

AFEHRI File 19-10

**Research Materials/Source Documents
ENLISTED FIRSTS**

**FILE TITLE: Corporal Vernon L. Burge
- First Enlisted Pilot**

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Burge, Vernon Lee, Captain, USAS. Born on 29 November 1888 in Fisher, Illinois. Captain Burge was the first known enlisted man to qualify as a pilot in the U.S. Army when, in March 1912, he received his Junior Military Aviator rating at Ft McKinley, Philippines. He was assigned to the 1st Aero Squadron in Mexico in 1916 and remained in that squadron until June 1917 when he was commissioned a Captain. Captain Burge then was transferred to the Signal Corps Aviation Section in September 1917 and assigned to Kelly Field, San Antonio, Texas from October 1917 to 16 April 1918 as an instructor pilot flying the JN-4D. He was then assigned to Rich Field, Waco, Texas as an instructor pilot in the Standard until 16 January 1919. World War I Decorations: World War I Victory Medal. Captain Burge continued his military flying career until 1925. He died on 6 September 1971.

Date.	Type of plane.	Type of engine.	Type of work done.	Detail of work done.	Duration.	Maximum alti.
			<p>Started flying in March 1912, at Ft McKinley, P. I. Qualified as Pilot and successfully passed J.M.A., tests. Also qualified for and received Certificate 154, F.A.I., Aero Club of America, April 1912. Type B & C Wright Pushers used exclusively. Enlisted man at that time, being the first enlisted man to fly in the United States army. Prior flying time prior to starting of this book as a conservative estimate <u>500 HOURS</u>, which should be on record in Washington. Have been flying continuously since 1912 and have flown all types of planes. Spent three years flying land and hydroplanes before returning to states. With First Aero Squadron in Mexico in 1916, and remained with that squadron until commissioned in regular army in June 1917, just prior to their departure overseas. Detailed in Air Service as a Captain September 1917 and in Air Service since that date.</p>	<p>Rich Field, Waco, Texas, May 1918.</p>		
			<p>I certify that the the above is a true statement:</p>	<p><i>V.L. Burge</i> V. L. Burge, Captain, A.S.</p>		
			<p><u>FLYING TIME PRIOR TO STARTING THIS BOOK 500 HOURS—CONSERVATIVE ESTIMATE. AS A MATTER OF FACT NO DOUBT HAD MUCH MORE TIME.</u></p>			

SERGEANT PILOTS' NEWSLETTER

Post Office Box 764 Columbus, N.C. 28722

Volume III, No. 2

July 1982

This is the last newsletter before the big event. When the November issue comes out our 40th Anniversary Reunion will itself be history. Be sure you don't miss it. Elsewhere in this issue will be the latest word on reunion plans. Please send your reservations on in to George Quisenberry. We need to have them and the money in hand well before the main event starts. More about that under the reunion news.

As part of the preparations for this momentous event we have been trying to generate a lot of publicity. Reunion notices have been sent out to all the major veteran organizations and many not so well know ones. About 40 in all. An article has appeared in the Air Force Times about Enlisted Pilots which mentioned our reunion, and a couple of men have generated some local interest via their hometown papers. BOB LAY 42-F Mather for one got a good write up in his local paper. It is an effort in which we can all join to do something for the cause. There are still a lot of names for which we do not have addresses or know their fate, the reunion notices in the various veteran publications will reach a few more, but stories in the local papers or even on the local TV news programs could tap many who might not otherwise be reached. Along this line, through the generous help of JOHN LAWRENCE, Editor and Publisher, and KEN HONKANEN, Reporter and feature story writer for THE NEWS LEADERS of Landrum, S. C., a feature story has been submitted to the Associated Press. A copy of that story is included with this newsletter—watch for it in your local paper, or even better yet, take this copy to them and inquire if they have received it over the AP wires. Your interest may be just the thing that triggers a decision to run the story in their paper. The more publicity we can get the more of the Real Pilots we can find and the merrier the reunion of old friends will be.

In Pursuit Of Heros

By Lee Arbon

I am sure that most of us are quite alike in our adolescence; strongly stirred by planes and pilots as they coursed our sky with glossy wings and noisy engines. I know they stirred me when they moved across my sky and did their thing, flew on and disappeared, leaving little but a vacant horizon in their wake—and oh yes, an up-turned face, a sense of wonder, and an invitation to adventure. I'm sure that most of us were quite alike.

Responding to that invitation and following in their wake, we did our damndest to emulate those earlier flights. As we did, they flew on, leaving us still trailing. They are gone now, their deeds surviving only in musty photo albums or foot lockers. In fortunate cases, the archives, museums, or surviving kin keep faded notes on who they were and what they did. From such scant momentos we try to reconstruct their stories. Thanks to one survivor, Mrs. Majorie Waters, we can focus rather closely on the first of our breed—her father, and the first enlisted man in America to be trained as an aviator, VERNON L. BURGE. He was born in Fisher, Illinois on November 29, 1888, and died in San Antonio, Texas on the 6th of September, 1971—just short of his 83d birthday.

Burge was an interesting man whose career went back to the beginning days of military aviation in America—back to August 1907 in fact, for that is when Private First Class Burge, looking like a cross between a youthful James Cagney and Bob Newhart, and just out of recruit training, reported for balloon duty with the newly formed 1st Aeronautical Detachment of the Signal Corps. At that particular moment the detachment, commanded by Captain Charles DeForest Chandler, was on temporary duty at the Jamestown Exposition in Virginia, demonstrating its balloon to festive crowds.

This assignment was fortunate for Burge, and typical of his uncanny ability to be at the right place at the right time with the right people and with the right attitude. Two of the several officers reporting to the detachment at that time for instance were Lieutenants Frank P. Lahm and Benjamin D. Fouois. Each officer would, in time, be in a position to advance Burge's career in aviation.

(Continued next page)



Pvt. Burge, circa 1907, about the time of his assignment to the First Aeronautical Detachment. (Photo courtesy of Mrs. Marge Waters.)

In Pursuit Of Heros (Continued From Front Pg.)

When the exposition was over, the officers and men of the detachment were ordered to Washington Barracks for further training before taking their show on the road for a series of demonstrations at fairs and military tournaments; colorful and crowd-pleasing events enjoyed by all hands, in spite of the hard and hectic schedule they kept. Within a two week period in 1907 for instance, they participated in the International Balloon Races held at St. Louis, Missouri, then raced across the country by train to take part in the New York Auto Show.

By the following spring, Burge and his buddies, having become experts at handling "aeronautical devices" were sent to Ft. Meyer, Virginia, to assist with the pending Army trials of a number of aeronautical machines, due to arrive in the summer months. One was to be a dirigible constructed and to be demonstrated by Captain Tom Baldwin, a famous aeronaut, and Glenn Curtiss, the designer and builder of the engine which powered the craft. Heavier than air machines were to be demonstrated as well. A Mr. Herring was rumored to be bringing an aeroplane, as were the Wright Brothers, but the idea of heavier-than-air-craft had not yet breasted the sea of skepticism, and Burge notes in his memoirs that chances for securing a contract for such craft were considered less than moderate.

The dirigible passed its trials (barely) and was accepted—becoming Signal Corps Dirigible No. 1. Mr. Herring and his aeroplane failed to show, and the Wright machine crashed, severely injuring Orville Wright and killing Lieutenant Selfridge. The only craft to survive the summer trials was the dirigible. It became the show piece for the circuit of tournaments and fairs that fall of 1908 and the spring of '09, and Burge became the "Mechanician" for its engine.

It was not an easy season. Plagued by problems of handling, tenting, transporting and servicing the strange ship, the crew was further put upon by the wind and weather as noted in Burge's diary entry for May 21, 1909: "... 6:30 p. m. Took ship out for flight. Lts Lahm and Foulois made fine flight of about five minutes duration in considerable wind. Lt. Winter then took the engine. It being his first attempt, he started off alright, but it became evident he could not handle it in the high winds. They circled the field and then headed in to the wind, but could make no headway, so they turned around and tried it again without success Lt. Lahm then threw out a drag line and three men seized it, but Lt. Winter failed to shut off the engine, it was impossible to hold the ship. They wrapped the line around a fence post, but it pulled the post up and headed for telephone lines. Being only about 20 feet high and running at good speed, it failed to clear the high poles. The ship struck one head-on, tearing a great hole in the nose of the bag. The frame (gondola) was over the wires and when enough gas escaped from the bag, it settle over the frame, buckling it in the center and causing the propeller to engage the telephone wires, twisting them into wreckage, running the service in that area for some time." Then ruefully adding, "The engine was rescued without injury, but most of the frame will have to be rebuilt."

Burge remained with the dirigible crew until ordered to Ft. Sam Houston, Texas for "aeroplane work," reporting March the 5th, 1910. where, according to his diary, he: "... located Lt. Foulois with nine men repairing the aeroplane which had been smashed up quite a bit in a slight accident."

Assigned as a mechanician for the Wright machine, Burge labored long and hard on it. A civilian mechanic from the factory, Mr. Oliver Simmons, became a friend and mentor, teaching Burge a lot about the ship. Burge became familiar with the Curtiss pusher too when that plane arrived and with a newer model of the Wright aeroplane on loan from Mr. Collier of magazine fame. He took advantage of every opportunity to learn from the demonstrations and conversation of pilots who were sent from the Wright and Curtiss factories to teach Lt. Foulois the finer points of flying. Men like P. G. Parmelee and Frank Coffyn from the Wright factory, and Eugene Ely from Curtiss Parmelee hooked Burge on flying for good when he took him for his first ride.

Another strong attraction for Burge, when it came to town, was the Moisant International Air Show with its contingent of flamboyant flyers and machines. It was there where Burge pursued his own heroes. These were the finest flyers in the world and he was enthralled by them. There was the American, Hamilton; the French team of Garros, Barnier, Simon, and Audemars; and Frisbie—the Irishman. All doing their best to kill themselves, or so it seemed to the crowds.

