

# The 1st Aero Squadron – A History



*One of new 1st Aero Squadron's Curtiss JN2s 'Jennys' at the Signal Corps Aviation School, North Island California, 1913*

**By Captain Nancy Welz Aldrich, aviation writer\***

The 1st Aero Squadron, or the 1st Reconnaissance Squadron, is the oldest US military flying unit. It was formed March 5, 1913, and has an unbroken heritage of over 100 years! General John J. Pershing ordered the 1st Aero Squadron to become the first aviation unit to participate in military action.

In February, 1913, tension with Mexico was increasing. President William Taft ordered the 2nd Army Division to mobilize a defense against Mexico. On March 5, a small group of Officers and enlisted men were formed into the First Aero Squadron, assigned to the 2nd Division, which was commanded by Signal Corps Captain Charles de Forest Chandler. Nine airplanes were assigned to the squadron, which was formed into two companies. Company A had 3 pilots, 4 airplanes, and 24 enlisted men; company B had 3 pilots, 27 enlisted men and 5 airplanes. The pilots were all Army Officers, with the rank of 1st or 2nd Lieutenant.

While the airplanes were 'cutting edge' at the time, very little scientific testing had gone their development. Some of the airplanes were actually made by the pilots themselves. Crashes were common, and repair was time-consuming and difficult. The fatality rate was high among the pilots. Flight lessons were almost unheard of, and frequently consisted of general guidelines given on the ground, and individual practice. One of the early pilots, Capt. Benjamin D. Foulois, was given instruction from Orville Wright, by mail!

# The 1st Aero Squadron – A History

On March 9, 1916, more than 1,000 of Pancho Villa's horsemen crossed the border at Columbus, New Mexico and raided the town. 17 Americans were killed as they looted and burned the town. President Wilson immediately asked permission from President Carranza of Mexico to send troops into Mexico. Carranza reluctantly gave permission, "for the sole purpose of capturing the bandit Villa." With that permission, Wilson ordered a "Punitive Expedition," and told General Pershing to "pursue and disperse" Villa's forces. Pershing thought this would be a good opportunity to use the airplanes, and ordered the 1st Aero Squadron to Columbus to set up operations. He planned to use the aircraft for observation support of the ground forces.

The greatest weakness of the Squadron was its lack of airplanes. Those observing operations in WWI in Europe, understood that an aviation squadron needed a minimum of 12 operational airplanes, 12 replacements, and a reserve of 12, 36 airplanes in all. The 1st Aero Squadron had only 8 Curtiss JN-3 airplanes, and was desperately short of spare parts.

The Squadron arrived in Columbus on March 15, only with 8 airplanes, 11 pilots, 82 enlisted men, and flew their first reconnaissance sortie on the 16th. That was the first time American aircraft were used in an actual military operation.

3 days later, on March 19th, the squadron was ordered to report 'without delay' to Pershing's headquarters in Casas Grandes, Mexico. The pilots departed early that evening. Having little actually night flying experience, darkness proved to be a major problem for the pilots. One airplane made it to headquarters that night. The next morning 2 aircraft landed. One airplane had returned to Columbus, and 2 others were missing. They then discovered another problem that could not be overcome. These airplanes, with their 90 horsepower engines were no match for the mountains. They simply could not climb high enough to cross the 10,000 – 12,000' peaks. In addition, the strong turbulent winds meant they could not fly through the passes. The frequent dust storms played havoc with the engines, making it almost impossible to fly, and the unrelenting heat de-laminated the wooden propellers!

Due to weather and maintenance problems, and the airplane's lack of power, many missions simply could not be accomplished. Captain Foulois told General Pershing the Jennies "were not capable of meeting the present military service conditions." He asked for "at least ten of the highest-powered, highest climbing, and best weight carrying aeroplanes" that could be provided. "I knew I was optimistic in thinking I would get the planes I wanted, but I was duty bound to ask for them," Foulois is quoted as saying. While he doubted he would get adequate equipment, he continued to do what he could with what he had! It was decided that the planes would be used to carry mail and dispatches between US ground units and reconnaissance flights.

One of the biggest problems with the whole mission was the hostility of the Mexican people and government. The Mexican government refused to let the US troops use Mexico's rail system to transport men and supplies. The Americans thought they were helping by chasing Villa, but Carranza's forces, the Carranzistas, were very hostile.

With the shortage of supplies approaching critical, Captain Foulois was ordered to fly to the city of Chihuahua to ask the American Consul for help getting the needed food and medicine to the troops. Supposedly, Chihuahua was held by friendly forces, but Foulois was skeptical. The reports he had received from commanders in the field indicated they had been fired on by the Carranzistas. He decided to send two airplanes, each with a pilot and an observer. One plane would land north of the city and the other would land on the south side. The pilots were told to stay with the airplanes while the observers walked into town to contact the Consul. The pilots were to protect the airplanes, and fly them out of danger, if necessary.

