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STUDENT PAPERS

FILE TITLE: Background Paper on Enlisted Pilots Program

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BACKGROUND PAPER
ON
ENLISTED PILOTS PROGRAM

Are you one of many who thinks only commissioned officers made their mark in aviation history as Air Corps pilots? This paper will give you an understanding of a program, known as the Enlisted Pilots Program that existed in the early 1940's and according to Harry O. Mamaux III's Air Command and Staff College Student Report No. 84-1655, produced nearly 2600 enlisted pilots (5:24). It should also give you hope in the event that history repeats itself and enlisted personnel are called upon again as pilots. This paper will first explore the circumstances and legislation, starting in early 1939 that led to the need for and use of enlisted men as pilots. Second, it will cover the Act in 1941 that authorized the training of enlisted men of the Regular Army as "Aviation Students" and the requirements that applied to them. Finally, it will detail the problems, the rationale, and the Act in 1942 that brought this otherwise successful program to an early end.

To begin with, there were many reasons that justified the need for enlisted men to be used as pilots. According to *Legislation Relating to the AAF Personnel Program 1939-1945*, year after year the War Department had urged an increase in the personnel of the Army, including the Air Corps, but it wasn't until the ominous days following the Munich Conference and the events taking place in Germany that the American people awoke to a realization of the nations weakness in defense. On 12 January 1939, President Roosevelt submitted plans to Congress and urged the authorization of a defense system which would provide protection well beyond the confines of the United States and increase the size of the Army Air Corps (6:3).

Following the President's message of 12 January 1939, Congress authorized the Army Air Corps expansion. Prior to the convening date of the 76th Congress, the War Department had been called upon for a program which would reorient the defense plans of the nation along hemispheric rather than purely national lines. In order to man the 3,032 additional planes for which it was asking, the War Department estimated that the number of Air Corps officers should

be increased to 3,203, an increase of 1,111 over the existing legislation limits (6:4). On 7 February 1939, H.R. 3791 was introduced with provisions for the increases needed in personnel. H.R. 3791 passed the House on 15 February 1939 with no opposition or changes to the personnel expansion provisions. The Senate made only one change concerning personnel expansion prior to its passage on 7 March 1939. H.R. 3791 became *Public Law No 18* on 3 April 1939 (6:7-10).

According to *Public Law No. 18*, this was an act to provide more effectively for the national defense by carrying out the recommendations of the President in his message of January 12, 1939, to the Congress. It provided "that immediately upon the effective date of this Act, the President is authorized to commission not to exceed three hundred second lieutenants in the Air Corps of the Regular Army, from among Reserve officers and flying cadets who have qualified for such appointment". On top of the 3203 officers requested, the basic allotment of 21,000 enlisted men was increased to 45,000 (1:555,558,559). So, with the enactment of this law, the most important single piece of legislation authorizing the expansion of Air Corps personnel went into effect. Though within a few months, the authorizations proved to be inadequate and further legislation became necessary. Following the passage of H.R. 3791, the Air Corps turned its attention to developing a training program that would provide the personnel necessary for its expansion plans (6:10).

As the annual objectives for pilot training were increased from 7,000 to 12,000 during 1940 and plans were laid for a 30,000 pilot training program in 1941, it became evident that the securing of the required number of pilots would necessitate new sources of recruits (6:11). According to Mamaux's report, up until this time, to be eligible for pilot training, two years of college was required. A serious conflict arose between meeting the goals of the pilot expansion program and finding college educated individuals. This was especially clear following the depression years when college enrollment had dropped drastically (5:4).

The need for training of enlisted men as pilots became gravely apparent in December 1940 as there was a growing critical shortage of pilot training applicants who could meet the two year educational requirements. The *Legislation Relating to the AAF Training Program 1939-1945* stated that a newspaper dispatch on 15 December 1940 cited the War Department's announcement that the Air Corps was short of pilot students and that applicants for training had

fallen far below the minimum set for manning new planes. It stated that it might be necessary to lower the educational standards in order to accelerate the personnel expansion program to keep step with the pilot objectives (7:58). This was what turned the focus to enlisted men.