Duty was good at Ft. Sam Houston or "Ft. Sam" as it is still known. San Antonio was an exciting and "air minded city" with plenty of pretty girls and places to court them—amusement parks, dances, baseball, and parlor games, but it couldn't last forever. A student pilot, Lt. Kelly, was killed in the crash of the Curtiss pusher and official support for aeronautics at Ft. Sam began to wane. The government Wright aeroplane was shipped to the Smithsonian, Mr. Collier's craft was returned, and Lt. Foulois was reassigned. By the end of 1911, Burge was on his way to the Philippines, accompanying a new aeroplane to be used by Lt. Lahm for his new aviation school at Ft. McKinley.

When Lt. Lahm encountered difficulty rounding up enough officers to train, his faithful crew chief, Corporal Burge, volunteered and was accepted. Together with Lt. Moss L. Love, they became Lahm's first students, each qualifying in May of 1912 and certified by the FAI (Federation Aeronautique Internationale) in August. Burge with number 154 and Lt. Love with number 155. It is hard to imagine any Corporal in any army at any point in history who could have felt more proud than Corporal Burge. At that moment he was unique!

Two months later Corporal Vernon L. Burge, "Aviator", became Sergeant Vernon L. Burge, "Aviator."
More graduates were produced by Lt. Lahm the following summer. One of whom was Lt. Herbert A. Dargue of the Coast Artillery. He returned to artillery after flight training, but in an altered role. With others, he shared the view that the aeroplane could significantly enhance the Corregidor defenses then in place. To support this idea, Lt. Dargue and Sgt. Burge made many flights out of Corregidor during the next year and a half, carrying out airborne experiments in a most fragile and unlikely craft bearing the Signal Corps number 17 on it. It was a Burgess-Wright Hydroplane, one of a kind and a hand-me-down requiring extraordinary tender loving care. It served them well however, until lost during a take-off in "puffy" winds near Corregidor. With their aeroplane inventory and flying activity reduced to zero, Lt. Dargue and Sgt. Burge were returned to the USA to resume "Aeroplane duty" at Rockwell Field near San Diego. While there, Burge continued to function as a mechanician and aviator, and in due time was promoted to Sergeant 1st Class, to Master Signal Electrician, and to acting Sergeant Major of the 1st Aero Squadron.

When the Squadron moved to Ft. Sam Houston in the fall of 1915, Burge came with it, returning to his old stomping grounds—briefly. By the following March, the squadron was operating in northern Mexico over terrain and in climates which cast its pilots and its planes in roles more fitting for a comic opera than for the punitive expedition it was known as. Burge completed his final tour of detached service in the interior of Mexico in the fall of 1916, and went on furlough to Washington, D. C. to further his career.

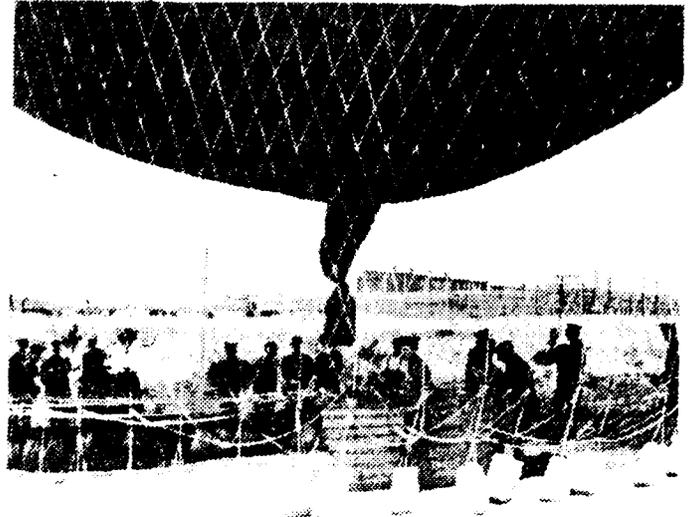
It was at this point that Burge's long and devoted Army aviation began to pay some dividends. Although Lts. Lahm and Dargue had recommended him for a commission in the Philippine Scouts while there, his transfer to the USA voided the process. It was not until after the punitive expedition into Mexico wound down that Burge was again recommended for a commission—this time for one in the Regular Army. He completed his examination and, supported by letters from officers with whom he had served, took the train for Washington. He received his commission the following June, 1917, as a provisional Second Lieutenant, becoming a regular officer in September of the same year—thus ending his career as the Army's first enlisted pilot.

Burge demonstrated the whole array of traits desired in the soldier and non-commissioned officer of his day. He grew with the state of the art, becoming a skilled mechanic, a competent aviator, and able administrator long before leaving the ranks of those "Soldier Pilots" as some called them. He continued to grow throughout his career as a flying officer as well.

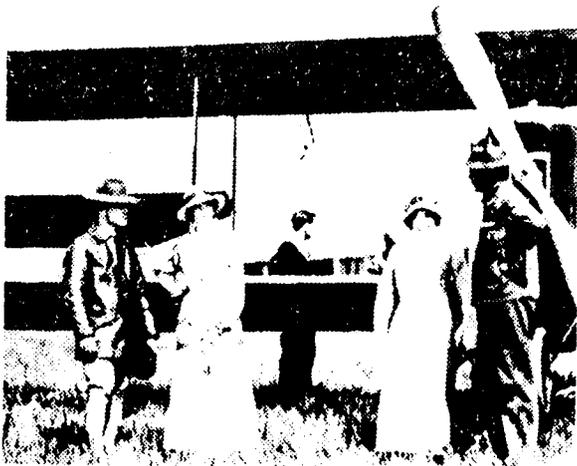
By the time the third class of future Flying Sergeants entered flying school in October of 1941, Colonel Vernon L. Burge was retired from active service after nearly 35 years. He has flown on, leaving us still trailing in his wake—and the pursuit continues.



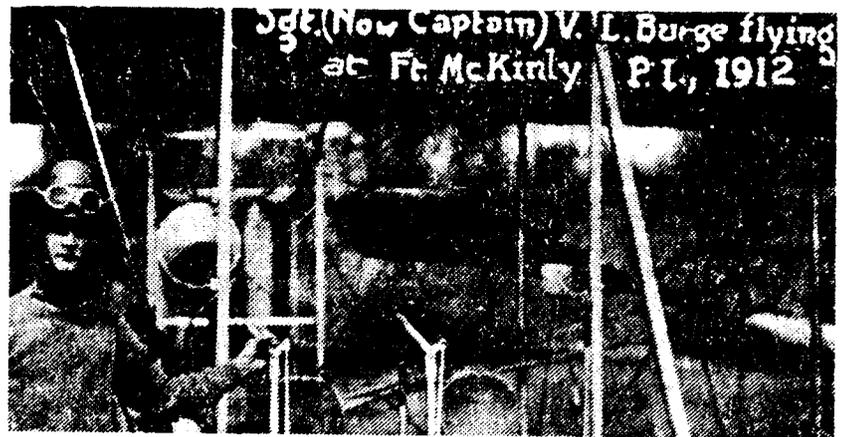
Burge (back row, middle) and his balloon crew buddies. (Photo courtesy of Mrs. Marge Waters.)



Burge and his buddies busy with balloon. (Photo courtesy of Mrs. Marge Waters.)

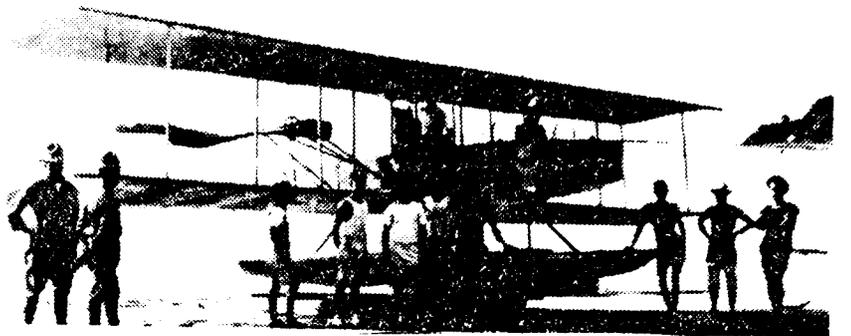


Of those halcyon days Burge spent at Rockwell Field in 1915, he wrote: "... flying would begin at the break of dawn and continue for a few hours to escape the winds which would occur later. Pilots would then adjourn to the Coronado Hotel where most of them lived and were heroes to the beautiful debs at that famous old society resort." (Photo courtesy of Mrs. Marge Waters.)



So far as we can determine, this man was America's first "Flying Sergeant." (Photo courtesy of Mrs. Marge Waters.)

The Burgess-Wright Coast Defense Hydroplane (Signal Corps No. 17), on San Jose Beach, Corregidor. Lt. Dargue and Sgt. Burge flew her for almost one and one-half years. (Photo courtesy of Mrs. Marge Waters.)



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The Sergeant Pilots' Newsletter is dedicated to the promotion of the interests of individuals who are rated as Pilots or Military Aviators and who served for any period of time in the U. S. Army or U. S. Air Force as enlisted pilots of powered aircraft - other than Liaison type - to the promotion of them as an association, to their reunions, and to their rightful recognition in the history of aviation.

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**Corporal
Vernon Burge:**

THE ARMY'S FIRST ENLISTED AVIATOR

by

William I. Chivalette
Director of Operations
Airmen Memorial Museum

Uncle Joe Cannon, famous Speaker of the House in 1909, on the flight trials of the Army's first aeroplane:

"You cannot convince me that the thing will fly."

After the plane was successfully catapulted into the air, he commented:

"Well, it's flying, but you can't make me believe that it will stay up."

When the Wright brothers electrified the world with the first powered aeroplane flights at Kitty Hawk in 1903, Vernon Burge was attending public school at Ivesdale, Illinois. Little did he realize the Wright brothers would build the Army's first aeroplane and he, Vernon Burge, would become the Army's first enlisted pilot. Burge paved the way for the approximately three thousand enlisted aviators who followed in his footsteps during the next three decades.

American aviation, however, was not born with the Wright brothers' stick-and-cloth, box kite-like contraption; rather, it began with the noiseless rising of balloons.

