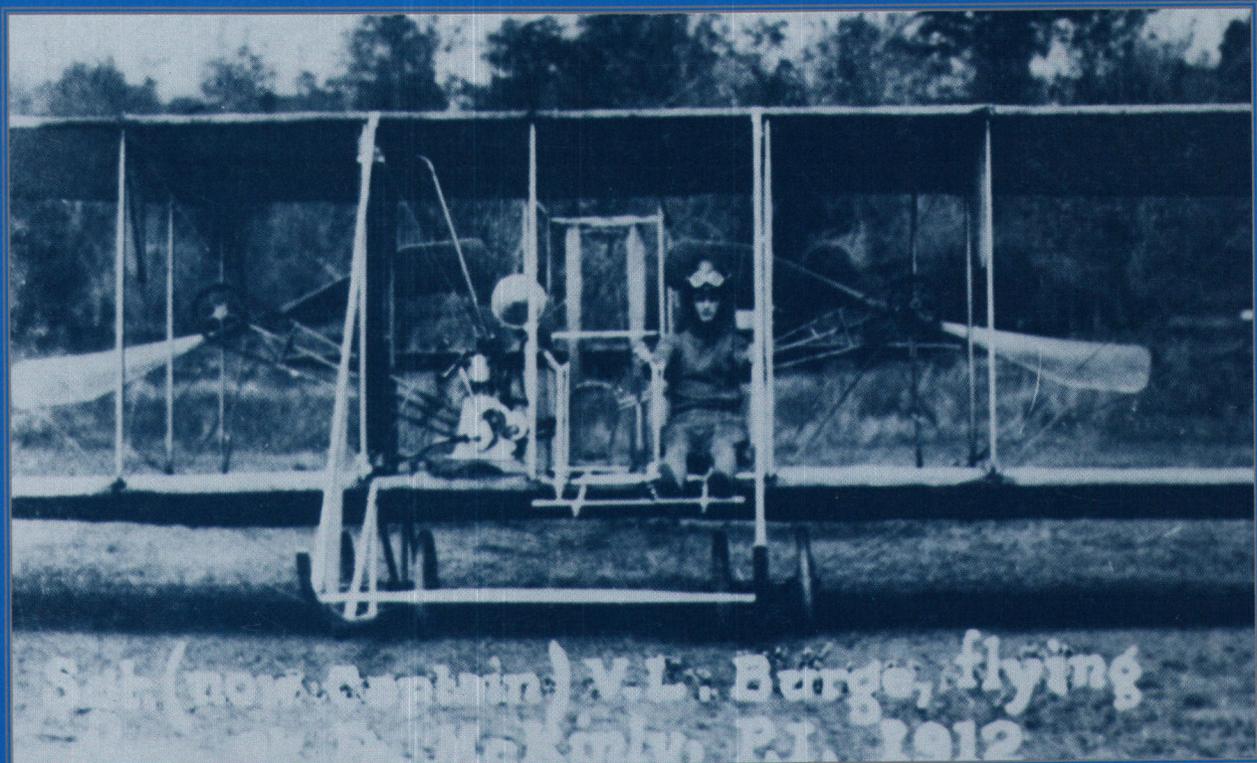




The Airmen Heritage Series
The Airmen Memorial Museum

VERNON L. BURGE
FIRST ENLISTED PILOT



Sgt. (now Captain) V. L. Burge, flying
the Wright Aeroplane, P.I., 1912
Vernon Burge sits in the seat of the Wright Aeroplane he accompanied to the
Philippines, February 12. (Courtesy of Majorie Burge Waters), AMM.



