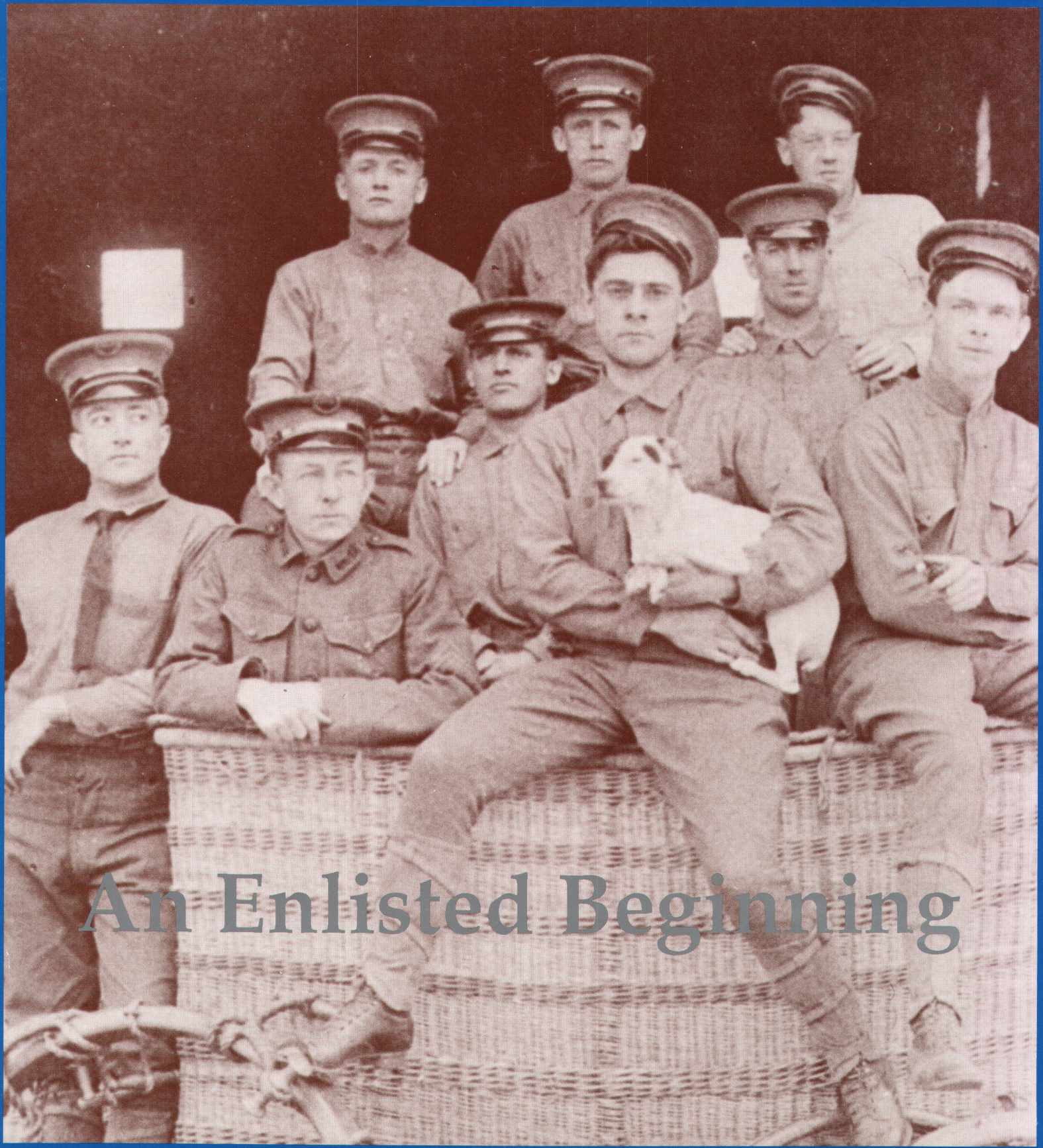
The Airmen Heritage Series

The Airmen Memorial Museum

1907



An Enlisted Beginning

Corporal Eddie Ward: The First Enlisted Airman

By George E. Hicks

Corporal Eddie Ward, if not one of a kind, was certainly the first of his kind. He was, in fact, the first enlisted man assigned to the United States Army's Aeronautical Division of the Signal Corps, the forerunner of the U.S. Army Air Corps and, in 1947, the U.S. Air Force. At one point, he was the only enlisted airman.