The Chief Signal Corps Officer, Brig. Gen. James Allen, officially established the Aeronautical Division in a War Department memo on August 1, 1907. Corporal Edward Ward's copy read:

"This division will have charge of all matters pertaining to military ballooning, air machines, and all kindred subjects."

Vernon Burge's association with America's fledgling air service paralleled that of the birth of the Air Force itself. If anyone was well-suited for the position of first enlisted aviator, it was Vernon Burge. He looked at the world through intelligent blue eyes. His blond hair and complexion

made him appear younger than his 24 years indicated (see photograph below right). When the opportunity to fly presented itself, Burge already knew how the Wright aeroplane operated and was personally associated with many of the outstanding aviators of the day. That familiarization gave him the advantage over his peers, but most of all, he was eager to fly.

The establishment of the Signal Corps' Aeronautical Division in 1907 found Private First Class Vernon Burge assigned to Fort Omaha, Nebraska. By late August, the youthful Burge was a veteran of 106 days in the Army. Ordered by his company commander to report to the unit's orderly room, Burge volunteered to take his chances in a balloon. Those fateful words dramatically influenced his commander to send him to the newly formed aeronautical detachment of the Signal Corps. Burge and his fellow enlisted peers became the nucleus that eventually evolved into today's enlisted Air Force.

In all, Vernon's commander selected six men he ordered to aeronautical duty at the Jamestown Exposition in Virginia. When Burge and the other PFCs reported in they found several men from Fort Wood, New York, there ahead of them. Among the chosen few was Corporal Eddie Ward, the first enlisted man assigned to the Army's Aeronautical Division.

As one of the first men assigned to the tiny Aeronautical Division of the Signal Corps, Vernon served as a ground crewman and balloon

handler his first five years. Burge and the five other volunteers boarded a train for Jamestown, Virginia. Prior to their departure, however, the Army saw fit to promote each volunteer to Private First Class and pay them. Corporal Ward met the six volunteers at the train station and marched them to the exposition grounds where the 23rd Infantry provided billeting and messing facilities. Their new commander, Captain Charles De Forest Chandler, announced that civilians Israel Ludlow and J.C. Mars would conduct their training as balloon handlers.

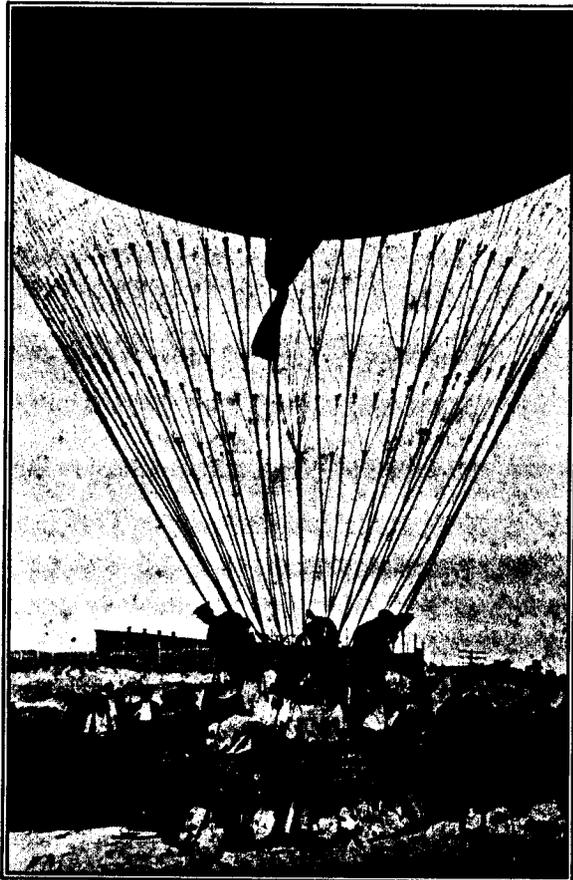
While there, they became involved with Mr. Ludlow's unsuccessful experiments using a bamboo glider towed by a boat. Mars, on the other hand, taught the men how to carry passengers aloft in their training balloons.

During the latter part of September 1907, the aeronautical detachment

(as it was known then), received orders to report to the Washington Barracks, Washington, D.C., for further instruction in balloon handling. There the celebrated balloon pilot and manufacturer, Mr. Leo Stevens, instructed them in all aspects of balloon maintenance and handling. Captain Chandler provided additional



Private Vernon L. Burge with the Signal Corps Aeronautical Division, August 1907. C/O Majorie Burge Waters.



Novice balloon handlers of the Aeronautical Division prepare a balloon for ascension, circa 1908. C/O Marjorie Burge Waters.

and Major Henry B. Hersey won the inaugural Gordon Bennett Balloon Race in September 1906.

After instruction in Washington, the Army ordered the detachment to Jefferson Barracks, Missouri, where they assisted contestants in the 1907 Bennett International Balloon race. The men were divided among nine balloon teams from four different countries. Vernon's assignment was the *Dusseldorf*, from Germany. The crowd was estimated to be 100,000 strong; the young apprentice balloonists were eager to show off their newfound skills, especially with the numerous young ladies to impress.

Burge's balloon placed third in the race. The closest American entry, the *America*, finished in fourth place. The end of the race also marked the end of the fun and excitement. On October 24th, the detachment boarded a train, waved goodbye to the belles of St. Louis, and returned to Washington.

Winter soon set in, so Burge and the men placed the balloons in storage. Meanwhile, they moved to the Signal Corps School at Fort Wood, New York, to continue their training.

instruction in weather and wind currents (see photograph above left and right). Additionally, while in Washington, the men met and worked with Lieutenant Frank P. Lahm. The lieutenant had just returned from Paris, France, where he



The first enlisted men to serve with the Aeronautical Division, minus Eddie Ward; Burge, bottom row, 2nd from left, circa 1908. C/O Majorie Burge Waters.

When the spring of 1908 arrived, they moved to Fort Myer, Virginia. Later in the year, the men prepared for several flight trials of experimental flying machines. The three machines involved in the trials included one from the Wrights, whose heavier-than-air machine was considered the only major contender. One entry was a lighter-than-air dirigible, powered by a new, Glenn Curtiss-designed lightweight four-cylinder engine. The other heavier-than-air entry was one by Augustus M. Herring. The premise behind the trials was not to demonstrate flight but rather to show the ability to carry out military-related tasks.

After the dirigible arrived, young Burge

The dirigible failed to attain top speed by only one mile-per-hour and had to forfeit a percentage of the bid price.

Despite the fact that the Army had not officially accepted the strange, cigar-shaped Baldwin dirigible, it made its public debut at the St. Joseph, Missouri, Military Tournament (see photograph below).

The Army officially accepted the dirigible on August 28, 1908, and named it Signal Corps Dirigible No. 1. Its designer, Thomas S. Baldwin, agreed as part of his contract to train two pilots in its operation. Consequently, he trained three, Lieutenants



The Baldwin Dirigible at the St. Joseph, Missouri, Military Tournament, circa 1908. C/O Majorie Burge Waters.

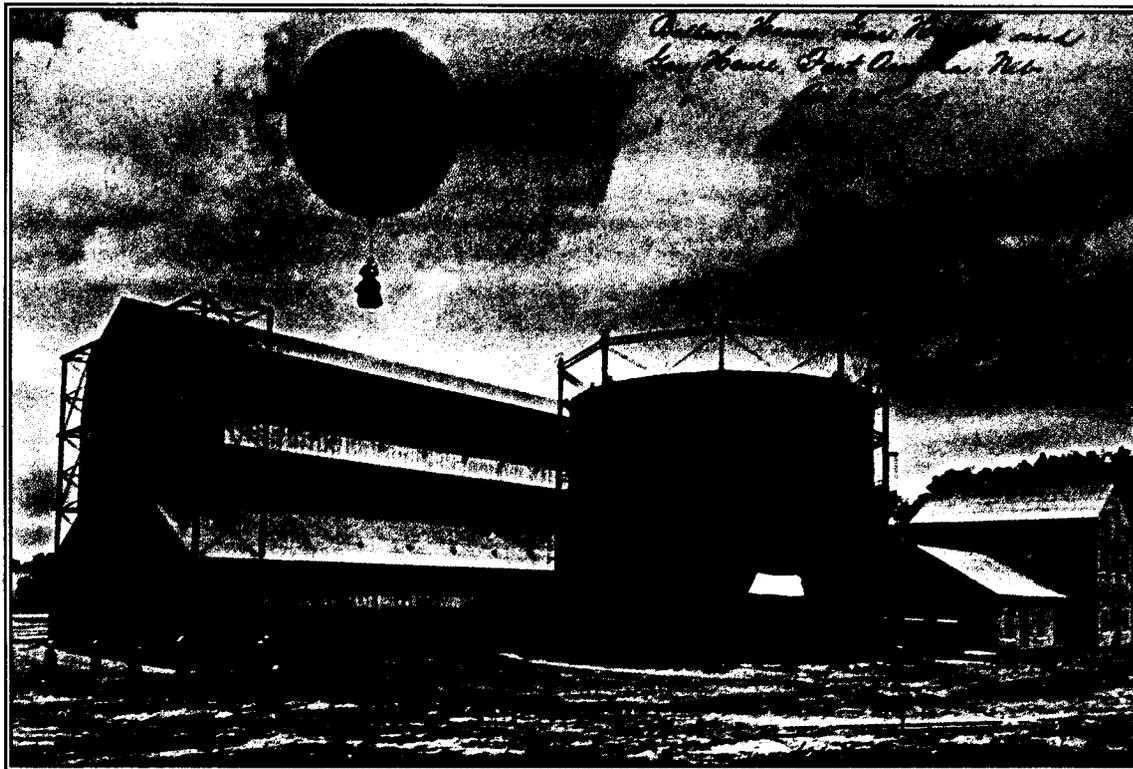
wrote:

"It looked like an overgrown cigar. Underneath was suspended a framework which contained a Curtiss four-cylinder engine and its controls."

Frank Lahm, Benjamin Foulois and Thomas Selfridge. Additionally, they trained the ground crew on the care and handling of the craft. Vernon Burge, as a member of the ground crew, paid particular attention.

