

When NCOs Were Pilots

by

SGM Edward Simpson

SGM Manuel Estrada

Group Room L06

28 Feb 05

Outline

- I. Introduction.
 - A. References
 - 1. Arbon, Lee. They Also Flew. 1992
 - 2. http://www.aetc.randolph.ar.mil/ho/sgt_pilots.htm.
 - 3. <http://www.armyavnmuseum.org/history/war/ww2/overview3.html>.
 - B. Research is simplified with the use of the World Wide Web
- II. The early days of enlisted pilots
 - A. First enlisted/NCO pilot
 - B. How it all began
 - 1. Training and Educating the NCO
 - 2. Early Limitations
- III. Enlisted contributions to Army Aviation
 - A. Building and Repairing aircraft
 - B. Flying Instructors
 - C. Duties
- III. Flying Missions
 - A. Contributions to WWI
 - B. Contributions to WWII
 - C. Weapons
- IV. Trial and Tribulations
 - A. Promotions/Commissioning
 - B. Recognition
 - C. Heroes
- V. How it ended/Summary

Noncommissioned Officer history is an important and intricate part of history in the United States Army. All students at the United States Army Sergeants Major Academy are required to write about some form of NCO history hence, I choose to write about Noncommissioned Officers that piloted aircraft for their service, more particularly U.S. Army enlisted pilots. To help facilitate this matter in a logical sequence, I will follow the career of Vernon L. Burge (the first “Army” enlisted pilot) and others that followed shortly thereafter.

In terms of fairness, the first U. S. Army enlisted pilot was probably SGT William Ivy. SGT William Ivy was a stunt balloonist. On 30 June 1898, SGT Ivy piloted a balloon to observe the Spanish Fleet in the harbor of Santiago, Cuba during the Spanish-American War. In August 1907, Brigadier General Allen published a memo establishing an Aeronautical Division within the Signal Corps and empowered the Signal Corps to oversee all matters pertaining to military ballooning, air machines and kindred subjects. In 1908 the “Army” added its first engine powered balloon and in 1909 its first Wright airplane.

Vernon L. Burge was born in Illinois on November 29, 1888. Burge attended public school in Ivesdale, IL. During his last year of school, Burge took a part-time job with the local newspaper. He held his position as printer with the local newspaper until 1907 when he enlisted into the U.S. Army Signal Corps. In 1911, Burge was tasked to assemble and maintain a brand-new Wright aeroplane. Burge was to complete this task

for Lt Frank P. Lahm at the newly created aviation school at Fort William McKinley, Philippines.

Burge and Lahm grew close as they began to undertake this enormous journey together. They experienced many trial and errors, to include bad weather and minor crashes. Once Lt Lahm was satisfied with the initial training, he was ready to take on students at the aviation school. Only one officer volunteered for aviation training and this stunned Lt Lahm.

Burge, the experienced mechanic, was aware that Lahm needed at least two students. Eager and desperate to fly, Burge volunteered to be the second student Lahm would need in order to begin training. Much to CPL Burge's surprise Lt Lahm accepted CPL Burge as the second student and so the training began. On April 15, 1912, Burge officially began his flying career. During the weeks that followed, Burge's flight training was met with many challenges. On June 14, 1912, Lt Lahm sent a letter to the Secretary of the Aero Club of America requesting Burge's aviator certificate.

An excerpt from the response by the War Department reads as follows:

It is not policy of the War Department to train enlisted men in flying aeroplanes.

Their military training is such that very few enlisted men are qualified to observe military operations and render accurate and intelligent reports of what they see from an aeroplane. Another objection is that very few enlisted men have sufficient knowledge of mechanics to appreciate the stresses to which an aeroplane is subjected during certain maneuvers.

(Qtd. In *They Also Flew*, Lee Arbon)

Needless to say, Burge eventually received his aviators certificate from the Federation Aeronatique Internationale (FAI) bearing the number 154.

Burge, Lahm and other comrades soon to follow in their footsteps were limited in regards to flight time. The experienced problems with bad weather (to include lampoons) and had several training flights that were unsuccessful.

