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AUTHOR: SMSgt Donald J. Bainbridge, SNCOA Student, Aug 1991

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APPROVED BY: Gary R. Akin

GARY R. AKIN, CMSgt, USAF

Director

Air Force Enlisted Heritage Research Institute

USAF SENIOR NONCOMMISSIONED OFFICER ACADEMY (AU)

ENLISTED PILOTS: THE CHINA CONNECTION

by

DONALD J. BAINBRIDGE
Senior Master Sergeant, USAF

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AIR UNIVERSITY
GUNTER AIR FORCE BASE, ALABAMA

PREFACE

The stories relayed concerning the "Fighting Tigers" and their escapades in China during 1944 and 1945 were extracted from a historical document entitled China Liaison. Each story has been paraphrased and sequenced to provide for smooth flow, and hopefully, interesting reading. To further aid the flow of the tales, all references have been purposely excluded. The entire document can be found attached to this paper, and is listed as item number two in the bibliography. Now, lean back, relax, and enjoy the reading!

THE CHINA CONNECTION

28 May 1945

The skies are clear now, except for those two P-51s that came over to make sure the Japanese had vacated the airfield. They're circling around above to provide coverage while the L-5, a tiny, single-prop liaison plane, makes a couple of passes to check the damaged runway for a decent landing spot before finally landing.

This is no typical landing by any means. First, the runway has been literally blown to pieces during the fight to reclaim this airbase. Second, the Japanese have spread barbed-wire and mines all over the place, even on the runway. Third, the heavy rains left much of what did remain of the dirt runway under water. The coup de grace, however, is the fact that this first American plane to land at reoccupied Nanning, China, is being piloted by Army TSgt Decker. That's right, an enlisted pilot was the first American to set foot on this reclaimed territory. But, how he got here, and the fact that his mission is far from over is another story we'll look at later.

Before going any further, we need to go back in time and see some of the problems the enlisted man faced in trying to become a pilot. It's time now, to flashback to 1928.

September 1928 - August 1929

On 29 September 1928, Brigadier General B. D. Foulois, the Acting Chief of the Air Corps, sent a letter to the War Department Adjutant General. In this letter, he first quoted the Air Corps Act of 2 July 1926, which states, in part:

"On and after July 1, 1929, and in time of peace, not less than 20 per centum of the total number of pilots employed in tactical units of the Air Corps should be enlisted men, except when the Secretary of War shall determine that it is impracticable to secure that number of enlisted pilots."

The general went on to explain that he felt that complying with the terms of this provision would be difficult to impossible without also establishing an appropriate grade and pay status. He recommended new ranks be added above the highest enlisted pay grade and below warrant officers. This recommendation was approved by the Adjutant General, H. H. Pfeie, by endorsement to the original letter on 21 November 1928 (4:--).

The executive officer for the Chief of the Air Corps, Major L. W. McIntosh, then recommended legislative changes to the War Department Adjutant General for Congress to consider in modifying the National Defense Act of 28 November 1928. These changes would incorporate the new ranks approved by the Adjutant General and establish pay levels. The Chief of the Air Corps felt that these changes were required in order to properly expand the Corps to include enlisted pilots (7:--). However, there is no further documentation to suggest that these changes were ever incorporated.

On 29 July 1929, W. E. Gillmore, the Acting Chief of the Air Corps, asked the Adjutant General to secure a waiver to the 20% rule because the legislature had not yet authorized the reorgani-

zation of the rank and pay grades (5:--). This waiver was approved, with stipulations, by the War Department, on 16 August 1929. The stipulations were that training begin in order to avoid the same problem the next fiscal year, since the Secretary of War could not approve another waiver to the law (10:--). Obviously, Congress and the Secretary of War were unwilling to change the National Defense Act. At the same time, the Army Air Corps was not willing to train enlisted pilots. Let's go forward, once again, to see some of the contributions of the enlisted pilots in China, and some of the adversities they dealt with in getting their job done.

Early 1944

The "Flying Tigers" of the 14th Air Force have been ordered to move from India to China. This move, initially, is being accomplished by dismantling the L-5 airplanes and transporting them with large transport aircraft. However, this is time consuming and the unit feels they can fly across some of the most dangerous mountain ranges in the world. After one expeditionary flight, led by two officers, the enlisted pilots begin traversing the course by themselves.

The flight is a long one since the L-5 only cruises at about 110 miles an hour and only carries enough fuel for three hours. Even with this, though, the trip is accomplished in less time than it takes to dismantle, transport, and reconstruct the plane. However, the amount of time is not the primary concern of the pilots.

The flight path leads these brave pilots through icy atmosphere, over dense jungle terrain where a downed aircraft could never be found, and across a narrow mountain pass over 9,500 feet high. The plane is not equipped with any de-icing equipment and has only a small compass for direction finding. It is only designed to fly at maximum altitudes of 3,000 feet. But, these limitations would soon prove to be an advantage.

An excellent example of this is the story of escape by MSgt Allt and TSgt Heidelbauer. They are trapped in a gorge by six Japanese Zeroes. Using their slow speed to an advantage, the men hang behind crags and hills, and climb into the clouds, playing hide-and-seek with the Zeroes until they give up and leave.

