

The 1st Aero Sqdn., U.S.A.S.

By JOHN J. SMITH and JAMES J. SLOAN

Author's note: The initial articles in this series were presented in the JOURNAL, Vol. 13, Nos. 3 and 4, pp 228 and 296, with the assistance of Members John R. Wells and John J. Smith. Parts of this current article were taken from the Gorrell Report, Records Group 120, National Archives, and checked with other sources, to describe the state of affairs in the 1st Aero Squadron in the period prior to America's entry into the Great War. The recent receipt of some photographs from John R. Wells, from a group of originals in the album of Lt. Joseph Gastreich, and through the courtesy of Mr. Charles Toelcke, have thrown new light on the days of the Squadron at Columbus, N.M.. circa 1916.

The provisional organization of an aero squadron in the U.S. Army dated from the War Department General Order No. 75 of December 4, 1913, which set forth the numbers of personnel, ranks, and equipment. This prescribed 20 officers, 90 enlisted men, 8 aeroplanes, 16 tractors, and 6 motorcycles, and was signed by Gen. Leonard Wood. The first unit to be formed within this parameter was the First Aero Squadron, a year and a half later. There was a First Reserve Aero Squadron brought into being on May 3, 1917, created from the work done by the Governor's Island Aviation school, and described in the JOURNAL, Vol. 9, page 136. There was also a first militia unit, but that is another story.

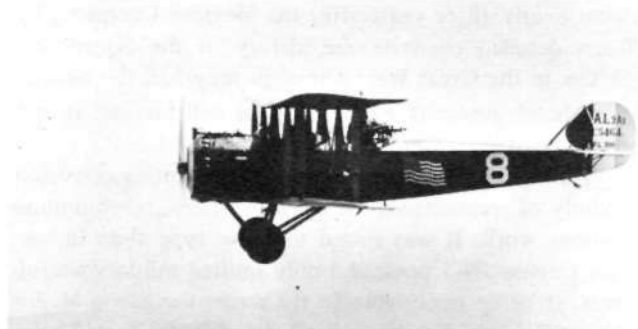
The real 1st Aero Squadron was formed from the personnel of the Aviation School at North Island on 15 July 1915, and until that time there was no numbered organization as an aviation unit in U.S. service.

In the years 1910 to 1912 various attempts in flying activities had been carried out at Fort Meyer, College Park, San Antonio, August, Manila (Philippines), Ft. Sam Houston, Hammondspont, and Texas City under the Chief Signal Officer. No real credence was given to any plan to use the airplane as more than a means of keeping some officers occupied in experiments. Rotation of assignments, lack of funds and equipment, and poor weather at the several flying sites affected all operations. Some months before the Army's lease at College Park, Md. drew to a close at mid-1913 the decision was made not to renew it but to find an area with more favorable flying weather the year around. The scattered and hesitating efforts to create an air arm were terminated. In January 1913 the foundation was laid for a permanent establishment when Army Lt. Harold E. Geiger inaugurated the Signal Corps Flying School at North Island.'

In 1911 the rising young aviator, Glenn Curtiss, had also determined to find a more suitable base for his flying activities. He had taken a lease with the Spreckels Company on North Island, then barren and uninhabited, and made offers to both War and Navy Departments to train officers in the art of flying. A number of officers from Army, Navy and Marines did train with the Curtiss School, among them Lt. T.G. Ellyson, USN, Army Lts. Paul W. Beck, G.E.M. Kelly, and John C. Walker, Lt. J.W. McCloskey, USMC, and Lt. (later ADM) John H. Towers, USN. These, and many more to follow became famous in early aviation and later.²

Flying training started in earnest at Signal Corps Flying School with progression from the Curtiss and Wright open biplanes to, by May 1915, the Curtiss JN-2. The first of these was accepted at North Island by "the 1st Aero Squadron," as chronicled by *Air Power Historian*, the first mention of the actual unit, although its date of official formation is obscure.³ The experiences of these early days are detailed in Chandler & Lahm's *How Our Army Grew Wings*, and *Jackrabbits To Jets*, compiled by Mrs. Elretta Sudsbury.⁴

