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USAF SENIOR NCO ACADEMY

CHEVRONS IN THE CLOUDS

USAF ENLISTED HISTORY RESEARCH

by

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TERM PAPER PRESENTED TO THE
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INTRODUCTION

Since ancient times, man has dreamt of the ability of flight. He has relied upon the knowledge of one generation to another. With each step man saw success and sometimes failure. Those misfortunes came in the form of aircraft design, construction or piloting ability. However, with persistence, skill and daring, he was able to overcome adversity. As aircraft and piloting became more perfected, the utilization of aircraft as a warfighting platform, became a reality. From the observation balloons of the Union Army in the Civil War, to the military jets and helicopters of today, there has been someone at the controls. In most cases the military pilot was a commissioned officer. However, there was a select group of qualified individuals who flew along side their officer counterparts. They were known as enlisted pilots. They overcame the difficulties of politics, the rigors of flight training and the adversity of combat. This report will illustrate and detail the contributions and sacrifices of this rare breed of aviator.

The Early Years 1898 - 1914

During the Civil War, Union Army commanders utilized an effective method of battlefield planning, the manned observation balloon. This vehicle provided the reconnaissance of troop movements. The observation balloon concept was used during the Spanish - American War. On June 30, 1898, U.S. Army Sergeant William Ivy became the first enlisted (pilot) With Lt. Col. Joseph Maxfield aboard as an observer, Sgt. Ivy piloted a balloon high above Santiago, Cuba. During the flight, they confirmed

the presence of the Spanish naval fleet in Santiago Harbor. This significant event predated the 1903 powered flight of Orville and Wilbur Wright.

The Wright brothers achievement sparked the interest of U.S. Army officials, who sought the use of the airplane, as a new observation platform. The U.S. Army established the Signal Corps, and assigned that division the responsibility of developing the first military aircraft. In August 1908, the aircraft, a Wright 'C' flyer, was delivered to Fort Meyer, Virginia. This single engine bi-plane, was similar to the original 1903 Wright aircraft, but was equipped with a second seat for pilot training purposes. This aircraft was maintained by a young Private First Class, named Vernon L. Burge. By 1911, he had become a top mechanic for the fledgling aero division. Later, he was assigned to a newly created U.S. Army aviation school at Fort William McKinley, Philippine Islands, under the command of Lt. Frank Lahm. Burge's keen interest in piloting and mechanical aptitude was recognized by Lt. Lahm. He trained Burge in the principals of flying. On June 14, 1912, then Corporal Burge, qualified for an aviators certificate. When the U.S. War Department was informed of this, they scolded Lahm for training an enlisted man as an aviator. Despite the admonishment, in August 1912, Corporal Burge received his aviators certificate. Thus, becoming the first enlisted pilot of a powered aircraft. (1-1-3) Burge would later become a commissioned officer, and serve in World War I.

During this time, other enlisted men were undergoing pilot training. Among those was, Corporal Frank B. Scott. While flying in one of the early Wright 'B' flyers at College Park, Maryland, Scott's aircraft crashed and he was killed. He was the first enlisted man

to die in an aircraft accident, eventually Scott AFB, Illinois was named in his honor. This is the only USAF base named after an enlisted man.

The U.S. National Guard pilot training program was established in 1911, under the direction of Private Beckwith Havens, a former exhibition pilot for the Curtiss Airplane Company. From 1911 to 1912, Beckwith trained members of the 1st Company, Signal Corps, New York National Guard. (2:12-13)

Military flying had been established. The aircraft and pilots would be tested in battle before the end of the decade. And, the enlisted man would play a significant role.

World War I 1914 - 1918

With war clouds looming in Europe, the U.S. recognized a need for additional military pilots. Congress passed the Act of July 18, 1914(38 Stat. 514) This Bill legitimized the selection of up to twelve enlisted men at a time, to be enrolled in U.S. Army flight training classes. (9--)

The concept of warfighting enlisted pilots, was utilized by other countries at that time. They included Italy, Germany, France and Britain. However, due to the increased war effort and heavy pilot attrition, Congress passed the National Defense Act of June 3, 1916(39 Stat. 175) This allowed more enlisted men to apply for flight training.(10--)

Piloting was just one of the occupations the enlisted corps trained and fought in. Enlisted observers and gunners made significant contributions and sacrifices during the war. Among those was Sergeant First Class Fred Graveline. He served in France, with the 20th Aero Squadron, American Expeditionary Forces. In 1918, he successfully

completed 17 bombing missions, downed 2 enemy aircraft. On two occasions, while flying in the rear of his formation, he drove off superior numbers of German aircraft. For his gallantry, he received the Distinguished Service Cross.(7:119-121)

World War I served as a catalyst for the development of military aircraft. The pilots had developed as well. Honing their skills in battle prepared them for the modernization of military aircraft. The enlisted flyer was to play a challenging role in that development. Now, we will look at a time, known as the Golden Age of Flying, for enlisted pilots it was the beginning of another climb to the top.

