War in the Air: Interview with Eddie Rickenbacker

A classroom play by Team HOPE

Cast List

Eddie Rickenbacker (Rick) ......................... Fighter Pilot, United States Air Service
Elijah Lovejoy (ANCH) ............................ anchor of “The History News Report”
Margaret Fuller (R1) ............................... reporter for “The History News Report”
Nellie Bly (R2) ..................................... reporter for “The History News Report”
TEACHER NOTES

SETTING: A contemporary classroom. It is advised to set up the anchor in the front of the room facing the class, in front of some sort of background with “The History New Report.” You may choose to set up the different reporters conducting the interviews around the classroom and have the historical figures come to them. This way it gives the appearance of different locations. A name plate in front of each cast member is highly recommended. A 5x8 index card folded in half works great for this purpose.

COSTUMES: Although not necessary, any period costumes for the historical figures are a great addition. Even a simple hat or wig is excellent.

MASKS: Masks are an easy addition that will add to the drama and make the entire event more fun for the students. First, go to www.google.com and click on “image search.” Type in the historical figure’s name and find an image of the person. Copy and paste the picture in a Word document. You may need to crop and then enlarge the photo so you get a picture large enough to be used as a mask. Portraits obviously work best for this use. Print out the picture and paste it onto a cardboard backing. You can tape a plastic spoon or popsicle stick to be used as a handle. You may decide to make masks for the student correspondents as well, using pictures of television news personalities for the masks.

Note: If there is a historical person you cannot find a picture for, don’t despair! Almost any random “period” person’s picture (as long as it not someone easily recognizable) would work as a mask.

ROLES: Encourage students to act out the roles with as much energy as possible. Do not be too terribly concerned that the sex of the historical figure matching with the sex of the student.

The teacher may decide to take a part in the play, role-modeling one of the historical figures. It is recommended that five copies of the scripts are specifically set aside for each character in the play. For each character, highlight all their lines in order to facilitate a faster pace of dialogue. All other students should receive an unmarked copy of the play to read as the play is performed.

ANCHOR AND REPORTERS: In order to facilitate the historical discussions that exist in the plays, actual famous journalist names have been used in the plays. Teachers should point out that these journalists come from different times in American history and do not necessarily reflect the period they report on. It is as if they can travel in time to deliver “The History News Report.” A teacher may also decide to substitute the names given in the script for student names if desired. A brief description of the journalists is as follows:

- **Elijah Lovejoy** (1802-1837) A minister and journalist for the *St. Louis Observer* and later editor of the abolitionist newspaper the *Alton Observer* of Alton, Illinois. In 1837, pro-slavery forces attacked his warehouse in order to destroy his printing press and he was murdered on the scene.
- **Margaret Fuller** (1810-1850) An early woman rights activist, Margaret was the first female journalist to work on the staff of a major American newspaper, *The New York Tribune*. She was a widely read literary critic who was also sent on overseas assignments to Europe.
- **Nellie Bly** (1864-1922) After a writing a fiery rebuttal to a sexist column in the *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, Nellie was hired by a very impressed editor at the newspaper. She went on to become a famous investigative journalist on the plight of working women, and gained further fame for having faked insanity in order to investigate the treatment of the mentally ill.

DISCUSSION: Use the accompanying worksheet to facilitate discussion before and after the play. Students who are not directly involved in the play can attempt to write preliminary answers as the play is performed. The audience should be told that they will be the primarily responsible for the discussion questions at the end of the lesson.
War in the Air: Interview with Eddie Rickenbacker
(A Report by HNR News)

NOTE: All responses by historical figures reflect actual events and beliefs as closely as possible.

CAST ABBREVIATIONS

Eddie Rickenbacker .........................RICK
Elijah Lovejoy ...............................ANCH
Margaret Fuller ..............................R1
Nellie Bly ......................................R2

ANCH Welcome to the History News Report, I’m your anchor Elijah Lovejoy. World War I saw the advent of many new types of terrible and deadly weapons: machine guns, tanks, poison gas, submarines, the use of barbed wire, and of course, the airplane. The most famous American pilot was Eddie Rickenbacker and he is here to tell us his story.

R1 Captain Rickenbacker, you were America’s most famous flying ace, correct?

RICK I was Margaret. I had twenty-six confirmed enemy kills in nine months fighting the Germans over France in 1918.

R2 How many kills did you have to have to qualify as an “ace?”

RICK Five. My twenty-six may seem like a lot, but of course the record achieved by the Red Baron, Manfred von Richthofen, who shot down 80 planes for the Germans.

