

The Family Heritage Series

A weekly discussion of Americanist truths and traditions for those "heirs of all the ages" who will have to preserve that most important inheritance of all – freedom.
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Volume II

Lesson Ninety-One

Captain Eddie

LESSON IDEA

To describe the outstanding character traits and accomplishments of Captain Eddie Rickenbacker, one of the great Americans of the Twentieth Century.

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HE WAS TWELVE years old when his father died, leaving his mother with eight small children and almost no money. He quit school and went to work in a glass factory to help pay the bills. His name was Edward Vernon Rickenbacker, and he was destined to become world-famous as a race car driver, a fighter pilot, and the president of one of the country's largest airlines.

But in 1902, the year Eddie left school to work the night shift in a glass factory, he was nothing more than a skinny kid with determination. In his autobiography, Rickenbacker tells of his first night on the job: "The factory made glass tumblers . . . I carried them on a heavy, awkward steel platter with a long handle to the tempering ovens. When we stopped at midnight for lunch, my legs were tired, and I thought my arms were going to drop off. I had hardly finished my sandwich when it was time to go back to work again. Somehow I finished the night and walked the two miles home. I went to sleep eating breakfast."

When he was thirteen, he took a job in a foundry where the pay was one dollar per day – an increase from the glass factory – and the hours were seven in the morning until six in the evening. "I stayed at the

foundry for about three months," Rickenbacker recalls. "When I heard of a job capping bottles in a brewery, which was closer to home and cleaner, I quit without hesitation. No worries, no fretting, no indecision. If I didn't like what I was doing or if another pursuit offered a greater challenge or more advantages, I acted immediately, without fear of the future. I have never been afraid to quit."

Does this mean that Rickenbacker was a quitter? Or that he had confidence in his abilities? How can you distinguish between the two characteristics? [*Encourage discussion.*]

It was not, however, until Rickenbacker started working in a small automobile repair shop that his job began to mean more to him than money in the pocket. Now his interest was sparked by the mechanical complexities of automobiles. As soon as he learned to drive them, he dreamed of building them, even of designing them. But here his ambition was stopped short by a lack of information. To remedy the situation, he enrolled in a course in mechanical engineering offered by a correspondence school.

"The first lesson, I do not mind admitting," said Rickenbacker, "nearly finished my correspondence-school education before it began. It was tough, and I was a little rusty when it came to formal education. I had to teach myself to study all over again, and furthermore, I had to teach myself to think. I did not realize then, as I laboriously worked away at the lessons all alone, that I was receiving a greater benefit from them than I would have received from

the same courses in a classroom. As there was no teacher of whom I could ask an explanation, I had to work out the answers myself. Once I reached the answer through my own individual reasoning, my understanding was permanent and unforgettable.” [Ask family members if they feel they are being taught, or were taught, to think for themselves in school, or are they forced to parrot the information given by teachers?]

Rickenbacker left the repair shop to become a janitor at the Frayer-Miller Company, a maker of automobiles. Within months he had proved so valuable to Lee Frayer, the plant’s co-owner, that he was moved from one department to another for special training. Then one day, Frayer casually announced, “Eddie, I want you to go into the engineering department now.” Rickenbacker barely had time to settle into his new assignment when Frayer asked him to be his traveling mechanic in an upcoming automobile race. And when Frayer accepted a new position with the Columbus Buggy Company, he took Rickenbacker with him. Both men shared a keen interest in high-speed racing.

The Columbus Buggy Company, however, was primarily interested in selling cars, not racing them. The best they could offer Rickenbacker in exchange for his hard work, mechanical knowledge, and enthusiasm was the prestigious position of branch manager with a salary of \$150 a month and a sales force of six men to supervise.

REGARDLESS OF the salary and the promising future, Eddie’s interest in racing continued to outdistance all other considerations. He finally entered a small sports car in a 25-mile race in Red Oak, Iowa. After several good laps on a rutted and dusty track, his racer lost a wheel rounding a curve, crashed through a fence, sailed across a ditch sideways, and rolled over. Fortunately Rickenbacker was thrown clear of the wreckage and escaped injury.

Far from being discouraged by this near disaster, Eddie continued to race, his reflexes improving as his automobiles became more reliable. At a two-day race festival in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1910, he won nine races out of ten and took home \$1500 in prize money. By the summer of 1912, he had decided to leave the sales field and concentrate on the race

track. To gain more technical knowledge he left his managerial post with the Columbus Buggy Company and took a job at the Mason Automobile Company as a mechanic, earning \$3 a day.

Rickenbacker’s first spectacular victory came in 1913 in Sioux City, Iowa. It was a grueling 300-mile race in which his assistant was knocked unconscious by a rock thrown up from the road, his vision was continually blocked by the spray of mud from the cars ahead of him, and the car’s oil pressure dropped dangerously low. Yet he came in first by forty seconds and pocketed a purse totaling \$12,500. In 1916 Rickenbacker won \$60,000 – an extraordinary income for a man of twenty-six.

