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CSA-13

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To better understand our Air Force enlisted heritage, it is essential for us to examine the historical roots of our enlisted force. I have selected to study the status of enlisted personnel in the Army Air Corps of 1936 in relation to their promotion system, training opportunities, and unique contributions. While the information available on enlisted personnel from that time period is limited, there is enough available to get a fairly good idea of what it was like to belong to the forerunner of the greatest Air Force in the world.

In 1936, the Air Corps promotion system for enlisted personnel was much different than the one we have today. As we will see, promotions were more subjective. Promotions to the grades of Corporal, Sergeant, and Staff Sergeant were based solely upon the recommendation of the individuals commanding officer. However, the promotion system for Technical Sergeants and Master Sergeants changed in 1932. Up to that time, it was based on a fitness 'score' given to each individual appearing before an officer examination board. After 1932, promotion to these top two grades was changed to reflect more emphasis on "efficiency and total Army service."[i] In order for Staff Sergeants and Technical Sergeants to be placed on a promotion list to the next higher grade, they must have served in their present grade for five years and have the recommendation of their commander. It was believed that the commanding officer should have the responsibility of selecting their "most efficient noncommissioned officers for promotion."[ii]

One of the primary goals of the new promotion system was to reduce the number of personnel deemed eligible for promotion and, therefore, placed on overly-long promotion lists. Another goal of the system was to promote those individuals possessing the most experience – hence the time-in-grade requirement. One aspect of the rationale for change that I found particularly interesting was the emphasis that was placed on grooming

prospective promotees during their five year eligibility period. It was assumed that commanders would strive to broaden the experience of noncommissioned officers by placing them in a variety of duties thereby providing them the opportunity to learn several specialties. The Air Corps was hoping to develop men who could supervise and direct others regardless of the task; they were advancing the idea that senior noncommissioned officers should be leaders of men not technicians. The emphasis on leadership in the senior noncommissioned officer corps extremely appropriate and refreshing.

In 1936, the Air Corps had 318 Technical Sergeant allocations and slightly less Master Sergeant allocations. However, on the June 1, 1936 list of Technical Sergeants eligible for promotion to Master Sergeant there were 201 names. This resulted in the majority of those eligible for promotion being carried over on subsequent list for several years. For those who were selected for promotion, it was interesting to see how the Air Corps announced their advancement. In the *Air Corps News Letter*, the official publication of the Information Division of the Air Corps, it was common to see death announcements of senior noncommissioned officers followed immediately by the names of those promoted to fill these ranks. For example, in the November 15, 1936 edition, under the heading "Air Corps Loses Veteran Noncommissioned Officers," the first paragraph announces the recent death of Master Sergeants Harry E. Turner and Carl W. Bradbury. The very next paragraph informs the reader of the promotion of Technical Sergeants Gust A. Tayloe and Lidias H. Albee. This struck me as being very callous. To the publication's credit, subsequent paragraphs did go on to recap the careers of the deceased.

Reading Air Corps publications also gave me a feel for just how small and close-knit this arm of the military was. In each issue of the *Air Corps New Letter*, there was a

paragraph dedicated to those individuals who were retiring regardless of their rank. In the November 15, 1936 issue, the following entry appeared:

> Staff Sergeant Delbert S. Lee of the 61st School Squadron, Kelly Field, Texas, was retired from the Army on October 31, 1936, after completing 30 years of service with the Infantry and the Air Corps.
>
> Sergeant Lee served with the Infantry until 1927, and since that time was stationed at Kelly Field. A dinner in his honor was served at the 61st Squadron mess, during the course of which he was presented a gold watch and chain.
>
> Sergeant Lee participated in three major battles during the World War, and saw many minor engagements. He will remain in San Antonio until the Spring of 1937 and then return to Bowling Green, Ky., his home.

I found these entries to be very touching because they reveal how personalized the Air Corps was during that time.

Along with the promotion system, training opportunities were also different. Unlike today, enlisted personnel were afforded the opportunity of becoming pilots while retaining their enlisted status. The applicant was required to meet the following requirements: two years of college at an accredited institution or the successful completion of an examination, be between 20 and 27 years of age, pass a rigorous physical, and be recommended by his commander. Once accepted as qualified, individuals were required to wait until notified by the Chief of the Air Corps of an opening at the training base at Randolph Field, Texas. In 1936, enlisted personnel competed with qualified civilians for the 375 available training slots. I was surprised to discover that policy dictated that enlisted personnel were selected first for training. Enlisted personnel entering the two year training program were appointed Flying Cadets and received $75.00 a month and $1 per day ration allowance. On the night of February 20, 1936, 33 enlisted flying cadets were awarded their wings by Colonel Henry W. Harms, Commandant of the Air Corps Primary Flying School. Following the formal presentation, "the remainder of the evening was devoted to gaiety and dancing.

