

BALLOON BUSTER

Written by

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The Frank Luke Story

Based on True Events

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FADE IN:

EXT. ALONG A RIDGE BEHIND GERMAN LINES - DAY

A Drachen - a brown hydrogen-filled cylindrical gas bag with an empennage or tail assembly at one end and a basket below it; a black cross outlined in white on its side.

Rope bridles connect the suspension band around the balloon to a cable winch on a truck. The observer's basket extends on smaller cords independent of the cable suspension.

Air enters the front end into a ballonnet and flows out through a small opening in the empennage, keeping the balloon inflated and headed into the wind.

In the basket under the balloon, the observer has a view for miles around.

EXT. AIR OVER FRONT LINES - DAY

A double-winged biplane flies above the mishmash of muddy shell holes and barbed wire between the Allied and German lines, known as No Man's Land.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

When the United States entered the First World War in April 1917, it was woefully unprepared. With no combat fighter of its own -

The biplane, a Spad XIII, crosses the line into German-held territory.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

- the U.S. Army Air Service obtained Spads from France.

INSERT - PROPELLER, ENGINE, MACHINE GUNS OF THE SPAD XIII.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

- one hundred twenty miles per hour, twin .303 caliber Vickers machine guns that fires four hundred rounds of ammunition -

A large "S" on the plane's tail signifies it is a French-built Spad. Red, white, and blue stripes on the tail and circles on the wings indicate it is American.

Next to the plane number "21" on the side is a Swooping Eagle with open talons - the emblem of the 27th Squadron.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
- planes piloted by aces like
Lieutenant Frank Luke, America's
foremost balloon buster.

TITLE - BALLOON BUSTER - The Story of Frank Luke, based on
actual facts.

An image of Frank Luke fills the screen.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
Reckless and daring, Luke went
after the toughest targets, the
heavily defended German observation
balloons, made of rubberized silk
and filled with hydrogen gas.

A balloon explodes - flaming hot gasses spread to encompass
the whole screen, wiping out Frank Luke's face.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
For two weeks in September, 1918,
Frank Luke was the deadliest pilot
in the sky.

EXT. WHEAT FIELD / AMERICAN LINES ALONG THE MEUSE - DAY

SUPER: France, August 1918

A thunderous artillery barrage does occasional damage to
AMERICAN TROOPS in a wheat field as they climb the slope of a
low ridge.

An oblong-shaped balloon hovers beyond the ridge.

EXT. BEHIND THE RIDGE

The observer in the balloon telephones to a platform below
where a telephone operator relays information to a messenger
on a motorcycle, who takes it to artillery gunners.

Hundreds of artillery guns become still as gunners make the
adjustments.

EXT. WHEAT FIELD

Soldiers cry out as the artillery barrage starts up again -
it is suddenly a horrendous nightmare of agony - men
clutching wounds, screaming, bleeding.

A LIEUTENANT stares up at the sky. He speaks to a CAPTAIN.

LIEUTENANT

Damned balloon - it's been up there all morning, helping the Huns get their range.

CAPTAIN

I'll let headquarters know.

Their attention is diverted by the noisy hum of the Spad approaching the field. Heads turn upward to look.

LIEUTENANT

Must be nice up there...

INT. FRANK'S SPAD

The pilot, 2ND LT. FRANK LUKE (21), wearing goggles, leather helmet and flight jacket, pokes his head out of the cockpit.

He waves at the doughboys, flies on. Climbs, gains altitude.

His breath forms a white cloud. He wraps a scarf around his head, not just to keep out the freezing air.

In front of him, the engine belches smoke and castor oil which blows back, stinging his face and searing his lungs, choking him, causing him to cough.

Reaching up with his gloved hand, he pulls the wool scarf over his nose.

In front of him, squeezed on each side into a narrow space between the top of the engine cowling and the upper wing, are the Vickers machine guns.

He peers through the narrow space between the guns to get his bearings.

Despite the close quarters and discomfort, Frank Luke is smiling - eager for action.

EXT. AIR OVER GERMAN LINES

The Spad, Number 21, banks and turns. Flashes erupt from the two Vickers machine guns as it swoops down on the German artillery line.

German artillery units twist their machine guns toward the Spad. The ground crew begins winching the balloon down.

The Spad swoops in, dodging the balloon as he barrels down the line, exchanging machine gun fire with the batteries.

The Spad makes one more pass. By now the balloon has been winched down. The archies, or anti-aircraft cannon, fill the air with bullets.

The Spad strafes them, then flies back to Allied lines.

EXT. WHEAT FIELD

American troops gaining the top of the hill cheer as the Spad buzzes the wheat field.

Frank waves from the cockpit and dips the plane's wings.

The Lieutenant, wounded, and the Captain watch the Spad.

LIEUTENANT

The Huns will have that balloon up
in no time.

CAPTAIN

By damn, if Billy Mitchell can't
take care of them, I'll go over his
head to General Pershing.

EXT. AIR OVER GERMAN LINES - DAY

A formation of a dozen Spads break up as one after another drops out with engine problems, eventually leaving only that of MAJOR HAROLD HARTNEY (30), commander of the FIRST PURSUIT GROUP, which includes the 27th, 94th, 95th, and the 147th Fighter Squadrons.

Frank Luke's Number 21 follows Hartney, but Frank's Spad is just a tiny dot in the distance.

INT. HARTNEY'S SPAD

Hartney jerks around in his wooden seat - bullets make a crackling sound as they tear through the canvas fuselage.

Thin strips of wood and canvas fabric with a varnish-like coating are all that separates him from death.

Out of the corner of his eye, he spots a German Albatross. Not staying around to count the E.A. - enemy aircraft - he fast dives to outdistance them and scurries for the safety of Allied lines.

EXT. AIR OVER GERMAN LINES

Frank aims his Spad higher, into the setting sun to avoid being spotted by the Fokkers.

He cuts the engine. Points the Spad's nose down. Plunges toward the last Albatross in the German formation.

A hundred feet from the Albatross, he re-starts the engine. Works both machine guns, fires in short bursts so as not to jam the guns.

As hot lead plows into the Albatross, it rolls over and falls, upside down, 1,500 feet... 1,000 feet... to 500 feet.

Frank's Spad zooms ahead, banks into a tight turn, dives and fires once more, following the Albatross down to 200 feet.

Anti-aircraft fire blisters the Spad, which launches into a steep climb - straight into the rest of the German formation of Fokkers and another Albatross.

Instead of heading for Allied lines, the Spad unexpectedly streaks toward German-held Jouy and Vailly, northeast of Soissons.

INT. FRANK'S SPAD

The engine coughs and splutters.

INSERT - FUEL GAUGE - VERY LOW

Frank frantically works the hand pump as bullets tear into the fuselage.

The engine catches. He looks through the space between the guns - sees only one Albatross. He's lost the others.

He crosses the river Vesle and strikes a course for the front lines. The Albatross does not turn away until it reaches the edge of No Man's Land.

EXT. COINCY FORWARD AIRFIELD - DAY

Branches piled on top and around a small hangar camouflage its purpose. A brown-and-green painted gas truck is parked near the hangar entrance.

A MECHANIC comes out as Frank exits the cockpit.

Frank takes off the scarf, goggles and helmet and tosses them into the cockpit. The mechanic holds out a bottle. Frank takes a swig, swishing the liquid around in his mouth.

FRANK

Hoo-ah!

He spits on the ground. Points toward Hartney's plane.

FRANK

Where's the major?

MECHANIC

Hartney? In there -

The mechanic nods toward an old dugout.

Frank drops the bottle and takes off running, past a parked Mercedes Benz.

MECHANIC

Hey! You can't go in there! Colonel Mitchell -

INT. COINCY DUGOUT

COLONEL BILLY MITCHELL (38), slender, medium height, brash, aggressive, stands in front of a table where three other officers drink coffee and look at a large map. Mitchell uses a long stick to point to a village near the front lines.

MITCHELL

The next forward airfield will be thirty acres near Rembercourt.

He turns to Major Hartney, a short, mustached man, speaks with a British-Canadian accent.

MITCHELL

Major, you'll have to slip your boys in overnight. Think they can take off and land in that small amount of space?

HARTNEY

Colonel, my boys can land on a dime if they need to.

Mitchell turns to short, round-faced LT. COL. THOMAS MILLING (31), his Chief of Staff.

MITCHELL

Tom, what about the balloons?

MILLING

At least thirty balloon companies support the German Fifth Army along this part of the front.

Mitchell's steely gaze bores into Hartney.

MITCHELL

When are you going to do something about 'em, Major?

HARTNEY

Rickenbacker shot incendiaries into a balloon, but it didn't ignite.

MITCHELL

If our top ace can't do it, then who -

Frank Luke bursts in.

FRANK

Major! Did you see me take down that Hun?

He stops short as he sees Mitchell. Salutes smartly.

FRANK

Sorry, Colonel Mitchell, sir. I...

1ST LIEUTENANT ALFRED "ACK" GRANT (23), tall, gangly, commander of the 27th Squadron, dumps his coffee as he sees Frank. He grabs a rag and wipes up the spill.

Frank turns to leave.

MITCHELL

Wait, Lieutenant! What were you saying?

Frank turns back into the room.

FRANK

I shot a Hun off the major's tail, never pulled till I had my gun right in his cockpit.

Grant comes out of his chair. He speaks with a Texas drawl.

GRANT

Colonel, don't pay any attention to him. He's just blowin' gas!

FRANK

I followed him to two hundred feet.

GRANT

Impossible! The archies would've cut you to pieces. Besides, I was with the major.

FRANK

You left him - everyone did. I was up high, sun blocking me. Four Albatrosses, tell 'em, Major.

HARTNEY

An Albatross shot at me.

MITCHELL

See any balloons?

Frank turns back to the colonel.

FRANK

Before that, this wheat field and beyond the German lines, a balloon. I strafed the battery around it.

Mitchell groans. Waves his arms in despair.

MITCHELL

Damn it! A balloon - and you go after the battery?

FRANK

I made 'em take down that sausage.

MITCHELL

You did? You made 'em take it down?

FRANK

Yes, sir, I did.

MITCHELL

How long before it was back up?

FRANK

I don't know, Colonel.

Frank runs a nervous hand through his sandy hair.

Mitchell stares daggers at him.

MITCHELL

Anyone see the problem? If you had taken down the balloon, now that would be something!

FRANK

If I'd known you wanted one -

MITCHELL

You think you can get a balloon, Lieutenant?

FRANK

Hell, Colonel, can't be that hard!

GRANT

Lord have mercy.

Grant slowly sinks back into his chair. Frank rambles on.

FRANK

A dozen, all you want.

GRANT

Good grief!

MITCHELL

Get me a balloon, and I'll personally pin a medal on you.

FRANK

It's a deal, Colonel!

GRANT

Oh, Lord!

MITCHELL

What's your name, Lieutenant?

FRANK

Lieutenant Frank Luke, sir.

MITCHELL

Thank you, Lieutenant Luke. You can go now.

FRANK

Yes, sir, Colonel.

Frank retreats out the door.

GRANT

Aw, hell!

MILLING

Make up your mind, Ack.

HARTNEY

Sorry, Colonel. He's an impulsive kid.

MITCHELL

He's got gumption. I like that. What kind of flier is he?

HARTNEY

Excellent. I couldn't shake him from my tail in combat practice. Neither could Ack.

EXT. TRAINING AIRFIELD - DAY - FLASHBACK

Grant lands with a clothes line dragging from the broken wing of his Nieuport. Frank grins out of the cockpit of his trainer plane.

MITCHELL (V.O.)

Major, take those sausages down. Use this kid Luke - go get 'em!

Grant gets out. Looks across the field at the grinning trainees. Stalks off the field.

END OF FLASHBACK

INT. HANGAR - SAINTS AIRDROME - NIGHT

Chief mechanic CORPORAL L.H.FLANNER (25), examines Frank's Spad. He slides his finger into a bullet hole.

FLANNER

Not much holding it together. Wonder you got back.

Several pilots enter. They head for Frank's plane.

With Ack Grant, is short, stocky FIRST LT. JERRY VASCONCELLS (26); rancher's son LEO DAWSON (25); LT. KENNETH "GONNY" CLAPP, Flight C commander; and LT. TOMMY LENNON, a quiet, mild-mannered man.

They circle the plane. Jerry bends to examine a line of bullet holes.

JERRY

Appears he was shot at.

LEO
Maybe he shot it up himself.

The others laugh, except for Grant - and Frank, who raises his fist and aims a punch at Leo.

FRANK
Shut up, Leo!

Flanner's muscled arm grabs Frank's fist as it heads for Leo's chin.

FLANNER
Leave him be!

Frank grudgingly withdraws his fist.

LENNON
Where did you take it down?

FRANK
Near Jouy and Vailly.

GRANT
Our maps don't even show those towns. You're making it up.

FRANK
I got a French map from the Storks.

GRANT
No confirmation, no credit. When did I ever give you permission to go over to the Storks?

FRANK
The major did.

GRANT
Well, thanks to you we now have to go after balloons.

FRANK
You all don't need to worry - I'll take care of the Drachens for you.

JERRY
Balloon busting's not as easy as it sounds, Frank.

GONNY
That's coming from a guy who was resurrected.

FRANK

Res... what?

GONNY

Jerry was shot down this summer.
They told us he died but three days
later in walks Jerry -

LEO

Fit as a fiddle. Tommy had to pinch
him to make sure he wasn't a ghost,
right, Tommy?

Tommy nods. Frank ponders a moment. He looks at them - men
whom he admires, a group he longs to be a part of.

FRANK

Why can't you guys believe me? You
believe me, don't you, Flanner?

FLANNER

I can tell the difference between
handgun shots and artillery shots.
You must have gone through hell and
back, from the looks of it.

Flanner gives him a couple of gentle slaps across the
shoulders and turns back to the plane.

FLANNER

You guys get out of here and leave
us alone so we can work.

INT. CANTEEN - NIGHT

The canteen is housed in a tent at this forward airfield.

JOSEPH "FRITZ" WEHNER (23), tall, muscular German American
with chestnut hair, and IVAN "ROBBIE" ROBERTS (22), short and
slight, sit off to themselves.

The only other patron is LT. WILLIAM "JACK" HOOVER, a flier
with a fearless reputation credited with taking down one of
Red Baron Richthofen's Flying Circus planes in July.

Jack hangs by himself, drinking a beer. Frank steals a glance
his way, orders a beer and plops down across from him.