The impact of the Great War (though it was not thus known at the time) began to have more than a casual affect on U.S. observers as 1915 wore on and the fighting settled into a grim pattern of immobility of ground forces. Capt. Benjamin Foulois, with other officers of the Aviation Section, was instrumental in getting some attention on aircraft support of ground forces by providing for artillery spotting training at the Artillery School, Ft. Sill, Okla. He arranged for the selection of officers and men from the Signal Corps Flying School, and orders were cut on July 1, 1915 for this. On July 26th the real 1st Aero Squadron, now officially reorganized and consisting of 15 officers, 85 enlisted men and 8 JN-2s with necessary camp equipment, left for Ft. Sill.



Better equipment was yet to come than was available to 1st Aero Sqdn in 1915 and 1916. In operations over the Front in 1918, Salmson SAL2A2, Ser. No. 5464 became the Squadron's "Old Reliable" No. 8, with a long history. (Photo—Nat'l Archives E-5312).

Various exercises were carried out at Ft. Sill, liaison with ground troops, artillery spotting, and photography. It is not recorded how the lessons learned at the Artillery School were passed along to the Army's total intelligence. At any rate the training had to be repeated with new personnel later in Europe in the then greatly expanded military forces.

In November the Squadron went to San Antonio, flying its JN-2s the entire distance, with stopovers at Wichita Falls, Ft. Worth and Austin. Somewhere in this period the JN-2s, which had been proven as unsatisfactory, were modified to JN-3s. At San Antonio no flying was done, weather being unsuitable, and the time was spent in erecting facilities. Then came the requirement for duty under uniquely Western American circumstances.

Pancho Villa and his men attacked the town of Columbus, N.M. in early March, 1916, and Brig. Gen. John J. Pershing was ordered to make a punitive expedition into the territory south of Columbus. Villa and his crew proved to be very elusive and the Army ran into difficulties, enhanced by the poor weather. Much rain had rendered the trails impassable by his few motor supply trucks, the terrain was extremely rugged, and the cavalry became widely scattered. It became an opportunity for the aviation branch to prove its worth as reconnaissance for the Cavalry. Though not fully preplanned that way, the First Aero Sqdn did prove very worthwhile in the campaign.

The order to report to Gen. Pershing came to 1st Aero at San Antonio on 13 March. It responded by flying its eight Curtiss JN-3 airplanes to Columbus, arriving on 15 March and the next day Capt. Foulois, as observer, with Capt. Townsend F. Dodd as pilot, made a first trip into Mexico.

The Squadron moved rapidly into its duties, flying many hours under poor conditions, inadequate maintenance, and extreme hardships for both flying and ground crew. The active flying in support of the punitive expedition lasted from March 19th through April 22nd, with quite a few hair-raising episodes in between. Dr. Maurer related the history of the First Aero Squadron from 1913 to 1917 in *The Airpower Historian*.⁵ It will not be amiss, however, to relate here the account of the Mexican Campaign from Gorrell, "*The History of the First Aero Squadron*."⁶ It should be noted that this portion of the Gorrell Report was written nearly three years after the Mexican Campaign by officers detailed to write the history of the Squadron's activities in the Great War. Although they had the benefit of first-hand accounts by many men still serving, it is a 2nd or 3rd hand recital.

During the Mexican Campaign the duties consisted mainly of reconnaissance work, courier, and communications work. It was found that the type then in use, the Curtiss JN-3 possessed only limited military usefulness, it being impossible to fly across the Sierra Madre Mountains which have an altitude of 9,000 feet. Therefore it was requested that two each of the following types should be tested under actual field conditions: Martin Model S; Curtiss R-2; Sturtevant, Thomas; and



Mail and dispatches were carried on many trips in Mexico, and the prevalence of the propeller problem is shown here. A Curtiss R-2 is loaded, and the spare prop lashed to the sides of the fuselage. At one time a special shop was set up for a factory-trained crew to provide propellers at Columbus, N.M. (Photo—Joseph Gastreich album, courtesy of John R. Wells).

