

Early Nebraska National Guard Aviation

by Douglas R. Hartman

In 1907 the United States became interested in aviation as an addition to the Signal Corps. The Army ordered a Curtiss the following year, and purchased three more in 1911. They expanded their aviation section slowly, possessing approximately 10 airplanes by mid-1914. These machines were considered little more than experimental models. The pilots who flew them paid for their operation from their own pockets because money was not available from the federal government. By World War I, America was several years behind European nations in establishing an effective military aviation branch.

Aviation sections were originally placed under the Signal Corps. Here the aeroplane was utilized solely for reconnaissance. According to the *Field Service Regulations United States Army 1914*, aero squadrons were to operate "around the flanks and to the rear of the enemy's position." They were also to operate in advance of cavalry to locate and track enemy movement while reporting on the enemy's disposition, the approach of reinforcements or the beginning of the enemy's withdrawal from action.¹

This severely limited the airplane's growth as a military weapon. Congress eliminated any realistic possibilities of expansion and development because of poor reports submitted by legislators. Yearly funding was so low that only 12 aircraft were maintained for field service along the Mexico border in 1916. In comparison, those countries participating in World War I maintained hundreds of aircraft that were far ahead of the American fleet. In July 1914 British and French aircraft numbered 220 while the German totaled 260.²

The National Guard was an organized militia that did not evolve into its current designation until the 1916 National Defense Act. Since their founding, state militias have operated independently of the regular Army, but could be activated by the President of the United States or by the state governor. While the Department of Military Affairs coordinated activities of the regular Army and militia, it was not until 1900 that federal funds were appropriated for militias.³ In 1903 the "Dick Act" placed limitations on the use of militias while in federal service.⁴ Consequently, state units operated independently of the regular Army with funds provided primarily by the individual states.

Militia aviation found funding similar to that of the regular Army and progressed at about the same slow rate. Many state militias maintained small air branches, but with the excep-

tion of New York, none financially supported themselves. The Nebraska Militia experience during this time was typical of the problems encountered by most Guard units. Between 1913 and 1916 most regular Army and militia aviation units were one-man, one-plane operations. As a result these units faltered in the later part of the nineteen teens and did not become active until the following decade.

In 1913 the Nebraska National Guard Signal Corps began an aviation section by building a biplane at Fremont. This machine so closely resembled the Model D Curtiss airplane that it is believed the officers and men of the signal branch merely purchased a Model D Curtiss and assembled it at Fremont. The plane consisted of an engine mounted between the wings driven by a pusher propeller, fitted with three wheels and no fuselage. The operator sat on an exposed seat in front of the wings. The aircraft was a practical design and not one of the many weird configurations civilians created that ended in failure. Though a photo of this airplane appears in the *1913 Nebraska Adjutant General's Annual Report*, no reference to its use is made.⁵

Not much is known about this early machine, except that it was flown in and around Fremont. The Signal Corps insignia on the rudder signifies a communications and reconnaissance function. It was probably used in the annual encampments held in the area. In 1913 there was no official recognition of an aviation branch as part of or separate from the Signal Corps. This first aircraft was not even registered on the militia's property books. It was apparently destroyed in an accident in 1914, after which no reference to the aircraft is made.⁶

Interest in an aviation branch continued to grow and draw new faces into the Nebraska Guard. Captain C.W. Schaffer was made chief of aviation in 1915 after he donated a Model D Curtiss, and an air corps was officially organized in Lincoln, Nebraska. Ralph E. McMillen, a qualified pilot, also furnished his own Model D shortly after and was commissioned a captain in the two-man aviation group. Edgar W. Bagnell originally joined Company "F," 2nd Infantry Militia, on 1 July 1912. Though he never flew until the spring of 1916, on 14 August 1915 Bagnell was commissioned a first lieutenant in the Nebraska Aviation Corps.⁷ Their headquarters was established at the Nebraska State Fair Grounds outside of Lincoln.

The Curtiss D Type V was the chosen craft of both Schaffer

Bobby Bagnall.