FRANK

Hear about the Boche I shot down
today, Jack?

JACK
Heard all about it.

FRANK
Colonel Mitchell wants me to go
after balloons.

JACK
Think you can do it?

FRANK
Be like hitting the broadside of a
barn.

Fritz and Robbie are listening.

JACK
If it's so easy why couldn't
Rickenbacker do it?

FRITZ
Willy Coppens, the Belgium ace, has
taken down twenty-five so far.

JACK
Ah, the silent one speaks.

FRANK
How does he do it, Fritz?

FRITZ
Hits them in the morning when
visibility is bad. Comes in low,
then up and away.

JACK
What about the archies?

FRITZ
Surprise is the key. Go in fast,
hit 'em hard.

EXT. HANGAR - NIGHT

Major Hartney and Lt. EDDIE RICKENBACKER (27), America's
foremost flying ace, checks out the engine of Hartney's Spad.

Rickenbacker, a German-American, is second-in-command of the
94th Aero Squadron, the Hat In The Ring. He was formerly
Colonel Mitchell's mechanic.

HARTNEY

I'll take a Nieuport any day over these Spads. This thing flies like a bloody brick.

RICKENBACKER

Naw, the Spads are faster and easier to maneuver. We just need to get the kinks ironed out.

Hartney leans against the Spad and crosses his arms as Rickenbacker probes around the engine.

HARTNEY

What are your views on balloon busting, Rick?

RICKENBACKER

They're hard to explode. Even the incendiaries just rip holes in the fabric. The Huns repair 'em and send 'em right back up.

HARTNEY

What do you think I should do about this kid Luke?

Rickenbacker wipes his hands on a rag.

RICKENBACKER

There's time to work with him before we move to Rembercourt.

EXT. ALONG THE FRONT LINES - DAY

Along a narrow road, Hartney's Packard, driven by a sergeant, passes medical staff tending the wounded and soldiers moving toward the front.

Hartney and Frank get out and walk to the top of a hill where two German planes lay next to each other.

HARTNEY

Hudson took down these two before he was killed.

Frank looks over the wreckage. He points to the tan patent leather shoes of one of the dead pilots.

FRANK

Looks like he was out on the town the night before. Didn't bother to change his shoes.

HARTNEY

No doubt. Let's go on.

Three hundred yards away on another hillside, they come to a wheat field of a hundred acres covered with dead American soldiers, packed side by side.

FRANK

Looks like they died in droves.

HARTNEY

The Germans left machine gun nests to cover their retreat. Their accuracy came from the information given them by balloon observers.

Frank picks up some post cards that have fallen from one young soldier's pocket.

FRANK

To his mother in Iowa. He never got to mail them.

HARTNEY

Leave them. That priest over there will pick them up and send them to his next of kin.

Frank carefully tucks the cards back into the boy's pocket.

FRANK

I'm glad I'm not in the infantry. They didn't stand a chance.

INT. PACKARD, NEAR FISMES - DAY

They move on, traveling in a northwesterly direction. Major Hartney talks, paying little attention to their route.

HARTNEY

Frank, you're a member of the 27th Squadron in the First Pursuit Group, the finest flying outfit on this front.

Frank straightens his shoulders. He recognizes the tone. When the major speaks like this, you listen.

HARTNEY

Back home, 50,000 boys are learning to fly and eager to be where you are. But you're in the 27th in name only.

They meet American troops walking along the road near the Vesle River. Several look at the Packard strangely, as if they are shocked to see it.

HARTNEY

When you've shown your buddies you have the guts and can play the game honestly and courageously, they'll probably let you stay.

A YOUNG LIEUTENANT pauses, stares at them.

HARTNEY

You'll know without my telling you when you are actually a member of this gang. It's up to you.

The Lieutenant takes a couple of strides into the road. He waves down the Packard. Hartney rolls down the back window.

LIEUTENANT

Sir, do you know you're beyond the front lines? The last car didn't come back. I'd advise -

HARTNEY

Have you seen any planes around here that were shot down?

The Lieutenant points south.

LIEUTENANT

Sure. About a mile that way, sir.

HARTNEY

Thanks, Lieutenant.

EXT. BRUSHY FIELD - DAY

Hartney and Frank come upon two downed German planes and several British Sopwith Camels.

HARTNEY

Tell me which way they were going when they were shot down.

Frank examines the bullet holes through the head rests.

FRANK

They were all diving away, weren't they, Major?

HARTNEY

Yes. That's about the only time you get hit. Also, watch out for the one lurking in the background while the fight takes place.

Frank picks up something in the major's voice.

FRANK

That ever happen to you?

HARTNEY

It was the Red Baron's old trick. I was lucky enough to just land in the hospital.

EXT. FRONT LINES - DAY

An American balloon hovers over a hill.

As the Packard approaches, American soldiers watch a German Albatross in the sky.

They get out of the Packard as the Albatross dives and fires at the balloon. The observers in the basket parachute out.

HARTNEY

I've always felt pilots should be furnished with parachutes, too.

Anti-aircraft guns shoot at the Albatross. The balloon explodes into flame as the Albatross lifts away and heads toward a second target being dragged down by its winch.

Moments later, the second balloon goes up in flames. The Albatross flies away unscathed.

Hartney glances at Frank, who takes it in, his eyes aglow with interest.

INT. PACKARD - DAY

As they head back to Rembercourt, Frank seems more at ease than before. He chatters away.

FRANK

I was captain of my football team my senior year back in Phoenix. Dad made me go to college but I liked working at his copper mine better.

HARTNEY

Then the states got into the war.
What made you sign up for the
Signal Corps?

FRANK

I camped that summer with two guys
named Sharkey and Bill, hunting in
the desert and exploring Indian
cliff dwellings.

Frank smiles as he recalls.

FRANK

Sharkey took me up in his plane.
I'd never experienced anything like
it. I knew then it's what I wanted
to do.

Hartney smiles, pleased.

HARTNEY

Any girlfriend?

FRANK

Marie. We're engaged. Met her in
San Diego, during training.

EXT. ROAD TO REMBERCOURT - NIGHT

Under cover of darkness, trucks and planes move into the new
airfield at Rembercourt.

SUPER: Rembercourt, September, 1918

EXT. FRANK AND FRITZ'S TENT - DAY

Frank helps Fritz pitch his tent among the trees with other
officer tents.

FRANK

You need someone to bunk with?

FRITZ

Not afraid of the Hun rubbing off?

FRANK

We've always been buddies, haven't
we? Others been giving you trouble?

Fritz shrugs and nods.

FRANK

My grandpa came from Prussia. Our name was spelled L-u-e-c-k-e. You won't get any flak from me.

INT. OPERATIONS TENT - DAY

The area is filled with new recruits. Hartney paces before them as Frank enters.

HARTNEY

Don't expect to go out on your first patrol and come back an ace.

Hartney explores the faces as he speaks - some proud, undaunted, some nervous.

HARTNEY

In fact, many of you may not come back at all.

Hartney pauses his pacing as he waits for this to sink in. Frank folds his arms across his chest and waits.

HARTNEY

Despite all I tell you, you'll probably never know the enemy is near you until your windshield disintegrates and a sharp sting interrupts your breathing.

Frank watches the confidence slowly ebb from their faces and uncertainty take its place. Only one or two remain impassive.

HARTNEY

If you get over the line and find you want to come back, it means you're yellow.

Their eyes widen. Mouths pop open - this isn't the pep talk they were expecting. Frank uses his fingers to hide a smile.

HARTNEY

If you think you are yellow, just let me know - I'll send you packing. Dismissed.

As they troop out, Hartney turns to Frank with a sigh.

HARTNEY

I never know if they're ready until they go up with me. You want some coffee?

Frank nods. Hartney gets them some coffee and they sit down.

HARTNEY

Colonel Mitchell wants a balloon tomorrow. Is there anything you need?

FRANK

Incendiary bullets. Confirmation sheets. I can type them up myself.

HARTNEY

Mitchell wants a report of how you do it. If you can't get it to burn, don't feel you have failed.

FRANK

I'm gonna do it, Major. I've wanted to ever since I saw that Bosche take down the American balloon.

INT. CANTEEN - NIGHT

Mixed with the sounds of rain hitting the tent, the rambling of artillery and flashes of explosions to the north herald in the next offensive.

The canteen is crowded. Frank sits with Fritz and Robbie.

ROBBIE

I got a kill last week, but I couldn't confirm it.

Frank pulls some small sheets from his pocket.

FRANK

I typed these. You can have some.

LEO

How many E.A.'s will this make, Frank? I've lost count.

FRANK

Probably more than you have, Leo. I'm getting a balloon tomorrow.

Jerry Vasconcells enters. He listens as he takes off his rain coat and shakes the water off before hanging the coat on a hook. He comes over to them.

JERRY

Any man who gets a balloon has my respect - he's got to be damned good. I know I wouldn't want to send anyone after one.

FRITZ

You could get one yourself, Lieutenant, the way you dived straight into that mess of Huns today.

JERRY

Wasn't much of a choice. You guys, it's gonna be a long day tomorrow. Better try and get some sleep.

LEO

You do bring a ray of sunshine into all our lives.

GONNY

Like we can sleep with artillery blasting.

JERRY

Tomorrow, just remember that we're in this together. We cover each other. Nobody's any different from any other.

They all nod. They are a band of brothers, a team.

INT. REMBERCOURT OPERATIONS TENT - NIGHT

On a cloudy, rainy, dark morning, pilots head for the operations tent. The thunder of cannon is even louder.

SUPER: Thursday, September 12, 1918, St. Mihiel Offensive.

Men from all four squadrons pack inside. Frank isn't there, but Fritz sips coffee and calmly eats one of the doughnuts being passed around. Others do not look so calm.

Hartney yells over the racket of German artillery.

HARTNEY

Our army attacks at five A.M. For morning runs, all four squadrons will engage any enemy planes or balloons they encounter. Because of the clouds, you'll have to fly low, go in fast. Any questions?

Leo Dawson raises his hand. Hartney points to him.

LEO
How low is low?

HARTNEY
A hundred feet. Be alert for a German counterattack, especially this afternoon.

Rickenbacker raises his arm. Hartney nods at him.

RICKENBACKER
What if there are no German planes or balloons in the air?

HARTNEY
In that case shoot into the German trenches. Torment the hell out of their supply trains; strafe their troops. Any other questions?

He waits. Nobody moves or raises a hand.

HARTNEY
Go to your squadron leaders.

The pilots of the 27th Squadron gather around Grant. Frank is noticeably absent.

GRANT
Who's going after balloons today?

When no one answers, Hoover speaks.

HOOVER
I'll give it a shot.

Frank Luke walks in and joins them.

GRANT
Why weren't you here for the meeting?

FRANK
Loading incendiaries into my guns.

GRANT
Looks like we have our man.

EXT. OVER GERMAN LINES - DAY

Nine planes cross No Man's Land. Beneath them thousands of men move across the muddy morass in a charge of German lines.

High winds whip into the cockpits. The pilots wrap their scarves tighter about their faces; wipe raindrops off their goggles.

Clouds are so low they cover the tops of trees. No enemy aircraft can be seen.

They fire at a line of German trucks, then at trenches filled with German infantry. The Germans return fire.

Bullets tear into Leo Dawson's Spad. He nurses it back to Allied lines.

The formation breaks up. Three Spads attack a horse-drawn ammunition wagon. The horses rear and bolt. The wagon overturns and spills out its contents.

Jerry's Spad and two others chase three Fokkers east toward Pont-A-Mousson. The German pilots spot them and flee.

EXT. AIR NEAR MONTSEC - DAY

Fritz sees a German observation balloon being launched near Montsec and cruises toward it, past the balloon, deeper into German territory to approach the balloon from a better angle.

The anti-aircraft guns start up as he flashes alongside the balloon. He sends a hundred rounds into it. The bag collapses without exploding.

INT. FRANK'S SPAD - DAY

Through the fog, Frank spots a target - the dark outline of a balloon floating just beneath the gray clouds!

He shoots through the mists toward it. At the last moment - to his horror - he sees the balloon's American insignia!

He slacks off without firing.

EXT. FIELD NEAR AMERICAN 5TH BALLOON COMPANY - DAY

Frank finds a wet, green field covered with shell craters and makes a rough, slippery landing near the American balloon over Dieulouard, near Pont-a-Mousson.

He leaps out and dashes over to a battery post.

FRANK

It was a mistake! Tell them it was
a mistake.

The telephone operator, LT. JOE FOX, hands Frank the
telephone receiver.

LT. FOX

Lt. Smith is on the line - tell him
yourself.

Frank's hand shakes as he takes the receiver.

From the balloon basket, LT. MAURICE SMITH looks down,
indignation blazing on his face.

INTERCUT TELEPHONE CONVERSATION - FRANK AND LT. SMITH

LT. SMITH

What the hell were you thinking of?

FRANK

I'm sorry! I didn't see it was
American till I got close.

LT. SMITH

In the future don't shoot unless
you know what the hell you're
shooting at!

FRANK

I will, sir, I will.

LT. SMITH

If you want a balloon, shoot down a
Bosche one. I can see one just
across the lines due north.

END INTERCUT

Frank hands the receiver back to Fox.

FRANK

I'll be back, Lieutenant.

TELEPHONE OPERATOR

Fox. Lt. Joe Fox.

Frank runs back to his plane.

EXT. AIR OVER MARIEULLES - DAY

Frank's Spad streaks north towards Marieulles.

EXT. BALLOON BASKET - DAY

Through his binoculars, German observer LT. WILLY KLEMM sees Frank's Spad cross the lines and head toward the balloon. Klemm calls down to the battery below. The ground crew begins winching down the balloon.

Swooping in low, Frank fires from both machine guns. Black plumes of anti-aircraft smoke burst around him.

Klemm lays down his notebook and puts on his parachute. He starts to bail out as Frank's Spad barrels in again, guns blazing.

Klemm ducks, then swings his legs over the side of the basket again as the Spad loops around. As he jumps his parachute harness catches in cables around the basket. He hangs, suspended in the air, screaming and kicking.

INT. FRANK'S SPAD - DAY

The balloon is almost down, looming in front of Frank as he fires two short blasts into it. He catches a glimpse of the grotesque writhing figure suspended from the cable as bullets rip into Klemm's chest.

A barrage of bullets and shrapnel cut sharply through the canvas wings and fuselage of the Spad, making it appear to stand still for an instant as it is rocked by fiery clusters, or "flaming onions," shot from an automatic 37mm flak cannon.