Sloane. The only planes received of which there is record were from the Curtiss Co., two type R-2 and N-8. These proved to be of great improvement over the old type.⁷

In actuality, the JN-3s were grossly underpowered, and had already been flown many hours prior to coming to New Mexico. By the end of March only two of the eight JN-3s were still in commission.

The following report illustrates the kind of work done by the Squadron and some of the difficulties encountered.

April 7, 1916. Aeroplane No. 42, Lt. Kilner, pilot, with mail and dispatches, from Geronimo to Colonia Dublan, distance 130 miles. Aeroplane No. 43, Lt. Dargue, pilot, Capt. Foulois, observer, from Geronimo to Chihuahua City, with dispatches for American Consul, distance, 105 miles.

April 14, 1916. Aeroplane No. 53, Lt. Dargue, pilot, Lt. Carroll, observer, on reconnaissance trip from Columbus, N.M. to Boca Grande, Pulpit Pass, Exaca Pass, Garretas, Janos, Ascencion to Columbus, reconnaissance over the posses; record non-stop (AM) cross-country flight with passengers. Distance 315 miles. This reconnaissance trip was made for the purpose of locating a large body of Carranzista troops, reported to be moving northeast towards our lines of communication. No troops were located within the area covered.

Aeroplane No. 45, Lt. Carberry, pilot, Capt. Foulois, observer, from Chihuahua City to Satevo with despatchers from American Consul to Gen. Pershing. Distance 50 miles.

Aeroplane No. 52, Lt. Bader, pilot, from Satevo to Ojito near Parral with despatches from Col. Brown and Maj. Thomkins, distance 100 miles. From Ojito to Soquillo, distance 20 miles. On this later trip Lt. Bader located Maj. Howses' command. He was compelled near the column, on a very rough piece of ground, badly damaging his machine. Being in hostile country, 100 miles from his base, and unable to make the necessary repairs, the machine was abandoned. Lt. Bader proceeded with Maj. Howses' column.

Aeroplane No. 53, Lt. Chapman, pilot, with despatches from San Andreas to San Antonio, distance 35 miles.

Capt. Foulois and fourteen men of the 1st Aero Squadron to Chihuahua City in squadron automobiles and trucks, with despatches for American Consul. Lt. Willis and detachment to Parral in automobile with despatches for Col. Brown, commanding troops near Parral.

Aeroplane No. 42 dismantled, condemned and destroyed. Lower wings of this machine were placed on Aeroplane No. 45, to replace wings that have been damaged in flight to Chihuahua on April 13th.

Total flights - 5. Time — 8 hrs. 3 mins.

April 19, 1916. Aeroplane No. 43, Lt. Dargue, pilot, Capt. Willis, observer, on reconnaissance trip from San Antonio to Chihuahua City, for the purpose of taking photographs and reconnoitring all roads and approaches to Chihuahua City. Left San Antonio at 5:25 A.M. Reconnoitred road, secured several photographs of same, then attempted to follow road leading west out of the city, through the foothills and mountains, in the direction of San Andres. While reconnoitring, the motor began to vibrate badly and lose power. Efforts were made to turn around and retrace the course through more open country, but due to failure of the motor and terrific downward currents the pilot was unable to reach a good landing ground and was compelled to land on the side of a mountain having a slope of about 45 degrees. The machine was completely wrecked, turning over on both pilot and observer. Lt. Dargue escaped uninjured though badly shaken up. Capt. Willis was pinned down under the wreckage, both his feet being caught between the engine bed and the gasoline tank. He received a severe though not serious scalp wound and was considerably bruised about the legs and ankles. As the aeroplane was completely wrecked, it was burned on the spot. The two aviators, with their personal equipment, started at 9:35 A.M. this date to walk back to San Antonio, their nearest base, a distance of about 65 miles. They struggled continuously through mountains and valleys for two days and nights, suffering all this time for lack of food and water. They finally

