

EARLY AIRMAIL and the Life of JOHN P. CHARLTON

By Jean R. Walton

Early airmail had its risks, and the National Postal Museum has a full page devoted to those who lost their lives because of their service to the Post Office Department.¹ One member of that early service actually called it a “Suicide Club.”

The profession of airmail pilot was, in 1918, a horrendously dangerous one. A surviving pilot recalled that the group was "considered pretty much a suicide club." Aviation was still young, and few planes offered protection in times of trouble. Mail pilots did not have the luxury of flying when they liked, nor could they wait for optimum conditions.

The service had to prove itself from the beginning, and officials strove to keep schedules tight. Crashes were common. The life expectancy of the first mail pilots was as short as 900 flying hours. Gardner and his fellow airmail pilots flew without parachutes, over land with few, if any, emergency landing fields. There were no lights, on the ground or in the plane, to assist with night flights.

Thirty-five of the pilots hired by the Post Office Department between 1918–1926 were killed while flying the mail. Most of those pilots died in the early years of the service. In 1919, one pilot died for every 115,325 miles flown.²

This became personal the other day when I opened a book, and two pictures fell out – pictures included earlier in an article on the Schooley’s Mountain post office. I realized I had put little emphasis on the pilot who lost his life. His story, and the story of those early air mail flights, deserves more attention.

The man who flew this tragic flight was John P. Charlton. He was flying a de Havilland DH.4 on a flight from College Park, Maryland to Belmont Field in New York on October 30th, 1919 – one of the earliest air mail routes – delivering mail from Washington (by way of College Park) via Philadelphia to New York. He had only just entered the U.S. Air Mail Service in October of that year, and was on his 5th flight with the Air Mail Service, having recently been honorably discharged from the army at Camp Dix, N.J., following World War I.

On passing over Schooley’s Mountain, he encountered a dense fog. In setting the plane down because of the loss of visibility, he hit a rock hidden in the tall grass, which flipped the plane over several times, breaking it apart. The wreckage was soon discovered, but Charlton was found dead of a fractured skull, still strapped into his seat in the debris.

His story is typical of many of the young men who took this career path. This was no barnstorming pilot. As a young man, he had been a crack athlete in his hometown high school in Reading, PA, and then a successful and well-liked member of the student body at Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, graduating in 1917.

The Great War was well underway upon his graduation from Andover, having begun in July 1914. The U.S. did not enter the war with Germany until almost three years later, on April 6, 1917. Compulsory registration for military service in this country for World War I commenced on June 5, 1917, and included all men between the ages of 21 and 30. Charlton’s own registration card shows a date of May 29, 1917, indicating he volunteered for military serve.

EARLY AIRMAIL And the LIFE OF JOHN P. CHARLTON ~ Jean Walton

In May 1917, shortly after the U.S. entered WWI, John Charlton was employed at Armour Packing in Newark, New Jersey as a cashier, as his draft registration card shows, and as yet unmarried.³ That would soon change, and on June 21, 1917, he married Marie Geissler, also from Reading, in Newark.⁴

The image shows two forms related to John P. Charlton Jr.'s military service registration. The left form is a 'Form 1 REGISTRATION CARD' with handwritten details: Name in full (John P. Charlton Jr.), Age (22), Home address (112 Spring St Reading Pa.), Date of birth (Feb 22 1895), Natural born citizen, Where born (Reading Pa. U.S.), What is your present trade, occupation, or office? (Cashier), By whom employed? (Armour Packing Co), Newark, Have you a father, mother, wife, child under 12, or a sister or brother under 12, solely dependent on you for support? (None), Married or single? (Single), Race (Caucasia), What military service have you had? (None), Do you claim exemption from draft? (None). The right form is a 'REGISTRAR'S REPORT' with handwritten details: Tall, medium, or short (Tall), Slender, medium, or stout (Medium), Color of eyes (Brown), Color of hair (Brown), Bald? (None), Has person lost arm, leg, hand, foot, or both eyes, or is he otherwise disabled? (None). The registrar is A. Archibald, City Clerk, Newark, N. J., dated May 29/17.

Ancestry.com. (See Fn3)

Fig. 1: WWI registration card for military service, signed by John P. Charlton, and the City Clerk at Newark, NJ, on May 29, 1917, a week before compulsory draft registration.

His service and compensation records show he was first assigned to the School of Military Aeronautics at Princeton – one of the schools set up at some eight colleges and universities across the county to teach young enlistees the basics of aeronautics.