AVIATOR-HUMORIST-HOME AGAIN



HOW BAGNALL'S "FLYING PARTNER" LANDED ONE DAY WHEN BOTH WERE IN THE AIR IN SEP. ERATE MACHINES



BOBBY BAGNALL-NEB GUARD AVIATOR



The front page of the 11 February 1917 *Omaha World-Herald* (left) proclaimed the famous barnstormer "Bobby Bagnall, Aviator-Humorist-Home Again." Bagnall was so famous this page of the Omaha paper was made into posters (note the spelling of "Bagnell's" last name). Captain Edgar (Happy) Bagnell continued barnstorming after the Nebraska Aviation Corps folded. In 1917 Bagnell poses with his Curtiss JN (above). (Courtesy Nebraska State Historical Society)

and McMillen. Its predecessor, the D-IV, was first tested by the military on 7 March 1911. Its uniqueness was that it could be easily disassembled into small pieces for easy transportation. The D-V could also be "knocked down" in 33 minutes and reassembled in 55 minutes. In the D-IV's debut, Col. C.B. Wender of the Ohio National Guard accompanied the pilot on one of his flights. No doubt Col. Wender's support of Curtiss-built aircraft influenced Schaffer and McMillen's choice.⁸

The D-V contained a 75-horsepower, 8-cylinder, water-cooled V-8 engine. Its wingspan was 26 feet, 3 inches and is covered in "doped" cotton fabric. The front tire was 20

inches by two inches and the rear tires were 20 inches by four inches. The pilot sat on an exposed seat in front of the wing to operate the D-V.⁹

Since Nebraska was the first militia to organize an Air Corps, the War Department could not prescribe guidelines to govern or authorize federal funds for expenditures until Congress created laws to govern such. Though Nebraska was the first to organize an aviation section in the Guards, they were not the first to be "officially" recognized by the War Department. The New York Militia holds that distinction.¹⁰

Final guidelines, standing operational procedures and fund raising for the existence of the Nebraska Air Corps was

"taken under consideration" by Governor John H. Morehead (1914–1918).¹¹ Appropriations for the National Guard were so small that justice could not be done to the Infantry, Signal Corps and Medical Corps if the Aviation Corps was to be properly supported. The governor decided the aviators should give exhibitions at county fairs and other public gatherings to raise funds to support, in part, the Air Corps.

On 19 July 1915, the Nebraska Militia officially organized the Nebraska Aviation Corps. General Order Number Seventeen, which created the Corps, suggests plans for a large unit that would assume sizable responsibilities in the Nebraska Militia.¹²

General Order Number Seventeen.

1. Under the provisions of Paragraph 3918, Section 20, Revised Statutes of Nebraska, an Aviation Corps is hereby organized, the word "Corps" to be used for the organization. The rules and regulations governing the organization of the corps are as follows:

- a) One plane is designated as a unit.
- b) Two planes or more, not to exceed four, a squadron.

2. The following personnel will compose a unit:

- a) One pilot with the rank of Captain.
- b) One observer who may be assigned from any branch of the service not to exceed the rank of Lieutenant Colonel.
- c) One signal man with the rank of First Lieutenant.
- d) One plane man with the rank of Second Lieutenant.
- e) One engine man with the rank of Sergeant.
- f) Two mechanics with the rank of Sergeant.
- g) Two motorcycle men with the rank of Corporal.
- h) Six utility men with the rank of Private.

3. The uniform for the commissioned personnel of this organization shall be the same as that for the Signal Corps, with the exception that attached to the crossed flags and torch there shall be silver wings for both dress and service uniforms for the collar devices. The uniform for the enlisted men shall be the same as that for the Signal Corps.

By order of the Governor

P.L. Hall Jr.
Brigadier General,
Chief of Staff¹³

Captain Schaffer and Captain McMillen began to raise funds for the Air Corps following its official recognition. These two aviators performed at public exhibitions in Nebraska, Kansas, Colorado and Iowa. But Schaffer was not successful in his fund-raising quests. Accidents contributed to the poor condition of his aircraft and prevented him from fulfilling many engagements. At Julesburg, Colorado, he made one successful flight and then attempted a second. As he began his descent, an over-aggressive crowd swarmed onto his designated cow pasture landing field. He was forced to land in an adjacent field where rough buffalo wallows flipped his

craft.¹⁴ This accident caused irreparable damage to the wing of the airplane and ended Capt. Schaffer's flying days. While he did not perish in the accident, no further official flights by the captain are recorded and his name fails to appear on the 23 October 1915 list of officers who successfully passed the Guard course of instruction and examination.¹⁵ Nebraska's Air Force was depleted by 50 percent by the mishap.

