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Air-Pre1941

U.S. ARMY AIR SERVICE/AIR CORPS, 1920-41

A Working Bibliography of MHI Sources

CONTENTS

General Sources.....p.1

1920s:

-General Sources.....p.2

-Airport Lighting.....p.3

1930s:

-General Sources.....p.5

-Air Mail.....p.6

-GHQ Air Force.....p.6

Other Special Aspects.....p.7

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U.S. Army Air Service/Air Corps, 1920-41

p.2

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U.S. Army Air Service/Air Corps, 1920-41

p.3

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1920s-Army Involvement in Airport Lighting

The U.S. Army Air Service, along with several other government agencies, contributed to the development of domestic aviation in general after World War I. The specific need for round-the-clock flying for air mail service in the early 20s led to airway and airport lighting systems by 1924. In this regard the Department of the Post Office seems to have the better claim to establishing the first operative lighting system for night flights.

Colonel Paul Henderson, a civilian, headed the Air Mail Service as Second Assistant Postmaster in the Administration of President Harding. He asserts, and is generally credited with, setting in motion the developments which led to the first operational lighting system, extending from Chicago to Cheyenne, WY in July 1924. Neither he nor the other sources consulted credit the Army with any direct or significant role in this. See:

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Testimony of Paul Henderson on p. 100.

U.S. President's Aircraft Board. Hearings, 21-23 & 28 Sep 1925. Vol. 1. Wash, 1925. UH23.2.A47.
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By mid-1922, the Airways Section, Army Air Service had already developed a lighting system extending from its experimental station at McCook Field, Dayton, Ohio, to Bolling Field, Wash, DC. The system soon encompassed the Midwest and then Texas. Meanwhile, the Post Office Department decided to develop its own independent system through private industries. General Electric and other companies produced electric-arc beacon lights and flashing acetylene ground lights, which were first tested in August 1923. See:

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Smith (in Airways, p. 76) describes Army Air Service experiments in lighting and credits LTs Donald L. Bruner, and Harold R. Harris for lighting developments between Dayton and Columbus, OH. Bruner, born in Iowa, 18 Oct 1893, graduated from Iowa State College in 1916; Harris, born in Illinois, 20 Dec 1895, graduated from the Army Air Service Engineering School in 1922. (Source: Army Register, 1 Jan 1923, pp. 970 and 977.) Harris was an experimental pilot at McCook Field, according to the House Select Committee Hearings (cited below, p. 3235).

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