

Frazier Curtis

One of the First Americans to Fly for France

Researched & Compiled by George Curtis
(Photos courtesy San Diego Air & Space Museum)

This story came to me from two different directions spaced by a year. First was the June 1916 New Orleans newspaper article about Frazier's 1916 return from France with a rest stop in that city between Boston and San Diego, CA. Our newsletter editor thought it would make a good article but I deferred thinking there had to be more to the story. Recently, I purchased a used book at an antique mart – "*Blue-Eyed Child of Fortune, Civil War Letters of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw.*" Shaw was epitomized as the man who formed the 54th Massachusetts Infantry during the American Civil War, the first black Union regiment known for its brave, but ill-fated charge on Fort Wagner, at the approach to Charleston Harbor in 1863 and depicted so well in the movie "*Glory.*" While Shaw was a lieutenant in the 2nd Massachusetts in 1861, his best friend in the regiment was Lt. Greely Stephenson Curtis (1830-1897), father of Frazier Curtis.

This Curtis family of Boston were descendants of William Curtis and Sarah Eliot of Roxbury 1632, thus, Frazier, Greely Stephenson, James Freeman, Thomas, Obadiah, Samuel, Isaac, William and Sarah Curtis.

Frazier was born on July 18, 1876, one of ten children of Greely Stephenson Curtis and Harriot Appleton. Greely Curtis had an adventurous early life and a distinguished career as a dashing cavalry officer during the Civil War that several of his children may have tried to emulate. Most of Frazier's siblings were very successful in their own way. Frances (1867-1957) was the first woman to run, although unsuccessfully, for mayor of Boston in 1925. Greely, Jr. (1871-1947) was an aviation pioneer. Harry (1875-1943), a graduate of Harvard and the University of Colorado, was a Rough Rider with Teddy Roosevelt and in Army intelligence during World War I. James (1879-1952) graduated Harvard Law School, was assistant Attorney General for Massachusetts and assistant Secretary of the Treasury under the Taft Administration. But it was Frazier's two youngest sisters, Harriot (1881-1974) and Margaret (1883-1965) who are probably the best known. The two sisters were outstanding athletes, especially at tennis and golf. Margaret won the Women's National Golf Championship in 1907, 1911 and 1912. She and Harriot founded the Curtis Cup, the biennial women's golf tournament first played between the U.S. and Great Britain & Ireland in 1932 and is still played today. (Source: *Curtis Family Papers, Radcliffe College*)

Frazier graduated from Harvard University in 1898 intending to be a writer. In the summer of 1899, Frazier began a nomadic life by first going west with the Forest Service to the Puget Sound area where he compiled a report on logging in Washington State. Hearing of the gold rush in Alaska, he headed north and ran a coastal passenger ship before trying his own luck in the gold fields. (Source: *La Jolla Historical Society, Winter 2006, Sandy Spalding*)

His career took many turns in the ensuing years when he worked as a reporter for a New York newspaper, as a private secretary to John Jacob Astor, and as a cattle rancher in North Dakota and Cuba before returning to Saskatchewan, Canada with a scheme for importing horses from Minnesota. He returned to Boston in 1907 and Harvard briefly as an assistant football coach before returning to the Northwest where he lectured at the University of Washington and worked on inventing an instrument for "calculating the contents of a standing tree." (Source: *La Jolla Historical Society, Winter 2006, Sandy Spalding*)





Gladys Raper Curtis—1923

In June of 1909, Frazier married Gladys “Diane” Margaret Raper (1880-1963) in Manchester, MA. The newly-weds moved to Seattle, WA in 1909, and by 1910 they had taken up residence in La Jolla, CA near San Diego where his interest in early aviation developed into a full-blown obsession. The San Diego Union newspaper reported in 1910:

“A number of enthusiastic spectators have been watching Frazier Curtis and his new glider negotiating the slopes of Mount Soledad. From the time of their arrival, the couple captivated the locals’ attention when it was reported in July that Curtis had acquired a Shaffer glider kit and was putting it together. A number of people gathered on the slopes of Mount Soledad in August to watch his attempts at flight with his wife running down hill, rope in hand, trying to get him aloft. It was the beginning of his love affair with flying.”

To learn about gasoline engines, Frazier began taking machine works classes in Los Angeles where he helped Charles Day, an early airplane designer, build his first model near Venice, CA. In 1912, he began taking flying lessons in Glendale and continued his training in Massachusetts.

