

474TH AERO SQUADRON (CONSTRUCTION)

The 62nd Aero Construction Squadron was organized on August 11th, 1917 at Kelly Field, Texas, with Lieut. George V. Smith as the first commanding officer. At Kelly Field the usual routine duties of guard and fatigue, where the Squadron got its first taste of construction work, were observed. An occasional baseball game -- the Squadron had a really good team at this time -- helped take the curse from life and frequent long hikes over dusty Texas roads, helped toughen the boys for the time when they would see service in France. On Dec. 18 Lieut. Roy R. Sutton relieved Lieut. Smith as C. O. and on Jan. 26 the Squadron entrained for the Aviation Concentration Camp, at Morrison, Va. with Lieut. Sutton, Lieut. B.W. Shir-Cliff and Capt. Ralph G. Cressman, Medical Corps.

At Morrison there was much business of drawing supplies and equipment. There were inspections, and leaves, and passes, and being photographed, and a general air of expectancy and subdued excitement. There were also changes in personnel at this time, officers and men being transferred in and out daily. Lieut. H. D. Ackerman was assigned to the Squadron Jan. 31, 1918. On Feb. 18 Capt. E.A. Eckman was assigned and took command, Lieut. Sutton being transferred to the command of another outfit, and on March 1, 1918 Lieut. A. R. Caughey was assigned to the organization.

Finally, orders for overseas came, and on March 4, 1918 the Squadron, now the 474th Aero Construction Squadron, loaded on to the U. S. S. Madawaska, formerly the old German ship Koenig Wilhelm II. Although the ship was tied to the wharf for the greater part of the night, it

was reported that two men were desperately seasick before being on board an hour. However, on the next day, when the Madawaska steamed up to Hoboken to pick up the remainder of the convoy, there were a number of "sure-nuff" cases, and time did not seem to reduce the number. On the second day out from New York, the rumor was started that one of our sister ships carried a thousand Red Cross Nurses, and glasses were in immediate demand. So, occupied with such rumors and by speculation as to where we would land, and by Abandon Ship Drills and by stomach trouble caused by buying sweet things at the Ship Store, seventeen long days gradually passed, and we found ourselves in St. Nazaire on March 21st, 1918. After so long a time on ship board, in constant association with a life preserver, nothing could have seemed better than to see the long green strip of shore land with its spires and red tiled roofs. Then when the ship was towed almost to the heart of the little town, and was passing through the locks, the men all crowded to the rail and threw candy, tobacco, cigarettes and coins to the laughing crowd on shore.

Immediately after the noon meal, unloading was begun, and by nightfall all of the Squadrons were in camp about two miles out of St. Nazaire. Officers and men were impatient to be assigned to some active duties, and there was general rejoicing when orders came on March 24th for the 474th to proceed to Vaucouleurs (Meuse). On the evening of the twenty-fourth, the men were loaded in third class carriages, eight and ten men, with their packs, to one compartment, and the journey started. On March 27th, the outfit arrived at Vaucouleurs, and after some little

difficulty in locating the camp, marched the three kilometers from the railroad station to the camp site.

The squadron reached the camp at dusk and found a detachment of engineers and a machine gun company on the ground preparing a flying field and erecting barracks. Four barracks were already erected, but there were no bunks, so a detail was immediately formed to build bunks for the men to sleep on that night. By nightfall, enough bunks had been built to accommodate the men, and no one had to sleep in the mud, which at the time was about a foot thick, inside the barracks as well as out.

