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Secretary of the Air Force  
The Pentagon  
Washington, D.C.

Dear Mr. Secretary:

There are not too many "first to do it" guys left alive, but I have talked to one almost daily for three recent weeks as he recuperated from cardiac surgery. His "first to" occurred when he was a B-17 pilot in WWII. His "first to" was landing in zero-zero visibility using automated control equipment, in a B-17G. The auto-pilot was disconnected just prior to touch down.

I asked him recently what the Air Force awarded him for this, and he said he was awarded nothing - that the A.F. probably didn't even know about it. This surprised me, but on hearing his story I think I can understand why: A major event occurred - we won the war. Here is the story.

This man, Coman W. Rothrock, Jr., went into the AF after Pearl Harbor and was assigned to Pine Castle AFB, Orlando, FL. About 150 test and development projects were under way, carried out by the Air Forces Board under the direction of Col. Earl R. Tash. An "All-Weather Project" was set up with Rothrock as project officer and test pilot reporting to Col. Tash. Capt. Ed Neff was the unit R&D Officer.

A lengthy debugging process was necessary using the SCS-51 system and the "black box" that coupled the localizer and glide-path beams to the auto-pilot. Lt. Bob Barry was his copilot and "safety pilot" as progress was made. When Rothrock deemed the equipment ready for the final test Col. Tash told Rothrock he wouldn't order him to make the test but would authorize the experimental landing.

Trial time came with a 500 foot thick dense blanket of fog. Fog density was such that he had to follow the white lines to find the runway. Either 2 or 3 take-offs & landings were done; there are no records available and Rothrock doesn't remember. Lt. Barry was not the copilot for these; the name of the copilot is unknown. This was done in late '44 or early '45.

Eisenhower's order for all to go to the 8th AF in England brought the end of Rothrock's involvement in the project, which was then transferred to Clinton County AFB, Wilmington, Ohio, where a large unit was set up to continue it. Then came Victory. And end of the Project. Project files were dumped and involved officers were told to take any records they wished to have.