**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.

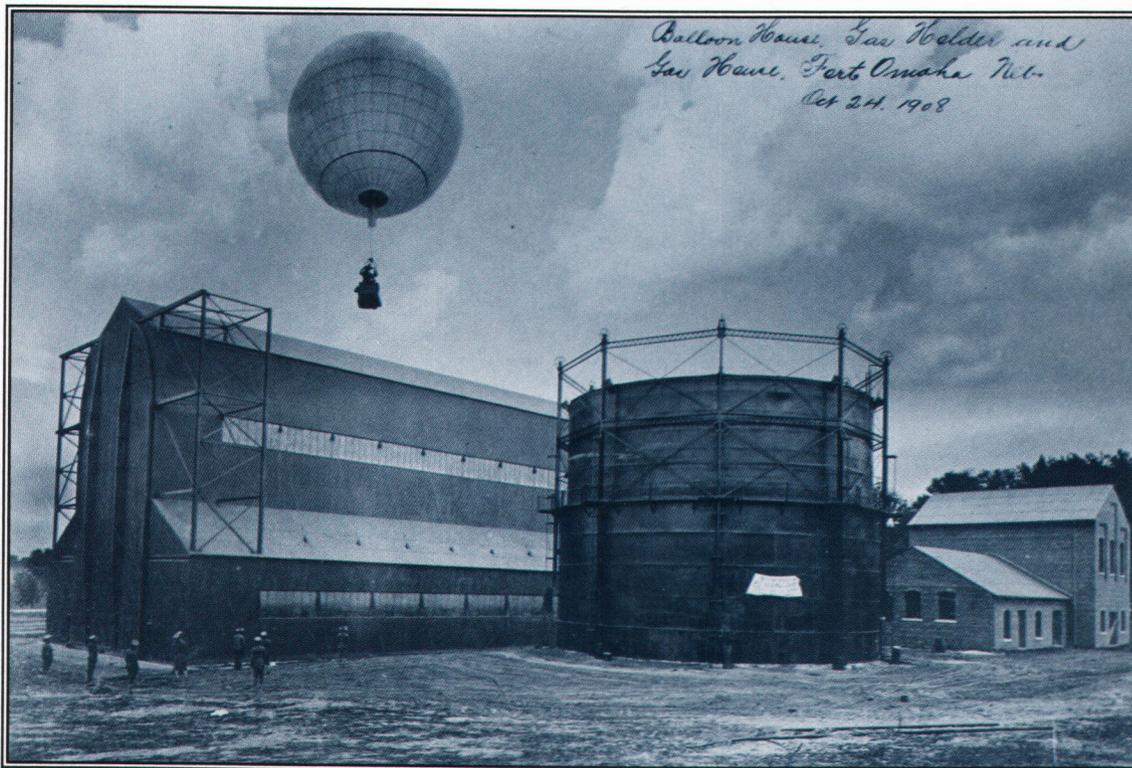
wrote:

"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).

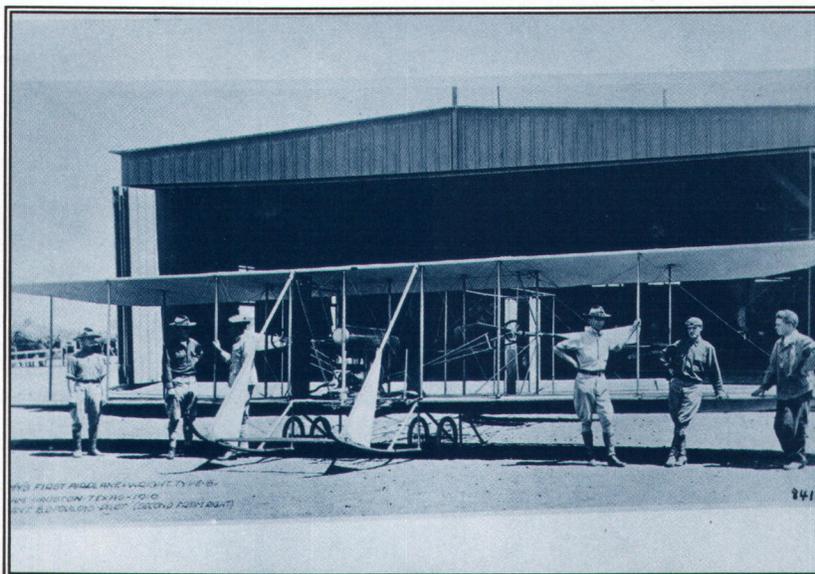
Burge arrived at the San Antonio rail station on March 5, 1910, where he cleaned up and took a streetcar to the fort. He was extremely happy with both the assignment and the fort. Vernon immediately went to the aeroplane shed and reported to Lieutenant Foulois.