Captain McMillen managed to fill several engagements successfully in his Curtiss pusher-type biplane. The few accidents he was in were not serious. While flying over York, Nebraska, he went into a stall but managed to glide his airplane to a safe landing beside a cornfield.

When the Nebraska aviation section was formed, Nebraska's Militia consisted of the Fourth and Fifth Infantry. They were divided by the most convenient east-west dividing line in Nebraska, the Platte River. The Fourth Infantry was composed of companies north of the Platte, while the Fifth combined those to the south.¹⁶ General Order Number Eighteen of 30 July 1915 ordered the Fourth Infantry to attend its annual Camp of Instruction at Fremont, from August 10 to 16. The Fifth Infantry trained at Crete from August 19 to 25. The aviation section was not assigned to either unit and operated with both regiments as conditions dictated.¹⁷ Both sites, Fremont located 40 miles north and Crete situated 20 miles southwest of Lincoln, were convenient for relocating Nebraska's Aviation Corps Headquarters.

On August 9 the Fourth Infantry Regiment, composed of 48 officers and 580 enlisted men, assembled just south of Fremont at Camp L.D. Richards. The aviation section, consisting of four officers and nine enlisted men, arrived at 9:30 P.M.¹⁸ The following day, 1st Lt. Bagnell was added to the Aviation Corps. He was not a qualified pilot, but assisted Capt. McMillen in his flights. During the seven-day encampment McMillen made several flights practicing aero-reconnaissance, attacks and bomb dropping. On a partly cloudy August 15 the Fourth Infantry held a parade at 6 P.M. Following the parade, McMillen completed a 15-minute flight demonstrating advantages of airplanes.¹⁹ In his report to the Adjutant General on August 18, the Fourth Infantry Commander, Col. George A. Eberly, called McMillen's flight "splendid." He said it excited a great many people concerning the prospects of bombs being dropped from airplanes.²⁰

McMillen's experiments in bomb dropping and attacks were not part of the United States Army's air "doctrine." Air Forces in World War I were utilizing the plane as more than a reconnaissance tool, but America lagged behind its European counterparts. The U.S. used aircraft primarily for reconnaissance and observation for artillery fire. U.S. planes were to operate in advance of the cavalry in order to locate and track the enemy.²¹ Their second mission was to spot for artillery fire while preventing hostile aerial reconnaissance by the enemy.

According to the 1914 *United States Field Service Regulations*, airplanes were routinely expected to be effective within a radius of 150 miles from their base. They were to "determine the position, strength and direction of advances of large elements of the enemy," and note the general "character of the roads, railroads, streams and general military topography" of the area of operation.²²

The 150-mile expectation was more idealistic than applicable. Few American planes in 1915 were hardy enough to



Nebraska State Capitol



School of Agriculture



State Penitentiary

Photographs of the Nebraska State Capitol, School of Agriculture, and State Penitentiary taken by Captain Ralph E. McMillen from his Model D Curtiss in 1916. These photos are taken from the *Nebraska Adjutant General 1915-1916 Biennial Report*. The center photograph was reportedly taken at night. (Courtesy Nebraska State Historical Society)

make routine 300-mile nonstop flights. Captain McMillen made the longest flight by a Nebraska pilot in 1915 by flying 50 miles between Lincoln and Omaha.

The Fifth Regiment began their Camp of Instruction on August 19 at Crete. The aviation squadron checked in at 10:30 A.M. McMillen began the training period by flying to Crete from Beaver Crossing, a distance of 25 miles over terrain unfamiliar to him. This operation tested McMillen's ability to reach a destination given to him minutes before takeoff utilizing a topographical map.²³

Once at camp, McMillen engaged in mock battles with the infantry and conducted reconnaissance missions. Photos of the Fifth Regiment engaged in an attack, taken by McMillen, appear in the 1915 Adjutant General's Report. Following church services on Sunday, August 22, a simulated battle was staged for the public. On this drizzly day, the Second and Third Battalions attacked the First Battalion. McMillen conducted two successful flights over the mock battle demonstrating aerial reconnaissance, attack and bombing.²⁴ The exercise lasted two hours. At 9:30 A.M. on August 25 the aviation squadron was paid for their services and released.