# The 1st Aero Squadron – A History

On April 7, two planes took off for Chihuahua. Captain Foulois and Lt. Herbert A Dargue were in one plane, and Captain Dodd and Lt. Carberry in the other. Dodd landed on the north side of town without incident, commandeered a carriage, and went immediately to the Consulate. Consul Marion H. Letcher contacted some merchants, purchased the needed supplies and made arrangements for them to be shipped later that day.

In the meantime Foulois plane landed on the south side of town. As he got out of the airplane, townspeople who had seen the plane circling to land came running at him. He said, "Four Mexican rurales waved rifles at us excitedly when we landed. When Lt. Dargue got the plane stopped, I got out and yelled to him to take off immediately to join Lt. Carberry north of town and that I would meet him there." Foulois started walking into town, ignoring the shouts and the people shaking fists as the airplane took off. Shots were fired, but the airplane got away safely. As he continued walking, he felt defenseless with only a Colt .45 against four Winchester rifles. He commented, "there was nothing I could do but put my hands up and pray. I did both."

Captured, he was being taken to the city jail when he heard a voice in the crowd yell, "Do you need any help, Captain?" He responded, "Yes! Go get the American consul!"

Once at the jail, he was shoved into a cell and an iron door clanged shut. Captain Foulois had become the first American airman ever to be a prisoner of war! Somehow, he was able to convince the jail warden to send a messenger to General Gutierrez, the military governor. He describes what happened next, "A Colonel Miranda, the general's chief of staff, showed up, took me in custody, and we marched several blocks to the headquarters. General Gutierrez was affable and agreed that I should not be detained any longer. I told him about the two planes north of the city and asked for guards to keep them from being harmed. Again, he was agreeable. I asked if I might visit the planes to reassure my men, and we were soon on our way."

Upon arriving at the field north of the city, they found only Lt. Dargue there. When he had flown in, a large crowd of Carranzistas followed him. They crowded around the airplanes and began burning cigarette holes in the aircraft fabric. Dargue and Carberry tried to stop them, but then the crowd took out machetes and began slashing at the airplanes, and young boys began climbing on the machines trying to take them apart. The pilots decided they had to get the planes to safety and fired up the engines getting ready to take off. Carberry was able to escape, but his escape only made things worse for Dargue. The crowd ran after him throwing rocks. When he lifted off the entire top section of the fuselage behind the cockpit ripped off and damaged the vertical stabilizer. He cut the power and was able to land successfully.

Captain Foulois immediately had the guards take over and subdue the crowd. Lt. Carberry had landed just a few miles away at a smelting company, and returned a little later. The four pilots were taken to the US Consulate where they spent the night. The next morning they were able to make enough repairs to make the airplanes flyable, and took off.

The whole situation seemed absurd. Both sides were trying to locate and capture Pancho Villa, but they seemed to spend more time fighting each other. The further into Mexico the Americans penetrated, the more hostility they encountered. On April 12, a US cavalry unit actually got into a battle with a band of Carranzistas. They killed 40 of the Mexican troops, while two Americans died and six were wounded.

On April 14, only two of the airplanes were in a flyable condition. The 1st Aero Squadron had done all they could with the equipment they had. The bad news reached Washington and Secretary Baker asked Congress for a \$500,000 appropriation to purchase 12 new Curtiss R-2 airplanes, equipped with Lewis guns, automatic cameras, bombs, and radios. On April 20, the 1st Aero Squadron was

# The 1st Aero Squadron – A History

ordered back to Columbus. When they arrived Captain Foulois determined the 2 remaining Jennies were in such bad condition that he set them on fire to make sure no one could order him to fly them again.

The bad news only got worse. When the new planes arrived, they were not twelve R-2s but eight Curtiss N-8s. After testing them, Foulois declared all eight of them unfit for service. Eventually, the R-2s did arrive, but were not practical for the conditions. Every plane required alterations, mostly to the engines and propellers, due to the climate. However, on August 22, 1916 they were able to get 6 planes in the air and give General Pershing the first aerial review ever held by a US air unit.

The first attempt by the US military air unit could be considered a failure. But, it was a learning experience. While they had no success in finding Villa, Captain Foulois considered this a turning point in the development of American military aviation. He later became a Major General, and in 1931 was appointed Chief of the US Army Air Corps.

During this first US military air action, the 1st Aero Squadron flew 346 hours on 540 flights and covered more than 19,300 miles, performing aerial reconnaissance and photography, and transporting mail and official dispatches. More importantly, the military learned that the airplane could no longer be considered an experiment or an oddity, but could become a useful military tool.

