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Enlisted Pilots

BY BRUCE D. CALLANDER

WHEN MSgt. George Holmes finally retired, it marked a milestone in US Air Force history. Holmes, at fifty-nine, was neither the oldest nor the longest-serving master sergeant, but something more distinctive. He was the last pilot in the enlisted ranks.

Holmes left in 1957, thirty-six years after taking flight training during the 1920s. Commissioned in World War II, he rose to the rank of lieutenant colonel, but reverted to master sergeant after the war. Holmes was among a handful of nonofficer pilots who transferred into the new, postwar Air Force.

When MSgt. Tom Rafferty died in a 1950 crash, Holmes became the sole enlisted pilot on active duty. Then there were none.

In the postwar force, men such as Holmes and Rafferty were viewed as novelties. Few recalled that the Army had used enlisted pilots during the war. Fewer still were aware that, over the years, the service had produced some 3,000 of this unique breed or that they flew virtually all types of aircraft. At times, the failure to remember seemed almost deliberate. Only in recent years has



MSgt. George Holmes, the last of the "flying sergeants," stands in front of a PT-38 on Bluebonnet Hill near Mathis, Tex. He graduated from pilot training in 1921 and retired in 1957.

the remarkable story of the enlisted pilots come to light.

The Army had not been engaged in aviation very long before its first enlisted pilot arrived on the scene.

That man was Pfc. Vernon Burge. In 1910, Burge and seven fellow enlisted men accompanied the Army's single plane, a Wright biplane, and their commander, Lt. Benjamin Foulois, to Texas. After serving there two years as a mechanic for Foulois, Burge was sent to the Philippines with a new Wright Model B, the Army's seventh airplane. He reported to Lt. Frank Lahm, who was in charge of setting up a flying school.

When Lahm called for student pilots, however, only one officer volunteered. Burge, by now a corporal, applied, and Lahm gave him lessons. In June 1912, Burge received his certificate from Fédération Aéronautique Internationale. At the time, only a dozen other Army men—all officers—were similarly certified.

Burge's accomplishment, however, drew nothing but frowns from the brass. When Lahm informed Washington about it, the Chief Signal Officer of the Army declared that teaching enlisted men to fly ran contrary to War Department policy. Thus, although Burge continued to fly, he spent his next few years working mainly as an aircraft mechanic. He eventually won a commission, however, and retired in 1941 as a lieutenant colonel.

Following the Footsteps

Despite the Army edict, other enlisted men followed in Burge's footsteps. William A. Lamkey, who enlisted in the Signal Corps in 1913, had already taken flying lessons as a civilian, earning his FAI certificate in 1912. Following further flight training in San Diego, Lamkey then left Army aviation and flew missions for Pancho Villa's forces in the Mexican Revolution. He returned to flying in World War I, this time with the Navy.

Sgt. William C. Ocker also earned his pilot's certificate from a private, civilian flying school. While he was training as an Army mechanic in San Diego, Ocker moonlighted at the nearby Curtiss flying school. In payment, he got free flying lessons. Ocker later became an instructor. He was commissioned in 1917.

In July 1914, on the eve of a general war in Europe, the Army changed its mind and officially recognized enlisted pilots. An act of Congress created the Aviation Section of the Signal Corps and provided that "twelve enlisted men at a time shall, in the discretion of the officer in command of the aviation section, be instructed in the art of flying." Volunteers were to receive up to fifty percent more pay.

Though permitted to train a dozen at a time, the Army had produced only seven enlisted pilots by the end of 1914. Joining their ranks in 1915 was Cpl. Albert D. Smith, who had logged forty hours as a civilian exhibition pilot before enlisting. He was able to solo three days after reporting for duty. Though he soon left the Army, Smith returned as a captain in the war.

Enlisted pilots may have been legitimated in 1914, but getting flying time was a problem. There weren't enough planes to go around, and enlisted men rarely got a crack at them. Many of the enlisted pilots spent their time working as mechan-

ics. Ocker and Smith were exceptions. They are counted among the pilots who helped test and develop airborne radio equipment in 1916.

By that time, World War I had been raging for two years, and the neutral United States was preparing itself for possible entry. Flight training schools were set up at Chicago, Memphis, and Mineola, N. Y. Harvard, Yale, and other universities into combat. Only a handful of American pilots continued to serve in enlisted status, mostly flying as test pilots, couriers, and instructors. Among them was Sgt. Walter Beech, who later founded his world-famous aircraft company and provided thousands of trainers to the Army in World War II.

The only flying enlisted men known to have seen action in the

SSgt. Pilot Ralph Jackson of the 36th Squadron, 316th Troop Carrier Group, poses in his C-47 at Del Valle, Tex. (later home of Bergstrom AFB). Hundreds of sergeant pilots were assigned to newly created troop carrier groups in the summer of 1942. Jackson's plane and crew, together with eleven others of the 316th TCG, were destroyed by friendly fire during the Sicilian invasion.



formed flying clubs to train Army pilots. Reserve and National Guard units launched small programs. It was not an orderly buildup. Training was sporadic, subject to the whims of weather and officialdom. The status of the students was confused and changeable.