In the morning the men were sent out on detail, under the direction of the engineers, while the officers became acquainted with the proportions and scope of the work to be accomplished. The original plans for the flying field at Vaucouleurs called for sixteen hangars for airplanes, and some thirty or forty buildings to house the officers and men of six pursuit squadrons and one park organization. In addition, there was outlined a complete water and sewage system, electric lights and telephones, with necessary roads and walks. The work was to be done under the direction of the engineers, and here friction developed from the start. The N. C. O's of the squadron, including the M.S.E's and 1st Class Sergeants objected to working on detail under engineer privates and corporals. They felt that their rank entitled them to have charge of details, and they believed that they were capable of handling the work. This led to a lack of interest in the work on the part of the men, and a certain amount of ill-feeling between the squadron and the engineer detachment. This

condition was shortly relieved by the departure of the engineers, the machine gun company had left shortly after the Squadron arrived -- and the subsequent handling of the work by the Engineer Corps, through the officers of the squadron. The work now progressed smoothly, shipments of material arrived regularly by rail, and considerable progress developed.

Work was suspended on Sundays, and the men had a chance to see what sort of country they were in. The coming of summer, and the consequent drying up of some of the mud, showed the camp to be a really beautiful place. Situated on a hill, the flying field commanded a wide view of the surrounding country, as many as seven villages being visible on clear days. On one side of the road to Void, the woods in which the barracks and huts were concealed developed all sorts of wild flowers and song birds while the fields became a crimson riot of poppies. The distant roar of the guns, and an occasional Boche airplane high overhead seemed simply unreal reminders that a war was going on. Down the hill from the flying field, and a few hundred yards from camp was the old castle of Gombervaux, said to have been built in the twelfth century. Its crumbling towers and weed-grown moat suggested the days of knighthood and battles fought with horse and lance. The town of Vaucouleurs also proved interesting. Evenings after recall, the men would walk to town and struggle with the vins, blanc and rouge, and with the French language. The acquaintance of the Mayor, M. Marrillet, was early made, and his unfailing courtesy and personal charm quickly won him the warmest regard of the officers and men.

At about this time, the need was felt for more labor to complete the flying field. After an unsuccessful experiment with French civilian labor, sent out by the Labor Bureau, a company of a hundred Moroccans arrived on the field. These were also under the control of the Labor Bureau, the local representative of which was Capt. A. T. Kennedy. It had been said that some squadrons doing similar work had had trouble with the Moroccans, but under Capt. Kennedy's management, they were a distinct success at Vaucouleurs. They had some queer religious ceremonies and customs but they worked willingly and intelligently.

Nine reformé horses were brought up from the Veterinary Hospital at Neuf-chateau, and these also, proved valuable on the field work.

A Y.M.C.A. was now established at the field, under the secretaryship of Mr. Prentess. There was a canteen, a library, and abundance of writing paper, entertainments, movies, two volley ball courts and a tennis court. The volley ball courts proved particularly attractive to the men, and in the evenings, with two warmly contested games in progress, the cursing would be heard for miles.

The project at Vaucouleurs was now practically completed, as far as contemplated. The idea of the sewage system had been dropped, as had the electric lighting, and the water system had been curtailed to the extent of installing a well, two motor driven pumps, a pipe line, and a ten thousand gallon tank located at approximately the center of camp. Things were in such shape that a flying squadron was momentarily expected, and on May 27th the 139th Pursuit Squadron under the command of Major Angstrom,

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moved in.

The following Sunday Capt. Eckman decided on an informal "house warming," in honor of the occupation of the field. Much thought and care was expended in issuing invitations to the civilian population of the neighboring towns, but as it happened, invitations were quite unnecessary as everyone for miles around made it a point to attend. Lieut. Caughey had great quantities of sandwiches made up, and with much voluntary assistance, mixed up a particularly villainous punch, incidentally nearly losing all track of the proceedings by frequently tasting the concoction to be sure it had the required kick. At about three-thirty the guests began to arrive. There were General Foulois, Col. Lahm, Col. Jones, Col. Aleshire, Col. Hume, other officers of the neighboring squadrons and most of the civil population of France. The 103rd Infantry Band had been secured for the occasion, and added considerable jazz to the party. During the afternoon there were boxing and wrestling bouts, and some splendid exhibition flying by Lieut. Seavers of the 139th. Light refreshments were served in one of the hangars. The party ended at about six o'clock and was voted to be somewhat of a success.

