

AFEHRI File 100.101

**Research Materials/Source Documents
STUDENT PAPERS**

FILE TITLE: Enlisted Pilots of World War II

AUTHOR: SMSgt Angelo A. Pellitteri, SNCOA Student, undtd.

Reviewed by:

AFEHRI Representative *G.R. Akin* date *30 Dec 97*

EPC Representative *Jac. Ch...* date *9 Feb 98*

Scanner Operator *Jandra J. Anderson* date *9 Feb 98*

APPROVED BY: *Gary R. Akin*

GARY R. AKIN, CMSgt, USAF

Director

Air Force Enlisted Heritage Research Institute

Feb 19-12
J.L.M.

ENLISTED PILOTS
OF
WORLD WAR II
BY
SMSGT ANGELO A. PELLITTERI

There are many reasons why we enlisted in the Air Force. These range from patriotism, to the educational and health benefits, and to a needing a job. These are true and valid reasons, but for many enlisted personnel there is an underlying desire to do what few of us can do; fly airplanes. There is a small group of men who were able to realize that dream. These were the Flying Sergeants, those few individuals who were at the right place at the right time and selected to be pilots in the U.S. Army Air Corps. This paper looks at the beginnings of the enlisted pilot program, official policy on enlisted pilots, the main reason to train enlisted members as pilots, and why these individuals chose to fly. It briefly mentions some of the aircraft they flew and their missions. It also describes the differences between the Flying Sergeants and the other enlisted pilots; glider and liaison pilots. From here it investigates the liaison squadrons, the type of aircraft they employed, the environments they operated in, and their missions. Finally, it lists some of the accomplishments of these brave individuals.

The enlisted flying program officially ended on 8 July 1942 with the passage of the Flight Officer Act, however, the beginnings can be traced to pre-World War I.(17:1) The first

enlisted pilot was Corporal Vernon L. Burge, trained by Lt. Frank P. Lahm in the Philippines in the Spring of 1912.(12:31; 17:1) Lt Lahm's mission was to train officers as pilots for the Signal Corps for the defence of Corregidor. He had only two volunteers at the time, Cpl. Burge and Lt. Moss L. Love.(12:31) Training enlisted pilots was against Army policy but Cpl. Burge was promoted to Sergeant and allowed to fly. This event sparked a controversy in the Army that spanned three decades: Should enlisted members be trained as pilots or restrict the profession to officers?

The arguments against training enlisted members as pilots were many but was primarily centered on the idea that one needed an advanced education to be a successful pilot.(17:1) This notion was clearly demonstrated by the response Brigadier General James Allen, Commander, U.S. Army Signal Corps, sent to Lt. Lahm on hearing of Cpl. Burge's training: "It is not the policy of the War Department to training 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."(17:1-2) 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.(17:2) Other considerations were morale, duty responsibilities, physical requirements, and tradition. The greatest proponent for enlisted pilots was lack of pilots.

From the early years, when the Army and the nation

recognized the need and benefits of an air force, there were not enough volunteers to train as pilots. Between 1912 and 1939 the Army trained enlisted men as pilots. In 1914, War Bulletin 35 stated, "...that 12 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."(17:2) The numbers of enlisted men to be trained as pilots increased by the National Defense Act of 3 June 1916, "The Secretary of War shall have authority to cause as many enlisted men of the aviation section to be instructed in the art of flying as he may deem necessary.", but only 16 enlisted men were trained during the war years.(17:2) Their primary duties included testing, courier and utility flights, and flight instruction.(17:2) The pilot shortage of 1940 highlighted the need for enlisted pilots.(17:1) Between August 1941 and November 1942 over 2,580 enlisted men became pilots.(17:24) The year and type of training program the enlisted pilots went through determined if they were commissioned as Second Lieutenants, Flight Officers (an officer below the rank of Second Lieutenant but higher than a Master Sergeant), or graduated as a Staff Sergeant Pilot.(5:-; 10:-; 11:-; 17:1-8) Many of the enlisted pilots received commissions and made rank through the officer corps.(10:-)