As mentioned earlier, Burge was an excellent airplane mechanic. Following behind Burge in his mastery of mechanic and becoming the second and third enlisted pilots were Corporals William A. Lankey and William C. Ocker. Burge was the sought after expert for mechanical expertise on the Wright Airplane and Ocker was the much sought after expert on the Curtis Airplane. Airplanes were shipped to training schools by rail or ship in several crates and assembled by Burge or Ocker. Whenever there was engine failure or an airplane crash, Burge and Ocker were the main two mechanics to repair the aircrafts. Needless to say, repairs and assembly were slow but well done.

Within four years the “Army” trained several officers and enlisted men as pilots.

On March 9, 1916, Pancho Villa and a band of followers crossed the U.S. – Mexico border and raided the small railroad town of Columbus, New Mexico. The newly formed 1st Aero Squadron received its first mission as a result of Pancho Villa raid. Pancho Villa and his followers stung America’s national pride, sparking outcries for retaliation.

By March 19th the squadron was airborne in hopes to gather intelligence on Pancho Villa and gang. Shortly thereafter, the squadron was dispatched to Casas Grandes. Casas Grandes, Mexico some 100 miles from Columbus, N.M. totally stretched the limits of the aircrafts. The mountains, winds and darkness of the night aided to mission failure. As a

result, Pancho Villa and his gang were not apprehended nor was any intelligence gathered during the mission.

In short, the airplanes failed miserably. They were not equipped for the terrain and the weather. Shortly thereafter, the JN-3s aircraft was replaced by the R-2s. The R-2s were hastily constructed. They were missing compasses, toolkits and had faulty wiring. However, the R-2s were equipped with automatic cameras, radios and Lewis Machine Guns, as well as incendiary and explosive bombs (the weapons were never used in Mexico).

In the following year, both Burge and Ocker were commissioned. Burge received accelerated promotions and in a short time rose to the rank of Captain. Burge's first assignment as a commissioned officer was head of the aero motors training in Kelly Field, while Burge's first attempt to train soldiers in aero motors failed miserably due to bad weather and lack of leadership support.

During World War I, Italy, Germany, France and Britain began using enlisted pilots. The U.S. only had a dozen or so enlisted pilots during WWI and these pilots were limited to ferry flights.

Contributions during WWII were more significant. During the aforementioned period some 2,500 enlisted men were trained as pilots. The majority of these pilots were used to protect California and 3 different airfields. Approximately five months later these soldiers received overseas assignments. The pilots were sent to Pursuit Groups, Light Bomb Groups, Transport Groups and Depot Groups. The first overseas mission in which Sergeant pilots took part in was on November 18, 1942 when the squadron escorted B-

17s for a raid on Kahili Field on the island of Bougainville. Sergeant Grant Reagh destroyed a Japanese bi-winged float plane over Tonalei Harbor, Sgt James Obermiller shot down another over Kahili but Sgt Eugene Woods was lost in action. In short, NCO pilots were responsible for shooting down 130 enemy aircraft during WWII.

Pilots were pilots as far as most Americans were concerned and especially the ladies. The enlisted pilots as well as their officer counterparts always received a heroes welcome no matter where they went. The pilots were viewed as handsome, classy and successful and women swarmed around them with every opportunity. The pilots were the center of many local hometown celebrations and festival as they show off their flying ability.

As most of us know, officers made up the majority of the pilots. Consequently, Department of the Army and soldiers did not know how to treat these unique soldiers. Some of the enlisted pilots were arrested for impersonating officers in New Mexico and it took the installation commander to personally authenticate their orders before they were released. Upon release, the provost marshal remarked, "You mean to tell me you fly airplanes just like a second lieutenant?" "No sir!" replied Van Ausdell. "We fly them better." When first arriving at a new installation, the enlisted pilots were put on kitchen patrol, guard duty, and latrine orderly. There are many more examples of perceived unfair treatment. The most notable struggle was the commissioning process. While most enlisted pilots were promoted without many problems, there were hundreds that flew as NCOs for years and a handful that were never promoted. Needless to say, they were not given the awards and fanfare as their commissioned counterparts.

In 1947 the United States Army Air Force became the United States Air Force and the last enlisted pilot served in the United States Air Force until 1949. Vernon L. Burge retired as a Colonel logging over 4, 600 hours. Eleven enlisted pilots went on to make General Officer.

Works Cited

Arbon, Lee. They Also Flew. *The Enlisted Pilot Legacy*, 1992

http://www.aetc.randolph.af.mil/ho/sgt_pilots.htm.

<http://www.armyavnmuseum.org/history/war/ww2/overview3.html>