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An Airman to Remember

by Merle C. Olmsted

"I was completely out of ammunition by that time with two Boches climbing up after us within 150 yards. I took one of my empty ammunition magazines and threw it in the direction of the Boche. Then I threw the other seven. " So wrote Sergeant 1st Class Fred Graveline in a letter to his mother, shortly after the Armistice of 11 November, 1918.

Sgt. Graveline is virtually unknown to Air Force history, but he deserves better as he occupies a unique place in that history. He was one of only two Air Service enlisted men in World War I to win the Distinguished Service Cross.¹ In addition, he was one of a very small group of enlisted men who flew combat missions during WWI.

Until recent years, the enlisted personnel of the Air Force have received little attention in published historical material. The Air Force Biographical Dictionary lists but five enlisted men. One of these is Corporal Frank Scott, the first EM to die in an airplane

accident (in 1912), and for whom Scott AFB is named. The other four are all WWII Medal of Honor winners.

There are, however, countless thousands who deserve to be remembered for various reasons. One tiny group of such men are the enlisted observers of the Air Service of the American Expeditionary Force. The 1914/18 war has long since receded into the mists of time and there are few today who know that such a thing as an enlisted observer ever existed.

Sgt. 1st Class Fred Graveline wearing his DSC and the half wing of an observer. The shoulder patch is that of the 1st Army Air Service.



Capt. Cecil Sellers, highly respected C.O. of the 20th Aero Squadron during its operational career. Sellers was lost aboard the Pan American Airways flying boat *Samoan Clipper*. He was First Officer on the big Sikorsky when it disappeared 12 January 1938, en route Honolulu to Auckland, New Zealand. (Rhea Moore)

A valuable Air Service memento of WWI, Graveline's DSC with his initials engraved thereon. (author)

Very early in Air Force history it became policy to limit aircrew members to officers only. Essentially it remained so until the gigantic buildup of WWII when EM were accepted and trained by the thousands as aerial gunners, radio operators, flight engineers and other specialized jobs.

After the United States entered WWI in April 1917, there was also a massive buildup of primitive airpower. During those years, there were, with a few exceptions, only two aircrew positions, that of pilot, and his team member, the observer. There were, in addition, a very small number of Bombing Aviators. In the formative years of army aviation, there had been a few enlisted pilots. Twenty-three such men were trained in the years before WWI, but those who did not leave the service or die in crashes were commissioned soon after April 1917.² Late in the war, a few enlisted aviators were trained and a small number served as enlisted pilots into the 1930s. As far as is known, none flew in France.

In the AEF in France, however, all aircrew members were officers. Regardless of this policy, a few enlisted men flew combat, and in almost all cases it was merely a matter of necessity, brought on by heavy casualties among officer observers, and the inability of the personnel centers to supply replacements. How many enlisted observers flew combat is not known. Records of many of the squadrons are sparse, but brief mention can be found in some records. The 8th Aero Squadron (Corps Observation) listed two, the 20th Squadron (Bombardment) had four among its ranks, while the hard-hit 96th Squadron utilized four of its EM, plus Pvt. Cedric Newby, an 11th Squadron man who flew one mission with the 96th.³ Five of these volunteer observers are credited with the destruction of hostile aircraft. It

should be pointed out here that under the victory credit system used by the Air Service, both pilot and observer of two-seat aircraft received credit for a victory, regardless of which one did the shooting.⁴

Of all the observation and bombardment squadron records examined by the writer, the records of the 96th, a day bombardment unit flying French Breguet aircraft, are by far the most complete. A study of these records reveals why volunteers from the enlisted ground crew were utilized in the aft cockpits of the Breguets. During the month of September 1918, the 96th suffered heavy losses, nine observers went missing in action, or killed in action, while two suffered severe wounds. Thus the 96th entered the month of October with a serious shortage of backseat men. In addition, an effort was being made to increase the size of the formations, thereby increasing the volume of defensive firepower. Hence aircrew members were borrowed from sister squadrons in the 1st Day Bombardment Group, the 11th and 20th, plus limited utilization of enlisted volunteers.

It was during this month that all missions by enlisted volunteers of the 96th were flown. Sgt. 1st Class James Trimble, NCOIC of the Bomb and Bomb Gear Section being quite active, flying three sorties and shooting down a hostile aircraft on the afternoon of the 4th.

Other than Sgt. Trimble and Pvt. Newby, other enlisted men who flew missions with the 96th were: Pvt. Leary, four missions, Sgt. Van Rossum with two, and Sgt. White, who flew one. All first names are unknown, from which it can be seen that records are often fragmentary. Little is known at this time of the other two-seater squadrons, although Sgts. Phillip Smith and Albert O'Cocke of the 8th Squadron are both credited with air victories,

and Sgt. Frank W. Neal of the 8th died in a crash in late September.