This photograph of the cavalry base at Columbus, New Mexico, circa 1915-16 is rotated approximately 90 degrees right. It shows the cavalry riding area at left, adjacent to the horse barns, and a railroad spur near the right side. The first Aero Squadron had its shops near here; the photo does not reveal any clue as to landing area. (From Gastreich album, courtesy J.R. Wells).

reached San Antonio on the morning of the 21st, completely exhausted, after almost 45 hours continuous walking. Both aviators remained at San Antonio until April 23rd when they proceeded in an automobile to Nariquita and turned in their reports to the division commander. Distance flown on this trip from San Antonio to Chihuahua City and vicinity, 100 miles.

The actual campaign into Mexican territory was of short duration. The squadron returned to Columbus on 22 April and remained there until mid-1917, several weeks after war was declared. Various accounts have recorded how attempts at more permanent shops and repair facilities were made. Propellers were one of the most frequent problem items, and mechanics from the Curtiss plant were sent to Columbus to set up a repair facility for these. The Gorrell Report provides the following interesting technical description:

A great deal of experimental work was done by different members of the squadron ... A parachute was rigged up which worked very well but was not adopted. Also a device for dropping bombs gave very satisfactory results but which, for some reason, was rejected. Work was done on a periscopic device to enable the pilot to see all around him, above and below at the same time, but this was not perfected ... Lewis machine guns were issued on October 29th and instructions were given in their use.

Gen. Pershing was not noted for his affection for the Air Service, being an old cavalryman, as was later proven a number of times during the War. However, in the interest of good organization morale, and quite possibly due to the realization that the Squadron had done some significant work for that period, the following telegram was sent to the Squadron on Christmas eve that year.

December 24, 1916.

Dublin 24

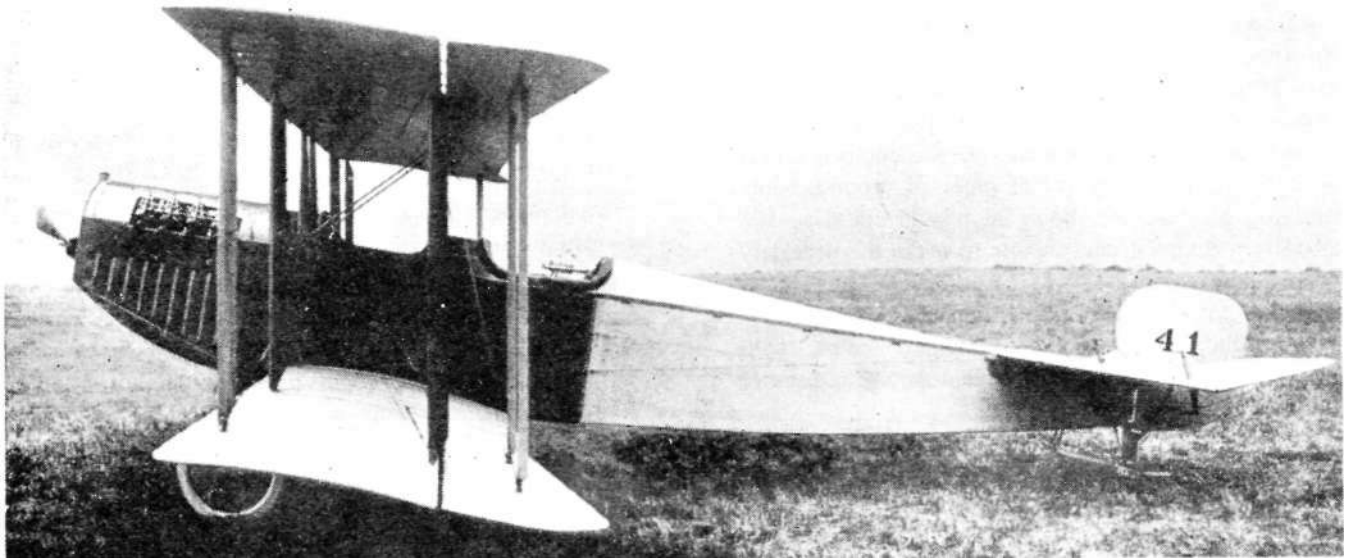
Capt. T.F. Dodd,

Commanding Aero Squadron, Columbus.