For several months the Air Corps had been considering and pushing legislation to authorize training enlisted men as noncommissioned pilots. Lowering the educational requirements would make using enlisted men as pilots possible. In a Memorandum to General Arnold on 27 December 1940, Under Secretary of War Robert P. Patterson said: "I submit that the time has come when 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." General Arnold advised Patterson that a great deal of study had already been done on this matter. He explained that the prevailing high educational standards had been retained because graduated pilots were being commissioned upon completion of their courses. If a grade of noncommissioned officer pilot was created, however, the Air Corps would be enabled to accept candidates with lower educational standards. He stated that he would "have this matter expedited as it not only would be a good thing for the Air Corps but is a necessary step. In a memo to the Chief of Staff, General Arnold pointed out that 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 applicants (7:61-62).

However, legislation as it stood would not provide authority for the training of enlisted men in grade unless amended so as specifically to authorize such action. Consequently, it was recommended that the Secretary of War direct the initiation of legislation to this end (7:62-63). On 22 April 1941, soon after General Arnold's opinion of urgency of the measure had been communicated, Senator Robert R. Reynolds of North Carolina introduced S. 1371, a bill to authorize the training of Army enlisted men as aviation students. The bill was passed by the Senate on 15 May 1941 and four days later was referred to the House Committee on Military Affairs. The House, without amendment or discussion, passed the bill on 21 May and by 4 June 1941 it had been signed by the President (7:65-66).

This Act, *Public Law 99, the "Aviation Students Act,"* approved 3 June 1941, authorized the training of enlisted men of the Regular Army as "Aviation Students". It also provided that they would be trained and instructed as aviation students, in their respective enlisted grades (2:241).

At the time of enactment, the contemplated requirements for acceptance as an aviation student were stated in the *Legislation Relating to the AAF Training Program 1939-1945*. The applicant must be unmarried, of good character, and between 18 and 22 years of age; that he be a graduate of an accredited high school, rank in the upper half of the class, and have a minimum of one and one-half mathematics credits; that he meet the Army physical requirements for flyers; and that he pass the Army General Classification Test with a score of 130 or higher (7:66-67).

Shortly after enactment of *Public Law 99*, on 1 August 1941 AR 615-150 was issued. According to *Legislation Relating to the AAF Training Program*, this regulation set forth the requirements and conditions of appointment for training enlisted men as pilots. It stipulated that upon successful completion of the training the student would receive the rating of pilot and a warrant as Staff Sergeant Pilot, Air Corps, without regard to the grade in which he received his training. Now with all the requirements laid out, the enlisted men were on their way to realizing dreams of being pilots. The program of training enlisted men started right away (7:67).

For the most part, according to Mamaux's report the Enlisted Pilot Training Program appeared to be well administered by the Army. It provided a new source of qualified candidates highly motivated in their desire to fly. It was successful with the low elimination rate and provided the Army with new combat pilots. It had provided the additional pilots the Army needed at the beginning of WW II. The formal Enlisted Pilots Program was, however, not without problems (5:14).

The training of enlisted men as pilots had always been controversial. From the outset of enlisted pilot training as far back as 1912, Army thinking had been generally negative. Even with Congressional approval and implementation in 1941, the program remained limited in scope and the enlisted pilot remained an oddity. The inconsistency of rank and duties was constantly a problem as people could not equate officer type duties with the enlisted rank. Enlisted rank with pilot duty inconsistency grew as the Army system tried to decide whether the enlisted pilots should be dealt with as officers or enlisted men. Differences continued to appear and the most obvious was the disparity of pay for the same work. Many Staff Sergeant pilots flew fighter formations along with 2nd Lieutenants or more senior officers and in some cases flew lead over officers. The Army had the most difficulty in dealing with this, but for the pilots themselves, this

posed no problem. It seemed that the professionalism as a pilot transcended the rank structure (5:14-15).

