



**JEFF SKILES**

COMMENTARY / CONTRAILS



*Arthur Lee McElmurry (back row, center), of Maysville, Oklahoma, received his first pilot training in a 65-hp Piper Cub on May 25, 1943, at Stapleton Airfield (Denver Municipal Airport). Two years later he was flying combat missions in a B-29 over Japan.*

# Boot Camp

A cadet's rise to the cockpit of a B-29

BY JEFF SKILES

**IT IS BY NECESSITY** that times of great peril lead to greater technological achievement and progress. This is as true in aviation as in any other pursuit. Over the course of aviation history there has been more advancement in aircraft design and powerplant development as a result of war than by any other defining factor.

At the beginning of World War I, aircraft were used solely as reconnaissance platforms. The pilots would wave to each other to commemorate a chance meeting in the skies as if allegiance to the fraternity of airmen trumped any petty geopolitical differences that might exist between peoples. It's unfortunate that some enterprising pilot came up with the idea of taking a pistol up with him and taking a potshot at the first enemy aircraft to happen by. That hostile act changed the military usage of aircraft forever.

By the end of the war, aerial dogfighting was well-established and a new term had been coined for the particularly proficient. Those who had gained the upper hand over five of their opponents were given the moniker "ace."

The two decades stretching between major conflicts were a time of sleepy progress. With little to drive development of new aerial technology, advancement was halting. Aviation dabbled in dirigibles and gyroplanes before returning to reliance on fixed-wing aircraft. But as storm clouds brewed around the globe, clear-thinking men put out a call to action for aircraft manufacturers around the country. The next generation of bombers, fighters, transports, and reconnaissance aircraft would be needed, and soon.

Originally government orders in quantities numbering in only the hundreds were enthusiastically embraced by the small aircraft manu-

facturers of the day, yet eventually tens of thousands would be produced as legions of P-51s, PT-17s, B-24s, and more would flow out of the factory doors. In fact, President Franklin Roosevelt set a national goal for the production of 50,000 warplanes each and every year. These aircraft would house the latest technologies in engines, bombsights, superchargers, and pressurization, and they would need young men to fly them. Young men that needed to be trained and seasoned to give them some hope to survive the gauntlet they would soon face.

Over the next few months in this column I will explore the journey of kids from Washington, Arkansas, Massachusetts, and Texas as they learned the flying skills necessary to survive and gained the courage and confidence to deliver America to a time of peace. I'll examine the aircraft, the training process, and follow the path of one very particular cadet, Arthur McElmurry, as he passed from new recruit to the pilot of the largest, most technologically advanced aircraft of his time.

I hope you will be as impressed as I am with the development and accomplish-

ment that was necessary to turn a largely agrarian America into a manufacturing juggernaut and the planning and preparation that was necessary to mobilize and train hundreds of thousands of men to serve their country.

#### ARTHUR'S STORY

Arthur McElmurry hailed from the bucolic farming community of Maysville, Oklahoma, and like most from his era, he was as hardworking as any who survived the Dust Bowl of the 1930s. He possessed a bedrock, unshakeable faith that would guide him from his youth working in his father's small grocery store in Maysville to a B-29 flight deck overflying the battleship Iowa as Emperor Hirohito signed the articles of surrender to end the greatest conflict this world will ever know.

In the late 1930s, the politically savvy knew that war was brewing, but most of America, like Art, was taken by surprise as they were thrust from their sleepy lives into a conflict that would soon propel them around the globe.

"On Sunday, December 7, 1941, I was working in the Waffle Shop when someone came in and told us the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor," Art wrote in his memoirs. "I had never heard of Pearl Harbor and did not realize how this would change my life..."

Art was attending Oklahoma University and registered for the draft never questioning his responsibility to defend his country, but by the later months of 1942 he began to think about volunteering so that he could control the nature of that service. Those who didn't take the opportunity for self-determination were drafted into the Army. Art wasn't sure that was right for him, but other than that, direction was unclear.

"I was never good at hand to hand fighting."

"Mom had taught us to be afraid of the water."

"I knew absolutely nothing about flying."

No good solutions to his dilemma were evident, but in keeping with Art's faith, he prayed and a decision came to him. On Friday, November 13, 1942, Art joined the U. S. Army Air Forces.

