

"TO ARMS, MEN"

by

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Two contrasting incidents of 1957 dramatize the role of the private collector in the preservation of the culture of civilization. One was the publication of an exhaustive reference book about a famous airplane and the other was the senseless destruction of a valuable group of negatives (public property) covering American aviation history. We will describe the latter first.

McCook Field was established in late 1917 by the Air Service as its central engineering department. To it were brought samples of the British and French aircraft recommended by the Bolling Committee for production in the United States, as at that time we lacked up to date combat types. Later came prototypes of our own manufacture for study, and endless variety of equipment and armament to be developed, and also captured enemy aircraft for evaluation. And there came the men like Doolittle, Arnold, Maughan, Eaker, Spaatz and others who were later to make history of the Air Force.

Through the years McCook Field, later Wright Field, remained one of the world's major centers of aeronautical development. The requirements for combat aircraft were born here, nurtured through specification, development, prototype, service test, and final approval, along with the multitude of propeller types, engines, flying suits, oxygen masks, machine gun mounts and all of the paraphernalia of contemporary military might. Its very name today, The Wright Air Development Center, is symbolic of all that air power means to this country.

In 1917 there also began the Still Photo Section at McCook Field, and with it the taking of pictures of these developments, these machines and these men. Its photographers were men skilled in their work. Of the many thousands of negatives made, most were "wire sharp" and well composed, representative of the subject. The aircraft subjects included now-forgotten names; Lewis & Vought VE-7, Curtiss R-4, the Lanzius, Loening M-18, Heinrich Victor Scout, Thomas Morse MB-2, J.V. Martin "Kitten". And those from the early days that we now recognise as Douglas, Boeing, Lockheed and Chance Vought.....There was one great trouble; those photographs made between 1917 and 1931 were made on nitrate base film.

And became the victim of relentless bureaucracy!

In April 1957 the Air Force completed the destruction of 44,000 original 8"x10" negatives covering all of the World War I aircraft and later types up to and including the Sikorsky Y1C-28. We were advised that the official reason is that "the films were of nitrate base and have deteriorated to such an extent that they have no value". There are many among us who can dispute the "deterioration"; many have ordered and received prints from those same negatives in recent years, and the author, for one at least, has personally examined these negatives as late as June 1956 and they were found in good condition.

We were further notified that the negatives had been offered to the National

Archives and to the Smithsonian and had been refused. Now, this is commendable that they were offered to those two great institutions before their destruction. But who else knew about it? One Branch at Wright Air Development Center wrote this author last November that, quote "...extremely concerned about the report that our historical negatives were being destroyed and immediately conducted a personal investigation. By the time word came to me, however, the negatives had been destroyed" end quote. The AAHS includes at least fifty men who would have given up time, sleep and everything else to go to the Center and personally haul the negatives away at no cost to the government to prevent their destruction. And would have given a complete release from liability to the government to eliminate future claims or complications.

The Air Force feels that because the master file of prints was microfilmed, there is no loss. Such a statement is ludicrous to any photographer. It is almost certain that such microfilm would be no larger than 35mm and enlargements from these small negatives can not compare with contact prints made from original 8" x 10" negatives.

But this is likely to happen again and again, both in government and private industry. The dead file was predicted for the McCook-Wright Field negatives in Vol 1 of the AAHS Journal, page 73. (Their destruction was a transitory thought, too horrendous to consider.) From this we must surely know that no true historian can sit back and expect that the government will take adequate steps to preserve our aviation history. In periods of austerity government departments are forced to reduce their staffs, facilities, records and space.

Likewise, the dictates of economy prevent private firms from maintaining any but records essential to their relations with the tax collector. To give you a 'fer instance'; North American Aviation inherited, as successor company, the photo files of Fokker Aircraft Co., later General Aviation Corp., and Berliner-Joyce Co. Today these files are pared to the barest minimum and stored away, inaccessible to the historian, and almost unknown to anyone in the Company itself. Also, when the Curtiss Wright plant at Columbus was sold after WWII the photo files there, covering the entire history of the great Curtiss Aeroplane and Motor Co., were boxed and sent away to the inaccessibility of the Curtiss-Wright engine plant. Further, when Chance Vought moved to Dallas, Texas it brought very little of its photos or other records of its past history. In fact, only a few weeks ago the firm had to ask Paul Mantz for pictures of his F4U-3 "Corsair" as the company did not even have one in its own files!

The primary reason is that the average corporation is not interested in its past history. Hardly one in a thousand has any historical record aside from fiscal and tax records. The casual employee also is not interested, or if he is, past records cannot be made available to him. Hence it falls to the private collector to preserve the books, letters, photographs, brochures and all other aeronautica.

The other major incident of 1957 pointing up the role of the private collector was the publication of "The Ford Story". This factual book covering the history of the grand and justifiably famous "Tin Goose" was authored by our own editor of the Journal, Bill Larkins, supported by a host of private collectors. Its illustrations, on page after page, were not contributed by the government or the corporations who made or used Ford Trimotors. Instead they were laboriously collected from the far corners of the earth, from private collectors, agents, pilots and photographers through painstaking correspondence over a span of years. Here, on every page, is the end product of individual initiative.

Without the help of private individuals who contributed their time and money toward the preservation of such material, this record of the Ford Tri-Motor could not have been written. Each of these persons have thus made a contribution to recorded American aviation history, and through the magic of the printing press their efforts will be enjoyed by thousands in the future.

The object of this discussion is now to make clear to you, and you and you, that the value of your collection should not be underestimated. Firstly, don't feel that because your negative is not taken with a certain camera or is not printed to an "acceptable" size, that it has no worth. And do not throw away that fading photograph, or that torn and tattered brochure because you think it must be a very common item. As we have seen, it is folly to think that the government or the company, the airline or the library, will preserve the same material for you until you need it. If you must discard an item of aeronautica for reasons of disinterest or space, give it to someone else who can use it rather than destroy it for all time.

Finally, be on the lookout for the countless items of historical value that are being discarded or destroyed each day. This is not to say 'be a packrat', but observe that most of what is here today will be gone tomorrow. Through the combined systematic efforts of the private collectors much of America's aviation heritage may be saved for future generations to marvel at. This illustrates the purpose of the AAHS. Civilizations demonstration of culture to the future observer is through its laws, customs and the artifacts left behind it. To this the AAHS is dedicated.