The desire to fly is what motivated these men, several even took demotions just to fly.(12:-) CMSgt (Ret) Walter F. Mayer says he enlisted in the Army so he could fly. He didn't do any flying as a civilian, except for buying rides at the airport when he had enough money. He knew he had to join the service

anyway, so he picked one where he would have an opportunity to fly. He enlisted in January 1941 and was made a company clerk. He says, "A little old flyer came through the office one day about putting in for enlisted pilots. Boy, I grabbed ahold of that darn thing and signed up, because that was really what I came in for anyway".(11:-)

Lt Col (Ret) Edgar R. Armagost enlisted for the same reason. He got hooked on flying when he "... had had a couple of rides with the old barnstormers, the 50 centers, that would scare heck out you for a little while."(1:1) He enlisted in the Army Signal Corps, 52nd Signal Maintenance Company, Albrook Field, Panama on 24 February 1941. He said he received a letter from the Army Air Corps that he failed the cadet exam, but the Army Air Corps was starting a new program for training pilots called the Aviation Student Program. He became a pilot under that program.(1:1)

The story is the same for Col (Ret) Harold A. "Popp" Gunn. "I became interested in aviation principally because one day my brother and I were driving a herd of cattle from one pasture to another and this was during the middle of summer, it was very hot a dusty. As the dust was about to choke us, an airplane went by overhead, this was in the middle 20s (1920s), it was flying by, not too high, and not too fast and I looked up and said, "That's for me."" He went on a ride a week later and was hooked.(10:1) He is one of the early enlisted pilots. Enlisting in the Army in 1929, he was commissioned in 1936 after becoming an instructor pilot at Randolph Field (Texas) and stayed there until September 1945.(10:2)

The Flying Sergeants flew all types of aircraft in the Army inventory during World War II. Their primary responsibilities was to ferry new aircraft from factories to their units, however many went straight to combat units after graduation.(17:10) The entire enlisted class of 42-C became fighter pilots in P-38's and were sent immediately to North Africa.(17:10) Other enlisted pilots were assigned to P-40s, B-17s, C-47s, C-54s and B-24s. (17:10,25)

There is another group of pilots who contributed as much to the war but don't get much publicity because of the nature of their work and the status relegated to them by the services and history. These pilots were the glider pilots and liaison pilots. The differences between these enlisted pilots and the Flying Sergeants were the training they received, the aircraft they flew, and the type of wings they wore.(17:17) The glider and liaison pilots only had six to sixteen weeks of training where as the Flying Sergeants flying fighter and multi-engined planes had six months flight training with additional transition training. The glider and liaison pilots flew manned gliders and L-4 and L-5 aircraft, respectively. The wings they wore differed from the Flying Sergeants' in that in the center of their wings was a "G" or "L" to denote glider or liaison. The Flying Sergeants wore the same pilot wings as commissioned officer pilots.(14:xxi; 17:17)

Glider pilot training was being recommended as early as 1939 but didn't become a reality until February 1942. What prompted the Army to take action was the successful invasion of Crete by

Glider borne German forces in May 1941.(17:18) These pilots received 130 hours of training in sixteen weeks. Their mission was to carry troops and explosives, after being cut loose from tow aircraft at low altitude and often at night, into hostile territory. Lee Arbon, a Flying Sergeant and author of the book They Also Flew says, "These are some of the bravest men this author ever knew. Every flight, whether training or combat, were one-way."(14:xxi) All were graduated in as Staff Sergeant Glider Pilots and later were commissioned. In 1943, excess glider pilots were encouraged to apply for aviation cadet training and become pilots. They took part in nearly every major airborne assault in the Mediterranean and European theaters and in Burma.(14:xxi) Their most notable contribution was in the invasion of Europe at Normandy, France. Many pilots gave their lives in those campaigns and deserves the nation's honors. The glider program officially ended on 15 January 1945.(14:xxi; 17:18)