Even before the US entered the war, Americans were flying combat missions as enlisted pilots in the Lafayette Escadrille and the British Royal Flying Corps. Both outfits made use of enlisted as well as commissioned pilots. The British, in particular, found it hard to accept that anyone other than an officer and gentleman could fly. Socially, the enlisted pilots were ostracized.

The emergence of the US as a belligerent in 1917 saw many enlisted American pilots simply transfer from the foreign outfits to new American units. Most, however, were commissioned before going war did so as observer-gunners. They were pressed into service because of a shortage of officers for the task. Of these, at least five were credited with shooting down one or more enemy planes.

The postwar era saw a severe contraction of forces. The US Army Air Service, which reached a peak strength of 200,000 in 1918, was down to barely 25,000 by 1919 and to 10,000 by 1920. Aircraft inventories plummeted. Many pilots left the service to barnstorm in surplus Jennies or to enter the emerging field of commercial aviation. Some, however, reverted to enlisted status and joined the small number of enlisted men still being trained to fly.

Exciting Time for Aviation

Still, the period after World War I was an exciting time for aviation. One of the most ambitious exploits came in 1924, when four single-

engine Douglas biplanes embarked on an around-the-world flight. Eight flyers, two of them enlisted, made up the team. Sgt. Alva Harvey flew with the mission commander, Maj. Fred Martin, in the aircraft Seattle. Sgt. Henry Ogden flew with Lt. Leigh Wade in Boston.

The tiny armada took off from Seattle, hugging the western coast of Canada and the southern rim of Alaska. There, Seattle crashed in a fog, and Martin and Harvey spent ten days hiking out to an Eskimo village. The other three planes continued southwest to Japan, down the China coast, across India and the Middle East, and up into southern Europe. All the planes made it to England, but Boston later ditched and was lost in the North Atlantic. A spare plane, Boston II, was pressed into service and caught up with the other two in Newfoundland. The three reached Seattle 175 days after takeoff.

Contemporary news photos show six smiling young men receiving the nation's acclaim. Not to be seen, however, were any wearing sergeant's stripes. Harvey had been left in Alaska. Ogden was wearing an officer's uniform; at Wade's request, he had been commissioned during the flight. Harvey later received his own commission and commanded a bomber group in World War II.

Two years later, the Army Air Corps came into being. Despite improved status and a planned five-year expansion, the force remained small, its officer corps limited by the ceiling on total Army strength. To fill the gap, the Army continued to train small numbers of enlisted pilots.

The ranks of enlisted pilots swelled after the October 1929 stock-market crash, when tight budgets forced the Army to trim commissioned officers. Faced with a choice between civilian job-hunting in the Great Depression or reverting to enlisted status, some officers chose to keep flying even if it meant doing so as privates.

Two flying staff sergeants even managed to gain wide attention in the mid-1930s. Billy McDonald and J. H. Williamson flew as wingmen to Capt. Claire Chennault in an aerobatic team known as "Three Men on a Flying Trapeze." Long before any-

one ever dreamed of the Thunderbirds, the trio in their peppy little P-12s thrilled crowds and inspired a generation of youngsters to fly. The group didn't last long. Chennault retired in a few years, and McDonald and Williamson left the Army to fly in China. There, all three were reunited when Chennault formed the now-famous Flying Tigers in support of Chiang Kai-shek.

While Chennault's aerobatic team was wowing the crowds, other enlisted pilots were helping build the air transport system that would be vital in the next decade. The 10th Transport Group included some two dozen pilots in grades ranging from private to master sergeant. They flew everything from Keystone bombers to Bellanca C-27s to the first Douglas twin-engine transport planes. Within ten years, five of the enlisted pilots would be colonels commanding troop carrier groups in the Mediterranean, one would command a troop carrier group in the South Pacific, and another, former MSgt. Maurice Beach, would head the 53d Troop Carrier Wing as a brigadier general.

In the late 1930s, with war raging in China and about to commence in Europe, the United States was beginning to realize how unprepared it was for a fight. President Roosevelt ordered increases in both aircraft production and pilot training.

Rapid Expansion

The aviation cadet program expanded rapidly. To supplement this group, the Army proposed to train more enlisted pilots. The last enlisted training program had ended in 1933, however, and commanders were not eager to revive it. Noncommissioned pilots didn't fit in, they said. Neither fish nor fowl, they were not welcomed by the officers and were not happy with their lot as enlisted men. Despite such objections. Congress authorized the start of a new aviation student program in June 1941, six months before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Cadets were to be commissioned on graduation, while aviation students were to receive the newly created rank of staff sergeant pilot.

