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## FLYING SERGEANTS: WORLD WAR II AND THEIR DEMISE

From the earliest days of military flight until the middle of World War II, Army aviation utilized enlisted men as pilots. Although limited in scope, flight training for enlisted men was a success because it provided an additional source of pilots at a critical time in Army aviation history. (9:24) The purpose of this essay is to provide a brief historical perspective on the so called "Flying Sergeants". We'll first discuss the period prior to World War II and then specifically cover the war years and legislation leading to the demise of enlisted pilots. Let's begin in the spring of 1912.

The location is Manila and the date is April 5, 1912. On this day, Corporal Vernon Lee Burge officially began his flying career and became the first enlisted pilot. He made eight short flights that day and later that summer was certified by the Federation Aeronautique Internationale. (2:2) Of further significance, his certification began the nearly three decade debate over the issue of allowing enlisted members to fly airplanes. Upon being notified of Burge's training, the War Department rebuffed by saying "It is not the policy of the War Department to train enlisted men in flying aeroplanes." (1:31)(2:3) Although against the policy of training enlisted men to fly, the practice continued and soon the first legislation addressing the issue was passed.

In his book, They Also Flew, Lee Arbon explains the congressional action, stating "...the first authority to train

enlisted pilots appeared in the Act of July 18, 1914, Section II (38 Stat. 514), and was published in War Department Bulletin 35, 1914." (2:25) This legislation allowed for the training of up to 12 enlisted pilots. Then, in 1916, the National Defense Act of June 3 granted the Army the authority to train even more enlisted members as pilots. However, few were trained and the onset of World War I saw a very limited number of enlisted pilots in the ranks. The war did bring a renewed interest in the issue of enlisted pilots.

In the flurry of activity brought by the War, many of the enlisted pilots accepted commissions, including Corporal Burge (commissioned 26 June, 1917). (2:33) This did not bring a total end to enlisted flying. For example, in August, 1917, 60 Army enlisted mechanics were sent to France to learn to fly and ferry airplanes from French plants to the Americans at the front. It was at this time that American flyers began to notice the extensive use of enlisted pilots in European Air Forces. This observation continued to fuel the debate over their use. Though largely ignored in literature, other examples of enlisted pilots can be found in military documents and government archives. The end of the War brought a huge exodus of personnel out of the Air Service leaving but a few enlisted pilots behind. One and one-half years after the signing of the Armistice, legislation again affecting the status of enlisted pilots was enacted.

The National Defense Act of 1916 was amended by the Army Reorganization Bill of 1920 which removed the provision for the

training of enlisted pilots. From this point on, flying school students would have the designation "Cadet" and be eligible for commission in the Officer Reserve Corp. In effect, an enlisted man could receive flight training, be commissioned into the Reserve Corps, discharged, and then re-enlisted. This is exactly what many did! Enlisted pilots, in limited numbers, continued to fly and then legislation in the form of the Air Corps Act of 1926 again played with their fate.

The Act provided several key changes to the Air Service. It changed its name to Air Corps, provided for a 5-year plan of expansion, and again added a provision for enlisted flyers. In his book, Aviation in the U.S. Army, author Maurer Maurer summarizes the Acts effect.

The 5-year program also envisioned more enlisted pilots. The Air Corps still wanted all pilots commissioned, but Congress insisted on saving money by using pilots who drew less pay. The 1926 act required that after July 1, 1929, not less than 20 percent of the pilots in tactical units be enlisted men [my emphasis added] unless the Secretary of War determined it impractical to secure that number. (10:204)

To meet the requirements of law, the Air Corps planned to train 225 enlisted pilots. (10:204) Even with the change in law, the number of enlisted pilots, for various reasons, did not go up but instead went down. Mauer tells us "... enlisted men on duty as airplane pilots dropped from 50 at the end of Fiscal Year 1926 to 38 in Fiscal Year 1930." (10:208) The Air Corps fell some 200 enlisted pilots short of the five year goal. (10:208) Changing world events through the 30's though, did manage to increase the number of enlisted pilots.