## Original 1st Aero Squadron Pennant



*1st Aero Squadron Standard – 1913. This is believed to be the original Standard (guidon) ordered for the United States' 1st Aero Squadron.*

# The 1st Aero Squadron – A History



# The 1st Aero Squadron – A History

## First Aviators

*By FASF Historian Ken Emery*

### **Col. Townsend Foster Dodd 1886-1919**



Colonel Dodd was appointed 2nd Lieutenant in the Coast Artillery Corps on 9/25/1909. He was transferred to the Aviation Section, Signal Corps in 1912. On 2/13/1913 he established a non-stop duration of flight record by flying 244.18 miles in 4 hours, 43 minutes in aircraft SC 26, a Burgess H Model. He also won the Mackay Trophy in 1914. Dodd was ordered to join the 1st Aero Squadron at Texas City, Texas, on 3/9/1913. He qualified as a Military Aviator 12/30/1913 and was one of the “original military aviators” listed in the War Department General Order #39, dated 5/27/1913. In June, 1913, he transferred with the 1st Aero Squadron to the San Diego Signal Corps Aviation School. There, he participated in various experiments and on boards to establish training requirements and aircraft specifications. Dodd went with the 1st Aero to Galveston during the Vera Cruz incident in 1914, then to Fort Sill. Shortly after the Squadron moved to Fort Sam Houston, Dodd participated with Captain Benjamin D. Foulois on the first tactical reconnaissance over hostile territory in Air Service history on 3/15/1916 with Pershing’s Punitive Expedition into Mexico.

He was selected by General Pershing as Aviation Officer of the American Expeditionary Force in 1917 and was appointed Lieutenant Colonel in the Signal Corps. He was superseded in that job by Colonel William Mitchell who outranked him. Dodd served as Chief of Materiel and Assistant Chief of Supply, Air Service, then as G-2, Air Service, First Army. He was promoted to Colonel 8/14/1918. Reverting to his pre-war rank of Captain, Dodd was serving as Commander of Langley Field when he was killed in an air crash on 10/5/1919 at Bustleton Field, Philadelphia, while participating in the New York to Los Angeles transcontinental air race. On May 10, 1928, Dodd Field was designated in War Department General Order Number 5. It was named in honor of Colonel Dodd who had previously served at the field and had been commander of the Aviation Post when the 3rd Aero Squadron was stationed there. Active flight operations were terminated in October, 1931, and official date of closure of Dodd Field as an aviation facility has not been determined.

# The 1st Aero Squadron – A History

**University:** University of Illinois, Engineering  
**Graduation Year:** 1907  
**Service branch:** Army Air Corps  
**Rank:** Colonel  
**Date of Birth:** 3/6/1886  
**Date of Death:** 10/5/1919

**Major Gen. Benjamin Foulois**  
1879-1967



Benjamin Delahauf Foulois, the first chief of the Army Air Corps to be a military aviator, had a number of “firsts” in his long and illustrious career. His accomplishments spanned 56 years during active-duty and retired military aviation service.

He was born in Washington, Conn., in 1879. Foulois enlisted as a volunteer in 1898, about six months later, he rejoined the Infantry as a private. He was commissioned officer of Infantry in 1901 until 1908 when he graduated from Signal School. Foulois was then assigned to the Office of the Chief Signal Officer, Washington, D.C. During this tour he operated the first dirigible balloon purchased by the U.S. government. He was also one of the first three officers in the Army to operate the first military airplane purchased by the government from the Wright Brothers in 1909. He accompanied Orville Wright on the final trial flight from Fort Myer, Va., breaking three world’s records – speed, altitude and duration cross-country.

Transferring to Fort Sam Houston, San Antonio, Texas, Foulois was in charge of the first airplane owned and used in the service of the U.S. Army. He was the only pilot, navigator, instructor, observer and commander in the heavier-than-air division of the U.S. Army from November 1909 to April 1911, and made many mechanical improvements, later incorporated in subsequent models of airplanes. He corresponded with the Wright Brothers to learn to fly, and correct his piloting errors. From May to July 1911 he was detailed with the Maneuver Division at San Antonio, and while there he designed and used the first radio receiving set ever used in a military airplane. During this period he also broke the world cross-country record with a passenger, and carried out the first aerial reconnaissance flights.

# The 1st Aero Squadron – A History

Transferred to the Militia Bureau, Washington, D.C., in July 1911, Foulois was in charge of all Signal Corps and engineering units of the National Guard. From 1912 to 1915, he attended Signal Corps Aviation School and assumed command of the First Aero Squadron.

Under his command, the squadron participated in the Mexican Punitive Expedition (March to August 1916) with General John J. Pershing, the supreme commander of the expedition. The First Aero flew hundreds of reconnaissance, photo and courier missions. The squadron demonstrated that the airplane was no longer an experiment or novelty, but a practical tool with many use military applications.

In May 1918 he was appointed chief of air service, First Army. When our European pipe lines began to “leak badly,” he was designated assistant chief of the air service, zone of the advance, and two months later he became assistant chief of air service, Services of Supply.

