

644 AERO SQUADRON

MISSION

LINEAGE

125 Aero Squadron (Supply) organized Sep 1917

Redesignated 644 Aero Squadron (Supply), Feb 1918

Demobilized, Jun 1919

STATIONS

Kelly Field, TX

Garden City, NY, Jan 1918

Port of Embarkation, Hoboken, NY, Jan 1918

AEF, Jan 1918

Mitchel Field, NY

ASSIGNMENTS

COMMANDERS

HONORS

Service Streamers

Campaign Streamers

Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers

Decorations

EMBLEM

MOTTO

NICKNAME

OPERATIONS

On the second day of September, 1917, One Hundred Fifty recruits lined up before the Training Brigade Headquarters at Kelly Field, Texas, were told that they comprised the 125 Aero Squadron. Practically every state in the Union was represented in the organization; Most of these men were mechanics who had enlisted to continue their occupation, some came with visions of an adventurous life in the air, but only four of the entire group had had any previous military experience.

Cadets Wightman and Forgie, then attached to the 84th Aero Squadron, were placed temporarily in command; and, under their supervision, the men went gingerly to the task of setting up their camp, procuring supplies, and establishing a Squadron Mess, Supply Department, and Orderly Room. After they had become accustomed to the changed mode of living and the hours of drill in the intense heat, a feeling of unity sprang up among them and, under the direction of Culver drill sergeant; they made rapid progress in their preliminary training.

First Lieut., John C. Handy was assigned to the squadron as Commanding Officer on September 24, 1917. Four weeks after his arrival, the squadron was reduced to a strength of only fifty-nine men by continuous transfer, to fill up outgoing units. On November 4, 1917, Lieut., Handy was called to Washington to occupy a position in the Office of the Chief Signal Officer, and 1st Lieut., George P. Texeda was placed in Command. A few days later, November 13, Captain Clifton A. Brode assumed command of the organization, and Lieut. Texada given command of the 126th Aero Squadron, But Captain Brode was also transferred after a very short stay with the unit, when 2nd.Lieut., E. Guy Doane, took over the Squadron. This change occurred on November 25, 1917.

By the time Lieut. Doane assumed command, the squadron had become a well drilled organization, many of the men had completed a course in the School for Enlisted Mechanics at Kelly Field, and every soldier was looking forward to the trip "across". Early in December the strength of the unit was again brought up to the required number. During these same days six members of the squadron were commissioned. Sergeant F. H. Bagley and Corp. Nugent Bousman received commissions as Observers; Sergeant D. C. Smith and Private C. J. McQuillan, as Pilots; and Private F. Borzynski and Private B. McNeil, as Ground Officers.

On December 27, 1917, 1st Lieut., Harrison E. Nixon, was assigned to the squadron as Commanding Officer, relieving Lieut, Doane, who was transferred to the 65th Aero Squadron. At the same time 1st Lieut. , T. L. Shear, and 2nd Lieuts. , W. G. Keick, H. L. Morris, M. Ringold, H. A. Karr, S. F. McCreary, J. F. McCormick, O. N. McCauley, H. A. Starrett, and L. D. Seymour were assigned to the organization. On the following day, Lieut., Nixon led his newly acquired command to a north bound troop train, and the squadron began its first move. On January 4, 1918, they arrived at Garden City, Long Island, New York. Preparations for overseas service began immediately, for the organization was not destined to remain at the post for any length of original time. On the "lucky 13th" of January, 1918, they boarded the U.S. Transport

Agamemnon at Hoboken, New Jersey. This ship was formerly the German Liner "Kaiser Wilhelm II" and everyone aboard it felt rather fortunate to cross the ocean in one of the enemy's former boats.

While at Garden City, 1st Lieut., Raymond M. Lewis was assigned to the squadron and 1st Lieut., T. L. Shear transferred to Washington to take up duties with the Air Service at that place. 2nd Lieutenants H. A. Karr, A. F. McCreery, J. F. McCormick, D. N. McCauley, H. A. Starrett, and L. D. Seymour were also transferred from the organization at Garden City.

The ocean voyage was, to the troops, not devoid of thrills. No submarines were encountered, but on the night of January 18, the big transport's rudder jammed when the sea was running high and she was tossed about like a cork. Nothing more serious resulted, however, than the shattering of most of the dishes and nearly every movable article in the ship. Daybreak of January 24, saw all troops on deck, with a yearning for "land" and eager for the first glimpse of France. At 8:00 A.M. on this day the steamer entered the harbor of Brest, France.

Two days later, the 125 Aero Squadron, in company with other Aviation units, barked and marched to the railway station to receive the shock of their lives. The "shock" was this, that "40 hommes" were to be jammed into a railway car that impressed the "Yanks" as having been built for four. But forty men did somehow manage to squeeze into each of the diminutive cars, and, with shrill whistling and a bumping protest of flat wheels, began their first railway ride in France.

Forty-eight hours of this whistling and bumping process, brought the train to Saint Maixent, France, a quaint old village where, the clatter of wooden shoes rings in the narrow streets, and where the peasants speak a tongue vastly different from the "French" which the recent arrivals had laboriously acquired from that popular publication, "The American in France". Here the 125 Aero Squadron were quartered in Canclaux Barracks, an ancient monastery built in the shadow of a great cathedral from which a multitude of ugly old stone gargoyles have stared alike on the Troops of Napoleon, Modern America, and upon the monks of times long past.

