

Eugene Coler—Flight Surgeon and World War I Ace

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The following is the citation published in the London Gazette in December 1918 describing the awarding of the Distinguished Flying Cross to Lt. Eugene Coler: "Bold in attack and skillful in manoeuvre, this officer never hesitates to engage the enemy regardless of disparity in numbers. On 13th August when on escort duty, he dived on a formation of twenty enemy aeroplanes. In the engagement that ensued he himself destroyed three and his observer two—making a total of five machines destroyed in the fight; a fine performance, reflecting great credit on the officers concerned."¹

Eugene Seeley Coler (Fig. 1) was born in 1896. He was a medical student when he left his home in New Jersey to make a difference in the European Conflict in 1917. He went to Canada and joined the Royal Flying Corps in October 1917. After only several weeks of flight training in Canada and England, Lt. Coler was sent to France. On 12 March 1918, he was assigned to No. 11 Squadron RFC (later to become No. 11 Squadron RAF), which was operating from the Western Front. At that time, No. 11 Squadron was flying long range reconnaissance sorties using Bristol F2B aircraft (Fig. 2).

By the time Lt. Coler arrived on the front in early 1918, both allied and German fighters had developed considerably since the Bristol F2B design. Nevertheless, Coler and his observers are credited with downing 16 German aircraft between May and September 1918, when he was injured.² He and his gunner, Cyril Gladman, attacked a formation of 14 German fighters on 9 May 1918. They drove three German Pfalz D.III fighters down out of control on this single combat sortie. On 13 August 1918, Coler and Gladman destroyed three Fokker D.VIIs and drove down two others out of control within a few minutes; Coler won the Distinguished Flying Cross for this mission. The action began when Coler dived on 20 Fokker D.VIIs, setting one with a red nose and yellow fuselage on fire from a range of 10 yards. He sent another spinning down out of control before his Vickers machine guns jammed. While he was clearing the jam, Gladman knocked a Fokker down out of control. As Coler cleared his guns' stoppage, a Fokker crossed before him 50 yards out; Coler fired 60 rounds into it and set it afire. Gladman then was shot in the right shoulder while changing ammunition drums. Nothing daunted, he shot the other plane down left-handed, sending it down in flames. The following day, Coler and Gladman were forced to land behind British lines, the gunner being severely wounded. Their conqueror seems to have been Otto Kønnecke. On 30 August, Coler changed gunners and planes, but was still flying a Bristol F2 Fighter when he destroyed a Pfalz D.XII and a Fokker D.VII almost simultaneously. He then destroyed two enemy fighter planes each on 6 September, 15 September, and 16 September. On the latter date, he was wounded in action. Bruno Loerzer scored his 40th victory by puncturing the fuel tank and cutting the aileron controls on Coler's Bristol and driving it into a crash-landing near Beugny. While Coler was power diving into this controlled crash, two Germans



Fig. 1. Colonel Eugene Seeley Coler, M.D., Chief Flight Surgeon, Distinguished Flying Cross recipient, and World War I Ace.

who were chasing him overran their prospective target and were shot down by Coler and his gunner.

After the "Great War," Eugene Coler finished his medical studies and practiced medicine in New York. After the commencement of American involvement in World War II, Dr. Coler was commissioned as an Army Air Corps flight surgeon on June 25, 1942. He served as a staff flight surgeon for the 319th Bomb Group at Barksdale Field in Shreveport, LA. When the group went to England in September 1942, Dr. Coler went with them, serving there until January 1943. Beginning in February of that year until October 1943, he was the Staff Surgeon for XII Bomber Command in North Africa.

In 1944, Lt. Col. Coler went to Randolph Air Base in Texas to complete the Primary Course in Aviation Medicine. He had already

From Wright-Patterson AFB, OH.

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Fig. 2. Bristol F2B in flight. This was a scout/observation plane with both a pilot and, immediately behind him, a gunner.

been an active flight surgeon for 2 yr. I'm sure that it was somewhat intimidating for the teaching staff in the School of Aviation Medicine to have this senior ranking flight surgeon and World War I Ace as a student in the class. They used his considerable expertise in flying to help his classmates while in training to understand the importance and nuances of what they were learning.

At the cessation of hostilities, Lt. Col. Coler left the service and returned to his medical practice in New York, remaining in the Reserves. He was recalled to active duty in the U.S. Air Force

in May 1951 and was appointed as a staff medical officer at Mitchell Air Force Base, NY. In July he was sent to MacDill Air Force Base, FL. In August he left to become the Division Air Surgeon with Headquarters 7th Air Division in England. He served in these duties from August 1951 until his death from illness on active duty on August 30, 1953. His service in American military aviation earned him the Legion of Merit and the Bronze Star Medal.³

Colonel Eugene Seeley Coler, M.D., Chief Flight Surgeon, Distinguished Flying Cross recipient, World War I Ace, served both the country of his birth and the United Kingdom. He was first drawn to military aviation when military flight was young. He was there when flight medicine was born and helped guide the process of adapting medicine to the support of aviation. There have been other pilots who became successful physicians and many of them became flight surgeons. However, I am unaware of any other war-time ace who later rose to a position high in the command chain of flight medicine.

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