cats" rolling slowly along the ground, directly crossing my intended landing place, so I gave "her" a little rudder and came ahead of him, and he, seeing that I was determined to land in front of him, stopped and gave me the right of way. I took it and nearly upset landing. Oh, yes, I lit all right, but I forgot to push the rudder to the right as soon as my wheels hit, so went around to the left. These tricky machines have a tendency to scoot off to the left whenever they are landing, and one must catch them with the rudder before they get started, or around you go in a circle. That is where the penguin training comes in handy because it teaches one to be quick with the rudder.

Wonderful Experience

'Tis wonderful to fly these Nieuports, they are so fast and surprising as it may seem, very stable. Besides, they can be controlled with two fingers, and this ease of operation enables one to view the scenery. Goodness knows, one needs the time to look around, because there are all types of machines in the air, and, although collisions in the air are rare, they happen once in a while, so one must needs watch out. I have only had three flights in them alone so far, but that was enough to make me understand why one humorous American said that they were so sensitive that one "wished" them around. And, indeed, he put it very aptly, because one hardly need move the controls an eight of an inch to go around in a close circle. And to think I was running a linotype last summer when such exciting and interesting sport could be gotten for the asking.

And now I am getting sleepy and if to-morrow is a good day I'll have a busy time of it. Anyway, this letter is getting big enough for an "F. M." to carry, so I will say good night and go back to the rat-infested stable I call home.

WALTER.

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