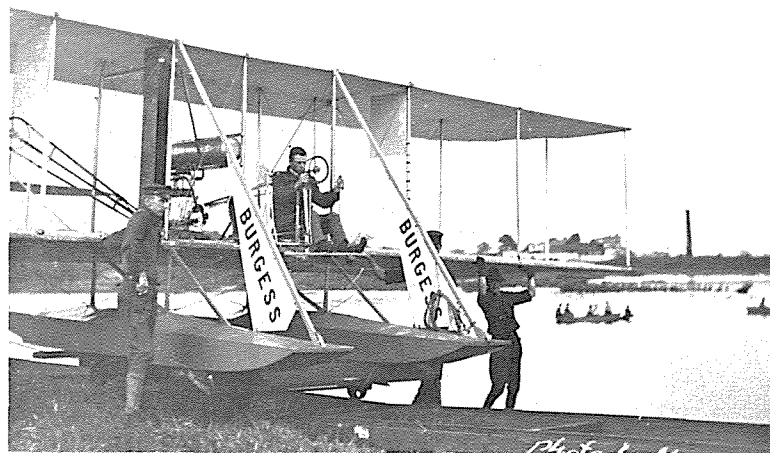


Some lived —
Some died —
The miracle of early aviation
is that not everyone was killed.

By MERLE OLMSTED



TAPS FOR CORPORAL SCOTT

To the military historian, the individual enlisted man — private or NCO, has always presented a blurred image. Throughout history the EM has always been submerged in the vastness of armies and navies, seldom to emerge as an individual. Those few who have written published works of their military careers have contributed significantly to military history, but they were the exception. The great majority of enlisted men, regardless of their accomplishments, have little chance for immortality, and soon fade into the mists of time.

One such man, although still obscure, did achieve a measure of immortality thru two incidents — neither of which was his own doing. His name was Corporal Frank S. Scott, Signal Corps, U.S. Army, and he was the first of a long line of enlisted men to die in military airplane crashes. Because of this, Scott AFB, Illinois, was named for him, the only U.S. military air base to bear the name of an enlisted man.

When Frank Scott was assigned to aviation duty, he was 27 years old, and the Aeronautical Division of the Army Signal Corps had been in existence just four years.

A memo from the Office of the Chief Signal Officer, dated 1 August, 1907 had established an Aeronautical Division, but there had been little aeronautical equipment to supervise. There were a few balloons, and there had been, for a short time, a primitive airship, but it had been disappointing and of little use. Captain Charles deForest Chandler, the Chief of the new division, had less than a dozen enlisted technicians assigned.

The single airship, and a variety of balloons occupied the personnel of the Aeronautical Division until August of 1909 when the army accepted its first aeroplane, a Wright, which became Signal Corps serial No. 1 (S.C. No. 1).¹ There, were, however, no followup orders for aircraft, and the whole concept of military aviation was very much on a trial basis. The Signal Corps had little money to sustain its aeroplane, and indeed, Lt. Benjamin Foulois, the only active pilot throughout most of the life of the first aircraft, used his own money for parts when the \$150 allotted for maintenance and operations, was exhausted early in 1910. Foulois and his small crew of pioneer mechanics, were then flying from the parade ground at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, where he was teaching himself to fly.

S.C. No. 1 lasted only a little over a year, and by the end of 1910 was, due to numerous crashes and rebuilds, in a badly deteriorated condition.² It would be spring before money would be available for more machines, but through the generosity of Robert Collier (of Collier Publishing Company), Foulois was able to keep his "Air Force" in operation. Collier had just purchased a new

Wright Model B and this was shipped to Texas on loan to the army.

