

[Rice, Marcus Herrick]

PLANE CRASH IN 1917 FATAL YESTERDAY TO MARCUS H. RICE
Watertown Man, Long National Guard Major and Captain
In the Air Service, Dies In California

Marcus H. Rice, 47, former major and captain in the air service, died yesterday in the Veterans' hospital at San Fernando, Cal., which he entered about a month ago. Death resulted directly from injuries suffered in an airplane crash while completing his student course at Chanute Field, Rantoul, Ill., in October, 1917.

Prominent in Business

Until his entrance into the army a life resident of Jefferson county, Major Rice was for years prominent in business and civic affairs of this city, having been long [a] junior member of the hardware firm of Connell & Rice and for five years a commissioner on the board of safety. He was one of the most popular officers ever to serve with the local militia.

During the last several years he had suffered continually from disability following his accident, which necessitated numerous delicate surgical operations to replace with silver plates, crushed and broken bones of the face and jaw. Tuberculosis developed, first of the bones and then communicating to throat and one lung, of which he had lost the use more than a year ago. For the last year he had been unable to speak above a whisper. Doctors warned him against passing a winter in northern temperature, that of 1926-1927 having been passed in a government hospital in Arizona. Last fall he returned there, found the hospital filled and went on to San Fernando, where he was on the waiting list for two weeks before a vacancy appeared.

Suffered Cheerfully

Throughout his disability, the injured aviator remained always cheerful and optimistic. His love of humor never deserted him and while in this city and at Rices with his father last summer he joked with his friends and recalled happy incidents in his long military career, he never forgot the suffering he had witnessed among World War veterans in hospitals where he had been treated, maintaining that however unfortunate his case might be there always were others more seriously injured.

...

The loss of his voice was his only cause of complaint or criticism. He maintained that this affliction resulted from treatment with too-powerful drugs while a patient in Arizona last winter. Physicians, however, contend that inability to speak above a whisper resulted from his throat ailment.

Born in Rices

Major Rice was born near the hamlet of Rices in the township of Watertown, the son of Mr. and Mrs. Harvey C. [and Emma Herrick] Rice. His mother died within the last two years. He attended district school near his home and then entered Adams Center high school, thereafter taking a course at the Northern Business School, now the Watertown School of Commerce in this city. Completing his education when scarcely of age, he became bookkeeper for the firm of H. M. Sponenburg and company, conducting a hardware store in lower Washington street, near the present Rice drug store.

Upon the death of Mr. Sponenburg, Mr. Rice, with Patrick Connell, a clerk in the store, purchased the business, which they continued under the firm name of Connell

[Rice, Marcus Herrick]

& Rice. Later the store was moved to Court street, in the Paddock building, where it remained until the partnership was dissolved.

Although never active in politics, and a Democrat in a decidedly Republican community, he was appointed by Mayor Hugo as a commissioner of public safety, joining the board about 1905. Under the aldermanic form of government the commissioners had jurisdiction over police and fire departments. Major Rice was assigned to the police committee and took a very active interest in this service. He was a member of the board through a full term of five years.

His Military Record

Back in 1896, when first he attained an age permitting military service, Rice enlisted in the 39th Separate company, N.Y.N.G., of this city, then commanded by Captain James S. Boyer. From a youth he had been interested in military service and his enthusiasm for the army never deserted him. As a rookie [sic] he showed marked adaptness for army life. Very soon he was made a corporal.

Then came the Spanish-American war of 1898. At the call for troops for war duty, Corporal Rice was among those who volunteered. The company, then in a battalion commanded by Major Boyer, did not see active service, passing its period under arms in a national camp in the south.

About this time the national guard was reorganized, the local command being designated as Company C, and formed with other North Country units into a battalion, of which Major Boyer was senior officer. Rice became second lieutenant in the local outfit, being advanced subsequently to first lieutenant and captain.

Commanded Battalion

When further changes, including promotion of Major Boyer to be lieutenant colonel of the First Infantry, N.Y.N.G., caused a vacancy, Captain Rice was advanced to the majorship, becoming junior major of the regiment and commanding its third battalion, which embraced the Watertown, Ogdensburg, and Malone companies. He continued in this position until his retirement from the National Guard, being senior officer of the troops called to duty to protect property of the St. Regis Paper company at Deferiet during the last (?) strike there. In December, 1910, Governor Dix made Major Rice a member of his military staff, which honor the Watertown officer held during Dix's term.

