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Article Summary: Olson served in the AAF in the Pacific in World War II, the first great conflict in which air power played a decisive role. He and other part-time unit historical officers documented the activities of their units as they were happening. Their accounts served as the basis for a formal history of the AAF published after the war.

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The Army Air Forces Historical Program, With Special Reference To The Pacific Ocean Areas

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World War II, it may be safely stated, will prove to be the most completely chronicled of any of the nation's conflicts. On the one hand, the media of information and entertainment—the newspaper, the radio, the magazine, and the motion picture—devoted themselves to extensive contemporary accounts of all phases of the war. On the other hand, virtually all departments of the government, both military and civilian, recognized almost from the beginning the importance of keeping accurate records of their activities, and writing from those records at least a preliminary historical narrative.

Because of the necessity for security inherent in warfare, information that is to be made available to the public—and hence to the enemy—necessarily must be restricted to that which in no way will give the enemy information that will be of value to him, or which he does not already have. Interpreted broadly, that eliminates much of the significant history of the war. In view of this, it becomes axiomatic that anything approaching a definitive history of a war cannot be written without recourse to classified records. Historians, and the American people generally, therefore, have particular reason to be grateful that the late President Roosevelt determined that a concerted effort should be made to record our experiences in the war, while the fighting was still going on, and that such recording should be done by professional historians.

A leading branch of the service, in the establishment and development of its historical program, was the Army Air Forces. In this short paper, an attempt will be made to discuss briefly the

Air Forces' historical program, with special reference, based on personal experience only, to its functioning in the Pacific Ocean Areas.

To head the program in the Army Air Forces, General Henry H. Arnold chose Professor—now Colonel—Clanton W. Williams, of the Department of History in the University of Alabama, and an Historical Division was established in the Office of the Assistant Chief of Air Staff, Intelligence, to be transferred later to the Office of the Chief of Air Staff, and designated the AAF Historical Office. As finally developed, the mission of the AAF Historical Office was:

1. To establish and administer in the Zone of the Interior and overseas a program for accomplishment of histories of all AAF organizations.
2. To prepare functional historical studies of AAF activities.
3. To accomplish the publication of an official *History of the AAF in World War II*.¹

At the end of the war, the AAF Historical Office was composed of four branches: 1) Combat Operational History Branch, 2) Administrative History Branch, 3) Sources and Editorial Branch, and 4) Overseas Organizational History Branch, consisting of teams of professional historians reassigned from the theatres to complete their histories prior to demobilization. In addition, there were field sections or units in all commands and higher headquarters, and part-time non-professional, but carefully instructed, historical officers in lower echelons.²

The Air Forces' historical program for the Pacific Ocean Areas was established in February, 1944, when Major James Taylor reported for duty to the Commanding General of the Seventh Air Force. In civilian life a college professor of history, and before going overseas historian of the Army Air Forces Central Flying Training Command, with headquarters at Randolph Field, Texas, Major Taylor was in charge of the Air Forces'

¹ Hq. AAF, Historical Office, Washington, D. C., Historical Officers' Circular No. 6, 20 February 1946.

² *Ibid.*

historical program in the Pacific throughout the remainder of the war. In this capacity he functioned from three different headquarters, each being in turn the highest air headquarters in the Pacific Ocean Areas: The Seventh Air Force; Army Air Forces, Pacific Ocean Areas; and United States Army Strategic Air Forces. In a sense, the record of his transfers epitomizes the growth of Army air power in the Pacific.

During the early years of the war, when the emphasis was on the European struggle and we had neither the bases nor the targets for the operation of large fleets of land-based aircraft in the Pacific, the highest air headquarters in that theatre was the small but active island-hopping Seventh Air Force. With the capture of the Marianas in the summer of 1944, and the introduction of the B-29 to the Pacific Ocean Areas, we had secured bases within range of the most lucrative target of the Pacific war—the Japanese homeland. The Seventh Air Force was divested of its service functions, streamlined into a mobile and tactical air force headquarters, and sent forward to Saipan. Back in Hawaii a new headquarters—Army Air Forces, Pacific Ocean Areas—was activated to service our rapidly growing airpower. Its commander, originally the late Lieutenant General Millard F. Harmon, also was designated Deputy Commander, Pacific, of the Twentieth Air Force, and charged with certain operational functions in connection with the B-29s. Finally, in the summer of 1945, as the Twentieth Air Force was about to be augmented by the Eighth (which, at the close of the European war, was converted from a heavy bombardment air force, employing B-17s and B-24s, to a very heavy bombardment organization, using B-29s, and redeployed to the Pacific), Army Air Forces, Pacific Ocean Areas, was replaced as the highest Army air headquarters in the theatre by the newly-activated Headquarters, United States Army Strategic Air Forces, under the command of General Carl Spaatz.

