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FILE TITLE: Army Air Force Enlisted Liaison Pilots in World War II

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Army Air Force Enlisted Liaison Pilots in World War II

“It was a foggy morning when Brownie Boggs left his base at Kalaikunda, India. Although young, he was a seasoned pilot, a member of an elite unit of hand picked men who had been groomed for many months to stem the Japanese invasion of the Far East. Brownie's unit, the 2nd Air Commando Group, was the second such unit deployed to the China-Burma-India Theater...Brownie wasn't a fighter pilot flying the hot P-51 Mustangs or P-47 Thunderbolts and he wasn't a bomber pilot flying B-17 Fortresses or B-24 Liberators. He wasn't even a transport pilot flying C-47 Gooney Birds over The Hump. He wasn't even an officer. He was a noncommissioned officer, a staff sergeant, flying a liaison plane, a Stinson L-5 Sentinel. Liaison pilots, or L-pilots were the only pilots in the Army Air Forces who did not hold commissions. Their light planes were small, fabric-covered metal and wood frames. They were used for courier duty, delivery of mail and supplies to the front lines and air evacuation of wounded troops back to medical aid in the rear. It was a dangerous job because the planes flew low and slow and were unarmed” (2:-).

Brownie Boggs was only one among thousands of enlisted liaison pilots to serve during World War II. This background paper examines the history of enlisted liaison pilots in the Army Air Forces in World War II. It begins with an overview of the enlisted pilot program, and the creation of the enlisted liaison pilots. The paper looks at liaison pilot training and the various

types of missions liaison pilots carried out. Finally, it explores some of the accomplishments and exploits of enlisted liaison pilots in different theaters of operation.

The History of Enlisted Pilots

Enlisted pilots faithfully served the United States for 45 years, first in the Army Air Corps and later in the Air Force. Corporal Vernon Lee Burge became the first of thousands of enlisted Army Air Corps pilots while serving in the Philippines in April, 1912. Enlisted pilots continued to serve in the Army Air Corps (AAC) and the Army Air Force (AAF) through both World Wars. According to Lee Arbon, in his book *They Also Flew*,

“When World War II ended, two old-time sergeant pilots, George Holmes and Tom Rafferty, then still serving as officers, opted for separation. Each immediately re-enlisted in his permanent grade as master sergeant and each retained his aeronautical rating. In 1947, when the Air Force became a separate service, the two sergeants elected to “suit up” in the new Air Force blue uniform, thus becoming the first, last, and only sergeant pilots in the U.S. Air Force” (1:154).

When George Holmes retired in 1957, the Air Force enlisted pilot era ended.

Preparation for World War II

Capt. A. L. Moore studied the merits of enlisted fliers for the AAC, based on history and lessons learned from other Air Forces in 1940. The War Department recognized the need to rapidly expand the AAC, but also realized that the number of men with prior flying experience far

exceeded the number of trained pilots qualified for a commission. Public Law 99, passed on 3 June 1941, authorized the War Department to train enlisted men as aviation students and provided life insurance at government expense during the training period. The first class composed entirely of enlisted aviation students, Class 42-C, began training in August, 1941. Class 42-C used the same course of instruction as the aviation cadets, who would go on to become commissioned officers at the end of their training. According to an article in the July, 1941 Air Corps News Letter, initial assumptions were that many of the enlisted pilots would serve in the ferry service or utility roles (14:9), but those plans changed with the beginning of World War II. Between August 1941 and November 1942, the Army trained 2,574 enlisted pilots using the “standard” pilot training curriculum (1:191-192). After training, these enlisted pilots were promoted to the rank of Staff Sergeant, and dispatched to fighter, bomber, transport, and training squadrons. By May, 1943, all of these initial enlisted pilots ineligible for Regular Army commissions were either commissioned as reserve officers or promoted to the newly created ranks of Flight Officer (1:148).

Creation of the Liaison Pilot Rating

The pilot shortage continued, and the Army Air Force determined that some flying duties did not require the full spectrum of pilot training. To generate more pilots in a shorter time span, the AAF elected to train enlisted pilots to perform limited missions. These limited pilots were designated as Liaison Pilots, Service Pilots, or Glider pilots, and were assigned to units and duties around the world. While these “limited pilots” were generally considered to be “non-combat” pilots, many saw first-hand combat without the benefit of being able to shoot back.