This is Form 721-214 A.G.O., a short history of John P. Charlton's service record. It shows he was enlisted in the Enlisted Reserve Corps (ERC) at Reading Pa on Oct 25/17, born in Dravosburg Pa on Feb 22/18, 22 yrs old. He was assigned to the School of Military Aeronautics at Princeton NJ, then to Camp Dick Tex, and finally to Camp Dix NJ. He was discharged on Sept 8/19, per cent disabled on date of discharge, in view of occupation. The form is signed by John P. Charlton Jr. and has a date stamp of JUN 21 1918.

This is Form 848-1 A.G.O., continuing John P. Charlton's service record. It shows he was appointed to the Air Service (AS) on June 25/18 from ERC, and discharged on Sept 8/19. He was assigned to Scott Field Ill, Hoboken NJ, Love Field Tex, Camp Meade Md, and Camp Dix NJ. He was discharged on Sept 8/19, per cent disabled on date of discharge, in view of occupation. The form is signed by John P. Charlton Jr. and has a date stamp of JUN 21 1918.

Ancestry.com⁵

Fig. 2: The above form is a short history of John Charlton's service record, beginning with Oct. 1917 enlistment into the Enlisted Reserve Corps (ERC).

Fig. 3: The reverse, continuing his record in the Air Service (AS). This card shows his service record from enlistment to discharge on Sept. 8, 1919.

When the United States entered World War I in April of 1917, we were woefully unprepared for what would be required of us. The Spanish-American War and the conflict with Mexico had left us more aware of the need for a standing army, or at least reserve units, but the first reserve units were not created until 1908, and that was a medical reserve corps of graduates of medical schools.⁶ By 1909, it included approximately 350 physicians – with the advantage that they had already received training in their field. Such was not true for army reserves. The National Guard would have seemed a good starting point to create such a force, but it was declared unlawful to use such militia for service abroad. A reserve army must come from elsewhere.

In 1912, a reserve army was created, but no allowance for payment was included, so it is not surprising that 2 years later, only 16 men had joined the reserve.

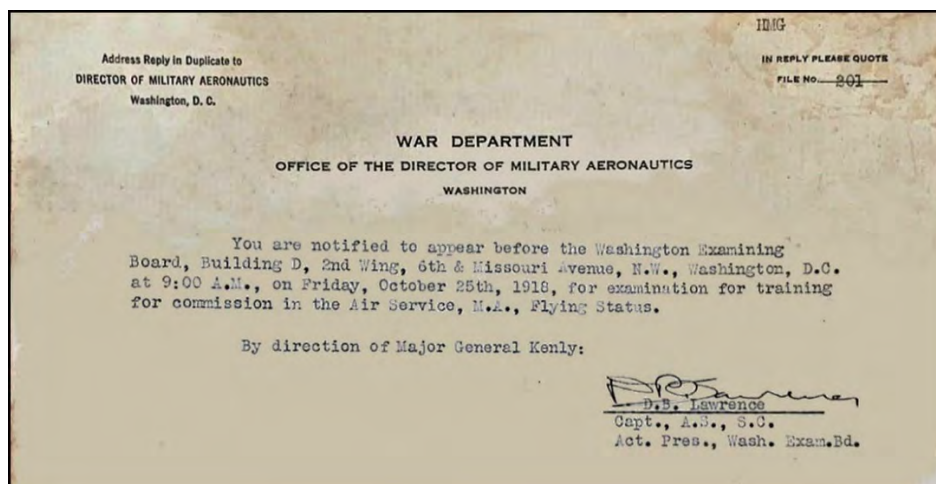
The Navy had taken greater steps for preparing men for service, and had established camps for interested enlistees, and approached colleges and universities in an effort to create a pool of men, trained to some degree, to be called on in times of emergencies as officers. That pool had grown to about 1000 men in 1915.

