

MILLIONAIRE

Kathleen Hanser reveals how privileged Yale University students

In 1916, two years into the war in Europe, Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, was among America's most highly rated schools and a bastion of elitism. Students, almost all white Anglo-Saxon Protestants, came from the highest echelons of US society; the ultra-wealthy crowd, the privileged few. Their fathers were the barons of banking and industry and their mothers were heiresses. They were football players, crewed on the rowing team and belonged to Yale's invitation-only secret societies and fraternities. To most, the war in Europe was a distant event that didn't concern them.

Ivy League figurehead

Out of this atmosphere one leader emerged – 19-year-old second-

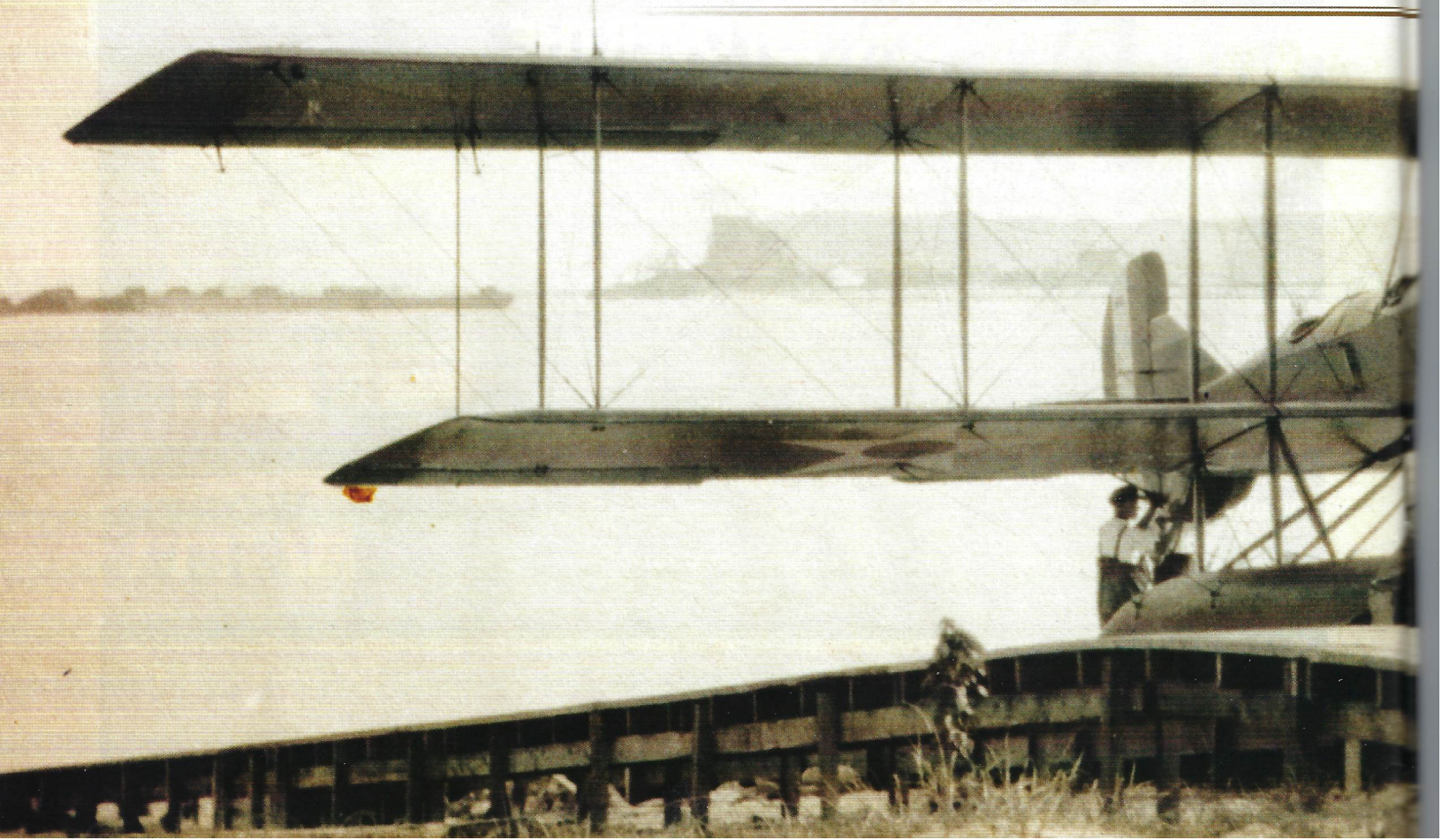
year undergraduate Frederick Trubee Davison, known to all simply as Trubee. His father was Henry Pomeroy Davison, one of the country's most powerful men as president of J P Morgan Bank, then the world's most formidable financial firm. Accompanying his father on business trips to Europe, Davison saw for himself the ruinous effects of the war. In 1915, he joined the American Ambulance Field Service and spent the summer transporting wounded soldiers to hospitals outside Paris.