The 20th Aero Squadron, however, was to produce the man who was clearly the outstanding enlisted observer/gunner of this small, unique group, Sgt. 1st Class Fred Graveline.

The Air Service buildup in France had been painfully slow, but by September of 1918 the long gestation period was over and a flood of new units were reaching the Zone of Advance in preparation for the brief St. Mihiel offensive, and the much more massive Meuse Argonne drive which was to ultimately end the war.

Although the 20th Aero Squadron had departed the U.S. in December 1917, its ground crews had been in training with the Royal Flying Corps on the home island and the Squadron did not reach France and become fully manned and equipped until the 10th of September, when it joined the 11th and 96th Squadrons at Amanty to form the 1st Day Bombardment Group. Only the 96th had seen action, having been operational since June. The 11th and 20th were equipped with U.S.-built DH-4s. These machines had already been in action with other squadrons as observation types, with reasonable success, but the 11th and 20th were to operate them as bombers, with somewhat less success.

Perhaps because of the heavy losses experienced by the 96th Squadron with its Breguets, an attempt was made to use the DH-4s of the 20th as two-seat fighters in company with 2nd Pursuit Group Spads. As might be expected, this was a dismal failure, and after an all-night herculean effort by the mechanics and armorers of the 20th, their aircraft had been equipped with bomb sights and racks and were bombed up for their first operation, on 13 September.

During the next six days the Squadron flew 11 missions in support of the St. Mihiel affair, standing down on the 19th to change stations and prepare for the Meuse Argonne drive which was to jump off on the 26th of September.

The target on the first day was the rail yards at Dun-sur-Meuse, with the 20th providing eight DH-4s. Near the target the formation was hit by half a dozen hostile single seaters. In the ensuing action the Squadron lost five DH-4s, with the flight leader bringing back a dead observer.

The raid reports for the period show a small effort on the 27th and an abort due to weather on the 28th. It was undoubtedly due to the loss of six observers on the 26th raid that several EM volunteered to ride the back seats of the DH-4s. A brief squadron history states that Sgt. Graveline started on 17 raids, and completed 15, starting on 29 September. However, the operations charts for the 20th Squadron show no sorties for that date, with the next operation on the 30th. From that date until 5 November, the Squadron flew 19 missions with Graveline starting 17 and completing 15—far more than any other enlisted observer in any unit. Since these were apparently all volunteer sorties, it can be assumed that Fred Graveline was a genuine tiger!

Graveline was somewhat older than the average when he enlisted in October 1917. He was born in West Warren, Mass., in 1891. Of average height and dark complexion, he was somewhat cocky and sure of himself.⁵ Unique in another way, he was already an old soldier, having first enlisted in 1911, serving five and a half years in the 5th Cavalry, and later the 2nd Regiment of Cavalry. This prior service was undoubtedly the reason for the rapid promotions, and by Dec. 1917 he was Sgt. 1st Class. When

the unit arrived in France in August 1918, Graveline was Acting First Sergeant, and continued these duties until the Squadron was mustered out in the U.S. in 1919.

It has not been possible to determine which missions Graveline was involved in those last five weeks of the war, but as pointed out, he apparently flew all but two or three of the squadron operations.

Citations and letters to his mother provide details on two of them which were the most memorable.

The 20th Squadron flew two missions on the 10th of October, the first departing base at 7 A.M. Although the raid leader reported observing a large dogfight at some distance, and the observers exchanged fire with two Fokker D-7s, no damage was done on either side, and the Squadron dropped 22 50-kg bombs and returned to base shortly after 0900 hours.

By the time the second group had taken off, led by Lts. Koepfgen and Fiske, and reached the target at 1225 hours, the Germans were aroused and seven Fokker D-7s with red noses and black fuselages struck the DH-4s only five minutes before bomb release time at Viller-Devant-Dun. In a running fight lasting 15 minutes, one machine crewed by Lts. Potter and Wilmer was hit and forced to land in German territory. Two other observers were wounded in the legs and the mission leader claimed one D-7 down in flames, and another down out of control, during which the observer/gunners fired 1500 rounds.