McMillen made many flights around Lincoln in the next three months in which he continued to develop tactics and procedures for night flying, bombing, signaling and aerial photography. The captain became an accomplished photographer whose work appears on many pages of the *1915-1916 Biennial Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Nebraska*. These photographs include the University of Nebraska Agricultural School taken at 3,300 feet, the state Capitol during darkness at 4,000 feet, and the Nebraska State Penitentiary at 5,200 feet.²⁵

The claimed altitudes were estimated by Capt. McMillen since he never owned a crude altimeter of the day. His night photo is also subject to speculation. It is not certain the type of camera McMillen used, but it is doubtful whether his claimed night photo was taken in the dark.

One of McMillen's most unique flights was accomplished on Monday during the week of 19 October 1915. The aviator strapped a movie machine to his airplane and operated it single-handedly while flying. He believed the 300 feet of moving pictures obtained, which no longer exist, could be

utilized by the military in time of war.²⁶

To appreciate McMillen's photographic skills, his accomplishments in Lincoln must be compared with photo reconnaissance in Europe during World War I. Aerial photography was first used during the war in the initial part of 1915. Prior to that, pilots made visual observations and submitted written reports of enemy movements.²⁷ As the front stabilized and trench warfare became the norm, comparing photographs of the same trench from different dates revealed stockpiling of equipment and probable enemy advances. By 1917 Germany had taken the lead in photo reconnaissance and was taking 4,000 photos a day, completely covering the Western Front twice a month.²⁸

McMillen began snapping photos from his plane at about the same time as aviators in World War I. He was no doubt stimulated by their success that were published in local newspapers. Air forces in Europe used one person to navigate the plane and one person to take photographs (the average camera weight was between 35 and 100 pounds.)²⁹ McMillen, however, took photos as he flew. He also took moving pictures from his airplane in 1915, something the Allies did not accomplish until the end of the war. Captain McMillen's accomplishments are extraordinary when compared with the corresponding actions of air forces in World War I.

Later in the week of October 19, thousands of spectators watched McMillen take off from the Nebraska State Fair Grounds and fly four miles to the penitentiary. He banked left and dropped a one-quarter-strength bomb designed to explode several hundred feet above the ground, on Thirteenth and O Street. He then maneuvered his machine back to the penitentiary where he dropped three bombs over the facility before returning to the Nebraska State Fair Grounds where the noise of his machine stimulated the crowd's applause.³⁰

Another unusual flight by this innovative aviator occurred the following month on a chilly November 21. As part of a war game in which Lincoln was occupied by the enemy, the airplane was called upon to carry dispatches. In low temperatures and adverse winds, McMillen flew from Lincoln to Omaha. He left Lincoln at 2:34 P.M., passing Havelock at 2:36, Greenwood at 2:48, and landed near Ashland at 2:55 to allow himself time to thaw. The high winds from the northwest forced the pilot to vary his altitudes between 2,000 and 4,500 (estimated) feet. No variance in height, however, could protect the aviator from the elements. McMillen even wore newspapers under his clothes to insulate himself from the

weather.³¹

After a one-hour delay, in which the airplane was found to be in perfect condition, the captain departed at 3:50 P.M. and landed on the Field Club grounds outside of Omaha at 4:12 P.M. The total time spent in the air was three-quarters of an hour. McMillen carried two letters, one addressed to the mayor of Omaha, James C. Dahlman, and another to Gould Diets, president of the Aero Club of Nebraska.³² These varied experiments were an indication of the advanced thinking of Capt. McMillen and the role of aviation in the Nebraska Militia.