When Davison learned about the Lafayette Escadrille – American volunteer pilots flying for the French – he decided that was the way for him. Its members came from the same background and it exuded a romantic reputation

and status only available to those who fought in the skies. When he returned to Yale in autumn 1915, he made a pact with his friend Bob Lovett that when the US joined the war they would go into aviation. "That was the life", he said.

But Davison wasn't just after romance and glory. At that time, those among this 'silver spoon' set were raised to live by the biblical passage: "For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required". They were taught to believe in duty, honour and sacrifice, especially in wartime. They took seriously the final stanza of the Yale University anthem: "so let us strive...for God, for Country and for Yale".

Recognising the US government was woefully ill-prepared for this



YVES AT WAR

formed the first US naval aviation unit during World War One

new kind of war in the air, Trubee railed against the navy's attitude toward flight, which it derided at every turn. Some navy 'brass' thought of the aeroplane as a toy. The army wasn't much better. Between the two military branches, there were just 26 pilots and 20 aircraft.

Forming a flying unit

In the spring of 1916, Davison and Lovett persuaded ten friends to give up their summer of golf and polo to learn to fly with the goal of forming a private, volunteer coastal patrol unit to operate along the eastern seaboard. He had obtained most of the financing for his ambitious endeavour from his father. The students would be housed at Peacock Point, the Davison's

mansion on a 57-acre estate on Long Island Sound, New York.

The boys were Davison's younger brother, Henry P 'Harry' Davison Jr, Allan Ames, John Farwell III, Artemus L 'Di' Gates, Erl Gould, Albert Sturtevant, John Vorys and C D Wiman. Rounding out the unit were two non-Yale men, Wellesley Laud-Brown and Albert Ditman.

Davison engaged a flying instructor, David McCulloch, an allegedly crotchety character well-versed in flight, who worked for a neglected flying-boat school 13 miles (21km) from Peacock Point. They were given access to the site and a Curtiss Model F flying boat, the *Mary Ann*, for the summer at a cost of US\$1 per minute. The 'F-boat' was basically a wheel-less waterborne craft with biplane wings, a rear-

facing 'pusher' engine and simple instrumentation (a tachometer and oil/fuel gauges). It would demand that the students learn to fly by the seat of their pants. McCulloch believed his young charges should not only fly, but also gain knowledge on everything there was to know about aircraft. First, he taught them how to dismantle the engine and the rest of the airframe and put them back together. He would also try to instil in them the intangible 'flying instinct', a daunting task not everyone can master.

By summer's end, the boys had become a tight-knit unit and were considered role models for other young men. As Ames recalled later, a whole new world had opened up to them: "It was a new life. I had [my] happiest days there."

BELOW First Yale Unit personnel pulling a Curtiss R floatplane out of the water at Huntington base.



RIGHT At the Port Washington hangar in 1916, pictured in foreground from left to right, are Erl Gould, Trubee Davison and John Farwell.

BELOW The original First Yale Unit members at Port Washington, New York in 1916. Back row, left to right: Bob Lovett, instructor Dave McCulloch, Al Sturtevant. Front row, left to right: Di Gates, Erl Gould, Trubee Davison, John Vorys, John Farwell, Allan Ames. Not pictured from the original group of 12: Henry P Davison Jr, Albert Ditman Jr, Wellesly Laud-Brown and Charles Wiman.

The American media covered the Yale students' progress that summer and some began calling them the 'Millionaires' Unit'. "I seriously doubt that any of them would enjoy or have used the moniker", says Ron King, grandson of unit member John Vorys and one of the directors of a documentary on the subject. "They were into the idea of service - not that they might be well off".

