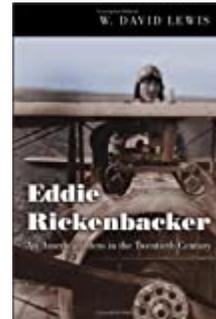




W. David Lewis. *Eddie Rickenbacker: An American Hero in the Twentieth Century.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005. xiii + 668 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-8244-9.



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An American Hero and Entrepreneur

W. David Lewis, Professor of History at Auburn University, has written extensively on aviation history as well as the history of science and technology. In this volume, he has compiled the definitive biography of Eddie Rickenbacker, an often forgotten American hero and entrepreneur. Exhaustively researched and well written, Lewis's study chronicles the life and achievements of Rickenbacker from his humble beginnings as the son of Swiss immigrants through his rise to heroic military veteran and founding father of American auto racing and airline travel.

Born in Columbus, Ohio (1890), and raised with his siblings in very modest circumstances, Rickenbacker's life was far from predetermined. But, his own work ethic and determination allowed him to secure employment and escape a life of poverty. His father's death forced him to leave school at an early age to help with the family finances. Rickenbacker's aptitude for mechanical technology, however, placed him on the cutting edge of the emerging internal combustion engine revolution, and permitted him to replace a series of menial jobs with a life-long love affair with automobiles and automotive

technology.

Rickenbacker's automotive career began with a job at the Evans Garage. His early life was highlighted by an innate expertise with mechanical devices. He quickly became adept at repairing and improving automobiles, and was eventually rewarded with promotion. His life as a race-car driver began with the Firestone-Columbus team, when he was asked if he was as good at driving as he was with mechanics. He jumped at the chance to race and immediately showed his love for competition, excitement, and speed. His success came in increments, but he soon gained a reputation as a fearless racer. By 1917, Rickenbacker had emerged as an American racing icon, participating in and winning a number of prestigious races.

In 1917, Rickenbacker offered his services to the nascent American Expeditionary Force (AEF) which was going to war in Europe. Beginning as a driver for Billy Mitchell, Rickenbacker eventually secured a transfer to the U.S. Air Service (named by Pershing), and began training as a military pilot. Rickenbacker's daring and racing experience gave him an edge in training, and

helped make him the most successful American pilot of the war. His interaction with Allies and Enemy alike contributed to his legend. Rickenbacker ended the war with twenty-six confirmed victories.

Following World War I, Rickenbacker returned to the States to reintegrate himself into the American auto industry. His ill-fated Rickenbacker label of automobiles was his first foray into independent business; unfortunately, there was too much competition at better prices. He continued to be involved in the racing world, at one time owning the Indianapolis Speedway. But his newfound passion was in aviation. As the president of Eastern Airlines, Rickenbacker built a strong business and showed his savvy for oversight and intuition. Under his tutelage, Eastern Airlines thrived during some of the most difficult times in American economic history.

With the threat of another war, Rickenbacker was asked to tour the world, commenting on foreign preparations for war. He visited England and suggested improvements, then Germany, where he was impressed. Rubbing elbows with the Luftwaffe high command (Hermann Goring, Ernst Udet, Erhard Milch), Rickenbacker reported that the Germans were on the cutting edge of aviation technology. When the war began, Rickenbacker was asked to tour American facilities to suggest improvements. During his Pacific trip, he experienced a life-changing event when he was marooned at sea for three weeks. His legend as a survivor was built around such events. After the war, Rickenbacker continued with Eastern, until the business outgrew him. He struggled with government oversight; labor problems; health issues re-

lated to drinking, smoking, and wear-and-tear; and underlying dislocation from his family. His work ethic became detrimental to his life.

Eventually he was asked to relinquish control of Eastern, and Rickenbacker faced the challenges of retirement. He gave some lectures, wrote a series of memoirs (with the help of ghost writers), and took his wife traveling. On one of these trips to Switzerland, in 1973, Rickenbacker died in his sleep after a bout of pneumonia.

Lewis's recollection of Rickenbacker's life is an excellent example of a professional biography. The research is extensive and comprehensive. Including the official government documents, Lewis was able to gain access to Rickenbacker's diaries and memoirs, interviews with friends and family, and travel to important venues. The endnotes contain a wealth of information on not only Rickenbacker's life, but also the various eras he was a part of. The uncorrected proof under consideration for this review did not have images or maps, but I am certain the author will include them in the final publication.

I recommend this biography without reservation for a number of audiences. The writing style makes this book accessible to any audience. It is an important book for anyone interested in aviation history, military or civilian, automotive history, or the development of mechanical technology through the first half of the twentieth century in America. It is a necessary read for anyone interested in Rickenbacker's life and contributions. This biography is an example of a well-researched and well-written biography; it will stand as the definitive biography of Eddie Rickenbacker.

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