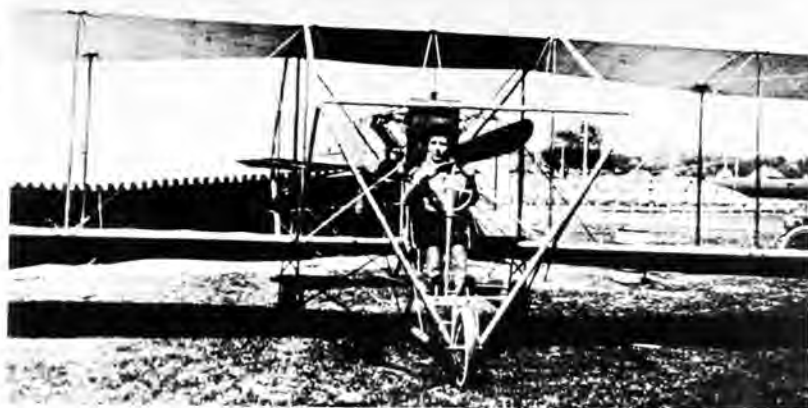
Winter grounded further flying until the spring of 1916. That February, Nebraska's Adjutant General, General Hall, wrote representatives in Congress requesting funds for an aviation school that could be built at the present site of Camp Ashland, Nebraska. He requested two tractor airplanes which would be used by McMillen and the Nebraska Aviation Corps to qualify five aviators and 25 to 50 observers per year. In his proposal, Nebraska would provide the instructors and mechanics while the federal government would provide the machines. General Hall believed it was a good time to ask for the equipment because the regular Army aviation department had been charged with incompetence. His letter included the qualifications and hard work of Capt. McMillen, who Hall proposed would run the camp.³³

Unfortunately, money, as usual, was unavailable for the purchase of two airplanes. The Army said it already possessed training facilities on the East and West Coasts. The climatic conditions in Nebraska was the final argument against the proposal.

In early 1916, as friction between Mexico and the United States heated up, the Nebraska Aviation Corps received support from the Aero Club of America. The club was interested in expanding National Guard aviation. It was appalled at the condition of America's aviation and publicly voiced its objections. They undertook a fund-raising campaign to finance the training of pilots for future military service. These funds were also utilized to bolster Army and Naval militia organizations, primarily along the East Coast, by purchasing airplanes. The club was also credited with lobbying Congress into adopting legislation increasing appropriations to expand military aviation sections.

As military aviation began expanding, qualified pilots were in short supply. A certificate indicating pilots met the standards of the Federation Aeronautic International was required to enter Army aviation units. This organization was headquartered in Paris, France, but the Aero Club was their representative in the United States. Aviators were forced to endure stringent flying tests before being accredited by the FAI. Upon completing the course a reserve military rating (RMA) or a military aviator rating (MA) was awarded. An RMA was necessary for militia aviators to enter the Army Aviation Air Corps.

In early March, McMillen was chosen as one of six men from around the country to be trained by the Curtiss School of Aviation at Newport News, Virginia. The \$350 expenses were paid by the Aero Club of America. After McMillen was accepted, the school offered to train another Nebraskan. General Hall forced all interested parties to take an examination on March 17. This exam determined who would accom-



Captain Ralph E. McMillen, commander of Company A, Nebraska National Guard Aviation Corps, poses with his Model D Curtiss in the summer of 1916 at his home in Perry, Iowa.

(Courtesy Nebraska State Historical Society)

pany McMillen. Lt. Edgar Bagnell, who had acted as McMillen's assistant for the past year, won the competition and left with McMillen on March 19. In an article in the *Lincoln Daily Star*, a reporter pointed out that Bagnell was the best choice because of his "considerable experiences with racing automobiles." In 1914 he had finished first in races at Grand Island and Norfolk, Nebraska.³⁴ Besides paying for the actual instruction, the men were allotted \$100 for travel expenses and paid \$18 per week for living expenses.³⁵

McMillen proved his proficiency in aeronautics by completing the course and earning his FAI Certificate within a month. He returned to Lincoln and continued his exhibition flying as a means to support his dependent mother who lived in Council Bluffs, Iowa. While the captain continued training, Governor Morehead attempted to use publicity to gain funds for the Nebraska Aviation Corps. The 16 April 1916 edition of the *Sunday Omaha World Herald* contained a full-page article accompanied by three photos. The headline, AVIATION ARM OF NEBRASKA GUARD READY IF EQUIPPED, was used to publicize the deficiencies of the aviation corps.³⁶ Nebraska was not alone in its effort to properly equip a state aviation corps. Other states experienced the same difficulties as those in Nebraska.