Showing how it's done

Before they returned to Yale in September, the group would become an even bigger media sensation when several students participated in US Navy wargames. In the first task of the exercise, a fleet of small ships was dispatched to search for dummy mines. The Yale Unit was invited to take part, and in foggy weather the ships failed to locate any of the mines, while a flying boat piloted by McCulloch and Farwell found them all. The next day, McCulloch and Davison set out to locate two 'enemy' destroyers heading for New York City and again were successful where ships failed. The navy was impressed at the possibilities of aerial reconnaissance demonstrated that day. Yet, secretary of the navy Josephus Daniels still would not support the boys in their efforts to form an officially sanctioned coastal patrol service.

The students continued to log time on Sundays in New London, Connecticut after school started.

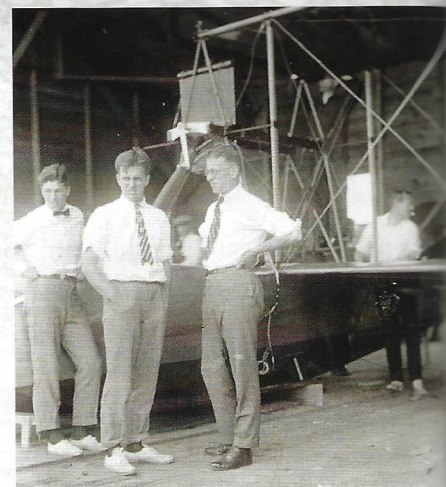
They demonstrated how successful reconnaissance could be in locating submarines under water, in tests conducted at the nearby Groton sub' base, which further influenced the navy.

In October, Davison formed the Yale Aero Club to study and promote aviation. Membership grew quickly, and meetings often featured guest speakers such as navigation equipment inventor Lawrence Sperry, Lafayette Escadrille co-founder William Thaw II and famous Arctic explorer Admiral Robert Peary, an avid supporter.

We're off!

Winter of 1917 brought another failed attempt by Davison to gain sanction from Daniels for the Yale unit. Finally, Davison met with the head of the navy's experimental aviation programme, John Towers, who asked them: "How do you fellows feel about leaving college?" Davison told him just how ready they were, and Towers asked them to enlist in the Naval Reserve and go to Palm Beach, Florida for training. Before boarding a train home, he wired Lovett: "We're off!"

Lovett immediately began spreading the word and told the unit - which then numbered 28 - they had five days to enlist and be ready to head for Florida. On March 28, 1917 the First Yale Unit of the Navy Air Reserve (its new official



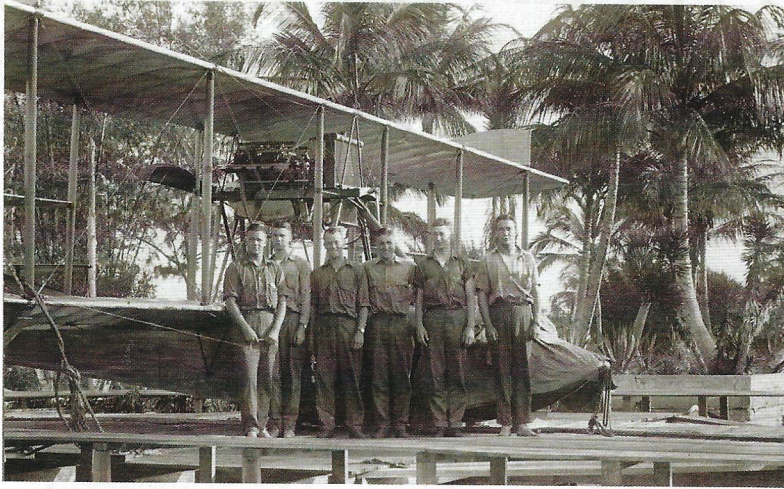
name) boarded a train at New York City's Pennsylvania Station for its long-awaited great adventure, not knowing what lie ahead.

On April 6, 1917 Davison's prediction came true when the US declared war on Germany. Shortly thereafter the Yale boys moved back north to Huntington Bay near the Davison estate, to avoid the worst of the Florida heat and humidity. All the enlistees had soloed by the end of June that year.

Trubee crashes

By July 28, all the unit's members had passed their written examinations and were ready to earn their wings proper. Mother nature provided a perfect flying day, and the three senior pilots - Davison, Lovett and Gates - took off first in front of the examining committee, and a large crowd of well-wishers in boats and on





Post-war Service

Trubee Davison became assistant secretary of war for aviation in 1926. In World War Two, he served as assistant chief of staff of the Army Air Corps, becoming a brigadier general. Each year after the first war, Davison hosted unit reunions. At the 50th anniversary gathering, he was awarded the wings he had failed to receive as a youth.