Appointed assistant chief of the Air Corps in December 1927, Foulois became chief of the Materiel Division at Wright Field, Dayton, Ohio, in 1929. He was then reassigned to the Office of the Chief of Air Corps, Washington, D.C., in July 1930. In May 1931 he commanded the Air Corps exercises, leadership of which earned him the Mackey Trophy for that year. On Dec. 19, 1931 he was designated chief of the Air Corps.

Foulois retired from active duty Dec. 31, 1935, after 37 years of service.

He was the president of the Air Force Historical Foundation from 1956 to 1965. He received many honors, including the Air Force Association Citation of Honor in the 50th Anniversary Year of the Silver Wings in 1963 and was inducted into the National Aviation Hall of Fame also in 1963. Foulois tells his story in “From the Wright Brothers to the Astronauts” (McGrawHill, 1968). He died April 25, 1967.

**Major Gen. Herbert A. Dargue  
1886-1941**





# The 1st Aero Squadron – A History

Herbert Arthur “Bert” Dargue (November 17, 1886 – in Brooklyn, New York – December 12, 1941 in California) was a career officer in the United States Army, reaching the rank of major General in the Army Air Forces. He was a pioneer military aviator and one of the first ten recipients of the Distinguished Flying Cross.

Dargue entered the United States Military Academy on June 15, 1907. He graduated on June 13, 1911 and was commissioned a 2nd lieutenant in the Coast Artillery Corps. In March 1913, while stationed in the Philippines, he was trained to fly by 1st Lt. Frank P. Lahm, and was detailed to the Aviation Section, U.S. Signal Corps on July 23, 1914. On December 16, 1914, he participated in the first military communication by radio while in flight. From March to July 1916, he was a member of the 1st Aero Squadron when it supported the Punitive Expedition in Mexico.

In 1926 he aided in drafting the legislation that became the Air Corps Act, which led to the establishment of the United States Army Air Corps.

From December 21, 1926 to May 2, 1927, Dargue led the Pan American Good Will Flight, a public relations mission to promote U.S. aviation in South America. Flying five Loening OA-1A seaplanes, each named for an American city, Dargue, Capt. Ira C. Eaker, and eight other Army aviators traveled 22,000 miles (35,200 km) in 59 flight days, stopping at 72 cities along the route. The ten airmen, two of whom died in an accident during the mission, were awarded certificates for the Distinguished Flying Cross.

In the aftermath of the attack on Pearl Harbor, Henry Stimson chose Dargue to lead the investigation of why the United States had been unprepared for the attack, and placed him in command of the US Army units there. However, while flying to Hawaii to take his new post, Dargue’s B-18 crashed in the Sierra Nevada mountains, outside Bishop, California, and he was killed.

## **Major Gen. Ralph Royce 1890-1965**

*(Compiled from various Internet sources & Wikipedia by Kris Lethin)*



Royce was supremely prepared for a career in military aviation. He was born June 28, 1890 at Marquette, MI. He attended the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, NY from 1910-1914 and received his B.A. and commission as second lieutenant of infantry upon graduation.

# The 1st Aero Squadron – A History

He learned to fly in 1915 at North Island, San Diego, CA. He was promoted to 1st Lt. and Captain in 1916 and flew with the 1st Aero Squadron in Mexico and in France, 1916-1919. He was promoted to Major in 1917. For his service in France, he was awarded the *Croix de Guerre* with the citation: "Commanding the 1st American Observation Escadrille, he insisted on making the first reconnaissance above the enemy lines himself. Gives to his pilots generally an example of admirable dash and intrepidity."

From 1920-26 he was commanding officer of the primary flying school at Carlstrom Field, Arcadia, FL. In 1926 he was transferred to Langley for duty as a student at the Air Corps Tactical School. We find him at Tucson on July 8, 1927 with his home base identified as Langley. After graduation a year later he went to Ft. Leavenworth, KS as a student in the General Service School.

