



Lt. Cassius Styles Recollections

12th Aero Squadron
U. S. Air Service, A.E.F.

Transcribed by Daniel Pool

A TwelfthRecon.com project

Special Thanks to Clifford Huntington for donating the Styles Papers Collection

Editor's Notes

First Lieutenant Styles served with the 12th Aero Squadron as an aerial Observer from 17 August to 29 September 1918. On 29 September, he and his pilot, Lt. Wistar Morris, were shot down by ground fire while strafing the enemy. Lt. Morris perished shortly after the crash. Lt. Styles was held captive until the Armistice. He was officially classified as "escaped" when he arrived in Switzerland on 6 December 1918 because he was never "officially released." He simply walked out of his POW camp after the war. He rejoined the 12th during the occupation and remained in the service until 1922.

After returning to civilian life, he became a well-known bow maker in the United States and even had one of his bows placed on display in the Smithsonian.

What follows is the transcription of a document typed by Lt. Styles. It was clearly in draft form as it contained several written edits in pencil. All edits annotated on the document were included. Words in parenthesis were added by the editor to aid readability. Likewise, minor edits to punctuation were made for similar reasons. Punctuation edits, however, are not annotated as they are all minor in nature. Every effort was made to preserve Lt. Styles' message, tone and intent. No edits were made that might alter the context or meaning of his accounts.

Amanty

On the day following Thanksgiving we nineteen embryo observers left “muddy Gondrecourt” for Amanty, where we were to have our first bit of work actually in the air. At Amanty we first went into billets in the houses of the French peasants. The Frenchman is used to much less heat in his home than the American who wants an indoor temperature that is unbearable to Europeans. We were therefore very uncomfortable in these old stone houses, but were given a chance to build Swiss huts for ourselves. We built those huts in a hurry, tarpapered them, and put wood stoves into each, and then moved in. Here we were very comfortable, as we had plenty of wood to burn.

As soon as we were settled in what were (than) luxurious quarters we took our first hops. Dick Whitner’s remark was, “A twin six on a glass road.” I remember what a different aspect the country took on as I left the level of the ground and saw hills and ravines and woods change into mere details of a large map laid out below me. Roads popped out from everywhere. The thing that sticks most clearly though is a crow, really high up in the air, whom I saw flying way down below us.

The next day we started classwork in our mess hall. The hall was more properly called a shed. The flooring was a good, well-mixed, six inches of mud, and all of the heating done by the sun. The sun never shone. Our professors were some French lieutenants from the Escadrille Caudron-42. They had been withdrawn from the front with the full equipment they used in actual work against the enemy. Their photographic laboratory was very compact and practical. They had also a small hut called an armory in which they had their machine-guns and all the equipment necessary for testing them and keeping them in order, as well as for fitting the cartridges, and filling machine-gun belts and drums with the calibrated ammunition.

We found this work very interesting. The subjects we worked on were...

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...Once “Jaybird” did an infantry liaison for some troops at the Gondrecourt training school. He deserved and got a lot of credit for it because he went up in a storm that was as heavy as the old ships we had then were able to navigate.

Our life at Amanty was altogether quite pleasant. It did not compare of course to an M.P.’s in Paris, but we had enough good food, warm quarters, and baths of a certain sort. In our hut we heated enough water on the little stove to half fill a G.I. garbage can, then stepped into the can and had what was almost as good a hot tub bath.

Some of us took leaves to Paris during week-ends; others took A.W.O.L.’s to Nancy and Toul. In those days there were practically no Americans in these places, and a visit to them was a delightful experience as compared to later times when they had been overrun by the A.E.F. hoards. At night we sometimes saw the fire of anti-aircraft batteries near the front. Once we observed an unusually lively celebration which we found in the morning had been the occasion

of a visit paid by the Germans to an English Airdrome at Ochey. They had made a big night of it and wiped out the whole plant of English equipment, which included thirty-five Handly-Page bombing planes. The Britishers took it all in good sort though, for as soon as they could rebuild they went back over and wiped out a whole German Airdrome.