On August 1, 1907, the Chief Signal Officer of the Army, Brig. Gen. James Allen, signed Office Memorandum Number 6 for the War Department, formally creating the forerunner of today's Air Force:

"An Aeronautical Division of this office is hereby established, to take effect this date.

"This division will have charge of all matters pertaining to military ballooning, air machines and all kindred subjects. All data on hand will be carefully classified and plans perfected for future tests and experiments. The operations of this division are strictly confidential, and no information will be given out by any party except through the Chief Signal Officer of the Army or his authorized representative.

"Captain Charles DeF. Chandler, Signal Corps, is detailed in charge of this division, and Corporal Edward Ward and First Class Private Joseph E. Barrett will report to Captain Chandler for duty in this division under his immediate direction."

Eddie Ward would probably have described himself as a "common soldier." He came from humble, unpretentious origins in Pine Knot, Ky. Life was centered on family, the farm or the railroad. When you were not in school, you worked -- usually seven days a week.

In 1959, almost 30 years after he retired from the military, the elderly Mr. Ward shared some remembrances about his military life and his boyhood in the rural Bluegrass State. Those recollections were preserved on tape in an unpublished interview with Air Force historian Royal Frey.

Speaking of his early life, Ward recalled the demands of his youth as challenges. "All the boys around there either grew up to be farmers or engineers or telegraph operators or something." In fact, "... from the time I was big enough to walk, I used to go with daddy, on Sundays. He worked seven days a week. Took care of those block signals on the railroad and I used to go with him. Learned all about them, the train rules and everything. One summer, I guess I was about 16 years old, I wasn't in school -- school must have been out or something -- and I had a job as a water boy.

"So, I worked a couple of days and there was this big train wreck. They gave me a red lantern and sent me down to stop trains before they ran off of the tracks. That made me a flag man. I worked there awhile and learned what I could before I moved on."

His years working with the railroad gave him the basis of an education that served him well in the military. When he enlisted in the Army in 1901, Ward was detailed to the 74th Company of the Coast Artillery. His first major task was mounting two of the long-range disappearing guns employed along our shores. Those mammoth artillery pieces served as the long-range defensive weaponry of "fortress America" until the advent of World War II.

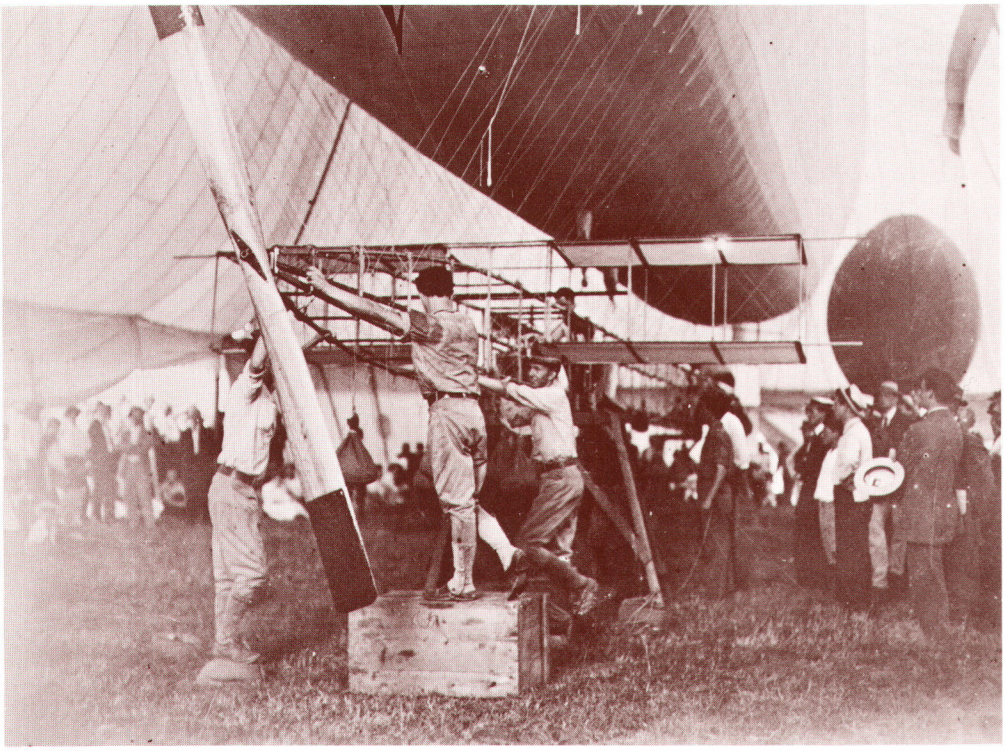
Creating the emplacements and mounting the weapons was no easy task. Yet, to the young private, it was another way of applying what he had learned while working on the railroad. "The commanding officer called me in one day and asked me if I knew anything about hydraulic jacks. I said, 'Yes, sir.' He said, 'Well, I'm going to put you in charge of mounting these two 12-inch guns.'