Frank's right gun jams. He peels away, out of range and pounds furiously at the gun until cartridges fly out.

He glances at the balloon. It is almost down - still no explosion.

As he dives in for a fourth time, a flicker appears, then an orange ball of flame erupts. He pulls the Spad into a steep upward climb out of reach of the explosion.

Below, the burning remnants of the balloon engulf Klemm and the ground crew members struggling to free him.

EXT. FIELD NEAR AMERICAN 5TH BALLOON COMPANY

Fox and Smith run over as Frank glides from the cockpit. Frank pulls the confirmation sheets out.

FRANK
Did you see me get it?

LT. FOX
We saw the whole thing.

They each sign a confirmation sheet.

LT. SMITH
It's been up there three days.
You've made the day for our guys in
the trenches.

LT. FOX
Have some coffee with us?

FRANK
Sorry, gotta get these signatures
to my commanding officer.

Frank gets back into his Spad and takes off. He's barely up when the engine cuts out and refuses to start. He lands.

FRANK
Guess I'll have coffee after all.

LT. SMITH
It'll soon be dark. You'll have to
stay the night. While you're here,
we'll fill you in on just how to go
after these Drachens.

EXT. FIELD NEXT TO BALLOON COMPANY - NIGHT

Frank sleeps on the ground, underneath the wing of his plane.

EXT. HEADQUARTERS OFFICE OF 27TH SQUADRON - DAY

A light rain falls as Frank gets out of the side car of a motorcycle. Behind him, a truck tows Frank's Spad.

SUPER: Friday, September 13, 1918

INT. HEADQUARTERS OFFICE OF 27TH SQUADRON - DAY

Frank charges in, holding out his confirmations.

FRANK

I told you I'd get one!

GRANT

How many victories are you claiming?

FRANK

One, but I've learned not to underestimate your capacity for doubt.

GRANT

Where's your plane?

FRANK

It's being towed in.

GRANT

You mean it's not flyable?

FRANK

I need a new Spad.

Grant waves the sheets in exasperation.

GRANT

You left your formation. No one knew where you were. You could have been killed!

FRANK

I don't have a scratch on me.

GRANT

Balloon attacks -

Grant turns, picks up a slender manual from his desk. He flips it open and reads from it.

GRANT

- should be made with an escort of considerable strength to allow the attacking machine to perform its mission without interruption by enemy aircraft.

FRANK

I didn't see any E.A.

GRANT

I don't want you staying out overnight again, is that clear?

INT. HANGAR - DAY

Frank paces angrily back and forth as he reads the latest orders from Lt. Grant.

FRANK

"Order 124 - Pilots who drop out will return immediately to the airdrome." He means me.

Flanner inspects the engine. He lets Frank vent without interruption.

FRANK

He never even congratulated me!

Flanner moves back to examine the wings.

FLANNER

The top wing is just air and wire - wonder it didn't collapse.

He sticks his finger through a gash in the pilot's seat.

FLANNER

Usually when they come in this way, the pilot doesn't climb out.

FRANK

Just goes to show if I was gonna be killed, this would've been it!

GRANVILLE "WOODY" WOODARD (22), enters the hangar.

WOODY

Hey, is that the Red Baron I hear breaking wind?

Frank's gloomy expression disappears.

FRANK

Flanner, this is my good friend Granville Woodard.

Flanner nods at Woody, who offers his hand.

FRANK

He's with the 95th. We were together in training, gunnery school and ferry duty at Orly.

Flanner takes off his greasy glove and shakes Woody's hand.

FLANNER

Good to meet you, Lieutenant.

WOODY

Woody. Let me tell you, it'll take a good mechanic to keep up with this guy.

FLANNER

You got that right. He wears out planes faster than some people wear out socks.

FRANK

Anyone asks any questions, you didn't see Woody, okay?

Flanner nods. Frank and Woody leave.

EXT. ROAD - DAY

Fritz joins Frank and Woody as they hurry toward a truck parked along the road at the side of the airfield.

WOODY

Where'd you get the truck?

FRANK

The guy who towed my Spad hadn't slept in 24 hours. He's getting some sleep. This won't take long, right, Fritz?

Fritz shrugs, his mood as overcast as the sky.

WOODY

The roads are pretty congested, I hear. Lots of troop movement.

FRANK

Our boys are making another push forward.

They pile into the truck, an open Dodge half-ton pickup with a canvas cover to keep out the rain. Frank starts the truck.

WOODY

Beauchamp, Sands, Nevius, and Whiton, all gone. Norman Archibald captured. We're all that's left of those who came here together.

FRANK

The major told us it would be like that. That's the first thing he said to us, remember?

Frank gives the engine a moment to warm up.

FRANK

Your odds of survival improve once you get some experience, isn't that right, Fritz?

Fritz doesn't answer. Frank winks at Woody.

FRANK

He took down a balloon but Grant said no confirmation, no credit.

EXT. HANGAR - DAY

Near sunset the truck returns. Frank hops out, peeks into the hangar and gives the thumbs up to Fritz, who backs the truck up to the door. Woody says goodbye and takes off walking back to his unit.

INT. HANGAR - DAY

Flanner stares down at the six cases of ammunition marked "Buckingham" and two machine guns.

FLANNER

What's wrong with our incendiaries?

FRANK

The Brock and Pomeroy's we're using are just explosive rounds, not true incendiaries like the Buckinghams.

Flanner turns his attention to the new guns.

FLANNER

Eleven millimeter Gras?

FRANK

How soon can you get 'em mounted?

The other two mechanics, VERNON (30), and GEORGE (20), grin.

Vernon swipes a brush, giving the last touch on a new number on the side of Frank's new Spad - "26".

VERNON

You came just in time. We were
about to mount the guns.

Frank notices the plane for the first time.

FRANK

A new Spad?

INT. CANTEEN - DAY

Frank sits with Fritz and Robbie. Leo Dawson comes in. He
pauses to stare down at Frank.

FRANK

What are you looking at?

LEO

Friday the 13th. You got your first
confirmation on Friday the 13th.

FRANK

I took it down on the 12th. Anyway,
I'm not superstitious.

LEO

I looked at your plane - I take it
all back. You may be crazy but you
ain't a coward.

Jerry, Gonny, Jack and Tommy saunter in and sit down with
Leo. Jerry smokes a cigar. Gonny pulls out some cards and
begins to shuffle them.

FRANK

(loudly)

I told you I'd get it.

They ignore him. Gonny continues shuffling. Frank pulls his
chair over to their table.

JERRY

Colonel Mitchell won't be satisfied
with just one sausage.

FRANK

I'll teach you how to take down
balloons. We can have a field day.

JERRY

You're an expert now?

TOMMY

Way I hear it, Fritz got the first one. 'Course it's unconfirmed.

LEO

It didn't explode. They could have raised it again.

Frank glances back at Fritz, who ignores them.

FRANK

As far as I'm concerned, it's confirmed. Deal me in?

Gonny looks at Jerry, who nods. Gonny metes out the cards, including Frank in the deal.

INT. OPERATIONS TENT - DAY

Grant and Hartney discuss the maneuvers for the day with the flight leaders.

SUPER: Saturday, September 14th, 1918

HARTNEY

Two patrols. Lennon and Dawson go after the balloon at Boenville with Gonny. Luke and Wehner go after the one at Buzy with Jerry's patrol.

The meeting breaks up. Gonny, Leo and Tommy corner Major Hartney and Grant.

GONNY

Look, Major, Luke and his balloon chasing are bad for morale. Can't we make some kind of deal?

HARTNEY

What kind of deal?

GONNY

Let him go with both patrols. If he takes down a balloon, he stays with the 27th.

HARTNEY

And if he doesn't?

GONNY

He gets transferred to some other outfit.

(MORE)

GONNY (CONT'D)

I know Rickenbacker would take him over at the 94th. Or he could go to the rear.

HARTNEY

Fine. For now, though, you're in this together. Frank can go with your group, but Dawson and Lennon go after balloons.

EXT. AIR NEAR BOINVILLE - DAY

An enemy balloon is boldly visible as Frank, Leo, and Tommy's Spads leave the formation at Abaucourt.

Leo's Spad swoops down first, guns blazing, followed by Tommy and Frank. As the last one shoots, the observer jumps.

On the second pass, the Spads face vigorous anti-aircraft fire as Leo fires one long burst and Tommy and Frank two short bursts at the balloon.

As they soar away, Frank notices a Fokker close by and points at Tommy to provide cover.

As they come around the third time, Frank dives beneath the balloon and fires at the circle of archies, especially the 37 mm German flak guns who are sending up "flaming onions."

The winch wires of the balloon are pulled tight, causing Leo to have to fly lower. Leo fires the last of his incendiary rounds and begins a steep climb.

Explosives from the archies hit Frank's Spad. He flies almost vertically to get away, which slows down his plane.

Having run out of incendiary rounds, Leo trades places with Tommy. Frank zooms in. After a short burst, his balloon gun jams. Tommy follows, his incendiary rounds puncturing the balloon, which now drops rapidly.

Frank, now also out of incendiary rounds, swoops under the balloon to target anti-aircraft guns with regular ammunition.

Tommy makes two more attempts at the balloon, which finally is reduced to a limp mass of silk in its nest. They can do no more. Frank signals them to return to Rembercourt.

EXT. AIRFIELD C - DAY

Hartney greets Frank with a bottle of water. The roar of the cannon from the front is deafening as Frank takes several long swallows after yanking off his helmet and goggles.

FRANK

It didn't explode, like maybe the
balloon material was damp, or...
the ammo was bad.

HARTNEY

The Buckingham's?

Frank's mouth drops open in surprise.

HARTNEY

The Stork's commander called me.
Seems you put on a persuasive show
yesterday, and since they had some
old cases on hand...

Frank looks away in embarrassment. Hartney laughs.

HARTNEY

A new case will arrive this
afternoon. Your next patrol is at
1430. Go find something to eat. And
next time, come to me.

EXT. MESS HALL - DAY

Fritz comes over and hands Frank a pocket compass. Frank looks at it in surprise.

FRITZ

It's for you. The cover doesn't
open with a hinge. It slides off.

He shows Frank how it works.

INSERT - THE COMPASS

The top of the cap is engraved with Frank's name, plus the words "Balloon Buster, with best wishes from Joseph Wehner."

Inside, it is white with a black hand to indicate direction and is engraved with "27th/1st", for the 27th Squadron, First Pursuit Group.

END INSERT

FRANK

You've already given me this Elgin watch. This is too much.

Frank touches the watch on his wrist.

FRITZ

Nothing is too good for my best friend. Come on, let's get some Drachens.

EXT. AIR NEAR BUZY - DAY

Frank and Fritz leave the twelve-plane formation led by Jerry Vasconcells over Buzy, a town now reduced to rubble and occupied by a German balloon company.

The other Spads form a protective front as a formation of Fokkers come out of the clouds. The Spads dive into the midst of the Fokkers and engage them in an air fight.

Gonny shoots into the cockpit of one Fokker and hits the pilot. With no one in control, the Fokker drops out of the sky.

Fritz slides in behind another Fokker, firing at it until it spins out of control toward the ground.

Frank fires the balloon gun with its new incendiaries. The balloon erupts into flame just as his guns jam.

As he pulls up and works to break the jam loose, some German Fokkers head toward him. He joins the dog fight.

The Fokkers, outnumbered, disengage and fly farther back into German-held territory.

Frank spots an American balloon company and heads down to get a confirmation.

EXT. HEADQUARTERS OFFICE OF 27TH SQUADRON- DAY

Jerry, Gonny, Leo, Tommy and Jack sit with Hartney and Grant.

GRANT

Even Fritz don't know where he is.

GONNY

Archies probably got him.

TOMMY

Or one of the Fokkers.

GONNY

At least he went down in a blaze of
glory.

Jerry puffs his cigar. He gives Gonny a reproachful look.

JERRY

Maybe he's getting a confirmation.

Hartney sighs and rubs his forehead as if it hurts.

The telephone rings. Hartney answers it. On the other end is
the Operations Officer, ROMER SHAWHAN.

SHAWHAN (V.O.)

Major, you gotta get down here!
That bird Luke wants to go after
another balloon.

HARTNEY

Hang on, I'm on my way.

EXT. AIRFIELD C - NIGHT

Grant and Gonny take the lead as they sprint toward the
hangar, a quarter-mile away. Hartney, with Leo, Tommy and
Jack, follow at a fast jog.

INT. HANGAR - NIGHT

Flanner and the mechanics have removed several yards of
fabric from the fuselage and the wings from Frank's Spad.

FRANK

I need it refueled. Get the wings
fixed. I'm going back after the
balloon at Waroq!

FLANNER

Not in this plane, you're not.

Frank sees Grant and Gonny enter. Grant starts after him.
Frank circles Fritz's Spad, keeping it between the two.

GRANT

Stop running away from me!

Hartney and the others come in. Frank makes a break toward
the major.

FRANK

Major, requesting permission to go after that balloon at Warcq.

GRANT

He doesn't even have a plane! The wing is ripped to shreds.

FRANK

I just need a plane. Jack said I could take his in a pinch. How about it, Major?

GRANT

Major, I'm in charge here. You can't go over my head. I need Hoover to fly tomorrow morning.

HARTNEY

You boys worked together today and I'm proud of you. Call it a night and turn in. I want to talk to Frank.

Grant and the others leave. Hartney goes over to Frank.

HARTNEY

Look, you did what was asked in record time. No one can beat that. Colonel Mitchell is pleased.

Frank glares down at his boots.

FRANK

I could have got that one easy.

HARTNEY

You can't do it alone, Frank. Have some patience - it's the best virtue you can have if you want to be an old man.

Frank goes over to where Fritz is working on his Spad. Hartney follows him.

HARTNEY

I arranged for a show for Colonel Mitchell in a couple of days. I want you in on this too, Fritz.

Fritz glances at Mitchell in surprise.

FRITZ

Me? The boys don't even like me -
they think of me as the enemy!

HARTNEY

I know the FBI investigated you
while you were in training.
Evidently they found nothing, or
you wouldn't be here.

Fritz takes a deep breath. He bares his soul.

FRITZ

Before college, I hitchhiked to
Kansas and learned to ride. Went on
a cattle drive in South Dakota.
Doesn't that make me an American?

Hartney grins and nods. Frank listens.

FRITZ

I just want to prove I'm a loyal
American.

