

The Life and Service of LTC Albert W. Stevens: A Story of Ingenuity, Leadership, and
Dedication

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Captain Albert William Stevens¹

I have chosen to research the life of LTC Albert W. Stevens, a World War I aviator who



Stevens in England.²

made history for his incredible aerial photography skills. I was initially intrigued by the idea of learning about the unique perspective of a wartime aviator who specialized in photography. My interest was further piqued when I learned about his numerous accomplishments following the war, and I felt it was my duty to investigate his life when I realized how little is known about this amazing man, even within his native state of Maine. Outside of his hometown, few people know about Stevens and his contributions to the war effort and other

accomplishments. I hope this paper helps shed light upon the impressive and interesting life and service of Albert Stevens.

LTC Albert W. Stevens was born Albert William Whitten on March 13, 1886 in Belfast, Maine, the third child of his biological parents, Nathan and Alice Whitten, who had a daughter named Maud (1880-1882) and a son named Ralph (1883-1948).³ Unfortunately, only six months later, tragedy struck the family when Alice passed away due to tuberculosis. According to family history, Alice and her best friend Nancy Stevens had created a pact that provided that if one of them were to die, the other would assume the role of mother for her children. Although Nathan sent his son Ralph to be raised by his sister, Albert was adopted by Andrew and Nancy Stevens.⁵



Stevens and his mother Nancy.⁴

Nathan died ten years later in 1896, and while it is unknown if Albert ever knew his biological

father, he stayed in contact with his brother Ralph and the two remained close over the years, even living together at one point. The Stevens family lived modestly, and as a teenager Albert worked in a machine shop to help support them. Albert was a member of the Belfast High School class of 1903, and during his time there he was a member of the High School Literary Magazine staff, honing skills he would later use in the 1920s and 30s when he wrote articles for National Geographic.⁶

In the fall of 1903, Stevens began studying electrical engineering at the University of



A postcard created by Stevens, 1909.⁷

Maine in Orono. In order to afford tuition, Stevens worked nights at the Stillwater Power Plant and also

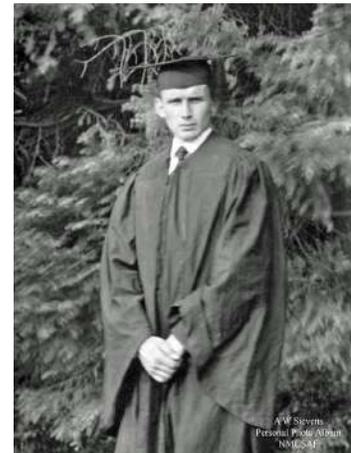
supplemented this income through

photography by selling postcards of photos he took. At the college, Stevens was a very involved and hardworking student; he was ran track and was a member of the Beta Theta Pi Fraternity,

and he also continued practicing his photography skills as he would sometimes take photographs during football games.⁸ The 1907

edition of the college's yearbook, "The Prism," described him as "a standing reproach to most college men. He works nights, plugs days, and in the meantime turns out for track and trains as faithfully as the next man. His life is one strenuous strenuousity."⁹ Stevens graduated

in 1909 and upon graduating, he accepted a job working for the Boston - Idaho Gold Dredging Company. The job required Stevens



Stevens' graduation photo, 1907.¹⁰

to relocate to the Grimes Pass Region of Idaho, where he managed the building of a dam and

powerhouse on the South Fork of the Payette River.¹¹ Later Stevens moved to Nome, Alaska in 1914 and, after returning to travel the contiguous United States, again in 1917 to manage a power-generating station for the Alaska Mining Corporation. When he wasn't working, Stevens filled his time taking photographs. From 1909-1917 Stevens worked in the gold dredging business, however, with the United States officially being part of the world war by 1917, Stevens decided to switch career paths.¹³ In a letter to