The pilots also prove they can overcome many of the design limitations. As mentioned earlier, the plane is supposed to fly no higher than 3,000 feet. However, in the terrain of China, most bases are at elevations in excess of this. In order to get to the airstrip, altitudes of more than 10,000 feet are often reached. Another limitation which is constantly overcome is the maximum load weight of 460 pounds, including the pilot.

During the Salween Campaign in December 1944, the pilots of the L-5 far exceeded this maximum capacity by supplying over 150 tons of supplies in 1797 missions. This is an average of over 1,000 pounds per mission! The reward for these efforts are in the human factor. As one pilot is quoted as saying, "I wish you could see the faces of the men who have been hidden away in the mountains without mail or cigarettes for two or three months, when one

of our planes lands." But, the ingenuity, usefulness, and courage of the enlisted man as a pilot have been continuously questioned by officers in the Army, even as recently as February 1940.

1940 - 1943

In his 15 February 1940 paper, Capt Aubrey L. Moore, in the Chief of Air Corps office, goes to great lengths to discourage use of enlisted personnel as pilots. He points out that the Army has never reached the 20% level mandated by Congress (9:4), and goes into detail on why he feels this has happened.

He states the cost of training an enlisted pilot would be nearly \$2,000 more than that of an officer (9:2). He bases this on the fact that most enlisted personnel do not have the college education that an officer has, and therefore, the wash-out rate would be higher since the enlisted man is not as smart as the officer. Another part of this assumption is that the enlisted man will purchase his discharge after one year of a three year enlistment (9:6), requiring more enlisted men to be trained to meet the quota.

Another assumption he makes is that enlisted personnel could not display the same quality of judgment as an officer. He goes on to say that the current enlisted pilots are under strict control by operations officers. These officers tell the enlisted pilot exactly when to leave, what route to fly, and where to land. By Capt Moore's assumptions, obviously the enlisted pilot does not know how to think or plan. This thought is expanded when he says

the enlisted pilot would not be able to use good judgment or initiative during a fight or in pursuit of the enemy (9:5).

Capt Moore also felt the enlisted pilot would lose his value to the Army by age or through physical defects. His rationale is that the enlisted man could not be returned to his original job or assume any duties involving large property or money responsibility and accountability (9:5) as an officer can.

Obviously, the Army did not accept Capt Moore's proposal or rationale. On 1 July 1941, the Army announced the beginning of training for enlisted pilots (3:--). The problem, at that time, was how the enlisted pilot was to be used. If a decision had been made by the Army, they were not revealing it. This lack of guidance was to lead to misuse of enlisted pilots in 1943.

There are several documented cases of misuse of enlisted pilots in late 1943. We will look specifically at four cases beginning 1 August 1943. On this date, HQ Northwest African Air Forces reported that approximately 40 enlisted pilots were not being used in their career fields. They said these men were originally assigned to them in anticipation of the arrival of liaison aircraft. They went on to say that there was no further expectation of this type of aircraft being used in their command (1:--).

On 29 August 1943, the XII Air Force Service Command offered to transfer seven enlisted pilots to the 315th Troop Carrier Group. The 315th TCG declined this offer by endorsement on

12 September 1943. They stated that they already had twelve enlisted pilots which were not being used (8:--).

The XII Air Force Service Command notified Twelfth Air Force on 11 November 1943 that they had 17 enlisted pilots assigned who were not performing duties for which they were trained (6:--). There was no documented response from Twelfth Air Force.

Finally, the 1626th Ordnance MM Company AVN notified HQ III Air Service Command that they were using an enlisted pilot as an auto mechanic and requested reassignment of the pilot (11:--). Again, there is no documented response.

It should be clear by now that the Army was reluctant to train enlisted personnel to become pilots for a variety of reasons. They also did not appear to be concerned about assigning trained enlisted pilots to positions where they could be employed usefully. This may very well have been because the Army never did specify what duties these pilots were to perform. But, eventually, some commanders did put the enlisted pilot to use, as evidenced by the stories presented about their experiences in China. These stories also show that the enlisted pilot did prove his usefulness, ingenuity, and good judgment. Let's return to the adventures of TSgt Decker in his historic flight to Nanning.

28 May 1945

Riding with TSgt Decker is a Chinese interpreter. Their mission is to gather intelligence about the recently retreating Japanese. Through the interpreter, Sgt Decker is able to learn

the size and general capabilities of the Japanese forces by talking with the Chinese officers and men throughout the night.

The next morning, TSgt Decker continues his mission. Even though the clear skies have turned once again to rain-laden clouds, he levels off at 400 feet to track down the retreating Japanese. After finding them and determining their line of travel, Sgt Decker returns to home station and files an in-depth report. As a result of his dedication and initiative, fighters were dispatched to assault the fleeing Japanese. This enlisted pilot, by flying where combat aircraft dare not go, was the key to the overall mission success! Quite a difference from the expectations held for so long by Army officers!!

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