Liaison Pilot Training

Liaison pilot training began in September, 1942, when Headquarters Army Air Forces requested that 50 liaison pilots be delivered to Fort Sill, Oklahoma. According to the History of the Army Air Force Central Flying Training Command, 1943, the new liaison pilots were selected from among glider pilots and other trainees. Liaison pilots were trained to fly low-powered aircraft at low altitudes for the purpose of controlling artillery fire, delivering messages and supplies, evacuating the wounded, and transporting observers (11:1939-1944). Small numbers of Artillery officers, junior Army Air Force officers, and aviation cadets were trained as liaison pilots, but the vast majority were enlisted men in the rank of Staff Sergeant or below. To enter the liaison pilot training program, men had to volunteer for the duty, be enlisted men in ranks of Staff Sergeant or below, have logged a minimum of 60 hours flying time prior to entry into liaison pilot training, pass a Class I or Class II physical examination, and accomplish normal flight tests required by AAF Regulation 50-7. The written exam required by AAF Regulation 50-7 was waived (11:1940-1941). Liaison pilot training, in its final version, consisted of a six-week course encompassing 40 hours of flight training, 194 hours of ground school, 12 hours of maintenance training, 36 hours of physical training, and 12 hours of medical training (11:1957-1958). According to an Air Command and Staff College Study, the Army trained 4,333 liaison pilots between September, 1942, and September, 1945 (12:18).

Following flight training, liaison pilots were either transferred to the artillery, or assigned to the Army Air Forces for duty in Observation Squadrons, Troop Carrier Squadrons (Light), or Liaison Squadrons. Ten officers and 25 enlisted liaison pilots from several Observation

Squadrons participated in Special Projects testing for the I Troop Carrier Command between 15 January and 15 March, 1943, at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. The Provisional Troop Carrier Group (Light) tested the feasibility of using light airplanes in an “air cavalry” role, identifying the advantages and liabilities of light aircraft in commando operations (4:3). These pilots established a baseline for future Liaison Squadron operations, including minimum takeoff and landing distances, radius of action, and maximum payloads—lessons that would soon be put to use with liaison squadrons in the China-Burma-India Theater and with the Air Commandos.

The AAF did away with the Observation Squadrons in 1943, redesignating several units as liaison squadrons. According to War Department Training Circular No. 46, dated 11 July, 1944, “The mission of Army Air Forces liaison squadrons is to provide theater and task force headquarters and ground force units with ground liaison, messenger and courier service in areas behind the front lines of friendly troops” (15:6). The War Department envisioned liaison squadrons performing messenger and courier service, transport and ferry service, visual reconnaissance, photographic reconnaissance, column control, passive air defense inspection, artillery adjustment, and limited air evacuation missions. To accomplish these missions, “The tables of organization and equipment called for 15 officers and 125 enlisted men with 32 liaison airplanes” (15:5). Some of the officers and up to 70 of the 125 enlisted men assigned to each liaison squadron were pilot qualified. In practice, liaison squadron missions varied widely according to theater requirements, geography, and the availability of other resources.

Liaison Pilots in Europe

Liaison operations in the European Theater consisted largely of courier, mail, cargo, and transport flights. During Battle of the Bulge (Germany Campaign), pilots assigned to the 47th Liaison Squadron distinguished themselves flying resupply and medical evacuation missions in support of the surrounded 101st Airborne Division. One enlisted Liaison pilot, MSgt Gardner C. Haynes, was credited with saving a B-17 Flying Fortress and its crew in January, 1945. MSgt Haynes was flying a Stinson L-5 Sentinel on a routine liaison mission over northern Europe, when he encountered the Flying Fortress circling over Holland. The B-17 was enroute to home base after completing a bombing mission. During the course of the mission, the B-17 pilot had been wounded and became lost. MSgt Haynes' L-5 was not equipped with a radio, so the pilots had to form together close enough to communicate via signals. The B-17 slowed down to avoid outrunning the L-5, and MSgt Haynes led the Flying Fortress to the nearest Allied airfield (9:3).

Liaison Pilots in the Southwest Pacific

Search and Rescue missions highlighted liaison operations in the Southwest Pacific. In 1944, the 25th Liaison Squadron operated first from New Guinea, and later, the Philippines. While based in New Guinea, the 25th Liaison Squadron flew 702 search missions and 253 rescue missions, accomplishing 72 rescues and 122 assists (15:12). The single most significant Search and Rescue event occurred in May 1944, when an enlisted pilot spotted and rescued a group of 27 Indian Prisoners of War (8:5). The 25th Liaison Squadron moved to the Philippines on October 22, 1944, following the U.S. invasion to liberate the country from the Japanese. In December, 1944, the 25th Liaison Squadron supplied virtually the entire 11th Airborne Division during the campaign for Leyte Island. Between 10 and 25 December, 1944, liaison pilots dropped more than

396,900 pounds of supplies and ammunition after the 11th Airborne Division outpaced its supply lines and became practically surrounded by the Japanese (15:9).

