



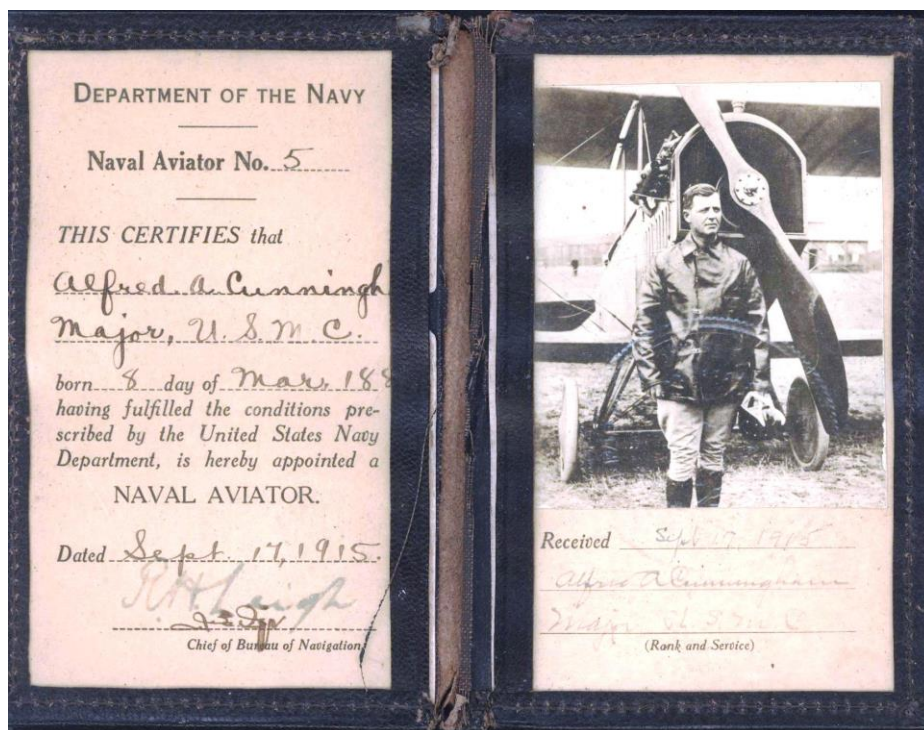
MARINE CORPS HISTORY DIVISION

Lieutenant Colonel Alfred A. Cunningham

Alfred A. Cunningham was the Marine Corps' first aviator. He was born 8 March 1882 in Atlanta, Georgia. During the Spanish-American War, Cunningham served in the 3d Georgia Volunteer Infantry regiment and spent the next decade selling real estate in Atlanta. He accepted a commission as a second lieutenant in the Marine Corps in January 1909 with the aim of becoming an aviator. By 1911, he was stationed at Marine Barracks Philadelphia Navy Yard and was experimenting with an airplane that he had leased from a civilian aviator for \$25 per month.

On 16 May 1912, Cunningham was detached from duty in Philadelphia and ordered to an aviation training camp that the Navy had established at Annapolis, Maryland. He reported on 22 May 1912, recognized

today as the birthday
of Marine Corps
Aviation. Flight
training followed at
Marblehead,
Massachusetts. After
less than three hours of
instruction,
Cunningham soloed on
20 August 1912,
becoming Naval
Aviator Number 5 and
the first Marine Corps
pilot.



Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division

Cunningham played a pivotal role in the development of naval aviation by determining how to utilize the new technology, and he even worked alongside the aviation industry to develop aircraft. During World War I, he went to Paris to study French and British aviation

Collect

Preserve

Promote

Support





activities. He used what he had learned when he deployed to Europe in command of the 1st Marine Aviation Force, which conducted 57 raids and shot down 8 enemy aircraft. Cunningham received the Navy Cross for his service during the war.

When he returned to the United States, Cunningham became officer-in-charge of Marine Corps Aviation. Due to Marine Corps policy, Cunningham was assigned to general duty after five years of aviation duty, and he spent the remainder of his career in various roles. With his health failing, he retired on 1 August 1935. He was promoted to lieutenant colonel while on the retired list and died in Sarasota, Florida, on 27 May 1939. He is buried at Arlington National Cemetery.