The militiamen did guard duty over the Deferiet mills in the fall of 1915, following a clash between the sheriff and strike sympathizers. The firm of Connell and Rice had dissolved some time previously. When the soldiers were withdrawn, protection was desired by the paper company and Major Rice was engaged for this purpose, remaining in authority over the civil guards there. It was about this time that he resigned from the state forces.

During his long association with the militia, extending over a period of nearly two score years, Major Rice won the reputation of being a splendid student of military requirements, a capable drill master and a thorough soldier. The reputation won through this period stood him in good stead later when he sought entrance to the regulars.

[Rice, Marcus Herrick]

Joins Air Reserve

In the following year he became deeply interested in aviation, particularly in its military association. Late in 1916, after consulting with acquaintances who had experience in flying, he made application for entrance to the aviation reserve, organized by the United States before the clouds of war drifted toward this continent.

The air service then was an infant in which the government took little interest and joining was not a simple matter. It was not until late in the winter that Major Rice was accepted, entering March 25, 1917, as the ninth man enlisted for the reserve.

He was sent to Mineola, L.I., where he enjoyed his first flight, and then to Miami, Fla., where he began training. The extreme caution practiced in private flying schools did not apply thoroughly in army training, and one of the first sights to greet the recruit on his arrival in Florida was to witness the 3,000 foot fall by Joe Bennett, an experienced instructor, into the Everglades. The flyers there were known as the "suicide club..." The ground school in which the rookies were trained, was under Col. Hiram Bingham.

Half Qualified

Of 44 students at Miami, 22 finished the air course and were sent to ground schools for further instruction in engines, plane construction, machine guns and the technique and principles of flying. About half of these students were graduated from the ground school...

Captain Rice went [on] June 3 from Miami to the ground school of the University of Texas at Austin, being graduated July 7 in the first class and being one of the first 10 ever graduated from a ground school in the United States. He was sent to Rantoul, Ill., to complete his flying and master all the feats of the air, having done his first solo at Miami.

Chanute field at Rantoul was not complete and the students waited two weeks for machines. Pilot Couch, an old balloonist, later killed in the air, was Rice's first instructor here...

When Tail Spins Were Fatal

Posted in all the hangars was this warning to the young air men: "Tail spins are fatal. If you get into one put all controls in neutral and wait."

Tail spins are now a daily feat of exhibitors, but it was at Rantoul, after Captain Rice's arrival, that Maj. Jason McDonald tested out the theory of the tail spin and taught the first lesson in its escape. He found that it was the vacuum created in the air by the whirling motion of the falling plane that left the tail rudders and elevator no hold upon the air.

Stunt flying, so valuable to the army pilot, was then in its creation in the United States air service. Students would figure out mathematically how tricks could be played in the air and would then go up and put their theories to the test.

The Crash at Rantoul

It was on October 19, 1917, while Rice, officially still a student flyer, was completing his course on solo work, that the accident befell which has claimed his life after more than 11 years. He felt certain that he was a victim of an enemy sympathizer, for his crash resulted from a broken control wire, and like cables were found tampered with on other places at Chanute and also at Dayton. The machine was a Curtis J N 4 tractor, similar to that which crashed at Pine Plains last summer but provided with the regular Curtis motor.

[Rice, Marcus Herrick]

To take advantage of the shortening days the field was illuminated before daylight by huge bonfires to enable the students to take off and mount upward to meet the sun. It was still dark when Rice glided into the air, gradually rising. Two miles from the hangars, when he had attained about 600 feet, the controls jammed suddenly and he found himself unable to manipulate the machine. The plane went over into a sharp nose dive and crashed head-on.

The impact hurled the aviator forward in the cockpit as far as his safety straps would permit, his face coming in violent contact with the cowl. Although terribly injured, he retained consciousness and extricated himself from the wreck. A hundred yards away was a house and to this he walked unsteadily, knocking for admission at the front door. A woman opened the door, uttered a scream and slammed and bolted the door. It was not until later, when he realized his appearance, that Rice appreciated the woman's feelings.