"As I remember there were some 40 or 50 young men wanting to join the Army Air Forces that day. Almost half were eliminated during the physical exam, and about half of the remainder were eliminated during the interviews. I think there were 11 accepted, but I never had a concern or doubt because I was certain this was what God had for me."

One Friday in late February, Art was accompanied by his mother and sister to the Federal Building in Oklahoma City for the beginning of his training.

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“From the Federal Building we were marched—perhaps a better word would be herded—to the Shrine Building for a physical exam—such as, is your heart beating, are you warm, can you move your arms and legs....”

“On Saturday we were up at 5:30 for another physical exam (is your heart still beating, etc.), and then we waited—I would learn that waiting seems to be an element of your training.”

By Sunday the remaining recruits boarded a troop train for Wichita Falls and Sheppard Field for basic training.

“Our first day in camp, we were up at 5 a.m.—made the bed, shaved, etc. for 7 o’clock breakfast and then an hour indoctrination lecture. Then—guess what? Another physical and blood tests.”

Basic training lasted one month and consisted of marching drills, physical training, and learning military protocol. With the demands of Army service, a recruit’s day was

full from early morning to long after sun-down. Time off was scarce.

“I remember only two days off during basic training. Once I caught a ride to Norman on a Sunday and got to spend about three or four hours. On another pass, Jack Stratton and I went to Wichita Falls—had a steak and everything served on china with silverware for 75 cents.”

No one was sorry to see their month at Sheppard Field come to a close. After completing basic training Art was a newly minted private first class and shipped out for the next step in training. In a time where roads were still unimproved and automobiles were often still only owned by the well-to-do, a troop train to Denver was Art’s mode of transport.

“For a country boy from Maysville to see the snow-capped mountains and Pikes Peak around Denver was a sight to behold.”

Art was assigned to a fraternity house on the campus of the University of Denver. Here

he was no longer a private first class. He was a cadet—with no increase in pay.

“The stay in Denver would be approximately two months. Classes would include math, physics, geography, English, military customs and courtesies, and medical first aid. Also, there would be plenty of drills and physical training. We were to get 10 hours of flying.”

Two months after arriving in Denver, Art had his first flight with a civilian instructor in a Piper Cub.

“I wrote Mom that it was one thrill after another and better than riding the Ferris wheel at the county fair in Pauls Valley, and I was not scared one bit. I described myself ‘sitting there grinning like a cat eating glue.’”

Cadets were introduced to all phases of flight that a 65-hp Cub is capable of, including stalls and spins.

“I wrote Mom this was a thrill deluxe.”

After completing their 10 hours of instruction, each cadet would pass a final check with

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another instructor before progressing to the next phase of the process—preflight training.

By now it had been four months since Art began training, and he had only received 10 hours in a Piper Cub. A far cry from what would be necessary to fly a B-29 in combat. On June 29, Art boarded another train for Santa Ana, California.

**“At end of the day, I thought I was a better swimmer than a shooter—and I was no expert swimmer.”**

Santa Ana was a classification center. Through mental, physical, and aptitude testing, the U. S. Army Air Forces would determine whether an individual was better suited for pilot, navigator, or bombardier. The expectations were higher at Santa Ana. The military was much stricter on appearance and training.

Classroom subjects included math, physics, aircraft identification, aerial photography, military tactics, and Morse code. Physical training included swimming and time on the rifle range.

“At end of the day, I thought I was a better swimmer than a shooter—and I was no expert swimmer.”

The cadets were then exposed to a pressure chamber to test their ability to withstand flight at high altitudes.

“The chamber is a big oblong, round chamber that seats about 20 fellows. The pressure is first lowered to 5,000 feet and then back to sea level (one guy passed out on this procedure). Next the pressure is lowered to 18,000 feet without oxygen masks and then on down to 38,000 feet with oxygen for one hour. Several had ear problems with the change in pressure.”

Art passed preflight training with an overall score of 85 and was able to make out eight

words a minute in Morse code and identify an aircraft in 1/10 second and a ship in two seconds. On February 27 Art’s class received orders for primary training just up the coast in Santa Maria, California.

Up until this point Art had been in continuous training for six months and still had flown only 10 hours in a Piper Cub. The sifting and winnowing that had occurred had sent many on a different path. Of the 50 men that had shown up with Art to join the Army Air Forces in November 1942, only 10 remained in the program to become flight officers. And the real washing machine was yet to come...in next month’s column, primary training. *EAA*

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