

# H-Net Reviews

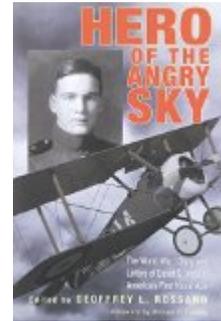
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Geoffrey L. Rossano, ed. *Hero of the Angry Sky: The World War I Diary and Letters of David S. Ingalls, America's First Naval Ace*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2013. 350 pp. \$28.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8214-2018-8.

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In *Hero of the Angry Sky*, Geoffrey Rossano gives us a view of the First World War through the eyes of David Ingalls, a U.S. Naval Reserve aviator and the U.S. Navy's first "ace." Rossano uses Ingalls's WWI diary as a "master narrative," leavening it with appropriate surviving letters to Ingalls's family and friends, his postwar reminiscences, and official reports from U.S. Navy and Royal Naval Air Service/Royal Air Force units. These additions serve to deepen the diary's context as well as provide alternate retellings (often with different details) of events mentioned in the diary entries.

Ingalls's diary (and thus the book) begins on April 29, 1917, less than a month after the United States entered WWI. Ingalls was then in Florida, learning to be a naval aviator along with fellow members of the "First Yale Unit." This was a self-organized group of Yale undergraduates formed in 1916 with the idea of providing a reserve of aviators to the U.S. Navy in the event that the United States entered the war in Europe. Through the diary, we follow Ingalls through additional training in the United States and then advanced training in Moutchic, France, followed by various Royal Flying Corps schools in the United Kingdom. The extensive technical notes Ingalls took while attending the gunnery school at Turnberry, Scotland, are included as an appendix.

The U.S. Navy then assigned Ingalls to Naval Air Station (NAS) Dunkirk, one of its many seaplane stations established along the French coast. These stations served as part of a combined response to the increase in U-boat predations that had led the United States to enter the war. Dunkirk was unique among these stations, however. It was the only one close enough to the front lines to en-

sure almost nightly shelling from a large German gun in addition to regular German bombing attacks. Because of this proximity, Dunkirk was also the only NAS to operate seaplane fighters (to protect the patrolling flying boats from enemy fighters). Then, in the spring of 1918, when the German offensive pushed back the Allied lines in the north, NAS Dunkirk loaned many of its aviators to British squadrons supporting the British army in Flanders, the only NAS to do so. In his service with the British during this period, Ingalls shared in enough victories to be considered the U.S. Navy's first "ace."

By the time the British no longer needed the extra manpower of its flyers, the U.S. Navy was assembling what would become known as the "Northern Bombing Group" (NBG). Conceived to have both a night wing and a day wing for "round-the-clock" bombardment of German U-boat pens in occupied Belgian ports, the NBG was largely the creation of First Yale Unit member Robert Lovett. It reunited many of the then-scattered members of the First Yale. However, the armistice ended combat before the NBG became fully operational. The book ends with Ingalls's last entries concerning his return back to the United States in December 1918.

Ingalls proved to be an interesting diarist, noting events both big and small in moderate detail, and Rossano's selection of supporting material adds detail and perspective to the diary descriptions. Where Ingalls's writing is too cryptic or obscure, Rossano provides annotations to explain. Sometimes, this is simply editorial expansion of abbreviations, providing full names where only first or last names (or sometimes just nicknames) are given, or clearing up Ingalls's occasional mis-

spellings of foreign place names. Other times, Rossano inserts more discursive footnotes explaining Ingalls's jargon, slang, and obtuse references. Additional footnotes provide brief sketches of people Ingalls has written about; specific businesses (often hotels, theaters, and restaurants) to which he had given his trade; or movies, shows, and entertainers he saw in London or Paris.