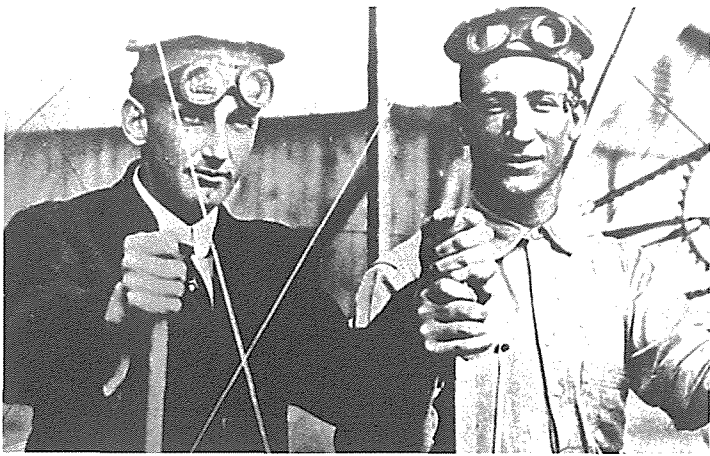
Finally, in March of 1911, Congress provided an appropriation of \$125,000 for aviation for the fiscal year 1912.³ With \$25,000 of this immediately available (before the beginning of fiscal 1912) the Signal Corps ordered two more aeroplanes, its first Curtiss, which became S.C. No. 2, and a Wright model B, S.C. No. 3. Both of these were delivered to Fort Sam in April, 1911, and early in May, Lt. George Kelly, 30th Infantry, was killed in the crash of the Curtiss. Kelly was the first American airman to die, who had been in actual control of the aircraft. (Tom Selfridge had been a passenger at the time of his death). Kelly, along with Lts. Paul Beck and John Walker, had recently joined Foulois at Fort Sam. They were all semi-trained pilots, having attended the Curtiss school at San Diego.

The death of Kelly ended flying at Fort Sam Houston and opened the way for the establishment of the first army airfield, at College Park, Md. College Park was then a village, located about 7 miles from Washington, D.C. The field chosen for the new facility was to the north of town, and it had been used briefly in 1909 when Orville Wright had trained the first two army aviators.⁴ 200 acres were leased, extending north along the Baltimore and Ohio RR tracks, the longest available runway area being 2,376 feet in an east-west direction. The Quartermaster Department paid \$325 per month for the land, and also built four wooden hangars from plans supplied by the Wright Company. 45 feet square, they were large enough to house one aeroplane each, with one being used to accommodate the enlisted staff (the officers lived in Washington). In August, the C.S.O. requested two more hangars and these were slightly larger.

This then, was the first military airfield in the United States, and by the summer of 1911 it was in full operation and by War Department order dated 3 July, it was designated "The Signal Corps Aviation School."

At first the only available aircraft were the rebuilt Curtiss in which Kelly had died, and the new Wright B. On the 19th of July, another new Wright was accepted by the army and delivered to College Park. This machine became S.C. No. 4, and it was to play a part in the life, and death of Frank Scott. It was also a model B Wright, often referred to as a "headless" type, which referred to the fact that it had no forward mounted elevators, a standard feature on the early Wrights.

The B models equal span wings were 39 feet in length, with 500 square feet of wing area. The machine was 31 feet long and



(Above) Whether Scott had ever flown before the fatal accident is unknown, but he is seen here, at left, seated in a Wright B on the hangar line at College Park. Although wearing civilian clothes, Scott has his military cap on backwards in the style of civilian aviators of the day. USAF

(Opposite) During the summer of 1912, a detachment from College Park moved into the city, where 3 machines on floats were operated from the river near Washington Barracks. This is the Burgess built S.C. #5 with mechanics Frank Scott at left, and Sgt. Art Mix at right. The pilot is Lt. Thomas Milling, who was Rockwell's instructor. Robert Casari

weighed 1,250 lbs.⁵ Power was supplied by a four cylinder up-right watercooled engine of a nominal 35 HP, and driving two 8.5 foot pusher propellers through the usual Wright chain drive.

By the end of July, 1911, there were five machines at the school, the original Curtiss Model D, a Curtiss E, the two Wright Bs, and new Burgess F.⁶ With the influx of new aeroplanes an expanded maintenance crew was needed. The enlisted men assigned to aviation duty were all members of Company G of the Signal Corps, and in June, 1911, as the school got under way, there were 15 men on duty, most of them had been with Foulois at Fort Sam, and a few had been first assigned to aviation at Fort Myer in 1908. Among the newcomers to College Park was Pvt. Frank Scott.