WHEN THE UNITED STATES entered World War I in 1917, Rickenbacker’s interest turned to flying. He even made a special trip to Washington to try to persuade the Army brass that former race car drivers, because of their mechanical expertise, would make good fighter pilots if organized in squadrons for special training. The answer he received sounds humorous today. “We don’t believe,” said one high-ranking officer, “that it would be wise for a pilot to have any knowledge of engines and mechanics. Airplane engines are always breaking down, and a man who knew a great deal about engines would know if his engine wasn’t functioning correctly and be hesitant about going into combat.”

Regardless of the rebuff, Eddie enlisted and sailed for France with General Pershing’s American Expeditionary Force. In Paris he met one of his old friends, a New York banker named James Miller. Miller was in line for the command of an advanced flying school at Issoudun, France, and he asked Rickenbacker if he would like to be the chief engineering officer there. Rickenbacker’s reply was an immediate yes. A few days later he began flight training as a newly commissioned lieutenant.

Eddie’s first combat missions were as dramatic as his auto races. On one mission, he spotted an enemy plane ahead, and swept in for an easy kill, forgetting for a moment his flight trainer’s warning about traps and decoy planes. Almost immediately two planes appeared above the Rickenbacker cockpit – a classic example of a trap maneuver. Eddie banked his craft and headed for home, the two planes tailing him closely. “I hunched over,” he said, “in dread

expectation of the heavy slugs ripping into my back. Ahead was the most beautiful cloud in the world. I held my breath. Closer, closer – then I entered it. I was safe. I stayed in the cloud protection for several minutes, then poked my nose out for a look around.” Thinking he had outmaneuvered his enemies, Rickenbacker landed with a sigh of relief – only to discover that his two pursuers had been American pilots heading for the same landing field. “Not only had they scared me to death,” Eddie recalled, “but because of my failure to identify them, I had lost what might well have been my first victory in the air. But I was learning. I was lucky that I lived long enough to learn. Many a pilot went to his death before he gained the experience that would have kept him alive.”

After shooting down five German aircraft, Rickenbacker qualified for the coveted title of combat “ace.” And as the months raced by, his victories continued and his name became a legend. When the war ended in November 1918 he was Captain Eddie Rickenbacker, veteran of 134 air battles; he had shot down 26 enemy aircraft and earned the title of “America’s Ace of Aces.” His exploits were known world-wide.

BACK IN AMERICA, Captain Eddie’s war record opened up many business opportunities. He finally decided to form the Rickenbacker Motor Company with the help of a group of eastern financiers; but, unfortunately, the buying public was totally unimpressed. Three years later, the business was forced to close its doors. At this point, commented Rickenbacker, “I was 35 years old. I was also unemployed, flat broke and \$250,000 in debt. Several friends suggested that I declare bankruptcy, but I did not consider it for even a moment. I owed the money, and I would pay it back if I had to work like a dog to do it. I was not ashamed and not afraid. Failure was something I had faced before and might well face again If you have determination, you can come back from failure and succeed.”

Are young Americans today being encouraged to face their failures in the Rickenbacker tradition, or are they being taught to fear failure and seek out security at the expense of accomplishment? [*Encourage a family discussion. Consider the far-reaching effects of “security-is-our-goal” thinking.*]

EDDIE RICKENBACKER was only temporarily defeated. Within a year, he had borrowed enough money to purchase the Indianapolis Speedway, one of the country’s most famous race car tracks, and was earning enough to repay his debts. A later venture also proved profitable during the depression of the 1930’s. By 1934, his business acumen was so highly respected that he was offered the management of Eastern Airlines, which, at that time, was practically bankrupt. He accepted the offer with one stipulation. “As it stands today,” he told the board of directors, “Eastern Air Lines is held up by government subsidy. I believe it can become a free-enterprise industry, and I will pledge all my efforts and energies to making it self-sufficient. But if this airline cannot be made to stand on its own feet and must continue to live on the taxpayers’ money through government subsidy, then I want to be relieved of that job.”

The year before Rickenbacker took control of Eastern, the company had lost a million and a half dollars; but under his management, it showed a profit of \$38,000 the first year. On March 2, 1938, he became the owner of Eastern Airlines and ran it at a profit until his retirement in 1959.

The judgment, leadership, and balanced character traits which produced this fantastic turnabout in the business affairs of Eastern are best illustrated by an event that took place in the 1940’s during World War II. The U.S. Army had invited “America’s Ace of Aces” to tour our military bases in Europe and in the Pacific to cheer up the troops and to report on the morale of the fighting men. On one of these missions from Honolulu to Canton Island, approximately 1800 miles southwest of Hawaii, the pilot of Rickenbacker’s plane realized that because of a broken compass, he had overshot the island and the plane was out of fuel. In the final minutes before the doomed aircraft plunged into the ocean, at-

FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

For those interested in learning more about Eddie Rickenbacker we recommend his autobiography, *Rickenbacker*, or his earlier books: *Seven Came Through*, the story of his ordeal adrift in the ocean, and *Fighting The Flying Circus*, the account of his air battles with Germany’s most deadly fighter squadron.