Full time historical officers were provided by Headquarters, AAF, in Washington, for each command and air force headquarters. At the war's end, Major Taylor had under him a dozen historical officers, scattered across the Pacific from Hawaii to Iwo Jima and Okinawa. All of them possessed advanced degrees in history, political science, English, or education. Also, there were an equal number of enlisted men in the program, most of whom were college trained.

In addition to the full time historical officers at the command and air force levels, the commanding officer of each separately administered unit in the Army Air Forces was required to designate one officer to serve as an historical officer in addition to his other duties. Thus, each squadron, group, wing, engineer aviation battalion, and similar organization, had its own historical officer. Because the historical program was carried on largely through Intelligence channels, the officer so selected usually was an Intelligence officer. On the whole, this was a happy choice: not only were Intelligence officers in a position to know what was going on, their civilian background usually made them among the most qualified men in their organizations for historical work.

The part-time unit historical officers were required to submit monthly historical reports of their organizations. These consisted of three parts: 1) an introductory page, giving such information as movement data, losses of men and aircraft, strength statistics, and lists of men who had been decorated; 2) a narrative section, in which the unit's activities for the month were presented in narrative form, with special emphasis on the primary mission of the unit; and 3) a set of supporting documents, consisting of mission reports, special and general orders, special staff studies, statistical reports, photographs, and any other data believed by the historical officer to be pertinent to the history of the organization.

Although a certain mechanical form was required for the sake of usability, no attempt was made to stereotype the content of the unit histories. Such supervision as was exercised by the full time historical officers at the command and air force levels was confined to insuring that the reports were submitted on time, that statements of fact were properly documented, and that insofar as possible, the information was presented clearly and simply. It goes without saying, that the quality of the unit histories varied considerably, depending upon the ability of the unit historian and the amount of time he could spend on each report.

The professional historical officers had other duties in addition to supervising the part-time historians under their jurisdiction. Most important of these was the preparation of comprehensive preliminary histories of their command or air

force. These were submitted in monthly or quarterly installments, were fully documented, and like the unit histories, were accompanied by a full set of supporting documents. While volume is no criterion of excellence, it might be stated that one monthly installment of the history of a unit like the XXI Bomber Command, with its supporting documents, often made a stack two feet high. In addition to supervising the histories of the units under them and preparing their own histories, the historians of the commands and air forces were called upon by their own commanding generals from time to time for special studies.

At the senior air force headquarters in the area an attempt was made to write a preliminary operational and administrative history of the overall air effort in the Pacific Ocean Areas. From this vantage point, where it always was the author's fortune to be located, it was possible to view the entire mosaic of our scattered Pacific aerial operations. It was a most interesting assignment, this chronicling of our air effort against the enemy in the Pacific. It is a story unique in the lexicon of aerial warfare, for out in the Pacific land-based Army aircraft were operating in a world of water. Before the capture of the Marianas, our advanced bases were nothing but pin-point atolls, some of which were so small that runways had to be extended into the surf before heavy bombers could be flown from them. From these tiny atolls, missions were flown over hundred of miles of water to strike at targets so small that the entire island would in itself be a pin-point target—and then there was the long trip back, often complicated by flak or fighter damage. Or perhaps medium bombers would take off from their tiny bases to search out shipping in devastating, low level attacks. When the boys in the mediums went in at low level they spared nothing. A story classic in the annals of the VII Bomber Command tells how one pilot returned from such a mission with a Japanese flag caught in the nacelle of his right engine. He hadn't left much margin for error. On the long missions—and all of them were long beyond precedent—fighter escort was virtually unheard of. The distances involved put a strain even on the heavy bombers. The bomber crews simply had to go it alone and take their chances, relying on their own skill and the performance of their aircraft.

The most awe-inspiring aspect of it all, though, was to watch the steady growth of our air power in the Pacific from

the days when getting a dozen B-24s at once over a tiny outpost of the enemy's empire was a large scale effort, to the last days of the war when hundreds of B-29s took off almost daily from those great bases in the Marianas to strike at the very heart of the Empire. On the day of a great raid, the western Pacific reverberated for hours with the beat of their engines.

Some mention should be made of the difficulties that beset the historian whose cloister had become a quonset hut or a leaky pyramidal tent. To most, it was amazing how much of one's time could be taken up on a tiny island just keeping semi-decently clothed, theoretically housed, usually well-fed, and reasonably clean. Some of the men were sure that had they known just what they were to be doing in the years after completing their college work that they would have dropped one or two of their academic courses in favor of one on how to operate a home laundry—where you have neither a home nor a laundry. The GI steel helmet had many uses besides that of protecting one's head.