Drill was the keynote of the military life at Saint Maxent. Each day meant a long hike into the country, calisthenics, and hours of practice on the now familiar "Squads right."

Here, too, a new name was thrust upon the organization, and they became known as the 644 Aero Squadron. This disappointed the men a trifle, for they had worked to build up a name for the "Old 125th" and they felt that they had lost their identity; 2nd Lieut., Morris was transferred from the squadron at Saint Maixent, and left for duty with the 400th Aero Squadron. He was replaced by 1st Lieut., J. A. Langston, who joined the command on February 20.

As February drew to a close, the organization again prepared for a move, and on the last day of that month entrained for the Third Aviation Instruction Center, arriving at their new post on the

evening of March 1, 1918. After an interval of four days, they were assigned to Field 8, an outlying field seven kilometers from the main center.

Field 8, they found, was just in the process of construction, and they learned to their delight that it was the final flying field for student pilots; in other words, the point where America's Chasse Pilots received their combat instructions and the "finishing touches" for the front. Here was work, real work, confronting the men, and they entered upon the task with enthusiasm. Together with the 10th Aero Squadron, they erected hangars, and enlarged the field, while the universally acknowledged "best flier in the world" was graduated in constantly increasing numbers and sent against the hapless German "Cadets." The highest quality of workmanship has always been necessary at this field, for the quick maneuvering required in combat work puts a severe strain upon the airplane. This was always an incentive to good work. It called forth better efforts from already competent mechanics, and the 644 Aero Squadron became known as a highly efficient organization. Every Pilot, as he went up to "shoot" his opponent with his trusty machine gun came-ra, could feel that his "Bus" was as safe as human hands could make it.

First Lieut., John P. Healey was assigned to the squadron as commanding Officer, on March 7, 1918, and 2nd Lieut. Frank S. Kieck joined the unit on the same date. Two days later, Lieut., Kieck and Ringold, who had come across from America with the squadron, were transferred to the 35th and 31st Aero Squadron, respectively. On March 21. Lieut. A. Langston was transferred to the 13th Aero Squadron. Two days later, Lt Welsh, left for the second Air Service Production Center, to take up administrative duties there. Early in April, 2nd Lieut., J. A. Taylor, and 2nd Lieut. , Marius Rocle, a former member of the Lafayette Escadrille, were assigned to the Squadron. May 10 saw the loss of another of our officers when Lieut. H. M. Lewis was transferred to the 35th Aero Squadron.

On June 5th, the non-commissioned Officers of the organization were moved back to the main center, where they remained for two months, working in the Major and Minor Repair and the Motor Departments. On June 8, Lieut, Taylor was transferred to the 10th Aero Squadron. While the noncommissioned Officers were on duty at the main center, Lieut., Harrison E. Nixon was also transferred from the organization, leaving for St. Maixent, France, July 9, 1918.

When the "Non-Coms," were returned to Field 8, on August 20th, the seven day leaves had just begun in earnest and wild stories of Aix-Les-Bains and Le Bourboule were brought back to be disseminated among the "Bucks", as the privates at Field 8 termed themselves. But all work continued with record-breaking smoothness, and remained at the high standard which had been set.

November 6, Lieut., John P. Healey was transferred to the 103rd Aero Squadron, where he took up the duties of Adjutant of that organization. Lieut. Healey had made a thorough study of his squadron, and accomplished much toward systematic organization. 2nd Lieut., Marius Rocle assumed command after Lieut., Healey's departure. On November 7, the squadron had its first flying officers assigned to it. 1st Lieut., G. S. Vincent, and 2nd Lieuts. S. D. Hancock, S. E. Lawyer,

and L. H. Steward, all Combat Instructors at Field 8, were assigned to the organization. 1st Lieut., J. G. Fleming, Field Transportation Officer, was assigned at the same time.

On November 20, 1918, Lieut, Rocle was transferred to the Claims Department, and 1st Lieut. John H. Clayton, a flying officer of considerable experience, took command of the squadron. Lieut. Clayton was also an Instructor in serial combat and was in charge of one of the training groups. It was one of his hobbies to get out a two-seater plane on Sundays and give the members of his command a "hop".

During the first days of December, the squadron became very busy preparing for another move this time, for a move to their homes. Ten month's collection of souvenirs disappeared miraculously, what surplus equipment there happened to be was turned in without a whisper of regret, and the men were down to bedrock on the list of allowed property forty-eight hours after they had received notice to "reduce" to the familiar "Equipment C." However, if they betrayed their anxiety to be home in this way, they did not do so in their work, for in this they continued as before.

The 644 Aero Squadron have always prided themselves on the harmony and contentment of their personnel. Although they have experienced hardships and disappointments, they have come through them smiling. They have learned how to take defeat as well as victory, and it has never been said that they were "Poor sports."

Air Force Lineage and Honors

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Sources

US Army Order of Battle 1919-1941. Steven E. Clay. Combat Studies Institute Press. US Army Combined Arms Center. Fort Leavenworth, KS. Nd.