

Aviation Apprentice

They were told to be there at 0730 and, with rare exception, they always were, at least on that first all-important day. There was never less than thirty-two of them, never more than thirty-six. The youngest had just turned fourteen, the oldest was a day shy of eighteen. There were no exceptions to this rule.

It was always a mixed bag that stood nervously outside that hanger door, with an occasional turban or fedora among the cloth caps. Especially nervous were the Africans, knowing they were in a country where lynching members of their race was still considered an acceptable form of behavior. A sprinkling of Orientals rounded out the racial mix but often confusedly so since some were lanky six-footers. The confusion was compounded by native-born Chilean named O'Hara who spoke better German than Spanish and a Chinese boy whose mother tongue was Portuguese.

And English, of course. English was another rule for which there was no exception. English was the language of aviation.

At exactly 0730 the door opened and a man bearing a clipboard stepped out. Without greeting or preamble he called the first name, got a startled reply from the surprised boy who was told "One-one," and saw his name ticked off the alphabetized list. The man went on to the next name and the one after that before he noticed the first boy was still there, a picture of worried indecision.

"Table one," the man said slowly. "Table one, place one. Inside," the man gestured abruptly with his pencil and went on to the fourth name who became 'one-four'. Number five became 'two-one' and the mystery was revealed as soon as the boys entered the building.

The tables were right there, impossible to miss since they occupied half the extensive space. Varnished maple tops a solid two inches thick, four