Another winter came and went, and with it, the division again moved to Fort Wood, New York, for school. In the spring of 1909, they returned to Fort Myer, Virginia, but by May, the dirigible and personnel moved to Fort Omaha, Nebraska. The unabated winds at Fort Omaha created unique problems for the fledgling air service. While taking the airship out for a five-minute flight in a brisk wind, Lieutenants Foulois and Lahm experienced the division's first serious indignity. After launch, it quickly became evident that the two young officers could not control the ship in the high winds. They circled the airfield, yet could not make headway in the wind. They threw down a line, but the ship

propellers severed several wires, disrupting local telephone service. The collision and subsequent damage to the dirigible led to increased rope training for Burge and the others on maneuvering over and around obstructions. Likewise, it posed problems for the detachment. The Army scheduled the unit to participate in the Toledo Military Tournament on the Fourth of July, which was only one month away. To get ready, the detachment rebuilt the dirigible, then manufactured and compressed enough hydrogen gas to fill two hundred metal containers, all within the span of two weeks (see facility in photograph below).



Airship hangar, gas holder, hydrogen plant, Fort Omaha, Nebraska, October 24, 1908.
C/O Majorie Burge Waters.

pulled up the fence post it was tied to and drifted toward some power lines. The dirigible struck one of the telephone poles head-on, and tore a great gash in its nose. The lower portion, holding the two distraught lieutenants, came to rest on the telephone lines. The whirling

Worn out from their exertions, Vernon and the crew prepared for what they hoped would be an exciting tournament. Fate, however, was not kind to the Aeronautical Division. When they arrived at Toledo, anything that could go

wrong, did. It rained constantly, hoards of hungry mosquitoes abounded, help was scarce and the tournament organizers had made no preparations for their arrival. Subsequently, the detachment formed three details, one crew unloading equipment, another erecting the large dirigible tent, and the last unloading the dirigible from the rail cars.

Although they completed all preparations, the bad luck continued. As they inflated the dirigible, a strong wind ripped the tent holding it apart, severely damaging the airship. After all the hard work and misery Burge and his fellow crew went through, repairs could not be made in time for the tournament. To assuage the situation and somewhat prolong the long trip back, they spent their time sewing the dirigible back together. Still, the detachment took advantage of their misfortune by mixing with the crowd and flirting with some of Toledo's young ladies.

But, all was not pleasant, for the weather grew from bad to worse as they loaded the damaged dirigible back onto the train. Lightning struck all around, hitting a government teamster and his mule team with lethal results. Two days later, they finally arrived back at Fort Omaha, at midnight and with the rain still falling.

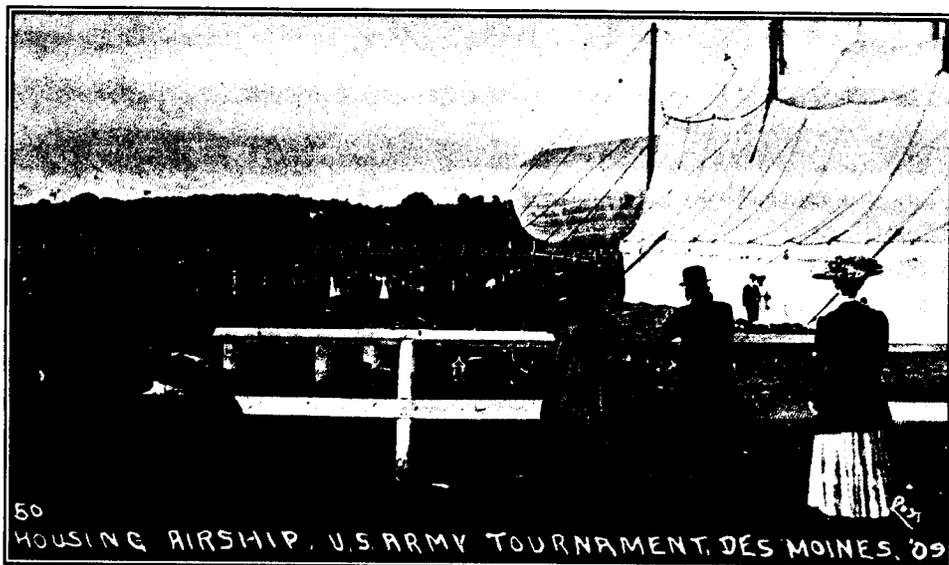
Despite their experience at Toledo, they made another appearance with the dirigible, this time at the Des Moines, Iowa, Tournament in mid-September 1909 (see photograph right). It took three weeks to repair damage to the dirigible from the Toledo tournament, but that was well before this affair.

Weather conditions, however, remained the same.

Bad weather forced the men to wallow in the mud just to set up their equipment. In spite of the miserable conditions, the tournament remained on schedule. However, the crew experienced everything from high winds to engine malfunctions. It took five days before the crowd of approximately ten thousand was able to witness four flights of the dirigible. Although elevator and engine problems plagued the crew, they managed to successfully fly and land the craft to the sounds of a wildly cheering crowd.

Burge and his associates struck their tents, broke camp and loaded everything back on rail cars on September 27, arriving back at Fort Omaha at midnight. This time, however, the men were so tired they did not bother to get off the train until morning.

They did other shows with just as many adventures, like the January 1910 airshow at Los Angeles, California. Burge did not travel to that particular airshow; instead, he attended the Signal Corps



Housing Army Dirigible #1 during the Des Moines, Iowa, Tournament, September 10, 1909. C/O Majorie Burge Waters, Airmen Memorial Museum.

School during the day and night school in

the evening, seeking to broaden his education.

In February 1910, the Army transferred Burge to Fort Sam Houston, Texas, where he served Lieutenant Foulois as mechanic (mechanic) on the Wright aeroplane purchased by the Army five months earlier. The Army ordered Lieutenant Foulois to teach himself to fly it, then establish an aviation school there at Fort Sam Houston (see photograph right).

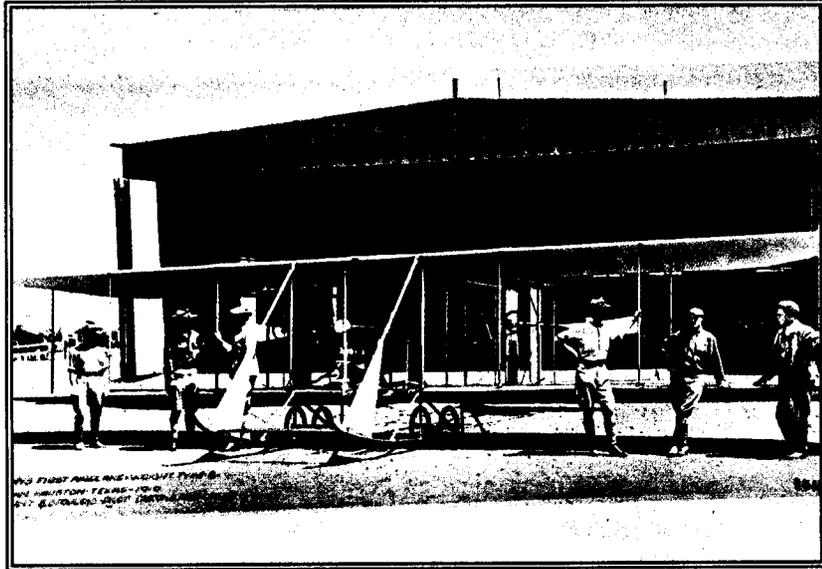
Burge arrived at the San Antonio rail station on March 5, 1910, where he cleaned up and took a streetcar to the fort. He was extremely happy with both the assignment and the fort. Vernon immediately went to the aeroplane shed and reported to Lieutenant Foulois.

Burge and his nine cohorts watched apprehensively each time Lieutenant Foulois gamely tried to master the art of flying. They breathed a sigh of relief each time the lieutenant skidded the aeroplane to a dusty, safe stop.

The mechanics performed all of the engine maintenance on the Wright Type B aeroplane, and would start the engine and taxi the craft for maintenance purposes. Burge became proficient in taxiing the aeroplane after a period of time.

Burge was much more than a mere mechanic for Signal Corps Aeroplane No. 1, he virtually lived and breathed aviation. He eagerly attended every aviation event that his duties would permit. Quite often, the San Antonio area hosted aviation events, and Burge attempted to attend them all. While attending to his hobby, he met many of the pioneers of early aviation, including Glenn Curtiss, Capt. Tom Baldwin and the daredevil Charles Hamilton. Burge learned of many aviation innovations at these events and

met many of the men behind them. He examined the Curtiss machine, and Captain McMannis' modification of the Curtiss and Wright machines, incorporating the swinging engine for altering the craft's



Army's First Aeroplane, Wright Type B, Fort Sam Houston, 1910, Burge left and Lt. Foulois middle right. C/O Majorie Burge Waters.

center of gravity.

The Army leased a newer Wright aeroplane owned by Robert F. Collier, and sent one of its exhibition pilots, Phillip O. Parmalee, to Fort Sam Houston to instruct Lieutenant Foulois in the particulars of its operation. Burge, now a corporal, and his crew assembled the newer plane, relegating old Signal Corps Aeroplane No. 1 to an adjacent tent while moving the new craft into the hangar.

As a reward for his work, Parmalee took Burge for a short flight in the Collier aeroplane. It was a pivotal moment in Burge's life; he knew from that time on, he would never be satisfied until he, too, became an aviator.

Soon after Parmalee left, on April 4, 1911, Signal Corps Aeroplane No. 2, a new Curtiss machine, arrived. Burge and his crew assembled the craft over the next

several weeks. Eugene Ely arrived to instruct Lieutenant Foulois on the particulars of the Curtiss machine. Lieutenant Ely also began instructing newly arrived Lieutenants Beck, Kelly and Walker on the Curtiss machine. Burge and his men performed maintenance on both aircraft.