## ***Military Career***

- **1928 – 1930** Commanding Officer of the 1st Pursuit Group, Selfridge Field, Michigan
- **1930** Commanding Officer of the "Arctic Patrol" Winter Test Flight of the 1st Pursuit Group (18 Curtiss P-1C fighters, two C-9 Ford transports, one C-1 Douglas transport, and one O2-K Douglas observation aircraft) from Selfridge Field, Michigan to Spokane, Washington and return, during a period of extreme cold, snow and other bad flying and operating conditions. Royce was awarded the 1930 Mackay Trophy in recognition of this achievement.
- **1930 – 1933** Duty with the War Department General Staff, Washington, D.C.
- **1933** Temporary duty as Operations and Training Officer (G-3), General Headquarters Air Force (Provisional), March Field, California
- **1933 – 1934** Student at the Army War College, Washington Barracks, D.C.
- **1934** Operations Officer of the Alaska Flight commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Henry H. "Hap" Arnold. Arnold and his executive and operations officers, Majors Hugh J. Knerr and Royce respectively, led ten Martin B-10 bombers on an 18,000 mile round-trip flight from Bolling Field, D.C. to Fairbanks, Alaska during which they photographed some 20,000 square miles of Alaskan territory, providing data that was useful later in World War II. The mission garnered Arnold the Distinguished Flying Cross and the 1934 Mackay Trophy (his second) for the most meritorious flight of the year. To Arnold's dismay, none of the other crew members received any award.
- **1934 – 1937** Commanding Officer of the 1st Pursuit Group, Selfridge Field, Michigan
- **1937 – 1939** Air Officer, Philippine Department
- **1939 – 1941** Commanding Officer of the 7th Bombardment Group, Hamilton Field, California; from 07.09.1940, Fort Douglas, Utah
- **1941** Assistant Military Attaché at the American Embassy in London, England
- **1941 – 1942** Military Attaché for Air at the American Embassy in London, England
- **1942** Chief of the Air Staff, U.S. Army Forces in Australia (USAFIA)
- **1942** Leader of the Royce Mission, a force of three B 17 and seven B 25 bombers deployed from Australia to secret staging bases on Mindanao, Philippines for attacks on Japanese targets at Manila, Cebu, and Davao
- **1942** Senior Air Officer, Allied Air Forces in the Southwest Pacific
- **1942 – 1943** Commanding General of the U.S. Army Air Forces Southeastern Training Center, Maxwell Field, Alabama
- **1943** Commanding General of the First Air Force, Mitchel Field, New York
- **1943 – 1944** Commanding General of the U.S. Army Forces in the Middle East (USAFIME)
- **1944** Deputy Commander of the Ninth Air Force, England; from 15.09.1944, France
- **1944 – 1945** Deputy Air Commander-in-Chief of the Allied Expeditionary Air Force and Commanding General of the U.S. Component
- **1944 – 1945** Commanding General of the First Tactical Air Force (Provisional)
- **1945** Commanding General of the Personnel Distribution Command, Louisville, Kentucky

# The 1st Aero Squadron – A History

- **1946** Retired (disability in line of duty)

**Edgar Staley Gorrell**  
1891 -1945



Edgar Gorrell was born in Baltimore, Maryland, graduated from West Point in 1912 and was assigned to the infantry with whom he served two years in Alaska. He joined the Air Service in 1915 and attended flight school at North Island, San Diego. Upon graduation in June, 1915 and receiving his Junior Military Aviation certificate in July, he was posted to the First Aero Squadron.

Edgar arrived in Columbus in March, 1916 with his squadron. He flew (and endured) in Mexico along with his fellows and contributed as both pilot and observer. Perhaps his major contribution was his criticism of the quality of the Curtiss JN-2/3 Jennys and the conditions the squadron faced

A newspaper reporter, Webb Miller, wrote a scathing article for his paper which was picked up by papers all over the nation. With Washington in a dither, an investigation ensued. Only Gorrell admitted to having spoken to Miller. Apparently, it didn't hurt his career for soon he was enrolled at MIT where he obtained a Master's Degree in Aeronautical Engineering. The revelation of the sad state of the Air Service helped to persuade Congress to appropriate funds for more and better equipment.

Gorrell left Columbus for MIT in September, 1916. When he graduated the next spring, he was stationed in D.C. as an intelligence officer in the Aeronautic Division. Ordered to France in June, he became part of Gen. Pershing's staff and on August 15, 1917 was appointed the first Chief of the Technical Section, Air Service, AEF. By December, Edgar was Chief of Strategical Aviation. While filling these two roles, Gorrell wrote "Bombardment Plan for the Air Service, AEF" in 1917.

This plan followed closely the plan proposed by the British for the Royal Flying Corps. It called for the development and use of long range bombers to attack the enemies' heartland; the manufacturing and distribution center and transportation infrastructure as well as tactical bombing against front line troops. It detailed priorities and requisites that should be followed for successful campaigns. He followed this up with a second paper, "The Future Role of American Bombardment Aviation". These

# The 1st Aero Squadron – A History

ideas, though enthusiastically accepted by Pershing, Foulois, Mitchell and others, weren't implemented due to lack of bombers and time. The Armistice intervened and Gorrell's papers were shelved.

On conclusion of WWI, Gen. Patrick, Chief of Air Service, AEF, ordered his personnel to forward reports of their own and their units' activities during the war to Colonel Gorrell (he had become a colonel on October 28, 1918. at age 27). Patrick wanted to know what had been learned by the Air Service. He ordered *everyone* to do this *prior* to their going home! Some reports were well done; others hastily prepared. The Second Artillery Aerial Observation School at Souge (France) even resorted to a form letter! Gorrell compiled and edited all this information during 1919. "History of the Air Service, AEF" has 282 volumes and is commonly called "Gorrell's History".