Robert Lovett served as assistant secretary of war for air during World War Two, leading the build-up of US air forces from the weakest to the strongest. After the war, Lovett was an undersecretary at the State Department and helped formulate Cold War strategy. He served as secretary of defence During the Korean War.

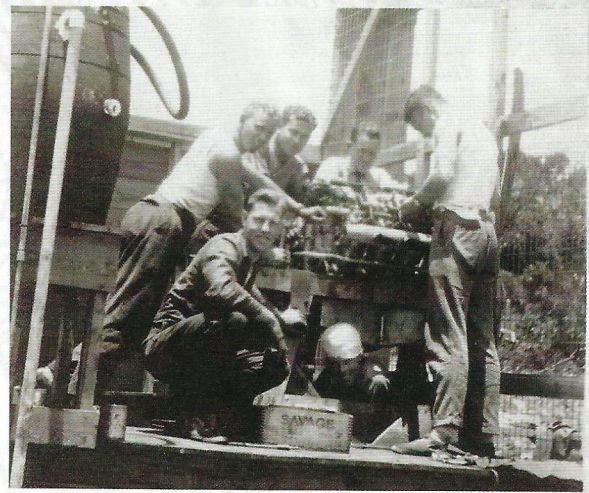
Di Gates married Trubee Davison's sister Alice, and eventually became undersecretary of the navy for air. Gates helped direct the expansion of the navy's air power from seven aircraft carriers and 5,200 aircraft to 100 and 70,000 respectively.

David Ingalls was the country's first assistant secretary of the navy for aeronautics, during which time he tripled the number of naval aircraft. He was appointed lieutenant commander in the Naval Reserve, and when Pearl Harbor was attacked he helped develop the Naval Air Station there, later becoming its commander.

the shore. As luck would have it, Davison was not feeling well; he was lightheaded, nauseated and exhausted from his duties as head of the unit. The day before he had fainted, but still considered himself fit to fly. He was worried that he hadn't flown an F-boat for a while, instead being aloft for hours on end as an instructor in Curtiss N-9 seaplanes, which were controlled by a stick, not a yoke as in the F-boats.

The test required them to climb to 6,000ft, spiral down, cut the engine at 3,000ft and glide in to within 200ft of a prescribed mark. Davison managed the first manoeuvres satisfactorily, but as one observer noted out loud: "He's flying like he's never been in a machine before." A

sudden waft of wind was all it took to cause Davison to bank the F-boat heavily, leading it into a nosedive straight into the water, snapping the wood and fabric aeroplane in two, entangling Davison in wires and twisted debris. The aircraft began to sink, and Davison had to be rescued by an observer who dived in and brought him to the surface. As Davison was being sped to shore onboard the naval yacht *Shuttle*, he whispered: "I had no business flying today". Others in the squadron were devastated at seeing their leader suffer such an ignominious experience. Curtis Read told his mother: "If it had been any of us but Trubee! You never can know what he means to us!"



Shaking off the fear and upset induced by Davison's crash, the remaining pilots passed their test flights and were awarded their wings, joining the ranks of the first 100 American men to ever achieve this accolade. Much to his and his comrades' disappointment, Davison's broken back and other injuries were serious enough to halt his military flying career, and he was in pain for the rest of his life. Despite this, he remained the unit's titular leader throughout the war.

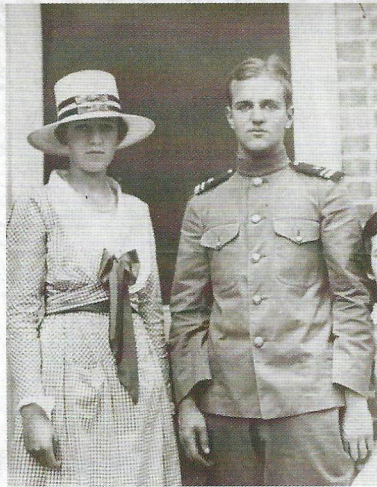
ABOVE LEFT
Members of the
First Yale Unit at
Palm Beach,
in Florida.

ABOVE Instructor
David McCulloch
insisted that the
young Yale aviators
master all aspects
of their aircraft.
Here unit members
work on an engine.

The squadron scatters

Unit members were filled with zeal for getting into the action, but the navy had other plans. Their expertise was needed at home, preparing graduate pilots for combat, setting up military bases and testing newly built aircraft. Some would have to forego personal glory in the air. "So proficient had these undergraduates become that they were used as a nucleus to train our aircraft forces", wrote William S Sims, commander of the US Navy in Europe, after the war. But this was not what the boys had been dreaming of, and morale suffered. Although those who remained stateside were disappointed, they went about their assignments with great vigour, determined to be a credit.

