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BACKGROUND PAPER  
ON  
CREATION OF THE FLIGHT OFFICER GRADE

1. Third Lieutenant is not a common military term and is not well known. There was a time in the US military where enlisted pilots received their “blue pickle” insignia upon graduation and were to be treated as “third lieutenants”. Among the first of these was the aviation pioneer Chuck Yeager. This background paper describes the events leading up to the creation of the Flight Officer (F/O) grade. This act was part of a series of events allowing many enlisted members of the Army Air Force to become pilots, bombardiers, and navigators. The huge influx of enlisted members as aviation students highlighted the need for a grade that would allow them the authority and respect of a commissioned officer without the academic background normally required for commissioning. The distinct contribution of enlisted members as flight officers during the war is an often overlooked part of our enlisted history.

2. We’ll take a look at the Aviation Cadet program used by the Army Air Corps, the requirements of a nation at war, and the effect on the program. The expanding need for pilots eventually led to the Aviation Student Act allowing a greater number of candidates to apply for flight training. This relaxation of requirements brought a large number of active duty enlisted into flight training. It was then apparent that the Staff Sergeant Pilot program would not allow for the status, authority, and benefits required for the expanded force. The Army currently used enlisted pilots as a pool of general purpose pilots performing such duties such as transport pilot and flight instructor allowing the officers to go on to combat flying(5:100). The Flight Officer Act was passed by Congress to allow the Army Air Force more flexibility in commissioning and to give the aviation student graduates the opportunity to remain as pilots or apply for commissioning and further career advancement as officers. The need for the flight officer grade was a result of a change in

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requirements, first we'll look at the requirements before the war.

3. The primary way the Army Air Force in 1940 obtained candidates for aircrew training was through the aviation cadet program. This program drew recruits from the civilian and military sector and required the candidate to be 20 to 27 years old, have two years of college, and pass a rigorous physical. Upon graduation the aviation cadet was commissioned a second lieutenant in the Air Corps Reserve. The stringent requirements limited recruitment to college campuses and a few qualified enlisted men. This system worked until until the need for more candidates pressed the Army Air Force to reexamine the relaxing of requirements. The annual pilot training objectives increased from 7,000 to 12,000 during 1940 and plans were laid to increase that to 30,000 in 1941(2:12). The granting of waivers and the modification of the examination resulted in increasing the number of recruits but not enough to satisfy the growing need for pilots. In addition, many civilian organizations, most notably the American Legion, sponsored aviation oriented prep schools to assist candidates with their examinations(1:13). This increased the pool dramatically; there were ten times as many applicants to the exam in fiscal year 1941 as had taken it during the preceding nine years(1:16). All the recruitment effort at this time was directed to college students who were regarded as being the most desirable. Allowing Reserve and National Guard officers to train in grade like Regular Army officers brought about an increase in the pool but recruitment still did not meet demand. The Air Corps was accused by some in Congress of being "high hat" in its requirement of two years of college(1:16). The Air Corps opposed the dropping of the college requirement on the grounds that cadets were to become commissioned officers and require the educational background. The worry was that there would be a huge group of officers that did not meet prewar standards(5:100). This increasing demand led the Under Secretary of War Robert P. Patterson to write to General Arnold: "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

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number of capable and eligible young men from becoming pilots. I should be glad to have your views.”(1:18). The pressure on the Air Corps by Congress and the public was to drop the college requirement. There was great concern in the War Department that it was not desirable to lower the educational requirements. Under Secretary of War, Robert A. Lovett put it this way “It is also from this group that a large part of the Regular Air Corps officers are obtained”(8:-). During hearings on expansion of the Air Corps, Edgar B. Brown, president of the United States Government Employees, Inc. requested that an editorial from the *New York Daily News* be included. This editorial entitled “Rickenbacker Didn’t Go to College” was an example of the harsh public criticism aimed at the Air Corps against the college requirement. The writer recommended the following:

“We move that these college requirements be discarded and that our flying forces be permitted to pick their material wherever they can find good material. The object, in building up our fighting equipment, is to get planes that can fly better than anybody else’s planes, driven by pilots that can pilot and air fight better than anybody else's pilots. The possibility that we may pick up some pilots who don’t know a cosine from a dodecahedron, or the proper way for a gentleman and an officer to navigate a teacup, is of very minor importance. We bet there are a lot of taxicab drivers who could be turned into swell combat pilots.”(2:13,14)

A temporary solution was proposed to give flying training to enlisted men who did not have the college credits. This was the birth of the aviation student program.

