

# CLAYTON KNIGHT

## A YANK IN THE RFC/RAF

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Illustrations via Clayton Knight unless stated otherwise.



An informal portrait of Clayton Knight taken at Harroby Camp, Grantham, Lincolnshire.

I HAD THE PLEASURE OF MEETING CLAYTON KNIGHT in September 1961 and enjoyed a friendship with him that lasted until his death at age 78 in July 1969. During that time, he shared with me reminiscences of his life in aviation – as a flier and as an author and artist. Now, I would like to relate to you what I learned about his World War I service as a pilot, based on interviews, conversations and correspondence with him and some of his comrades, as well as post-war news accounts and personal papers. He had such good communication skills that, for much of this text, I will use his words, as he relayed them to me.

Clayton Knight was born on 30 March 1891 in Rochester, New York. As a young man, he pursued a career in art and, from 1910 to 1913, and studied at the Art Institute of Chicago under such illustrious artists as George Bellows and Robert Henri. Both men were advocates of realism in art and their works influenced Clayton Knight – as can be seen in examples of his artwork that portrayed his aviation experiences in World War I.

By early 1917, Knight was enjoying a flourishing art career in New York City. But newspaper and magazine articles about the war in Europe disrupted his otherwise tranquil state of mind. On the one hand, accounts of German conduct of the war filled him with revulsion – especially the lingering memory of accounts of the sinking of RMS

*Lusitania* in May 1915. Conversely, colourful stories about the exploits of bold young Americans flying fighter aircraft with France's Lafayette Escadrille made a powerful appeal to him and conjured up visions of gallant young men serving in a noble cause. All that kept the 27-year-old bachelor artist from heading for Europe to enlist was the notion that he was too old to join any military aviation service. As time passed, he later recalled: *The US showed every sign of joining in the conflict* – and he thought there might be a chance for him to serve in the war.

Consequently, in February 1917, Knight wrote to the US Army's Signal Corps Aviation School at Mineola, Long Island to inquire about becoming a military pilot. The process was slow, but after the United States declared war on Germany on 6 April 1917, his prospects improved. Fears of not meeting education standards evaporated when his studies at the Chicago Art Institute were accepted as the minimum two years of college required for officers.

On 8 June, Knight received a physical examination prior to appearing before the Examining Board of the Aviation Section, SORC [Signal Officers' Reserve Corps] to determine his fitness for a commission. He was approved by the board and, on 25 June, he was accepted as Private, first class, Aviation Section, Signal Corps and then assigned to the

