Army Aviation Hall of Fame 1989 Induction

Recognized by many as being one of the "founding fathers" of Army Aviation, Joe Watson received his pilot's license in 1928, and was commissioned in 1930 in the Field Artillery. A first lieutenant in the Texas ARNG in 1936, he had a "better idea" - a way to use light aircraft of that day to adjust field artillery from the air. Then the S-4 of the 61st Artillery Brigade, Watson believed the slow-flying J-3 Cub was a perfect platform for directing the placement of artillery fire.

He took his idea to his DivArty Commander, obtained permission to test his theories, and with his "observer" drove to San Antonio's Stinson Field where he rented a Cub. Wrestling a bulky SCR-178 radio into the rear seat, he tested and re-tested their ability to spot targets and perform general aerial reconnaissance.

At that time, ground observation and aerial reconnaissance were the jealously guarded missions of the fledgling Army Air Corps. Proponents of light organic aviation argued that the O-49 Air Corps airplane was too expensive, too dependent upon permanent bases, and too fast for effective observation or artillery adjustment. Eventually, while Watson was struggling in rented aircraft to learn how to use light aviation above the battlefield, the day's military journals began carrying essays calling for the formation of light aviation units organic to the ground forces outside Air Corps control.

The proponents included MG Robert Danforth, then the Army's Chief of Field Artillery; and LTC William W. Ford, a Regular Army artilleryman. But while others published article after article, Watson was actually testing the concept.

In 1940, Watson got together with William T. Piper, the president of Piper Aircraft, after he had won permission from his DivArty Commander to conduct a two-day test of the light plane as an artillery observation platform at Camp Beauregard, LA. In November, 1940, the 36th Division was mobilized and stationed at Camp Bowie, TX. Here, Watson, Piper himself, and other Piper personnel flew missions for 14 days in three rented Cubs, keeping meticulous records which were sent to the War Department to document the concept. Their report supported what Watson had been preaching since his initial flights in 1936: organic light Army Aviation worked.