Two incidents, one a fatal tragedy, the other a near tragedy, forced General W. H. Carter, the commander of Fort Sam Houston's Maneuver Division, to order an end to flying at the field. While trying to land the Curtiss aeroplane, Lieutenant G. E. M. Kelly descended at too steep an angle, hit the ground and collapsed the front chassis. Thrown in front of the craft upon impact, the young aviator never regained consciousness and officially became the first Army pilot to lose his life in a military aircraft (Kelly Field was named after him). The machine was totally destroyed. The other near accident occurred when Lieutenant John C. Walker Jr. took the Curtiss up in a strong wind, lost control and nearly crashed.

Burge remained at Fort Sam Houston for a while, acting as caretaker for the Wright Flyer. To avoid boredom, he volunteered his time in the print shop, assisted in the installation of a new wireless station, and clerked for the signal officer.

In August 1911, Gen. James Allen, the Chief Signal Officer, recommended the establishment of an air station in the Philippines. In September, Lt. Col. William A. Glassford, Chief Signal Officer of the Philippines, requested two aeroplanes and one trained aviator be sent to participate in the 1912 maneuvers. General Allen wanted to comply with the request; however, there was an extreme shortage of men and officers in the War Department. On December 11, the Army shipped a Wright B aeroplane (S.C. No. 7) and two mechanics (Corporal Burge and Private First Class Kintzel) to the Philippines.

Later that month, Burge received orders to accompany the newer Wright aeroplane to Fort McKinley, Philippines. There he joined Lieutenant Lahm, who would establish an Army flying school at the fort.

Burge boarded the U.S. Transport *Sheridan* on January 5, 1912, and left San Francisco as an Army band played "Auld Lang Syne."

The ship arrived in Honolulu on January 14, where Corporal Burge lent muscle to loading coal on board. His visit to Honolulu was brief and they set sail for Guam. The *Sheridan* arrived in Guam on January 28 and left the same day. It was the last land the troops would see until they hit the Philippines. On February 3, they arrived at the Philippine archipelago, where the ship steamed through the San Bernardino Straits to Manila.

Burge awoke the next morning to a whole new world. His view of the Filipino people was to him an eye-opener. The people wore few clothes and the women smoked right out in the open, in the streets, just like men. After he left the ship, Burge had a carromata (a two-wheeled, horse-drawn cart) take him to the Signal Corps post.

Burge reported in along with Private First Class Kintzel, but was not ordered to Fort McKinley until a hangar was built for the aeroplane. The Army Quartermaster was building a two-plane hangar shed on the edge of the polo field at Fort William McKinley to house the aeroplane. Meanwhile, he pulled kitchen patrol (KP), charge of quarters (CQ), and guard duties. The Army obtained five more mechanics (Sergeant Cox and Privates Dodd, McDowell, Johnson and Corcoran) in Manila, Philippines.

Lastly, it detailed Lieutenant Lahm from the 7th Cavalry, Philippines, to open a Philippine Air School on March 12, 1912.

Corporal Burge, in charge of the enlisted detachment, oversaw the clearing of the landing field. The hangar was finished on March 13, and the aeroplane assembled six days later.

Lieutenant Lahm finally took the machine out for a flight. On that first flight, he managed to break the right skid, two struts and a skid brace. Burge finished the repairs the same day. To his credit, Lieutenant Lahm had been out of aviation for three years and was relearning how to fly. Lahm got progressively better, and on April 5, he took Burge up as a passenger. They made eight short flights, but only averaged 30 feet of altitude because of engine trouble.

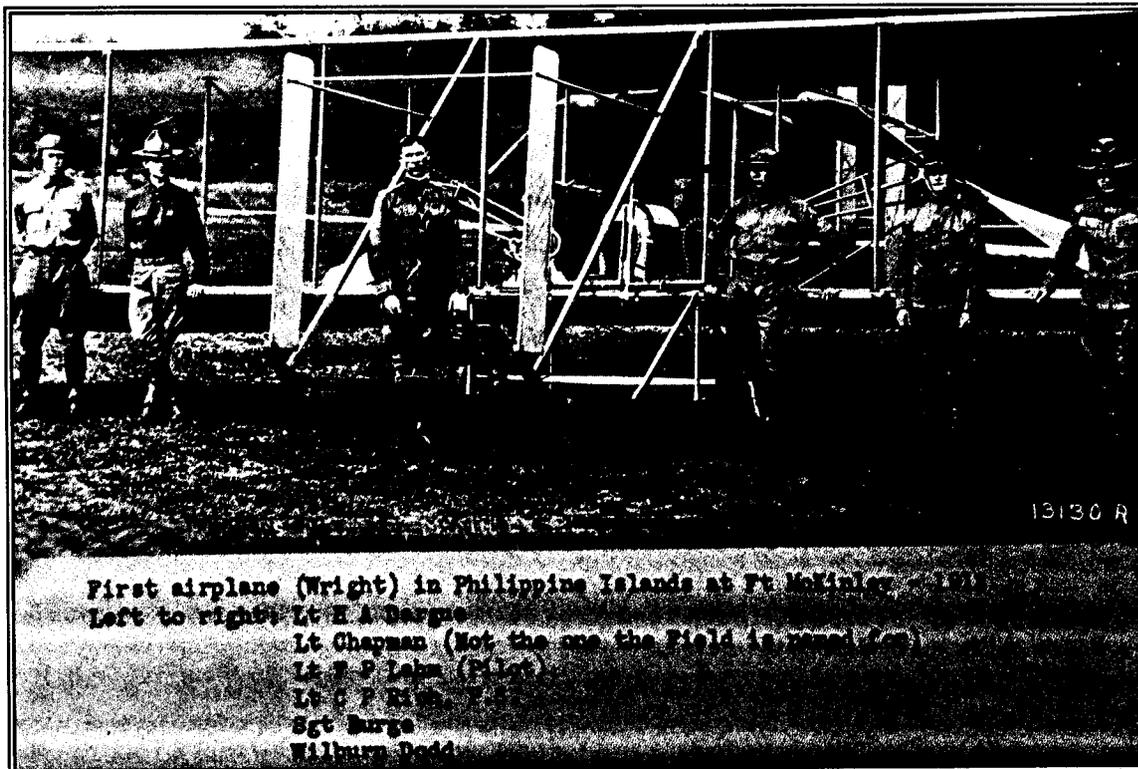
As a member of the Aeronautical Division for over four years, Burge was one of its most qualified aeroplane mechanics. However, he

Lieutenant Moss L. Love reported for flight training. Burge and Love both received their instruction from Lieutenant Lahm, making them the first two official students at the flying school.

Burge became the first enlisted man taught to fly by the Army, passing the FAI test on June 14, 1912, and receiving aviation certificate No. 154.

Love passed his test on June 28 and received aviation certificate No. 155 (see photograph below).

In March 1913, three additional



First airplane (Wright) in Philippine Islands at Ft McKinley, 1912.
 Left to right: Lt H A Gergie
 Lt Chapman (Not the one the Field is, same name)
 Lt F P Lahm (Pilot)
 Lt C P Rich
 Sgt Burge
 Wilbur Dodd

First aeroplane(Wright) assigned to the Philippine Flying School at Fort McKinley, 1912.
 C/O Majorie Burge Waters, AMM.

remained a true student of aeronautics and harbored the hope of flying one day. He got his chance when Lieutenant Lahm accepted his flight training request. Lahm selected Burge because of a shortage of officers in the Signal Corps available for instruction, much to Burge's delight.

On April 8, Lahm instructed Burge on the aeroplane's operation. On April 29, 1st

student aviators, all lieutenants, reported to Lahm for training.

Lieutenant Lahm requested a new Wright C aeroplane to upgrade their much-used and often damaged flier. The Army saw fit to honor that request, and in May, a new Wright C aeroplane arrived from the United States named Signal Corps No. 13.

Burge and his men assembled it, after which Lahm and Burge learned to operate its new duplicate controls. When Burge became familiar with both positions, Lahm utilized him as an assistant instructor (see photograph right). Sometime in September, the men installed pontoons on the aeroplane, and Lieutenant Lahm attempted to test them in Manila Bay. Unfortunately, he was unable to get the plane off the water. They tried again the next day, but despite an accelerated speed of fifty miles per hour, the aeroplane flew only 10 feet in the air, then crashed.



Sergeant First Class Vernon L. Burge, October 12, 1912. C/O Majorie Burge Waters, Airmen Memorial Museum.

Burge and his men stood by for just such an emergency. They rowed over and extracted Lahm from the water.

Soon after the accident, the Army reassigned Lieutenant Dargue and the new Sergeant Burge (promoted October 1912) to Fort Mills on the island of Corregidor. There they established facilities for a newly arrived but damaged Burgess-Wright hydroplane, Signal Corps No. 17. It was similar to the Wright plane, except it had pontoons instead of wheels and a fabric-covered fuselage surrounding the cockpits (see photograph below left).

Burge and Dargue made many flights and served as observers for the Coast Artillery. As the only aviators on Corregidor, they shared piloting duties on the island's only aeroplane. Dargue and Burge continued flying the fragile hydroplane for 15 months, a credible accomplishment, considering it was

damaged and obsolete when they received it.

In December 1914, the Army ordered Burge to duty with the Signal Corps' 1st Aero Squadron at North Island, San Diego, California.

Glenn Curtiss began his famous flying school there in



Burgess-Wright Coast Defense Hydro Aeroplane, Signal Corps No. 17, Corregidor, P.I., 1914. C/O Majorie Burge Waters, AMM.

1911, prior to the Army's arrival. The Army established its' aviation school at North Island in November 1912. As a "mecca for aviation students," the field not only produced practically all of the famous early Army pilots, but anyone connected with aviation, or who hoped to be connected with aviation, was also drawn there.

Burge immersed himself in his new duties, and quickly became acquainted with other enlisted pilots. Two were Corporal William A. Lamkey, the Army's second enlisted pilot, and Sergeant William Ocker. Sergeant Ocker watched Burge fly at Fort McKinley in 1912, and on his own initiative, became the Army's third enlisted pilot. Ocker requested a transfer to the Aviation Section from his commanding officer, "Billy" Mitchell, who later came over himself.

