

Fuller Patterson '38 leans on the tail section of his Spitfire aircraft in November 1941.



FULLER PATTERSON '38

WAR STORY

On Memorial Day, remembering a Princetonian and a Belgian's loving deed

The first American casualty of Dec. 7, 1941, that date which will live in infamy, occurred more than 7,400 miles from Pearl Harbor, on the coast of Belgium.

While sailors and airmen slept at the U.S. naval base in Hawaii, Richard Fuller Patterson '38 was half a world away, flying a Spitfire for the Royal Air Force. His sortie had taken off from its base in England and just crossed the North Sea when the Luftwaffe intercepted it. Patterson was no stranger to trouble in the skies. In barely a year since earning his wings, he had crashed once, made two forced landings, and bailed out twice when his plane caught fire.

Far below, in the town of Bredene-aan-Zee, a young police commissioner named Henri Verhelst heard gunfire and looked up from his work, hoping to learn — as he later wrote to Patterson's mother — “if the bullets and the cannon balls of the enemy would not mortally hit one of these large birds, which flew over our violated country.” The British planes carried “the men whose hearts were beating in unison with ours, friendly men, Allied aviators!”

The dogfight ended quickly. Verhelst watched as Patterson took fire and wheeled toward the coast, hoping

to escape. “Alas, fate had decided otherwise,” he wrote. “It's with a heavy, anxious heart, that I saw the big bird being massacred, the plane which carried inside of it, your beloved son, its wings forcefully broken, the bird which flew toward the sea, had to succumb at the edge of the great expanse of water ...”

A Messerschmitt pilot who attacked the RAF squadron wrote in his report that Patterson had been hit by machine gun fire and was slumped over his controls as he went down. Verhelst raced into the waves, pulled Patterson's body from the wreckage, and was copying his identifying information when German soldiers shooed him away. Though it was often their practice to bury enemy soldiers in mass, unmarked graves, Verhelst persuaded them to let him claim Patterson's body.

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When Patterson failed to return with his squadron, he was reported killed in action, but there were no details available until nearly five years later, when the International Red Cross located his mother and delivered Verhelst's letter. Patterson joined more than 10,000 RAF pilots — and 290,000 Americans — killed in combat during World War II. But those are just numbers. As Henri Verhelst's letter attests, there was a story behind every one of them.

“He was a fine fellow,” recalls John Hardy '38 '39, who roomed with Patterson for two years at Princeton.

Patterson was the pride of Richmond, an all-state football player and president of his class at Woodberry Forest School. “I am selecting Princeton as the college where I hope to attain my collegiate education,” he wrote in his application, “because it is an institution which offers the type of education necessary for success in the world of tomorrow.”

He was a young man in a hurry, so eager that he signed up for too many courses freshman year and had to be told to drop one. Though his family had founded the R.A. Patterson tobacco company, which developed Lucky Strike cigarettes, Patterson's father died when he was just a boy, and the son attended Princeton on scholarship, supporting himself as manager of Tower Club. Popular and outgoing, Patterson also was intensely private. Hardy says that, although they had roomed together for two years in prep school just a few miles from Patterson's home, he was not even aware that Patterson had siblings until he saw them at graduation.

In the summer of 1936, Patterson's mother saved up enough money to let him travel to Europe. Seeing fascism firsthand made a profound impression, one augmented when, during a stop in Germany, the Nazis jailed him overnight for disorderly conduct after a night of raucous drinking. A politics major, he wrote his thesis on “The Totalitarian State: A Study of the Dictatorships in Italy, Germany, and Russia.”

Totalitarian governments, Patterson declared, “are standing denials of what we seem to mean by liberal civilization. They represent a challenge to democratic

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PRINCETONIANS

ideology ... a challenge to which so many are inclined to remain indifferent." He warned Americans not to be complacent. "We can sit back and enjoy democracy, but if we make ourselves too comfortable and fall asleep in the chair, if we become too indifferent toward governmental affairs, the situation will soon be such that Fascism will become a necessity. ... It can happen here."

What did Patterson really think? From this vantage point, it is hard to say. Hardy recalls that, like many Americans, Patterson sometimes spoke favorably about Hitler's strong leadership in the first years after the Nazis came to power. In a questionnaire for the *Nassau Herald*, Patterson listed his political affiliation as "Fascist tendency," underlining the last word.

Whatever his tendency may have been, he did not wait for America to join the war against fascism but dropped out of Harvard Law School and went to fight.

Patterson, who loved race cars and motorboats, had earned his pilot's license while in college. The British received scores of applications from Americans eager to fight the Nazis, but told them to wait until they could decide how to use them. Growing impatient, Patterson traveled to Canada, spent weeks hectoring recruiting officers in Montreal, and even volunteered for the Finnish and Norwegian services before the Canadians finally selected him for the Royal Canadian Air Force's Empire Air Training Program.

By joining the RCAF, Patterson committed himself in more ways than one. Americans who fought for another country forfeited their U.S. citizenship (pilots who joined British forces before America entered the war later had that citizenship restored). Joining the RCAF, however, did not automatically confer Canadian or British citizenship. Patterson was literally a man without a country at the time of his death.

The RCAF crammed two years' worth of training into just six months; Patterson had his wings by the end of October 1940 and served as an instructor in Ontario. When the British Royal Air Force formed a second American Eagle Squadron comprising expatriate Americans, Patterson secured a transfer.

In April 1941, he finally shipped out for England. His unit spent the next seven months escorting British convoys along the North Sea coast.

In his last letter home, written just weeks before his death, he left his family with words that would live after him: "If this is where I get mine, up there where it is cold and clear, on a battlefield where the dead don't lie about and rot, where there is no mud and no stench, where there is moonlight by night and stars, and in the day the wizardry of intriguing cloud formations, and a blue sky above where a man is free and on his own and the devil and Jerry take the hindmost; if I get mine up there, there must be no regrets. I would have it that way. ... I pity those, who living, live in fear of death."

Seventy-four years later, Fuller Patterson lies in a small graveyard beside the church of St. Richard in Bredene-aan-Zee. Henri Verhelst rescued the bodies of 18 other RAF fliers that day, buried them all, and was able to contact the families of 14 of them. He planted flowers on their graves and tended them until his own death in 1973.

Fate veers in sharp directions. Had Verhelst not been so insistent, the Germans might have thrown Patterson's body into a pit and his family never would have known his fate. Had his plane crashed a few hundred yards away, it might have disappeared into the sea. Had he not been wounded, he might have escaped. Fuller Patterson died at 26; his roommate, John Hardy, celebrated his 100th birthday in October.

Verhelst's letter did reach Patterson's mother — who also lost another son and a son-in-law in the war — and the two kept up a correspondence for decades. Patterson's sister filled scrapbooks with clippings about her brother and visited Belgium to thank Verhelst and see the grave. Her granddaughter, Latanè Crittenden Miller, has been in touch with Verhelst's daughter and has been trying to make Patterson's story more widely known.

"In his 26 years, he accomplished more than most of us will in our entire lives," she says. "It's a fascinating story. I hope my children will care about it as much as I do." ♦ *By M.F.B.*