



Enlisted Pilots

Soaring high from the lower ranks

by Tech. Sgt. Annie Proctor
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In October 1942, a B-26 with an all-enlisted crew was returning from Mobile, Ala., to Fort Myers, Fla. The pilot, Staff Sgt. Luther "Wes" Feagin -- one of the first qualified B-26 pilots -- filled out his clearance papers and handed them to the major in base operations.

"Where's the pilot?" the major asked.

Feagin pointed to his shiny new wings indicating he was the pilot.

"Who's flying the B-26?" the major asked, irritation creeping into his voice.

"I am," Feagin said.

The major, still not convinced, asked, "OK, where's the officer in charge of the crew?"

Feagin replied he didn't have one, but that his radio man was a technical sergeant and perhaps the major preferred to talk to him.

The major left and returned with a colonel, who walked up to Feagin, put his arm around the sergeant's shoulder and said, "Well, you brought that B-26 in here, and there's nothing I can do to keep you from taking it out. But, son, I don't think you should be flying that airplane!"

After takeoff, Feagin wasn't sure if the B-26's landing gear had retracted and requested to fly by the tower for a gear check. Getting the go-ahead, Feagin flew down the ramp at what some might consider a rather low altitude -- about two feet.

This incident is just one of many similar episodes enlisted pilots experienced. They were treated differently and paid differently, but trained wingtip to wingtip with commissioned pilots and performed identical duties.

Between 1912 and 1942, records indicate nearly 3,000 enlisted men of the Signal Corps, Air Service and the Army Air Forces became sergeant pilots. Between 1919 and 1973, about 3,700 served with the Navy, Marines and Coast Guard. In all, sergeant pilots totaled a little more than 1 percent of all trained military pilots.

Training enlisted men as pilots was, indeed, a controversial concept. While it was necessary to meet the personnel needs of a rapidly expanding aviation field, it was questionable whether or not they'd make good leaders and commissioned officers. "After all," according to one opinion, "they lacked certain educational and cultural requirements."

But the need for increased manpower prevailed, as evidenced by the Air Corps Act of 1926 and Public Law 99, enacted June 3, 1941. Both pieces of legislation authorized the training of enlisted pilots.

The main differences between enlisted and commissioned pilot training at the time was age and education. Enlisted aviation students had to be 18 to 22 years old, while commissioned cadets were 20 to 27 years old. Enlisted men had to graduate from an accredited high school, rank in the upper half of their classes and have one-and-a-half math credits. Basic college requirements were waived.

Sergeant pilots were intended to fill the essential and unglamorous needs of military aviation. They were to serve as utility pilots, hauling cargo and people, or as instructors.

Instead, they played vital roles in pioneering the development of both military and civilian aviation. Indeed, many of the aircraft flown in the Allied invasion of North Africa on Nov. 9, 1942, were piloted by enlisted men.

Although they began flying as enlisted pilots, eventually all were commissioned or became flight officers, precursor to warrant officers. Flight officer ranks were created to compensate the sergeant pilots, putting them on an even plane with commissioned pilots.

While most enlisted pilots were promoted to flight officer or second lieutenant by May 1943, orders didn't always catch up to those in the field. Subsequently, sergeant pilot Dick Engle was listed on the squadron books as a staff sergeant when his plane crashed during a transport mission over the "Hump" in April 1943.

Some opted to stay in for a career, while others left for opportunities in civilian aviation. Of those who left, some were recalled to active duty to fly support missions during the Berlin Airlift and Korean War. More than 155 were killed in action, 17 became fighter aces and 11 reached general officer ranks.

However, few people know of their contributions to aviation. But thanks to Lee Arbon, himself a former enlisted pilot, that's slowly changing. In his book "They Also Flew," he fills a huge gap in Air Force history.

For example, Cpl. Vernon Burge became the first enlisted pilot in 1912 while stationed in the

Philippines. He was a member of one of the first military-powered dirigible crews and a member of the "Dusseldorf" balloon crew that participated in the 1908 International Balloon Race in St. Louis.

And then there are the men who taught Charles Lindbergh to fly. Ira Biffle, an enlisted pilot during World War I, taught Lindbergh the basics, while Master Sgt. Bill Winston helped hone the flying skills Lindbergh needed to complete his historic solo flight across the Atlantic.

Others left their aerial marks as well.

William C. Ocker, an enlisted pilot in World War I, was so considered the "father of blind flying" that the instrument training center at Randolph Air Force Base, Texas, was dedicated in his name in 1984.

Walter Beech, co-founder with his wife of Beech Aircraft Corp., served as a sergeant pilot in 1919 until his discharge.

Floyd Bennett, a former enlisted naval pilot, co-piloted the tri-motor Fokker "Josephine Ford" with Adm. Richard E. Byrd during his 1925-26 arctic expedition. Both received the Medal of Honor for their exploits.

Maj. Gen. Claire Chennault's aerobatics team -- called "Three Men on a Flying Trapeze" -- which predated today's Air Force "Thunderbirds" air demonstration squadron, consisted of sergeant pilots William McDonald, John Williamson and Ray Clifton.

Throughout World War II, enlisted pilots flew fighters, transports, medium bombers, and medical evacuation and photo reconnaissance aircraft into combat.

By the early '40s, all five troop carrier groups in the Mediterranean were commanded by former sergeant pilots.

Eventually, most enlisted pilots were assigned to transport operations, becoming the human airframe of the forming troop carrier commands and air cargo divisions of the Army Air Forces we now know as the Air Force's Air Mobility Command. They hauled anything and everything from anywhere in the world, pioneering routes and navigation channels.

In peacetime, sergeant pilots soared through the ranks, too. Maj. Gen. Charles Bennett, who served as Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower's personal pilot, began his career as an enlisted pilot.

Maurice Beach -- who retired as a major general -- spent most of his 26-year Air Force career in military airlift operations, later becoming commander of the 10th Transport Group and the 53rd Troop Carrier Wing. He made crucial airdrops during World War II in Europe; afterward, he played a key role in the Berlin Airlift.

Louis H. Carrington and his crew won the Mackay trophy in 1952 for the first nonstop transpacific flight of an RB-45 multi-engine jet bomber with two air refuelings.

Carroll Shelby left the Air Force and the fast lane of flying and became a world-class race car driver and designer.

And Bob Hoover -- a world-class test pilot, aerial demonstration guru and stunt pilot in several top-rated movies -- began his flying career following training at Columbus, Ohio.

The story of enlisted pilots is long and legendary. And although they faced obstacles due to their noncommissioned status, like their commissioned counterparts, they were heroes and leaders who dreamed, soared, fought and died for America.

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