Bagnell continued training in Virginia after McMillen returned to Nebraska. He, along with other volunteers, assisted the Aero Club in lobbying for larger congressional appropriations for the following year. In an attempt to generate further publicity, President Alan R. Hawly of the Aero Club had his test pilot fly him nonstop from Sheepshead Bay, New York, to Washington, D.C., in a Curtiss twin-engine JN airplane.

The Twin JN was a twin-engined craft capable of being armed and was promoted as a battle plane that would replace the plane used by McMillen and other state militia units. Lieutenant Bagnell assisted Capt. Ralph L. Taylor of the Connecticut National Guard for three days in explaining the JN's capabilities to the public, Secretary of the Navy Daniels, and congressmen. It was believed that a large public showing would motivate Congress to appropriate more money for Army aviation.

Meanwhile, Capt. McMillen prepared to qualify as an expert aviator with the Aero Club of America. The requirements for this rating were two-fold. The aviator was required

to make a 50-mile round-trip flight without alighting, stop his engine at an altitude of 2,500 feet and land within 164 feet of a designated point, without using brakes. The pilot then had to make 10 consecutive "figure-eights" around two points 1,640 feet apart, staying within 164 feet of the indicated points while making the turns.³⁷

On June 3 the National Defense Act was passed which reorganized the militia into the National Guard as we know it today. The new law removed the nine-month limit on federal service as the maximum time which Guard units could serve. It also reorganized the regular Army and Guard units enabling the National Guard to become activated without organizational changes that hampered previous attempts at mobilization.

Woodrow Wilson ordered the activation of the National Guard on June 18 to deal with Pancho Villa on the Mexican-American border. The Nebraska Fourth and Fifth Regiments were two of the units mobilized. The following day, General Hall wired the Division of Military Affairs and inquired if the Nebraska Aero Company (a shift in terminology after the passing of the National Defense Act) would be mustered into service as a separate unit.³⁸ Thus began a long and exhaustive ordeal for McMillen and Bagnell as they attempted to enter the Army aviation section. Their campaign to be inducted into federal service was typical of that of Guardsmen interested in aviation.

On June 27, General Hall reported that McMillen and Bagnell were both "qualified" pilots able to be processed into federal service. Hall enlisted the aid of the Aero Club of America and congressmen. He argued that Nebraska's Aero Company was organized according to the War Department's directives and in addition to two aviators, five balloon men along with mechanics, were available for service.³⁹ Hall then submitted the names of Ernest R. Wells, William A. Lovelady, Tandy N. Dillon, Alva N. White, Fred Bolton, Robert P. Chesney, Leo D. Westover, Harley J. Devoe, Joe E. Westover, Roscoe J. Craig, Fred E. Roberts, and Walter T. Hansen as other Nebraskans desiring to enter the Army's aviation school.

Wires flew back and forth between General Hall and Adjutant General William A. Simpson of the Eastern Department, U.S. Army, concerning the probable federalization of the Nebraska Aero Company. The latter, completely assembled, was in Lincoln on June 29 when Simpson wired that only those National Guard members at Newport News would complete their training and be mustered into federal service.⁴⁰ The Nebraska company would remain in Lincoln.

On July 2, Hall requested that Nebraska's Aero Company be inspected, mustered into federal service and moved to Newport News for training as a unit. The next day the National Guard Bureau in Washington advised the aero company that it could not be considered for activation until the Fourth and Fifth Infantry Regiments were at full strength. They recommended that if men in the aero company join one of the Nebraska regiments to fill its ranks, they would later be allowed to transfer back to aviation duty.⁴¹ Other members of the aviation company followed Simpson's suggestion, but Bagnell and McMillen never gave up their dream of becoming federally recognized as aviators.