The Liaison pilot program ran from September 1942 - September 1945 with 4,333 pilots trained.(17:18) They attended a six week program consisting of 40 hours of flying time and 194 hours of ground school.(17:18) They too were graduated as Staff Sergeant Pilots. They flew L-1, L-3, L-4, L-5, and L-6 aircraft.(2:3; 14:xxi; 17:18) The L-5 was an adaptation of the Stinson-105, also called the Sentinel. It was a four passenger, high-wing aircraft similar to private planes like Piper "Cubs" or Cessna's.(9:2; 17:18) Their primary missions were photo reconnaissance, courier duty, air rescue, and artillery

observation. They served in all theaters of World War II.(5:-; 14:xxi; 17:18)

Even though the majority of these pilots were eliminees from other training programs with up to 60 hours flying time, they served no less gallantly than their fellow enlisted pilots who flew the "glory" aircraft.(17:18) Their primary aircraft was the L-5 with a 185 horsepower engine. It was rated to fly at 110 miles/hour, land at 50 mile/hour, and have an optimum ceiling of 3,000 feet above sea level.(9:-) The liaison pilots in China often operated from airfields that were at 6,000 feet above sea level.(9:2) The L-5 had no radio navigation equipment, common gear in larger aircraft.(9:9) It was meant to operate at smooth, stateside, municipal airfields; not in the jungles and mountains of China, India, and Burma.(9:10) These pilots flew the treacherous "Hump" with only a compass and inaccurate maps to navigate by.(9:7,9)

They operated in and out of unimproved airfields, many times just improvised landing strips cleared for one-time flights.(2:3; 9:7) These fields were not kind to the aircraft, flying rocks pitted the 85 inch wooden propellers and rough surfaces bruised the tires, some of which were recapped and only held 32 pounds of air pressure on the forward wheels and 42 on the tail wheel.

(9:7) Sgt. Junior D. Miller, a B-25 radio operator and gunner from the 490th Bomb Squadron, tells how three L-1 aircraft of the 5th Liaison Squadron were damaged due to landing strip conditions during rescue attempts for him and other survivors of his crashed B-25 near Mandalay: "5 - 13 January 1945 - The B-25 came back in

the afternoon, dropping a note telling us to lay out the (landing) strip on (solid) ground at least 300 feet long and they would return in 2 hours with the L-1s, and (to) put an arrow (pointing) into the wind. We went to work fixing up the strip where we thought they could land, and in a little over 2 hours, they came back with 2 L-1s, the rescue B-25 and some P-47s. One L-1 circled and looked over the field. Then the other L-1 tried to land. His left wing hit a tree. It almost tore off the wing and twisted the plane around, but the pilot was unhurt....We worked the strip some more, and about (1330) the Air Jungle Rescue B-25 and 2 L-1s of the 5th Liaison Sqd., came back. The first L-1 came in and gassed up....The L-1 tried to get off the ground. He got off the ground a bit and ran off the strip. He ran into a stump and broke off the undercarriage. The three men got out of the L-1. As they were getting out, the third L-1 landed. As it did, its wheels hit the runway, and the left wheel broke off....With three planes cracked up, we knew we had to put some distance between ourselves and the Japs, because we knew they weren't far away."(2:3,4)

The liaison pilots' missions were often as dangerous as those of the fighter and bomber pilots. This excerpt from an official news dispatch illustrates the danger: "...to hang over artillery positions and draw enemy ground fire so fighters may know where to strike means the difference between winning battles and losing them."(9:3) These men also flew in environments they weren't trained for as reported here on a mission by T/Sgt Clifford Bryan of the 5th Liaison Squadron: "He worked out an

air-ground radio net with the field artillery for use against the enemy targets. On May 17, 1944, first day of campaign, he flew night artillery adjustment mission. Night flying is not a part of a liaison pilot's training."(3:VI-3)