"Well, they didn't have machinery like they do now [speaking in 1959]. It was all done by hand ... and he gave me a detail. Well, they had these big 12-by-12 blocks -- like these house movers have -- ya' know. They [the guns] weighed 110 tons and the carriages weighed 110 tons. So, we'd have to jack up them hydraulic jacks ... and put a block in there and jack up the other end and put in a block [raising the piece one foot at a time]. We had to raise them about 25 feet to get them on the carriages."

Ward's positive attitude and his ability to adapt to the more practical aspects of life on the railroad served him well. In his more than 28 years in the military, Eddie Ward was a Master Signal Electrician, Master Photographer, Balloon Pilot and Mechanic. He witnessed history in the making and contributed to it. Indeed, many of his assignments came as a result of his own adaptability in an era in which there was no formal training for many of his duty specializations or assignments.

In actuality, Eddie Ward first became involved in military aviation a month prior to the formal founding of the Aeronautical Division. In July of 1907, Corporal Ward and First Class Private Joseph E. Barrett were detailed to the Balloon Factory of Leo Stevens to obtain basic training in the fine art of ballooning. The pair of soldiers were schooled in the very rudimentary tasks of fabric handling, stitching, the manufacturing of gases and the control of the "aircraft."

"Dirigible Number One." The first Army dirigible at Fort Myer, Va., in 1908. Vernon L. Burge Collection, courtesy Mrs. Marge Waters.



The ground crew of Army Dirigible Number One prepares the lighter-than-air craft for flight at Fort Myer, Va., in 1908. Vernon L. Burge Collection, courtesy Mrs. Marge Waters.

Under the watchful eye of Stevens and his wife, the two enlisted men received basic instruction in ". . . folding, inflating and handling of balloons." At the time, the use of gas-filled balloons was still in the experimental stages. They were little more than a logical step in the progression of hot air balloons that served as popular attractions at county fairs.

Indeed, those spherical envelopes were small wonders unto themselves, as were the early daredevils who used them as aerial platforms for parachuting. Stevens and his wife were among those first parachutists.

Mrs. Stevens' daredevil days, though, were brought to an early end with a rather unceremonious landing. As Ward himself reported, "She landed in an apple tree and tore her pants off! She quit! She had to!"

Balloons of the era were crude. They were, in fact, little more than layered spherical bags of rubberized silk, contained in an open net which was, in turn, attached to the man-carrying basket, or gondola, suspended below. The cigar-shaped dirigible featured a somewhat more frightening "cockpit," or "car," which was made of Oregon spruce and was ". . . bound together by wire." Maintaining and maneuvering the different aircraft posed unique challenges to the pioneering airmen who sat on canvas seats suspended beneath their highly-flammable "lighter-than-air" craft.

Speaking from the vantage point of retirement, Ward himself recalled the challenges and the simplistic technology employed in those early days. The balloons were equipped with a valve enabling the vessel to be filled with hydrogen. Once fully inflated and the craft unleashed from its ground tether, the pilot gained or lost altitude by opening or closing a valve, thereby releasing the gas. For quick landings and emergency descents, the balloon was equipped with a "rip strip."