Shortly after this, on July 21st the Squadron moved to Busey, about two kilometers South of the field it had been working on and started work on another airdrome. Here Capt. Cressman was transferred to a surgical team, and Lieut. Wm. E. Orr, Medical Corps, was assigned to the Squadron, serving with it until Nov. 30, 1918, when Capt. Cressman was reassigned. Little was done at the airdrome

beyond cutting some of the underbrush and removing the stones from the field, before orders came on Aug. 7th, 1918, attaching the Squadron to the First Army, and directing it to proceed to La Ferte-sous-Jouarre, just South of Chateau-Thierry.

The Squadron had six trucks in running condition, one motor cycle and a Fiat Touring car. With ten trucks borrowed from the 2nd Pursuit Group and four from the First Air Depot the trip to La Ferte was completed in twenty-four hours. On reporting to La Ferte, orders were received to construct an airdrome in the vicinity of Coupru, about eight kilometers south of Chateau Thierry.

Here the outfit was quartered in an old farm house that had sheltered all manner of troops, and was, in consequence, the embodiment of filth. Decomposing carcasses of all descriptions abounded, and the place was overrun with vermin of every kind. The water at the farm was not fit to use, and the food was prepared under conditions which at best were not sanitary. Flies were present in swarms. The weather was very hot. As a result of these conditions, quite a number of the men were taken ill. But the work of constructing the airdrome went ahead rapidly. In addition to the 474th Squadron, which had control of the work, there was the 218th Squadron, a company of Italians, and a detachment of German prisoners. The cutting of approximately one hundred acres of wheat was completed, and the whole crop removed from the flying field in one day. The next 2 days saw the erection of 3 hangars and 7 barracks. During this time, the French arrived at the field, and put up three hangars. Our men had the

idea that they were pretty clever at hangar erection, but they used this opportunity to learn much from the French, who had been at the game long enough to reduce the job to an exact science.

The country here presented quite a different appearance from the comparatively peaceful sector adjacent to Vaucouleurs. Here the villages were merely shells of houses, the whole interiors having been shot away, and only fragments of the walls left standing. The fields were pitted with shell holes, the woods torn and mangled, and everywhere were fresh and often half completed graves, abandoned clothing, rifles, ammunition, everything. In the day time the roads were packed with doughboys, in trucks and on foot, going in and coming out of the lines. And at night, the Boche planes came over regularly and bombed the entire vicinity, always managing to miss the farm where the Squadron was camped.

On August 18th, the French having taken over the airdrome, the outfit received orders to go to Bar-le-Duc. The four trucks from the First Air Depot had been returned, but the Squadron had been permitted to retain the others, so the trip was made with these. Arriving at Bar-le-Duc, it was found that the next assignment was the construction of an airdrome at Rembercourt (Meuse) for the use of the First Pursuit Group.

At Rembercourt the men camped in a small grove of trees on the side of a hill. Rainy weather made it somewhat uncomfortable, but after Chateau-Thierry, anything would have been an improvement. When the field at Rembercourt was completed sufficiently to permit the moving in of the Group,

the Squadron moved down to the nearby village of Erize-la-Petite and made itself comfortable with large wall tents and bunks.

Working out of Erize-la-Petite, the Squadron entered upon a series of rush jobs on various airdromes in the sector. Work was done at Rembercourt, Vavincourt, Belrain, Rumont, Remicourt, Moulon, Lisle-en-Barrois, Sommeilles, Courcelles, Issoncourt, Souilly, Vadlaincourt and Julvecourt, and a number of barracks were hauled to Bethlainville, to be erected by a squadron at that point.