Upon further inquiries by General Hall, Simpson agreed

on July 5 that Bagnell and McMillen would be covered by separate orders allowing them to be accepted as aviators. Bagnell, however, was later informed he was ineligible because he was not on either the federally recognized Fourth or Fifth Regiment's roster. General Hall made Bagnell a quartermaster captain in the Fifth Infantry, allowing him to be federally recognized and eligible for service. So Bagnell officially entered federal service on July 19 when he was ordered to aviation school at Mineola, New York.⁴²

While Bagnell was fighting for federal recognition, Capt. McMillen's dreams were shattered. The Army informed him that since he fractured both legs in a 1912 accident, that eliminated him physically from federal service. So, the captain continued to earn money from exhibiting his flying skills around the Midwest. Though he was medically "unfit" for federal recognition, he continued to serve the Nebraska National Guard in flights around Lincoln in his 75-horsepower Curtiss D-V.

In the week of July 23, McMillen made nightly flights over Lincoln at the request of General Hall. For use during night flights, a row of lights was strung on the craft that could be turned on and off at the pleasure of the pilot. On one flight, which lasted 20 minutes, the young captain took off from a stubble field, followed the Burlington tracks, circled the residence section of town and landed within six feet of his departure point. By this time, McMillen's flights became social events. Many citizens of Lincoln showed up at the Nebraska State Fair Grounds to witness his incredible flights. McMillen had proved himself as an extraordinarily proficient pilot, but was continually rejected by the Army as being unfit for federal service.⁴³

Lieutenant Palmer from the War Department was present on July 30 to observe McMillen demonstrate his aviation expertise. He experimented with new bombs invented by Major A.E. Haysel, assistant adjutant general. These bombs had a fuse which was capable of being lit in "the highest of winds" without the aid of matches, an automobile light being mounted on the plane to do it.⁴⁴

McMillen began his flight at 8:40 P.M. by climbing to an altitude of 3,000 feet. He dropped his first simulated bomb on the state arsenal which would have "blown the building up had the bomb been one of the bloodthirsty kind."⁴⁵ His second bomb exploded above a streetcar, causing a commotion among the passengers. His last bomb was targeted at the Capitol grounds.⁴⁶ After his safe return to the fairgrounds, Lt. Palmer commented that he was impressed with McMillen. He said the Army needed just such experienced men who "not only had nerve but the brains to work out intricate and dangerous problems in an intelligent manner."⁴⁷

Flights like these solidified McMillen as an innovator in early military aviation history and as a competent aviator. Some citizens of Lincoln, particularly the ones in the streetcar, must have wondered about the decision in using Lincoln as an impact area for the captain's bombing missions. Yet, however impressed Palmer was with McMillen's flights, he never asked McMillen to enter federal service. Nevertheless, even with two crippled legs, the captain, as proven by his flights around Lincoln, was capable of federal service.

McMillen continued flying and on September 1 made two exhibition flights at St. Francis, Kansas. The following day he

made another flight, despite high winds. At about 200 feet a gust of wind caught his airplane and forced it into a dive. McMillen was killed instantly when his machine hit the ground.⁴⁸ This accident devastated all who respected Ralph McMillen as a man and aviator. It also signified the end of the Nebraska Aero Company which never owned an airplane, but claimed as many as three pilots at its peak.

Other National Guard units around the country fared no better than had Nebraska's. On September 9, the Second Aero Company, comprised of National Guardsmen from around the country, including Capt. Bagnell, were discharged from federal service due to lack of funds. Only 21 National Guard pilots were qualified under the Army's regulations by the end of 1917. One had qualified in 1912, 16 were registered in 1916 and four more were placed on the official books in 1917. Only New York could boast of a complete aero squadron, equipped with four trainers at its peak. One of these was damaged in 1916 and sold to the Army after the state could not afford to repair it.

National Guard aviation did not become effective until more federal funds became available to militia units in the late 1920s. Money was also a major stumbling-block in Nebraska's Air Corps development, even though it retained the complete support of the public, governor and adjutant general. The airplane was a relatively new weapon of war with great expectations, but the priorities of the militia were not on its development and use. The War Department was also unsure of the plane's military effectiveness and provided little enthusiasm or funding for aviation until after World War I. From then on the airplane's rapid development enabled it to take its place as a permanent part of state military organizations. But pioneer National Guard aviators like Capt. Ralph E. McMillen of Nebraska did not live to see the transition. ■

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