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.

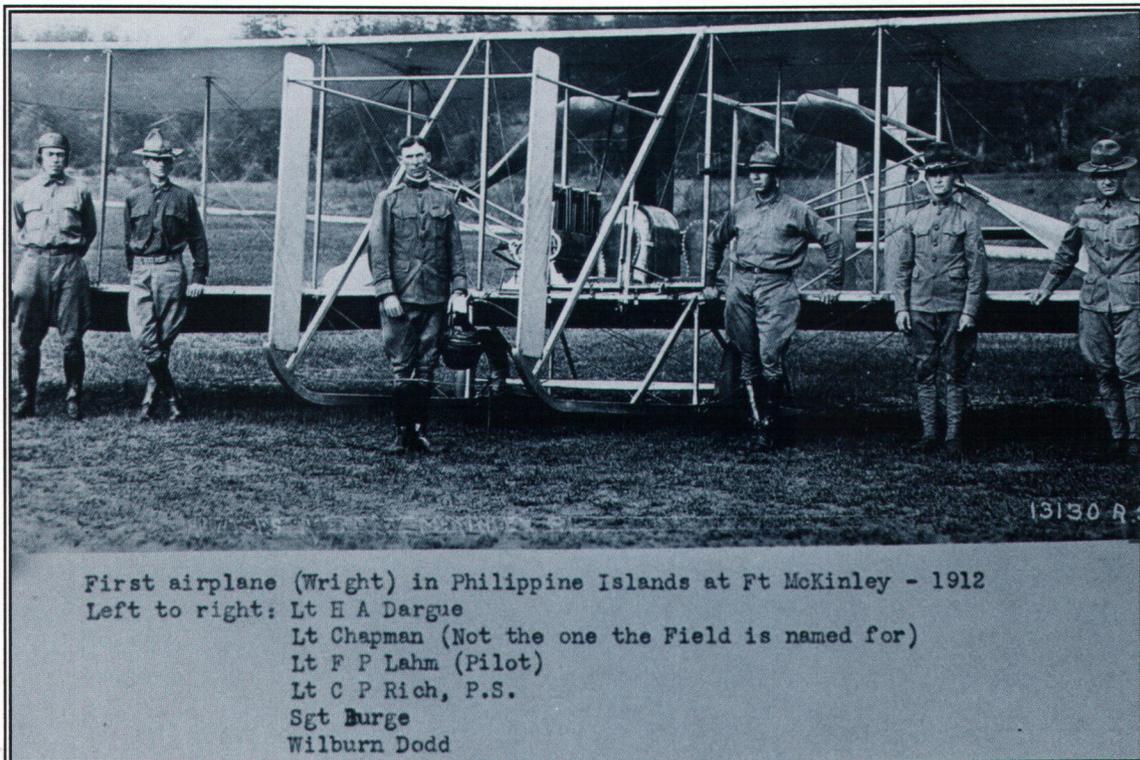
As a member of the Aeronautical Division for over four years, Burge was one of its most qualified aeroplane mechanics. However, he

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 Dargue
 Lt Chapman (Not the one the Field is named for)
 Lt F P Lahm (Pilot)
 Lt C P Rich, P.S.
 Sgt Burge
 Wilburn 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