The liaison pilot's aircraft were normally unarmed and they had to use the aircraft's flying characteristics to avoid being shot down as illustrated here: "M/Sgt James J. Alt....and T/Sgt Frank A. Heidelbauer....were caught in the Salween Gorge by six Zeros. The two L-5 men sneaked into clouds and behind hills. With their slow speed they hung behind crags, playing hide-and-seek with the Japs who finally gave up after a half-hour."(9:9) Air combat wasn't their only danger, they were just as likely to be shot down or forced to land due to mechanical problems and risked being killed or captured like other the aviators. T/Sgt. Jack Lindgren, the pilot of the first L-1 damaged in the B-25 rescue attempt mentioned earlier, was killed by a Japanese patrol while trying to escape to friendly lines during the rescue attempt.(2:5; 9:V-31)

The liaison squadrons didn't have the luxury of operating from bases free from enemy attack. An entry from the 5th Liaison Squadron's history of 17 May - 3 August 1944: "5. Enemy fire encountered: a. Airstrip was under constant enemy artillery fire. b. Enemy anti-aircraft fire, machine gun fire, and small arms fire used during entire campaign against our airplanes. c. Airplanes continued successful operations during enemy fighter plane attacks. 29 October 1944: Squadron members experienced first night attack by enemy aircraft. Several bombs were dropped

at airfield and no damage or casualties suffered at liaison strip. The following day was spent digging foxholes."(3:V-6, VI-3)

The Japanese feared the the liaison pilots and their aircraft because of their intelligence gathering and forward air control capabilities.(9:3) "During the Salween Campaign for Lungling, in Southwestern China, the Chinese Expeditionary Forces units were unable to move up the fortified hill overlooking the city because hidden Jap gun emplacements battered them down. Air-ground coordination officers noted that Jap artillery would not fire while L-5s were in the air for fear of disclosing their positions."(9:3) This narrative by S/Sgt Monatague of the 5th Liaison Squadron further illustrates this point: "3 February 1945 - We were spotting in the Fighter-Bombers on ground targets and I received information to lead the planes in and point my nose at the direction of the target. I immediately picked the spot that my observer thought contained a Jap gun position and dove on it. The fighters overhead peeled off behind me and really let go at this position. On my pull up, we saw a group of Japs in a village nearby and I again pointed my nose at the target. This time the Japs on the ground realized that I was controlling the bombing and they let loose with heavy ground fire at my aircraft, but I continued my dives and led the planes in. We know we were successful as secondary explosions resulted in the bombing and strafing by our P-47 aircraft".(7:V-25)

Another aspect of the liaison pilots' mission was rescue work. In less than nine months in the Burma theater, the 5th

Liaison Squadron evacuated approximately 4,000 patients, mostly from forward installations.(6:-) An excerpt from a June 1945 news release about the 19th Liaison Squadron says this about the rescue mission: "Primarily an observation unit, the squadron has evacuated wounded and sick personnel, transported medical supplies and ammunition....That sounds elementary in these days of miracle aviation. But to fly a man with appendicitis out of an impassable Himalayan region in a few minutes, on a trip that would mean eight days by mule pack and jeep means saving a life. To fly bandages and plasma into inaccessible mountain areas is to save more lives."(9:3) The following account of S/Sgt Carl W. Hughes rescue of a downed pilot is another example: "16 November 1944 - S/Sgt Carl W. Hughes flying a L-1 type liaison plane, volunteered to go deep into enemy territory and bring back a fighter pilot, Lt. Ray C. Abbott, 60th Fighter Squadron, 33rd Fighter Group, who was forced to bail out because of engine failure. A hilltop was chosen as the spot for Sgt. Hughes to land his plane for the rescue. The landing on a strip only a few hundred feet long and atop a 5000' mountain was skillfully done. He successfully negotiated this landing by mushing his plane in and by taking advantage of the uphill slope of the clearing.