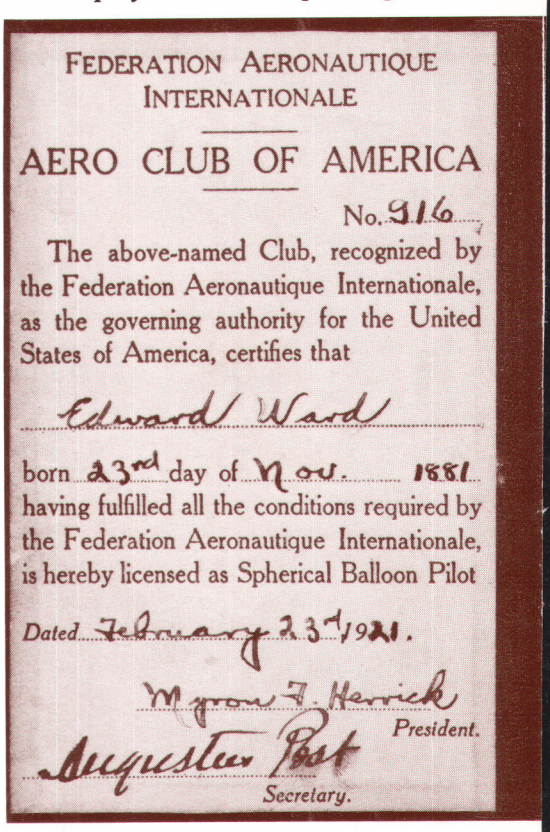
"In a balloon, any kind of balloon, even a gas balloon, you gotta have some way, if you gotta make a landing, to get rid of that gas quick," Ward recalled. "On the side you had a strip . . . the full length of the balloon [attached] to a rope. When the pilot pulls the rope, it rips out the whole side of the balloon. Then, you have to sew that strip back in before you make another flight."

Training with the Stevens couple was apparently not terribly tough; in fact, it was probably good duty, all things considered. While on temporary duty in New York City, Ward and Barrett were provided with a subsistence allowance and trolley tickets. The pair put the money to good use.

In the same neighborhood with the balloon factory were several ". . . saloons, you call them taverns now. But, you could go in there and buy a glass of beer for a dime and you'd get a hamburger steak dinner, french fried potatoes and everything, but you couldn't get no coffee. You had to drink beer! So Barrett and I, we were at Fort Wood there, and they'd give us car tickets to go up to the school, see, and 50 cents to buy our lunch with. We'd go up there, buy a dime glass of beer and get our lunch and have 40 cents left over to go to town on Saturday night. We could have a big time on that."

In the autumn of 1907, the pair of enlisted airmen were detailed to Norfolk, Va., to participate in the 300th anniversary of the first settlement of Virginia. The "Jamestown Exposition" featured military parades, naval flotillas and aeronautical demonstrations.

Corporal Ward and Private Barrett were tasked with the responsibility of supporting two civilian aeronauts and their experimental aircraft. J.C. "Bud" Mars displayed his ". . . passenger-



FEDERATION AERONAUTIQUE INTERNATIONALE

AERO CLUB OF AMERICA

No. 916

The above-named Club, recognized by the Federation Aeronautique Internationale, as the governing authority for the United States of America, certifies that

Edward Ward

born 23rd day of Nov. 1881

having fulfilled all the conditions required by the Federation Aeronautique Internationale, is hereby licensed as Spherical Balloon Pilot

Dated February 23rd 1921.

Myron T. Herrick
President.

Augustus Post
Secretary.