Skills in aeronautics were new so perhaps it is understandable that the training of pilots lagged behind. Its beginning was only after the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand in Austria in June 1914. Woodrow Wilson established in July what was known as the Aeronautics Division, a part of the US Signal Corps, which officially became the Aviation Section, US Signal Corps. At its creation it had 19 officers, 101 enlisted men, and 7 aircraft. It grew quickly, however, with the growing threat of war, the progress of aeronautics abroad, and undoubtedly the appeal to young men of the opportunity to learn these skills. By December of 1914, The Aviation Section of the Signal Corps had grown to 44 officers, 224 enlisted men, and 23 aircraft.⁷

When created, the Aviation Section and the Department of Military Aeronautics was part of the Signal Corps. The history of the Signal Corps explains why the Aviation Section was allocated to it. Balloons had been used in the Civil War, notably for reconnaissance. That made it seem, at the time, the likely matching for what today seems an odd beginning for military aviation. The law creating this section of our defense stated the following:

There is hereby created, an aviation section, which shall be a part of the Signal Corps of the Army, and which shall be, and is hereby, charged with the duty of operating or supervising the operation of all military aircraft, including balloons and aeroplanes, all appliances pertaining to said craft, and signaling apparatus of any kind when installed on said craft; also with the duty of training officers and enlisted men in matters pertaining to military aviation. In 1918, when we were actively involved in the European conflict, this status still existed.⁸

The Aviation Section would eventually become the future Army Air Force.



Used with permission of Ebay seller AntMuffin, and available for sale on that site.⁹
Fig. 4: A letterhead from the War Department, Office of Military Aeronautics in October 1918, signed below for Major Kenly by D.S. Lawrence, Captain, A.S. (Aviation Section), S.C. (Signal Corps). The Division of Military Aeronautics would transition shortly into the Army Air Service.¹⁰

The urgent demand for pilots was met by Washington with a need to find a way to train men quickly. A delegation was sent to Toronto in May 1917 to examine the plans already in place there by the Royal Flying Corps, as Canada had been involved in World War I since August 1914 when the United Kingdom entered the war. The Canadian training operations served as a model for the U.S.

Members of the delegation sent to Canada included representatives of six colleges and universities in the U.S. Within 10 days of their return from Canada, President Wilson established training camps within these schools, to begin ground training for future pilots at universities around the country. These were known as Schools of Military Aeronautics. Although not part of the original six, Princeton and the Georgia School of Technology were added within a month. These schools provided ground training, and served as well to weed out less promising candidates. John Charlton was sent to the School of Military Aeronautics at Princeton, and served there until February 1918.



Fig. 5: Students assembling parts of an air-plane engine.

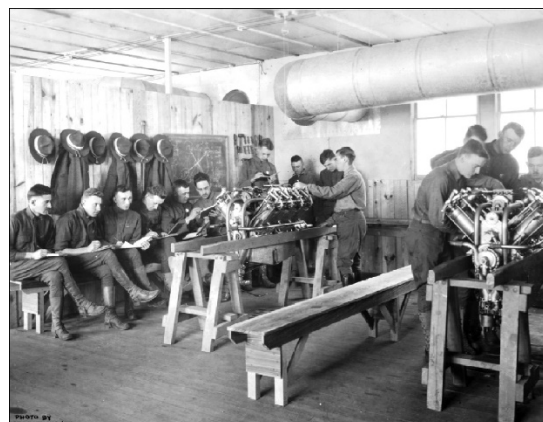


Fig.6: Students learning the construction of the Liberty Motor.

Photos by Orren Jack Turner, public domain, National Archives, <https://nara.getarchive.net/search>

Training Aviators for the United States Army



BRIG. GEN. W. L. KENLY, DIRECTOR OF THE DIVISION OF MILITARY AERONAUTICS.

(© Harris & Ewing.)

AVIATION for army purposes comes under the direction of the Signal Corps, but owing to the immense development of aerial warfare we are gradually seeing the Aviation Section develop into what will become ultimately a quite separate branch. The first step has already been taken in the recent creation of a Division of Military Aeronautics under the direction of Brig. Gen. William L. Kenly and the concentration of the work of the Chief Signal Officer of the army on purely signal work. The new division has control of the training of aviators and the military use of aircraft, while in matters of designing and engineering it works in conjunction with the Division of Aircraft Production. Many of the leading universities now have schools of military aeronautics which provide the preliminary instruction in aerial science to candidates for commissions in the Aviation Section. Among these schools that at Princeton University holds a leading position.



TS OF THE PRINCETON UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF MILITARY AERONAUTICS.

(Photo from Orren Jack Turner.)



N OF STUDENTS AT PRINCETON SCHOOL OF MILITARY PRESENTED WITH THE UNIVERSITY COLORS MEMBERS OF THE FACULTY.

(Photo from Orren Jack Turner.)



BRIG. GEN. W. L. KENLY, DIRECTOR OF THE DIVISION OF MILITARY AERONAUTICS.

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Fig. 7: From the New York Times pictorial section in 1918, a story on Princeton's ground school for the training of pilots for World War I.