Promotion opportunities also differed. Most Staff Sergeant pilots were not promoted in NCO grades while officers progression in war time was rather rapid. As rank and pay were a problem so too became the problem of command (5:15,25).

The pilots viewed flying hours or expertise as the most important factor for command, but an enlisted pilot did not fit the Army's structure. When the United States entered WW II, the direction of the program was drastically altered. With this change, the problems of command increased either with enlisted fighter pilots and their position in formation or with others as pilot or copilot in a crew that outranked them. Many became permanent copilots on multi-engined cargo planes or bombers. Others were not made flight leaders in fighter groups due to rank. Thus, the problem of command was to become the fatal blow to the program (5:16,25-26).

Even from the inception of the Aviation Student Program, simultaneous actions were underway to find a more palatable solution. The Air Corps was confronted with the problem of how to deal with the graduates among enlisted men who were good officer material and those graduates among the cadets who, because of lowered requirements, did not measure up to the desired qualifications for commissioned officers. The solution to the problem appeared to be the creation of a new grade (6:42).

On 16 January 1942 in a memorandum for the Chief of Air Staff, the Assistant Chief of Air Staff called attention to an enclosed draft of a bill creating the new grade of Flight Officer with the status of Warrant Officer, junior grade. The bill provided for promotion by selection where deemed advisable and amended the Aviation Cadet Act in order to allow the graduates of the Air Corps training centers either to be commissioned Second Lieutenants or appointed Flight Officers. General Arnold authorized the Directorate of Legislative Planning to prepare a draft of a bill to create the new grade (6:44).

The bill was introduced into the House as H.R. 7129 and into the Senate as S. 2553 on 25 May 1942. Both H.R. 7129 and S. 2553 were reported without amendments and with recommendations that they be passed. S. 2553 passed the Senate on 15 June 1942 and was approved by the House of Representatives on 2 July 1942. Six days later it was signed by the President and became *Public Law No 658*. This Act created the title of "Flight Officer" in the

Army Air Forces. It stated that a Flight Officer shall have the rank, pay, and allowances, provided for a Warrant Officer, junior grade, and shall take rank as of the date of appointment (3:649).

With the passage of the Flight Officer Act, The Enlisted Pilots Program drew to an end and created another unknown but more manageable situation. Enlisted men were still being accepted for pilot training but no longer trained in grade. They were changed to "Cadet" status. The Army had been unable to incorporate enlisted pilots into the system. While the input remained the same, the output was not enlisted, nor was it an officer. The problem had been given a temporary solution. The Enlisted Pilot Program was short lived, but had been a successful interim step (5:23).

Looking back at what was covered, the Enlisted Pilots Program was a necessary step in our aviation history due to a critical shortage of pilot training applicants who could meet the two years of college requirement. Next, the "Aviation Student Act", *Public Law 99* was passed, authorizing the training of enlisted men of the Regular Army as aviation students with the requirements that the applicants be unmarried, of good character, and between 18 and 22 years of age. Last, the end of the program came early because of the disparity of pay for the same work between officers and enlisted pilots. Although the program did not last it was a success because it turned out over 2580 enlisted pilots during the period August 1941 - November 1942, a time that was critical in our aviation history. These enlisted pilots were better adapted to military life and more disciplined than their civilian counterparts and dispelled the myth that a higher educational level was needed to have flying ability (5:24). The achievements and accomplishments of the men who became enlisted pilots will never be forgotten because they opened the door and showed where we can improve the program should enlisted personnel ever be needed again to pilot Air Force planes. Chief Master Sergeant Wayne L. Fisk, Washington D.C. was Quoted in Arbon Lee's book *They Also Flew*: These pilots... "if compared to precious stones, would be like jewels in a crown. Among the shiniest of the jewels in the crown of US aviation achievements is that of the sergeant pilots." (4:xi)

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