R2 Wow, 80 planes! Now, you were already a famous American before the war, right?

RICK Yes, I was a racecar driver and held the world speed record at the time with 134 miles an hour.

R1 Were you among the first American pilots in the war?

RICK Actually, no. The first American pilots in the war were there before the U.S. even joined the war in 1917. These American volunteers were formed into an American fighter squadron called the “Lafayette Escadrille.” They joined because they believed in freedom and fighting the German “Huns.”

R1 Who trained them?

RICK The French organized and trained the squadron, but thirty-eight American volunteers were the main pilots. They were quite successful and became heroes in the United States. Several became aces. One of the pilots, Eugene Bullard, was the only black pilot in the war, so the Escadrille was even way ahead in racial equality.
ANCH Captain Rickenbacker, back to your story. Can you tell us about the first plane you shot down?

RICK Sure, although we call it a “kill.” As a matter of fact, getting your first kill was seen as a rite of passage. Veteran pilots often refused to have a drink with you or even acknowledge your existence until you got your first kill.

ANCH Okay, so tell us about your first “kill.”

RICK It all started at about five o’clock on April 29th, 1918. Captain James Hall, who later by the way became famous for writing *Mutiny on the Bounty*, received a telephone call from the French headquarters stating that an enemy two-seater had just crossed our lines and was flying south over our heads.

R2 So you were immediately sent to intercept?

RICK Absolutely. Within the minute we had jumped into our seats and our mechanics were twirling the propellers. I suddenly picked up a tiny speck against the clouds, which I was convinced must be the enemy plane we were after. Pointing out the distant speck to Captain Hall, I begged him to give the word. To my great joy he ordered the boys to pull away the blocks from our wheels.

R1 How long did it take to reach the enemy plane?

RICK Well, we climbed swiftly, side by side, and within about five minutes Captain Hull changed his direction and curved up into the sun. I followed close behind him knowing that there was a good reason for this maneuver. I looked earnestly in every direction and then I saw a German scout plane coming toward us.

ANCH Did he spot you?

RICK No. We kept climbing into the sun, carefully keeping our position between its glare and the oncoming fighter plane. The Hun was steadily approaching us, unconscious of his danger, for we were full in the sun.

R1 Using the sun was a common tactic then?

RICK Oh yeah, the Red Baron himself had perfected that maneuver.

R2 So, how did you position yourself before attacking?

RICK We waited until we were directly above him, about a thousand feet advantage and then we started to dive. The Hun couldn’t outfly us, but the German Pfalz was a plane that could outdive our machines. I was thinking he would have to dive toward his lines to save himself.
ANCH Did he?

RICK Well, he would have but I decided to cut off his escape route before he could run. I rashly stopped following Hall’s dive hoping to get into a position to pin him in. However, as soon as I pulled out off the attack, the Hun immediately saw me. He pulled up his nose and actually starting climbing toward me to attack!

R2 But what about Captain Hall?

RICK I don’t think the Hun saw him at first, because by about the time he rose to my height, Hall started firing. The Hun seemed surprised and pulled hard out of his attack and headed directly for his lines, just like I expected him to do.

R1 You followed of course?

RICK Oh yeah, in seconds I was on his tail. I jammed the joy stick straight ahead and down, down we sped with throttles both full open. He didn’t maneuver but just ran like a scarred rabbit.

R2 Did you get a clear shot?

RICK I soon did. I was gaining on him every instant and I had my sights trained dead upon his seat before I fired my first shot.

ANCH Did you actually hit him in his seat?

RICK Nope, I was shooting from about 150 yards and the tracer bullets cut a streak of living fire right into the rear of his tail. I raised the nose of my plane slightly and the fiery streak lifted itself like a stream of water pouring from a garden hose.

R2 Hitting his tail must have caused him some navigation problems, right?

RICK Yeah, he started swerving, which indicated that the rudder was no longer in use. It was soon over. My streak of fire gradually settled into the pilot’s seat. I pulled out of my headlong dive at 2000 feet above the enemy’s lines.

R1 Did you see the German crash?

RICK Yes. He slumped over the joy stick and then curved off to the south and the next minute he crashed into the ground just at the edge of the woods a mile inside our own lines. I had brought down my first enemy plane!

ANCH Thank you Captain Rickenbacker, what a breath taking tale! Thank you for being our guest today on the History News Report. For HRN News, I am Elijah Lovejoy reporting.