

# AIR FORCE Magazine

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### The Third Lieutenants

*By J.H. MacWilliam and Bruce D. Callander*

**Among the first to wear the "blue pickle" insignia of flight officer was a West Virginia boy named Chuck Yeager.**

The military caste system was alive and well in the early 1940s, but it was soon to clash head-on with the realities of rapid mobilization.

With war already under way in Europe and threatening in the Pacific, President Franklin D. Roosevelt called for the production of 50,000 military aircraft per year and aircrews to match. US industry, already building planes for Britain, geared up to produce more. Training flyers to man them would be a bigger problem.

The Army Air Corps still required pilot trainees to be at least twenty-one years old and to have at least two years of college, because they were to be commissioned on graduation from the training program. If the Army were to meet the new training goals, something had to give. Gen. H. H. Arnold, Chief of the Air Corps, supported the idea of training enlisted men with high school diplomas and graduating them as sergeant pilots.

Some of General Arnold's staff officers and field commanders had reservations. Britain's Royal Air Force had been using enlisted pilots, and some had wound up commanding crews with commissioned officers acting as copilots and navigators. The Air Corps did not want to repeat that social faux pas, the officers said.

Still, the Air Corps needed to broaden its pool of potential pilots, and there seemed to be little choice but to lower the age and education requirements. In June 1941, Congress authorized the training of enlisted "aviation students" to be graduated as staff sergeant pilots. The understanding was that they would tow targets, fly transports, instruct students, and do other odd jobs. Like the service pilots recruited directly from civilian life and the women in the ferry service auxiliary, they were to relieve officers for combat flying.

#### Then Came Pearl Harbor

When the United States entered the war, the Army still was woefully short of commissioned pilots, but it had graduated more than 400 men as sergeant pilots, and hundreds more were in the pipeline. The newly formed US Army Air Forces began to use the enlisted flyers wherever they were needed, including combat. Some did, in fact, command crews that included commissioned officers.

By then, the distinction between officer and enlisted pilots had blurred. As the pace of the buildup increased, USAAF lowered the entrance requirements for aviation cadets to admit eighteen-year-olds with high school diplomas. Now the criteria were essentially the same for the cadets who would be commissioned as for the aviation students who would become staff sergeants.

Logically, the solution might have been to commission the flying sergeants, but officials still had reservations. USAAF might find itself overpopulated with officers who couldn't have come within a country mile of prewar standards. In May 1942, USAAF asked Congress to create a new grade above the enlisted ranks but below that of second lieutenant. On July 8, the President signed Public Law 658, establishing the grade of flight officer (F/O), equal in status to that of warrant officer junior grade.

Three weeks later, Headquarters notified all commanders, "It is the desire of the Commanding General, AAF, that these new Flight Officers be accepted in the nature of 'Third Lieutenants' by all personnel and that they be required to comply with, and in turn to be treated in accordance with, all the customs and courtesies of the military service pertaining to commissioned officers."

That November, the first F/O appointments were made as pilot Class 42-J graduated from flight training. They were to wear colored bars like those of warrant officers except that the enameled portion would be blue instead of brown. With no such insignia available, the first graduates doctored officer bars with blue paint. Most pinned the makeshift insignia onto their enlisted uniforms, but a few managed to order the "pinks and greens" they were entitled to wear in officer status.

Among the first to wear the new rank was a cocky eighteen-year-old country boy from West Virginia. He had enlisted before the war, had become an aircraft mechanic, and had applied for the aviation student program. While he was still in training, the F/O law took effect, and he graduated with blue bars instead of staff sergeant stripes. A born flyer, he was assigned to fighters and

became an ace. In the process, he received a battlefield commission. Later, Charles Yeager would become America's leading test pilot and retire as a general officer.

The law that created the F/O rank applied not only to aviation students such as Yeager, but also to aviation cadets. Those who entered after the date of enactment could be graduated either as second lieutenants or as flight officers. By the spring of 1943, graduating classes from pilot, navigator, and bombardier schools were sprinkled with blue bars. The aviation student program had lasted only fifteen months and was phased out. The fact that hundreds of pilots had flown as enlisted men would be all but ignored by aviation historians for many years.

### **Meanwhile, Back at the War**

Though USAAF was creating no more staff sergeant pilots, it already had more than 2,000 of them in the field. By the time the F/O rank was created, at least three enlisted pilots had been killed in a troop carrier unit in the Pacific. Others were flying fighters in North Africa and New Guinea, commanding transports, or performing aerial reconnaissance. Bomber crews were being formed with sergeant pilots and commissioned bombardiers and navigators.

Headquarters gave commands authority to promote the enlisted pilots in their units, but it was a slow and confused process. Commanders debated whether the sergeants should be made flight officers or, since they already were senior to many of the newly graduated second lieutenants, given direct commissions.