The Army did not plan to use the staff sergeant pilots in combat. The aviation student program was just one of several schemes designed to free rated officers for combat. Another was to use private flying schools and civilian instructors for the first phase of flight training. Overage commercial pilots received direct commissions and ratings as "service pilots" to instruct and fly noncombat missions. Female pilots were formed into a women's auxiliary, the WASP, or Women's Airforce Service Pilots, to ferry planes in the US.

Those were the roles envisioned for the new sergeant pilots. The Army particularly wanted to avoid putting them in the position of being in command of aircraft with officers serving as other crew members.

That was the plan as the first group of 183 men entered the aviation student program in August 1941. From the beginning, the Army wasn't sure how to treat this new breed of flyers. Aviation cadets were officer candidates; aviation students were enlisted men destined to remain enlisted men. They were given separate barracks and were socially isolated from cadets. They ate at the same mess, but not on equal terms. On graduation, sergeants generally were forbidden to exit by the same door used by cadets.

Over fifteen months, more than 2,000 staff sergeant pilots were graduated. Those assigned as flight instructors worked with commissioned officers by day but returned to enlisted barracks at night and, of course, were barred from officers' clubs. Often the sergeant pilots faced not only the elitism of rated officers but the hostility of jealous nonrated officers as well.

The situation did not last long. By early 1942, the demand for pilots had grown to the point that the Army had to lower its entrance requirements, even for cadets. Applicants needed only to be eighteen years old and possess a high school diploma. The aviation student program phased out. Graduates either received commissions or were warranted in the new grade of flight officer. In a short time, however, even the flight officer program was given up. All graduates received officer commissions.

Most graduates were officers by the time they went overseas, but not all. Some continued to fly transports in combat zones as enlisted pilots, and at least a few were shot

At Mines Field, Calif. (later Los Angeles International Airport), during the summer of 1942, pilots of the 95th Fighter Squadron, 82d Fighter Group, await a scramble for coastal patrol. Left to right: SSqt. Pilot James E. Obermiller, Capt. Robert E. Kirtley (Squadron Commander), Lt. "Gummy" Joel, SSgt. Pilots Marshal Hyde and Charles Langdon, Lt. David Stentz, and SSgt. Archie F. Mallette.



down while wearing stripes. The men whom the Army had intended to use only in a backup role were flying every kind of mission in every theater of the war, most as officers but some as sergeant pilots.

Not Enough Room

In the postwar demobilization, there was no room for the tens of thousands of officers commissioned in the war. Most simply left the service. A few reverted to the enlisted grades in hopes that they could keep flying.

In July 1948, however, the newly created United States Air Force ordered all enlisted pilots—except those who had received pilot ratings before December 7, 1941—to cease flying by year's end. Those who didn't like the deal could apply for immediate discharge. The Air Force's ranks still contained about 140 enlisted pilots. Only a few, such as George Holmes, qualified to continue flying under the dispensation granted for pilots with prewar ratings.

In 1957, the Air Force did take official note of Holmes's retirement. Even so, it expressed a general lack of interest in documenting the era and the contributions of the enlisted pilots. It was willing to acknowledge that enlisted men had flown gliders and liaison planes during the war,

but didn't appear very eager to remember that any had piloted "real" airplanes. Perhaps this was because the new Air Force was trying to build a new image. Fast, complicated jets were coming into the inventory, and the Air Force was looking for bright, highly educated officer pilots to fly them. It was not helpful to call attention to the fact that hundreds of pilots had flown proficiently without benefit of commissions.

The story of the enlisted pilots still might be buried in official archives if not for the efforts of a few World War II veterans who decided to bring it to life.

Over the years, individual pilots had kept in touch with each other. Small groups had met in reunions of wartime units, and modest attempts were made to organize alumni of specific classes. Still, there was no overall movement to tie things together. In the late 1970s, however, a small group of former sergeant pilots began to gather names and addresses of aviation students. They collected orders, class rosters, and personal histories.

One of the organizers was James H. MacWilliam of Columbus, N. C., a graduate of Class 42-G who flew with the Fifth Air Force in World War II, served with the Fifth Air Force in the Korean War, and retired in 1964 as a lieutenant colonel. By 1980, MacWilliam and his cohorts had gathered enough material to publish the first "Sergeant Pilots' Newsletter." Within a year, the newsletter grew into a slick publication, with MacWilliam serving as editor and publisher and Lee Arbon, of Johnson City, Tex., as contributing editor. Arbon, from Class 42-F, also retired as an officer. He specializes in researching the history of enlisted pilots from 1912 to 1933.

Now, even an "Army Air Corps Enlisted Pilots Association" has been established. It held its first reunion in 1982 and plans to hold another in 1990 at the Air Force Museum in Ohio. Thus is the story finally being told of all the men, from Corporal Burge through Master Sergeant Holmes, who have worn stripes and wings in service to the nation.

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