

Air OP Is Here to Stay

By Maj. Delbert L. Bristol, F.A.

IN DECEMBER 1941 THE WAR Department ordered a test of the feasibility of using organic aircraft in the held artillery to provide short range air observation for adjustment of fire. By 1 March 1942 a group of volunteer pilots and mechanics had completed a short course of instruction at the Field Artillery School followed by a series of practical tests conducted in conjunction with the 2nd Infantry Division Artillery at Fort Sam Houston and the 13th Field Artillery Brigade at Fort Bragg. The board reports recommended the establishment of organic aviation in field artillery units, and the War Department approved this recommendation in June of that year. Within a short period of time, courses of instruction for both pilots and mechanics were being conducted at the Field Artillery School, utilizing the personnel of the original test group and qualified civilians as instructors. In September the first pilots and mechanics were graduated and either assigned as instructors at the school or assigned to units then preparing for the invasion of North Africa.

Air OP's first participated in combat when our forces invaded North West Africa in November 1942. Shortly thereafter, they joined units fighting in Tunisia and before the end of the Tunisian campaign were operating effectively as a secondary means of observation. Air OP's moved into Sicily in July 1943 with the invading forces and it was during this operation that they really won recognition as a dependable observing agency for the field artillery. In September 1943 the Air OP's accompanied the assaulting forces to Italy and there became extremely popular with the American doughboys and highly unpopular with the Germans. Later, in June 1944, the Air OP's landed

in Normandy and were the only effective means available to the artillery for locating targets and adjusting fire in the "hedge-row" country.

From this time on, the Air OP's played a vital role in all phases of combat operations as a *primary* means of observation. In Europe alone, it may be said that Air OP's accounted for better than 75% of all of the observed fire adjustments conducted.

To the surprise of many combat losses both in aircraft and personnel were surprisingly low. This was not attributable to the fact that the enemy did not endeavor to liquidate the Air OP's, but because a well prepared Air OP has more fire power than any enemy antiaircraft battery, and can easily evade the enemy aircraft which is very vulnerable to being shot down by our own AAA. Although there are no statistics on the subject, it is probable that the enemy lost an average of at least two aircraft for each attempt to destroy one Air OP. This was largely due to the effectiveness of our own AAA fire, and Air Force fighter cover.

There is probably no Artillery Air Officer with more diversified combat experience than Major Bristol. He served with the II Corps in North Africa and Sicily prior to becoming the first Army Artillery Air Officer in the fall of 1943—a post that he held throughout the entire period of First Army operations in Europe. Below is a statistical summary of the Air operations supervised by him during this period. Major Bristol was integrated into the Regular Army last July.—Editor.

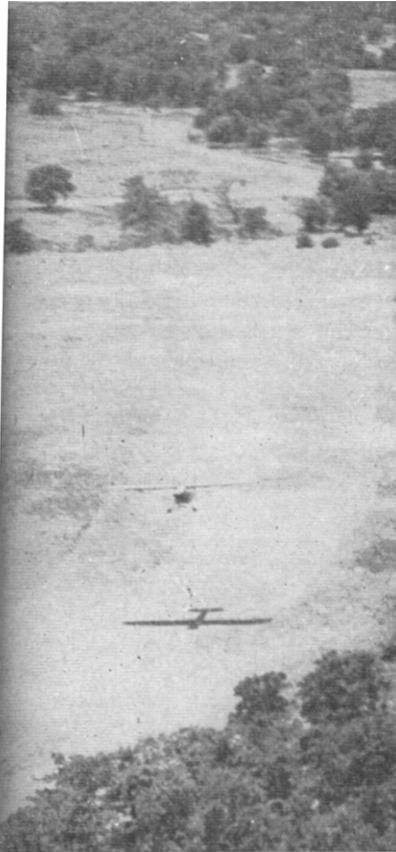
FIRST U. S. ARMY AIR OP OPERATIONS

First Army field artillery Air OP's flew more than 78,000 operational hours from June 1944 to May 1945. During this period a total of 56,488 combat missions were flown. Of these, 34.4% were adjustment of fire, 56.1% reconnaissance, and 9.5% other combat missions. In addition to the combat missions a total of 4,392 training and 13,733 administrative missions were flown. An average of 232 aircraft were operational with the Army during

this period. The following table is an analysis of Air Op reports received from First Army units for the period.

Throughout the entire period of combat on the continent of Europe eighty-one pilots of First Army units were reported missing, killed or seriously injured. These losses represent an average monthly attrition of 2.72%. During the same period a total of 176 liaison aircraft were missing or actually salvaged, representing an average monthly attrition of 6.9%.

