

Noncommissioned Pilots: Historically, who did, and now who does/could pilot Air Force aircraft?

The Air Force has a long, extensive history as being the world's premiere fighting force in the air. With its roots in the Army Air Corps, the Air Force has had extensive experience with fighting our nation's enemies. When it comes to their pilots, the Air Force is very selective, making sure that the individuals who step into that cockpit have hundreds of hours of experience and commensurate education. Historically, very few noncommissioned officers could fly in the Air Force because the Air Force, along with every other branch, prefers commissioned officers with college degrees. But, nonetheless, there have been enlisted pilots in the Air Force.

In June of 1941, there was a law passed allowing the training of enlisted men to become pilots. This was due to the war in Europe breaking out, causing the U.S to decide that it needed to strengthen its air fighting capabilities. Many of these men were trained to fly transport or liaison missions, but some were fighter pilots, flying the P-38 lightning in the African theater, 18 of which became aces, showing the immense potential in the enlisted force. However, as the demand for pilots dropped during mid 1944 due to the war coming to a close, the Air Force began to prefer commissioned officers to fly their aircraft. The enlisted pilots did not train in vain as these men were then either promoted to Flight Officers, technically being Warrant Officers, or if their merit was significant, they were promoted to Second Lieutenants. The last enlisted pilot, George H. Holmes, flew until 1957 as a Master Sergeant.

Enlisted men have not been able to fly since this program. But, recent legislation has allowed for the training of enlisted men to fly UAVs in order to free up the officers to ease the demand on pilots. This new policy will undoubtedly make our Air Force an even more formidable foe for any enemy and a more flexible fighting force because what many people do not realize is that there are many enlisted men who are extremely bright and talented; but for some reason could not go to college at the time, and chose the military as their best option. This would be similar to the Navy's Nuclear Power Program, which my father is a product of because he could not go to college, where enlisted personnel undergo immense academic and hands-on training to be able to work in nuclear reactor departments, tapping the unused potential of enlisted men and women who may have never have had the opportunity to go to college and become a commissioned officer.

Another very important part about this policy is the fact that many young Americans are committed video game players, which is again, untapped potential in our enlisted force as many of them too, play video games. This policy will give these young adults a chance to use their skills with electronics to serve our country, increasing the combat capabilities of the Air Force.

Ultimately, this new policy is a strive in the right direction to strengthen our military because not only has the history of enlisted pilots been successful, but the Air Force's utilizing of enlisted personnel for the RPA missions is making sure that all personnel are being used to their utmost potential. With this new policy, the Air Force will continue to fly, fight and win now more than ever thanks to these noncommissioned remotely flying pilots.