

Col. Robert E. Herndon
Interviewed for the ACSM Bulletin
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It was August 1943, and the 319th B-26 Bomber Group, flying a combat mission in the Mediterranean Theatre, had a new Squadron Commanding Officer and a new takeoff and landing system. The Sq. Commander was a little over 25 years old, and an experienced B-26 pilot ready to test his wings in battle. The “six abreast” was Air Force’s novel solution to the join up problem of medium-range bomber planes, and the 319th Group was the first to put it to test in real fire. The system, for which a special six parallel runway airfield was built in Sardinia, and which hinged on a dogleg flight join up in the air, assembled four intact six-plane flights 25 minutes faster than when 24 planes were launched separately.

Sitting in his cozy house in Falls Church sixty years later, the 88-year-old Col. Robert E. Herndon, Jr. can look back on a life full of engagement, but his thoughts often veer to the “six abreast”—and not only because this unique idea by a brilliant classmate (Randy Holazpple) in a major way helped win the war.

As a combat pilot and, later, target materials analyst, Col. Herndon had a first-hand appreciation of the role maps and charts play in war and in peace. His involvement with mapping for strategic defense purpose culminated in 1970, when a DOD Study Group of which he had been a member recommended the creation of a defense mapping agency. The DMA was signed into existence by President Nixon in 1971. By then, Col. Herndon, approached by Walter Dix, past ACSM president, was carefully weighing the idea of heading the tiny office of ACSM as its Executive Director.

The background to Herndon’s coming to ACSM is interesting. Before retiring from active military duty in 1969, Col. Herndon had been Commander of the Aero Chart and Information Center (ACIC) in St. Louis, Missouri (1957-60) and later of the Defense Intelligence Agency’s Mapping, Charting and Geodesy Department at the Pentagon (1963-69).

When Dix asked whether he would be interested in becoming the Executive Director of ACSM, Herndon naturally wanted to find out what the job entailed. He particularly wanted to know what responsibilities he would have for the office, the finances, and the employees. He visited with staff and then talked some more to Walter Dix. There was no written description of the Executive Director’s functions and responsibilities, so in the end, Dix said: “You have it; the office, the money, and the staff are your responsibilities.” The just retired Col. Herndon was eminently suitable for the task, and it was on his watch that the organization grew into bigger and better things.

But, first, there was a lot to be done... Everybody pitched in: the staff, the boss, and even the boss’ family.

“Having said ‘yes’ to the job,” Herndon remembers, “I set about straightening the finances—the issuance and collection of dues—in accordance with the guidelines established by the Board. Similarly, in the initial office we had very limited staff and, ‘lousy’ is a good word, for the headquarters work space.”

The office that Col. Herndon remembers with little fondness was in the Woodward Building on the corner of the 15th and H Street in Washington, D.C. It consisted of one second-floor room and an “offset” room which was used as a conference or visitors’ room. “The facility was modest and poor and expensive,” Herndon comments dryly.

But the staff, although only four in number, did wonders out of that “lousy” facility. “Walt Dix was, at that time, the principal in the office, performing all kinds of key jobs from editing and publishing the ACSM journals to acting on behalf of the ACSM Board. Then there was Mrs. Gates, who was the secretary, and two young men. One of them was responsible for keeping the books, handling and recording daily deposits and payments; the other packed and shipped publications and journals, and performed other things of that nature.”

The difference between then and now resulted from quite a number of steps. “First,” Herndon continues, “I decided that we had to get out of downtown D.C. where the rent was irrationally high for our purposes, and, to add insult to injury, the office was poor. I looked all over the countryside, south of town, always in Virginia because I did not think that we could find anything suitable close-by in Maryland, without being sponsored by someone else.”

After months of scouting the “countryside,” Col. Herndon finally found new accommodations for the ACSM headquarters. “It was this very nice three-story brick building right here in Falls Church,” Herndon says wistfully. “I think we made a sad mistake in not buying it,” he continues. “It was available for about \$40,000 at the most.”

When they finally moved to Falls Church, the staff were able to take on a number of activities that were not “readily available” to them before. ACSM also paid the monthly rent but “sublet” two small unused spaces for exactly the amount of the building rental.

“Our debt went down rapidly, “ says Herndon, “because of this “rent foregone” arrangement, and because we had a huge jump in our membership and our receipts from conventions and the increasing sales of our publications. Eventually, we wound up with a lot of money in the bank. I think it was in the range of 20 to 25K.”

Once a military man, always a military man. That’s certainly true for Col. Herndon, who to this day refers to “staffing” as “manning,” The ACSM office staff was a responsibility he took very seriously; the search for new accommodations and other activities we undertook were always done with two objectives in mind—to make staff more productive and to help ACSM retain good staff.

“Manning, let’s see what happened on that front,” Col. Herndon reminisces. “We got people who lived out here and could get to work without problems and without having to pay an arm-and-a-leg to get to work. The parking lot behind the building and the pleasant atmosphere in the office also helped...We were able to attract some new and very effective individuals.

Better headquarters, new staff, and more and better member services led to very welcome reserves for the future of the organization. Without doubt this positive state of office management affairs is one of the contributions to ACSM for which he will always be remembered.

Outside ACSM, the world of surveying and mapping forged ahead too. A number of technological innovations that the DOD had been working on were on the brink of being unveiled to the civilian world, and the members of ACSM were the people who would be involved with these technologies on a daily basis.

When asked about technology during his time in the Air Force and then at ACSM, Col. Herndon remembers the U2 and missiles, and how the requirement for more accurate targeting of those missiles led to a significant improvement of mapping and charting.

One of the special projects in which Col. Herndon was involved as the Commander of the Aero Chart and Information Center in St. Louis was the U2 aerial photo system operated by the CIA. The Chart Center was permitted, under ultra special clearances, to interpret "code word" materials that were under the "U2" classification. This enabled Col. Herndon's staff to update their charts about facilities of military interest with more and new information. For example, they could add a road newly built or a rail line added or taken out, and do it without having to declare the source.

"The missile photo products," continues Herndon, "came along as a substitute for the U2. We were able to make use of those, through the same classification channels. We added certain specific target areas as requirements for the people who were operating the photo systems, and the information we received substantially improved the content and accuracy of the target materials [and other maps and charts] for which we were responsible in St. Louis."

The expanded application of data from airborne and satellite sensors to mapping and charting led to an expansion of activities at the ACIC substations in Washington, D. C., Panama, London, Paris, and Tokyo. And there was also a renewed sense of the close links between data acquisition and their rendering on maps and charts.

Asked whether he remembers how surveying and mapping came together in ACSM, Col. Herndon's response is to the point: "They blend into a field that's unique to them. They act in a format that fits them in one aspect—to be useful. So, that's where the marriage comes in and that's why, I think, they have always been considered together. Consider the Army, Navy, and Air Force, and the surveillance side, and every one of them is founded on people who have skills in at least three, usually more fields, but definitely geodesy, photogrammetry, and cartography. When I left ACSM in 1979, ASPRS and ACSM were operating separately. They were both prominent ... but even though these two civilian organizations of surveyors and mappers do business independently, they still belong together in the sense that they deal with the same data.