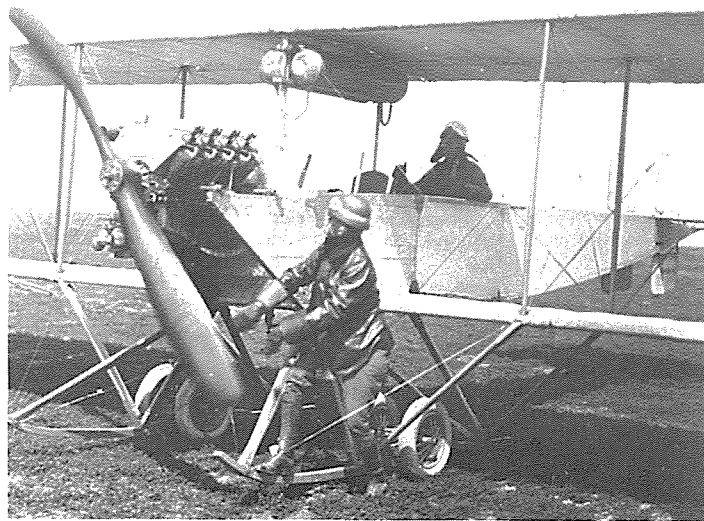
Little is known of Scott's early life before his enlistment early in March of 1908, at age 24. He was born in Braddock, Penna. on 2 December, 1883, the son of Robert J. Scott.⁷ No record of his mother's name has been found, and at the time of his death the Adjutant General's office listed only a sister, Mrs. Clara B. Schaffer, of Ridgeway, Penna.

Scott's first enlistment was with the 3rd Field Artillery at Fort Myer, which places him on the scene during the momentous days of 1908 and 1909 when the army's first airship and its first aeroplane, were undergoing trials. He was discharged there in March, 1911, and apparently having his fill of an artilleryman's life, he re-enlisted the next day, the 2nd of March, in the Signal Corps. Whether he chose this branch with the express purpose of joining the Aeronautical Division is unknown, but shortly thereafter, he was on duty at College Park. Information on Scott (or any other College Park personnel) is scanty for the rest of 1911, but it is not difficult to imagine the daily scene, where everyone involved were pioneers in a new field.

Upon the establishment of the school, Capt. Paul Beck, 8th Infantry, a Curtiss trained pilot, was in command, but soon relieved by Captain Charles deF. Chandler, who had been the first chief of the Aeronautical Division in 1907.⁸

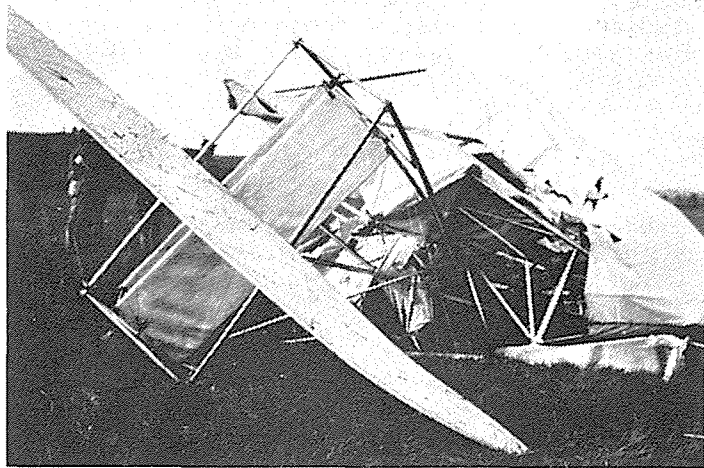
After Kelly's death in Texas there had been considerable bad feeling between Benny Foulois and Paul Beck, whom Foulois felt was partially responsible for the Kelly crash.⁹ Foulois had voiced his opinion in a letter to the Chief Signal Officer and possibly as a result of this, he was relieved from aviation duty and assigned a desk job in the Division of Militia Affairs in the War Department.

The prospects of winter flying in Maryland were grim, and in November Chandler went south in search of a suitable area for winter flying. Augusta, Georgia was finally picked, largely on the



(Above) An unusual photograph of Lt. William C. Sherman pulling the prop through on the Burgess H biplane while Lt. Thomas DeW. Milling is in the cockpit. Arthur Schoeni Collection