Edgar Gorrell resigned from the Army in 1920 and joined the Nordyke and Marmon Co. In 1925, he became associated with the Stutz Motor Car Co.; he later became President of that firm in 1929. (While at North Island, Gorrell drove a Studebaker. Roy Brown, a fellow student, had a Stutz Bearcat with bucket seats four huge cylinders, each with four valves, and made a *lot* of noise! (One wonders if Edgar might have been a little envious so later "bought" the company.) Stutz stopped production in 1935 and Gorrell was elected the first president of the Air Transport Association of America in 1936. He held this post until his death.

During these years, he headed an investment company that he founded in D.C. and served on several government commissions. One of these, the "Army Air Service Investigating Commission" was formed to look at the future of the Army Air Corps. Among the members were Benjamin Foulois, Jimmy Doolittle and Hugh Drum.

Gorrell's time in the military was short but he made some serious contributions. His *History* speaks for itself, an epic work. The earlier papers that he wrote concerning "strategic bombardment", though not put into effect in WWI, were not forgotten. Before WWII most of his ideas were included in the Army Air Corps Tactical Manual. Major General Laurence S. Kater called Gorrell's strategic bombardment plan the "earliest, clearest and least known statement of the American conception of the employment of an air power."

Edgar Gorrell died in Washington, D.C. in 1945. At his request, his ashes were scattered over West Point from a military airplane.

<b>Born:</b> Baltimore,					Maryland
<b>Died:</b> Washington,					D.C
<b>Served:</b> U.S.	Army	(1912	–		1920)
<b>Rank:</b> Colonel					
<b>Commands:</b> Chief of the Technical Section of the Air Service, AEF Chief of Strategical Aviation for the					AEF
<b>Award:</b> Companion of the Distinguished Service Order (Great Britain)					
<b>Civilian:</b> President of Stutz Motor Car Co., President of Air Transport Association of America					

=====///////////////=====

# The 1st Aero Squadron – A History

**Robert Henry Willis, Jr.**  
**1886 – 1918**



Robert Henry Willis was born in Williston, South Carolina. He attended The Citadel (often called the West Point of the South) and graduated the First Honor Graduate of the Class of 1908. He was commissioned a 2<sup>nd</sup>Lt. and then assigned to the 6<sup>th</sup> Infantry at Helena, Montana.

On January 1, 1910, the 6<sup>th</sup> was sent to the Philippines where Willis served, primarily on Mindanao, until his outfit returned to San Francisco in the summer of 1912. While there, an aviator gave him a ride over the bay and he fell in love with flying.

He was accepted into the Signal Corps Flight School at San Diego and, after a long furlough, started training in 1913. He received both the F.A.I. airplane pilot certificate and the Military Aviator rating in December. In 1914, the Aero Club of America rated him an Expert and he received his J.M.A. rating in November.

The reorganization of the First Aero Squadron on July 1, 1915 has Lt. Willis listed as a member. (He may have been a Capt. according to one source.) He moved with it to Fort Sill, OK; Fort Sam Houston, TX; and to Columbus, NM in the aftermath of the Villa raid.

On March 19, 1916, at about 5:15 P.M., the squadron took off for Casas Grande, Mexico. In the gathering gloom, the formation quickly broke up in the gathering dusk. Four of the planes landed at Ascension, Mex.; one returned to Columbus while three others flew south blindly. At one point Willis and Gorrell almost collided as they zeroed in on a fire that they thought might mark the landing strip. Finally, out of gas, Willis was forced to land 5 or 6 miles south of Pearson (now known as Mata Ortiz). His plane, #41, suffered severe damage and he abandoned it and hiked north. Hiding during the day and walking at night, it took him 2 days to reach Casas Grande. He returned with a squad a few days later to find that the plane had been stripped. Only the engine was salvageable.

Willis, as an observer with Lt. Dargue in #43, crashed in rough country in the hills west of Chihuahua City, Mex. on April 19<sup>th</sup>. The plane landed on a 45 degree slope, bottom side up. Dargue was banged up a bit, but Willis suffered a 3 to 4 inch gash in his scalp and he was hanging from the plane caught by his ankle which was severely bruised. The airplane was a total

# The 1st Aero Squadron – A History

loss so they burned it and started walking to San Antonio, Chih., 65 miles away. It took nearly two days. A few days later, they were in Columbus and Willis was sent to the base hospital at Ft. Sam Houston. He spent nearly three months recuperating and it was discovered that he had walked to San Antonio with a broken ankle!

After a short return to Columbus he was posted to Washington, D.C. to be part of the committee to select machine guns for the U.S. Army. He was its Recorder and received a letter from the Board's President commending him for his outstanding work. He then served for a time inspecting airplane factories in Buffalo, Boston and New York. During this time in August, 1917, he became a Lieutenant Colonel and sailed for France on October, 29<sup>th</sup>.

