



## Newsletter Issue 52, July 2021

### Americans in the Foreign Legion: Ferdinand Cap de Vielle

Approximately 100 Americans joined the French Foreign Legion before the US entered World War 1. 38 of them either died of wounds or were killed in action. Most who survived were wounded between one and four times. Today we feature one of them: Ferdinand Cap de Vielle. He was American born, of French extraction, and when the war broke out he left his job in New York and was sworn in at Les Invalides on 21 August 1914. Assigned to the 2nd Foreign Regiment along with many fellow Americans, he first saw serious combat in Champagne in September 1915. The charge over the top on 24 September involved 50 Americans—the largest group of Americans to fight until the arrival of AEF troops in 1917. Capdevielle survived, although 2/3 of his section fell that day. The Legionnaires that survived that action were given the option to transfer to the regular French Army, which Capdevielle did, joining the 170th Line Infantry Regiment. Here he fought in the bloody battle of Vaux (Verdun) in February 16 followed by the Battle of the Somme in August 16. By now only six of the 20 Americans that had joined the 170th with him were still alive. After surviving the French Aisne-Champagne



campaign in April 1917 and being promoted for the fourth time, he was given leave and a trip home to New York City paid for by the French government. While on leave he spoke at West Point and at several Army training camps in his French uniform. Upon returning to France, he was sent to St Cyr and received a promotion in second lieutenant. The US entered the war and offered him the rank of captain in the US Army. Capdevielle turned them down, electing to stay in the French Army for the duration. In July 1917 he took part in the major French counteroffensive along the Marne. He was killed on October 3rd, 1918 by a bullet to his forehead while leading his men in an attack. Perhaps no other American volunteer of August 1914 participated in as many historic campaigns and hard-fought battles as Capdevielle. He was the last of the American volunteers to die on the battlefield. Five weeks later, the war ended. He was posthumously awarded the Croix de Guerre. Today he is buried in the French military cemetery at Sommepey-Tahure and his name appears on the American Volunteers memorial in Paris.



### Bernt Balchen

Bernt Balchen, a naturalized American born in Norway, was one of America's greatest aviators. During the First World War, he served in the French Foreign Legion and in the Norwegian Army. He then fought as a volunteer in the Finnish Civil War in 1918, when he was seriously wounded. After he returned to Norway and the Norwegian Navy, he received a commission as a naval aviator in 1924 and advanced in the Norwegian Naval Aviation Service as a test pilot and Arctic explorer. He was the pilot for the first aircraft flight over the South Pole with the Byrd Antarctic Expedition in 1929. During the 1930's, Balchen became a U.S. Citizen, helped create the Norwegian Airlines and the Nordic Postal Union. He joined the British Royal Air Force at the outbreak of World War II, and was commissioned in the U.S. Army Air Forces on September 5, 1941. Col Balchen built, organized, and commanded Bluie West-8 base in Greenland from October 1941 to January 1943, and then operated a courier air transport service between Britain and Sweden, as well as other clandestine missions, from January 1943 until the end of the war. He left active duty on April 20, 1946, and then helped organize the Scandinavian Airlines System until returning to active duty with the U.S. Air Force on October 11, 1948. Col Balchen served as commander of the 10th Air Rescue Squadron at Elmendorf AFB, Alaska, from November 1948 to July 1950, and then as a staff officer with Alaskan Air Command from July 1950 to January 1951. During this time, he flew an aircraft non-stop from Alaska to Norway in 1949 to become the first person to pilot an airplane over both poles. Col Balchen next served as advisor for the construction of the Air Force Base at Thule, Greenland, before serving as the Assistant for Arctic Activities at Headquarters U.S. Air Force in the Pentagon from August 1951 until his retirement from the Air Force on October 31, 1956. Bernt Balchen died on October 17, 1973, and is buried in Arlington. Today he is honored on a monument in Lulea, Sweden and a beautiful sculpture in Kristiansand, Norway, as well as being in the Aviation Hall of Fame.