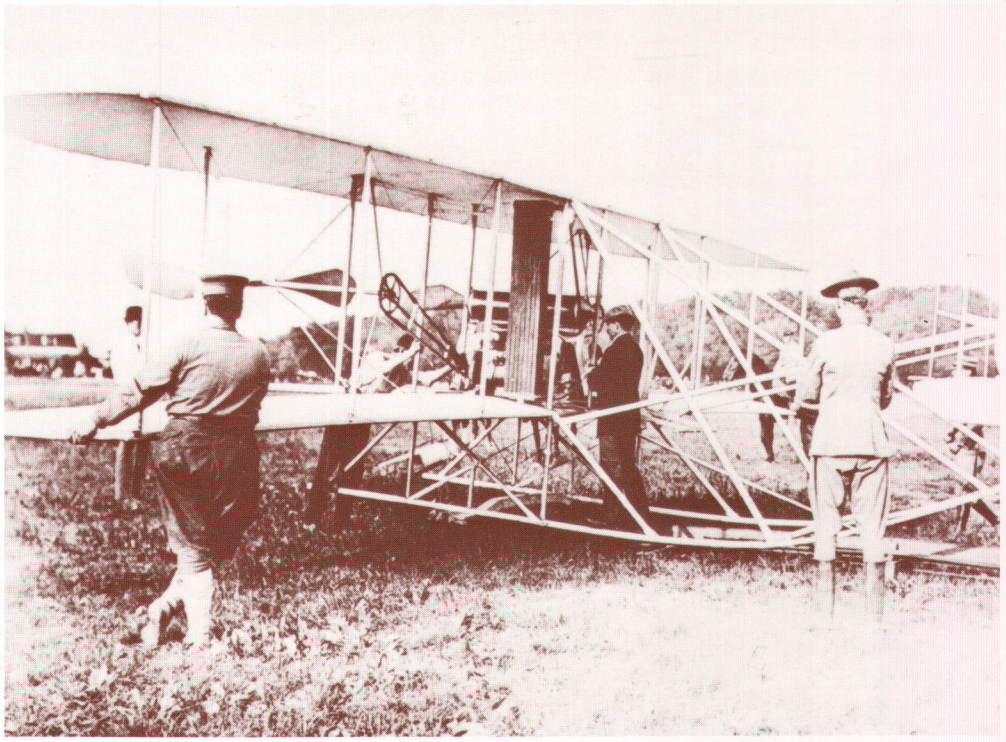
Ward participated in the flights of the first

carrying captive balloon and Israel Ludlow intended to construct and demonstrate a man-carrying kite." Each inventor was to be supported by the Army's new Aeronautical Division and the Navy with their power boats.

For Private Barrett, this was only his second assignment since enlisting in the Army the previous May. Barrett, 29 years old at the time of the Jamestown Exposition, had already seen eight years of service in the Navy prior to reporting for temporary duty in Virginia.

Whether Barrett did not like the Army, aviation, Bud Mars, or Israel Ludlow, is unclear. Ward did, however, recall that while on duty in Norfolk, Barrett ran into an old friend, a chief petty officer in the Navy, and opted for the life at sea. Whatever the motivation, First Class Private Joseph E. Barrett simply left the Army. His service record documents the fact that he "deserted" in September 1907, and with that act, Corporal Eddie Ward became the *only* airman formally assigned to the Signal Corps' Aeronautical Division. History also tells us that Barrett retired honorably after some 20 years in the Navy.

Army aircraft but was not licensed until age 39.



"Pre-Flight Check," College Park, Md., 1908. *Wilbur Wright (Dark Suit, Center) checks the engine of Aeroplane Number 1 as the ground crew stand prepared to assist with the launch. Courtesy College Park Airport Museum, College Park, Md.*

During the brief assignment in Norfolk, Ward's detail was expanded to include eight other enlisted men. They were Vernon L. Burge, John H. Cratty, Eldred O. Eldred, Harry T. Settle, Stewart K. Rosenberger, Benjamin Schmidt, Cecil R. Coile and William R. McConnell. Private Charles De Kim, a Canadian by birth, joined the group sometime later. Of this group, First Class Private Vernon Burge was the only one to stay active in Army aviation.

Immediately after the Jamestown Exposition assignment, Ward and his detail returned to Fort Myer, Va. There, the group participated in the launching and testing of balloons. By the fall of 1908, the Army was ready to consider the purchase of its first airplane, even as balloon testing continued.

In the spring of that year, Orville and Wilbur Wright arrived at Fort Myer with the first of their military aircraft. Ward and his enlisted men were assigned to help unpack the craft but were allowed little opportunity for active participation with it. Yet, the launchings of that early airship almost assuredly required their assistance.

Launching the bi-wing ship was no easy matter. With aeronautical sciences still in their infancy, little was known about the mechanics of takeoffs, landings, lift, propellers or the "power plant."