HARTNEY

You'll get your chance, Fritz. The
other guys are already starting to
respect you.

INT. OPERATIONS ROOM - DAY

At five A.M., Frank joins other pilots rubbing sleep from
their eyes.

GRANT

Robbie, I want you to lead the
first patrol. It's only
reconnaissance, toward Verdun.

Robbie walks out with Frank.

ROBBIE

You're not going to give me any
problems, are you?

Frank just grins and gives him a salute.

EXT. EAST OF VERDUN - DAY

German balloons are popping up everywhere.

SUPER: Sunday, September 15, 1918

For an instant, it looks like Frank might veer away from the formation and take on the enemy. But he holds off.

EXT. AIRFIELD C - DAY

Hartney is waiting when they land. He goes over to Frank.

HARTNEY

Get your plane refueled. Our other morning patrol has been scrapped. Hoover's patrol is going on a balloon busting mission at 1045.

EXT. AIRFIELD C - DAY

The mechanics have Frank's plane wheeled out and ready to go. They seem unusually quiet.

FRANK

What's going on?

FLANNER

You hear about the guy from the 147th?

FRANK

No. What about him?

FLANNER

Wilbur White took out a balloon over by Chambley around sunset last evening.

FRANK

Did he get back okay?

Flanner nods. Frank turns and runs off. Flanner looks at Vernon and George, the other two mechanics.

FLANNER

Was it something I said?

INT. HEADQUARTERS OFFICE OF 27TH SQUADRON - DAY

Frank races over to Major Hartney, who is conferring with Grant. They look up in surprise as he bursts in.

FRANK

We hit 'em at dusk!

GRANT

By the time you returned, you wouldn't be able to spot the airfield to land.

FRANK

Throw up some flares.

HARTNEY

We can't light up the airfield - too great a target for the Huns.

FRANK

Fake landing field? We have to do something. The Fokkers are starting to expect us. They're up in the sky waiting -

GRANT

A fake field - that would give you the general direction. You could send a signal flare, and we could send a couple back to guide you in.

Hartney looks from one to the other.

HARTNEY

We'll look into it, Frank.

EXT. AIR OVER BOINVILLE - DAY

Planes drop out of formation because of gear problems. Gonny is the last to leave. His engine sputters as he heads back, leaving only Jack Hoover and Frank.

The Germans have spotted them and are hauling the balloon down. Anti-aircraft guns point upward and a Fokker lurks above them, following their every move.

Jack gives Frank the thumbs down signal and points for home.

EXT. AIRFIELD C - DAY

Instead of taking the bottle Flanner offers him, Frank flings his helmet and goggles into the cockpit and goes over to Jack Hoover. Jack looks nervous but holds his ground.

JACK

Sorry, Frank, I didn't have a choice. Odds were against us.

FRANK

Exactly! They were waiting for us.

Jack's mouth opens in surprise.

FRANK

I wanted to go after that balloon so bad I could taste it. But they were setting a trap.

Frank grins at Jack.

FRANK

What did you think I was gonna say? We get to try again this afternoon.

EXT. AIRFIELD C - DAY

Just before five P.M., seven planes take off in formation. Unable to get his plane started, Fritz is left behind.

EXT. AIR ABOVE MARS-LA-TOUR - DAY

Not a balloon is up. The formation flies on towards Etain. Far in the distance, Fritz trails them.

EXT. AIR NEAR BOINVILLE - DAY

Frank spots a balloon south of Boinville. He goes after it, without a signal from Jack.

Anti-aircraft fire starts up as Frank's Spad dives. His guns spit fire - the balloon sinks into its nest.

Frank speeds toward another target a short distance away, north of Etain. Flame explodes from the second balloon.

Out of ammunition, Frank rejoins the formation.

They head back to Rembercourt.

EXT. AIR OVER WAROQ - DAY

Several Fokkers and an Albatross swarm out of the clouds, straight for Fritz's Spad.

Over the village of Waroq, Fritz opens up with both machine guns. A Fokker spirals downward. He peppers an Albatross, which also takes a nose-dive.

The other Fokkers abruptly end the fight and leave.

Fritz dives for a balloon near Bois d'Hingry, between Etain and Spincourt. Using the remainder of his ammunition, he fires and the balloon erupts in a red-orange explosion.

INT. HANGAR - DAY

Frank's Spad is being refueled and Fritz is just taking off his helmet and goggles as Romer Shawhan, the operations officer, comes over to them.

SHAWHAN

E. A. spotted in our sector. Lt.
Grant's taking out a patrol. Get
your planes ready to join him.

EXT. AIRFIELD C - DAY

Grant's patrol takes off while Frank's mechanics are still refueling. As Frank takes off a few minutes later, Fritz's Spad is wheeled out.

EXT. AIR NEAR CHAUMONT - TWILIGHT

Frank's Spad cruises at a low altitude of 1,600 feet north toward Verdun. Fritz's plane trails far behind and a little higher.

Frank's Spad seems to disappear as it grows dark.

INT. FRANK'S SPAD - NIGHT

Details of the countryside fade as night closes in. Frank sees small pinpoints of light, none unidentifiable. Any unseen object sticking up - wires, poles, even a house with no lights - is a potential hazard.

And it's cold - very cold. He wraps the scarf tighter about his face.

Then he sees it - a larger, moving light in the distance - an enemy plane?

He closes in on the light, which barely moves in the sky. It can't be an enemy plane. He flies toward it, just over the outlines of treetops.

The mysterious light becomes a massive gas-filled balloon slightly below him near the edge of a forest.

EXT. CLEARING NEAR DANNEVOUX FOREST - NIGHT

LT. BERNARD MANGELS, 31, in command of Ballonzug 35, sits in front of his tent, eating supper with some of his officers.

The sound of the Spad's engine fills the air. Mangels sees it - a solitary Spad, buzzing like an angry bee towards a large plant with nectar - his balloon!

Mangels knocks over his chair as he scrambles up, yelling at the balloon crew and waving his fist at the sky.

MANGELS

(In German)

Quickly - lower the balloon.

The ground crew works to lower the balloon. Anti-aircraft fire springs up as the Spad rolls in, machine guns blazing.

When the balloon fails to ignite, the Spad circles for another try. The balloon is down to 350 feet as the Spad swoops in from over the forest, right through a massive barrage of "flaming onions."

Still there is no flame.

The balloon is down to 50 feet. The observer bails without a parachute as the Spad's guns blast a third time.

And this time, the balloon explodes.

MANGELS

(In German)

Get him! Get the balloon destroyer!

Mangels yells after the departing plane, swearing that next time he will be ready for the balloon buster.

MANGELS

(In German)

Next time I will be ready for you,
American Balloon Buster!

Mangels will keep his promise.

EXT. NEAR VERDUN - NIGHT

The sight of tracer bullets and the flaming balloon attracts Fritz's attention.

He heads toward the flames - they must be Frank's work!

Several Fokkers come out of the clouds, flying straight at him. Fritz opens up with both machine guns.

His bullets find their mark - one Fokker spirals down over the mud of No Mans Land. The others head away, farther into German territory.

Fritz, up high, is aided by light from the horizon. He spots a balloon near Bois d'Hingry and heads for it.

As the ground crew winches down the balloon, Fritz fires the last of his ammunition. The balloon erupts into a gigantic explosion. Fritz comes out of the flames and smoke.

The German Fokkers, along with an Albatross, come after him again. Fritz easily outdistances them as his Spad streaks for American lines.

INT. FRANK'S SPAD - NIGHT

Frank searches, finds his small "C" cell Eveready flashlight. He focuses the light on his fuel gauge.

INSERT - FUEL GAUGE - ALMOST EMPTY

He digs out his new compass, shines the flashlight on it, corrects his course, and sprints for Allied lines.

EXT. WHEAT FIELD / AGERS - NIGHT

Dragging some straw, Frank spreads it to make a warm nest for himself and crawls under the Spad's wing to sleep. He fashions a pillow and removes his scarf, spreading it across his head and shoulders to keep warm as he lies down.

DREAM SEQUENCE

The face of Frank's girlfriend, MARIE, 16. He's sitting in church, lovely organ music starts playing; he sees Marie seated at the organ. He approaches her, holds out his hand...

The two hold hands as they walk along the beach, he in his uniform, she in a dress and coat on a chilly January day. Their hands are ripped apart... he's seated on a train, traveling cross-country for New York, looking out at the countryside... signs with American towns on them...

Then suddenly, the signs are in French... French people looking at the train as it passes.

He hears himself saying some words.

FRANK

I have passed the dangerous
stage...

END DREAM SEQUENCE

EXT. WHEAT FIELD / AGERS - DAY

Frank stands up. The sun is already over the horizon, visible through the early morning fog.

SUPER: Monday, September 16, 1918

Frank straightens his shoulders. Picks up his scarf and slings it around his neck. Begins walking through the field.

He reaches the road, looks both ways, makes a decision, and heads toward the rising sun.

HARTNEY (V.O.)

When you have shown your buddies
you have the guts and can play the
game honestly and courageously,
they'll probably let you stay.

Frank spots an old French farmer up ahead, herding his goats. He sprints toward him.

HARTNEY (V.O.)

You'll know without my telling you
when you are actually members of
this gang. It's up to you.

Frank gives a ferocious shout and rushes up to the surprised goat farmer, hugs him and dances a jig.

FRANK

I'm an ace now! An ace! I'm an ace!

EXT. AIRFIELD C - DAY

Col. Mitchell and Lt. Col. Milling get out of Mitchell's Mercedes Benz.

They walk over to the pilots lined up in front of the hangar. Neither Frank nor Fritz are present.

MITCHELL

I want you to know headquarters is
grateful for your heroic actions.

(MORE)

MITCHELL (CONT'D)

You men have saved countless lives on the ground. Keep up the good work.

INT. HEADQUARTERS OFFICE OF 27TH SQUADRON - DAY

Hartney, Mitchell, and Milling sit drinking coffee. Grant bustles in, barely acknowledging them as he sits down at his desk.

MITCHELL

The Storks are having trouble with the carburetors of the new Spads. I promised to send them a mechanic. Any recommendations?

HARTNEY

Nobody knows these Spad engines like Eddie Rickenbacker.

Mitchell laughs.

MITCHELL

Hell, Rick used to drive for me, before he resigned from that good safe job to become a flier. Send him over.

The phone rings. Grant answers. The conversation at Hartney's desk silences as they see Grant's expression of dismay.

HARTNEY

What is it, Ack?

GRANT

Lennon lost control taking off, hit a plane being worked on. Both planes out of commission, two armorers hurt, Tommy has a bad cut under his right eye.

The phone rings again. Grant answers, reports the news.

GRANT

Luke's back. Says he ran out of fuel and had to land in a field.

MITCHELL

How many victories does he have?

HARTNEY

Six accounted for. He's an ace now.

Frank bursts in excitedly.

FRANK
Hey, major, I -

He stops as he sees Mitchell and Milling.

MITCHELL
You were saying, Lieutenant?

Frank glances at Hartney and then grins.

FRANK
If you gentlemen come back about
dusk, Fritz and I'll put on a real
show for you.

Mitchell's eyes sparkle with enthusiasm.

MITCHELL
A real show, huh?

FRANK
In fact, I'll give you the exact
time the balloons will go up!

MITCHELL
Now that I gotta see!

EXT. AIRFIELD C - NIGHT

At dusk, Frank and Fritz leave the hangar and walk over to their planes. Hartney, Mitchell, Milling, Rickenbacker and Grant await them, with a civilian in a suit, JAY HARRISON, who carries a camera.

HARTNEY
Frank, this is Jay Harrison, a
columnist from the New York Times.
Let him take your picture.

Frank is eager to get started. He walks by Harrison.

FRANK
No time. It's getting dark.

He climbs into his Spad. Fritz is already in his.

HARTNEY
Come on, let's climb the hill.

EXT. HILL ABOVE AIRFIELD C - NIGHT

An observation platform has been erected on a hill on the north edge of the airfield. The officers join pilots and crews already gathered.

Frank and Fritz take off to the west, then swing back toward the north, passing over the upturned heads on the hill.

Grant points out two German observation balloons to the east about two miles behind the German lines, near Reville.

GRANT

Keep your eyes on those. The first should go up at exactly 7:15, the other at 7:19.

The sound of artillery gunfire starts up near the front.

MITCHELL

Colonel Barnes' artillery is doing a little extra shooting tonight so the Germans will have reason to keep the sausages in the air.

More German balloons begin popping up.

EXT. AIR OVER DAMVILLERS - NIGHT

The two Spads reach the edge of some wooded hills. They do not see the balloon nestled at the edge as they circle around and head west for Reville.

EXT. BALLOON SITE OUTSIDE DAMVILLERS - NIGHT

However, the commander of Ballonzug 35 sees them. Lt. Bernard Mangels yells at the balloon's ground crew.

MANGELS

(In German)

The balloon - take it down!

Mangels stares at the departing planes.

MANGELS

(In German)

Be ready! They will return.

Mangels watches as the two planes streak away. He is still watching when a ball of flame erupts over nearby Reville.

EXT. OVER REVILLE - NIGHT

Frank's opening rounds hit the balloon which explodes into flames, enveloping the parachute of the observer.

The two Spads split up as they head away. Fritz heads west toward the Meuse River as planned. Frank, however, spots another balloon and turns to the east.

EXT. HILL ABOVE AIRFIELD C - NIGHT

As flames from the balloon light up the horizon. Hartney looks at his watch.

HARTNEY

Right on time!

Harrison snaps a photo of the blazing light in the darkness.

INT. FRITZ'S SPAD / OVER THE MEUSE - NIGHT

Fritz's Spad speeds westward and reaches the Meuse River, some five miles distant. He banks, making a turn, and looks around for Frank.

FRITZ

Where is he?

He turns south, in the direction of Verdun.

EXT. AIR NEAR ROMAGNE - NIGHT

Frank notices another target, at Romagne. He turns east instead of west and follows a wooded ridge out of Reville.

Flying over a bridge, he enters a low valley with bluffs on each side. Pulling out his signal pistol, he stuffs a flare into it and signals to Fritz.

EXT. BALLOON SITE OUTSIDE DAMVILLERS - NIGHT

Mangels looks up once more as the solitary Spad flies around the balloon, which is now down and parked under some trees.

He looks back, toward Reville, waiting for the second plane, which doesn't show.

He sees the flare.

MANGELS

(In German)

I will get you next time, Balloon
Buster!

