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**Exhibition:** [World War I: The Birth of Military Aviation](#)  
**Photos:** [World War I: The Birth of Military Aviation Photos](#)

## Exhibition Fact Sheet “World War I: The Birth of Military Aviation”

**Opening:** July 28, 2025; National Air and Space Museum, Washington, D.C., Gallery 209

World War I was the laboratory that transformed airplanes from vehicles of limited capability into reliable weapons of war. The “World War I: The Birth of Military Aviation” exhibition highlights both the central role of the war in defining the nature of military aviation and the remarkable experiences of World War I aviators who served in combat. As intrepid aviators first tested many roles and practices that remain crucial to modern military aviation, wartime investments in aviation accelerated the development of breakthrough technologies and established the foundations of the post-war aviation industry.

The exhibition features some of the war’s best-known aircraft—the Sopwith F.1 Camel, Fokker D.VII, and the Dayton-Wright DH-4—along with other artifacts related to the air war and the military aviators who fought in it. These artifacts demonstrate the emergence of aviators as a new type of warrior and represent the tragedy and bravery of day-to-day heroism.

### Highlights include:

- **Dayton-Wright DH-4:** The United States possessed no combat-worthy aircraft upon entry into World War I in 1917. Based on the British Airco DH.4, this plane was the American-built prototype of the “Liberty Planes,” the first combat aircraft mass produced in the U.S. In the early postwar years, the DH-4 became the principal aircraft for the first regular airmail routes.
- **Sopwith F.1 Camel:** Named Camel for its distinctive hump ahead of the cockpit, this aircraft was famous for its instability—which, once Allied pilots mastered it, became the war’s top-scoring fighter. The Camel on display in the exhibition is the only surviving Sopwith-built Camel, and it served with No. 10 Squadron of the Royal Naval Air Service. Visitors can engage with a nearby Camel cockpit interactive to hear the distinctive sounds of the Camel in combat.
- **SPAD XIII “Smith IV”:** The SPAD XIII’s ability to dive at high speed made it one of the best dog-fighting airplanes of the war. Despite being the most produced aircraft of the time, only four SPAD XIIIIs remain. This example, named “Smith IV,” is one of the only surviving aircraft that had been flown in combat by an American wartime ace—specifically Arthur Raymond Brooks, who lived long enough to see it fully restored in 1986.

- **Fokker D.VII:** Allied pilots at first underestimated the German-produced Fokker D.VII, but they quickly revised their view. The Fokker D.VII's ability to seemingly “hang on its propeller” endowed the plane with a fearsome reputation. The Fokker D.VII was so significant that the Treaty of Versailles, which formally ended World War I, specifically demanded the surrender of all aircraft of that model to the Allies.
- **Eugene Jacques Bullard Bust:** Eugene Jacques Bullard was the first and only African American combat pilot in World War I. Living in France when World War I began, he enlisted in the French military. After the U.S. entered the war, Bullard’s request to fly for the Army Air Service was denied despite having flown 25 combat missions for the French. This bronze bust by African American artist Eddie Dixon commemorates Bullard, who the U.S. Air Force posthumously recognized with a commissioned rank of second lieutenant in 1994.
- **Davis Gun:** Cmdr. Cleland Davis developed the first recoilless gun for U.S. and British aircraft to hit targets more precisely than bombs. During the war, it was mainly used for hunting submarines. The Davis gun was made with two guns back-to-back. A counterweight firing backwards cancelled out the recoil of the forward-firing projectile, making the gun ideal for use on fragile wood airplanes.
- **Billy Mitchell Flight Suit:** Gen. William Mitchell wore this standard-issue flying gear while commanding American air combat units in France during World War I. Mitchell was an early outspoken proponent of greater preparedness in military aviation and an independent U.S. air force.
- **Balloon Basket:** Military observers for all the major participating nations in World War I photographed and reported details on enemy troops from balloon baskets. Observation balloons were tethered to a winch on the ground and floated close to the front lines at a standard altitude of 500 meters (1,640 feet).
- **Insignia Display:** Military units, and sometimes individual aviators, used a range of markings and paint schemes to identify their aircraft to friendly forces. The often colorful, flashy insignia of World War I include a large German cross from one of the first two planes downed by the U.S. in air combat and “Oscar,” a Grim Reaper skeleton from the 13th Aero Squadron.
- **Immersive “In Flight” Video:** A large format, high-definition theater projection allows visitors to simulate the experience of riding along on some of the historic wartime aircraft operated by Old Rhinebeck Aerodrome, a living-history museum in New York.
- **Trench Table Interactive:** Aerial missions unfold across a stylized battle map on a large-scale interactive table. Visitors can progress through three different scenarios, each of which creatively explores an aspect of the use of aircraft during World War I.
- **Fokker the Dog Touchable Sculpture:** Visitors can pet a sculpture of Fokker, the French Bulldog mascot of the U.S. 148th Aero Squadron.

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