Captain Benjamin Foulois commanded the 1st Aero Squadron. One of his first moves was to obtain as many of his old mechanics from the early days of Fort Sam Houston as he could. Among them was Vernon Burge. He and his fellow mechanics were on hand when the 1st Aero Squadron received new Curtiss JN-2s from the factory at Buffalo, New York. As they uncrated the new aircraft, their initial excitement turned quickly from disappointment to despair. Many of the new aeroplanes were defective and required either overhaul or outright rejection. Even when the best mechanics the 1st Aero Squadron had to offer assembled the new aircraft, they proved both underpowered and overweight.

Despite their aircraft, the squadron proceeded to Fort Sill, Oklahoma, for temporary duty at the Artillery School of Fire. Prior to departure on July 26, Burge and his men dismantled the aeroplanes and placed them on railcars for shipment to Oklahoma.

The squadron arrived and found no facilities prepared for them, so they literally carved a tent city in the Oklahoma summer heat. Additionally, the aircraft performed poorly and demands for their use exceeded their capability. The planes could scarcely climb with two people aboard, a point that became tragically evident when a plane crashed with two aboard on takeoff,

killing a spotter, Captain G.H. Knox.

On August 14, 1915, the Army ordered two aeroplanes and crews to Brownsville, Texas, to work with U.S. artillery batteries posted close to the Mexican border in an attempt to discourage the infiltration of bandits.

In mid-November, the Army ordered the unit to Fort Sam Houston. While pilots flew the aeroplanes to San Antonio, the enlisted men proceeded by truck convoy. Others under Burge, now the acting sergeant major of the squadron, moved by rail. The squadron arrived on November 26, completing the first mass cross-country flight in aviation history. It was a remarkable feat considering the aeroplane's limited capabilities in 1915.

Pancho Villa and a band of followers crossed the U.S.-Mexican border on March 9, 1916, and raided the small town of Columbus, New Mexico, killing a number of American settlers. As part of General Pershing's Punitive Expedition, the 1st Aero Squadron served as the general's eyes and messengers. Four days later, the nation's total air might (eight JN-3s) was train-bound for Columbus.

Burge found the fragile planes underpowered and unable to withstand the rigors of Northern Mexico's mountains. Burge and his men were fighting a losing battle, laboring endlessly to keep the planes airborne.

After a month of less-than-desirable flying operations, it was obvious the Curtiss JN-3 was not suitable for the Aviation Section's small air force. The Army purchased some new Curtiss R-2s and sent them to Columbus for the 1st Aero Squadron in May 1916. The squadron returned from Mexico to Columbus to equip itself with the newer models. They completed the conversion by July 21, and returned to Mexico, where Burge and his crews adequately maintained

the new aircraft.

One interesting incident occurred when Lieutenant Ira Rader made a reconnaissance flight near Parral, Mexico. The U.S. Cavalry pursued Poncho Villa to the gates of Parral, knowing full well that the bandit was hidden within the village. Lieutenant Rader had to land some 20 miles away from the American Cavalry. He engaged a Mexican to guard his plane while he walked the rest of the way through hostile country to the American lines. The lieutenant was quite sure he would be unable to return and retrieve the plane. It would be interesting to know how long the Mexican guarded the plane, or what became of it.

While the 1st Aero Squadron operated out of Mexico, the Army examined the manner in which it carried out its mission. They considered how aviation would affect national policy with the possibility of American involvement in the European war. The 1st Aero Squadron returned to Columbus from Mexico when the Punitive Expedition withdrew. Early in 1917, they received orders to sail to France, where they participated in flights over enemy lines, receiving credit for downing many German planes.

Section II of the Act of July 18, 1914, legitimized the selection and training of enlisted pilots, but restricted their numbers to just 12 men. The National Defense Act of June 3, 1916, elevated the selection of new enlisted pilots to the Secretary of War, and removed the constraint on their numbers. Many enlisted personnel applied for pilot training, but by the fall of 1916, only seven had completed the course. Most of those received commissions soon after America declared war on Germany.

Meanwhile, Burge returned from Columbus, New Mexico, with a 90-day furlough and an application in his pocket for a commission in the Regular Army. Burge caught the train to Washington, D.C., armed with recommendations from officers under whom he served, and hand-carried his application through channels. He headed home on furlough to Fisher, Illinois, and in March 1917, received word that he would soon be commissioned. On June 26, 1917, two-and-a-

half months after the United States declared war on Germany, Burge received his commission (see photograph below). The Army ordered him to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, for officer training, then assigned him to Kelly Field to assist in establishing a mechanics training department. By the time he arrived at Kelly in October 1917, he had received two rapid promotions and a set of captain bars, none of which was yet three months old. He remained at Kelly until April 4, 1918.

Thus ended Vernon Burge's enlisted career. Burge was involved in many more major aviation events in America's fledgling years, and his career continued to parallel important events in aviation



Vernon L. Burge is commissioned in the regular army as a 1st Lt., August 25, 1917. C/O Majorie Burge Waters, AMM.

history.

Upon his retirement on January 31, 1942, Colonel Burge had served in every grade from private to lieutenant colonel for a span that

he closed his flight log one last time on a career that spanned the first 35 years of military aviation. He spent 30 of those as a pilot, logging 4,667 hours and 55



Colonel Vernon L. Burge on the eve of his retirement in 1941 after his final flight. C/O Majorie Burge Waters, Airmen Memorial Museum.

bridged some 32 years. He saw the Air Corps grow from one aeroplane and ten men to its 1971 strength.

Vernon Burge flew his last flight in October 1941, a 45 minute cross-country hop in an AT-6 (see photograph above). Upon landing,

minutes of flying time.

The Army's first enlisted pilot, Vernon L. Burge lived 82 event-filled years.



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THE ENLISTED PILOT LEGACY

by **GEORGE E. HICKS**

In August of 1907, the War Department authorized the creation of a formal Aeronautical Division composed, at the time, of one officer and two enlisted men. The founding order specified that the trio was to "... have charge of all matters pertaining to military ballooning, air machines and all kindred subjects ..."

That was the beginning. It was an era of experimentation, fragile heavier-than-air craft, cigar-shaped dirigibles and tethered balloons.

At the time, few of those who flew or those who actually drafted the policies understood the dynamics of flight. In fact, in those early years, most of the military planners regarded the balloon as the "thing of the future." Yet, a few aircraft were procured and distributed to American military garrisons. The handful of experienced aviators who actually received the aeroplanes were responsible for assembling the craft and training others to fly.

In 1911, Corporal Vernon L. Burge

received orders to report to the Philippines. He was an experienced aeroplane "mechanician" and balloon handler. His specific assignment was to assemble the new Model C Wright aeroplane, Signal Corps Flyer Number 13, and maintain it for Lieutenant Frank Lahm's "... newly created Philippine aviation school at Fort William McKinley."

In the spring of the following year, Vernon L. Burge trained as one of Lahm's first student pilots and satis-

fied the requirements for an aviator's certificate. When that fact was reported to Washington, Lt. Lahm received a rebuke that matter-of-factly stated, "It is not the policy of the War Department to train enlisted men in flying . . . very few . . . are qualified to observe military operations or render accurate and intelligent reports of what they see . . ."

Vernon Burge was the first of more than 3,000 young enlisted airmen to earn their pilot's wings in the three decades that followed. And, in order to deal with the dilemma, the War Department wrote and rewrote the policies in an attempt to define who was eligible for flight training, the criteria for aviation pilots, and what kind of aircraft or cargo they could and could not transport.

On the more personal level, these young aviators directed the energies of engines lashed to fabric-covered spruce struts held together by bailing wire and piloted by guts. Getting up was one thing, the time aloft was the treat, but they frequently wondered if the damn thing would hold together when they landed.

Then, in the years between the world wars, a diversity of problems arose. Economic times were tough. It was a period of national uncertainty, and military programs came under severe scrutiny from an anxious Congress. The uniformed services were cut, airplanes were simply not available, spare parts inventories were not maintained, fuel was hard to come by, and aviation slots were reserved for the commissioned officers.

Despite the difficulties of the "roaring '20s" and the depression of the 1930s, aircraft were modified and used as ambulances and rescue vehicles. In response to the Air Mail contractors strike, the United States Army Air Corps' enlisted pilots flew the missions and delivered the mail. When the Alaskan-Canadian territory and the Great Smoky Mountains National Park were photographed and mapped, enlisted pilots were in command of some of the aircraft.

These young men were bound by one single purpose — they wanted to fly. Willingly, they performed the host

of mundane garrison duties as they anxiously awaited their turn in the cockpit.

The stories, their exploits and their accomplishments are legion. These young pilots were — in the modern venacular, free spirits — with ice water in their veins and a devil-may-care attitude. Yet, their abilities as pilots were unmistakable. They were good. Damn good.

Within the ranks, they were heroes. They composed the few who wore the wings of an Army Aviator. And, if I had to pick a favorite personality in enlisted aviation, it would almost certainly have to be Sergeant Raymond "Uncle Chew" Stockwell. He was a huge walrus of a man with a neatly trimmed beard, a booming voice and piercing blue eyes. He was an aerial photographer and one of the most skilled pilots to ever operate on the Alaskan frontier. His work as pilot and photographer graced the pages of *National Geographic Magazine* and enabled the mapping of the Alaskan-Canadian Highway.

He was a man who definitely took some getting used to. His physical presence was intimidating and his appearance often did not fit the military "mold." Stockwell took particular pride in his mustache and beard, which he frequently described as "virgin hair" — it had never known a razor. While serving on the Alaskan frontier, he once encountered an astounded commander from the spit-and-polish stateside Army. The impeccably uniformed officer pointed to the NCO's beard and asked, "What's THAT?" Uncle Chew responded rather factually: "It's hair, sir. It grows there!"

Chew was also a gifted instructor pilot who maintained a possessive approach to his planes and his pupils. But, then, it took a dedicated sort of student to fly second seat in an open cockpit biplane with Uncle Chew — given the multitude of brown streaks of tobacco juice that adorned the fuselage from cockpit to vertical stabilizer!