EXT. OVER VERDUN - NIGHT

Fritz flies over the lighted city of Verdun. He glances over his left shoulder, looking for any sign of Frank

He sees it - a small bright light streaking across the sky - the signal flare!

FRITZ

That's the wrong balloon!

He turns the plane toward a new target.

EXT. HILL ABOVE AIRFIELD C - NIGHT

The officers count down from their watches.

GRANT

The next target is -

Grant starts to point toward the next target, but stops as he notes the direction of the flare. He looks at Hartney, who places a finger across his lips.

GRANT

Any second now.

EXT. AIR NEAR ROMAGNE - NIGHT

The balloon ground crew is prepared - they can see the burning balloon to the west and are winching the balloon down. Gunners open fire, riddling Frank's Spad as it dives.

The incendiary bullets sink into the balloon's folds, but it doesn't ignite.

Frank makes another pass at the balloon. The anti-aircraft fire is so fierce it shakes the Spad to a near standstill.

Frank waits until he is very close to the balloon before cutting loose with both guns.

Again, the balloon fails to ignite.

He flies through a hailstorm of anti-aircraft fire two more times before the balloon erupts into flame.

EXT. HILL ABOVE AIRFIELD C - NIGHT

Mitchell yells excitedly.

MITCHELL
There she goes! By God, right on
time!

Grant looks at Hartney - an "it's the wrong balloon" look - Hartney shakes his head no and shrugs. Beside Hartney, Rickenbacker grins and winks.

Harrison's camera gets another shot of a balloon in flames.

EXT. AIR NEAR MANGIENNES - NIGHT

Fritz's Spad swoops in from the southwest in time to witness the explosion. Crossing above Frank, he heads for a third balloon, three miles to the north and west.

Fritz dives toward the balloon at nearly a hundred miles per hour. Although it is barely fifty feet in the air, the balloon goes down in flames after a single machine gun burst.

EXT. HILL ABOVE AIRFIELD C

Mitchell gasps in disbelief as he sees the third red glow.

MITCHELL
Three in less than five minutes?

HARTNEY
Eight in four days of flying.

MITCHELL
I've never seen anything like it!

Mitchell grabs Milling's arm and dances in a circle. Pilots start clapping.

Mitchell suddenly stops.

MITCHELL
How will they get back in the dark?

HARTNEY
Explain our new night landing
system, Lieutenant Grant.

GRANT
A lighted dummy airfield is set up
four miles away to guide them.
(MORE)

GRANT (CONT'D)

We exchange flare signals with the pilots to guide them in.

HARTNEY

The Huns can waste all the ammunition they want on the fake field.

MITCHELL

Amazing! Major, your men are geniuses!

EXT. AIRFIELD C - NIGHT

The two Spads make perfect landings. Mitchell shakes hands with each pilot.

Harrison takes a picture of Mitchell with the two pilots.

MITCHELL

You boys need to take better care of your birds. They cost the taxpayer ten thousand dollars each.

RICKENBACKER

I hear German balloons are a hundred thousand.

MITCHELL

But these two -

Mitchell slides his arms around Frank and Fritz's shoulders.

MITCHELL

- are not replaceable.

He gives the two pats on the shoulder, then checks his watch.

MITCHELL

Gonna rain tomorrow. You men can take the day off.

HARTNEY

Good day for paperwork.

MITCHELL

Speaking of paperwork, I want to see two Distinguished Service Medal recommendations on my desk tomorrow.

As Mitchell's Mercedes Benz pulls away, Hartney, Grant, Frank and Fritz walk to their cabins.

GRANT
 You come back all hale and hearty,
 but others will go out -

Heads turn toward Grant. He has a peculiar look on his face.

GRANT
 - and they won't have your skill or
 luck...

HARTNEY
 Ack, what's got into you?

GRANT
 It's only a matter of time. I'll be
 the one writing the letter to their
 parents. Or yours.

Grant's long legs stretch out. He moves some distance ahead of them. A far-away look comes into his eyes.

EXT. TEXAS AIRFIELD - DAY (FLASHBACK)

SILAS GRANT, 18, his legs crippled, hobbles eagerly over to a Curtiss Jenny JN-2 biplane.

Grant's mother watches as the pilot helps the boy into the double-seater.

Silas grins and waves at her from the plane. She waves back.

The Curtiss Jenny takes off.

Mrs. Grant watches in horror as the plane stalls and begins falling, crashing on the airfield in front of her.

EXT. CEMETERY - DAY

Minus Alfred "Ack" Grant, the rest of the family, dressed in black, are gathered around the grave and casket.

EXT. SHIP, NEW YORK HARBOR - DAY

Lt. Alfred "Ack" Grant, in uniform, stares over the railing. The telegram from his family is clutched in his hand.

END OF FLASHBACK

EXT. VILLAGE NEAR AIRFIELD C - DAY

Frank plays catch with some French children.

Fritz takes a picture as Frank hands out candy.

SUPER: Tuesday, September 17, 1918

EXT. AIRFIELD C - DAY

The planes are grounded due to heavy rain and fog.

In the distance, through the haze, French villages are smoldering ruins after days of hard shelling on both sides.

Jerry Vasconcells, smoking his usual cigar, drives up with a truck piled high with goods taken from abandoned German trenches and bunkers.

Pilots and ground crews come up to rummage through helmets, clothing, bayonets, ammunition, and other German supplies.

Fritz pulls out two miner's type Eveready flashlights still in their boxes. He takes one out, holds it up.

FRITZ

It's twice the size of ours.

He hands one to Frank. Frank recovers two German .45 semi-automatic pistols along with a metal infantry helmet and a motorcycle.

EXT. HANGAR - DAY

Flanner and the other mechanics watch as Frank, astride the motorcycle, yells war whoops and races up and down the tree-lined road near the hangar, firing the .45s at targets nailed to trees on each side of the road.

They puzzle over what to do with the Spad. The wings are completely shredded and the tail has been spliced by so many bullets it is barely attached.

They replace the left side with a wing from Lennon's wrecked Spad and use other mismatched pieces for the tail and left engine cover.

FLANNER

It'll have to do.

INT. FRANK AND FRITZ'S CABIN - NIGHT

Fritz plays *Pour Soir d'Amour* on his mandolin.

FRANK

Don't you ever get tired of playing that song?

Fritz grins and kicks up a rendition of Twelfth Street Rag.

FRANK

You ever write that girl over at Chateau Thierry?

FRITZ

A time or two. You write your girl?

FRANK

Not as often as I should.

FRITZ

Are you still in love with her?

FRANK

Why do you think I asked her to marry me? When this war is over, we're going to buy a farm.

FRITZ

A farm? I can't imagine you on a farm.

FRANK

It would be quiet. Peaceful. Cows, chickens, dog... kids.

Fritz looks pensive. Stops strumming.

FRITZ

None of this means anything, you know, all this talk about civilization. We're still barbarians. We still fight wars.

FRANK

At least we have better clothes - we don't run around in a skirt waving a sword.

Fritz laughs and strums the mandolin.

FRITZ

The twentieth is my birthday. Maybe I can celebrate by getting another balloon.

FRANK

Remember during training when my engine cut out?

FRITZ

I thought you were pulling a stunt, so I cut my engine and landed the same way.

FRANK

Only it wasn't a stunt. We've always had each other's back. That's what counts.

INT. HANGAR - DAY

Frank tosses his helmet, jacket and goggles into the cockpit, just in case a patrol goes out. He paces restlessly as rain splatters on the hangar roof.

SUPER: Wednesday, September 18, 1918

By mid-afternoon, it clears off. Frank talks to the Operations Officer on duty.

FRANK

With your permission, Fritz and I want to do a voluntary patrol. How about it?

The Operations Officer writes up an order giving permission.

Frank dashes over to Fritz's plane.

FRANK

Ready to take down some balloons at Three-Fingered Lake?

EXT. OVER THREE-FINGERED LAKE - DAY

North of the lake, two gray-green balloons float near Labeuville, a marshy area about 20 miles east and slightly south of Verdun.

Fritz's ascends high to watch for Fokkers, while Frank approaches from the German side and dives for the balloon amid anti-aircraft fire.

He lifts away. Spotting no flame, he swoops in again, then up and out of range of the archies. Still no flame.

On the third try, a tongue of fire leaps from the balloon.

There is a flash from the ground, a puff of black smoke, and a LOUD PING as a bullet hits Frank's gas tank. By some miracle, the Spad doesn't catch fire.

Frank turns east toward the second balloon, a half mile away.

He misses the red danger flare sent from Fritz's Spad.

EXT. AIR FROM LABEUVILLE TO SAINT-HILARE-EN-VOEVRE - DAY

Six red-and-blue Fokkers of JASTA 15 lurk in the clouds to the northwest, observing Frank's Spad as it heads toward the second balloon to the east.

The balloon observer parachutes out as Frank swoops in low and fast, nearly on top of the balloon as he fires.

The balloon erupts in a tower of flames.

Machine guns suddenly cease firing. The silence of the guns is a sure warning that German aircraft are close by - the gunners don't want to shoot down their own planes.

Frank pulls away to the south and scans the sky for Fritz, who is several hundred feet above him heading west with six Fokkers on his tail.

Frank turns the nose of his Spad upward to join Fritz. He loses speed due to the climb.

Three of the Fokkers break from the formation and dive on his tail. Frank turns the Spad in a half roll so that he winds up facing them.

Frank's Spad and the lead Fokker race toward each other, firing as the gap closes between them.

A streak of bullets rip into the Spad's upper wing.

A split second before they collide, the German pilot dives down to pass below Frank.

Frank banks and turns the Spad into a sharp, circular dive, allowing him to fire into the Fokker's cockpit.

Frank's incendiaries tear through the Fokker's cowling and into the cockpit, slamming into the pilot and sending the Fokker plummeting downward out of control.

EXT. AIR WEST OF CONFLANS TO THIONVILLE - DAY.

Three Fokkers fire at Fritz's Spad as he takes off in a northeasterly direction, towards Conflans, two miles away, in an attempt to lure the Fokkers off Frank's tail.

Three of the Fokkers stay with him. The muzzles of their machine guns flash, sending bullets into the fuselage of Fritz's Spad.

A flame flares up from his gas tank. His only hope is to squelch the fire. He puts the plane into a roll - over and over it goes, the air whipping at the flame, as more bullets rip into the cockpit and riddle his body.

Near Thionville, the Spad hits the ground hard and rips apart.

The damp, soggy ground quickly puts out the fire.

INT. FRANK'S SPAD

As the first Fokker plunges, Frank turns on the tail of another above him. He nudges the Spad's nose upward and fires.

The second Fokker drops in a smoky spiral and bursts into flame as it hits the ground

The third Fokker sheers off and swings north after his friends.

Frank looks around for Fritz's Spad, but the sky is empty.

He finally turns south and west from Saint-Hilaire, toward the French balloon south of Verdun to get his confirmation.

EXT. FRENCH BALLOON - DAY

The observer in the balloon basket telephones down the victory. The battery unit around the French balloon cheers as Frank's plane nears.

INT. FRANK'S SPAD

The bullet that punctured Frank's fuel tank has done its work.

INSERT - FUEL GAUGE - ALMOST EMPTY

The engine begins to splutter. He works the hand fuel pump to bring up the pressure. The engine catches again.

Over his shoulder, he sees black puffs of smoke from anti-aircraft guns.

FRANK

Fritz!

Frank turns toward the east. Working the hand pump, he opens the throttle and moves in the direction of the anti-aircraft gunfire flashing from between Wadonville and Jonville, towns now in Allied hands.

He discovers the cause - two French Spads chase a couple of two-seater German LVG-CV reconnaissance planes. The French Spads shoot at the German planes from a distance, doing little harm.

One German plane manages to get away and crosses to German lines. The other pilot dodges the French Spads as the photographer in the rear seat snaps pictures. The French planes follow the LVG south, without attempting to close in.

Frank makes a sharp turn and heads west in a straight line above the LVG's flight path. He dives under it and cuts loose with incendiary bullets that tear into the LVG's belly and into the cockpit.

The LVG literally trembles from the vicious onslaught, rocking and slipping into a spin as the engine cuts out. It descends on the Allied trenches below.

The observer in the rear cockpit abandons the camera for a machine gun. The French join the fight from a distance.

The LVG drifts eastward as it falls in a spinning spiral.

EXT. RIDGE ALONG ALLIED LINES - DAY

The LVG crashes on a high ridge close to an American battery. It barely avoids smacking a concrete bunker as it breaks into several pieces near a row of low trees.

INT. FRANK'S SPAD

Frank still works the hand pump as he flies over the open farmland. To the south is a village about a mile away. The land in between is scarred with shell holes and trenches.

Flat land to the east is within rifle range of German lines. To the west are more trenches and an American battery post.

To the north, Frank finds a soft landing spot near a farmer's two-story house, only yards from the crash site.

EXT. FIELD NEAR FARM HOUSE

Frank slides out of the cockpit. He pulls off his goggles and takes a look at the damage to the bullet-riddled Spad.

EXT. RIDGE ALONG ALLIED LINES

On the ridge above him, a group of French soldiers and an American Ambulance Crew have gathered around the wrecked plane.

As he heads toward them, Frank stumbles over the dead body of the pilot, who has been thrown clear of the wreckage.

The German pilot, his helmet on, lies face down, his coat ripped open. His gloves are off and his outstretched left hand claws the ground. His right arm is twisted grotesquely around his back, with dried blood between the fingers.

One of the French pilots, SERGEANT REGGIE SINCLAIRE, comes over to Frank.

FRANK

Duex balloon! *Duex* Fokkers! This Boche *cing*, five. Confirmation?

SERGEANT SINCLAIRE

I don't care about your victories! We spent two hours stalking him.

Two French soldiers cover the body with a blanket.

SERGEANT SINCLAIRE

He bounced out of the cockpit on impact and flew through the air.

FRANK

Who was he?

SERGEANT SINCLAIRE

His identification says Lieutenant Ernst Schulz. We were trying to capture him.

FRANK

Capture him? Why?

SERGEANT SINCLAIRE
So we could examine the plane and
question them.

An ambulance worker comes up. Behind him are some American
soldiers from the 42nd Rainbow Division.

AMBULANCE WORKER
Are you hurt, Lt. Luke?

FRANK
Just thirsty.

Frank drinks deeply from the canteen the worker gives him.
Handing it back, he follows Sinclair to the top of the
ridge.