Dam and Powerhouse on the South Fork of the Payette River.¹²

his sister-in law Alice Whitten, Ralph's wife, dated July 24, 1917, he wrote, "Saw the enlistment officer at Fort Davis – Lieutenant Perrine – and volunteered for service in engineer corps...Sent our applications on July 11th by wireless; cost us \$8.36 apiece to wire officer at Frisco. Just got word by wire that no more applications are being received now, so we at Nome are left out – for which we are not greatly distressed, as none of us hold any rose-colored pictures of army life. However, we made our several offers in good faith and would have stayed by them if accepted, but I guess the states are full of better engineers than Nome is apt to provide." As it turned out, Stevens would eventually find a spot for himself in the military, and at the end of the season he set sail from Nome to Seattle.¹⁴

In another letter to his sister-in-law Alice, from January 4, 1918, Stevens wrote, "You'll be interested to know that I am joining the aviation corps. I expect to take the physical examination and flying tests Monday at the Seattle City Hospital." A second letter, dated January 14, 1918, read, "Am leaving this week for San Antonio, Texas. As I wrote you, I took the

examinations and passed and enlisted on January 7th. The captain here says I will probably get a 1st Lieutenants commission after several months training.”¹⁵ When they next heard from him, Stevens was studying at the United States School of Military Aeronautics in Ithaca, NY; evidently, Stevens had failed flight school in San Antonio, but when the Army Air Service learned about his photography skills, they sent him to the aerial photography school located on the campus of Cornell University.¹⁶ Here, Stevens began his very successful 24-year-long career as an aerial photographer. By the time Stevens arrived in Ithaca, he had been a serious photographer for over ten years, and his experience paid off. In March 19, 1918, he wrote to Alice, “You will be interested to know that I have finished the course a week ahead of time, and that while I am waiting for orders from Washington to go overseas, I am appointed in charge of instruction in the developing department. They gave me my choice of positions and I chose developing as I consider it is the most important. Next in order comes map making and plotting, which I am much interested in, for that is the final product of the organization. It will be necessary for me to go up as observer, along with a pilot, at frequent intervals. Part of the photography, however, is now done by cameras which are partially automatic. I am not able to write to you details, as it is strictly against the rules.”¹⁷

One month later, Stevens wrote to Ralph and Alice from Field 2, Aeronautical General Supply Depot and Concentration Camp Garden City, Long Island, N.Y.: “You will perhaps be surprised to know that I am now here at Garden City, waiting for the balance of my section to arrive, and to be sent overseas. There is no telling how long I will be here. It will interest you to know that I am known as the Commanding Officer of the Sixth Photographic Section...”¹⁸ Stevens went on to describe the section in depth, describing its daily schedule and stating that it

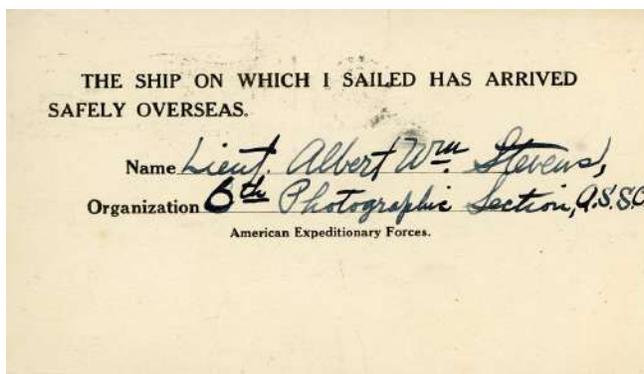
was comprised of 10 laboratory men, 8 chauffeurs, two draftsmen, one supply man, one file clerk, one cabinet maker, and one camera repair man. He wrote, “The last two are for fixing up things after an aeroplane has a spill, which often results in damage to the camera. The chauffeurs are for taking messages, bringing in magazines of plates from the machines as they return, and carrying observers back and forth, from drafting room and laboratory to aeroplanes. A portable laboratory, on a motor truck, is furnished, so that it can be moved as desired. The photographic section is attached to an aero squadron, which is composed of 173 men, including 19 officers. I cannot tell you more than this, and it would be better not to say much about it, except that I am an observer and am in command of a section.” As a section



Stevens' photo of an organized army cot.¹⁹

commander, Stevens was responsible for preparing his section for inspections; he showed ingenuity as a photographer and leader by photographing a field cot with the soldier's gear properly organized and distributed the photo to men in his camp for reference.²⁰