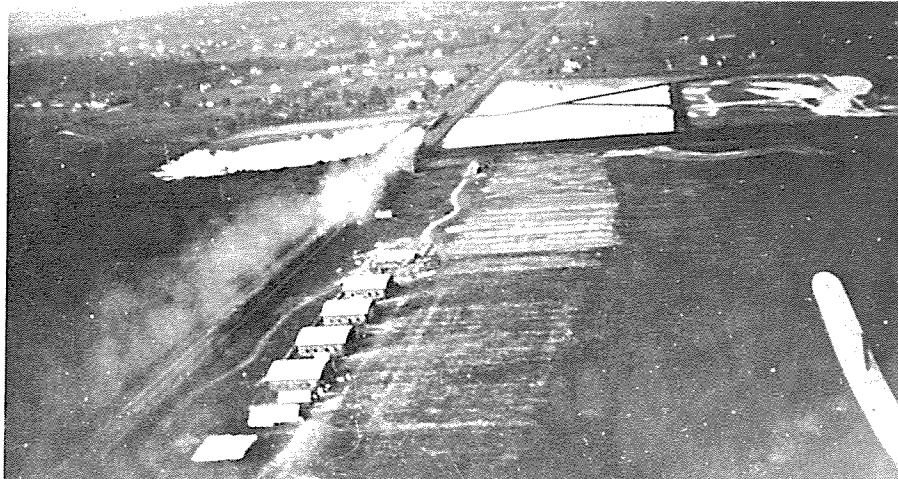
(Below) Two views of the fatal crash of Lt. L.C. Rockwell and Corp. Frank S. Scott at College Park, MD, September 28, 1912. USAF



(Right) The first military airfield in the U.S., the Signal Corps Aviation School at College Park as seen from an altitude of 600 feet, on the 19th of September, 1911. One of the skids of the Wright can be seen in lower right corner. USAF

(Opposite page, left) Wright Model B. The first mass production plane ever built. USAF

(Opposite page, right) Lt. Lewis Rockwell who died with Corp. Scott. MacCartee via Robert Casari



recommendations of the Weather Bureau, and all officers, aircraft, and men left College Park by rail late in November. The winter of 1911-12 in the Augusta area proved to be near impossible despite the Weather Bureau's encouraging report, and in April, 1912, the school moved back to College Park after a wet and miserable four months.

Although removed from the scene of the action, Lt. Foulois maintained his avid interest in the aeronautical scene, spending much of his spare time designing experimental radio equipment. During the summer of 1912 he carried out a series of tests which resulted in successful radio transmissions from an aircraft. It may have been at this time that Foulois met Frank Scott, as he tells us in his memoirs that Scott assisted him on the radio tests.

Late in July, Foulois escaped from his desk long enough to take part in army field exercises in Connecticut. In addition, six other pilots from College Park were ordered to Bridgeport. Three aeroplanes were scheduled, but Lt. Henry Arnold wrecked a new Burgess-Wright enroute, leaving only a Wright B (S.C. No. 5) and a Curtiss model E (S.C. No. 8). The New York National Guard was the proud possessor of another Curtiss, which was flown during the exercises by Beckwith Havens, a NY guardsman.

Frank Scott, now a Corporal, went along with the ground crews, and when Foulois had a forced landing, damaging the Wright on 14 August, it was Scott's crew which arrived to remove the damaged machine. While helping with the loading of the aircraft, Foulois suffered a hernia, and after the exercises he reported to Walter Reed hospital for surgery. It was during his stay in the hospital that Frank Scott came to visit, and apparently on a last minute urge as he was leaving, he presented Benny Foulois with his own good luck charm, a horseshoe.

In his memoirs, published shortly after his death in 1967, Foulois tells of the gesture with considerable emotion.¹⁰ His feelings about the gift are indicated in the fact that he carried Frank Scott's horseshoe, for the rest of his flying career, in a special pocket in his flight suit. During a further 20 years of military flying he was never again hospitalized.

At the time training began at the Aviation School in the summer of 1911, there were no specific requirements to qualify as a military aviator. Since the need was obvious, the Signal Corps adopted the FAI requirements, and Captain Chandler (who passed his FAI test on 20 Sept., 1911) was appointed FAI representative at College Park. By the spring of 1912, with the arrival of new aircraft with bigger engines, and emerging army needs, more severe pilot tests were required, and early in the summer of 1912 the War Department announced the new tests along with rating of Military Aviator.

Among the new students who had applied for training that spring was Lt. Lewis C. Rockwell, a 1907 graduate of the Military Academy. The son of a socially prominent Ohio family, he had been a patient at Walter Reed Hospital in the spring of 1912, and along with hundreds of Washingtonians, had come out to College Park to watch the flying. Unlike most of the others, he had

obtained a ride with Lt. Arnold, and liked it so well, he applied for assignment to aviation training. Rockwell, was at the time, assigned to the 10th Infantry at Fort Benjamin Harrison.