As a result, the early design of the aircraft was faulty. It did not include wheels. The landing "gear" was little more than a sled. Assistance of the ground crew was elementary but critical to getting the ship up and off the ground.

In order to get the craft out of the hangar, the wings and fuselage were placed on wheels and pushed to the field and the launch ramp. There, the plane was carefully balanced on a single rail, with the crewmen steadying the ship at either wing tip. The plane itself was attached by means of a rope and pulley to a 1,500-pound weight the crew would ultimately hoist to the top of a derrick. Once the pilot had the twin propellers at maximum power, he gave the ground crew the signal to release the weight. The bi-winged aircraft, with pilot and passenger, was then catapulted down the launch rail toward liftoff. Two enlisted crewmen ran at the very wing tips to ensure the stability of the craft for as long as they were able to keep up the pace.

Corporal Ward's exposure to these early flights by the Wright Brothers was minimal. Shortly after the first

test, Ward was detailed to Fort Omaha, Neb., and the new balloon air station for the training of pilots and ground crews.

There, the enlisted cadre became schooled in the handling of the cumbersome dirigibles and the manufacture of hydrogen gas.

The Army's first dirigible was the principal attraction, since there were a substantial number of military thinkers that doubted the Wright's aircraft could ever be employed as a weapon or instrument of defense. Signal Corps Dirigible Number One, the oblong, cigar-shaped balloon, which held 20,000 cubic feet of hydrogen gas, was still regarded as the airship of the future.

Though manned flight in 1908 was a reality, the technology was uncertain. The lighter-than-air balloons and the heavier-than-air ships were the marvels of the age. Young Eddie Ward, though, was more interested in *how* the airships could fly. "Now, [that was something] that I guess a lot of people can't understand. I was more interested in the mechanical features of the thing than fond of flying. I learned to fly all right. I learned ballooning and I learned to pilot an airplane . . . but, I was more interested in the mechanical features." Military aviation was the benefactor of that inquisitive devotion.

At one point during 1909, the Army was "making up a detail" to go to Alaska and another to go to the Philippines. Ward decided to give Alaska a try, leaving Fort Omaha, and made the trip north as the engineer on a military river boat. He did not like the climate and when the immediate opportunity was presented to go to the Philippines, he fairly jumped at the chance.

It required 31 days of travel aboard the *USS Sheridan* to make the crossing to Fort McKinley and the Philippine Islands. There, the United States was beginning to establish an air presence in the Pacific — with one aircraft.

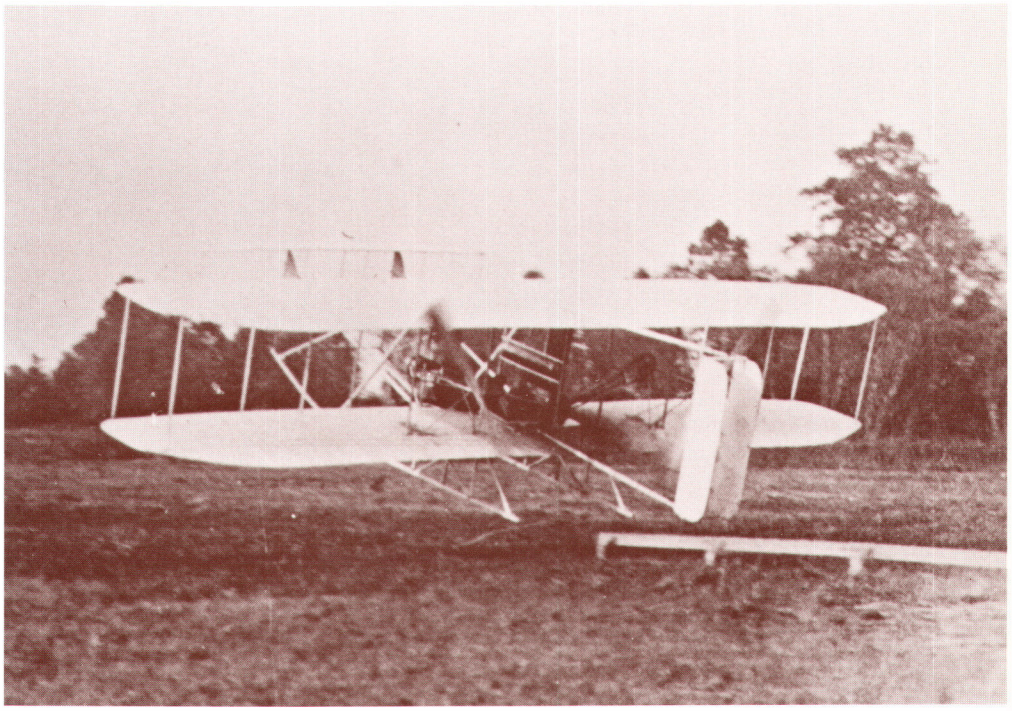
Lieutenant Frank P. Lahm preceded Sergeant Ward to the Philippines outpost by some nine months. By the middle of March 1912, Lahm had succeeded in opening the Philippines Air School.