Master Sergeant Ralph Bottreill possessed a different sort of commitment. He was one of the Army's pio-



Private Vernon L. Burge, at the time, and six other recruits, volunteered for "balloon duty" with the newly created Signal Corps Aeronautical Division in August 1907. (Photo courtesy of Marjorie Burge Waters).



THE ENLISTED PILOT LEGACY

neers in parachute jumping. At age 24, Bottreill had some 700 to 800 jumps to his credit either from balloons — he started at age 16 — or aeroplanes. Then in 1919, he jumped successfully from an aircraft in flight, employing a parachute with a D Ring and a ripcord device for the first time. The D Ring and the ripcord were his inventions and enabled endangered aviators the ability to exit an aircraft with some added measure of safety. His exploits and his near-brushes with death caused many an anxious moment and earned him a Distinguished Flying Cross in 1933.

Then in 1941, Congress half-heartedly funded Public Law 99, which provided some conditional training possibilities and gave "... enlisted flying students the title of Aviation

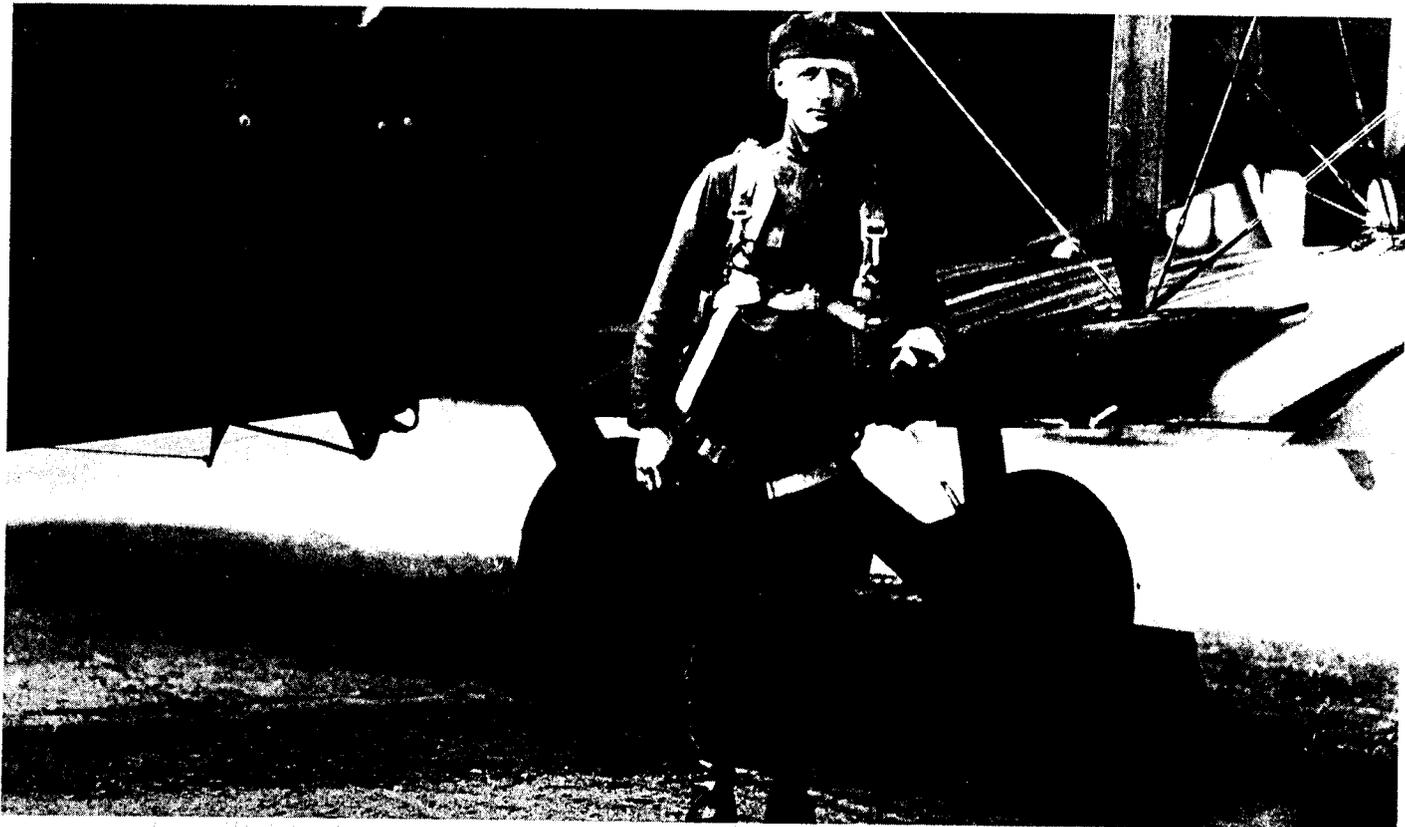
Students." Graduates of the program "... were awarded the rating of pilot and warranted as a staff sergeant."

By that time, too, much of Europe was teetering on the brink of, or immersed in, World War II. American public opinion was divided on the subject of whether or not to be aggressively involved in those hostilities. Within the uniformed ranks of the Army Air Corps, many enlisted men sought the coveted slots for flight school. Some prospective aviators were impatient and doubted if they would ever receive one of the coveted aviation appointments in the Army Air Corps. Rather than wait, they crossed the border and joined the Canadian Royal Air Forces. There, the candidates "enjoyed" the rigors of the Canadian flight training program, and the graduates earned the inverted chevrons of our ally. Many of those who earned the Canadian wings were then transferred to England and a number fought to repulse the German Luftwaffe in the Battle of Britain. While some did not survive, many others ultimately transferred back to the United States Army Air Corps follow-

ing the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. In fact, there were at least 145 staff sergeant pilots who transferred back to American service. They had the unique distinction of wearing the pilots' wings of two nations.

In the earliest months of World War II, sergeant pilots did all that they were supposed to do and more. They provided a core of experience that could — and did — serve as a foundation to build the Army Air Forces. They were proven pilots of experience and longevity. They had indeed been around. Those pilots with chevrons winged their way to the various forays around the world *in command* of fighter aircraft, transports and bombers. They served with bravery, honor and distinction. Yet, official Washington still did not know how to cope with the concept that enlisted men could actually be trusted with aircraft. To put an end to the dilemma once and for all, they called for new legislation.

In late 1942, Congress enacted the Flight Officer Act — Public Law 658. As a result, "... those sergeant pilots produced by the Staff Sergeant Pilot Program were promoted to flight of-



Sergeant Ralph W. Bottriell, standing beside a DH-4, displays the parachute "D" ring he designed. The "D" ring enabled the jumper to open the parachute at his own discretion. In 1933, Bottriell was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross in recognition of his part in the development and testing of parachutes. (USAF Museum photo).

ficers . . . reserving forever, the cockpit for the commissioned." Some of the noncommissioned pilots received their new ranks expeditiously. Still, others did not.

At the time, Staff Sergeant Forrest Bruce served as a pilot with the 374th Troop Carrier Group, which was committed to evacuating wounded G.I.s from Dobodura in the Pacific. On one particular mission, SSgt. Bruce noticed that a battered and bloodied ". . . American infantry sergeant was watching him with more than casual interest. The bloody and battle-weary sergeant watched me and my co-pilot, who happened to be a second lieutenant, for a minute or two. Then, preparing to board, he paused and asked, 'Are you the pilot of this plane?' 'Yes,' I answered.

"Are you the boss?' he asked skeptically. 'Yes,' I repeated.

"Glancing toward my co-pilot again he asked, 'Do you tell him what to do?' 'I sure do,' I assured him.

"A smile slowly broke on his face and continued to widen. Shaking his head, he boarded the plane for his trip out of hell. Boarding the plane myself, I ambled up to the crew compartment and took the left seat. Looking back into the cabin I could see by the still-present grin on his face I had made his day."

The enlisted pilot legacy is a colorful one to be sure. There were characters like Uncle Chew, pioneers like Burge and heroes like Bottrell. And, there were thousands more who simply wanted to fly, to serve, and to contribute like SSgt. Forrest Bruce.

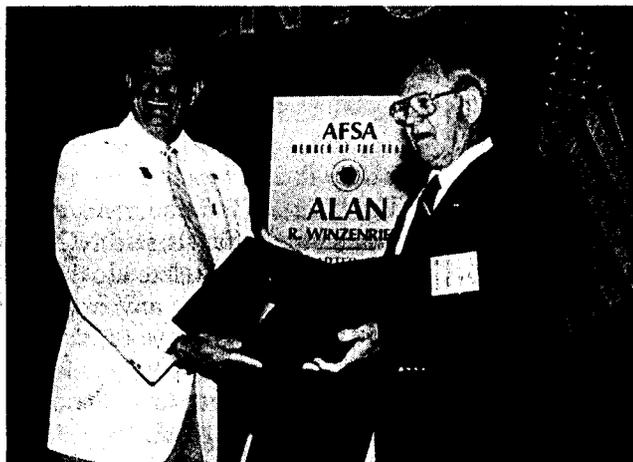
From their ranks came some of America's youngest heroes. A review of their accomplishments reveals that 17 of them became fighter aces. More than 155 of their number were killed in action. Eleven were promoted to the general officer ranks. A handful served as a cadre of trainers for Pan American Airlines. One ultimately co-founded the Beech Aircraft Corporation. Yet

another pair resigned from the United States Army Air Corps when they were denied a commission. Instead, they volunteered to serve Chaing Kai-Shek and train Chinese fighter pilots. From that experience came the founding of the famous "Flying Tigers" of World War II.

The enlisted pilot legacy is the story of real people, a special group of men who confronted the system, sought an opportunity and found a way to realize their dream. They served, they sacrificed and they say with pride that . . . "They Also Flew."

(Editor's Note: The preceding historical information was obtained from a culmination of efforts by former World War II Staff Sergeant pilot Lee Arbon in his book "They Also Flew: The Enlisted Pilot Legacy, 1912-1942," and historical research by the Airmen Memorial Museum. Mr. Arbon's book is available from the museum by calling 1-800-638-0594 or 301-899-3500.)

