

Centennial of Military flight: the ground crew that kept Foulois in the air

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On that historic first flight in 1910, Lt. Benjamin Foulois may have flown alone, but he did not serve alone.

On the ground he had a crew composed of – as he said – nine enlisted and one civilian mechanic, but they are not the only men who served with Foulois during those early flight operations.

Other early aviation annals mention Pvts. Roy Hart and Berkeley Hyde. The U.S. census, taken in April of that year, lists three more “Soldiers Signal Corps Quartered in Rear of Aero Plane Shed” – Master Signal Electrician Charles Chadbourne, Signal Corps Sgt. William Bailey and Pvt. Edwin Eldred.

It is common in military history for information on enlisted men to be just names in the records.

Now, however, thanks to the availability of online databases and communication through the Internet, we can discover something of the lives of these men seen in the old photos, standing around that Wright flyer.

Private 1st Class Felix Clarke, a member of the enlisted crew, identified Soldiers in a photo taken of the Signal Corps Aero Detachment on the back of a print. A member of his Family provided a copy of the image to the Fort Sam Houston Museum.

We know that, like Foulois, Chadbourne, Sgt. Herbert Marcus and even Civilian Mechanic Oliver G. Simmons had been in the Army and seen service in the Philippines during the Philippine Insurrection.

Chadbourne had been stationed there for six years.

Tracking each of the Aero Detachment crew’s assignments was difficult as all except Chadbourne, Bailey and Eldred were assigned to Company G, Signal Corps, at Fort Myer, Va.; although later in the year, Cpl. Vernon L. Burge and Pvt. Cpl. Glenn R. Madole would be transferred to another company without a documented location.

Chadbourne, Bailey and Eldred were assigned to Company B, Signal

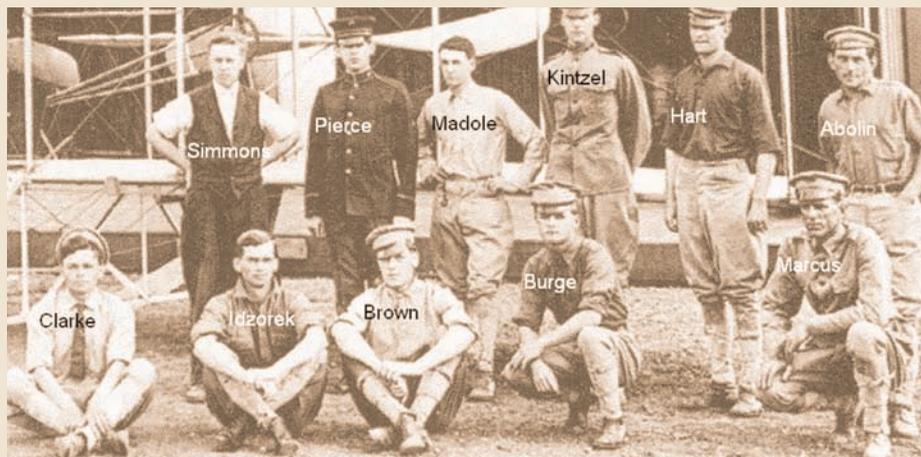


Photo courtesy FSH Museum
Eleven of the original Signal Corps Aero Squadron enlisted men pose with the Wright “B” Military Flyer at Fort Sam Houston in 1911.



Pvt. Berkeley Hyde

Corps. They may have been at Fort Sam Houston attached to Company I, Signal Corps and stayed at the Post when Company I was sent Wyoming just before the census. In 1914, Company B would be

involved with flight operations on the Mexican border.

Again like Foulois, several of the men had previously served in frontline units – the infantry, cavalry or artillery. Sgt. Stephen J. Idzorek served four years with the Marines. Bailey had been part of the Army’s “navy” serving on the Signal Corps cable boat “Cyrus W. Field” out of Portland, Maine.

In their civilian lives most of the men had been involved in some sort of technical field such as printer, telegrapher, or electrician.

Two listed their occupation as “clerk.” Abolin, the detachment’s cook, listed his occupation as “painter decorator,” although he apparently had electrical training.

Most of the men were from the northeastern U.S. or the Midwest. Clarke was born in Mississippi but later lived in Tennessee, and Pierce was from Georgia.

Two were foreign-born: Idzorek was

born in Poland and Marcus was from Canada.

After their stints in the Aero Detachment, most of the men returned to civilian life. Three of the men, Bailey, Brown and Madole, get lost in history.

Abolin returned to house painting. During World War II, he organized a group of 96 painters to paint the house of a wounded G.I. in New Brunswick, N.J. The group painted the entire building in 2 minutes, 32 seconds according to a news article.

Clarke and Pierce, the southern boys, went to work in the railroad industry. Eldred became a clerk in Colorado. Hyde became an original member of the Long Island Police Department and chased reported sightings of a mysterious “ape-like” creature on Long Island, N.J. in the 1930s.

Kintzel went to work for an explosives company as a “powerhouse engineer.” In the 1930s, he became a civilian employee of the Army at what is now Aberdeen Proving Ground, Md.

During WWI, all these men had to register for the draft. Kintzel was exempted because the manufacture of explosives was a “military necessity.”

It looks like Pierce avoided the draft because of his weight. On his draft registration, he weighed 260 pounds. Clarke and Hart both served as officers during the war, but again returned to civilian life.

Four of the men went on to com-

plete a career in the military. Chadbourne and Marcus took commissions during WWI. After the war, Chadbourne reverted to his enlisted rank and retired in 1930. Marcus kept his commission and was assigned to Kelly Field before his retirement in 1921.

Corporal Vernon Burge, who apparently lied about his age when joining the Army in April, 1907 (he was the same age in 1907 as he was in 1910, when he re-enlisted), stayed involved in aviation.

Assigned to the Philippines after leaving Fort Sam, Burge learned to fly under the tutelage of Frank Lahm and became the Army’s first enlisted pilot. He also became an officer during WWI and retired as an Air Force colonel in San Antonio in 1942. He is buried at the Fort Sam Houston National Cemetery.

Idzorek, a former Marine, also had no problem moving up the ranks. He was commissioned during WWI. By 1938, he was a colonel and commander of McClellan Air Field in California. He retired the next year, but was called back to duty for the duration of WWII, serving at the Presidio of San Francisco. He is buried at the Golden Gate National Cemetery.

As Foulois’ foray into the skies became the U.S. Air Force, a handful of enlisted men kept the planes running; and allowed the pilots to venture into the skies.

Close to retirement Foulois made a list of the men he remembered:
Sgt. Stephen J. Idzorek
Sgt. Herbert Marcus
Cpl. Vernon L. Burge
Pvt. Cpl. Glenn R. Madole
Pvt. R.W. Brown
Pvt. Felix G. Clarke
Pvt. Kenneth L. Kintzel
Pvt. Pierce
Cook William C. Abolin
Civilian Mechanic Oliver G. Simmons

(Research for this article was made possible by the Families of Abolin, Idzorek and Chadbourne, the Long Island Police Department and Web site <http://www.Ancestry.com>.)

