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BACKGROUND PAPER

ON

U.S. ARMY AIR FORCE ENLISTED PILOTS

This paper will discuss the US Army's enlisted pilot training program during WWII. This program served as an experiment to see if high school graduates could be used as an alternate source of pilots. It also tested the social class difference between officers and enlisted men which, in itself, determined its future. We will begin by discussing the need for an alternate source of pilots. We'll then look at their training, the different types of pilots and their contributions to the war effort. We'll also look at the problems faced by the pilots and the Army. Finally, we'll discuss the program's success in terms of its primary intentions, and the Army's acceptance of flying sergeants.

Flight training of enlisted personnel has always been driven by pilot shortages. Corporal Vernon Burge who, in 1912 became the first Army enlisted pilot, was trained because his commander didn't have enough officers for pilot training. For the next 30 years, enlisted pilots were rare. Congress mandated training for enlisted personnel but the Army never seriously enforced it, feeling a college education was a must. In 1940, an impending war and congressional pressure forced the Army to reconsider its views on enlisted pilot training. Though an Air Corps study in February of 1940 rebuked enlisted pilot training, General H.H. Arnold saw the need for pilots and supported the idea. He was instrumental in the

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passage of Public Law 99 (The Aviation Student Act) on 21 May 1941. This law eliminated the two year college requirement for flight training and allowed enlisted men to be trained as pilots. While General Arnold's support was based on a shortage of pilots, the Army's views of enlisted pilot training had not changed.

When the law passed, the Army advertised for volunteers. The Air Corps Newsletter of 15 June, 1941, called for enlisted men between 19 and 22 years of age who could conform to the same physical standards required of flying cadets. (4:3) Upon graduation from flight training, they would be appointed Flight Sergeant 3rd Class, ranking as a Staff Sergeant with a pay of \$108.00 a month. (4:3) A July Air Corps Newsletter released more information stating the applicants would be aviation students instead of cadets with their exact use undetermined. (3:5) Applicants were sent to flight training schools throughout the states. Initial phases of training were contracted to civilians and all enlisted men trained in grade, along with cadets. Being enlisted never created problems with the cadets, though Bernard Makowski said the enlisted men refused to repeat the basic training atmosphere the cadets were subjected too. (7:3) Flight training was divided into three phases, (preflight, primary, and advanced) with the first two phases taking six months. During the initial phase of training, enlisted men and cadets trained together but lived separately. Training was demanding. Enlisted and cadet washout rates were about 50

percent. (1:5) While some washed out academically, it was the actual "stick and rudder business" that failed people. (1:5) From there, students would go to a primary course for instrument, weather and navigation training and then to advanced school. Here they would be assigned to specific aircraft. Since they were now open rated pilots, they were assigned to every type of aircraft the Army had.

While the Army anticipated ferrying duty for these pilots, they performed every function in military aviation. Walter Mayer, a P-47 pilot was awaiting orders to go overseas when he was sent to Wright-Patterson AFB as a test pilot. There, he flew operational test flights on P-47's. (9:6) He flew seven days a week from dawn to dusk. Edgar Armogost was a staff sergeant pilot flying AT-6 gunnery training missions at Ellington, Texas. He logged 800 hours in the AT-6. 800 hours in the B-24 and 500 hours in an AT-18 (Lockheed-Hudson). (1:9) Mr Makowski, a B-24 pilot flew 26 combat missions against German targets. He was wounded on his 26th mission and sent home. (7:20) Other pilots flew in all theaters of the war and distinguished themselves in action. Thomas P. Petit, a P-47, pilot became an ace during the war. (9:22) Enlisted pilots flew for the Army's ferrying division however, they numbered only 161 throughout the war. (11:142) There were other flying sergeants who held limited pilot ratings. They were liaison, and glider pilots.

The liaison pilots flew support missions in L-4 and L-5 (cessna type) aircraft. Their duties included supply drops, search and rescue, courier, and photo reconnaissance flights. They were, perhaps, the best known of the enlisted pilots based on their

numbers, <sup>7</sup>(4333). Glider pilots flew infantry landing forces into combat, primarily in Europe. The difference between these and regular enlisted pilots was the training. An open rated pilot, completed six months of flight school then qualified on a specific aircraft. Glider pilots finished a 16 week course while liaison pilots (many washed out of regular pilot training) went through a six week course, 40 hours flying and 194 hours ground school. All enlisted pilots graduated as staff sergeants but gliders pilot had a "G" on their wings and liaison pilots had an "L" on theirs. Regular enlisted pilots wore officer pilot wings because they were open rated. Because they were NCO's, a problem of command emerged.