From Peace to War Drums 1919 - 1941

After WW I, the U.S. Army Air Service was reduced from a force of 150,000 officers and enlisted men in 1918, to just 1,000 officers and 10,000 enlisted in 1920. Military funding had fallen dramatically, as the U.S. turned its attention to domestic affairs. This self-serving lifestyle was later identified as the "Roaring 20's." With the surplus of enlisted men, in comparison to the officer ranks, a bulk of the military flying was conducted by enlisted aircrews. Their duties ranged from, the establishment of air mail routes, to air cargo and medical transport flights.

The late 1920's was an exciting time to be involved in aviation. In May 1927, Charles Lindbergh crossed the Atlantic by aircraft. This event spurred aircraft designers, manufacturers and pilots to even greater achievements. The development of more radical and faster aircraft made the 1930's, "The Golden Age of Aviation." The new airplane designs were incorporated into military production requests. For example, the bi-plane

was replaced by faster single winged aircraft, and fabric covered airframes gave way to lighter aluminum skinned wings and fuselages.

As aircraft and flying became more complex, certain U.S. War Department officials became concerned with the continued utilization of enlisted pilots. In a 1940 U.S. Army report, Captain A.L. Moore stated, "In case of war, it is not desirable to use enlisted men as co-pilots, because if the officer pilot becomes a casualty, the co-pilot must fly the aircraft, and be responsible for the safe return of the plane and its crew."(6:06) The report continued, "To place enlisted pilots and officer pilots in the same organization, with similar duties, but a different rate of pay, is not conducive to a high state of morale."(6:6-7) In 1940, the monthly basic flight pay for a pilot-sergeant was \$81.00, in comparison to the 2nd Lt. flight pay of \$187.50 monthly.(6:02) As debate on those issues continued in Washington, war in Europe had escalated. Nazi Germany had invaded Poland, and U.S. isolationism was about to come to an end. In 1941, the U.S. military would be put to the test, and the enlisted pilots would answer the call.

Flying Sergeants 1941 - 1957

In August 1941, for the first time in the history of the U.S. Army Air Corps, a full class of more than 200 enlisted flying students entered training. This seemed as a reversal of the plans to scrap the enlisted pilot program. It is ironic that this group of students were scheduled to graduate on December, 7, 1941. The day Japan attacked U.S. naval forces at Pearl Harbor Hawaii. As the U.S. entered World War II, the enlisted pilots served in several flying responsibilities, at home in training aircraft and overseas, in combat.

They flew C-46 and C-47 transports over the China to Burma air route. This war theater was dangerous, because of the high mountain ranges and the potential surprise attack from Japanese fighter aircraft. Often the transports would have no fighter escort, leaving them unable to defend themselves. Many aircrews did not complete their missions. The China to Burma route was infamously known as the "Aluminum Highway."

Another battle front was the jungles of New Guinea. Flying sergeants served as liaison pilots. Utilizing small aircraft, these brave flyers rescued combat crews, strafed enemy huts and led U.S. fighter aircraft to concealed jungle targets.(5:20-22)

While the flying sergeants fought in battle overseas, a new debate erupted in Washington. This concerned the continuance of the enlisted pilot program. The high influx of qualified officer pilots prompted U.S. Army to reconsider pilot qualifications. In November 1942, Public Law 99, the law that authorized the training of staff sergeant pilots, was replaced by the Flight Officer Act of July 8, 1942-Public Law 658. With rare exceptions, those sergeant pilots produced by the program were promoted to flight officers. The remaining flying sergeants continued to serve with distinction and valor. At the end of the war, some reverted from the rank of Flight Officer to their original NCO grade, which eliminated any opportunity of military flying.

The last of the Flying Sergeants, MSGT George Holmes, who had earned his pilot wings in 1921, retired from the USAF in 1957. MSGT Holmes flew many aircraft, from bi-plane trainers to the B-17 bomber.(8:95-99) Thus, closing an era that began with the first enlisted pilot, Corporal Vernon L. Burge, and ended with the dawn of the jet fighter and bomber.

Conclusion

In this report I have illustrated the role of the enlisted flyers. From the observation balloons of the Spanish-American War, to the first flights of Corporal Vernon L. Burge. We examined the heroics of gunner/observer Sgt. 1st Class Fred Graveline in W.W.I. And, we looked at airpower development in the 1920's and 1930's. Finally, we saw the contribution, dedication and bravery of the Flying Sergeants who served in W.W.II. The enlisted pilots program was eliminated by a congressional mandate in 1942. However, the flying NCO of today's air force continue to serve with distinction, such as, the flight engineer, air refueling "Boomer" and the load master. The desire to fly continues, and in the near future the first enlisted astronauts will serve on board the Space Shuttle.

In 1911, Corporal Vernon L. Burge put his military chevrons in the clouds, today's NCO will fly even higher.

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