Their hopes for going to Europe were renewed somewhat when the navy sent the unit's most senior pilots, Bob Lovett and Di Gates, to France in August 1917. At Naval Aviation Headquarters in Paris, the two were exposed to a cruel reality: "The Germans are masters of the air". Lovett wrote Making



RIGHT Trubee Davison with his sister Alice, who eventually married First Yale Unit pilot Di Gates.

RIGHT CENTRE Bob Lovett poses for the camera in between training missions while in Florida.

FAR RIGHT The engine of a Curtiss Model F is just about to be cranked over by Erl Gould.

matters worse, the German Fokkers were superior in numbers, speed and agility to the British Sopwith Camels and French SPADs flown by the Allies. During training at a French flight school, further grim reality set in; half of all pilots sent into battle were killed or wounded, with 50% of the deaths occurring during training. Raw pilots entered combat with just 10-15 hours' flight time. Lovett was alarmed at the swiftness with which he was given positions of leadership. "We are so green", he lamented.

Twist of fate

In early September 1917, Albert Sturtevant and John Vorys became the third and fourth Yale Unit aviators deployed to Europe. The inseparable friends were stationed at Felixstowe in Suffolk, conducting patrols over the North Sea. In February, Sturtevant became the first US naval aviator killed in action in World War One – ironically after trading flying days with Vorys. Sturtevant's mount was shot down into the North Sea by one of Germany's most feared aces, Friedrich Christiansen, who told Sturtevant's father about his son's ill-fated final flight after the war. Sturtevant was posthumously awarded the Navy Cross (US).

Bob Lovett, who assumed the role of leader in the First Yale Unit after Davison's crash, was quickly promoted through the ranks, eventually becoming in charge of all US naval aviation operations in Europe. Lovett was responsible for organising the Northern Bombing Group, the first US strategic bombing force and a squadron that made aerial bombardment

practical and more efficient. His tactics became the model for US military aviation for the remaining century.

While assigned to Dunkirk, the most dangerous place for a flyer, Di Gates became a hero when a British Handley Page bomber was



downed into the sea. Gates piloted a flying boat to the site, landed and rescued the airmen clinging to the bomber's wings while under fire. He was later shot down in a SPAD fighter, captured and released four days after the armistice. Gates became the most decorated of the Yale group, receiving the British Distinguished Flying Cross and Distinguished Service Medal from his home country. He was also recommended for the Medal of Honor – one of just three navy men to receive this recommendation.

Soon more unit members were on their way to Europe. David Ingalls, nicknamed 'Baby Daredevil' for being the youngest (18) and boldest of the group, eventually made his way to Coudekerque, France and quickly became the first and only naval ace among the Yale Unit with a total of five kills.

In October 1918, a few days after Gates' capture, Kenneth MacLeish, one of the unit's most talented pilots, also disappeared. While flying with the RAF's 213 Squadron, MacLeish took the place of Ingalls one day and on only his second combat flight was shot down over Belgium. A farmer discovered his body and the wreckage three months later. After the RAF identified his remains, the

Belgian buried MacLeish in a grave marked with a simple wooden cross and wrote the boy's mother a letter. Kenneth was the brother of Archibald MacLeish, a famous poet, who memorialized him in verse. Kenneth was posthumously awarded the Navy Cross.

In February 1918 Curt Read (who was a nervous flyer according to fellow pilot John Farwell) flew a Donnet-Denhaut on a training mission but was killed when his aircraft nosedived into the waters off Dunkirk. He was the first American naval aviator to die in France.



Pioneering legacy

As the debut US Naval Air Reserve squadron, the boys of the First Yale Unit were recognised as pioneers in the field. The *Yale Daily News* of November 14, 1916 noted: "... because little is known about naval aeronautics in this country, their work is the work of the pioneer". Admiral Peary also said as much early on, but also stated: "Instead of being dismayed to find that neither the army nor the navy could supply them with textbooks and information to guide them, they set to work to experiment and find out for themselves". Growing from a group of 29 aristocratic college students into a solid fighting unit, they established a foundation for US naval aviation for both world wars and beyond.

A documentary, *The Millionaires' Unit*, based on a book of the same name by Marc Wortman is available on DVD and Amazon Prime. **FP**