Terribly Injured

His upper jaw was broken in seven places, his nose was fractured and crushed almost level with the face, one side of the face was crushed, the right eyeball was partly out of the socket and his lip was cut severely. He had suffered a fracture of the skull and four broken ribs. Yet, after being repulsed at the house, he walked a half mile across the fields until he met a car from the hangars, where his fall had been noted against the brightened sky.

At the hospital he was told he couldn't survive over six hours. Nasal and throat passages were stopped, making it impossible to eat and difficult to breathe. Surgeons operated to relieve this and [on] October 30 Rice set out for the East, "to be repaired by Watertown surgeons," as he told his friends. He was admitted to the House of the Good Samaritan where Drs. F. R. Calkins, J. D. McCaw and W. F. Smith performed three operations, removing broken bones, rebuilding jaw, cheek and nose. The reconstruction, achieved partially with silver plates, slightly altered his appearance.

[On] January 3, 1918, while recuperating here, Rice received commission as captain in the air corps, and 16 days later, January 19, he reported for duty at Ellington field, Houston, Texas. [On] January 22 he was assigned to the 250th aero squadron as commanding officer.

Commands Squadron

Shortly afterward he was made commanding officer of the flying school detachment, in which he had under him 17 aero squadrons approximating 4,000 enlisted men and 600 officers, including several captains. Many other duties fell to him. He was officer in charge of Garrison school for all officers of the post; was president of two general courts martial, survey officer and investigating officer, became a member of boards to determine the fitness of officers for the regular army.

Captain Rice was a member of the board of officers appointed to recommend standard organization for air service squadrons, an assignment of importance.

On September 26, 1919, Captain Rice was transferred to Kelly field, San Antonio, Texas, first as commander of the 20th day bombardment squadron and later as commanding officer of the 166th day bombardment squadron. At intervals he was in command of the first day bombardment group consisting of four service squadrons

[Rice, Marcus Herrick]

and corresponding in the air service to a regiment. Such units are usually commanded by a lieutenant colonel.

Set Altitude Record

With Lieut. Harry Widdington, in a DeHaviland four, Captain Rice made the altitude record of Kelly field at the time, the altimeter registering 23,500 feet. The thermometer stood below zero at this point.

Captain Rice was awarded the 191st certificate as an expert in aviation by the Aero Club of America and held certificate 72 as a United States army pilot. He operated planes corresponding to the advancement of flying in the army, beginning with the Curtis two seater tractors capable of 80 miles an hour; the Curtis H. machine with Hispano-Suiza motors attaining 90 to 200 miles; the DeHavilands, equipped with Liberty motors and covering 120 to 125 miles an hour; big Handley-Page bombers carrying 15 persons, and Italian Capra, three motored machines.

In the fall of 1919, at Kelly field, while flying at an altitude of 3,000 feet, gasoline in the plane ignited from a backfire. Captain Rice fought the flames with a hand extinguisher, suffering burns to feet and legs, but brought the plane safely down.

Given Honorable Discharge

[On] July 15, 1920, Captain Rice was ordered before a medical board at Kelly field to be examined, injuries suffered in the 1917 accident having reappeared. That fall he received his honorable discharge with a recommendation for disability pay. He then was at his home in this city, and had undergone further operations to extract broken and diseased bones from his jaw.

He continued his interest in aviation and as far as his disability permitted, his activity. In 1926 he was appointed a councillor of the International Airways council, devoted to promoting aeronautics. At that time he retained his commission in the army air service reserve and had a major's rank in the reserve of the state national guard.

In 1925 he served for a time in the federal immigration department, being stationed at Cape Vincent and at Ogdensburg. After leaving the army he was employed as manager of the Watertown Garage in State street. His old injuries continued to give him trouble, however, frequently necessitating hospital treatment. Several times he was a patient in government hospitals and in May, 1924, underwent an operation at Walter Reed hospital, Washington, D. C.

Legion Member

Captain Rice was a member of the Disabled American Veterans of the World War, Watertown Army and Navy post of the American Legion, the Air Service institute of the United States, National Aeronautical Association of the United States and the Aerial League of America.

He was married many years ago to Miss Grace Brimmer of this city, their home being in West Flower avenue until after he entered the army. Mrs. Rice died several years ago [in 1922].