In his fifteenth anniversary Harvard College class report in 1913, Frazier Curtis announced that his profession had become "aeronautics." His enthusiasm appeared boundless and he attempted to learn everything he could about the first generation of airplanes. He built and flew gliders over an unforgiving cactus-studded landscape that should have quickly improved his skills or ended his flying career, but it took several courses of training in the United States and France before he finally received his pilot's license in England in May 1914 at Hendon, north of London. *(Source: The Harvard Illustrated Magazine, 1916)*

The outbreak of the First World War presented Frazier, by then 38 years old but with significant knowledge of airplanes—a new field of vital military importance—with an opportunity to play an important role. Before the war, he had offered his services as a flyer to the U.S. Navy, but after the Great War began in 1914 he quickly sailed for England where he attempted to enlist in the aviation arm of either the British army or navy, even offering to provide his own aircraft (his brother, Greely, Jr., was in the aircraft manufacturing business in Massachusetts). British authorities rejected Frazier's offer politely, but firmly. At 38, he was very old for a novice pilot, a citizen of a neutral nation, and may have displayed some of the eccentricity apparent in his later life. Another obstacle to serving with the British was he would have to renounce his American citizenship by swearing allegiance to the king. It was either Frazier or Gladys, English-born, who attempted to go outside official channels and approached Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty, through his wife, Clementine for entry into the British flying corps, but to no avail.

The Escadrille Américaine

Frustrated in his first efforts, Frazier returned to the United States for further flight training. There he met Norman Prince, a Harvard-trained lawyer about ten years his junior, who had put aside his Chicago law practice to learn to fly. It was from this meeting of Curtis and Prince in Marblehead, Massachusetts, that the first effort to form a flying corps of American pilots, rather than volunteering as individuals, was born. At the end of 1914, Frazier sailed once more for England—thinking that the French language would be a barrier to service as a combat pilot.

Stymied again by the British, he crossed over to France in February 1915, where a small number of Americans, including Norman Prince, already were making attempts to join the French air service. While the French rejected the Prince-Curtis



Norman Prince

plan of forming an American volunteer squadron, other forces were at work. An American physician living in Paris, Edmund L. Gros, with the support of members of the French government, attempted to capitalize on the propaganda value of the U.S. pilots who had volunteered to fight for France by forming exactly the type of unit that Prince and Curtis had planned. The Escadrille Américaine was made up of U.S. volunteers with flight experience such as Prince and Curtis (including several non-fliers who bluffed their way into military training), supplemented by Americans who had enlisted in the Foreign Legion. (Source: *Object of the Month, Feb 2015, Massachusetts Historical Society*)

On 2 March 1915, Frazier Curtis became one of the first Americans to enlist in the French air service. He was soon joined by Norman Prince and many of the flyers who later would found the Lafayette Escadrille. While Frazier is numbered among the "first to fly for France," and as historians of the American volunteer effort later noted, "he did not receive the credit for his really important share in launching the movement," his actual military service was brief and inglorious. (Source: *Object of the Month, Feb 2015, Massachusetts Historical Society*)

Frazier, accompanied by Gladys—an unusual accommodation for a lowly "soldat" (private) in training—was sent to the French aviation training school at Pau in March 1915. Gladys had spent six months in 1914 and 1915 working with women in the slums of London whose men were at the war front. With Frazier at Pau, she served in the Bourges hospital in France and was there to receive her husband when he was brought in after his final crash. When asked by a newspaper reporter why she followed Frazier to France, she replied, "A woman's place is certainly at her husband's side." (Source: *Object of the Month, Feb 2015, Massachusetts Historical Society*)



Frazier (left) at Pau with (l-r) Jimmie Bach, Bert Hall & Norman Prince - March 1915

Frazier was in the thick of the combat for several months, over Flanders and Belgium. On one occasion while making a get-away from several German air scouts, he went into a rapid, steep angle dive, leveling out just in time to make a crash landing and was rescued bruised and badly shaken. Not a week later while over the front lines, his biplane was hit by ground fire and he smelled smoke. Heading toward the rear of Allied lines as fast as he could with the wind fanning the fire, he crash landed and leaped from the wreckage just as the gas tank exploded. Frazier was rescued and transported to the hospital in Bourges to the full attention of his devoted wife. He was put on 45-days sick leave but was slow to recover from his physical injuries and had a nervous breakdown, what was then known as being "shell-shocked". Today, we know it as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). During his sick leave, Frazier went to Paris and recruited more flyers for the unit from among Americans already working as ambulance drivers. After his leave ended in August 1915, he was honorably discharged by the French because of his injuries, and with Gladys, returned to England for recuperation before their departure for New York in December 1915. (*Times-Picayune (New Orleans, LA), June 6, 1916*).

The Lafayette Escadrille and the Lafayette Flying Corps

The Escadrille Américaine finally was authorized in March 1916 and was in action over Verdun in May of that year. When diplomats (and the Germans) raised concerns about what appeared to be a breach of American neutrality -- the United States did not enter the war until April 1917-- the squadron was renamed the Lafayette Escadrille. Norman Prince served in the squadron until he was killed in action in October 1916. By 1917, a single squadron could not muster all the American pilots available and more than 200 U.S. pilots were



dispersed among many French squadrons (becoming the unofficial "Lafayette Flying Corps"—a term for all the Americans who flew for France), while others flew with the British. When the United States entered the war, many but not all of the American flyers transferred to the U.S. Army and Navy, where they formed the experienced cadre of the fledgling U.S. air services. (Source: *Object of the Month, Feb 2015, Massachusetts Historical Society*)

The Harvard Flying Corps

By the time the Lafayette Escadrille went into action, Frazier Curtis was back in the United States, but not done with aviation. After his discharge, he had turned to recruiting Americans already in France for flight training, and made one more abortive attempt to form an American unit for the British Royal Naval Air Service. In Boston, he devoted his energies to training Harvard College students to become aviators and to prepare for military duty.