I took a good many walks to the villages around; one Sunday, McComack and I walked to the Mauvages and saw the entrance to a three mile underground section of the Rhine-Marne Canal. This is quite a large as well as novel engineering project. By means of it a canal boat can go by water from Paris to Coblenz. On another Sunday I walked from Amanty to Vaucouleurs, the scene of some of the first of Joan of Arc's activities. On the way I pass through several villages in which were billeted units from the famous Foreign Legion, "Legion Etrangere" -also Moroccan troops. These soldiers were principally plastered with decorations. A soldier from one of them told me that his division had taken twenty-five thousand prisoners. The Moroccans were black, thick lipped, happy negroes, most of them wore decorations any man I know would be glad to have.

The Argonnes

On the twenty-second of September, 1918, we were given a most significant notice, we were told to be ready to move in four hours. It was our part of the remarkable surprise movement that the Americans so often successfully fooled the German staff with. So we rolled our bedding rolls and boarded the trains at the Toul Station for Bar-le-Duc. Before we started we phoned the maire, or mayor, of Bar-le-Duc to please reserve billets in his town for forty American officers. It turns out later that we did not use all of these because some of us went to another town on the way and stopped overnight there.

When we reached Bar-le-Duc we waited at the Hotel de Metz until the truck train with our baggage and equipment arrived there, then we joined it and rode out to the new terrain at Rembercourt. On the same field were two other squadrons, the First Aero and the Fiftieth. The three of us made up the First Observation Group. Our Group Commander, Major Hall had his headquarters at Rarecourt where the Army Headquarters were, and where we had an advanced landing field on which we kept an alert plane. We moved into our quarters and got the maps of the sector pasted on our map boards, started studying them, and tuned up generally for some real stuff. We were not allowed to fly within five kilometers of the front, this being part of the procedure of concealment necessary in order to keep the Germans ignorant of our presence. However, some French pilots from the Escadrille Bregut 211, the ones to which I had belonged in the spring when I was with the French came over to our field and took several observers from the Group for short surveillance trips over the lines to give them a slight acquaintance with the sector. Some others of us went to within five kilometers of the lines to study the back areas. Wis (Lt. Wistar Morris) was at this time at Colombey-les-Belles after a plane, so I went over with Doc Holden, who had just joined our outfit.

Finally, the day came, and we woke up with the sound of the guns thumping Fritz. There was a bad fog at day-break, and until about eleven o'clock, when I was sent over to the line. I found them just a couple of hundred meters south of the village of Varrennes in the trench

running along the north side of the forking road. When I came back to the Argonnes in the spring of 1919, I found one of my school-boy chums, Lieutenant Guy Chamberlain, buried there with his corporal, at the very place where the lines were laid out for me by the infantry panels. He was leading a formation of tanks, and was walking in front of them with his cane when he met his death.

After I had dropped my report to the headquarters at Rarecourt and to several other P.C.'s around the divisional sector, we flew back to the lines to see what we could see. The first thing that we saw was a German field-piece on the north edge of Varennes being worked at point blank range against our troops. It was so close to our lines that I could hardly believe it wasn't one of ours that had in some manner strayed ahead of the Doughboys. My pilot dropped down to it so that we could machine-gun it a little, and as soon as we did the Germans who were working it dusted into a dugout so that all we could do was to wireless back its location and fire a yellow rocket over it to warn the artillery of its position. Then we drifted to Montafaucon sending occasional bursts of tracers into the Heinies we saw. They never waited for a second dose when those red-hot bullets came cracking into them, but rustled out of sight with a quickness that was surprising. When we got back to Varennes the Dutchmen had started manning their gun again and we had to make them duck into cover a second time. I have always remembered that gun-crew, and with a little admiration too.

Now that our gasoline was used up we turned our nose toward home. On my way back, I dropped a few more messages which gave data that I had gathered since my last report. Then we passed over the small lake just east of our Airdrome, I tried out my guns on the surface of the water to check up the alignment of the sights. There was a French boy fishing on shore. He left.