Music was furnished by an excellent orchestra from San Antonio, refreshments were served, and the Flying Cadets and their young ladies danced until one a.m."[iii]

Unlike other military jobs available in the inter-war years, flying was a dangerous business whether you were an officer or an enlisted member. The science of aeronautics was still in its infancy and there were many hazards that "drained the air arm of some of its best men."[iv] One way to show this is by examining an organization known as the Caterpillar Club. To become an initiated member of the Caterpillar Club, an individual had to be 'forced' to parachute from a 'less than perfect aircraft.' In 1935, there were 69 emergency jumps and a total of 809 from the previous 16 years. One hundred and forty of the total of 809 were made by enlisted members. The experience of Private Norbert D. Flinn, 96th Bombardment Squadron, is an example of what these men endured. While attempting to bail out at 4,000 feet, Private Flinn's parachute "lodged in the door…I managed to kick loose by pushing against the bottom of the fuselage. Knowing I was too near the ground to allow time to clear the airplane, I pulled the rip cord and saw my parachute unfurl. I was jerked around as the parachute opened and hit the tree tops almost immediately, which broke the fall."[v] After releasing his parachute harness, Private Flinn ran to the burning wreckage in an attempt to help the others who did not get out of the aircraft in time. He was unsuccessful.

Enlisted contributions to their community and service were also notable during 1936. At noon on July 30, it was verified that within a few hours, a hurricane would strike Maxwell Field's Bombing and Gunnery Base at Valparaiso, Florida. When the storm struck, all telephone and telegraph lines went out and the only communications medium available was at the army radio station on base. Privates Bertram D. Johnson and George

M. Belesky remained on duty throughout the emergency situation and provided messaging services for the base and the community. People were permitted to send messages to relatives in other states to inform them that they were alive and well. Following the emergency, a lawyer from Birmingham, Alabama sent the commanding officer a letter extolling the extraordinary efforts of the two privates. His letter concluded with "I am glad to know that men with such ability and devotion to duty are engaged in the public service."[vi]

Even in 1936, the idea of 'doing more with less' was alive and well. The Air Corps News Letter from August 16, 1936 described the implementation of an innovative guard system at Pope Field, North Carolina. The Pope Field guard system was in need of change because so many of the 165 enlisted personnel stationed at Pope Field were tied up guarding two separate areas on the base and the Operations Office. During every shift, there were three noncommissioned officers and six privates on duty in the guard shack and a noncommissioned officer in the Operations Office. To make better use of the manpower, it was determined that all personnel in engineering, transportation, and aircraft servicing perform guard duty after regular duty hours. In addition, the Operations Office was transformed to serve as the guard shack so that personnel on guard duty could perform "double duty of guard and administering Pope Field out of regular duty hours."[vii] This 'double duty' required noncommissioned officers to: "supervise the servicing and repairing of transient aircraft, operate the night lighting system, send and receive all flight messages out of duty hours, supervise the transportation of all transients to and from Fort Bragg in the station wagon assigned to the guard…and take care of the wants in general of visiting aviators."[viii] Valuable manpower was saved for use in more vital areas.

With the exception of having the ability to pilot aircraft, the enlisted force in 1936 was not that different from Air Force enlisted personnel today. Sixty-one years ago airmen were concerned about promotion to the senior noncommissioned officer corps and the leadership responded during those inter-war years by changing the system to meet the needs of the Air Corps. There was also a great amount of affection displayed to retiring enlisted members of enlisted soldiers that passed away. Each individual's retirement or death was announced in the official newsletter of the Air Corps. It brought a sense of community to this 16,000 man branch of the Army. We see the same kind of unit recognition today. It is also apparent that there existed the same sense of commitment to society that we see displayed today. When disaster struck Florida in the form of a hurricane, two airmen provided civilians with the only form of communication available to the outside world. Finally, we see that in 1936 the Air Corps was just as concerned about doing more with less as we are today and the airmen responded. By becoming more aware of our history we can discover that it's great to be a part of this tradition!

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[i] "Promotion of Enlisted Men," *Air Corps News Letter*, 15 Dec. 1936, p. 9.
[ii] Ibid.
[iii] "Recognition at Randolph Field," *Air Corps News Letter*, 1 Apr. 1936.
[iv] Alfred Goldberg, *A History of the United States Air Force 1907-1957*, Van Nostrand Co., Inc., 1957, p. 35.
[v] "The Caterpillar Club," *Air Corps News Letter*, 15 Nov. 1936, pp. 9-10.
[vi] "Valuable Service by Maxwell Field Radio Personnel," *Air Corps News Letter*, 15 Sep. 1936, p. 10.
[vii] "Guard System at Pope Field," *Air Corps News Letter*, 15 Aug. 1936, p. 13.
[viii] Ibid.

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