In June the request was approved and Rockwell reported to College Park on 7 July. During the summer months he progressed satisfactorily through the Wright curriculum, with Lt. Thomas De W. Milling as his instructor, and on 25 Sept. he qualified for his FAI certificate No. 165. He then began testing for his Military Aviator rating, and three days later had completed most of the requirements.

The 28th of September was a Saturday and the usual crowd of about 300 people were on hand to watch the flying, including the acting Chief Signal Officer, Colonel George Scriven.

During the day, Rockwell had been flying the Wright B, S.C. No. 4, and shortly after 1600 hours, he took off to complete another segment of the test. The requirement was as follows: "Carry passenger to height of at least 500 ft. and on landing, bring machine to rest within 150 feet of previously designated point, the engine being completely shut off prior to touching the ground. Combined weight of pilot and passenger at least 250 pounds."

Captain Fred Hennessy is said to have offered to be the passenger, but Rockwell decided he was too heavy, and chose instead, Corporal Scott.

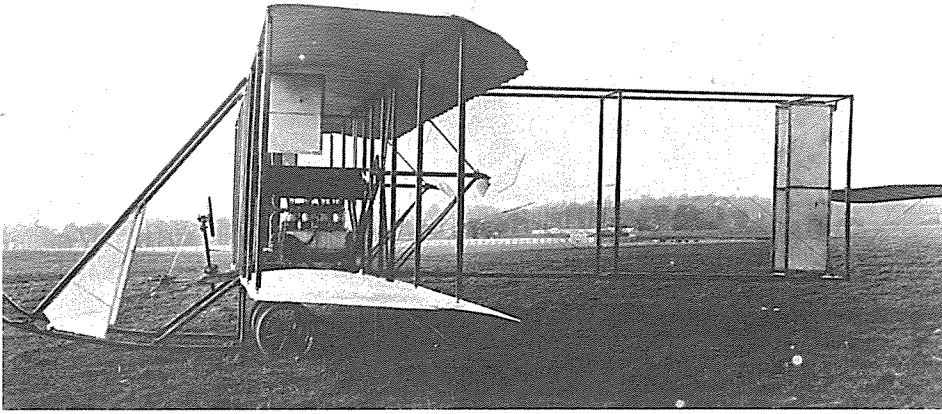
We do not know Scott's exact status in regards to S.C. No. 4. Some recent sources say he was the "crew chief" (a term not then in use). Available photos of the era show Scott with other aircraft, but the N.Y. Times for 29 September, 1912 states that No. 4 had been rebuilt during the past few weeks, that Scott himself had done most of the work, and was quite proud of the aeroplane. It is likely that Scott, was, in fact, the "crew chief" on No. 4.

In any case, when Rockwell took off on his last flight, Frank Scott was along as the required passenger. Rockwell circled the field for about 14 minutes and then cut his engine and entered a glide, apparently intending to land. For some unknown reason, the pilot applied full power, and the aircraft pitched down and struck the ground.

By the time pilots and crew members, who had been watching, were able to pull the crumpled wreckage apart, Scott was dead and Rockwell fatally injured. From the nature of the injuries, it is probable that the engine falling on them was the major cause of death.

Capt. Chandler's auto was used to transport Rockwell to Walter Reed Hospital where he died shortly after 7 p.m.

Immediately after the crash Chandler appointed a board of inquiry which consisted of Capt. Hennessy, Lt. Harry Graham, and Lt. Thomas Milling (Rockwell's instructor). The report of the board was short, and would hardly be considered exhaustive or acceptable in later years, but accident investigation was in its infancy as was flying itself. The findings, as reported in AERO-



NAUTICS for November of 1912, were:

"Immediately after the accident, the board proceeded to examine the machine and upon examination found the control wires were all intact. From the testimony of eye witnesses, the board is of the opinion that the accident was caused by the aviator misjudging his height from the ground and his failure to bring the machine out of the glide in sufficient time to clear the ground."