FORMER SERGEANT PILOT IS AWARDED THE AFSA AMERICANISM AWARD FOR EMBODYING THE . . . **ENLISTED SPIRIT**



Former sergeant pilot Lee Arbon (R) receives an AFSA Americanism Award from then AFSA International President Victor F. Bartholomew during the AFSA International Convention in Indianapolis.

Former Army Air Corps sergeant pilot and noted historian Lee Arbon realizes the sacrifices and contributions made by enlisted people to the defense of our nation and feels that history books have overlooked many of these accomplishments. Because of this, he has dedicated thousands of hours documenting the service and sacrifices of sergeant pilots and all Army Air Corps and U.S. Air Force enlisted members. His efforts have culminated in his authoring of the Smithsonian Institution Press' publication of "They Also Flew: The Enlisted Pilot Legacy, 1912-1942." Due to this diligence and devotion, Arbon was recently awarded the AFSA Americanism Award during the association's international convention in Indianapolis, Ind.

Mr. Arbon enlisted in the Army Air Corps six months prior to the bombing of Pearl Harbor and entered flying school as a private first class. In June 1942, he graduated as one of a select few staff sergeant pilots and was deployed to what was known as the "Desert Air Force" — the forerunner of the 9th Air Force. As a pilot in North Africa, Mr. Arbon commanded a C-47 that transported fuel, food and bombs to the Allied effort against German General Erwin Rommel. He also transported wounded allies of the British 8th Army Armored Force away from the action.

Mr. Arbon was later promoted to flight officer and second lieutenant in 1943. He retired from the U.S. Air Force in 1961 as a major with the Strategic Air Command.

AFSA's Americanism Award is presented to individuals who have displayed outstanding efforts in the support of the defense of our nation and the heritage and accomplishments of enlisted members of America's air arm.



Sgt. (now Captain) V. L. Borge, flying
at Ft. McKinley, P.I., 1912

M
Burgess, ~~Ver~~ ^{Ver}non L.

MY EARLY EXPERIENCES IN AVIATION

BY
MAJ. V. L. BURGESS, A. C.

Regarding my early experiences in aviation, the following resume is submitted which is possibly taken from what I feel is real beginning of military aviation in this country--

In August, 1907, I was a member of the Signal Corps stationed at Fort Omaha, Nebraska. The latter part of August, the Company Commander, Captain W. E. Barry, called me into the orderly room and asked me if I were afraid to go up in a balloon. Inasmuch as I had never seen other than a hot air balloon as used in circuses, I answered to the effect that I was willing to take a chance. I was then informed that an aeronautical detachment was being organized within the Signal Corps to be stationed at Jamestown Exposition, Pa. As I remember, six men were picked from Fort Omaha, Nebraska, and ordered to proceed to Jamestown Exposition for duty and report to Capt. Charles Chandler upon arrival. Names follow:

- P.F.C. - Benjamin Scholtz, Illinois
- * - Frank Miller, Akron, Ohio
- * - E. O. Eldred, Denver, Colorado
- * - E. E. Rosenberger, Philadelphia, Pa.
- * - G. E. Madala, New York City
- * - E. L. Burgess, Champaign, Illinois.

Of the above list, I am the only one still an active duty. The first three men have been lost track of. Rosenberger purchased his discharge at Fort Myer in 1908, joined the Washington Fire Department and was later killed by a fall from a fire ladder. Pvt. Madala died of tuberculosis at Fort Hill, Oklahoma in 1909 while the Det. Aero Squadron was still in camp there.

History 8/28/28/28/28

Upon arrival at Junction Station, we were attached to the 2nd Infantry for rations and quarters and reported to the aeronautical building, exhibition grounds for baby. Other than several aeronautical exhibits, the only aeronautical equipment was several free and captive balloons. Mr. Ives had a balloon of that period was in charge of building and was attempting to fly a glider of Yankee construction towed by a boat, which was unsuccessful. Also present and operating a captive balloon for passenger hire, was Mr. Red Ware, later a famous airplane exhibition pilot and believed to be still alive.

Upon arrival at Junction we also found that several men from Fort Ford, N. Y. had proceeded as we followed. Cpl. Edward A. Ward, now retired; Pvt. J. G. General, deceased; and Pvt. C. E. Collins, retired as Master Sergeant, U.S.A.

The latter part of September, 1907, the Aeronautical Detachment, as it was then known, received orders to proceed to Washington Bethesda, D. C., for station and for further instruction in balloon work. Upon arrival at Washington, the detachment daily proceeded to the Washington gas plant where they were instructed in setting, inflating, and handling of balloons. The instructor was Mr. Lee Stevens, a famous balloon pilot and manufacturer of balloons. During and after the Greek War, Mr. Stevens was an instructor at Fort Crane, Nebraska and South Field, Illinois.

During the time the detachment was in Washington, numerous free balloon flights were made by Captain Chandler and Lieutenant J. F. Lutz. The latter had only recently returned from Paris where he had won the international balloon race in 1904. Captain Chandler completed his tests for, and received his license as balloon pilot about this time. Captain Chandler died

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In December 1952, the Army obtained a flight plane to Manila, P. I. (C-47) and the plane was on duty with the 7th Group at Fort McPherson, P. I. It was detailed to fly the plane and establish a flight school. Two soldiers were sent to Manila as a nucleus for the school personnel. They were:

Corporal Norman E. Borge, Signal Corps
Pvt. E. Bennett E. Kistner, Signal Corps

General was assigned from Signal Corps Groups at Manila, Philippines, and assigned to duty at Fort McPherson in the Army.

A large shed had been erected on the lower end of Camp Field and the plane was assembled and flight class early in March, 1953, by Captain E. Borge.

In the meantime, several officers had been ordered to receive flight instructions as follows:

1st Lt. W. E. Borge, Company, killed at Fort McPherson, California

1st Lt. W. E. Borge, Company, killed at Fort McPherson, California

1st Lt. W. E. Borge, Company, killed at Fort McPherson, California

Colonel W. E. Borge, (now Colonel), Signal Corps, in charge of school. Detailed to receive instructions and qualified as a pilot in April 1953, before the first flight was to take place in the Philippines. He was assigned to the 7th Group, receiving flight instructions at Fort McPherson, California.

He was the only person who received flight instructions at Fort McPherson. In the meantime two more officers had been detailed to receive instructions:

2nd Lt. W. E. Borge, Signal Corps, now assigned to the 7th Group and a regular pilot.

2nd Lt. W. E. Borge, Signal Corps, killed at Fort McPherson, California.

2nd Lt. W. E. Borge, Signal Corps, killed at Fort McPherson, California. He crashed into the bay from a height of several hundred feet and was instantly killed.

Another airplane, a Burgess-Wright equipped with engines, had been received and it was shipped to Corregidor (land) at the estimate to Manila Bay, Iloilo. (now General) W. A. Burgess was in charge. Corporal (now Colonel) V. L. Burgess was ordered to Corregidor for duty. Many flights were made and artillery fire observed by the Coast Artillery. Later, Burgess also installed radio apparatus, which, while crude, actually worked and he succeeded in transmitting and receiving messages. Late in 1914 the plane was wrecked and Lieut. Burgess and Corporal Burgess were ordered to the Army Aviation School, San Diego, California, where they continued flying.

The annual report of Major General Franklin D. Bell, commanding the Philippine Division in 1917, is of interest. It reads as follows:

The Commission in signal corps work, in this division, benefitted from the fact that an acceptance was received in February 1917.

The machine is a DOW B. Wright airplane, 100-h.p., with floats, and a supply of spare parts. A hangar, 20 x 75 feet, inside dimensions, with concrete floor, elevated two feet, with a road entirely across the front, and large enough to accommodate ten warrented machines, was erected by the quartermaster's department on the reservation, adjacent to the polo field at Fort William McKinley, at a cost of \$1,500.00.

Lieut. Frank J. Bell, the pilot, was detailed for temporary duty with the signal corps for aviation work and entered upon this duty March 11, 1917. Five uncommissioned officers and four men of the signal corps selected for their mechanical ability and especially for their experience with aviation engines, were assigned in July as mechanics.

The airplane was ready for use from the first day March 11. It was ready, flights were made every morning; the total time in the air up to June 10, was 74 hours and 5 minutes.

On June 14 Sgt. Herman L. Page, signal corps, of the aviation detachment

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successfully fulfilled the requirements of the International Aeronautical Federation for an aviation pilot's license, and on June 25, Lieut. Ross L. Love, signal corps, successfully passed the exam test.

"There are at present three visitors to the station and one airplane. Application has been submitted for two airplanes, one a Clark wheel airplane suitable for use in connection with the Defense of Coronado Island, and the other a type B Wright machine for use at maneuvers at whatever needed."

Cpl. Borge, mentioned in the report, now colonel of the Air Corps, was the first enlisted pilot.

Lieut. Love was killed at San Diego in 1917.

The "three visitors to the station with one airplane" were Lieut. Love, Lieut. Love, and Cpl. Borge.

In 1904 all training activities for flight had been concentrated at North Island, a large sandy spit adjacent to San Diego, California, an ideal location for year round training. North Island is one the sites of the largest naval air training base in the United States.

North Island included practically all the early army pilots, among them being Lieut. Berkeley, E. G. Jones, flight officer to help the line to an end. Also, Hilling, Fitzgerald, Dutton, Merrill, Callahan, Capt. Redwood, Brewster, Delger, Gerkston, Murray, Kilmer, Dennis, Brett, Johnson, Curtis, Kennedy, Fogarty, Howell, Richards, Baker, Churchill, Cook, Ross, Brown, E. E. McConally, Lewis, Lawrence, Murphy, Egner, O'Leary, Willoughby, Kelly, Thayer, Ryan, Croshaw, Callahan, Sperry, et al. Robertson, an army officer. The civilian instructors were the famous Lieut. Fr. Henry Bishop, of the original Wright aviation team, and "Doc" Wilson of the PL (civilian aviation team). These two pilots trained (instructed) all of the early Air Corps pilots prior to 1917.