EXT. TOP OF RIDGE

The downed LVG rests on a ridge with a view for miles around,
with a bunker on one side and a clump of trees with thick
brush a few feet away on the other side.

French soldiers gather around the LVG and roll it over to
retrieve the body of the observer tangled in the wreckage.

The dead observer's left arm is broken and lays across his
face. His eyes stare unblinking above the arm.

The French soldiers retrieve the man's identification and
cover the body. They hand the papers to Sinclair.

SERGEANT SINCLAIRE
He was Lieutenant Karl Hohne.

Frank strolls over to the wreckage. He cuts one of the black
German crosses from the fabric of the plane and rolls it up
as a souvenir.

An official car drives up and stops. Signal Corps sergeant
C.E. DUNN leaps out, carrying his camera and tripod. He
scales the sloping ridge and offers his hand to Frank.

DUNN
Sergeant C.E. Dunn, United States
Signal Corps. You Frank Luke?

Frank nods. Dunn circles the plane. Looks for the best angle.
Mounts his camera onto his tripod. Yells at Sinclair.

DUNN

Have them scoop the wreckage into a pile. Swiftly, please, while there's still enough light.

Sinclair and the French begin working. Dunn turns to Frank.

DUNN

Stand by the plane, please.

Frank takes his place in a stiff, unsmiling pose.

Dunn looks through the camera viewfinder.

DUNN

Off with the helmet. Smooth your hair.

Frank does as he's told, holds the helmet behind his back.

THROUGH VIEWFINDER - Frank is dwarfed by the ridge behind him.

Dunn loosens the camera from its mounting and gets down on one knee to refocus the shot.

THROUGH VIEWFINDER - Frank's head and shoulders are visible above the horizon, giving him a more heroic stance.

Dunn takes the photo, which will grace news stands around the world.

A reporter, GEORGE SELDES, comes up. Starts talking as Dunn shoots from various angles. By now Frank is exhausted. The adrenaline has worn off. He stammers through the interview.

SELDES

Tell me in your own words what happened.

FRANK

Saw two balloons, set 'em ablaze, took two Fokkers, then went to help Fritz.

SELDES

You went to help a German?

FRANK

No, wing man... took down two Huns. Fuel pressure low, hole in fuel tank...

Seldes goes over to where a Rainbow Division private is describing what happened. He hurriedly starts scribbling.

RAINBOW DIVISION PRIVATE
The French planes were just toying
with the Boche, shooting from far
away and then Luke flashes across
the sky like a rocket...

EXT. FRANK'S SPAD - NIGHT

Frank sleeps on the ground under the wing. He twists and turns restlessly.

START DREAM SEQUENCE

Frank is at home, in uniform, before leaving for training. He plants flowers for his mother, OTILLA "TILLIE" LUKE. He looks up at her, as she stands next to his father, FRANK SR.

FRANK
When will they bloom, mom?

TILLIE
Lilies only bloom in the spring.

FRANK SR
Have patience, son. They'll bloom
in their own time.

TILLIE
Everything has its season.

END DREAM SEQUENCE

EXT. FRANK'S SPAD - DAY

Frank awakens to the sound of a car approaching. He crawls out from under the Spad as another photographer comes up.

SUPER: Thursday, September 19, 1918

DRUCKER
Lt. Harry S. Drucker, Frank Luke?

Frank checks his watch.

FRANK
It's noon. I need to patch the fuel
tank and get some fuel.

Drucker points to the beat-up Spad.

DRUCKER

How about a picture next to it?
Then I'll take you to get fuel.

FRANK

Deal.

DRUCKER

Lean back against the wing. Got a
girl back home? What's her name?

FRANK

Marie, in California. We're going
to get married when the war is
over.

Frank tucks his cap under his left elbow and crosses his
arms. The Elgin watch Fritz gave him shows on his left wrist.

Drucker snaps the picture.

FRANK

The other side of the plane is less
shot up. I don't want Marie or my
mom to worry.

Frank moves to the opposite wing. His arms outstretched, he
gives a semblance of a smile.

FRANK

They'll be excited to get a picture
of me. Can you mail it to them if I
give you the addresses?

INT. AIRFIELD C - NIGHT

Frank lands the plane in the darkness with help of signal
flares. Woody and Robbie meet him as he slides out of the
cockpit.

WOODY

Come on Frank, you don't want to be
late for the party.

The mechanics take charge of the plane as the two other
pilots lead Frank toward the mess hall of the 95th.

FRANK

Party's early, isn't it? Fritz's
birthday isn't until tomorrow.

Woody and Robbie glance at each other, hurrying him along.

INT. 95TH SQUADRON MESS HALL - NIGHT

All of the First Pursuit Group is there, including Major Hartney, Lieutenant Grant, and Eddie Rickenbacker. The room is already filled with smoke and the booze is flowing.

RICKENBACKER
Congratulations, Frank! You're the
new Ace of Aces.

FRANK
You're not mad at me, are you?

RICKENBACKER
As far as I'm concerned any other
fellow can have the title any time
they want it.

Someone begins a rousing cheer.

LEO
Speech! Speech!

Frank looks around in astonishment. They are yelling, whistling, and clapping - for him!

Frank is lifted up onto a table.

JERRY
Come on, you gotta say something!

FRANK
It's a bully party - thanks for
this dinner. I was awfully hungry -
haven't eaten in two days.

Frank starts to get off the table, but he's pushed back.

LEO
You can do better than that.

FRANK
Well, there is one thing I do wanna
tell you guys...

The crowd hushes.

FRANK
It's hard work makin' a speech and
talkin' to reporters. And getting
your picture taken.

Groans from around the room - he can't let them down, though many have treated him like crap. He pushes the next words out with gusto.

FRANK

I'll tell you just one more thing -
I'm going after more god-damned
Huns and their balloons. They will
never take me alive!

The men cheer and lift their drinks in a salute.

MEN

To Frank! To Frank!

WOODY

Someone bring this guy some food
and a beer!

They allow him to hop off the table. He sits between Woody and Robbie and the other members of his squadron.

It finally hits him - Fritz isn't there. He turns to Robbie.

FRANK

Where's Fritz?

Robbie looks away. No one answers. They stare down at their plates, as if fascinated by the food.

FRANK

Come on, guys. Is this Fritz's idea
of a joke?

Frank's eyes rest on Major Hartney.

FRANK

Major?

HARTNEY

I'm sorry, Frank. He never returned
last night.

Frank can't speak for a long moment. Several of the men wipe tears from their eyes.

FRANK

I'm going up to the front and find
out what happened to him.

Hartney gets up. He goes over to Frank and sits down next to him. Places a hand on his shoulder.

HARTNEY

Look, Frank, you need to take some time off. Let some of us go up to the front, get confirmations, find out if anyone saw what happened.

FRANK

I'm going with you.

Frank jerks away and stands up.

FRANK

I have to find him! You can't stop me from trying to find him!

HARTNEY

He was behind enemy lines. If he's alive, he's been captured. If not, he's gone. I'm giving you a week's leave. It's an order. You don't have a choice.

INT. TRAIN - DAY

Frank sits dejectedly, looking out of the window.

SUPER: Friday, September 20, 1918

An army CAPTAIN comes through the car. He sees Frank and pauses. Frank finally realizes the captain is looking at him.

CAPTAIN

Frank Luke? Your picture's in the paper. See?

He shows Frank the picture.

CAPTAIN

My men were on the front line. Went to ground when the first artillery shells hit, muddy, drowning in our trenches, scared shitless...

Frank looks at him dully.

CAPTAIN

They knew they'd be chopped to bits but you flew over and then we saw a huge red glow through the fog - you'd gotten the balloon directing the Hun's artillery.

He holds his hand out to Frank. Frank shakes it.

CAPTAIN

By golly, we all stood up and cheered. My men started running and stormed right through those German trenches like they was nothing.

The captain reaches out and pats Frank's shoulder.

CAPTAIN

You gave them the courage to fight. God bless you, man!

Frank is so choked up he can't speak. He nods.

CAPTAIN

Come on up and talk with my guys. They'd give the shirt off their backs to meet the great Frank Luke.

Frank follows him to another car. The captain keeps talking as a dozen enlisted men and officers shake his hand.

CAPTAIN

Those sausages hang over you and you know they're getting ready to blow you to Kingdom Come...

Frank starts to relax. Soon he's laughing. He joins their crap game on the floor.

EXT. STREETS OF PARIS - DAY

Frank pauses at a news stand. The headlines scream at him, along with his picture taken in front of the wrecked LVG.

He goes over to the flower stall next to the news stand and stares at the flowers. The OWNER studies him.

OWNER

Red roses for your girl?

FRANK

For my mom.

OWNER

Yellow carnations?

FRANK

How about lilies?

OWNER

Lilies aren't in bloom now.

FRANK

I know. They bloom in the spring.
I'll send carnations.

Frank shoves his hand in his pockets for cash to pay.

INT. HOTEL DESK - NIGHT

SUPER: Saturday, September 21, 1918

The HOTEL CLERK gives Frank some telegrams.

HOTEL CLERK

These came for you.

Frank sorts through the messages.

INSERT

"On behalf of the citizens of Phoenix and Arizona."

"Congratulations, your brother, Joseph Luke."

"We are proud. God bless you, Mama."

Frank looks up from the last card. His cheeks are damp with tears.

INT. HOTEL ROOM - DAY

Frank writes a short, heartfelt letter to his mother, He makes some mistakes in spelling and punctuation.

INSERT - LETTER

"Dear Mother, Have not writing you in some days on account of being so busy. As you no doubt you have already learned. This is on a line to let you know that I am ok. Now mother, remember that I have passed the dangerous stage of being a new player in the game. You don't have to worry for me. I now know how to take care of myself. Love to all, Frank."

Frank starts a letter to his girlfriend, Marie.

INSERT - LETTER

"Dearest Marie, I know I am overdue on a letter but have been busy. As you by now already know -"

At this point, he stops. Tears up the letter.

EXT. SIDEWALK CAFE - DAY

Frank sits with JULES (24) a mechanic from the training site at Orly.

JULES

Nice to be away from wrecked machines. How does it feel to be a hero?

FRANK

I lost a buddy on that mission. I was the one who suggested we go after those bags.

JULES

You could just as easily have been the one. The important thing is, you're here now.

FRANK

I hadn't told my mother I was at the front. She found out from the newspaper and sent a telegram.

JULES

Did you write her?

FRANK

I keep thinking about the lilies we planted before I left. She used to say, everything has their season.

INT. CATHEDRAL - DAY

Frank listens to the service, his face somber.

INT. HANGAR - DAY

A shadow falls over them as Flanner and the other mechanics clean parts. They look up to see Frank standing there.

SUPER: Wednesday, September 25, 1918

FRANK

How soon can you get me in the air?

FLANNER

Your old Spad's been retired. We can't get your guns mounted before tomorrow.

FRANK

I'm going up now. If I can't shoot,
I can swing along the lines and
throw candy and cigarettes to the
men.

INT. FRANK AND FRITZ'S CABIN - NIGHT

The artillery along the front lines starts up with an earth-shattering roar. Frank lies awake, staring up at the ceiling.

He looks at Fritz's empty bunk. Someone has cleaned out his partner's things. Even the mandolin is gone, but Frank can still hear the sound of Fritz playing.

EXT. MESS HALL - DAY

Frank walks toward the mess hall. It is 0515 hours. In the semi-darkness, Jerry Vasconcells takes off with six Flight B planes.

SUPER: Thursday, September 26, 1918, Meuse-Argonne Offensive

Ivan "Robbie" Roberts comes up behind Frank.

ROBBIE

They won't be coming back.

FRANK

Why's that?

ROBBIE

The line's moved up and we have a new forward position for refueling. Jerry's been assigned to it.

FRANK

Maybe I'll ask for reassignment. I can get along with Jerry. You flying today?

ROBBIE

I'm going up with Hoover in half an hour.

EXT. HANGAR - DAY

The mechanics attach the guns to Frank's new Spad.

FRANK

I thought you'd have it ready. Now the wings are off!

FLANNER

That's the only way to mount onto the fuselage. We still have to align the guns and check the convergence.

FRANK

You should have done that yesterday.

FLANNER

You took the plane out yesterday afternoon, remember?

A young messenger brings a note to Frank.

FRANK

Grant wants to see me?

INT. HEADQUARTERS OFFICE OF 27TH SQUADRON - DAY

Frank sits next to Robbie Roberts in front of Grant's desk.

GRANT

There's a sausage over by Consenvoye that Colonel Mitchell wants down. Robbie has volunteered to be your wingman.

FRANK

I'd rather go alone.

GRANT

That's against regulations.

FRANK

He doesn't know anything about balloon busting.

ROBBIE

(offended)

Who says? I just got through shooting at balloons with Hoover.

FRANK

Get any?

ROBBIE

No, but I'm going to.

GRANT

You see? Because you did it, others think they can. That's why we need you to pass on what you know. The weather tomorrow looks bad for flying -

Grant takes a deep breath, looks at Frank.

GRANT

- so be in the operations tent just after lunch to help train others.

EXT. AIRFIELD C - DAY

As the mechanics ready the Spads for takeoff, Frank takes Robbie aside. He pulls out his map.

FRANK

We don't have enough cloud cover to come in low, so we'll have to stay high. The Huns will be waiting for us, so when we see them, we dive for home.

ROBBIE

We don't stay and fight?

FRANK

Our job is to bring down balloons. We only fight Fokkers when we have to.

EXT. OVER ALLIED LINES - DAY

As they pass into German-held territory, Frank and Robbie find the sky filled with fighter and reconnaissance planes.

EXT. AIR BETWEEN CONSENVOYE AND SIVRY- DAY

Frank flies high, north along the Meuse, with Robbie to the side and rear. An unidentified Spad joins them.

The river below meanders through rolling hills, every hill hiding anti-aircraft guns and batteries, as well as German infantry. They stay high, flying on for another minute before Frank banks and turns.

He rocks the plane's wings and points down to where a balloon is tethered several thousand feet down. Then he dives.

Frank dives. He locates the balloon a thousand feet below, and rolls to the right 45 degrees to bring his guns in position to the gas-filled balloon.

EXT. BALLOONZUG 35 - DAY

Lt. Bernard Mangels is in the balloon basket. He and the observer parachute out as Frank's Spad blazes toward them.

Mangels barks orders as he struggles out of his parachute harness.

MANGELS

(In German)

Do not shoot! We have planes
waiting for them.