The early 1930's saw the Great Depression. In a job market glutted with pilots, reserve officers re-entered the Army as privates and by 1934 there were 62 enlisted pilots. (2:79) In 1935 the Army offered a limited number of slots for commissions causing more reserve officers to enlist. An all time high of 117 enlisted pilots was achieved. (2:88) As these pilots received regular commissions, the number of enlisted pilots dropped to 44 by 1937. (2:111) The decline of enlisted pilots continued. By early 1939 only 27 enlisted pilots remained, and this figure dropped to nearly zero as war began in Europe. (2:113) It appeared that the era of enlisted pilots was again about to end. World War II changed that.

World War II brought a definite need for a pool of qualified pilot candidates. Legislation again prohibited the use of enlisted men as pilots. The Aviation Cadet Bill, passed in September, 1940, did not provide the authority to train enlisted men. However, some government officials and the Air Corps recognized that enlisted men could be a potential source of pilots. This is evidenced by communications between Undersecretary of War Robert P. Patterson and Deputy Chief of Staff for Air Major General H.H. Arnold. On 27 December 1940, Mr. Patterson, in a memo to General Arnold, stated "...we should not require two years of college for the Air Corps. It seems to me that this requirement is barring a large number of capable and eligible young men from becoming pilots." (5:61) General Arnold then, in a memo to the Chief of Staff, stated "...although the utilization of enlisted pilots would upset the traditional Army Air Corps practice, such a procedure would undoubtedly tend to minimize the possibility of a shortage of pilot

candidates." (5:62) The stage was being set to put enlisted pilots in the cockpits of airplanes. But again, this was dependent on new legislation.

In February, 1941, Undersecretary Patterson again addressed the issue of requirements for pilots. In a memo to the Special Assistant to the Secretary of War, he wrote "If the Air Corps has not already done so, it seems to me that it should, without further delay, abolish the requirement of two years of college for flying cadets." (5:63) This memo provided the final stimulus leading to a change in legislation. In May, 1941, Congress passed the required legislation and on 4 June, the President signed it. The act, Public number 99, "authorized the training in grade of enlisted men of the Regular Army and of other components of the Army of the United States on active duty status. They were to be known as aviation students rather than aviation cadets." (5:66) The Air Corps "Flying Sergeants" were born.

Thanks to the new legislation, enlisted members could now fly. A 1942 text, Flight Training for the Army and Navy, outlined the entrance requirements for enlisted members. It specified that Aviation Students would be enlisted personnel to be given the rank of Staff Sergeant Pilots upon graduation. Importantly, it stated that the only minimum educational requirement was a high school diploma. (6:201) There was no lack of applicants and on August 20, 183 enlisted men entered training in Pilot Training Class 42-C. Of these, 92 eventually graduated. Throughout 1942, the program continued to grow and 2,143 pilots are known to have graduated

(some began training in '42, but graduated in '43). (7:24-25) With the program in full swing, legislation again intervened.

Although the Enlisted Pilot Program was proving successful, there were factors that shaped the future, and eventual demise, of the program. In January, 1942 action was taken that removed any educational requirements for appointment and the only mental requirement was a passing score on a newly developed Qualifying Exam. It was also found that many of the men in training were fully qualified for commissioning or, at the least, a status higher than an enlisted grade. (5:80) Lastly, there were problems encountered in the field (a Staff Sergeant pilot with a commissioned officer as the co-pilot is a classic example). These factors, and others, led to the eventual passage of the Flight Officer Act of 1942.

The Flight Officer Act ended the era of enlisted pilots. For those members not meeting commissioning requirements, the act created a new grade known as Flight Officer. J.H. MacWilliam tells us "The enlisted pilot program effectively ended with Class 42-J. All aviation students graduating after that class were directly appointed as either flight officers or second lieutenants." (8:116) Between 1942 and 1944 virtually all sergeant pilots in the Air Corps were appointed. Enlisted aviators were a dead breed.

We have seen the importance of enlisted men as aviators, especially at a critical time when a source of willing pilots was needed. I have provided a brief historical perspective by reviewing the pre World War II years and then covering World War II and the legislation that caused the demise of the "Flying Sergeants.

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