The *Princeton Weekly Bulletin* describes this program:

In 1917, during the height of World War I, the U.S. Army asked Princeton and several other private universities to host a School of Military Aeronautics to educate cadets in aeronautics and engineering prior to flight training.

Students in the program attended a four-week “ground school” before attending stateside and overseas flight schools. Subjects taught by University instructors included “Aeronautical Motors,” “Theory of Flight,” “Cross Country and General Flying,” “Aerial Observation,” “Gunnery,” “Signaling and Radio,” “Infantry Drill” and “Calisthenics.” Princeton was one of eight universities to host such a program.

Princeton students were among those enrolled in the program. The first cadre had a total of 29 attendees, but by the war’s end, thousands of cadets had attended the school.

Classes were held in Guyot Hall and the former Palmer Physical Laboratory (now Frist Campus Center). The last class was held Nov. 23, 1918.¹¹

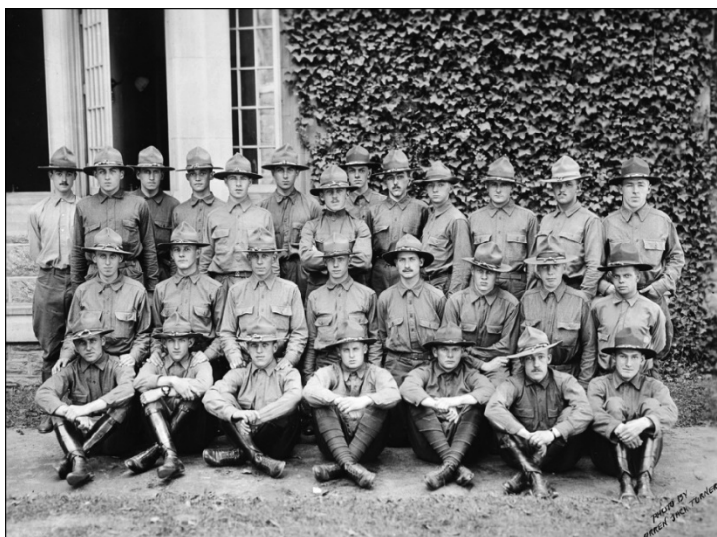


Photo by Orren Jack Turner, see note following Figs. 5 & 6.

Fig. 8: First graduation class of Princeton School of Military Aeronautics.

Charlton’s second posting was at Camp Dick, Texas where he began his pilot training as part of the Aviation Concentration Camp there. This too was a new facility. Camp Dick (not to be confused with Camp Dix in New Jersey), was established for this purpose in 1918.

National Archives describes this camp as follows:

This post was originally established January 31, 1918, in Dallas, Texas on the State Fair Grounds, as an aviation concentration camp to which graduates of ground schools were sent to await admittance to primary flying schools and for graduate reserve military aviators awaiting admittance to advanced schools. On February 5, 1918, the post was named Camp Dick in honor of Flying Cadet James F. Dick, Jr., who was killed January 6, 1918, at Dallas. Camp Dick was closed in January 1919.¹²

Charlton was honorably discharged on June 22, 1918 and accepted a commission as 2nd lieutenant in the Aviation Section, becoming an instructor of other young enlistees. Unlike most of his compatriots, he never saw any overseas service. His service in the Aviation section took him to Scott Field, Illinois, Hoboken, NJ, Love Field in Texas, and Camp Meade in Maryland, before he was honorably discharged in September of 1919 at Camp Dix, New Jersey.

By October 1919, just 24 years old, he offered his skills as a pilot to the U.S. Air Mail Service. This post-war transition from the US Army Air Service to the newly created U.S. Air Mail Service was not uncommon. Charlton was only on his 5th day flying as an air mail pilot when on October 30th, he was assigned the flight from College Park, Maryland carrying Washington mail to Belmont Field, New York, when he found himself in that dense fog over Schooley's Mountain.¹³ Those on the ground could hear the airplane as it attempted an emergency landing. As already noted, he was found dead, still strapped into his seat in the debris.

Fig. 9: The de Havilland DH.4 aircraft in pieces on the ground on Schooley's Mountain. Morris County, New Jersey.



Fig. 10. The remains of No. 77, after flipping on landing. The inscription on both realphoto cards reads: Wreck of the U.S. Mail plane/ Schooley's Mountain, N.J. Oct. 30, 1919.

An excellent article describes these early years of air mail service, and excerpts here describe the successes and failures of those early years flying the mail.