There are no muzzle flashes from the ground as Frank sweeps by.

INT. FRANK'S SPAD - DAY

Frank spots five Fokkers a quarter of a mile away to the west. He tips his wings, indicating to Robbie they should fly for home.

Robbie is already barreling straight at the Fokkers.

FRANK

No! Robbie, no!

Frank takes after Robbie, but one of the Fokkers turns on him and he has no choice but to fight.

A Fokker heads straight at him, guns blasting. Frank sends out series of quick bursts. The enemy plane twists into a downward spiral just as Frank's gun jams.

Before he can look for Robbie, two more Fokkers attack from behind. Frank dives swiftly, drawing them away as he tries to get the jam loose.

INT. ROBBIE'S SPAD - DAY

Robbie is dealing with two other Fokkers, one with a blue fuselage and tail and a green nose on which is painted a golden werewolf's head. He dives to get away from the Fokker bearing Jasta 13's commander, Franz Buchner.

Tracers from the Fokker fill the air and as Robbie dives, he sees a balloon in front of him.

He ignores Buchner's Fokker, and sends a burst of incendiaries toward the balloon. It bursts into flame.

At nearly the same time bullets enter the cockpit and Robbie collapses. His Spad turns into the flaming balloon and falls to the ground with it.

The Fokker is so low it makes a forced landing on rough terrain. Buchner exits, appearing unhurt.

INT. FRANK'S SPAD - DAY

Frank pulls his Spad into a half loop and rolls out, going after one of two Fokkers who is on his tail. He fires but his guns jam with the first rounds.

He tries to clear the jam. To his frustration, he is able to only fire a few more rounds before the gun jams again.

Suddenly, for no apparent reason, the two Fokkers join the remaining Fokker hovering above, and fly away.

Frank flies in circles, looking for Robbie.

INSERT - FUEL GAUGE - RUNNING LOW

Frank finally takes off for Allied lines as night settles in.

EXT. AIRFIELD C - NIGHT

Frank sees the signal - a green flare followed by two red ones. He swerves from the falsely lit field towards Rembercourt.

INT. HANGAR - NIGHT

Leo glances towards Frank's Spad as the mechanics push it inside.

LEO

No bullet holes? Are you slipping?

FRANK

There's a bag near Bantheville if you want a crack at it. If you don't get it, I'll go over and take it down tomorrow.

LEO

Where's Robbie?

Frank looks tired. He glances at Flanner.

FRANK
Hasn't he returned?

Flanner shakes his head no.

INT. OPERATIONS TENT - NIGHT

Frank types up his report. Grant sits in silence, waiting for him to finish.

GRANT
What happened to Roberts?

FRANK
Fokkers. We were both fighting. By the time they disengaged, it was dark. I couldn't find him.

GRANT
Didn't you go after the balloon?

FRANK
Never got the chance. My guns jammed again. Next time, I'll go alone.

GRANT
I don't want you going out again without an escort.

Frank gets up, heads for the door.

FRANK
That just puts more of you at risk.

GRANT
Like the major says, we're all in this together. We need to figure out what to do. Don't forget, you are to talk to the boys tomorrow.

Frank nods as he rises to leave.

INT. FRANK'S CABIN - DAY

Frank stays in bed, too depressed to get up.

SUPER: Friday, September 27, 1918

INT. OPERATIONS TENT - DAY

A group of pilots, including Woody, are gathered.
Grant checks his watch. Looks over at Gonny Clapp.

GRANT
You're his Flight C commander. Go
get him.

EXT. FRANK'S CABIN - DAY

Gonny bangs on the door.

GONNY
Frank? Are you in there?

FRANK (O.S.)
Go away.

GONNY
Can I come in?

Gonny hears a sound, but it is indistinct. He goes in.

INT. FRANK'S CABIN

Frank turns toward the wall as light hits his face. He pulls
the sheet over his head.

GONNY
You gotta pull yourself together.
The major will let you go back to
Orly if you want.

Gonny pulls the sheet off and tugs at Frank's arm.

GONNY
But you can't just stay in bed all
day! It's bad for morale.

Frank gets up. He's still wearing his uniform from the
previous day.

FRANK
More balloons... Bantheville!
Couldn't get it yesterday.

GONNY
Everybody's worried about you.
You're not acting like yourself.

FRANK

I'm fine... unless you're my wing man. I've lost two, maybe three. I don't even know who the other guy was yesterday.

Frank stands up, starts pacing, chatters excitedly.

FRANK

I'll show the other guys how to get balloons. Just tell Lt. Grant I want guns that don't jam.

INT. OPERATIONS ROOM - DAY

Frank stands in front of the group. He talks more to himself than the others.

FRANK

To shoot 'em down, perforate the bag so the hydrogen mixes with air, regular ammo will do. Short burst of incendiaries to ignite 'em.

A hand goes up. He nods at Woody.

WOODY

Do you shoot 'em just any place?

FRANK

Only the front two-thirds has gas in it, the rest just air. Come in close, twenty-five, fifty yards, not just make a vertical dive.

Some of the pilots are taking notes. They're older than him, college graduates. Talking in front of them makes Frank feel uncomfortable.

FRANK

It's getting away that's tough. Ground defenses, machine guns and flaming onions, try to catch you when you start climbing.

He keeps talking, one thing after another, mostly as if he's talking to himself.

FRANK

Spads are fast and heavy, great for dives, not as quick to turn as Fokkers.

(MORE)

FRANK (CONT'D)

Don't get into a turning fight with a Fokker. Never give up your speed if you don't have to.

He wipes sweat from his forehead, although it is a cool day.

FRANK

The archies shoot at you. The Fokkers lurk in the clouds, waiting to dive when you lose speed after a climb. Both will get you.

INT. HEADQUARTERS OFFICE OF 27TH SQUADRON - DAY

Grant types an application form.

INSERT - "Distinguished Service Cross"

INT. 95TH SQUADRON MESS HALL - DAY

Frank sits down with Granville Woodard.

FRANK

I'm taking down that balloon at Bantheville tomorrow.

WOODY

Who's gonna be your wingman?

FRANK

Nobody. I don't need a wingman.

WOODY

Will Grant give you permission to go alone?

FRANK

I'm not gonna ask.

INT. HEADQUARTERS OFFICE OF 27TH SQUADRON - DAY

Grant looks out the door in time to see Frank's Spad take off, heading north.

GRANT

That's it! I've had it. He took off without my permission.

Hartney and Gonny come up behind him.

GRANT

If he's not back tonight, he's grounded.

GONNY

I thought you were typing a Distinguished Service Cross application for him.

GRANT

Distinguished Service Cross or not, by God, I'll court martial his ass if he keeps this up.

EXT. OVER GERMAN LINES - DAY

Frank speeds west until he crosses over Verdun. Gaining altitude, he heads for Bantheville, where he finds the balloon nest in a field north of town. He notes the position of anti-aircraft guns and the German ground crew.

He searches for landmarks that might stick out in the dark.

As the sun sets, he lands south of Verdun at the B-Flight forward airfield.

EXT. B-FLIGHT FORWARD AIRFIELD - NIGHT

The field is built on level, high ground 200 yards east of the old city walls of Verdun, so close to the French artillery that shells regularly pass overhead.

It looks like the post is deserted. The hanger is camouflaged as is the operations dugout.

SERGEANT-MAJOR ALBAUGH, the chief mechanic, comes out wearing a gas mask. He looks Frank over and motions for two mechanics to wheel Frank's Spad inside.

ALBAUGH

What's your name, kid?

FRANK

Lt. Frank Luke. Why are you wearing that mask?

ALBAUGH

We're on the front lines. Anything could happen. You know what gas does to you?

Frank nods. He glances towards a dugout.

FRANK

Lt. Vasconcells in there?

INT. B-FLIGHT OPERATIONS DUGOUT - NIGHT

Frank eats supper with Jerry Vasconcells. The food is cold, even though there is a wood cook stove with water steaming. Frank eats fast.

He glances at a notice posted to the dugout wall stating that the men are restricted to the old barracks, with no more than two coming out at a time.

JERRY

Lots more restricted here. Not like Rembercourt.

Jerry shoves his plate back. Lights a cigar and leans over to pet a small terrier.

JERRY

I took down the balloon over Lisson last evening just before sunset. Man, lead flying everywhere.

FRANK

They expect to be hit at dusk now. I'm changing strategies - hit 'em just before dawn.

JERRY

How do you expect to find your way in the dark?

FRANK

I buzzed the balloon on the way here. I know exactly where it is.

Jerry is silent a long moment, enjoying his cigar.

JERRY

I'm sure Ack didn't send you here, nor did I get a call from Major Hartney. What's going on?

FRANK

You should have been made commander of the 27th, not Grant. He'd rather run than fight.

JERRY

I don't know about that. Thing about Ack is, he doesn't want any of his men to go down.

FRANK

I can take care of myself.

Jerry looks at him thoughtfully.

JERRY

You get along with Rickenbacker, don't you? Maybe you ought to ask to be transferred to the 94th.

Frank nods sullenly.

FRANK

I may do that.

EXT. FORWARD B-FLIGHT AIRFIELD - NIGHT

Frank puts on his helmet and goggles.

SUPER: Saturday, September 28, 1918

It's the coldest hour of the day. Frank lifts his collar of his leather flying coat against the wind. He ties the scarf tightly around his head.

Two of Flight B's mechanics wheel his Spad out of the hangar in the dark. Frank holds his long flashlight for them to see.

FRANK

Can you hurry?

Sergeant Albaugh appears with his gas mask on.

ALBAUGH

It'll be even colder up there in the wind and fog. Sure you want to do this?

FRANK

I won't be gone that long.

He pulls out a confirmation sheet and gives it to Albaugh.

FRANK

When you see the balloon at Bantheville go up, fill this confirmation out for me, okay?

EXT. OVER THE MEUSE - NIGHT

Frank follows the Meuse north to Dun-sur-Meuse, then the road west to Bantheville. He streaks for the balloon's nest north of town.

EXT. AIR NEAR BANTHEVILLE - NIGHT

The Bantheville balloon is still in its nest as Frank's Spad approaches. Frank dives, firing incendiary rounds into it.

The balloon goes up in flames on the first try. Frank flies up and away.

EXT. AIRFIELD C - DAY

Frank tears off his goggles and checks his Elgin watch as he climbs out of the plane - 0650 hours. It's barely dawn.

INT. HEADQUARTERS OFFICE OF 27TH SQUADRON - DAY

Frank walks over to the typewriter desk. He pulls his confirmation sheet from his pocket and sits down.

Gonny sits at Grant's desk.

GONNY

You got one? Where?

FRANK

Bantheville. Where's the major?

GONNY

At Mitchell's headquarters.

FRANK

Grant?

GONNY

Flew up to Verdun to check things out for when we move up there.

FRANK

He say anything about me?

GONNY

Well, first he and the major discussed whether they should court martial you. Then they talked about allowing solo flights.

He grins in satisfaction as Frank stalks out.

INT. HANGAR - DAY

Frank wears a fresh uniform. He looks at the newest Spad allotted him. There's no number painted on the side yet.

FRANK
Is she fueled?

FLANNER
Give us fifteen minutes.

EXT. OVER GERMAN LINES - DAY

In the new, unmarked Spad, Frank tangles with a Hannover CL near Monthianville. His guns rattle - not jamming. The Hannover spins downward.

EXT. FIELD NEAR STORKS AIRDROME - NIGHT

Frank puts down in a pouring rain at a field near the Storks airdrome at Riocort. Frenchmen run out to greet him.

EXT. AIRFIELD C - DAY

Frank climbs from the cockpit of his Spad and sashes across the muddy field, past the row of Spads standing ready for a break in the weather.

SUPER: Sunday, September 29, 1918

INT. HEADQUARTERS OFFICE OF 27TH SQUADRON - DAY

Frank holds a confirmation sheet out to Grant.

FRANK
Got a Hannover near Monthianville.

Grant does a slow burn as he glares up at Frank.

GRANT
You know the rules. Why didn't you return last night?

FRANK
I had motor problems.

GRANT

Always a convenient excuse. Why didn't you call? Where were you?

FRANK

At the Storks.

GRANT

Jerry said you were at Verdun.

FRANK

I was earlier. I tried to get back here but it was raining. The engine cut out -

Grant glides out of his chair and begins yelling. He points an accusing finger at Frank.

GRANT

I didn't give you permission to go! You don't want to be part of a team. I've had enough of your insubordination!

FRANK

Major Hartney gave me permission.

GRANT

He never mentioned it to me if he did. You're grounded, Luke! You're not going up until I say so.

Frank stares at him in shock.

FRANK

For how long?

GRANT

Until further notice!

FRANK

Do you have that in writing?

GRANT

I will have. Just give me a minute.

Grant heads for the typewriter. Frank throws down his confirmation sheet and runs out.

EXT. AIRFIELD C - DAY

Frank dashes over to his Spad. Leaps into the cockpit. Starts going through the startup procedure. Flanner rushes outside.

FLANNER

What the hell you doing? It's not ready! It needs fuel and -

FRANK

I'll fuel up at Verdun.

FLANNER

You need ammunition.

FRANK

Still have plenty from yesterday. I'll get more at Verdun. I've got to go, Flanner.

The Spad's engine comes to life. After a moment, Frank sends it to full throttle.

Flanner watches as Frank takes off for the last time from Rembercourt.

INT. OPERATIONS TENT FOR 95TH SQUADRON - DAY

Some of the 95th squadron hang out, bored, playing cards and drinking. Woody, well into his liquor, makes a suggestion.

WOODY

We should form our own voluntary patrol - go out and bring some balloons down!

Everyone starts talking at once.

Woody is ushered out with two other pilots, DENNY HOLDEN and MEREDITH ROBERTS.

EXT. AIRFIELD A - DAY

Guns are loaded with incendiary bullets. Planes are pushed out. Woody and the other two pilots put on their flight jackets, helmets and goggles.

Other pilots cheer the three on as they climb into the cockpits and take off.

INT. B-FLIGHT OPERATIONS DUG-OUT - DAY

Frank paces back and forth, talking with Jerry Vasconcells and Major Hartney.

JERRY
More coffee?

Jerry pours cups for both of them.

A U.S. Navy cannon on a railroad car near the field roars.

Startled, Frank slings his cup upward. It bounces off the ceiling. Hartney drops his cup on the floor.

Jerry slaps the table and laughs. His little terrier hops around in delight.