Please accept for yourself and officers and men of the 1st Aero Squadron my very cordial greetings and sincerest good wishes for the coming year period. Please kindly extend my warmest thanks to your command for the faithful and efficient service it has performed as a part of the Expedition.

JOHN J. PERSHING





The Curtiss JN-2, ten of which were purchased for the Signal Corps Aviation Section in 1915. It was a modified Model J, having ailerons in both wings. Shown above is No. 41, the first to be delivered to the Signal Corps Flying School at North Island. (Photo-National Archives).

The personnel of the Squadron were anxious to take part in the Great Adventure and to maintain the Squadron's reputation. Orders were in fact received late in the afternoon of May 20, 1917 to prepare immediately for foreign service, but nearly three months ensued before the Squadron actually moved out. Gen. Arnold reported;

If the Aviation Section was in a fog at times, so was the whole Army. Take the case of the 1st Aero Squadron, ordered to accompany the 1st Infantry Division overseas. By the end of May the Squadron was all packed up, ready for transportation from the Mexican Border to the Port of Embarkation. The 1st Division sailed in June, and in so far as the theoretically secret details of that troop movement were known to the General Staff, the 1st Aero Squadron was with it. But according to plaintive messages received from the Squadron itself, it was with nobody - it was still left behind, with all its goods and chattels... at Nogales, Arizona.

However, 1st Aero did arrive in Jersey City on August 9th, and embarked under the command of Maj. Ralph Royce, just arrived also, on the steamship LAPLAND for Europe on the 13th of August.

FOOTNOTES/REFERENCES:

¹Chandler, C. deF. and Lahm, F.P. HOW OUR ARMY GREW WINGS. New York, 1943, Ronald Press Co. Page 258. Actual lease was due to expire 30 June 1913.

²Hardie, G.A., Jr. "The Birth of Naval Aviation," JOURNAL of the A.A.H.S., Vol. 6, No. 1, Page 3 & subs.

³AIR POWER HISTORIAN, Vol. IV, No. 1, Page 28.

⁴ JACKRABBITS TO JETS describes the early flying activities of Curtiss, Army and Navy at North Island in great detail. The Army's part of North Island was later named in honor of Lt. Lewis C. Rockwell, killed in a flying accident, with Corp. Frank S. Scott, at College Park, Md. on 28 Sept. 1912. Scott Field, Ill. is named for Corp. Scott.

⁵AIR POWER HISTORIAN, Vol. IV, No. 4 (1957).

⁶The Gorrell Report, commonly used name for the Final Report of the Chief of the Air Service, 1918, now in the National Archives. "THE HISTORY OF THE FIRST AERO SQUADRON" is in Vol. E-1.

⁷Fahey, James C. U.S. ARMY AIRCRAFT, 1908-1946. New York, 1946, Ships and Aircraft. Fahey cites four Curtiss N-8 built in 1916, serial No. 60 (probably through 63, and twelve R-2, also built in 1916, s/n 63 and up.)

⁸H.H. Arnold, Gen., USAAF. GLOBAL MISSION. New York, 1949, Harper & Bros. Page 59.



Curtiss R-2, with VX engine of 160 hp, and red star on rudder, device used in 1915-16 by Signal Corps. (Photo—Curtiss, courtesy Peter M. Bowers).

Just in Case....

In case anyone should mention not having received their JOURNAL, such as you are looking at now, it could be that they did not renew their dues. NEWSLETTER No. 9 was mailed to ALL Members of record as of 1 Feb. 1969, and included a second envelope for dues renewal (first was mailed with NL/8 in November 1968). Annual dues were payable in January for calendar year 1969.