The Post Office Flies the Mail, 1918-1924

On August 12, 1918, the Post Office Department took over airmail service from the U.S. Army Air Service (USAAS). Assistant Postmaster General Otto Praeger appointed Benjamin B. Lipsner, who left the USAAS, to head the civilian-operated Air Mail Service. He would remain only until December 6, when he resigned over what he felt were wasteful and "unnecessary expenditures." One of Lipsner's first acts was to hire four pilots, each with at least 1,000 hours flying experience, paying them an average of \$4,000 per year. The department also abandoned the polo grounds in Washington, D.C., and moved north to the larger airfield at College Park, Maryland, where it would begin its route to Philadelphia.

The department used mostly World War I surplus de Havilland DH-4 aircraft, which were flimsy and not designed for long cross-country flights. Another popular plane was the Standard Aircraft Company JR-1B, which could carry 300 pounds (136 kilograms) of mail as well as 60 gallons (227 liters) of fuel. During 1918, including the initial four pilots, the Post Office hired 40 pilots, and by 1920, they had delivered 49 million letters. In its first year of operation, the Post Office completed 1,208 airmail flights with 90 forced landings. Of those, 53 were due to weather and 37 to engine failure. The Post Office also bought the German-made Junkers F 13, which it renamed the J.L.6 after John Larsen, who had imported it to the United States. The postal service had high hopes for this all-metal plane, but it proved extremely dangerous and was removed from service after several pilots were killed in fiery crashes.

Postal aircraft could fly with sacks of mail for an average cost of \$64.80 for each hour in the air. Pilots received a base pay of about \$3,600 per year and then were paid five to seven cents more for each mile they flew, flying an average of five to six hours each day. After a year in operation, postal revenues for the year totaled \$162,000. The cost to fly the mail had been just \$143,000. This first year of operation was to be the only time in airmail history that the service showed a profit.

Flying conditions were poor, and the pilots were forced to fly in all kinds of weather. Praeger, who didn't know how to fly, was unyielding about keeping the mail on schedule in spite of the risk, hoping that it would make the public trust the service more. Tragically, of the 40 pilots hired when the Post Office took over airmail operations, at least half had died by 1920, most from weather-related crashes.¹⁴

The telegram below describes the tragic end on Charltons's life. It was sent from Post Office Department in Washington, D.C, to the postmaster at New York, instructing him as to the disposition of the mail carried on this flight, which would be forwarded by train by the postmaster at Long Valley, New Jersey:

Post Office Department Washington, New York, NY Oct 30, 1919 [illegible] Washington, D.C. Following received from Postmaster at Chester, N. J. Postmaster at Long Valley, NJ reports that aeroplane No. 77 on way to New York went down one mile north of Long Valley, NJ. The plane totally destroyed, aviator J P Charlton was killed. Mail now in charge of postmaster Long Valley NJ Will be forwarded to New York by first train. Riddell

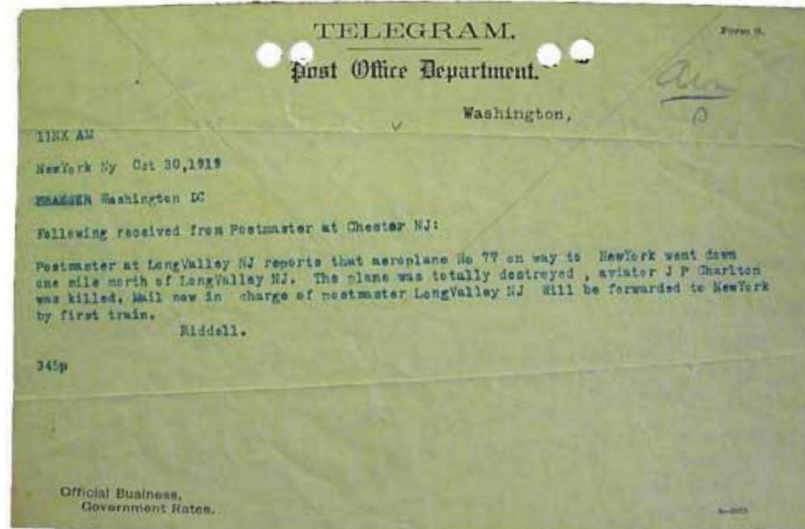


Illustration: National Postal Museum¹⁵

Fig. 11: Telegram Oct, 20, 1919 to New York City from the Post Office Department, Washington.