HARTNEY
Blast you, Jerry! You did that on purpose.

JERRY
Get's 'em every time.

FRANK
I thought I was past being scared. Guess I was wrong.

He edges toward the door - he's antsy.

HARTNEY
I said 5:56 P.M. That'll give you plenty of time to fly over to Dun-sur-Meuse.

Frank makes a show of checking his watch.

FRANK
I think I'll go wait by the plane. Check to see if it's been refueled, ammunition loaded.

Hartney gets up. He nods at Jerry.

HARTNEY
I should be going too if I aim to be back before dark.

He and Frank get up to leave.

Jerry starts to go with them, but the phone rings.

EXT. B-FLIGHT HANGAR-SHED - DAY

Frank walks over to his Spad. Hartney pauses to put on his helmet and goggles. Albaugh wears his gas mask.

Hartney gets into the cockpit of his Sopwith Camel. Tries the engine. It won't start.

Jerry comes out. He and Albaugh work at trying to get the Camel to start.

Frank gets in the cockpit of his Spad. Begins running through the start-up procedure.

Hartney hears the Spad's engine idle. He checks his watch and turns to Frank.

HARTNEY

Sixteen minutes, Frank. You wanna get sent back to the rear? Shut her down.

Frank shuts down the engine. Gets out and grins sheepishly as Hartney waves his fist at him.

At that moment, the Camel's engine catches. Moments later, Hartney is in the air.

Frank looks over at Jerry.

FRANK

Who was the call from?

JERRY

Who do you think? Grant wants you placed under arrest.

FRANK

The major is the only one who can issue that kind of order. Why didn't you tell him about the call?

JERRY

I was too busy helping him get that Sopwith Camel started, then he took off before I had a chance.

Frank gets into the cockpit. Starts up the Spad. Pushes the throttle forward as he speaks, then back to full throttle.

FRANK

I'll drop a note to the balloon company over Avacourt to get my confirmations. That way you won't get in trouble.

Frank takes off into the evening sun.

EXT. FRONT LINES - DAY

Troops look up, see Frank's Spad. They wave and shout, cheering him on.

EXT. AMERICAN 7TH BALLOON COMPANY OVER AVACOURT - DAY

Frank flies low. He tosses out a small cannister with a handwritten note inside.

One of the ground crew retrieves it.

INSERT - NOTE

"Watch three Hun balloons along the Meuse. Luke."

EXT. OVER GERMAN TERRITORY - DAY

Frank flies east, over the trenches, over Verdun, into German-held territory.

The sky is overcast, cold, under 40 degrees Fahrenheit, with a brisk wind. Visibility is limited.

Any balloons will have to fly low, so Frank also flies low, under the clouds, crossing paths with the three Spads from the 95th Squadron flying at a much higher altitude.

He doesn't see Meredith Roberts drop out with engine trouble and head to Verdun. Woodard's and Holden's Spads are mere specks headed northeast which he never even notices.

Frank turns north at Dumloup. His clock reads 1826 or almost 6:30 P.M.

EXT. AIR OVER GREMILLY - DAY

A balloon floats low over an empty field two miles east of Gremilly. The observer jumps as Frank makes a shallow dive. Ground fire erupts as he swings around for another pass.

No fire this time either, but the balloon is so punctured with holes it collapses on the ground.

EXT. AIR OVER AZANNES - DAY

Frank doesn't bother to climb up to the clouds. He heads directly for the next balloon, two kilometers north of a small village called Azannes.

He flies along a sloping ridge, then above pasture and farmland, with no hills to hide his approach.

The two observers jump just before the balloon erupts into a ball of fire.

Frank looks at his compass - heads northwest.

EXT. AIR NORTH TO COTE ST. GERMAIN - DAY

The next balloon has already been hauled down.

In fact, all along the line, balloons are going down as telephone warnings precede him. Heading northwest, Frank loses track of the balloon line.

A hill looms up in front of him - Cote St. Germain, blocking Frank's view of the Dun-sur-Meuse area. He banks, rounding the hill, turning west.

EXT. OVER MILLY, NEAR BRIERE FARM - DAY

Fifteen miles away, Woody's and Denny Holden's Spads fly in circles along the Meuse. Two balloons are visible in the distance, several hundred yards apart, near a farmhouse.

Denny spots four Fokkers coming to cut them off. He points his Spad upward into the clouds to get away.

Woody doesn't see the Fokkers, just the balloons west of Dun-sur-Meuse and north of the village of Doullcon.

The northern balloon is higher, an easier target. His Spad dives on it from the south, using first regular ammunition, then incendiaries.

After his third pass, the balloon begins to smoke. The anti-aircraft fire is hot. He pulls up and away.

Behind him, the balloon explodes and burns.

EXT. AMERICAN 7TH BALLOON COMPANY - DAY

The ground crew for the balloon company sees the balloon at Doullcon go up in flame. Cheers go up for Frank Luke.

But it isn't Frank - it is his friend Granville Woodard.

EXT. AIR NORTH OF COTE ST. GERMAIN HILL - DAY

Three miles away, Frank rounds the hill in time to see the brilliant flash that leaves a trail of heavy black smoke. It's the balloon Woody has just brought down.

EXT. AIR SOUTH OF BIERE'S FARM - DAY

The Fokkers descend on Woody. He out-maneuvers two of them, does a roll to escape the third, but the fourth that's on his tail blasts away at him. Bullets rip through his tail section.

Woody turns his roll into a side-slip, which becomes a nose-dive as he plunges toward the earth and crashes.

EXT. AIR OVER BRIERE'S FARM - DAY

Denny Holden's Spad comes out of the clouds. Both the Fokkers and Woody are gone. But there's the second balloon, still aloft.

He slips down unnoticed from the clouds and fires at it.

His guns jam. As he fixes the guns and banks the Spad to go after the balloon again, it explodes.

As anti-aircraft guns rattle, he heads for home.

EXT. BETWEEN VILOSNES AND SIVRY-SUR-MEUSE - DAY

Some German soldiers use Woody's Spad for target practice.

A GERMAN OFFICER runs up.

GERMAN OFFICER

Stop! The pilot is still alive!

Woody comes to. He is pinned under the plane on his back. He cries out as German soldiers lift the plane away from him and a German field medic examines his injuries.

EXT. AIR WEST OF MURVAUX - DAY

Frank heads for a balloon tucked in along the side of Cote St. Germain Hill near the village of Murvaux.

EXT. BALLONZUG 35, NEAR MURVAUX - DAY

The balloon company commander, Lt. Bernard Mangels, spots the Spad in the distance. He yells orders to the ground crew.

MANGELS
(In German)
Lower the balloon!

And to the anti-aircraft battery.

MANGELS
(In German)
I have been waiting for you,
Balloon Buster!

He waves his fist at Frank's Spad as it swoops in.

The ground crew works frantically to haul the balloon down.

Frank's Spad shakes from a heavy barrage of ground fire.

INT. FRANK'S SPAD - DAY

Frank's body shudders as a bullet ricochets into the cockpit and through his shoulder, burying itself deep in a lung.

Frank keeps his gaze on the falling balloon, continuing to fire at it while ignoring the pain.

The balloon explodes. Hot gasses sear the side of the Spad as Frank soars up and away.

EXT. AIR OVER MURVAUX - DAY

German foot soldiers on the town's main street turn their weapons up to take aim at Frank's Spad.

Frank strafes them with incendiary bullets, leaving at least a dozen Germans killed or wounded.

He circles a church with a tall steeple and heads west from the town, over French farmland.

EXT. FIELD NEAR MURVAUX - DAY

Gunfire comes from a hill to the north. Bullets rip into the Spad and its cockpit.

The plane quickly loses altitude. A line of trees marks a creek to the west.

Frank makes a perfect landing in the field east of the trees.

EXT. UPSTAIRS OF FARMHOUSE - DAY

An old woman looks down from an upstairs window of a two-story farmhouse some 1,500 feet away.

EXT. FIELD NEAR MURVAUX - DAY

Frank stumbles out of the cockpit. Staggers dizzily toward the line of trees along a creek.

EXT. MILLY CREEK - DAY

Frank kneels to scoop water into his bloody gloved hands.

German soldiers, led by Lt. Bernard Mangels, approach.

MANGELS

(In German)

Surrender, American!

FRANK

You won't take me alive!

Frank manages to stand and draws his two .45 semi-automatics.

It's growing dark - or so it seems to Frank.

FRANK

Where are you? Let me see you!

Frank fires the pistols randomly and wildly in the direction of the enemy soldiers. None are hit.

MANGELS

(In German)

Hold your fire! Take him prisoner.

Frank slumps down to his knees. He topples over, falling partially into Milly Creek.

Mangels and his men approach cautiously. He motions to one of the soldiers, who walks over to Frank's body. The soldier kicks him in the side. No movement.

The soldier bends, takes some items from Frank's pocket and hands them to Mangels - a small pocket notebook and a pair of metal wings with the letters "USAS."

The other soldiers gather around, taking off Frank's shoes and leggings. They find money but miss the Elgin watch.

Frenchmen watch from a distance. Mangels motions to them.

MANGELS

(In German)

Bring a wagon!

The Frenchmen hurry off. Mangels searches through the papers from Frank's pocket.

MANGELS

(In German)

Frank Luke! Such an inglorious end
for you!

It starts to rain.

EXT. MURVAUX CHURCH - NIGHT

The Frenchmen park the wagon with Frank's body behind the church. Some French women bring a white sheet and wrap the body in it.

EXT. CHURCH YARD - NIGHT

A group of French men and women gather around the open grave. An old FRENCHMAN repeats the Lord's Prayer.

FRENCHMAN

(In French)

Our Father, who art in Heaven,
hallowed be thy name.

To one side, Mangels and two of his officers look on.

INT. B-FLIGHT OPERATION DUG-OUT - NIGHT

Jerry Vasconcells calls the 27th Squadron's headquarters.

INTERCUT TELEPHONE CALL - GRANT / VASCONCELLS

JERRY

Is Frank there?

GRANT

Haven't you arrested him?

JERRY

Major Hartney gave him permission to go after some balloons, only he's been gone too long. He would be out of fuel by now.

GRANT

Have you checked with the Storks?

JERRY

Yes. They haven't seen him.

GRANT

Unless he's put down in some field... we'd better throw up flares to guide him in, just in case.

EXT. AIRFIELD C - NIGHT

Throughout the dark, rainy night, the pilots of the 27th Squadron wait in a tent near the airfield. Now and then, someone goes outside and sends up a flare or rocket to mark the landing field.

EXT. LUKE HOME IN ARIZONA - DAY

Otilla "Tillie" Luke goes outside and notices that the lilies have bloomed - in the shape of an airplane.

She pales, crosses herself.

TILLIE

It's only September! Lilies don't bloom until -

A bright light seems to glide past her. She clasps her hands over her heart.

TILLIE

Oh, no! Frank! Frank!

She falls to her knees and begins to cry.

EXT. AIR OVER MURVAUX FIELD - DAY

Jerry Vasconcells and Tommy Lennon fly over the field west of Murvaux.

SUPER: Monday, September 30, 1918

Jerry notices something shiny. He banks and comes back, flying low, looking through binoculars.

THROUGH BINOCULARS - Frank's Spad.

Jerry circles another time... no sign of life.

The two planes tip their wings as a sign of respect and fly away.

INT. HEADQUARTERS OFFICE OF 27TH SQUADRON - DAY

Jerry and Tommy bursts in excitedly.

JERRY

We found his plane in a field near Marvaux.

Grant rises, his voice filled with concern.

GRANT

And Frank?

JERRY

No sign of him. The Spad was riddled with bullet holes, but it didn't look like it had crashed.

Grant sighs heavily and sits down again.

GRANT

The Huns might have captured him.

JERRY

That's possible.

GRANT

Missing in action. Likely a prisoner of war. I can tell his parents that...

INT. HEADQUARTERS OFFICE OF 27TH SQUADRON - DAY

Grant types a long letter to Frank's parents.

INSERT - LETTER, dated October 8, 1918 to Mr. And Mrs. Frank Luke, Sr.

The words "missing in action" stand out as well as "Distinguished Service Cross" a few paragraphs from the end.

EXT. CEMETERY AT MURVAUX - DAY

A Red Cross unit digs up Frank's grave. They find the Elgin watch and examine it for it's identifying number.

INSERT - Red Cross letterhead, dated Nov. 26, 1918:

"My Dear Mr. & Mrs. Luke:

I am very sad to have to tell you that the International Red Cross reports, out of Germany, that Lieutenant Frank Luke, Jr., your son, was killed in action on September 29."

INT. MARIE'S HOME - DAY

Frank's girlfriend Marie reads a letter and the newspaper clipping enclosed with it, announcing Frank Luke's death.

She cries softly. Places the letter and clipping into a scrapbook with similar letters, articles and pictures.

HARTNEY (V.O.)

In the following days, other pilots began taking down balloons, which hastened the war's end.

EXT. BOLLING FIELD - DAY

PRESIDENT HERBERT HOOVER slips the Medal of Honor around Eddie Rickenbacker's head.

SUPER: November 6, 1930

HARTNEY (V.O.)

In addition to the Distinguished Service Cross, Frank Luke was awarded the first Medal of Honor bestowed upon an airman. Twelve years later, Eddie Rickenbacker also received a Medal of Honor.

Rickenbacker makes a speech, ending with:

RICKENBACKER

... and if others had lived they might surely have emerged from the war as America's Ace of Aces, rather than me. Frank Luke was the most daring aviator and greatest fighter pilot of the entire war. His life is one of the brightest glories of our Air Service.

(MORE)

RICKENBACKER (CONT'D)

He went on a rampage and shot down at least fourteen enemy aircraft, including ten balloons, in eight days. No other ace, Britain's Bishop from Canada, France's Fonck or even the dreaded Richthofen, had ever come close to that. I thank you, ladies and gentlemen.

Cameras click photographs.

EXT. BOLLING FIELD - DAY

Harold Hartney stands next to Eddie Rickenbacker and Granville Woodard, along with Jerry Vasconcells and others of the 27th Squadron, watching the air show after the ceremony.

HARTNEY

Frank Luke, how that kid could fly. He was the perfect combination of hero and pilot. There will never be another like him.

DISSOLVE TO:

SERIES OF SHOTS - LUKE AIR FORCE BASE

SUPER: Luke Air Force Base in Arizona was named for 2nd Lt. Frank Luke, Jr.

FADE OUT.