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ENLISTED HERITAGE HALL CONCENTRATED STUDY AREA PAPER
VERNON L. BURGE

by

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BACKGROUND PAPER SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY
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BACKGROUND PAPER

ON

VERNON L. BURGE

In his book "Life on the Mississippi," Mark Twain wrote: "Two things seemed pretty apparent to me. One was, that in order to be a [Mississippi River] pilot a man had got to learn more than any one man ought to be allowed to know; and the other was, that he must learn it all over again in a different way every 24 hours."

Such a description marks Vernon Lee Burge. On 16 April 1907, at the age of 18, he enlisted in the U.S. Army Signal Corps. (1:1) He was one of 39 enlisted men assigned and one of 90 enlisted men in the Aero Squadron of the Army Signal Corps at the end of 1913. (8:--) Private Burge earned \$15.00 a month for his work. (9:19) A little over five years later on 14 June 1912, Corporal Burge would become the Signal Corps (S.C.) first enlisted pilot.

Shortly after completing recruit training, Private Burge and five other enlisted men were offered the opportunity to join the newly established Aeronautical Division of the U.S. Army. Private Burge started his military career in the new division as a balloon handler. (3:78) Until February 1910, he traveled the United States as part of a military team competing in balloon races and demonstrations. His duties included setup, repair, and transportation of the dirigible. Perhaps because of his knowledge of the dirigibles or

maybe because of sure luck, Burge was transferred to Fort Sam Houston. At this assignment, he would begin the rest of a 34 year career associated with aeroplanes.

He served as an aeroplane mechanic at Fort Sam Houston. His experiences at Fort Sam Houston evoked his fascination with the heavier-than-air machines. In February 1911, the Signal Corps leased Robert F. Collier's aeroplane a Wright B model. It was a newer craft not yet flown by military officers. The aeroplane arrived at Fort Sam Houston and was assembled by Burge and his crew. For his efforts and assistance, Burge was given a ride in the Collier craft.

(1:13) It was this ride which fired the spark and generated the internal drive to become an aviator. He wanted to be one of the few men who practiced the art of flying in heavier-than-air machines. (2:5) Collier's aeroplane was returned and replaced by the S.C. aeroplane number 2. It was a Curtis IV model D "Military". Burge's team assembled the Curtis and a different Wright B aeroplane which had just arrived. While at Fort Sam Houston, Burge also became familiar with S.C. aeroplane number 3, a newer Wright B model aeroplane. (4:42) Because of his knowledge of the different models and his own skill, Burge received the Signal Corps Aviation Mechanician Rating on 18 July 1914. (4:251)

Once again fortune would fall to Burge. He was assigned to Fort McKinley in the Philippines with Private Kenneth L. Kintzel. They delivered Signal Corps aeroplane number 7, a Wright B model, to Lieutenant Frank P. Lahm. Signal Corps aeroplanes 12 and 13 both Wright C Scouts configured with pontoons, and the Burgess coast defense seaplane S.C. number 17 arrived at in the Philippines later, during their tour of duty. (4:79-81) The War

Department established Fort McKinley to provide military aviation pilot training as an alternate location to state side bases. Lahm would train Burge and Lieutenant Moss L. Love as Fort McKinley's first two students. (5:12)

Lahm used Burge's skills as a mechanic and tapped into his desire to fly. He instructed Burge on how to operate the Wright B delicate controls. When Burge had become proficient, he was designated as an assistant instructor. (1:17) As Burge continued to master the controls, Lahm afforded Burge the opportunity to fly solo and qualify for his Federations Aeronautique Internationale (F.A.I.) license. (10:--) On 14 June 1912, Lahm wrote a letter to the Secretary, Aero Club of America applying for Corporal Burge's aviation pilot license.

Enclosed I send application of Corporal Vernon L. Burge, Signal Corps, U.S. Army for aviation pilot's license... He passed the test this morning and fully complied with the requirements given on page 50 of the year book for 1912. Enclosed is the barograph record of his altitude flight. It shows an altitude of about 100 meters. The center of the machine was 13 meters from the designated point on the first landing and 9 meters on the second. He shut off engine when about 8 feet from the ground the first time, and about 20 feet in the air the second time.

Corporal Burge has been under my instruction in operating the Signal Corps Wright aeroplane for over two months and I

consider him fully capable to operate this machine. In addition, he is a skilled mechanic and capable of making any repairs on the machine. (7:--)

The Army had not prescribed a test to qualify as an aeroplane pilot. The F.A.I. regulations were adopted for all Army aviators as the standard. The Aero Club of America, the only representative organization for the F.A.I., issued all aeroplane pilot certificates. (3:206) Burge received certificate NO. 154 making him the first enlisted pilot in the Army. The Aero Club of America had issued only 21 other certificates to Army officers prior to Burge's. (6:-) It seems only fitting that the first Army officer recipient, F.A.I. certificate NO. 2 issued in October 1909, was Lieutenant Lahm-- the same person who trained and observed Burge's flights.

To qualify, Burge had to pass the Requirements for Aviation Pilot Certificate set forth in 1910. He had to fly three flights of 5 kilometers each in a closed circuit without coming to the ground. On completion, the engine must be stopped and landing effected within 150 yards of a given previously designated spot. (4:226)

Had communications from the War Department to Fort McKinley been faster, Burge may not have had a chance to become an aviator. Lahm received the following rebuke in a War Department letter.

It is not the policy of the War Department to train enlisted men in flying aeroplanes.

Their military training is such that very few enlisted men

are qualified to observe military operations and render accurate and intelligent reports of what they see from an aeroplane.

Another objection is that very few enlisted men have sufficient knowledge of mechanics to appreciate the stress to which an aeroplane is subjected during certain maneuvers. (1:3)

Corporal Vernon L. Burge was one of the few enlisted men who helped establish the value and utility of aeroplane flight in the early days of the U.S. Army Signal Corps. His drive, and quest to master the repair of aeroplanes fostered his desire to become an aviator. As a young man in his early 20s and with an opportunity, he seized the moment and became the Army's first enlisted aviator.

Former Secretary of Education Shirley Hufstedler sums up this type of spirit, when she said: "When I was very young, the things I wanted to do were not permitted by social dictates. I wanted to do a lot of things that girls weren't supposed to do. So I had to figure out ways to do what I wanted to do... If you think of what you want and examine the possibilities, you can usually figure out a way to accomplish it." Vernon L. Burge, a young Corporal in the U.S. Army Signal Corps, saw the future of flight, what it held for himself and the enlisted men and women who followed.

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