

## COLONEL BENJAMIN F. GILES



In June 1939, Lieutenant Colonel Benjamin F. Giles assumed his post as Chief of the National Guard Bureau's Aviation Division. He served in that assignment until June 1941. Giles had been born on a farm near Mineola, Texas on September 13, 1892. Neighbors remembered him and his twin brother Barney as "the out-workingest hands and the best danged bird hunters in Texas." Both brothers attended East Texas Normal College and then taught school for 3 years. Wanting to pursue careers in law, they entered the University of Texas but World War I changed their plans radically. Ben was commissioned a second lieutenant in the Army Infantry Reserve on April 25, 1917 but transferred to aviation within a month. He flew combat missions in France during World War I as an observer and aerial gunner officially sharing the credit (25 percent) for downing an enemy balloon. Giles left the Army after the armistice but returned to it as a regular Army aviation officer in 1920. His brother followed a similar military career path.

Like his predecessor at the National Guard Bureau, Colonel Clarence L. Tinker, Ben Giles was considered a promising officer in the rapidly expanding Army Air Corps (renamed the Army Air Forces on June 20, 1941). Initially, he was assisted in the Bureau by two other regular Army flyers, Major Thomas W. Blackburn and Captain Otto P. Weyland. Like their predecessors, those three Army aviators continued to fly the Bureau's Chief around the country in the organization's own twin-engine transport and performed all the basic functions for Guard aviation that the Air Staff did for the entire Air Corps including planning, budgeting and monitoring training. More significantly, Benjamin Giles oversaw a significant expansion of National Guard aviation and the induction of 22 Guard observation squadrons into federal service in the years immediately prior to the entry of the United States into World War II. Responding to the deteriorating international security situation in the late 1930s, Congress had approved President Franklin D. Roosevelt's proposal to expand the Army Air Corps from 1,755 to 5,500 aircraft on April 3, 1939. Roosevelt's program had increased the number of National Guard observation squadrons from 19 to 29 and increased the number of aircraft authorized for each unit from 10 to 14. During Colonel Giles' tenure in the Bureau, nine new National Guard Observation Squadrons were activated in: Mississippi (153<sup>rd</sup>), Rhode Island (152<sup>nd</sup>), Wisconsin (126<sup>th</sup>), Oklahoma (125<sup>th</sup>), Iowa (124<sup>th</sup>), Louisiana (122<sup>nd</sup>), the District of Columbia (121<sup>st</sup>), Oregon (123<sup>rd</sup>), and Georgia (128<sup>th</sup>). The number of assigned Guard aviation personnel grew rapidly from 2,395 to 3,426 while Giles was at the Aviation Division's helm. Since the Air Corps was unwilling or unable to train pilots and enlisted technical specialists to fill out the rapidly growing Guard aviation program and replace departing personnel, he authorized Guard air units to continue training their own new pilots and technical specialists because Air Corps schools were swamped with recruits from the rapidly expanding regular Army's air arm.

The Bureau and its Aviation Division could not keep up with the desire of the states to form new aviation units. During that period, it received applications to form 40 new Guard flying squadrons. The NGB had neither the funds nor the War Department's authorization to satisfy those demands. Each new unit cost an estimated \$1million to form and approximately \$ 130,000 a year to operate while they remained in state service. During Giles' tenure, plans approved by the War Department and the National Guard Bureau in mid 1940 to form four new squadrons in the National Guard dedicated to the interceptor mission were scuttled apparently because of resistance in the larger Guard community. Ironically in view of what later happened during World War II, that opposition was ostensibly based on the argument that most Guard pilots were too old to fly high performance pursuit aircraft and that they could not handle any other mission than observation, the only one which they had known in the National Guard,

Because of the additional National Guard field training authorized by the War Department, its pilots averaged approximately 150 hours of flying time annually, well above the prescribed 60 hours during Fiscal Year 1940. During that same period, the NGB placed record orders for 187 brand new National Guard observation aircraft before Ben left the organization on June 13, 1941. By that time, the Guard's flying inventory had grown to about 252 aircraft, well above the 171 reported to be on hand 3 years earlier.

Giles oversaw the induction of 22 National Guard observation squadrons into federal service before he left the Bureau in June 1941 as part of the nation's pre World War II buildup. Contrary to prewar plans, many of their pilots as well as engineering and supply officers were subsequently transferred as individuals to the rapidly expanding number of AAF units because of their relatively high experience levels. The Guard observation squadrons were then split away from the Army

Guard infantry divisions and regular Army corps headquarters which they had been assigned to before mobilization. They were reequipped with modern combat aircraft and transformed into fighter, reconnaissance, heavy bomber and liaison units as shifting AAF requirements dictated during World War II.

Colonel Giles' interest in National Guard aviation continued after he left the National Guard Bureau. Major General John F. Williams of Missouri, the Bureau's wartime Chief, lobbied senior Army Air Forces officers to change their original postwar plans which had excluded the National Guard. During the spring of 1944, the Chief convinced then Major General Ben Giles to pass pro-Guard "propaganda" to his twin brother Barney, chief of the Headquarters Army Air Forces' wartime staff in the Pentagon. Williams asked the former to pass this information to Barney as well as several other highly placed airmen and ". . . to impress upon them that if they attempted to make any plans for a future Air Corps omitting the National Guard and the States, they would run up against a blitz that would make one of their forays over Berlin seem like child's play. . . . [Williams reported that Ben] was entirely in accord with me . . . and seemed very anxious to put the idea across."

After serving in a variety of senior AAF positions during the war including command of the Army Air Forces in the Africa- Middle East Theater, Ben retired on September 1, 1946 as a major general. He had earned two Distinguished Service Medals, the Legion of Merit, an Air Medal and decorations from Great Britain and Yugoslavia for aerial flights under combat conditions. His aeronautical ratings included command pilot, combat observer and aircraft observer.

After leaving active duty, he took a position as vice president of Trans World Airways and then served on the board of the Twentieth Century Fox movie corporation. Ben enjoyed bridge, poker and hunting as well as a companionable

highball. Reportedly, he shocked his Texas friends by developing a preference for Scotch over bourbon. He was considered a more reserved than his demonstrative brother Barney. Giles died on November 30, 1974 in San Antonio and is buried in the Fort Sam Houston National Cemetery.

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