At one point, Headquarters said the sergeants should be moved through the flight officer rank before being made lieutenants. Two months later, it said they could be granted direct commissions. At least six more sergeant pilots died in combat and another fifty-eight in training accidents before they were promoted to either grade. Those serving with the 82d Fighter Group were promoted en masse to second lieutenant before moving overseas. Others made lieutenant or flight officer, depending on where they were and what local policies were in effect at the time. Ironically, those flying with Stateside training and defense outfits usually received their promotions first. It was well into 1943 before those in England, New Guinea, and North Africa received theirs. As late as March 1943, there still were more than 800 pilots flying in enlisted status.

Rapid wartime reassignments were part of the problem. Some enlisted pilots were recommended for promotion at one base but moved to another before their orders came through. In the confusion, some continued to serve for months as flying sergeants.

One of the more extreme cases was that of Robert L. Bryant. Graduated as a staff sergeant in September 1942, he was assigned to the 1st Air Force in the northeastern US, but then quickly transferred to 3d Air Force in Florida, where he qualified in P-40s and P-39s. Both 1st and 3d Air Forces issued orders appointing him a flight officer. They caught up to him in North Africa, where he pinned on his blue bars and, six months later, received a direct commission from 12th Air Force. Thirty-two years later, when he retired as an Air Force colonel, Bryant discovered that officially he had never been a flight officer. Both of his Stateside F/O orders had been revoked and, without telling him, USAAF had revised his records to show that he had been a staff sergeant when he received his battlefield commission. Generously, however, the Air Force did not dock him for the months for which he had been overpaid.

### **Neither Fish Nor Fowl**

If the flight officer program solved the problem of putting enlisted men in command of aircraft, it also created anew one. USAAF was never entirely comfortable with the status of its warranted but still noncommissioned officers. Although General Arnold had said they were to be treated as officers, socially they fell somewhere between the enlisted and commissioned ranks.

They were a particular trial to some of the commanders who had risen through the ranks of the prewar Regular Army. In the explosive growth of the war, USAAF's numbers had swollen with teenagers commissioned in the temporarily large Army of the United States. The veterans of the "old" Army barely recognized these lieutenants as officers. They were even more reluctant to accept the newly contrived flying warrant officers as their peers.

There were fewer problems among flight crew members, most of whom were recently plucked from civilian life and had little feel for the subtleties of the ranking system. The F/Os who had been sergeant pilots had more experience than most of the newly commissioned officers had. The more recently graduated F/Os often were the classmates of the commissioned officers in their outfits. Their relative ranks weren't that important. If there was any resentment when an F/O was picked to lead a squadron or group, it was short-lived. Combat was not the place to debate one's social standing.

Financially, F/Os were actually a little better off than their commissioned counterparts. Their \$150 per month in basic pay was the same as that of junior grade warrant officers and second lieutenants and, like other officers, they received another \$75 (half of basic pay) as flight pay. But where the overseas allowance for commissioned officers was ten percent of their basic pay, that for warrant officers was twenty percent. Flight officers collected the warrant rate. Thus, a second lieutenant collected \$240 in combat, while a flight officer drew at least \$255 and often more because of his added time in service.

F/Os enjoyed another advantage over lieutenants. As the equivalent of warranted officers, they were not given the full responsibilities of commissioned officers. Whereas lieutenants were saddled with numerous additional duties when they were not

flying, flight officers usually had their ground time to themselves.

### **Who Got the Pickle?**

One question about the F/O status persisted through much of the war. When the Army had authority to award a flight training graduate either the gold bars of a second lieutenant or the "blue pickle" of a flight officer, how did it decide which he should receive?

Officially, the policy was to commission those with the best training records and leadership qualities and make the rest flight officers. However, there is no record to show that any of the aviation students in training when the F/O law took effect were commissioned on graduation, even though they legally could have been. When aviation cadets could have been granted either rank on graduation, some of the better students received blue bars, while some of those who had seemed on the verge of washing out became second lieutenants. At best, the decision of who qualified as "officer material" often appeared to rest with the subjective judgment of local flight school officials.

Another theory about the appointments was that the flight officer bars went to the men who had been the class mavericks, the cocky "hot pilots" who gave only a passing nod to military discipline. Though they often proved to be the best flyers in their outfits, F/Os had a reputation for being a wild bunch, and some seemed determined to act the part.

How many flight officers finally were appointed is uncertain. While the bulk of the blue bars went to pilots, bombardiers, and navigators, the rank was also worn by glider pilots, service pilots, flight engineers, gunnery control officers, and others. As late as the summer of 1945, there still were more than 32,500 on active duty. By then, of course, many who had held the rank earlier had already been commissioned. A check of the service numbers blocked out for F/Os shows that more than 200,000 were available, and most appear to have been used.

Exactly when the last flight officers entered service is also unclear, but the law authorizing the grade was not repealed until July 1947, two months before the Air Force became a separate service. At the same time, flight officers who had served in time of war were made eligible for reserve commissions. The short, turbulent era of the "Third Lieutenant" was over.

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