Stevens and the 6th Photographic Section left for Liverpool, England on June 12, 1918 and arrived on the 24th of June; upon arrival, they received a welcoming note from King George



Stevens's American Expeditionary Forces Card.²¹

V. The Section then journeyed via train to Winchester, England and remained there until June 30, 1918, when they left from Southampton for the Port of La Havre, France, and from there traveled on foot to the rest camp known officially as Rest

Camp No. 2 and finally arriving on the fourth of July at Beaumont Barracks, Tours, the Headquarters of the Photographic Service, A.E.F.²² Upon arrival, an attempt was made to dissolve the section; Stevens was able to prevent this through “urgent solicitation,” and asked that the Section be given a chance to present their skills, and if only proved unable to complete the necessary tasks, be disbanded. The Air Service agreed and allowed the section an opportunity to prove its training (with 4 less chauffeurs). After some more traveling, on July 10th they hiked to the camp at Colombey-les-Belles, the First Air Depot. Stevens was able to stop yet another effort to dismantle the section, and at this point trucks were utilized to move the section to Flying Fish Field at Ourches. Here, the 6th Photographic Section actually began their real work and became known as Photographic Section No. 6, 4th Army Corps, Observation Group; they were also



The Sixth Photographic Section, 1918.²³



Aerial photograph of Fermes de Greves.²⁴

assigned to the 90th Aero Squadron. They were soon reassigned to the 88th Aero Squadron and then left the aerodrome at Ourches; they were supposed to travel to the aerodrome at Ferme des Greves which was southeast of Chateau Thierry, but for some reason, Stevens and the Section

headed for Mortefontaine. After some days of travel, the section arrived at Mortefontaine which put the Section farther north than any

American Photo Section had been and closer to the front lines than they had realized. The only other nearby Americans belonged to a group of grave identification men.²⁵ Observation balloons could be seen within three kilometers and “Boche shells were breaking close enough to distinctively hear their progress thru the air.” After seeing that their presence had no purpose in Mortefontaine, the Section returned to the French 11th Army HQ at Coyelles, where the French Prime Minister, Georges Clemenceau directed them to the U.S. First Army HQ at La Ferte-sous-Jourarre. After receiving specific instructions here, the Section was finally able to reach their destination of Ferme des Greves, at which the 6th Photo Section mobilized with the outfit and organization they were assigned to support.²⁶

Using his innovative camera mount, Stevens took critical photos of Vaux and Chateau Thierry, and also German machine gun nests located along the Vesle River. The information gained from these photographs allowed the U.S. Army ground forces to defeat the Germans during the battle of Meuse Argonne. His commanding officer spoke highly of his work here and in a letter of recommendation stated that “During rush periods, he has often remained at his post directing and personally participating in the work of the Photo Section until every detail was finally accomplished. His services have at all times been characterized by unsparing effort and conscientious painstaking methods.” He also wrote, “Lieut. Stevens while serving in a non-combative capacity has been a persistent volunteer for hazardous airplane missions over the enemy lines. During our advance in the Chateau Thierry district, he flew at a low altitude, in face of enemy anti-aircraft fire, making a remarkable series of oblique photographs of our front along the Vesle river.” Because of his abilities, success, and leadership, Stevens was named the Chief Photographic Officer for the U.S. First Army in early November 1918; this included the new

duties of working with the 14th Balloon Section to photograph the enemy. While flying with the 88th, Stevens was wounded in his right hand, and was later awarded the Purple Heart for this wound. He also earned nine battle stars for the campaigns he took part in.²⁷

Following the armistice, Stevens spent the next few months photographing the destruction caused by the four-year-long war, including locations in Paris and Germany. He was promoted to Captain in February 1919, and returned to the U.S. in August of 1919, where he was assigned to Langely Field, VA. For several years after the war, he was one of the top aerial photographers for the U. S. Army Air Corps, and in the decades following the war, he became well known as arguably the best aerial photographer of the World War I and the person who perfected the art of oblique photography.²⁸

Stevens continued to be a successful photographer in his life following the war.