Though Rossano has done a good job with these annotations, there are a few places where I feel he comes up short. For instance, Rossano has chosen to define Ingalls's first use of the word "flippers," when the reference to a plane's elevators is fairly clear from context (both here and in many other instances) to anyone with a basic knowledge of how planes fly (p. 26). It is, therefore, curious that Rossano defines this as meaning a plane's ailerons, though this may be due to Ingalls himself speaking of "aileron flippers" once (p. 76). On the other hand, Rossano chooses not to define the adjective "punk" as applied by Ingalls to concerts, shows, and the weather in half a dozen instances that provide no contextual clues whether this is a good or a bad thing. Not until p. 171 is it clear that "punk" carries negative connotations. Rossano may have chosen not to annotate its first appearance, since modern dictionaries do supply an appropriate definition. However, since it is a meaning not in current, widespread use, a definition would have been appreciated. In one instance, I feel Rossano missed an opportunity to provide a possibly deeper context in a letter from Ingalls to fellow Yale man Harry Davison (pp. 172-173). Following a reference to Kenneth MacLeish getting a letter from his fiancé, Ingalls writes, "Talking about girls, did you hear that Ken S[mith] got a sub the other day?" Rossano's note explains that their friend had been given credit for sinking a submarine roughly two weeks before the letter. While this is an obvious meaning to "got a sub," it seems a non sequitur from "Talking about girls." Furthermore, the context following this statement seems to imply that "got a sub" *could* carry the same sense that men today mean when they say they "got to second base." Still, these are minor (and rare) instances that do not take away from Rossano's otherwise excellent job of teasing meaning and significance out of Ingalls's writing.

*Hero* is the most recent in a series of books with dense interconnections to each other. It is difficult to review this book without mentioning these other publications, many of which Rossano cites or cross-references in the footnotes. Rossano himself has previously given us *The Price of Honor: The World War One Letters of Naval Aviator Kenneth MacLeish* (1991) and *Stalking the U-Boat: U.S. Naval Aviation in Europe during World War I* (2010). The

latter is an operational history of naval aviation that grew out of his frustration, while annotating MacLeish's letters, that no such book existed. Ingalls and MacLeish were friends from Yale, especially from their time together in the First Yale Unit. Consequently, *Price of Honor* provides additional, sometimes alternative perspective on events, especially on those occasions when Ingalls and MacLeish were stationed together, while *Stalking the U-Boat* helps to place Ingalls's experiences in the larger context of the war.

Another closely related volume is *Sailor of the Air: The 1917-1919 Letters and Diary of USN CMM/A Irving Edward Sheely*, edited by Lawrence Sheely (1993). Chief Machinist's Mate (Aviation) Sheely was also a member of the NBG, serving as MacLeish's gunner/observer during training and missions in the DeHavilland DH-4s that equipped the day wing of the NBG. Alongside MacLeish and Ingalls, he went through the U.S. Army's day bombing school at Clermont-Ferrand, France, in preparation for flying with the NBG.

Finally, there are two titles dealing with the formation and wartime service of the First Yale Unit itself. The first is Ralph Paine's two-volume set, *The First Yale Unit: A Story of Naval Aviation, 1916-1919* (1925) The second is Marc Wortman's *The Millionaires' Unit: The Aristocratic Flyboys Who Fought the Great War and Invented American Airpower* (2006). Both are good, if (as hinted at in Wortman's subtitle) rather partisan in their belief in the singular importance of the Yale men to the Navy's WWI aviation activities. Rossano cites Paine more often, however, probably because it belongs to an earlier, breezier style of popular history; Paine attended several of the post-war reunions of the group, and his history includes the kind of interesting personal anecdotes largely irrelevant to present-day historical writing, but useful in fleshing out the stories in Ingalls's writing.

Given that MacLeish's and Sheely's letters have been published and that two additional titles address the history of the First Yale Unit and its members, *Hero of the Angry Sky* provides little new information. However, I believe it is the book to start with for anyone seeking a view of World War I U.S. naval aviation from the vantage point of an individual. Somehow, I find that *Hero* is more readable than either of the other two published collections and Ingalls is a more relatable correspondent. This may stem from Rossano's previous experience with MacLeish's letters and his greater knowledge of the period gained through writing *Stalking*. Anyone seeking specific information or individual impressions of

events would also be well advised to start with *Hero*, since Rossano's annotations include helpful cross-references to these other first-person accounts. The difference may also be that *Hero* relies mainly on Ingalls's diary, whereas the other two are primarily letters.

To sum up: if you are looking for a micro-level, first-

person history of U.S. naval aviation in the First World War, or a different perspective on the United States in that war, then read *Hero*. Rossano's annotations mean that you do not need any "background knowledge" to follow Ingalls's writing. If you already have the MacLeish and Sheely books, then *Hero* makes an excellent, perhaps even necessary, addition to your collection.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

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