On September 1, 1918, his orders came to become Chief of Air Service of the Seventh Army Corps. A few days before he was to report, he accidentally shot himself with a pistol. He was buried with full military honors in the cemetery at Remiremont, France.

Thus his promising military career was cut short. One can only speculate as to what he might have achieved. The letter to Willis' father from General Pershing best summarizes his character.

## **August 17, 1920**

Dear Mr. Willis:

I have your letter of July 20<sup>th</sup>, regarding your son Lieutenant Colonel Robert H. Willis, Jr., who lost his life during the World War.

I knew this young officer as a member of the small group of aviators on duty with the American Punitive Expedition in Mexico, where I had ample opportunity to observe his work. Being imbued with the ideals of the true soldier, his service was in keeping with the high standards of our army, and I was pleased to have him as a member of the flying corps in France. Colonel Willis was a man of pleasing personality and an officer in whose ability I had the greatest confidence and I was deeply grieved to learn of his untimely death.

With sincerest sympathy in your great loss, believe me.

Sincerely yours,

*John J. Pershing*



Robert Willis, Jr. Pictured above with his Martin TT Trainer. (From the collection of John Moore, courtesy of Copeland Willis III, 2-28-08)

# The 1st Aero Squadron – A History

ROBERT HENRY WILLIS, JR. 1886 – 1918

---

Born:

---

Died: Remiremont, France

---

Served: U.S. Army (1908 -1918)

---

Rank: Lieutenant Colonel

## COMMAND

---

Chief of Air Service, Seventh Army Corps

(died prior to assuming position)

## Ira Adelbert Rader 1887–1958



Ira A. Rader was born in Mayten, California on July 30, 1887. He attended the University of California Berkley for one year then entered West Point. He graduated in 1911 with a B.S. in engineering and was assigned to the 19th Infantry Regiment in the Philippines. A year later, still in the Philippines, he transferred to the 24th Infantry.

# The 1st Aero Squadron – A History

Lt. Rader returned to the U.S. on leave in 1914 and volunteered for the Army Air Service. He started training at North Island, San Diego in December. He soloed in May, 1915, received his F.A.I. certificate in June and his J.M.A. rating in July and was assigned to the First Aero Squadron at Fort Sill, OK. He moved with the squadron to San Antonio, then on to Columbus for the Punitive Expedition into Mexico.

Between March 19 and April 14, 1916, Rader served competently and uneventfully with the squadron scouting and carrying dispatches. But on the 14th, while delivering dispatches to the 11th cavalry, he landed in country too rough for his Jenny, #52, to handle. He was 100 miles from the nearest U.S. base and the plane was so badly damaged he was forced to leave it. The cavalry graciously loaned him a sick mule which he rode at the end of the column, the latest in the long line of camp followers.

Rader, now a Captain, was ordered to Mineola, NY on September 19th, 1916 to serve with the Signal Corps Aviation School. At this time, most of the experienced pilots of the First Aero Squadron were being dispersed to various bases to serve in training and organizational capacities. This assignment lasted until July 20, 1917 when he was promoted and became the Departmental Aeronautical Officer, Central Dept., Chicago, IL. In October he was ordered to France and arrived there on November 12, 1917.

Major Rader was attached to Headquarters, Chief of Air Service; Paris, briefly, then was given command of the Seventh Aviation Instruction Center at Clermont-Ferrand from November 27th until September 11, 1918. On the 13th, he was promoted to Lt. Colonel and joined the First Bombardment Group at Amanty. He flew on missions over the lines during the St. Mihiel and Champagne campaigns.

He sailed to the U.S. on October 9th as Special Representative of Training Dept., Air Service, and on November 4th took command of Ellington Field, the largest aviation training facility in the nation. During the inter-war years, Ira Rader served in a number of capacities and attended four army schools. He became a temporary Colonel in 1936 and Colonel permanently on June 1 of 1940. In 1939, he commanded Barksdale Field near Shreveport, LA, then the largest airfield in the world.

Colonel Rader was in Staffordshire, England in charge of the 8th Air Force Reinforcement Depot during WWII. He retired of July 31, 1947 after 36 years in the army, 33 of them in the Air Service. He died September 14, 1958 and is buried at Arlington National Cemetery.

