

Patrician Explorer-Turned-Aviator Pioneers U.S. Air Force

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Most people who know anything about Hiram Bingham III can recite his two famous accomplishments.

As an explorer and Yale history professor, he found the abandoned Incan city of Machu Picchu in Peru in 1911, making many believe that he was a model for the Indiana Jones movie character.

As a politician, Bingham was elected governor of Connecticut in 1924 but held the office for just one day in January 1925 before taking the oath for U.S. Senate,

where he served until 1933.

Both careers were marked by controversy but also by strong leadership and vision — traits that Bingham also showed powerfully in a role that's less well known.

During World War I, after he turned 40 and with seven sons at home, Bingham was commissioned as a captain in the Connecticut National Guard. He learned to fly airplanes, attained the rank of lieutenant colonel in the Army, and served as a commander at the Allies' largest air base in Europe.

250
YEARS
MOMENTS
IN HISTORY

Bingham was an early advocate of separating the flying corps from the U.S. Army, a change that didn't happen until 1947.

The Bingham family's penchant for challenging the system continued in World War II. Bingham's son, Hiram "Harry" Bingham IV, helped save more than 2,500 people in Vichy, France during the Nazi occupation, mostly Jews slated for concentration camps, including the artist Marc Chagall and political theorist Hannah Arendt. As a diplomat in

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Marseilles, Harry Bingham issued visas in direct violation of State Department orders, and in some cases, hid refugees in his house.

Robert Kim Bingham Sr., a grandson of Hiram Bingham III and one of Harry Bingham's 11 children, has shepherded much of the family's history. The artifacts he has collected include a letter that Hiram Bingham III sent to his sons on Easter Sunday, 1918, from the Yale Club in New **BINGHAM, B4**

Bingham

Continued from Page B1

York, as he was about to ship out to France.

The letter illustrates Bingham's ethic of righteous service — a moral compass, as Kim Bingham calls it — that was bred into him as the son and grandson of pioneering missionaries in Hawaii and as a graduate of Phillips Academy, Yale, the University of California at Berkeley and Harvard.

"This may be my last letter to you. I am going into seas and lands where the Germans are daily killing as many of our friends and countrymen as they can. ... We must never get discouraged or downhearted **NO MATTER WHAT HAPPENS** — because **OUR CAUSE IS JUST AND MUST PREVAIL**. Even if we have great reverses and even **YEARS** of disappointments remember this: it is far better to die for freedom than to live as slaves.

"It is evident that thousands of brave Americans must die and tens of thousands be wounded before the world can be delivered from Prussian madness and made free for Christianity," he continued in the letter. " ... I do not ask to live through it. It is enough that I have been given a chance to help in it."

The words were not overly dramatic, considering the times, the horrible events of the war and Bingham's status as a patrician, high-ranking Army officer. He signed "your loving father" and ended the letter with a P.S., "My last request to my sons." On the list of five requests, No. 1 was to obey, love and cherish their mother. No. 2: "That you will fight for truth, justice and mercy."

Robert Kim Bingham, who lives in Salem and recently delivered a talk about his grandfather's World War I service, believes those words must have deeply inspired young Harry, who was 14 at the time of the letter.

Hiram Bingham III did return from the war after commanding the flying school at Issoudun, France, from August to December, 1918. He received the Order of the Black Star from the French government and, after the war, as president of the U.S. Aeronautics Association in 1920, he wrote the book "An Explorer in the Air Service," published by the Yale University Press. In it, he made the argument for a separate air force.

The family was wealthy in large part due to the inheritance of his wife, Alfreda Mitchell Bingham, granddaughter of Charles Lewis Tiffany, who was born and raised in Killingly. They had a year-round house in New Haven and the "Bingham camp" in Salem, where the family still gathers.

Hiram Bingham III, a Republican, be-



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HIRAM BINGHAM III in 1917.

came lieutenant governor in 1922 and was elected governor two years later, but decided after the unexpected death of a sitting senator to seek that office, instead, in a special election a month after his victory as governor. And so on Jan. 7, 1925, he took the oath for governor and stepped down the following day — a long enough tenure that his portrait hangs in the Hall of Governors at the Connecticut State Library and Museum.

As U.S. Senator, Bingham won a full term in 1926. He was censured in 1929 for briefly placing a paid lobbyist on his payroll — even though the Senate committee's report, filed three days before the Wall Street crash, did not recommend censure. He narrowly lost a bid for re-election in 1932 to a Democrat in the year of Franklin D. Roosevelt's landslide.

Bingham served on many public and corporate boards, and during World War II, lectured at Naval training schools.

Harry Bingham defied his State Department bosses for barely more than a year in Marseilles before he was reassigned in 1941. He never talked about his heroics, which were uncovered after his death in 1988 when his family found documents and letters at the home in Salem. In 2006, after posthumous awards by the State Department, the U.S. Postal Service issued a stamp in his honor.

Hiram Bingham III died in 1956 at age 80 and is buried in Arlington National Cemetery. In recent years Yale has agreed to return to Peru many of the treasures his expedition removed a century ago from Machu Picchu, when the times, and ethics, were very different.