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USAF SENIOR NONCOMMISSIONED OFFICER ACADEMY (AU)

THOSE MAGNIFICANT (ENLISTED) MEN AND THEIR FLYING MACHINES

by

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HISTORICAL RESEARCH PAPER SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY
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In the August 15, 1940 issue of Air Corps News Letter Lieutenant Richard Marshall wrote, "The public knows through beautifully colored pictures and brilliantly written articles the accomplishments of (Air Corps officers)... I in no way want to detract... for all of that and more is well earned... but I would like to dedicate these few lines to those men written less of... Certainly our Air Corps can be no better than its enlisted men and its noncommissioned officers... the people of the United States should never lose sight of the fact..." (5:).

The contributions of the Enlisted Corps to military flying is legendary. Complete coverage of the subject would not require books but libraries filled with them. This paper will highlight some of those contributions as it explains some of the missions undertaken by that enlisted corps, and some of the rationale for using or not using enlisted personnel in those types of activities. Enlisted personnel have of course always been used in the maintenance of aircraft and no one doubts their value in that role, but in the many other capacities in which they have served there have always been questions and doubts. Bomber, gunner, flight engineer, navigator, radio operator, radar operator, load master, and pilot are all occupational specialities in which the enlisted corps has participated, but in which their service has been questioned and even fought over.

Piloting aircraft has always been the area of greatest controversy. It started in the Philippines in 1912 with Corporal Vernon L. Burge, an experienced and very capable aircraft maintenance man was trained as a pilot by his commander,

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Lieutenant Laham. When the commander could not find a sufficient number of commissioned officers to train as pilots, the Corporal volunteered and was accepted. (mamaux) (4:)

The successful training was communicated to Signal Corps headquarters in Washington, DC. Brigadier General James Allen, Signal Corps Commander, sent a strong reply which read in part, "It is not the policy of the War Department to train enlisted men in flying... Their military training is such that very few enlisted men are qualified to observe military operations and render accurate intelligent reports... Very few have sufficient knowledge of mechanics to appreciate the stresses to which an aeroplane is subjected..." (4:) (mamaux) Although enlisted personnel were trained and used as pilots for more than thirty years after that incident, the controversy has continued to this day.

The most publicized pilot training program took place between 1941 and 1942, but this was by no means the only enlisted pilot program. There were glider pilots, liaison pilots and some unofficial training programs as well. The Flying Sergeants were not immune from elitism, for they saw themselves in a status above the rest, and were probably justified in that attitude. Only the flying Sergeants were trained in the same program as commissioned officers. All of the others had significantly less flight training. () While not given equal recognition, those other categories of pilots, as well as the other enlisted crew members, served with honor, valor and great distinction ().

A War Department study in 1914 resulted in the issuance of a bulletin which stated that "... 12 enlisted men at a time shall,

in the discretion of the officer in command of the aviation section (of the Signal Corps), be instructed in the art of flying." (rucker ⁽⁷⁾15:2). In 1916 the National Defense Act stated, "The Secretary of War shall have the authority to cause as many enlisted men of the aviation section to be trained in the art of flying as he may deem necessary." (rucker ⁽⁷⁾15:2). While this action increased the potential number of enlisted pilots to be trained it moved the level of approval authority up the chain of command creating the possibility of delays. Only 16 enlisted pilots were trained during World War I. By 1920 there were a total of forty (mamaux:⁽⁴⁾2). Between 1920 and 1923 no additional enlisted pilots were trained, because the Army Reorganization Bill of 1920 deleted all previous provisions (rucker ⁽⁷⁾15:8). In 1925 the Report of the Presidents Aircraft Board recommended that a careful study be made of the desirability of ^{SP}increasing the use of enlisted men as pilots in the Air Corps (board). Another law implemented the boards recommendation in 1926. It stated that, "On and after 1 July 1929... Not less than 20 percent of the total number of pilots employed in tactical units of the Air Corps shall be enlisted men, except when the Secretary of War shall determine that it is impractical to secure that number of enlisted pilots (rucker:⁽⁷⁾22).

Not all enlisted flying was necessarily of the officially sanctioned type. In an interview with Chief Master Sergeant (Retired), John J. Lhota, I found that there had been a good deal of unofficial piloting by enlisted crew members. Chief Lhota, who ultimately served for forty years, had enlisted in 1940 and been

trained as airplane mechanic after basic at Keesler ^{UC} field. He said, "Anyone with more than a 110 I.Q. was automatically sent to a technical school." He had wanted to be a pilot but was told that there were no slots at the time, but if he enlisted he could get a recommendation for flight training in the Air Corps later. While serving at McDill Field, he caught the eye of his commander with his exceptional mechanical skills and received on the job training as a flight engineer. He stated that, "In those days regulations were seen as kind of general guidance and our superiors were very liberal in their interpretation. If you wanted to learn to fly they taught you." The unit was flying B-26 Martins, which he said, "We called the Flying Prostitute, because it had no visible means of support." "It had very short wings, and because of the angle of attack flew backwards when you lost the engines. We used to say, "A plane a day in Tampa Bay", because we literally lost that many. His was one of the few crews to survive a crash when they went into the Everglades and were spotted by a movie crew in the process of filming. His was the first unit out of McDill to go to the war in Europe, and he got plenty more of that "OJT stick time" on the way. They were the first medium bombers to take the "Northern Route". When they first arrived in theater he spent more time on the ground, where his mechanical skills were badly needed. "The theater commander directed that all flight crew personnel must be trained to fly the aircraft, in the event that it became necessary, so we got more OJT on taking off and landing.

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