The next day I had the first mission at daybreak. We had no more than reached the front than it began to rain. However, I fired rockets for a few minutes and finally found one battalion P.C. panel at a fork of the roads just north of Varennes, and observed some of our infantry on column of squads marching in the direction of the lines, even farther north, so it was pretty obvious that there had been a pretty good advance during the night. By this time it was raining so that Wis had to land the ship at Army headquarters at Rarecourt. This he did very prettily though it was about the worst place to land that I have ever seen a landing made in. We waited around Rarecourt all day. There were eight hundred prisoners there, and we made them a visit. I had little idea of ever being in the same boat as they were, and thought it a great joke on them, never considering how it would feel if everything were turned around.

That evening we went up over the Argonne woods looking for the 77th Division, which at that time was on its way towards becoming, in part, the famous Lost Battalion. We found them near the Abri St. Louis. I guess that was about the last time that they were found.

The next few days we had the same sort of work, and nothing very startling happened. On the morning of the twenty-ninth of September, a Sunday, I was on the alert. That meant Wistar and I got out of our blankets before daylight, roused our crew, and had them run our ship out of the hanger. We ate a few bites and then stood by to leave the ground, when it started raining. The ship had to be run back into the hangar, and we waited until one in the

afternoon before we could take off. Then it was so muddy on the landing field that in taking off our propeller was smashed by the mud that the wheels threw up. We had to return to our hangars and take Whitey Thomas' ship, number eight. Wistar picked out a strip of the field that was covered by a pretty heavy growth of grass, taxied out to it, had the wheels scraped there and then covered with oil, and then took off successfully. We found the lines at Apremont, though no panels were shown, and we had to fly down low and count noses in order to find where the Yanks left off and the Germans began. After I had made out my report and dropped it at the various P.C.s we came back and tried to get a rise out of one of the batteries so as to fire on Fleville. None of them seemed to get our wireless, so Wis and I set out to see what we could do ourselves with our own artillery. We soon saw a plenty. Southwest of Fleville, across the Aire River we spied a German battery of artillery crossing an open field. We wasted no time, but dropped on them and limbered up our machine-guns. We gave the first gun enough so that it tumbled into the river with a splash like Humpty Dumpty falling off his wall. The battery commander, attired in a magnificent light grey over-coat led all in the race for cover. We honored him with only a burst of tracers. I am sure that if I didn't hit him at least I hit his coat-tails which were standing straight out behind him in the air. The three cannon that were left offered a much more tempting target, so we returned to them. By this time some enterprising Heini had gotten out a machine-gun from somewhere and set it up. Wistar saw it as he was turning to give me a broadside position, and dropped the nose of our ship on them, with his gun blazing a steady stream of tracers and held it steadily on them as we dropped at a hair-raising clip until I was sure our nose was touching the ground; then yanked back on his stick and we started circling them again, while I resumed my own firing. I filled the crow and horses in the middle of the field. We started after the other two guns of the disappearing battery, but they got into the forest before we could properly disable either of them. Then there being no more people in sight to be shot at we went back into the air, so that I could wireless in a skeleton report of the facts. I dropped a report writing to our P.C. at Varennes, and asked Morris whether he had any more gasoline. He looked, and said first that he had not, but a minute later said he had. Then we started back to where we had left this German outfit. When we were near enough to make out anything, we saw that there were a good many people gathered around the wreck of the cannon and machine-gun so we opened on them. After we had given them a few good bursts I noticed the motor suddenly stop. I spoke through the tube to Morris. He was too busy getting the ship to stay right side up to make any reply. He dodged a tree and then we hit the ground. Just before we hit the ground I had one of those strange lightning-like reviews of some of the parts of my life such as occur to drowning people, we are told. One funny thing I remember is that I said to myself that all of my notions about living through the war were real bunk. The next thing I noticed was that I was alive and pulling myself out of the ship with a part of the compass in my hand, meaning to get my bearings and sprint for home. I got around to where I could see Wistar; I dropped the compass. He was not able to get out of the wreck, and I could not get him out alone so I waved my arms to a German soldier I saw wearing a hospital brassard on his arm, signaling to him to come and attend to Morris. Just then a bunch of soldiers who had been firing at me with their pistols as they approached, reached the scene and started to finish the affair. They cocked their lugers, which looked as big as cannon to me at that instant, but a young German second lieutenant of (the) artillery called them off, made them put their pistols in their holsters, and started the first aid men working on Wistar. They dressed his injuries as well as they could and carried him over to a large auto-

cannon. Once the young Lieutenant stepped away for a few minutes, and I heard the holsters of a couple of the men being opened with the sound that is familiar to anyone who has carried a pistol. The unterleutenant heard it too and turned in a flash. He ordered the men who were not helping to get out, and in no uncertain terms. After that there was no more gun play.

