

Signal Officer recalled during month of military aviation anniversaries

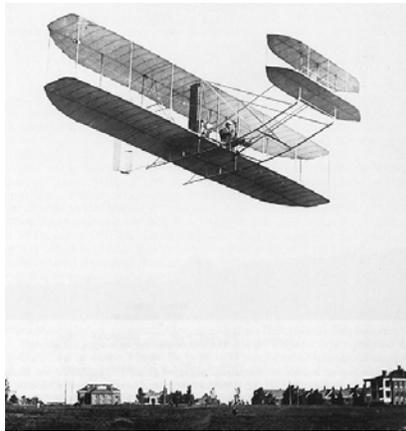
By Melissa Ziobro, CECOM LCMC Command Historian

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On August 1, 1907, the Army established an Aeronautical Division within the office of the Chief Signal Officer.

Signal Corps Specification Number 486, dated December 23, 1907, solicited bids for one heavier than air flying machine.

A Signal Corps Officer named Charles S. Wallace signed a contract for that first Army airplane with brothers Wilbur and Orville Wright on February 10, 1908.



Orville Wright Flies over Fort
Myer, 1908.
US Army Photo

According to the National Museum of the Air Force, the Signal Corps took delivery of the first American military aircraft on August 2, 1909. For \$30,000 the Army received Signal Corps Airplane Number One, an aircraft capable of staying aloft for over one hour, carrying two people sitting upright. It could fly as high as 500 feet above the ground and as fast as 47 miles per hour.

The Army paid the Wrights the contract price of \$25,000 plus \$5,000 for speed in excess of 40 miles per hour.

Stories of the Wright brothers and the first military aircraft are well-told. But surprisingly little is known about Wallace, the man whose name lives in perpetuity on the historic contract.

What little we know about Wallace comes from a variety of sources. The National Museum of the U.S. Air Force, the Travis Air Museum, the U.S. Army Center of Military History, and the U.S. Army CECOM LCMC archives all offer tidbits of information. The number of seemingly relevant government repositories that will tell you they have no information on Wallace is just as long, if not longer.

Wallace merited brief mentions in official government records from the first half of the twentieth century, as well as in publications such as *New York Times*. Pieced together, these sources outline his life and career.

So who is this career Soldier perhaps most famous for his John Hancock?

According to the *Official Army Register*, 1922, Wallace was born in Illinois in September 1866. The circumstances under which he joined the military are unclear, but the *Register* shows he was a sergeant as of March 18, 1890.

According to the September 12, 1890 *New York Times*, Wallace received an appointment to West Point from Texas. West Point graduate rosters do not include Wallace, however. What happened here is unclear.



This grainy photo of Charles S. Wallace from the July 26, 1917 edition of the *Air Service* journal gives us a rare look at the man who signed his name to the contract for the military's first aircraft. US Army Photo

The July 8, 1898 *New York Times*, *Salt Lake Herald*, and *Omaha Daily Bee*, however, report that Sergeant Wallace was nominated Second Lieutenant, U.S. Volunteer Signal Corps shortly after Department of the Army General Orders No. 30, April 30, 1898, established the Volunteer Army.

General Orders No. 30 decreed “That the Regular Army is the permanent military establishment, which is maintained both in peace and war according to law,” while “the Volunteer Army shall be maintained only during the existence of war, or while war is imminent...”

The *Official Army Register*, 1922, confirms Wallace’s July 1898 promotion.

The August 7, 1898 *New York Times* states that Second Lieutenant Wallace was ordered to proceed from Jacksonville to Tampa to report to the Chief Signal Officer of the Fourth Army Corps for duty with the balloon company of the Signal Corps. Stephen Tillman’s 1958 book about early military aviation, *Man Unafraid*, claims that Wallace went on to take pioneering military photographs from Signal Corps balloons. These early experiments reportedly proved that lens filters could minimize the effects of ground haze.

The 1900 *Annual Reports of the War Department* and the *New York Times* place Wallace in the Philippines during the Spanish American War/Philippine Insurrection era. During that period, he took charge of and organized civil control of telegraphs and telephones received from the Signal Corps and earned an appointment as a First Lieutenant, Signal Corps, Regular Army.

The *Annual Reports of the War Department*, 1900, states that Wallace’s work “in building the eastern line between San Jose and San Joaquin [Philippines] met with resistance from...insurgents from start to finish...and almost daily he and his necessary escort were under fire...”

“His services have been of unusual value. He is cool in danger, energetic, eager for work, and endowed with thorough professional knowledge.”

Another section of the *Report* states, “With new men, through a difficult and hostile country, with insufficient transportation and that of the slowest kind, cutting their own poles, and working in intense heat, the two small detachments under Lieutenants Wildman and Wallace had in a few

days more than a month completed a line which the Spaniards were seven months building. Great credit for this work is due to the officers named..."

The *Report* also offers us a rare chance to hear from Wallace himself. In the addendum, *Extract from Report of Lieutenant Charles S. Wallace, Signal Corps, United States Volunteers*, Wallace expresses frustrations with the local population and infrastructure, saying that "the people are mostly in sympathy with the insurgents and unwilling to work," and "the roads are wretched, bridges rotten or entirely gone, and transportation crude and scarce." He takes ambushes in stride, however, saying for example of one incident, "the firing was quite spirited for half an hour, but no casualties resulted."

