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**FILE TITLE: A History of Enlisted Pilots in the USAF**

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of 19-12  
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**A History**  
**of**  
**Enlisted Pilots**  
**in the**  
**United States Air Force**

**Master Sergeant David B. Krecklow**

**22 February 1995**

When George Holmes retired in 1957 as a Master Sergeant with thirty-nine years of service (for pay purposes), he closed out the era of enlisted pilots in the Air Force. This era began when Army Corporal Vernon L. Burge became the first enlisted flyer in the Philippines in 1914 (10:95). During this period of more than 40 years enlisted pilots made significant contributions by flying everything from airships and balloons to heavier-than-air craft, such as transports, fighters, and multi-engined bombers. Early legislation and controversy surrounded enlisted pilots, but those men who did fly, especially the enlisted pilots in the liaison squadrons of World War II, proved capable and highly qualified, bringing credit upon themselves and the entire enlisted corps.

As far back as the passage of the Air Corps Act on July 2, 1926, the composition of the tactical pilot corps could to include enlisted men at numbers "...not less than 20 per centum of the total number of pilots..." (1:2). Between 1921 and 1935, there was an average of approximately 50 enlisted pilots in the Air Corps, with a high of 85 in 1926 and a low of 27 in 1932. In 1935, the number of enlisted pilots jumped up to 117, due in part to officers in the Reserve enlisting into the regular Army to improve their chances at receiving a regular commission. In 1936, the Adjutant General issued instructions barring reservists eligible for regular commissions from enlisting in the regular Army. These instructions had a negative impact on the pool of enlisted pilots, as many of them qualified for, and received their regular commissions (8:4).

Enlisted pilots were not unique to the Army Air Corps. The U. S. Navy pool of pilots consisted of approximately thirty percent enlisted men (8:2). European countries such as France, Germany, and England employed enlisted pilots (8:3). Despite other countries and services using enlisted men to pilot aircraft, the Air Corps did not look favorably on enlisted pilots. A 1940 memo, drafted by Captain A. L. Moore for the Chief of the Air Corps, stated several reasons that an enlisted pilot corps would not be desirable. One reason was that regulations at the time limited the amount of responsibility that enlisted

men could hold. This constrained the number and types of aircraft and missions that enlisted men could fly. This study went on to say that "He (the enlisted pilot) is in constant radio communication with a ground station and can be directed at any time. He is merely an operator of an airplane and does not have to rely upon his own judgment except in the actual operation of the airplane (8:4)." Capt Moore went on to say that placing enlisted and officer pilots in the same organizations with similar duties would not be conducive to high states of morale. This is because pilot techniques and errors could not be freely critiqued on an equal basis between the two different groups of pilots (8:5). A final piece of controversy brought out by this study involved economics and abilities. Capt Moore States "With such a large investment in a pilot, it is obvious that it should be expended on the type of personnel which is going to be the greatest asset to the Government. The small amount of money saved by using an inferior product which cannot render services required of it when required to develop its maximum efficiency (8:6)."

At the time Capt Moore performed his study to backup this memo, there were 24 enlisted pilots in the Air Corps. Of these, 12 were assigned to transport squadrons located at the four Air Corps depots and were flying about 50 hours per month (8:14). The other 12 men were either assigned to base or balloon squadrons. According to Capt Moore, these men were very closely supervised in their operations (8:4). This close supervision is quite a contrast to the enlisted pilots employed in the liaison squadrons developed and used extensively during World War II.

Assigned to ground force elements, these liaison squadrons evolved to conduct limited observation, transport, and other air tasks such as courier duties, air evacuation, and search and rescue missions. The majority of pilots in liaison squadrons were enlisted men. They usually held ratings that restricted them to operation of low-powered aircraft, usually of the L-4 Grasshopper or the L-5 Sentinel types. They most typically graduated from special Training Command courses that were shorter than those for standard pilots. The Air Corps Training Command contracted civilian flying schools all over

the country to teach these courses. (1:618-619) These units, and their pilots, performed exemplarily in both the European and Pacific theaters. To illustrate the types of missions, the conditions they flew under, and the high levels of performance these pilots exhibited, I'll use excerpts from the monthly historical reports from two of the liaison squadrons, the 25th Liaison Squadron which operated in New Guinea and the Philippines, and the 19th Liaison Squadron which operated under in China.

The 25th Liaison Squadron came into existence on 15 April 1943, when its designation changed from the 25th Observation Squadron. This unit's history begins at Laurel Army Air Base, Mississippi, where it operated with 42 flying personnel, 109 ground personnel, and 30 L-5 aircraft (4:1). This unit began its journey from Laurel, Mississippi for the Southwest Pacific Area (SWPA) on 20 October 1943.

The unit departed San Francisco, California, on 1 November 1943, bound for Wellington, New Zealand, where they took on water and fuel. They departed Wellington for Sydney, Australia, where they boarded ferries and trains for Camp Doomben, Brisbane, Australia, arriving there on 24 November 1943. On 23 January 1944, the unit boarded the Liberty ship S. S. Robert Stuart, which joined a convoy headed north. The ship arrived at Lae, New Guinea 11 February 1944. The main detachment of the unit began carving a camp site out of the jungle at Nadzab. Upon the arrival of their aircraft, the 25th Liaison squadron began operations as a rescue unit, locating downed aircrews, dropping food and water, and guiding ground rescue missions to these downed airmen (4:2-3).