Due to the density of the surrounding jungle, the imperiled pilot was unable to reach the hilltop, makeshift strip before nightfall so Sgt. Hughes was forced to leave this area before darkness set in. A note was dropped to the pilot telling him to be on the hilltop the next day. While waiting on the mountain for for Lt. Abbott, Sgt. Hughes cleared away boulders and cut

dense brush and elephant grass to facilitate his takeoff. Sgt. Hughes accomplished the take-off by running down the slope and off the mountain side into space, where after a drop of some 500 feet, his plane picked up flying speed and returned safely to home base.

On the following morning, 17 November, with element of surprise now lacking and the danger of enemy interception increased hundred-fold, Sgt. Hughes successfully carried out this mission using procedures as day before and skillfully and courageously brought the grateful fighter pilot back to home base."(4:V-7,8) This heroic action earned S/Sgt. Hughes a Silver Star.(5:V-10)

Supply and mail delivery were other tasks these pilots did well. In December 1944 during the Salween Campaign, 45 L-5s from the 19th Liaison Squadron flew 2,544 hours in 1,797 missions. They transported 150 tons of material supplying the Chinese Combat Command.(9:7-8) This average of 3.3 tons per plane set a record for the unit, an amazing feat because the plane was designed to carry only two persons and baggage weighing no more than 460 pounds.(9:8) These men carried whatever they could to support the troops in the field. They carried PX supplies and other little necessities along with with dynamite caps, stripped field pieces, medical aids, and automotive and airplane parts. These supplies might never have reached their destinations by surface transportation.(9:8) The troops in the field were grateful for these flights. One liaison pilot expressed it this way, "I wish you could see the faces of men who have been hidden

away in the mountains without mail or cigarettes for two or three months, when one of our planes lands."(9:8) This entry from the 5th Liaison Squadron's December 1944 unit history further illustrates this gratitude: "25 December 1944 - Climaxing a week of mail deliveries to the GIs in isolated areas, our Pilots outdid themselves in playing Santa Clause by flying Christmas mail to the boys at the front up to (the) last flying minute of the day. The gratitude and affection that GIs hold for the work of the liaison planes is something to record on this Christmas Day and has much to do with the wonderful spirit and high morale of the 5th Liaison Squadron.(5:V-15)

The contributions of enlisted pilots are many and varied. Seventeen men became aces in World War II with Major William J. Sloan being the top scoring ace in the Mediterranean theater with twelve kills.(14:133; 18:331) Many of the enlisted pilots rose to and retired at field grade ranks; seven became General officers, most famous being Brigadier General "Chuck" Yeager.(14:153; 17:30) At least four enlisted men earned the Silver Star, S/Sgts. George L. Buzzard and Carl. W. Hughes from the 5th Liaison Squadron, and T/Sgt Eugene Salternik and S/Sgt James Nichols from the 25 Liaison Squadron earned the Silver Star.(5:V-10; 7:-; 16:156) S/Sgt Buzzard won his medal for this action on 23 November 1944: "Squadron received a call to effect a rescue of imperiled fighter pilot, F/O Howard D. Collins, of the 60th Fighter Squadron, 33rd Fighter Group, who had been forced to bail out over enemy territory. S/Sgt. Buzzard volunteered to attempt a landing and pick up the beleaguered

pilot. The field chosen for this dangerous mission was covered with a three-foot foliage of elephant grass, but Sgt. Buzzard skillfully and courageously landed his L-1 plane on this tract. On reaching the plane, the fighter pilot shouted, "Lets get out of here! They're (Japs) shooting at us." In as much as prearranged plans called for leveling and building an adequate strip to take off, this unexpected change of plans increased the peril of both men and plane. With unusual and extraordinary skill, Sgt. Buzzard engineered a takeoff from this difficult terrain and brought the grateful pilot to home base."(4:V-8) T/Sgt Eugene Salternik and S/Sgt James Nichols, stationed at Gasup, New Guinea, were awarded Silver Stars for their part in rescuing a downed P-40 pilot 15 February - 10 March 1944.(16:156)