Then consider the case of that most important weapon of modern warfare, the typewriter. At times it seemed almost unobtainable, and once one was procured, the climate of certain islands in the Pacific is such that no matter how a typewriter is cared for, in a few weeks it has rusted itself into a state of utter worthlessness. And in these days, history can hardly be made without typewriters, let alone written.

The distances in the Pacific also presented their own peculiar problems. It was difficult to supervise the work of people spread out over 5,000 miles of water. Occasionally, this supervision brought with it experiences other than academic. The following excerpt from a letter from Major Taylor, the Air Force Historian in the Pacific, may be of interest:

“Monday at 7:00 I left via C-46 for Okinawa. There were only four passengers and a heavy load of freight. About 350 miles out I was standing in the cabin conversing with the pilot when without warning or any sort of advance indication, one engine popped and went dead. The plane spun around a bit before the pilot got the dead propeller feathered. The plane began to lose altitude rapidly—we all fell to and began to jettison cargo and everything we could get our hands on—and we continued to drop until we had

gone all the way from 10,000 feet to less than 3,500. The pilot gave the signal to get everything ready and stand by to ditch—and you can bet that we stood by with Mae Wests on and life rafts ready. I wasn't scared, but I noticed that my body was cold and I was shivering while I had developed a taste in my mouth suggestive of a tablespoonful of quinine. Well, we didn't ditch. At about 3,000 the plane leveled off, and we came in at that altitude, flying for three hours on one engine."

At Okinawa: "water was half an inch deep on the floor of the mess, and I returned to the plane to sleep rather than sleep in a tent with an inch of slush on the ground."

Every time a unit moved from one island to another, there was, of course, a period of time when there was nothing to do but for all hands to busy themselves in clearing away the rubble of battle and the Jap occupation and constructing quarters in which to live and work. Not much history could be written during these periods. Moreover, each movement involved a period varying from several days to several weeks when the unit's records were unobtainable—they were packed away, either being shipped or awaiting shipment.

The unit historical officer was the one most plagued by these interruptions, because it was the relatively small organization—the squadron or group—that moved most frequently in our island-hopping progress across the Pacific. It must be remembered, too, that those men were historians only part of the time, that in addition they could have any number of other duties to perform, and usually did, particularly when life was complicated by movement and by getting established at new locations.

Nevertheless, it was found to be almost always true that during the periods when the going was the toughest, these men wrote their best history. That is most fortunate for the history of the Army Air Forces, because, of course, it was just at these times that the unit was playing its most significant role in the war. Historians will always have cause to be grateful that these men were willing to work long hours, in intense heat and under the most primitive conditions, to get down, *and get documented*, the history of their particular units "while it was hot."

The monthly historical reports of all organizations, together with many documents and special studies, were forwarded regularly to the Historical Division at Headquarters, Army Air Forces, in Washington, and there were catalogued and filed. The full-time historical officers from the Pacific (and from all other overseas theatres) were returned to the United States as soon as practicable after the cessation of hostilities, and assigned to the AAF's Overseas Organizational History Branch at Baltimore to complete the writing of preliminary command and air force histories prior to demobilization. The men reassigned to Baltimore had at their disposal, not only all of the reports and documents they had transmitted from their own headquarters during the war, but a complete file of the histories of all units with which they were concerned.

With the completion of the Air Force and theatre air organization histories (scheduled for this summer), most of the necessary spadework will have been accomplished for the projected *History of the AAF in World War II*, which is to be completed in four to five years and published by the University of Chicago Press. For these volumes, editors and contributors have been chosen from among the military and civilian historians who were active in the AAF historical program during the war. Inasmuch as most of them are college teachers, arrangements have been made for them to work at their respective campuses and to return to Washington during the summer months. The Air Staff, in turn, has agreed to make available to them all historical data and to allow complete freedom of interpretation.³

Behind the seven volume publication will be the AAF archives, constituting a rich and skillfully selected collection of military documents. As staff and field personnel, and the public, have learned of the value of these documents, requests for information have increased. Many Army and Navy agencies have drawn heavily upon this source of information. Services rendered to outside agencies include answers to requests of relatives of men killed in action asking for details; assembly of data presented before Congressional committees; and answers to varied

³ *Ibid.*

queries of former Air Force personnel. The personnel of the Historical Office expect these requests to grow in volume.⁴

For the benefit of future historians of the first great conflict in which air power played a decisive role, the archives of the AAF Historical Office constitute a rich, carefully selected, and highly usable source of vital information.

⁴ *Ibid.*