4. The Aviation Student Act became law on 3 June 1941. The differences between an aviation cadet and an aviation student were age and education requirements as well as the rank upon graduation. The age limit was 18 - 22 for a student while a cadet’s was 20 - 27. A student had to be a graduate from an accredited high school, in the upper-half of his class, with at least one and

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one-half credits in mathematics, while the cadet still had the two year college or exam. Upon graduation the student was given the grade of sergeant pilot while the cadet graduate was commissioned a second lieutenant in the reserve(1:19). The first group of enlisted students entered training on 23 August 1941. The changing of requirements along with the draft brought a large increase in the number of candidates from the active duty Army. The Army Air Forces Historical Studies show that the numbers increased from two to ten percent in 1939 to July 1941 to 25 to 35 percent by the time America entered the war(1:20,21). The differences in status upon graduation created two classes of graduates and a corresponding difference in pay and benefits. This disparity led to the creation of the flight officer.

5. The Air Corps was facing the problem of enlisted graduates that were good officer material and those who were not. The creation of the flight officer grade would allow qualified enlisted pilots to be commissioned second lieutenants after a period of time. A study in May 1942 recommended that the policy of commissioning all aviation cadets continue and those who did not want commissioning be appointed as a non-commissioned officer. General Arnold did not act on this recommendation but authorized preparation of a bill to create a new grade(2:48). This bill was eventually introduced as H. R. 7129 in the House and S. 2553 in the Senate on 25 May 1942. This bill allowed for the creation of the flight officer grade with pay and allowances to equal that of a warrant officer. The current pay bill which was pending in the Congress brought warrant officer pay to equal that of a second lieutenant, therefore making a flight officer and second lieutenant financially equal. Rear Admiral J. H. Towers stated that the policy did not fit in with that of the Navy but it does not appear to conflict(2:47). On 8 July 1942 the President signed Senate Bill S. 2553 and it became Public Law No. 658. After passage of this bill, pilots were either commissioned as second lieutenants or were appointed flight officers. The new grade was regarded inferior to that of the second lieutenant but much better than that of staff sergeant. This

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led to a question of how these new flight officers were to be treated. Were they officers or enlisted men? What about the sergeant pilots? According to AAFR 50-7, Personnel Policies in August of 1942, flight officers were to be treated as "3rd lieutenants" and be required to comply with and be treated as commissioned officers. The sergeant pilots would progress through the grade of flight officer in the same way as the current aviation student graduates(3:-). The promotion to second lieutenant was not an automatic process. The requirements were that they have served in the grade of flight officer for a minimum of three months and demonstrate officer qualifications other than that of holding a rating(4:45). All flight officers were required to be evaluated as to their qualification to be a commissioned officer(4:Atch 3). The actions to be taken with flight officers removed or reclassified was a much stickier issue. Should they be commissioned or reclassified as enlisted members? According to the General Board, Appointments and Promotions in the European Theater of Operations, this issue was based on a "lack of moral fiber" of the individual(9:-). The individual was able to present their case to a flying board which then decided their fate. The end of the war and the beginnings of the new Air Force signaled the end of the flight officer. The shrinking military and an excess number of pilots spelled the end of a need for the flight officer grade.

6. Flight Officers were a curious breed within the Army Air Force. They were not required to perform the extra duties required of the commissioned officers and frequently flew as flight lead over commissioned officers. This apparently resulted in a few bruised egos, but for the most part, the better pilot was chosen because of ability and not rank. Many in the old Army looked down on the flight officers but the blue bars proved themselves as valuable combat pilots. As J. H. MacWilliam, a former flight officer stated in his article, *The Third Lieutenants*, published in Air Force Magazine: "The USAAF was never entirely comfortable with status of its warranted but still noncommissioned officers. Although General Arnold had said they were to be treated as officers,

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socially they fell somewhere between the enlisted and commissioned ranks”(7:102). The era of flight officer was short-lived, the law authorizing the grade was repealed in 1947.

7. The Aviation Student Act along with the Flight Officer Act gave the Army Air Force the flexibility to recruit pilot candidates from a larger pool. The lowering of the education standards let many enlisted men apply and be accepted into pilot training. This helped to alleviate the chronic shortage of pilots within the Army, but in turn, created the problem of the enlisted pilot. The problems of status and pay plagued the Staff Sergeant Pilot program since its inception. The new grade of flight officer gave the graduates pay on an equal with a lieutenant and the status of an officer. This program helped fill the wartime pilot need and gave many enlisted members the opportunity for pilot training. There were many flight officers that went on to distinguished careers after the war, one of the most notable being Chuck Yeager. The era of the flight officer is a colorful footnote in our enlisted history. The enlisted force proved able and willing to meet a nation at war’s call for combat pilots.

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