Already assigned to the no-frills aviation section were Corporal Vernon Burge and Private Kenneth L. Kintzel. Five more enlisted men were identified from the Manila garrison to supplement the aviation effort. Their duties were ill-defined but ranged from the routine maintenance chores to building stilts for the aircraft that kept it off the hangar's earthen floor when the officer's polo field, and part-time air strip, flooded. It was there that Corporal Burge acquired his pilot training, thus becoming the first enlisted pilot with Aero Club of America License Number 154.

Sergeant Edward Ward was conspicuous in his absence from the cadre of air school personnel. Evidently, there was "bad blood" between Ward and Lahm, the former still smarting over not being able to stay in the Washington, D.C., area during the ultimate acceptance of the Wright Aeroplane. The sergeant opted to remain in his assignment with the Manila machine shop.

It was good duty. Ward was able to have the best of all things aeronautical, mechanical and electrical. He took particular delight in utilizing his skills as a mechanic and correcting the errors of his rivals — though he would never gloat or acknowledge the fact. He, in actuality, ran an efficient shop employing uniformed personnel and local civilians.

As a result of the unique challenges confronting the aviators, there was never any shortage of work for Sergeant Ward and his maintenance crew. The newly-arriving aircraft were furnished with new equipment — wheels. No pilot assigned to the group had any experience taking off or landing with the new "landing gear." The new technology made for smoother landings, but there was difficulty in stopping the aircraft. The addition of pontoons, for landing on water, presented entirely new complications that necessitated frequent repairs and modifications to the airframe. Moreover, the absence of any bona fide aircrew mechanic soon *caused* problems when the fragile engines were reassembled in other than the proper sequence or without an even, uniform tightening, or torquing, of the bolts. Ward was quick to identify the problem and took pride in its rather simple resolution.



"Off We Go!" A rare photo of an early Wright flyer lifting off its monorail in College Park, Md., in 1909. Courtesy College Park Airport Museum, College Park, Md.

Sergeant Edward Ward remained on duty in the Philippines until early in 1914. By that time, the European nations were literally standing at the threshold of the First World War. When Ward returned to the continental United States, he was assigned to the Signal Corps' First Balloon School Squadron. At the outbreak of World War I, Edward Ward was commissioned a first lieutenant and ultimately

retired as a reserve captain in 1930.

Edward Ward was no highly-decorated hero. He was a common soldier. As a master electrician, he laid cables across Tampa Bay and maintained the power supply and patched up the aircraft for the Army on the Philippine Islands. As a master photographer — on the ground or in the air — he supervised the aerial mapping of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and the Shenandoah National Park. As the first enlisted airman, he pioneered as an airframe mechanic and as a "mechanician" for the first aircraft.

By the end of his career, he was ". . . working in conjunction with the NACA at Langley Field [Virginia]." There, he assisted in the installation of the earliest wind tunnel for the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics — the forerunner of the modern day National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

In December 1959, Edward Ward had just celebrated his 78th birthday when he agreed to sit down to an "oral history" interview with Air Force historian Royal Frey. During that interview, the aging airman summarized his career and, perhaps, his philosophy. "Well, I done every Tom, Dick and Harry thing from telephone to typewriters and radios and steam engines to everything else. . ." He had to; that was a time when there was no one else to do it. And, after he learned, he trained others.

