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A STUDY ON ENLISTED PILOTS

by SMSgt Johnny A. Genwright

The enlisted pilot program history is very important, but fragmented. For a program of this significance, I would have imagined the historical value would be extremely rewarding. I conducted research on this interesting topic in order to find out, who were the enlisted pilots, what exactly did they go through to become pilots, and what are they doing now. My purpose is to pull together, and understand some of the details of this unique program. This program was critical during World War II. Being an enlisted pilot during this time was beneficial to both the individual and the country.

Who were the enlisted pilots? During the time, these individuals were enlisted Army sergeants with a true value of flying. They were also soldiers before, during, and after their pilot experiences. The U.S, prior to World War II, did not have enough commissioned pilots to man the aircraft generated for entry into the war. These valiant noncommissioned officers were critical during the build up, prior to the war. In August of 1907, the War Department authorized the creation of a formal Aeronautical Division, composed of one officer and two enlisted men. These three men were to have control of all matters pertaining to military ballooning, air machines and kindred subjects. Four years after this beginning, Corporal Vernon Burge received orders to a newly created aviation school at Fort William McKinley as an airplane mechanic and balloon handler. In the spring of the following year, he became one the first student pilots to satisfied the requirements for an aviator's certificate. He was first, of over 3000 enlisted men to earn their wings within the 30 years that followed. In July 1914, Congress created the Aviation

Section of the Signal Corps and provided that twelve enlisted men at a time be instructed in the art of flying. These initial twelve men needed to meet only mechanical requirements to fly.

Training requirements changed somewhat in preparation for entering the second world war. According to the War Department circular 35-7, dated 2 Jun 41, to become an enlisted pilot during the initial years, there were a few minimum requirements that must be met.

Education consisted of at least eight years grammar school with a proficiency in arithmetic and must be able to handle without further instruction, problems in fractions, decimals, ratio and square root. They must possess a satisfactory degree of mental alertness and aptitude. Must be citizens of the United States of unquestionable loyalty with at least one year in the Army. (4:2-3)

There was one other requirement all 3000 men possessed, a true love of flying. According to an Oral Interview with Lt Col Bernard Makowski, enlisted pilots conducted their pre-flight training here at Maxwell AFB, AL along with the cadets. There were some confusion as to whether the enlisted pilots were under the same rules as the cadets. The enlisted pilots quickly clarified there position, which was a definite no. After initial training, they would later be separated from the cadets and sent to Georgia for flight training using the BT-13s. (2:3-5) The enlisted pilots out ranked the cadets because the pilots were on active duty, the cadets were not. According to a memorandum from the Office of the Chief of the Air Corps dated 15 Feb 1940, the substitution of enlisted pilots for officer-pilots in the Air Corps would effect money saving if only the difference in their respective rates of pay and allowances are considered. (5:2) Utilizing enlisted pilots was a very big economical advantage for the War Department. The training was not as extensive as cadets, since the enlisted pilots were military oriented and already on active duty. Also, they were not paid as much as a commissioned pilot even though they performed just as well or better.

Some of the problems enlisted pilots had with their commissioned counterparts was social status or fraternization. According to the previously mentioned memorandum from the Office of the Chief of the Air Corps, to place enlisted pilots and officers in the same organization with similar flying duties is not conducive to a high state of morale. It went on to say, combat pilots are, and always should be, on an equal professional and social basis in order to insure that lessons may be learned from free and unrestricted analyses of technique and tactics. (5:5) As you can tell the two levels of pilots caused serious social problems within the ranks. Even in England where there also were enlisted pilots, the problem was even greater because of their caste system. The English, in particular, found it hard to accept anyone other than an officer and a gentleman can fly. The enlisted pilots were severely ostracized by their fellow countrymen during this massive buildup of men and equipment to support the war.