Wallace apparently maintained his good morale, because Major General Adna R. Chaffee, U.S. Army, Commanding, Division of the Philippines, wrote in his 1901 report that "Lieutenant Charles S. Wallace... recently promoted from First Lieutenant, U.S. Volunteers, has been in charge of signal work on the islands of Leyte and Samar since their occupation, has been in the field nearly all the time, and has shown remarkable perseverance, energy, and ability. The physical conditions of the island and the activity of the insurrection have called for exceptional bravery, foresight, and executive ability. His work has been of unusual value to the government and his appointment to the Signal Corps of the Army well-merited."

The *Official Army Register*, 1922, shows that Wallace earned another promotion, to Captain, in March 1903. According to the *New York Times*, Wallace left the Philippines and reported to Omaha by way of San Francisco in November of that year for duty as Signal Officer, Department of Missouri.

The April 16, 1904 *Times* reports that Wallace was ordered from duty in the Missouri Department to Seattle, Washington. There he was to perform duties related to the installation of the Alaskan cable system, in compliance with the May 26, 1900 Act of Congress that called for an extensive system of military telegraph and cable lines in Alaska.

Here, we lose track of Wallace for a few years. According to *Boyd's Directory of the District of Columbia*, by 1908, Wallace could be found at the Rochambeau Apartment House at 815 Connecticut Avenue. It's unclear how Wallace arrived in D.C.

In February of that year, Captain Wallace signed the historic contract with the Wright Brothers for the first military airplane. Wallace also served on the board of officers appointed to observe the progress of the Wrights' flight trials at Fort Myer, Virginia. The July 1909 edition of *Aeronautics* reports that the Chief Signal Officer appointed this Board to observe the craft's first flights and "to make a report and recommendations in regard thereto."

According to news clippings in the Alexander Graham Bell Family Papers at the Library of Congress, Wallace was present at Fort Myer when on September 17, 1908 Lieutenant Thomas E. Selfridge, flying with Orville Wright, became the first Army Officer to die in a modern airplane crash.

The flight testing continued despite Selfridge's death. By July 1909, the project neared completion. *Aeronautics* reports that the wind "absolutely refused to abate" enough for the plane to take off the first scheduled day of the final trials, despite the presence of the large number of politicians, high-ranking Army officers, and other spectators assembled for the show. No word on how Wallace felt about this delay. But the Board ultimately decided to accept the plane in August 1909.

The 1910 *Annual Report of the Army Service Schools, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas*, shows that Wallace graduated from the Army Signal School in 1910. (Interestingly, he graduated with Carl F. Hartmann, later the first commander of Fort Monmouth).

Congressional testimony shows that Wallace accompanied Chief Signal Officer Brigadier General George P. Scriven to lobby for Signal Corps funds in 1913. Wallace had served under Scriven in the Philippines. Wallace seems confident, determined, and knowledgeable in addressing the politicians, and Scriven defers to his expertise on several occasions. This was not the first, or the last time, Wallace would be sent to petition lawmakers for money.

Scriven thought so highly of Wallace that he thanked him in the acknowledgements of his 1915 report, *The Service of Information*.

The *New York Times* reports that on June 24, 1916, Wallace was detailed to assist the non-partisan Committee on Industrial Preparedness convened to help prepare American industry to support the Armed Forces in the event of War. A promotion to Major came the next month, per the *Official Army Register*, followed by one to Lieutenant Colonel on May 15, 1917.

The *Air Service Journal* of July 26, 1917 reports Wallace serving as officer in charge, Signal Corps General Supply Depot, Washington, DC. Wallace then appears to have headed the Finance and Supply Division of the U.S. Army Air Service.

The *Official Army Register*, 1922, shows that Wallace earned a temporary promotion to full Colonel on August 5, 1917. The August 9, 1917 *Air Service Journal* shows Wallace transferring from the Finance and Supply Division to Fort Wood, New York.

According to A. Lincoln Lavine's 1921 book *Circuits of Victory*, Wallace's overseas assignments during World War I included Chief of the Lines of Communication (as the area rear of the "Advance" section of the American Expeditionary Force was known), and Director of the Telephone and Telegraph Division.

The *Annual Report of the Chief Signal Officer*, 1919, reports that "the Telephone and Telegraph Division will direct the construction, maintenance, and operation of all telephone and telegraph lines and stations..."

Brigadier General S. Herbert Wolfe, Army of the United States, said of Wallace's WWI battlefield responsibilities, "he will have charge of the telephone and telegraph service except at the front — a very responsible detail."

Circuits of Victory reveals that Wallace left his position as Director of the Telephone and Telegraph Division for Washington, D.C., in response to a demand that an experienced field officer be sent there for staff duty to represent the American Expeditionary Force Signal Corps.

Wallace earned a permanent promotion to Colonel on March 18, 1921.

According to the Center of Military History, Wallace retired in 1928 after some 38 years of service to his country. No obituary has been found. His personal life remains even more shrouded in mystery than his career.

Army aviation remained within the Signal Corps until 1918, when it became the Army Air Service. That became the United States Army Air Corps in 1926, the United States Army Air Forces in 1941, and, finally, the United States Air Force in 1947.

The relatively little-known Charles S. Wallace will always be a part of this story.