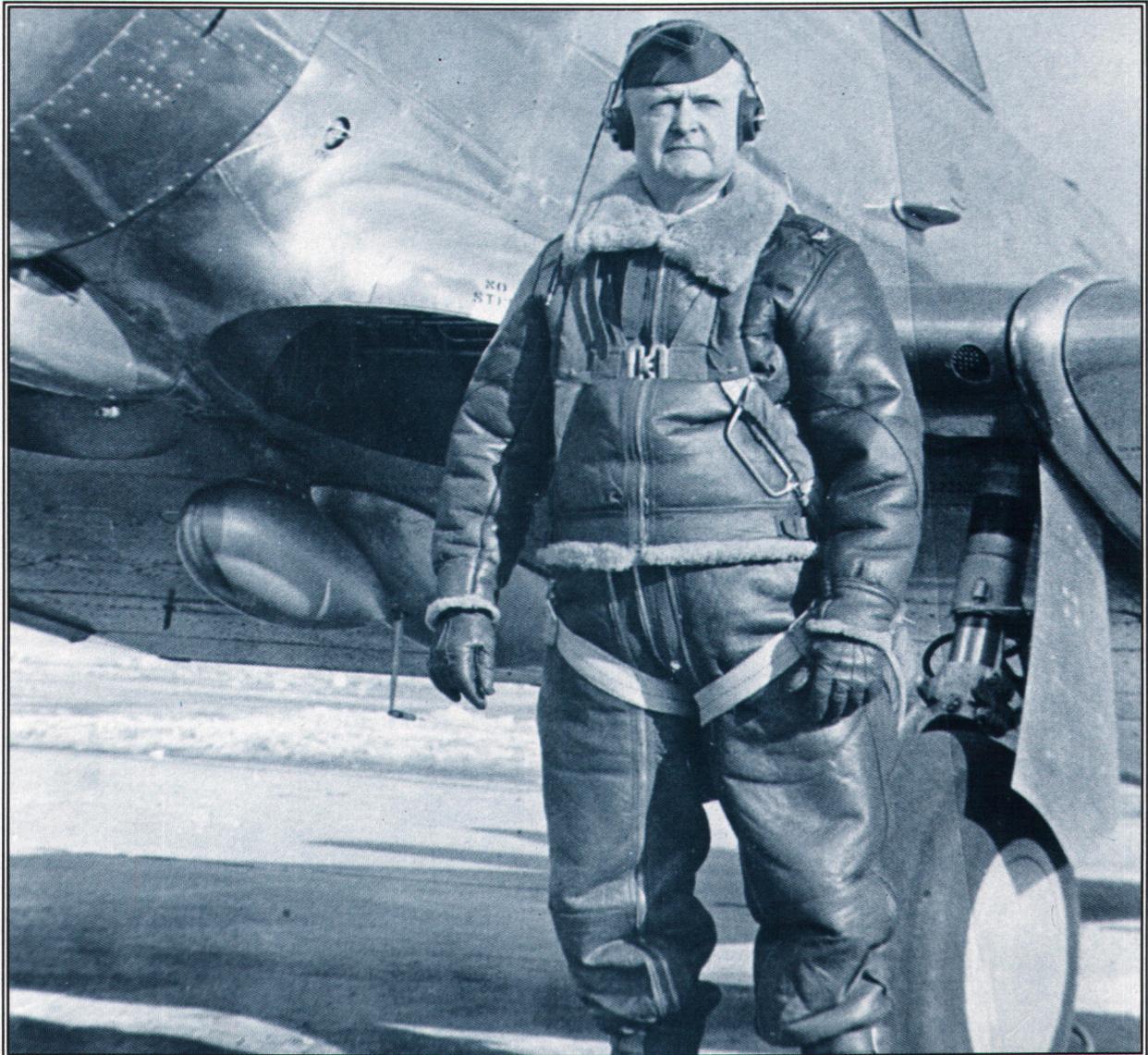


Vernon L. Burge is commissioned in the regular army as a 1st Lt., August 25, 1917. C/O Majorie Burge Waters, AMM.

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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AIRMEN MEMORIAL MUSEUM

Founded in 1986, the Airmen Memorial Museum stands as a tribute to enlisted airmen who have served in the U.S. Air Force, the Army Air Corps and the U.S. Army Air Forces.

Located in the Airmen Memorial Building just eight miles from Washington, D.C., this museum is a maturing showcase of accomplishments. It is also designed to function as a research and reference center that documents and preserves the contributions of the men and women who have served honorably but, until now, without a memorial or museum they could call their own.

This special series of compiled histories is the first effort by the museum, through its ongoing research activities, to make available to the public the story of America's unsung heroes -- enlisted airmen.

The museum is open 8 a.m. until 5 p.m. weekdays and during specially-scheduled events. For more information about the museum and its research project, contact the Airmen Memorial Museum, toll-free, at 1-800-638-0594 or 301-899-8386.