The enlisted pilots were pressed into service because of the shortage of officers prior to the war. The Army Corps had a two year requirement on education to become a pilot. This would get you into the cadet program with training and an eventual commission. These were two years the Army Corps did not have. In an Oral History Interview with SMSgt Walter F. Mayer, when asked why do you think they started the enlisted pilot program. He responded by stating, "I think they just needed a lot of fighter pilots. They had to get rid of that 2-year requirement. There weren't that many people, back during those days, who had that much education to begin with, except people who were wealthy." He went on to say, "If your IQ was high enough, you had no problem." (3:12) The Army needed pilots in a hurry and post depression era left very few educationally qualified young men to suffice during the war. They dropped the educational requirement and received a large response from the enlisted force to join the pilot program. Some of these enlisted pilots went on to become commissioned officers,

others retained their enlisted status. From the enlisted pilots program came some unique accomplishments, 17 went on to become fighter aces. There was also, 11 who went on to become general officers. A well know general who started out as an enlisted pilot was Brigadier Chuck Yeager, who was also presented a special Congressional Medal of Honor by President Gerald Ford during peacetime. The common bond of commissioned officers and enlisted or noncommissioned officers at this time was the fact, they all wanted to fly.

These enlisted pilots flew a variety of aircraft available during this time. They even flew fighter aircraft in combat situations. According to a Hq 69th Composite Wing letter regarding a Requested Story on the 19th Liaison Squadron, an adaptation for army use of the Stinson-105, the L-5 also called the Sentinel and very often miscalled a Cub. Most of its pilots were enlisted men. The Japanese feared the L-5 because it was an intelligence aircraft. The Japanese would not fire artillery while L-5s were in the air for fear of disclosing their positions. The L-5s were sent up in relays and kept flying, the Japanese guns were silenced, and the Chinese were able to liquidated there strong points. The L-5s flown by enlisted pilots were accredited for the battle. (1:3) The feats of this squadron were well known by Japanese strategists. This is only one example of the enlisted pilots contributions to the war efforts. The men whom the Army had intended to use only in a backup role were flying every kind of mission, in every theater until the end of the war. Afterwards, the U.S. Air Force was established and had different rules.

In 1948 the newly created United States Air Force came on line with a completely new way of business. Air Force leaders ordered all enlisted pilots, except those who had received pilot ratings before 7 December 1941, to stop flying by the end of the year. The enlisted pilots who did not like this arrangement could apply for immediate discharge. During this time, there were about 140 enlisted pilots still active in this newly developed U.S. Air Force. The new Air

Force did not express any interest in documenting the contributions of the enlisted pilots. It was later willing to acknowledge enlisted men had flown planes such as gliders or liaison planes during the war, but not bombers or any real strategic type aircraft. In our bid to establish ourselves as a new branch of service, we came just short of, discounting the history of the enlisted pilots in order to build a new image.

In an effort to document the history of the enlisted pilot program, previous enlisted pilots pulled together to collect names, class rosters and personal histories. They even were able to publish a newsletter called "Sergeant Pilots". From the dedication line of the Sergeant Pilots' newsletter, "The Sergeant Pilots' newsletter was dedicated to the promotion of the interests of individuals who are rated as pilots or military aviators who served for any period of time in the U.S. Army or U.S. Air Force as enlisted pilots of powered aircraft other than liaison type to their promotion as an association, to their reunions, and to their rightful recognition in the history of aviation." A previous enlisted pilot, Lee Arbon authored the book, "They Also Flew" that documented a number of the sacrifices and contributions of pilots ranging from Corporal Vernon Burge, the first "Enlisted Pilot", to Master Sergeant George Holmes, who retired in 1957 as the last "Enlisted Pilot".

This mini-research paper has been a real pleasure to compose. I truly wish the time and resources were available for the continued documentation of this worthwhile program. I explored some of the facts of who were the enlisted pilots and what it took to become a pilot during this wartime era. The social problems they had to endure while serving their country and being ostracized by their countrymen because of a few years of education that separated them. These enlisted pilots were required to fly almost every type of aircraft, in almost every type of situation. They flew, not because they were required, but because this is what they joined to do.

These men were soldiers first, who had true ambitions to fly. The war gave them that opportunity and they served well. Our then newly established branch of service, the U.S. Air Force, completely and purposely overlooked the enlisted pilots' contributions to World War II and numerous peacetime efforts in a quest to establish a "new image." When MSgt George Holmes, the last active duty enlisted pilot finally retired in 1957, it marked a milestone in U.S. Air Force history and closed a chapter. We as enlisted members should ensure the complete history is well documented and preserved not only for us, but for those enlisted that follow us.

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