Truly alarmed by the state of U.S. military aviation—Frazier estimated that the country had approximately 24 fully trained pilots, about the same number as Serbia. He attempted to raise \$300,000 to form an aviation school at Harvard University that would operate on the same scale as the French training base at Pau that he had attended, and turn out 500 pilots each year. Harvard President A. Lawrence Lowell prevented the name of the university from being used by the Corps, and in the summer of 1916 it was only able to provide flight training for ten students. Their camp was renamed for Victor Chapman, a 1913 Harvard graduate and another founding member of the Lafayette Escadrille, who had been killed in action in June 1916. In spite of his best efforts, Frazier's health collapsed again and he returned with Gladys to their home in La Jolla, California. (Source: *Object of the Month, Feb 2015, Massachusetts Historical Society*)

On the long train trip home in June 1916, the Curtises took a few days rest stop in New Orleans, LA, as reported by the local newspaper, the *Times-Picayune*. The reporter attempted to interview Frazier at their hotel but "*the chances are that Mrs. Curtis, the devoted wife who shared her husband's terrific adventure, will not even let you cross the door of the Curtis suite in the hotel. The reason is clear enough. Mr. Curtis is a nervous wreck, and because of his awful experiences, and Mrs. Curtis is too wise to let visitors talk to her husband of the happenings of recent months, for fear of the black memories that will impede his recovery.*"

When the War Was Over

Back home in June 1916, Frazier and his wife worked to make La Jolla a military town for the soldiers stationed at nearby Camp Kearney. They helped organize dances and suppers for the men. On Sunday, April 21, 1918, prompt action by Frazier and a group of bathers saved the lives of a local doctor, his son and four soldiers from Camp Kearney, all of whom were caught up in a strong current and being pulled toward the rocks in the cove. Frazier also organized the "Treat 'em Rough Club" in 1918 which urged American officers to show no mercy toward the enemy. (Sources: *La Jolla Historical Society, Winter 2006 - Sandy Spalding and Evening Tribune (San Diego, CA), April 22, 1918*)

Frazier and Gladys Curtis celebrated the end of the First World War at home in La Jolla. The town held a victory celebration which included speeches and singing concluding with a blazing bonfire where the Kaiser was burned in effigy. Leading the participants in a serpentine line about the flames was none other than Frazier Curtis. (Source: *La Jolla Historical Society, Winter 2006, Sandy Spalding*)

The Curtises were frequent guests at the Warner Hot Springs resort in Warner Springs, CA. They also traveled occasionally to Battle, on the southeast English coast, to visit Gladys' family.

Like many of his generation, Frazier shared the prejudices that were prevalent at the time. During a trip to England in 1919, Frazier became involved with a British anti-Semitic society called "The Britons" and helped get their version of the Protocols of Zion published. In 1923, he even boasted in his Harvard alumni record about his anti-Semitic work. After his long convalescence, Frazier described himself as a seaplane pilot and rancher, but later informed his Harvard classmates that he had become a "propagandist" — a self-described purveyor of virulently anti-Semitic and anti-Communist literature, interlaced with concern over the growing "Japanese menace." The injuries caused by his flying accidents may have affected his mental as well as his physical health, but he had long suspected that there were dark conspiracies at work everywhere, including suspicions of German and Communist espionage at work in the still-neutral U.S. The 1938 class record has Frazier's writing about his work with anti-communist groups. *"It has meant wearing persecution, expense, slander, and some bodily injury. My car has been rammed six times, once being rolled over a grade. In every case where I could get the assailants name; they were Communist agents with no insurance and no funds to match."* (Source: La Jolla Historical Society, Winter 2006, Sandy Spalding)

Although both were active in the La Jolla social scene, it was Gladys who was most active. She was president of the Republican Women's Federation, national president of the Woman's Overseas League, member of the La Jolla Woman's Club and American Legion Auxiliary. While Gladys was busy in the La Jolla social scene during the 1930's, Frazier slide deeper into bouts of depression culminating in his suicide on January 26, 1940. None of his obituaries mentioned his suicide or his propaganda work, but all acknowledged his efforts in organizing the Lafayette Escadrille. His remains were returned to Massachusetts and he was buried in the family plot at the Mount Auburn Cemetery, Cambridge, MA. Gladys passed away in 1966. (Source: La Jolla Historical Society, Winter 2006 - Sandy Spalding and various issues of the San Diego Evening Tribune — society pages.)