Liaison Pilots in the China-Burma-India Theater

The 71st, 19th and 5th Liaison Squadrons operated in the China-Burma-India (CBI) Theater from November 1943 to August 1945. Liaison pilots made their mark in the CBI Theater evacuating patients, usually operating from hastily prepared, makeshift airstrips. The 71st Liaison Squadron evacuated at least 1,088 patients between January 1944 and March 1945 (10:-). From August 1944 to June 1945, the 19th Liaison Squadron evacuated 1,029 patients (7:-). The 5th Liaison Squadron evacuated 2,103 patients between October 1944 and May 1945 (5:-). At the same time, these liaison squadrons also supported Allied forces flying rescue, reconnaissance, artillery adjustment, courier, mail, and cargo missions—often behind enemy lines or under enemy fire.

Technical Sergeants Stanley B. Colewell and James L. McCullough, assigned to the 71st Liaison Squadron, each earned the Air Medal for distinctive aerial accomplishments on 7 January, 1944. Sergeants Colewell and McCullough each flew “a liaison airplane over unknown and exceedingly difficult terrain, under adverse weather conditions into enemy held territory, and landed on a secret and crude airstrip previously unknown to the pilot in order to pick up and fly back ... an American officer who was in imminent danger of capture” (10:-).

Technical Sergeant William C. Coleman, assigned to the 71st Liaison Squadron, earned the Silver Star for gallantry in action as a pilot on 6 March, 1944. Sergeant Coleman flew his two-seat L-5 Sentinel and landed at an improvised landing strip in the forward area of Northern Burma

while under enemy artillery fire to evacuate wounded American soldiers. That day, Sergeant Coleman flew a total of seven such flights to the same landing strip to evacuate seven soldiers wounded by enemy action (10:-).

On 28 May, 1945, Technical Sergeant Vernon Decker piloted a liaison plane to an airfield recently evacuated by Japanese forces, landing 20 feet short of a mine which would have destroyed his aircraft. Sergeant Decker's mission was to deliver a Chinese interpreter to try to gain intelligence information about withdrawing enemy troops. The next day, Sergeant Decker took off in bad weather, found the retreating forces' line of travel, and returned to home base with the information. The intelligence and locational data Sergeant Decker provided led to successful air strikes against the retreating forces (13:1-2).

Enlisted Liaison Pilots with the Air Commandos

British ground forces formed Long-Range Penetration (LRP) groups for operations deep behind enemy lines in Burma in 1942. The first LRP operation showed promise, but identified a lack of adequate air support. British air forces were not up to the task in Southeast Asia, so the AAF agreed to supply the necessary aircraft. LRP experiences pointed out the need for close air support, accurate air drops, and light aircraft for casualty evacuation to keep morale high. The AAF unit designed to support the LRP was eventually designated the 1st Air Commando Group (ACG) and was initially separated into a Fighter Section, a Bomber Section, a Transport Section, and a Light Plane Section. The Army Air Force established the 2nd and 3rd ACGs in 1944, each composed of two fighter squadrons, three liaison squadrons, and one troop carrier squadron. The 2nd ACG deployed to Burma to support the 1st ACG, while the 3rd ACG was assigned to the

Southwest Pacific Theater. In September, 1944, the 1st ACG was reorganized to form the 5th and 6th Fighter Squadrons, the 164th, 165th, and 166th Liaison Squadrons, and the 319th Troop Carrier Squadron. The fact that liaison squadrons made up half the flying squadrons in these ACGs underscored the importance of the liaison mission,

Enlisted liaison pilots serving in the Light Plane Section and later in the liaison squadrons performed the supply, insertion, and medical evacuation missions critical to the success of the Air Commandos. The very nature of the ACGs and the LRPs they were created to support placed the liaison pilots in combat situations. TSgt Ed Hladovcak's flight on 21 April, 1944 goes a long way to illustrate the point. TSgt Hladovcak was evacuating three wounded British soldiers in an L-1 Vigilant when his plane was shot down by Japanese ground fire 60 miles behind enemy lines. Four days later, TSgt Hladovcak moved the wounded soldiers to a clearing where they could be evacuated one at a time by helicopter. TSgt Hladovcak was rescued the next day after spending five days on the ground in enemy territory (3:29-30).

A Proud Tradition

Liaison pilots make up a short, albeit important chapter in the story of enlisted aviation. Although they did not receive the same training as "regular" pilots, enlisted liaison pilots were rated pilots nonetheless. Their willingness to fly light, slow, unarmed aircraft into combat situations attests to their dedication and courage. Enlisted liaison pilots served in all theaters from 1943 to the end of World War II, earning decorations ranging from the Air Medal to the Silver Star and the Distinguished Flying Cross. Whether delivering mail, ferrying VIPs, adjusting

artillery fire, or evacuating wounded soldiers, their invaluable contributions were in the highest traditions of the military.

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