Wistar was put on the seat of the cannon, and a large red feather mattress was brought from a French peasant's house nearby, with chairs and pillows for me. Then the auto was cranked up and we started for the nearest hospital which was at Marc-en-Argonne. Poor Wis stopped breathing before we got there. I left him there, after I asked to be allowed to see his burial. The place was being shelled so I had to be moved to a P.C. which was under more protection. There I was searched and asked a few questions by a German who could not speak very good English. If he had understood what I told him his dignity would have been slighted I am pretty sure. This questioning was the first of two that I underwent while I was in the care of the German Imperial Army. I was taken into a quite comfortable room and what I took to be the regimental headquarters. There I found the table, some chairs, fireplace, and a young German officer. An individual whom I took to be a sergeant major started questioning me in poor English. He asked me first why Americans wanted to fight Germany; he himself had been in the United States, had enjoyed himself very much there and had never dreamed that we would be at war with his country. I told him that we had entered the war for the direct reason that Von Tirpitz had not known enough to lay off us with his submarines. Then after beating around the bush a little he asked where my squadron was located. I told him that it was the other side of the lines. Later a colonel came in to try his luck on me. The merry gentleman announced his arrival by a loud and hoarse volley of commands to me in German which he believed I could not be so presumptuous as to not understand. The one phrase, "Auf-stehn sie", I did understand, but didn't bother with, so they yanked my chair away from me I had to up stand. Put my hands in my pockets with the attitude of a hobo at the rear door bargaining for a meal, and one of his subordinates pulled them out; they he had to do it so much that it got monotonous, and they began to see the joke. When the colonel saw that I wasn't properly terrified he changed his attitude and tried to be even pleasant. They took off my clothes and search them for what they could find. They took my purse, looked through it, and gave it back after the colonel had appropriated a snap-shot of me that he found in it, saying that he thought it would be a good souvenir.

Next, I was taken outside and put in an auto. It was very cold and the Dutchman had appropriated my flying suit, so I asked them for an overcoat. The colonel saw this in the light of a very clever joke on me, and told me that they were going to make it hot enough for me. That had to suffice me for the fifteen-mile ride to Buzancy, their Army Headquarters. There I was assisted by my guard up to a very comfortable room in a French château, which was used as the office of the Army intelligence officer. This officer was a competent person. He put me in a chair by the open fireplace in which a very cheering fire was burning and after he had telephoned around to some of his friends certain data that he already had concerning me, he began talking to me in perfect English. First, he remarked that I was an aviator. I admitted that I was. Then he said "You were in a Salmson airplane." Knowing that he knew a Salmson as well as I did, I said yes. Then he asked "Just what kind of work were you doing?" Believing that he had no business knowing that, I questioned him asking him what he would reply to such a question as that if he

were in my position. Much to my surprise he said that he understood perfectly that he had no right to demand such questions of me and that he would not ask anymore. He didn't, but sent me to a guarded room for the night. In this room there was a bunk and blankets and a stove. An American soldier, a prisoner too, was sent in to build a fire for me. He had very little to say, seeming to fear that he was watched. He made the room quite comfortable and went out.

I had asked to see a surgeon and I was accordingly taken to a dressing room and a hospital nearby, my nicks examined and passed over by the German surgeons. They offered to do some cutting if I wanted it, but I passed the opportunity. They might have done very good work but I got well anyway. I shall never forget how white those surgeons were. They had doubtless been working overtime since the scrap on their front began, and there was a big line ahead and behind them which indicated that some of the American ammunition has reached its mark with the desired effect.