## **IRA ADELBERT RADER 1887 – 1958**

---

Born: Mayten, California

---

Died: Hendersonville, No. Carolina

---

Served: US Army 1910 – 1924

---

Rank: Colonel



# The 1st Aero Squadron – A History

IRA ADELBERT RADER 1887 – 1958

## COMMANDS

---

Seventh Aviation Instruction Center

---

Ellington Field

---

Barksdale Field

---

8th Air Force Reinforcement

## AWARDS

---

Legion of Merit

---

Bronze Star

---

French Croix de Guerre with Palm

# The 1st Aero Squadron – A History

Joseph Eugene Carberry  
1887 – 1961



Joseph E. Carberry was born on July 20, 1887 in Waukesha, Wisconsin. He graduated from West Point in 1910 with honors and was posted to the 6th Infantry. Carberry was selected for flight duty in 1913 and ordered to North Island, California for training. He must have been adept because here he received his F.A.I. certificate #251 in July, and his M.A. (Military Aviator) rating in September. The Aero Club of America rated him an Expert Aviator on November 17, all in 1913. His J.M.A. (Junior Military Aviator) came on July 23, 1914 and he was placed on official flying status. Prior to this, though, he had already made contributions. In August, 1913, Lt. Carberry recommended that airfield symbols be used on maps to identify landing places. A “Y” was to mark a good landing field and a “V” for a possible field. Lt. Thomas Bowen, who subsequently became a flyer, was on a mapping assignment near San Diego and undertook to do the work. Standards weren’t terribly high. A “good” field had to have a runway at least 300 yards long in all directions, firm soil and no shrubbery over 2 ft. high. A “possible” field was a 250 yd. runway in one direction, at least 50 yards wide. Sandy soil was OK, shrubs couldn’t be over 3 ft. high and there could be no high obstructions around the field. A new army altitude record for two people was set on the December 26 1913. Lieutenant Carberry, with Lieutenant Taliaferro as his passenger, reached 7800 ft. Three days later, with Lieutenant Seydel, observer, he won the [Mackay Trophy](#). And, in 1915, with Captain Foulois as passenger, he established another altitude record: 11,690 ft.! The First Aero Squadron was reorganized in 1915 and included Lieutenant Carberry. He was sent to the Curtiss plant to evaluate the JN-2s that were being purchased. He flew one on June 4, 1915, but doubted that its rate of climb met the Army’s requirements, nevertheless he recommended that they be accepted. The JN-2s turned out to be woefully inadequate and Curtiss was forced to modify them into JN-3s.

Carberry was one of the 11 pilots who came to Columbus with the First Aero Squadron on March 15, 1916 and served in Mexico with the Punitive Expedition. By the end of April, the Jennies were worn out or destroyed and the squadron was back in Columbus where it would remain until August, 1917. Carberry, however, was given a new assignment. First Lieutenant Carberry took command of the Signal Corps Aviation Station, Mineola (later Hazelhurst Field) on July 22, 1916. It was the Army’s second flying school and was established to train flyers from the various state militias. The first group was from New York, and trainees from other states came later. Carberry was named Acting Aviation Officer Eastern Department in September, but didn’t assume that role until November. He

# The 1st Aero Squadron – A History

held these positions until he went to France with the AEF for advanced flight training. Upon arrival in France, Captain Carberry became a member of a Board of Officers to make aviation recommendations. Colonel Edgar Russell headed the board which included, among others, Billy Mitchell and Townsend Dodd. Carberry served as recorder. The board convened on June 19, 1917 and on July 4, suggested the organization of tactical and strategic aviation for the AEF.

With his assignment to the board completed, Captain Carberry remained on General Pershing's staff and was in charge of establishing airfields in France. By 1918, he was back in the U.S. as director of Air Service Instruction, and by June, the now Lt. Colonel Carberry was chief of Heavier-Than-Air training for the Air Service. As such, he reported that the lack of coordination between aircraft production and the training program was his greatest problem. Advanced, specialized and technical training was severely hampered by shortages of engines, spare parts and high performance planes.

Joseph Carberry apparently suffered an illness (influenza?) during or after this time for, in 1919, he left the Army General Hospital in Hot Springs, Arkansas for Rockwell Field, San Diego. He retired from the military in 1924 and in 1933 moved to Arcadia, California. He died in Los Angeles on November 12, 1961 and is buried in Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery, San Diego, California.

## JOSEPH EUGENE CARBERRY 1887 – 1961

---

Born: Waukesha, Wisconsin

---

Died: Los Angeles, California

---

Served: US Army 1910 – 1924

---

Rank: Lieutenant Colonel

## COMMANDS

---

Signal Corps Aviation Station, Mineola, Long Island, New York

---

Director of Air Service Instruction

What was the type of plane assigned to the 1st Aero Squadron in 1916?

In addition to the **R-2s**, the squadron received three Standard H-2s, six Curtiss twin-engine JNs, about seven Curtiss JN-4 "Jennies", and other planes from Martin, Sturtevant, Thomas, and LWF. All told, counting the four Curtiss N-8s, the 1st Aero Squadron received fifty-one airplanes at Columbus by 6 April 1917.

# The 1st Aero Squadron – A History

Which was the first American military unit dedicated to aviation?

## 1st Aero Squadron

On December 4, general orders redesignated the unit as the **1st Aero Squadron**, effective December 8, 1913. This first military unit of the US Army devoted exclusively to aviation, today designated the 1st Reconnaissance Squadron, has remained continuously active since its creation.