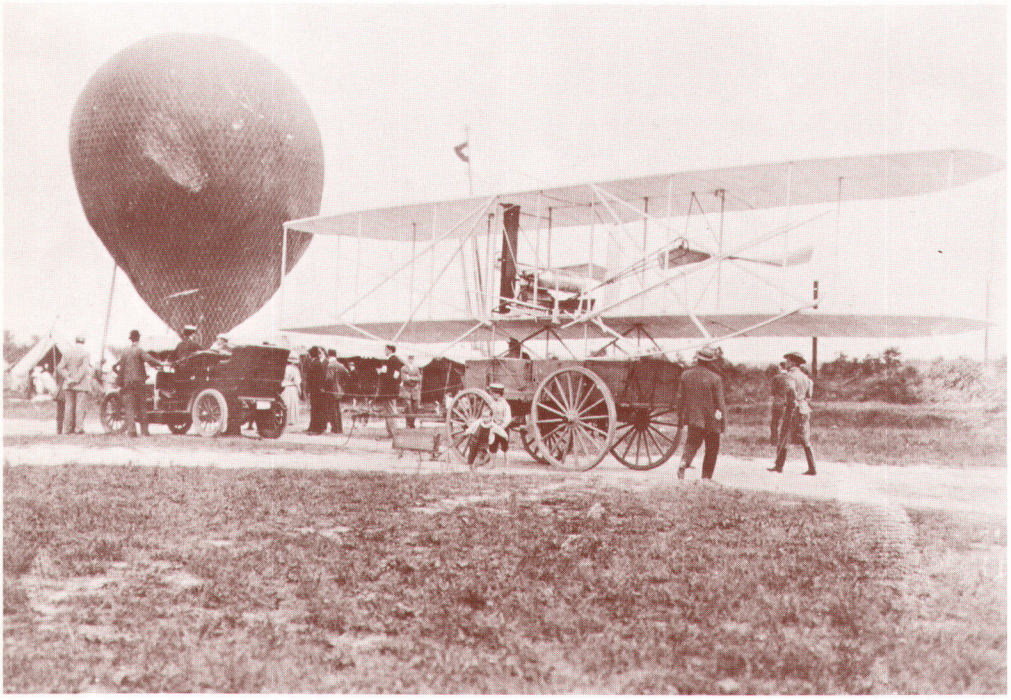
Eddie Ward died in January 1965, at the age of 84.

From the author: In 1989, the Airmen Memorial Museum began to research the origins of enlisted Air Force members and discovered the untranscribed tape-recorded interview made almost 30 years before. During the time-consuming process of transcribing the deteriorated tape, Ward's many contributions came to light, providing us with an insight into his many unheralded accomplishments that have been overlooked by military historians.

The tape also revealed there was a personal side to Eddie Ward that few people knew. To James Cooper, Eddie was a Great Uncle with whom he spent the summers of 1935, 1936 and 1937. "Uncle Eddie was something," he offered. "He was strict, but he was fair. Everything had to be just so. Everything in its place. He was old Army in every way. He was crusty and, at times, cantankerous, but he loved kids. The little ones would always come over and sit on the front porch to listen to Uncle Eddie talk."

"Was he ever married?" I asked.

"You bet," came the reply. "Twice, in fact. But, he was too strict for them, too. Heck, he even went to the commissary and did all of the shopping. Plus, he liked pretty girls and big fancy Packard automobiles. That was Uncle Eddie, all right. He was really something."



"Four Modes of Transportation." *The Wright Flyer was carefully, but unceremoniously, towed to the test site at Fort Myer, Va., in August 1908. Vernon L. Burge Collection, courtesy Mrs. Marge Waters.*

Sources Consulted and Recommended References:

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2. Brigadier General Frank P. Lahm Papers, USAF Museum, Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio.
3. Eddie Ward, "Oral History Interview by Royal Frey," edited and compiled by George E. Hicks, courtesy USAF Historical Research Center, Maxwell AFB, Ala.
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5. Goldberg, Alfred (ed.), A History of the United Stated Air Force 1907-1957, Van Rostrand, New York, 1957.
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Author

George E. Hicks

Director, Airmen Memorial Museum

Editor

Mark J. Bowman

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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.