I was now returned to my billet and given my first chance at the famous German war-bread. I was pretty hungry, as Morris and I had only a very short time in which to snatch a mouthful that noon. A German soldier brought me one of the saddest disappointments of my life; a large piece of dark, sour, black bread and a jug of substitute, -ersatz-, coffee. I determinedly and philosophically bit into the bread. It was like eating a bran and bone poultice with thin ink to wash it down. After a ten-minutes exercise with this I gave up. Later I learned to eat the bread, but I never mastered that coffee. What it was made out of I don't know. I believe that it was a brew made from their clumping military boots.

I laid down on the cot, utilizing the least bumped portions of my anatomy to rest on. I went to sleep thinking of what I could do that would make my position least unfortunate, in other words trying the philosophy of the Stoics. It didn't altogether reconcile me to my lot.

In the morning a young officer from a Kansas regiment, who had led his men too far forward, was escorted in to join me. He too was in a rather dull humor. After I had been given some more bread and coffee a German sergeant came in and chatted with me. He spoke very good English; had been in Montréal, which I was somewhat acquainted with and talked a good while with me. He really seemed a perfectly decent Dutchman. He told me that I would have need of a pack, and brought me one and gave it to me. Later, I made mighty good use of it. Another German drifted in who spoke as perfect English as anyone learns at Oxford. He was more English than German; said that he had stayed on the Russian front as long as there was any, because he wouldn't fight on the British front, one of his brothers being in the English Army. He was the first to tell me just how near the Germans were to defeat. At that time most people in France believed that victory was assured and that it would come in the late spring of the ensuing year, or in the summer anyway. He told me, as did all the Germans with whom I discussed the subject, that the war could not last three months more for Germany. It turned out as they said, four in forty days the armistice was signed.

In the afternoon we were carried in a truck to Vouziers, about ten miles north of Buzancy. Here I found waiting for me a chap who had been in my squad at the first Plattsburgh training camp. He had been brought in by an older German Sergeant and exchanged for an Iron

Cross. In this place, which was a French home made escape-proof by barbed wire, I enjoyed a very light diet. I was given a little more than two slices of black bread a day. Fortunately, I did not stay there very long. I was put aboard a German hospital train on the fourth day and taken to Sedan. Here I was put in the hospital. It was the worst place that I have ever seen occupied by human beings. I shall never forget the terrible stench of the rotting wounds, foul beds, and dirty damp, cold rooms. There were about a dozen American soldiers there. I shall always remember them with a good lot of pride in the fact that I am a fellow-countrymen of such staunch men as they were. They were all wounded, some of them terribly. Yet there was never a whimper from any of them. It is thrilling enough to see the spirit of some of the wounded in hospitals in France, but it was vastly different in that place, where there was no Elsie Janis to sing to them, or a Red Cross worker to look after all their wants; where there was not even any physical comfort. They joked of what they would do to Broadway when they got back to it. I know that a good many of them never reached Broadway, and those that did were not able to any more than hobble down it on crutches.

I stayed in Sedan for a week. One afternoon I was taken into the office and presented to a German aviator Eric von Heimbürg who offered to carry a message over the lines for me. I gladly availed myself of the offer and wrote a letter to my squadron, telling them that Wister had died, and that I was alright, and requesting them to put some money of mine and in the Guarantee Trust Company Bank in Paris. The German to whom it was given for delivery was shot down when he had crossed the lines, and he gave the letter to an intelligence officer in our Army Headquarters, which again happened to be a former Plattsburgh squad-mate of mine. The letter was duly delivered to my squadron, not, however, until after they had officially decided that I was dead. Lt. Arthur had found the wreck of our plane, and decided that I must have been finished off in the fall if I hadn't been killed before, as the body of (the) ship was pretty well riddled by machine gun fire.

This wily German did not confine himself to looking after my correspondence, but tried by sundry very guarded inquiries to find where I was from and when I was there. I don't know just how much information he gained, but as I replied to none of his questions I believe that he was not very greatly enlightened. One very good card that he played was to show me a set of photographs of our own airdromes, and ask me whether I recognized them. Of course, the only thing to do was to hold as good a poker face as I could.

In the hospital there was a French soldier who spoke very good English, and whom I came to know quite well. He had been brought up in England, had been rejected by the English recruiting service on account of his very poor eyesight, and had come to France and enlisted there. He had not been very long on the front when he was captured, due to an occasion when his eyes failed him.