These NCO's were open rated pilots performing officer duties. This raised the question of how to treat them. In flight training, they were exempt from manual labor details and given officer type duties like duty NCO, ect. In operational units, it was a bit different. Commanding officers would determine if NCO's flew lead, as co-pilots or as aircraft commanders. Edgar Armogost recalls flying lead on several occasions over second lieutenants. (1:15) He felt experience was the determining factor. Senior Army officials however, saw it differently. The commander of the of the Gulf Coast Air Corps Training Center said of enlisted pilots, "they are neither fish nor fowl - no commanding officer has ever been able to fit them in properly into the pattern of life of the Air Corps" (5:421) This letter was dated 9 July 1941, one month after the Aviation Student Act was signed into law. The General was referring to the enlisted pilots already on active duty and went on

to say, "There seems to be no difference in responsibilities between the proposed enlisted pilot and his brother pilot who is an officer with more pay and allowances. This is bound to cause friction." (5:421) It is this reasoning that initiated the flight officer act of 1942.

The Flight Officer Act recognized enlisted pilots were above an NCO's status but may not have the qualities desired of a commissioned officer. (6:88) Flight officers had a warrant officer status, between a second lieutenant and an enlisted man. It was felt this status would reduce the class difference between officer and enlisted pilots. Supporters in the Army felt it would allow all pilots to mix freely and promote team work. This bill was signed into law in June of 1941, a year after the Aviation Student Act. Ironically, no documentation could be found that indicated any real animosity between enlisted and commissioned pilots. Experience in the air seemed to be the determining factor in flight command and leadership roles. Because of the timing of this law, most open rated enlisted pilots were promoted to flight officer status immediately. However, there were some exceptions. It seems glider and liaison pilots remained in enlisted grades. Speculation was these pilots were in one deep positions. No co-pilots were needed on these aircraft. The 25th Liaison Squadron, formed on 1 March 1943, consisted of 15 officers and 125 enlisted men. (2:6) An element of the Fifth Air Force, stationed in New Guinea, they were structured like most liaison squadrons. Overall, most open rated enlisted pilots were either commissioned or made flight officers by the end of 1942. Some did remain in enlisted status to

the end of the war (the Ferrying Command had 59 in 1944) while others like General Yeager were made flight officers upon graduation. The Flight Officer Act also eliminated the aviation student status. This allowed all pilot candidates to train as cadets, and effectively ended the enlisted pilot program.

While the program did achieve its goal, its overall success must be viewed in two aspects. First, it showed a college education wasn't required for successful pilot training. These men proved ability, not education, was the deciding factor in flying aircraft. By performing test, bomber, and fighter pilot duties, they dispelled the myth that a pilots ability was based on his education. By rising to senior and flag officer ranks, they proved leadership was a learned skill, not exclusive to college and academy graduates. Their success validated congress' opinion that the Army could draw from its enlisted corps as a source of pilots during shortages. Based on the afore mentioned examples, the program was a complete success.

With respect to the transition of rank, the programs success was, at best, marginal. There's no documented evidence of any animosity between enlisted and officer pilots. In the interviews on file, no enlisted pilot said he was treated any differently from any officer pilot. All agreed the question of command, for the most part, was based on experience, not rank. One can conclude the question of rank and command was important to high level Army echelons, not the operational commanders. To them, the flying sergeants had proven themselves.

This program resulted in several exceptional achievements. The enlisted pilot program produced 14 ace fighter pilots during the war. One hundred and fourteen enlisted pilots became Lieutenant Colonels. Sixty nine became full Colonels. Seven rose to flag officer ranks. The program gave us our most celebrated test pilot, Brigadier General Chuck Yeager. And most importantly, the program was a vehicle for over 2,580 ordinary men to do extraordinary things.

When one puts aside the pride these men shared, they said the one thing the program gave them was the chance to fly. They didn't want status or glory, just the chance to fly. This simple nobility will always hold a place for them in Military aviation history.

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