Two enlisted pilots were personal pilots for VIPs; Eddie Russell became a personal pilot for Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery and Charles I. Bennett piloted General Eisenhower. (14:153) Major William C. Ocker, the third enlisted pilot on record in 1914, did studies on the phenomenon known as "vertigo". He and Lt. Carl Crane developed a system of blind flying making all-weather flying possible.(12:31-32; 14:98,184) Sgt. Pilot Walter Beech, along with his wife, founded the Beech Aircraft Corporation.(13:23) Even though the Air Force doesn't have enlisted pilots today, our enlisted aircrew members serve no less gallantly. Three pararescue technicians were recognized for their bravery and unselfish acts of heroism for their part in a firefight in Mogadishu, Somalia on 3-4 October 1993. TSgt Timothy Wilkinson was awarded the Air Force Cross, the highest

award possible short of the Medal of Honor, and MSgt Scott Fales and SSgt Jeffery Bray were awarded the Silver Star.(15:4)

In summary, this paper explored the enlisted pilots of World War II. It looked at the beginnings of the enlisted pilot program, arguments against enlisted pilots, and what forced the Army to train enlisted members to be pilots. Then it told why these individuals became pilots. It explained the types and differences of enlisted pilots: regular, glider, and liaison. It then explored liaison squadrons; their aircraft, environment in the Pacific theater, and their missions. Finally it mentions a few achievements of enlisted pilots. Our nation owes all these individuals much. These aviators helped make history, shape a nation, and changed the world. But most of all, they accomplished what many of us can only dream of; they were Enlisted Pilots.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY SOURCES

1. Armogast, Edgar R. Interview with author. Montgomery, Alabama, 10 Nov 1983. Transcript of tape recording, United States Air Force Historical Research Center, Maxwell AFB, Alabama.
2. Department of the Army, Escape and Evasion Bulletin # 14, 13 Feb 43.
3. Department of the Army, 5th Liaison Squadron History, Apr 43 - Oct 44.
4. Department of the Army, 5th Liaison Squadron History, Nov 44.
5. Department of the Army, 5th Liaison Squadron History, Dec 44.
6. Department of the Army, Letter: Medical History of 5th Liaison Squadron, 31 Dec 44.
7. Department of the Army, 5th Liaison Squadron History, Feb 45.
8. Department of the Army, 5th Liaison Squadron History, Mar 45.
9. Department of the Army, News Story: 19th Liaison Squadron, 9 Jun 45.
10. Gunn, Harold A. (Popp) Interview with Casey, Joseph H., Lt Col (Ret), USAF. Moraga, California, 17 Mar 1981. Transcript of tape recording, United States Air Force Historical Research Center, Maxwell AFB, Alabama.
11. Mayer, Walter F. Interview with author. Montgomery, Alabama, 8 Nov 1983. Transcript of tape recording, United States Air Force Historical Research Center, Maxwell AFB, Alabama.

SECONDARY SOURCES

12. Arbon, Lee, "Enlisted Pilots- A Forgotten Legacy, Part I." Sergeants, Vol 22, Number 3 (March 1983), pp. 30-32.
13. _____. "Enlisted Pilots- A Forgotten Legacy, Part III." Sergeants, Vol 22, Number 5 (May 1983), pp. 22-23.

14. _____ . They Also Flew, The Enlisted Pilot Legacy. 1912-1942, Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992.
15. Compart, Adrew, "McPeak Honors Three Who Aided in Mogadishu Fight." Air Force Times, 14 February 1994, pp. 4.
16. Frisbee, John L., "Jungle Rescue." Air Force Magazine, Vol 75, Number 5 (May 1992), pp. 156.
17. Mamaux, Harry O., III, Maj, USAF. "The Enlisted Pilot Program in the USAAF 1941-1942: Was it Successful?" Unpublished thesis, Air Command and Staff College, Maxwell AFB, Alabama, 1984.
18. Toliver, Raymond F. and Trevor J. Constable. Fighter Aces. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965.