Apparently only the flamer was confirmed and under the victory credit system of the Air Service, four men received credit for this one victory. From sparse 20th Squadron records available, it would appear that Graveline, whose aircraft was "tail-end Charlie" (to use a WWII phrase), was the one whose fire actually knocked the D-7 down. The victory credit system used was that of the French Air Service, where all personnel involved directly were credited with the victory, even though only one may have been responsible. Hence, any pilot/observer team was always awarded equal credits. This is understandable enough, but it becomes sticky when two or more aircraft were involved in the same action. Among the WWI victory credits can be found incidents where as many as eight crews (16 men) all received credit for the destruction of one hostile aircraft.⁶

In the 10 October case of the 20th Squadron, one other team, plus Graveline's pilot, were credited for the flamer, as can be seen by this General Order from Headquarters, 1st Army Air Service.

"First Lieuts. A.S. Woolfolk, J.H. Weimer, H.E. Turner, and Serg. 1st Class F.C. Graveline, 20th Aero Sqdn, 1st Day Bombardment Group, are hereby credited with the destruction in combat of an enemy Fokker, in the region of Villers-devant-dun at 13,000 feet altitude on Oct. 10, 1918, at 12:25 O'clock."

Because of bad weather the last six days of the war, the 20th flew no missions during this period. The Squadron's last operation, on the 5th of November, developed into another bitter struggle with Blue Fokker D-7s and a few Siemens-Schuckert D-III's, or D-IV's.

The weather was foul that morning when the formation departed base at 0815 hours bound for the target town of Mouzon. The 11th Squadron turned back because of the weather and did not bomb, the newly operational 166th Squadron bombed a secondary target, but Lt. Sidney Howard leading eight DH-4s of the 20th pressed on to the target and bombed with good accuracy.



The men who kept the cranky DH-4s flying, the enlisted staff of the 20th. Capt. Sellers is standing near the center, with his head showing between the outer interplane struts of the center DH-4. 1st Sgt. Graveline is to his right. (USAF)

A pair of 20th Squadron DH-4s, one under tow by a non-issue horse. Despite the assistance of three former members of the 20th, the location of the photo and the identity of the men is uncertain. In the background is a 96th Squadron Breguet, and a 93rd Squadron Spad. (Robert Cavanagh)



In the ensuing battle, the 20th lost three machines (three men killed), and claimed two hostile aircraft shot down in flames, one out of control, and one seen to crash. To describe this last mission for the 20th Squadron, we turn to Sgt. Graveline's letter to his mother partially quoted at the beginning.

"Just before we reached our objective we were attacked by a formation of 8 enemy scout planes. We were able to chase them off and bomb the town which was our objective. As we were returning we were attacked by a formation of 6 enemy planes and were fighting them when another formation of 8 enemy planes came at us from the right wing. They were very aggressive and soon I saw one of our machines tumble down, apparently out of control.

"Well, those 14 planes were reinforced by 6 or 7 others from underneath and from the left side. I was firing at one of them that was directly underneath one of the machines just opposite me, and saw him fall in a dive. Turning around quickly, I saw two machines coming up on my left not more than 50 yards away. I thought for a moment that I was a gone goose. I swung my guns around and let them have it point blank. The leader burst into flames so my bullets must have hit his gas tank. Then I started after the other and saw him turn over into a vrille. I don't know whether he was out of control or not, as I didn't have time to watch him.

"As I turned to get a shot at some of the other planes I saw one of our machines trying to fight two of the Boche. The observer fell backward into the cockpit and I knew that machine was gone unless we could get the Boche off his tail. I tried hard to get it away, but I guess they were a bit too far away, for I saw the American plane burst into flames and fall out of control. I said a short prayer for the pilot and turned loose at one of the enemy planes. He turned tail for home. I was completely out of ammunition by this time."

It was at this point that Graveline threw his empty Lewis drums as related at the beginning. He concludes his story with

the following comments.

"The entire battle lasted over 35 minutes. I am sure I aged 10 years on that one trip. We got back to camp at 10:15 AM. Our right elevator control wires were shot completely off and there were bullet holes all around the back of the machine. The pilot, 1st Lt. John Baker, related to Secretary Baker, and I shook hands and called it a day."

The operation on the 5th of November which was to be the last for the 20th Squadron, was also one of the most intense. The raid leader indicated in his report that not only had most of the observers exhausted their ammunition, the pilots had also done a great deal of shooting with their fixed Marlin guns, a total of 3,500 rounds being fired in the course of the combat!

This presentation is intended to spotlight Sgt. Graveline, in the belief that his large number of sorties make him the outstanding enlisted observer/gunner of WWI. However, three other EM of the 20th Squadron volunteered to ride the gunners' cockpits, and certainly deserve to be listed among this elite group of men. They were Sgt. 1st Class Claude Brodeur, who flew two missions, and Pfc. Hoyt Fleming, credited with one. The last was Corporal Raymond Alexander, who took part in two raids and was Lt. Koepfgen's gunner on the 5 November mission, during which he was wounded and is credited with a share in the destruction of one of the German fighters shot down that day.