The material no longer arrived at the job by rail, but had to be transported by truck train from the railheads at Bar-le-Duc, Souilly, and Colombey-les-Belles. Much material was obtained by demounting flying fields which were farther to the rear. All this necessitated constant use of all available transportation and almost frantic efforts to keep every truck on the road and to secure the necessary spare parts for repairs. Truck trains were on the road practically twenty-four hours a day, driving at night without lights, and over roads constantly congested with troop movements, truck convoys, wagons, guns and ammunition trains. During this time, the men worked continuously, rain or shine, Sundays and legal holidays. No praise that they may receive can do justice to the spirit that they displayed.

An incident in connection with the work at Souilly will illustrate some of the conditions that were encountered. At the beginning of the work on this airdrome, the utmost secrecy was necessary to avoid observation by German aircraft, Souilly was then what was known as a camou-

flage field, that is, it had on it a number of imitation hangars. These hangars occupied the exact ground space of a real hangar, but were only about five feet high at the walls, and were constructed of wire and painted burlap. To complete the illusion, a number of imitation airplanes had been placed on the field, as well as some structures built to resemble trucks. Orders were that this field should not be approached by truck during daylight hours and that all construction must be done on rainy days, when observation was impossible, or at night. A rainy day was a long time coming, so one evening Lieut. Ackerman and a detachment of men set out by truck for Souilly, reaching there about seven-thirty. By daylight of the following morning, one camouflage hangar had been demounted and stored, and a real hangar, complete stood in its place.

On October 31st, Capt. Eckman was assigned to duty with the Second Army, and Lieut. Ackerman, who had handled the construction work from the beginning, took over the administrative duties as well, as commanding officer.

After the signing of the armistice on Nov. 11th, the Squadron was kept busy putting some of the fields in such shape that they would not deteriorate while arrangements were being made for their ultimate disposition. On Nov. 21st, orders were received to report to Colombey-les-Belles and turn in all equipment, preparatory to proceeding to Brest for embarkation for the United States.

While at Colombey, the following orders were received, citing the work done by the organization while at Erize-la-Petite:

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OFFICE

FIRST ARMY AIR SERVICE COMMANDER

AMERICAN EXPEDITIONARY FORCES.

France, 21st November 1918.

GENERAL ORDERS:

NUMBER 29

Extract.

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The Army Air Service Commander, First Army, desires to make of record in General Orders of the First Army Air Service his extreme satisfaction with the conduct of the officers and soldiers of the following units:

1. 474th Aero Construction Squadron, following closely the advance of the troops in the St. Mihiel and Argonne-Meuse attacks, constructed six airdromes with a speed and thoroughness that rendered service of the greatest value to the Observation and Pursuit Squadrons.

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By order of Colonel Milling:

W. C. Sherman,
Lt-Col., G. S., U. S. A.,
Chief of Staff.

OFFICIAL

H. S. Sturgis,
1st Lt., A. S. U. S. A.,
Adjutant.

ROSTER OF OFFICERS
474TH AERO SQUADRON
FROM ORGANIZATION.

—1st Lieut. George V. Smith, A.S.
1st Lieut. Gustave Carlson, A.S.
2nd Lieut. Wm. E. Kapp, A.S.
1st Lieut. Roy E. Sutton, A.S.
2nd Lieut. James F. Reeves, A.S.
2nd Lieut. Charles G. Shaw, A.S.
Captain Ralph G. Cressman, M.R.C.
2nd Lieut. S. D. Swan, A.S.
2nd Lieut. Bernard W. Shir-Cliff, A.S.
1st Lieut. Herschel D. Ackerman, A.S.
Captain Elmer A. Eckman, A.S.
2nd Lieut. John Thomas, A.S.
1st Lieut. Thomas F. Healey, D.R.C.
2nd Lieut. Arlington R. Caughey, A.S.
1st Lieut. Lyman Walker, A.S.
1st Lieut. Harlan E. Haines, D.R.C.
1st Lieut. Wm. B. Orr, M.R.C.
2nd Lieut. LaRue Smith, A.S.
Major Ralph G. Cressman, M.C.
2nd Lieut. Harry B. Kinsman, A.S.
1st Lieut. Wm. Green, A.S.