As of May, 1944, the 25th Liaison Squadron was the only one of its kind operating in the SWPA (5:2). Excerpts from the historical reports of this unit provides some good examples of what types of missions these enlisted pilots typically flew.

16 May 1945: Staff Sergeant J. W. Palmer, pilot, and First Lieutenant H. H. Willett, observer. This was a special photo reconnaissance mission to examine the area east from the Valencia airfield.

They observed a fuel dump, supply area, and many trails with fresh wheel tracks. The aircraft received small arms fire while over target area (7:5).

21 May 1945: S/Sgt Palmer was the pilot and 1LT H. H. Willett accompanied him as an observer. Purpose was to direct an air strike of 18 aircraft. After making initial bomb damage assessments on the first target, they launched smoke grenades on target number five. They recorded direct hits on both targets. They observed some ineffective anti-aircraft fire, but no damage to any planes. The crew took six photos of the target area (7:6).

December 1945: While operating in the Philippines, the 25th Liaison Squadron dropped two 150-bed field hospitals (including cots, tents, medical instruments and medical personnel) to the U. S. 11th Airborne Division. Japanese forces surrounded this division, which had outrun its supply lines. While this may not sound like a great feat, these drops were not made by transport aircraft, but by the diminutive L-5! The enlisted pilots of the 25th, took their slow flying aircraft into direct enemy gunfire to drop their bundles of medical supplies to the encircled division, evading the gunfire by flying below the ridge tops (6:11-15). The missions supporting the 11th Airborne Division contributed significantly to the 2505 hours flown on 1478 missions. These missions carried 2851 passengers (in a two-place airplane) along with more than 425,000 pounds of freight and mail (6:3).

William L. Worden, writing for the Saturday Evening Post, said that the men of the 25th were "...the lost men, the completely unrecorded men whose existence never was planned and whose survival is a constant surprise...". He goes on to say that they follow no rules and have no regular job. He points out that men in these liaison units are the only enlisted pilots flying as enlisted men. This is not to say that the men liked that distinction. They, for the most part, want "to be second lieutenants." Despite their desire for increased status and pay, these men performed demanding missions under poor conditions in

aircraft described as "flying bicycles" (7:2-4). I'm sure this desire for improved status and pay held true for liaison pilots in other units.

I need to emphasize at this point that the 25th Liaison Squadron was not the only unit of its type in WW II. Others, such as the 19th Liaison Squadron in India and China, performed much the same missions on a routine basis. The 19th was activated in March 1942 at Miami, Florida. They began their history as an observation unit, switching over to a fighter reconnaissance unit before they ended up as a liaison squadron. They moved to India in late 1944, and began setting up detachments to support operations in China soon after. Enlisted pilots of the 71st Liaison Squadron, led by S/Sgt Paul G. Hovey of the 19th flew 12 of the 185 horsepower L-5 Sentinels over the Burma hump, delivering planes the 19th needed to operate. (Squadron History for December, 1944)

During the Salween Campaign in December 1944, 45 L-5 Sentinels from the 19th flew more than 2500 hours in almost 1800 missions, carrying 150 tons of cargo. Not bad for an airplane with a rated payload of 460 pounds! These pilots also helped Burma Road engineers keep on schedule by ferrying them into small clearings ahead of the construction to perform surveys for new sections of the road.

The pilots of the 19th agreed that the most dangerous flying they did was in one of the world's most treacherous mountain areas, the Kaolikung Range, with peaks as high as 12,000 feet. The L-5 pilots tackled flying in this area without de-icing equipment or instruments, relying solely on skill and courage to complete their missions. General Joseph W. Stilwell and Brigadier General Frank Dorn, commanders of the forces involved in the Salween Campaign, formally recognized their accomplishments. (3:30)

Being the first at many different things was not unusual for the pilots of these liaison squadrons. In April 1944, Marine Corps Major General Rupertus, a passenger in an L-5 piloted by T/Sgt Lowell C. Schrepfer, was the first person in the SWPA to drop hand grenades on enemy formations from an airplane. Enlisted pilots from these units, such as S/Sgt. Gilbert Pease, from the 25th Liaison Squadron

(8 May 1944) and T/Sgt Vernon Decker, 19th Liaison Squadron were many times the first pilots to land on airstrips in this theater. Some of these airstrips were brand new, some of them were not airstrips at all, but were sand bars or beaches on rivers, and some were reclaimed from Japanese forces. Many times they landed on airfields that were severely cratered by bombs or had been mined by retreating enemy forces.

Enlisted pilots played significant roles throughout the early history of the Air Force. From 1914 until 1957 they flew everything from airships to bombers. Although there was some controversy surrounding their existence and use, they filled vital roles for more than 40 years, including two world wars. The most widespread use of enlisted pilots was in the liaison squadrons that were attached to ground force commanders in the European, Southwest Pacific, and China theaters during World War II. As you can tell, the enlisted pilots in the liaison outfits were hardly the kind of people that needed close supervision or their every move directed. These men performed their duties from austere fields, flying slow, flimsy, and unarmed aircraft against the Japanese forces. Their missions often required that they use their judgment, initiative, and considerable flying skills to complete their missions and survive their tours. Even though the Army did not really desire to have enlisted pilots in the ranks, those who did serve, not only in the liaison squadrons, but also the balloons, airships, and transports, did so with distinction throughout the 40 years they flew.



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