Since all of the enlisted observers were volunteers, with little formal gunnery training, the writer was anxious to find out whether these men were authorized to wear observers' wings. No documents have been found to support this, but at least three of the four EM of the 20th did wear wings, as shown by a group photo taken in 1919. War Department General Order #38, dated 18 April, 1918, which was the first army order covering observers, could not have been considered the authority in this case, as it required an aerial observer to be graduated from an authorized school. In addition, it quite clearly specified officers only.



Fred Graveline in the observer's cockpit of a U.S.-built DH-4. The unattractive "Bolshevik" insignia was used by the 20th in memory of its designer, who was shot down. After WWI the insignia was dropped and the 20th Squadron carried a more appropriate insignia. (George Graveline)

It should also be pointed out that the wings worn by the three 20th Squadron EM observers, including Fred Graveline, were of a pattern which had been officially discarded in December of 1917. After that date the authorized observer badge was a half-wing letter "O", less stylish than the RAF badge, but following its pattern. Photographic evidence indicates that many officer observers also preferred the obsolete shield-type wing, wearing them until war's end.

Until further evidence surfaces, the wearing of wings by the few enlisted observers must be considered unauthorized, although to this writer, Fred Graveline, at least, certainly deserved the honor. As a final note, unauthorized and non-regulation insignia and uniform items were a common occurrence among aircrews of the Air Service AEF.⁸

The 1st Day Bombardment Group, although only in action a short time, saw very heavy fighting and suffered the heaviest loss rate of any AEF air units. The weight of bombs carried and dropped was small, and therefore the effect on the German war effort was minimal. However, the attention they received from enemy fighters tended to keep these machines away from the low-flying observation types, whose mission (in retrospect) was more important.

Whatever the results, the air and ground crews of the 1st Day Bombardment Group, along with the rest of the Air Service, AEF, set the high standards to be met by those who followed them. The tiny group of enlisted observer/gunners, with Sgt. Fred Graveline as the leading figure, was the predecessor of the flood of enlisted aerial gunners which were to occupy the turrets and man the waist guns 25 years later.

EPILOG

In 1926 the Office of the Adjutant General of the Army compiled a complete list, with available citations, of all army personnel who had been awarded the Medal of Honor, the Distinguished Service Cross, and the Distinguished Service Medal, the only decorations awarded up to the time. Titled American Decorations, 1861-1926, it was published by the Government Printing Office in 1927. Only two Air Service enlisted men were awarded the DSC. Fred Graveline's citation is as follows:

"Volunteering to act as observer and aerial gunner because of the shortage of officer observers, he started on 17 bombing missions, successfully reaching his objective on 14 of these expeditions, shooting down 2 enemy aircraft. On 2 occasions while flying in the rear of his formation, he drove off superior numbers of German machines."

After WWI, Fred Graveline settled in California and for many years was a rural mail carrier in the then-pastoral Canoga Park area of the San Fernando Valley. He died on 6 Feb. 1956.

SOURCES AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Operational reports of the 96th Squadron used as reference were supplied by the Air Force Museum, while raid reports and operational charts for the 20th Squadron came from the National Archives.

NOTES

1. The other was Sgt. 1st Class Harold Nicholls, an observer with the 7th Balloon Company.
2. USAF Historical Study #98, *The U.S. Army Air Arm, April 1861 to April 1917*. Research Studies Institute, Air University, Maxwell AFB, Alabama.
3. Pvt. Newby appears to be the only enlisted observer to be shot down (wounded).
4. USAF Historical Study #133, *U.S.A.S. Victory Credits, WWI*. Aerospace Studies Institute, Air University, Maxwell AFB, Alabama.
5. Letter from Rhea Moore, an aircraft mechanic with the 20th Aero Squadron throughout its WWI service.
6. *Op. cit.* USAF Historical Study #133.
7. The reference here to Secretary Baker refers to Newton Baker, Secretary of War in the Wilson Administration.
8. *Aviation Badges and Insignia of the United States Army, 1913-1946*, by J. Duncan Campbell, Triangle Press, Harrisburg, PA, 1977.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Merle Olmsted, retired from the USAF, is presently employed by the U.S. Army as a helicopter maintenance and flight test mechanic. He is an AAHS life member, and was one of the original 20 members of the Society. With a 35-year interest in USAF history, he has written numerous articles on the subject ranging in time from the pre-WWI years to the Korean War era. He is also the author of *The Yoxford Boys*, a history of the WWII 357th Fighter Group.