Although the direct cause of the accident was undoubtedly pilot error as a result of a insufficient experience, there was another indirect cause — a deadly flaw in the design of the Wright pushers which was soon to give them a reputation as killers, and cause their withdrawal from service in February, 1914, along with the similar Curtiss pushers.¹²

On the Wright machines the two chain driven propellers were mounted slightly above the center of the wing gap while the engine and crew were placed on the lower wing. This placement put the center of gravity considerably below the propellers, and hence below the thrust line. When the aeroplane was in a glide and near the stall condition, a sudden application of power would cause the nose to pitch down sharply. Aiding to the problem was the fact that the elevator would have been relatively ineffective at low airspeeds and this, combined with the sudden pitchdown put Rockwell in an attitude from which he could not recover.¹³

Both men were buried at Arlington National Cemetery on 1 October, 1912, Scott's funeral in the morning, and Rockwell's in the afternoon. Army regulations of the period prescribed a funeral escort, for a corporal, of 12 men with a corporal in command. Officers did not normally attend the funeral of enlisted men.¹⁴ Neither of these requirements were observed at Scott's funeral, as he was accorded an escort of a full troop of the 15th cavalry, as well as that regiment's band. Why this is so is unknown as correspondence from the Adjutant General's office to Fort Myer requested only a "suitable escort". The pall bearers were his fellow mechanics from College Park, and these same men served at Rockwell's afternoon service. All officers from the Aviation School attended Scott's funeral, and two members of the family were present, a sister and a brother-in-law. The service by Chaplain Brander of Fort Myer was short and ended with taps and the usual firing salute due a soldier.

Rockwell and Scott were the 4th and 5th airmen to die in army aviation accidents and when the new airfields were built during the WW1 period, two of these were named for them. Scott AFB, Illinois is still a major USAF Installation, but Rockwell Field, San Diego, has long since passed into history along with its namesake.

Christmas day of 1935 was cold and blustery, with leaden clouds hanging over Bolling Field when Major General Benjamin Foulois arrived to bring his flying requirements up to date. At the end of December he would complete his four year term as Chief of Air Corps, and end his military career. He had come back from leave to clean out his desk and make his last flight as an active military pilot. Finding his crew chief in the barracks, he had his O-38F

rolled out and took off alone into the gloom. His route carried him from Bolling Field, south to Kill Devil Hill, where it had all begun 32 years before, and then home to Bolling Field, where an anxious crew chief met him after a four hour flight.

With the O-38 back in the hangar he sat down to remove his boots and felt the hard lump of Scott's horseshoe in the special pocket he had designed for it years before. The following quote from his memoirs is a fitting epitaph and tribute to Corporal Frank S. Scott and to those who followed him:

"While I have never admitted to being a believer in good luck charms I didn't want to take any chances. Call it skill, cunning or luck, I had flown thousands of hours and survived. I was grateful, not only to Corporal Scott, but to the hundreds of men like him who were the real backbone of our flying force — the dedicated enlisted men whose skills kept us in the air. They will never get enough praise. Without them there is no air force."¹⁵

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND SOURCES

Published works constantly referred to were: **HOW OUR ARMY GREW WINGS**, by Chandler and Lahm; **FROM THE WRIGHT BROTHERS TO THE ASTRONAUTS**, by Foulois and Glines; and **Robert Casari's ENCYCLOPEDIA OF U.S. MILITARY AIRCRAFT**. To the latter goes my thanks for assistance with photographic evidence also.

REFERENCES

1. The term "aeroplane", in common usage in the early years, is used here in preference to the later "airplane".
2. It was eventually refurbished and donated to the National Air Museum, where it remains today.
3. Brig/General James Allen, the Chief Signal Officer, had asked for one million, but it would be years before Congress would agree to such a sum.
4. These were Lts. Frank P. Lahm and Frederic E. Humphreys, trained under the terms of the Wright contract.
5. **JANE'S ALL THE WORLDS AIRCRAFT**, 1912.
6. The Burgess F was essentially a license built Wright B.
7. Letter from Robert Scott to Adjutant General, date not legible, 1912.
8. See **AAHS Journal**, Fall, 1973.
9. See **FROM THE WRIGHT BROTHERS TO THE ASTRONAUTS**, the memoirs of Major General Benjamin Foulois. McGraw-Hill, NY, 1968.
10. See note 9
11. Although Foulois still had this horseshoe in an honored place on his den wall at the time of his death, efforts to locate this historic piece have been unsuccessful. The Air Force Museum, the Air Force Academy, and the NASM were all queried, with negative results.
12. **ENCYCLOPEDIA OF U.S. MILITARY AIRCRAFT**, Robert Casari, 1970.
13. "The First Eleven," **AEROSPACE SAFETY**, May 1964.
14. **U.S. Army Regulations for 1895 and 1913**.
15. See Note 9.