	June	July	Aug.	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.
Aircraft, Operational	261	243	191	216	203	240	237	213	248	252	253
Pilots, Operational	289	264	214	247	246	276	281	264	299	301	289
Aircraft Lost	36	13	10	9	24	14	30	9	4	7	20
Pilots Lost	20	14	8	6	5	2	4	2	2	7	11
Total Flying Hours	4,960	9,851	7,982	9,169	4,677	4,610	6,303	3,598	6,160	10,332	11,023
Average Hours/Aircraft	19	40.5	41.7	42.4	23.1	19.2	26.6	16.9	24.9	41.2	43.6
Average Hours/Pilot	17.2	37.1	37.1	37.1	19.0	16.7	22.4	13.2	22.1	36.9	38.1
Average Hours/Inf Div Arty Pilot	24.4	40.0	42.8	39.2	19.2	17.9	20.3	13.6	24.0	38.8	45.3
Average Hours/Armd Div Arty Pilot	23.6	37.0	59.8	49.0	19.8	19.7	33.9	19.6	20.9	44.3	44.0
Average Hours/Corps Arty Pilot	17.8	36.8	29.8	24.7	19	15.8	21.8	14.5	15.5	30.1	36.5
Average Hours/Army Arty Pilot	15.8	21.5	34.6	32.6	18.0	12.4	18.1	8.9	17.8	26.4	30.9



Student pilot taking off from fight tactical strip.

From the outset of the organic aviation program in 1942 to the present date, the principal aircraft for use as Air OP's has been the L4, better known as Piper Cub. Practically all units overseas were equipped with this aircraft until very late in the war when a limited number of the L5 type (Stinson Sentinel) were made available to artillery units. Experience in all theaters indicated that there was a definite requirement for an aircraft with better observation and performance qualities than provided by the L4 type. On the other hand, the L5 did not prove entirely satisfactory because of its greater weight and increased maintenance in comparison with the L4. Just prior to the end of the war, military characteristics for an observation aircraft were established based on combat experience in both the European and Pacific Theaters.

The Army Air Forces were directed to develop an aircraft based upon these characteristics, with a view to standardization for the field artillery. With regard to personnel, it was

originally planned that the bulk of the Air OP pilots would be enlisted men. However, it was soon realized that officer pilots were required who were qualified not only to fly but also to serve on battalion and higher staffs as advisors to commanders on matters pertaining to air observation. This fact naturally resulted in a change of concept. It is a matter of passing interest to note that, although several thousand field artillery pilots were trained during the war, less than twelve were Regular Army officers.

No one can challenge the success of the Air OP during the recent conflict. It established itself as a "must" and is here to stay. In spite of their exemplary performance, much can be done to improve the effectiveness and versatility of Air OP's of the future. I feel that the following are of prime importance:

1. The training of the maximum number of junior field artillery officers as field artillery pilots.
2. Training of the maximum number of field artillery officers and enlisted men in the duties of air observer.
3. Training of all field artillery pilots in the non-flying duties of field artillery officers of the same grade.
4. Establish a policy of 3 years as the maximum tour of primary duty as pilot, after which field artillery pilots must serve at least 3 years in another assignment before again becoming eligible for primary duty as a pilot.
5. Development of a combination VHF and FM multiple-channel radio installation, which can be carried in the observation aircraft in order to insure flexibility of communication.
6. Establish a Ground Aircraft Service Test Section at Wright Field with the mission of overall technical supervision of Army Ground Forces' organic aviation, to include responsibilities in connection with new developments, dissemination of technical information, compilation of technical and supply statistics, preparation of technical bulletins and liaison with the Army Air Forces Air Technical Service Command.

The adoption of the major portion of the above program will insure that the Air OP's of the future maintain a position abreast of all elements of our modernized post-war Army.



OF MORE THAN PASSING INTEREST

Happy Birthday. Antiaircraft Artillery was 29 years old on 10 Oct 46.

Citizen-Soldier. A salute herewith to General Omar Bradley for his ringing charge to American veterans to remember, above all, that the primary obligations of citizenship transcend other organizational loyalties.

Opens. Hq AGF opened officially at Ft. Monroe, Va., on 1 Oct 46.

Closes. The Replacement and School Command will be inactivated 1 Nov 46.

Fellow Travelers. A bow and best wishes to *Signals* (Journal of the Army Signal Association) and to the *Chemical Corps Journal* (Journal of the Chemical Warfare Association) whose first issues appeared this month. They give added strength and breadth to the family of Service Associations which contribute steadily to the good of our Army and Nation.

Merging Artillery. Signposts on the straight-away road to a single Artillery arm: the meeting this month of the Consolidation Board at Fort Sill relative to the merging of all artillery schools; the assignment of one-time Field Artilleryman, Brig. Gen. R. M. Montague, as Assistant Commandant of the AAA School at Fort Bliss.

Milestone. Long remembered, in man's continuing efforts to bring order out of chaos in our world society, will be the prominent legal milestone this month at Nuernberg of the conviction and sentencing of high Nazi officials for instigating aggressive war against mankind.

Vets and Congress. The 79th Congress provided over \$12.5 billions for veterans, or nearly \$1,000 for every soldier discharged since V-E Day. Over 80 veterans have been nominated for election to the 80th Congress.

Former Editor. Noted, with regret, was the death on 6 Oct of Brig. Gen. Clarence Deems, Rtd., a former editor (1917) of THE FIELD ARTILLERY JOURNAL.