There survive his father, Harvey W. Rice of Rices; two sisters, Mrs. Lewis G. Ives of Rices and Mrs. Ephraim Hodge of Rices, and his mother-in-law, Mrs. Martha A. Brimmer, 148 West Flower avenue, where Captain Rice made his home when in this city.

[Rice, Marcus Herrick]

He was a member of the Watertown lodge of Elks, which was notified by wire this afternoon of his death. An Associated Press dispatch from Los Angeles stated that the hospital physician said death was the result of "war injuries."

The body is being sent to this city.

Daily Standard, Watertown NY, Thu. 5 Jan 1928

MIILITARY PAYS FINAL HONORS TO MAJOR RICE
Impressive Rites Mark Funeral of Former Officer of Air Service
FRIENDS THRONG ALL SOULS
Honor Roll of Church's Heroes Draped as Pastor
Preaches Funeral Service—Burial Made at Brookside

Marcus H. Rice, former major of the New York National Guard, who died last Wednesday at the Veterans' hospital, San Fernando, Cal., as the result of injuries sustained in an airplane crash at Rantoul Ill., in 1918, was laid at rest with full military honors beside his wife, Grace A. Brimmer Rice, in the Brimmer plot at Brookside cemetery this afternoon.

After lying in state at Masonic temple until 8 o'clock last night, the body was taken to the William R. Box parlors. At 1:30 this afternoon, Company E of the New York National Guard, under command of Capt. Cecil H. Page, the 13th Fleet Division, commanded by Ensign Albert C. Hyde, assembled in Stone street and presented arms as the body of Major Rice was borne from the undertaking parlors by six non-commissioned officers of Company E and the Naval Militia.

The procession, as it moved slowly up Washington street to All Souls [Universalist] church, was led by Company E, followed by the Naval Militia and the American Legion. Immediately behind the American Legion came the hearse, flanked by six uniformed bearers. Next in the line came the eight army and navy officers who acted as honorary bearers.

Flag in Mourning

Cars containing mourners and officers from Madison Barracks completed the procession. The colors of the National Guard company were bordered with crepe and the sword worn by each officer was sheathed with crepe.

At the church the escort came to attention and presented arms as the casket, draped with an American flag, was carried by, followed by the honorary bearers and the mourners.

The bronze tablet at the rear of the church, inscribed with the names of the members of the church who served in the late war, and the names of the two men who gave their lives in action, was draped with black and surrounded by flowers. At the front of the church were the innumerable floral pieces, tributes of Major Rice's many friends and of the various military organizations of the city.

[Rice, Marcus Herrick]

Soldiers in Last Homage

Following the services the procession moved up Washington street and came to a halt near the House of the Good Samaritan, where Company E and the Naval Militia formed at the side of the street and presented arms as the hearse passed.

At the cemetery a squad of six men, three from Company E and three from the Naval Militia, fired a volley as the body was lowered into the grave.

...

Many city officials and clergymen occupied pews in the church as Dr. Harry Westbrook Reed conducted the prayer service and spoke a few words in eulogy of Major Rice. Dr. Reed said in part:

Ten Years of Suffering

"It is fitting that we should pause a moment in our day's work to pay tribute to Major Rice. I think we are all of one mind and feeling this afternoon. We immediately, in our minds, revert back to the time of the World War. Many heroes lost their lives on the other side of the ocean. In addition, many more heroes died while serving the colors on this side of the Atlantic.

"Twenty-two young men of this church have their names inscribed on the roll of honor in this church. Two of those, Ralph Richard Marion and Sumner Ryder Matteson, gave their lives in France. Major Rice is the third, after ten long years of suffering which he bore so bravely.

"I am sure we are saying to ourselves that this shall not happen again. That there shall be no more war; that we shall labor unceasingly for merciful peace. I do not think an extended eulogy is necessary. Each of you knew him. The entire city is with us today in a feeling of loss over the death of Major Rice. We shall miss his genial smile, the courage which he showed during his long illness. He is leaving us at an early age, but not in vain."

Dr. Reed closed the service with the reading of a poem and a short prayer. As the body of Major Rice was borne from the church and down the steps to the street between a file of National Guardsmen and Naval Militiamen, Mrs. Wilhelmina Wollworth Knapp softly played the funeral march.

Daily Standard, Watertown NY, Thu. 12 Jan 1928

Transcribed on 17 Dec 2023 by Karen E. Dau of East Rochester, NY