



Lt. Col William Thaw II was a flying "ace" during World War I. Historians believe that Thaw was the first American to engage in aerial combat during the war.

While a student at Yale University, Thaw learned to fly in 1913. His father gave him a Curtiss Hydro flying boat. Thaw took that boat to France for a run at the Schneider Trophy.

When France was caught-up in World War I, Thaw donated his plane to the French cause and joined the French Foreign Legion. For a time, he served in the trenches of France.

In December of 1914, Thaw joined the French Air Service. He was not a pilot initially. Instead he served as a gunner / observer. In April of 1916, he transferred to the Escadrille Americaine - a French unit comprised of Americans - as a pilot.

Despite physical limitations - Thaw reportedly had a bad knee, poor vision and impaired hearing - he was a skilled pilot.

Before serving as a combat pilot, he was the first person to fly under the four bridges of New York City's East River. We see him in the left seat of a plane, flying as PIC (pilot-in-command) during that October 17, 1915 bridge run.

Credits:

Image online, courtesy [Aerodrome](#).

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