Throughout the 1920s and 30s, he took photographs for the National Geographic Society. In



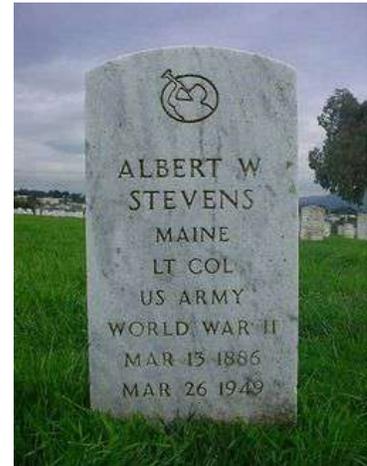
*Stevens' photograph of the curved horizon.*²⁹

1932, along with Lt. Charles D. McAllister (of the Army Air Corps), Stevens took the first photograph of the lunar shadow cast onto Earth during a solar eclipse. Three years later, Stevens accompanied by Captain Orvil A.

Anderson set a new altitude record of 72,395

feet with their balloon ascent inside the Explorer II Gondola; this record was not surpassed until 1956. At this height, Stevens also took a photograph that provided the first visual evidence of the curvature of the horizon. Stevens' final great photographic achievement came in 1937 when he took the perfect photo of the total solar eclipse, flying 25,000 feet over Chile.³⁰ Stevens was

awarded the Distinguished Flying cross twice for his courageous balloon flights, and he also won the Mackay Trophy twice. In 1938, he married Ruth Fischer; they had no children. Stevens was medically discharged from the army in 1942. At the time of his discharge, he was the commander of the aerial photography school at Lowry Air Force Base in Denver, CO. He died seven years later on March 26, 1949 at age 63, in his home in San Carlos, CA. Stevens is buried in Golden Gate National Cemetery.³¹



Stevens' gravestone.³²

Notes

- ¹ "LTC Albert W. Stevens - Ret." Facebook.com. Accessed June 7, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/LTC-Albert-W-Stevens-Ret-1272291836133267/>.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ "1900 Maine census." Ancestry. Accessed June 7, 2018. <https://www.ancestry.com/>.
- ⁴ "LTC Albert W. Stevens - Ret." Facebook.com.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ "1907 School Yearbook." Ancestry. Accessed June 7, 2018. <https://www.ancestry.com/>.
- ¹⁰ "LTC Albert W. Stevens - Ret." Facebook.com.
- ¹¹ "Albert W. Stevens WWI Service Timeline." Belfast Historical Society and Museum. Accessed June 7, 2018. <http://www.belfastmuseum.org/exhibits/>.
- ¹² "LTC Albert W. Stevens - Ret." Facebook.com.
- ¹³ "Albert W. Stevens WWI Service Timeline." Belfast Historical Society and Museum.
- ¹⁴ "LTC Albert W. Stevens - Ret." Facebook.com.
- ¹⁵ "Albert Stevens Letter." Belfast Historical Society and Museum. Accessed June 7, 2018. <http://www.belfastmuseum.org/exhibits/>.
- ¹⁶ "Albert W. Stevens WWI Service Timeline." Belfast Historical Society and Museum.
- ¹⁷ "LTC Albert W. Stevens - Ret." Facebook.com.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² "History of the Photographic Section No. 6." Belfast Historical Society and Museum. Accessed June 7, 2018. <http://www.belfastmuseum.org/exhibits/>.
- ²³ "Sixth Photographic Section." Belfast Historical Society and Museum. Accessed June 7, 2018. <http://www.belfastmuseum.org/exhibits/>.
- ²⁴ "LTC Albert W. Stevens - Ret." Facebook.com.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ Charles Gannon, in discussion with the author, June 2018.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ "LTC Albert W. Stevens - Ret." Facebook.com.
- ³⁰ "Albert William Stevens." Belfast Historical Society and Museum. Accessed June 7, 2018. <http://www.belfastmuseum.org/exhibits/>.
- ³¹ Charles Gannon, in discussion with the author, June 2018.
- ³² "LTC Albert William Stevens (1886-1949) - Find A..." Find A Grave. Accessed June 11, 2018. <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/10283663/albert-william-stevens>.

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