Charlton left behind a young son, born in April 1919, and his young wife Marie. Although he did not give his life on the battlefield, he died just as surely in the service of his country. His funeral service in Reading, PA was attended by family and friends, and two government representatives, one from the Army, and another from the Postal Service.

Death of John P. Charlton '17

News has recently arrived of the tragic death on Thursday, October 30th, of John Porter Charlton, Jr., '17, of Reading, Pennsylvania. Charlton, who had just been honorably discharged as a Second Lieutenant in the Air Service, had just accepted a position as an aviator in the government aerial mail service, and, on his fourth flight, while landing in a fog on the top of Schooley's Mountain near Dover, New Jersey, met with an accident through his wheel striking a rock, and was fatally injured.

Lieutenant Charlton was born on February 22, 1895, in Reading. At Andover, which he entered in 1914, he was a natural leader, playing on the football eleven, acting as captain of the track team, and serving on the Student Council, the Advisory Board, and the Athletic Council. He was a member of Phi Delta Sigma.

He enlisted in October, 1917, being commissioned on June 22, 1918. Because of his recognized skill, he was retained in this country as an instructor, and had a record of nine hundred hours in the air, with only two mishaps.

JOHN P. CHARLTON, '17
Died October 30, 1919

THE PHILLIPS BULLETIN 44

Credit: Phillips Academy Bulletin¹⁶

Fig. 12: An obituary which appeared in the Phillips Academy Bulletin (Andover, Massachusetts) in January 1920. Charlton left behind a wife and young son.

We owe a debt of gratitude to the young men who flew these early routes, and laid the groundwork for today's "all-up" mail service across the county.



Find-A-Grave¹⁷

Fig. 13: John P. Charlton, Jr. gravestone Charles Evans Cemetery in Reading, PA.

END NOTES:

¹ "The Suicide Club" is commemorated on the National Postal Museum site at <https://postalmuseum.si.edu/the-suicide-club>.

² *Ibid*, "The Suicide Club," NPM.

³ Ancestry.com, WWI Draft Registration cards, 1917-1918, at <https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/34268026:6482/>.

⁴ Ancestry.com Public Family Trees, Baker Family tree at <https://www.ancestry.com/family-tree/person/tree/8463982/person/1550654649/facts>, and noted in The Philadelphia Inquirer, 22 Jun 1917.

⁵ Ancestry.com, see <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/60884/> (search John P. Charlton)

⁶ U.S. Army reserve at <https://www.usar.army.mil/OurHistory/ManpowerReserve/>.

⁷ The First Wings of War, Air Force Reserve in World War I, by Paul H. Larson, Kevin I. Burge, Keith L. Barr. See <https://media.defense.gov/2015/Sep/11/2001329832/-1/-1/0/AFD-150911-040.pdf> for a history of this beginning of the U.S Air Force.

⁸ National Archives catalogue at <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/10454301>.

⁹ Letter from the office of Military Aeronautics in 1918, for sale on Ebay from seller AntMuffin at this location: <https://www.ebay.com/itm/234419932551?hash=item3694844d87:g:pMgAAOSwtA5h-e2E>

¹⁰ Wikipedia, Division of Military Aeronautics, Signal Corps, was short-lived, and quickly became independent of the Signal Corps as the Army Air Service. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Division_of_Military_Aeronautics. The timeline on this change shown here is not consistent with another Wikipedia article on the Army Air Service.

¹¹ *Princeton Weekly Bulletin*, Volume 98 (2008-09)/ Number 28 (June 1), see <https://pr.princeton.edu/pwb/volume98/issue28/bythenumbers/>

¹² National Archives, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/10454301>.

¹³ National Postal Museum: <https://postalmuseum.si.edu/charlton-john-p-jr>

¹⁴ "US Centennial of Flight, The Post Office Flies the Mail, 1918-1924." See full text of this interesting article on the development of early air mail service, see https://www.centennialofflight.net/essay/Government_Role/1918-1924/POL3.htm

¹⁵ National Postal Museum, "John P. Charlton": <https://postalmuseum.si.edu/charlton-john-p-jr?width=90%25&height=90%25&iframe=true>.

¹⁶ Google Books, The Phillips Academy Bulletin, Vol. XIV, Jan. 1920, No. 2, p 44 on Google books at https://www.google.com/books/edition/The_Phillips_Bulletin/uN0gAAAAMAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&bsq=John%20P.%20Charlton.

¹⁷ John P. Charlton, Jr., <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/125851273/john-p-charlton>.