

“REEL STUFF”

“FOR GOD, COUNTRY AND YALE!”

BRINGS BIRTH OF NAVAL AVIATION TO LIFE

Story by **Ron Kaplan**



FILMMAKER RON KING, already a skilled producer of short films and travel shows, had long sought a full length project to sink his creative teeth into. In 2006 he happened upon a non-fiction book by historian Marc Wortman titled “The Millionaires’ Unit: The Aristocratic Flyboys Who Fought the Great War and Invented American Air Power.” King’s interest was keen, as he knew that his late Grandfather, John Martin Vorys, had served among those “aristocratic flyboys.”

The book chronicles a group of young men in 1916, most of them Yale undergrads, who despite their youth and largely privileged status were driven by a deep sense of obligation to be among the first of their countrymen to fight in “The Great War.”

F. Trubee Davison, manager of Yale’s Crew and founder of the Yale Aero Club, thought that forming a volunteer flying unit to protect our nation’s coasts would be a noble and effective contribution. Heck, it might just be the adventure of a lifetime. So it was that the First Yale Unit, as the volunteers were called, was mustered in as the US Navy’s first air reserve squadron. What these classmates and peers could not foresee was the pivotal and often tragic roles each one would play in pioneering U.S. naval aviation in WWI.

The dynamic and popular Davison severely injured himself on his flying test for the Navy, though remained the titular leader of the Unit as the others, including his little brother, completed training and entered service. King’s Grandfather Vorys, who played football at Yale, was among those known as “the original twelve” of the Unit, serving in Europe and later a test-pilot as US Naval Aviator No. 73. The youngest and wildest member, David Sinton Ingalls, among those in the Unit’s expansion to thirty, would earn distinction as the Navy’s first ace and its only ace of WWI. Throughout the group’s roster, fiction pales in comparison.

After a dig into the Vorys’ family archives, King realized he had found his project, complete with a cast of colorful characters set on the stage of global conflict. Thus was the genesis of the soon-to-be-completed documentary, *For God, Country and Yale!: US Naval Aviators in the First World War*.

King found welcomed help in Darroch Greer, a former classmate, fellow history buff and documentary filmmaker conveniently also based in L.A. By design, the film shares three stories simultaneously; the history of the First Yale Unit, the birth of

American naval aviation, and the challenge of mastering control of early aeroplanes. “We’re striving to put our audience in the seats of our characters as they experience flight in these primitive machines,” explains King.

Interviews with Unit family members, WWI experts and naval aviation historians weave an extraordinary narrative. Exploring family collections along with visiting numerous museums and libraries provided a wealth of archival content, including motion pictures. The two traveled the globe to capture air-to-air footage of a SPAD, Albatross, Fokkers and Sopwith Camels, to name several, each in full-color, high-definition glory. Most spectacular of these may be the 1912 Curtiss E-boat of the Glenn H. Curtiss Museum in Hammondsport, New York. The museum’s rare, airworthy replica is an early iteration of the Navy’s later F-boat in which nearly all the Unit’s members first trained (and Trubee crashed, breaking his back).

Early funding help came through grants from both the Davison and Ingalls families. The filmmakers founded Humanus Documentary Films Foundation so that donations could be tax deductible (and have two more projects in development on WWI — as Greer points out, “the first ‘industrial war’ — a huge game-changer for the world and armed conflict.”). King and Greer have plans in the works debut the project on Public Television soon after completion. With the rapid approach of the Centennial of WWI in 2014, *For God, Country and Yale!*’s character-driven focus on patriotism and progress at the dawn of US military aviation will no doubt be worth putting on your viewing schedule. ✨

For more information, the trailer and updates, visit www.millionairesunit.org.

Ron Kaplan is director of Reel Stuff Aviation Resources LLC, consultant to non-profit museums and the entertainment industry. Contact him at www.reelstufffilmfest.com.