

Atlas deutscher und ausländischer Seeflugzeuge.

THE BENOIST TYPE C 1916 FLYING BOAT

Compiled by Paul Leaman

I HAVE TO ADMIT that at first I was puzzled by the inclusion of the American built Benoist Flying Boat in the *Atlas Deutscher und Ausländischer Seeflugzeuge*, an official publication dedicated in the main to providing technical information on indigenous German seaplanes and flying boats. I could understand the pages given over to descriptions of most foreign aircraft that the Germans had captured during the war, but why, I thought, include an American-built machine which they seemed never to have owned or even to have examined in either the USA or in Germany at any time. Equally, I am ashamed to admit that the names that came up, Thomas Wesley Benoist and Tony Jannus, were also unknown to me. But a closer look into the background of the type revealed good reasons for the German interest in the machine and for its inclusion in the Atlas. It also threw light onto the lives of those two men, both of whom died relatively young and who would otherwise be much better known on this side of the Atlantic.

Thomas Wesley Benoist was born in Irondale, Missouri, USA in 1884 and by 1904 was making a successful career in the automobile industry in St Louis, Missouri. After visits to that year's much celebrated World's Fair,¹ where he saw a number of demonstrations of both lighter and heavier than air flight, he became so interested in aviation that, in 1908 and together with his brother as a partner, he started *Aerosco*, an aeronautical component supply company that traded in the supply of a wide range of basic materials and components needed for the construction of simple aeroplanes.

This business prospered and, in time, came to include the sale of kits from which a range of contemporary aeroplane



A formal studio portrait of Thomas Wesley Benoist

designs could be built by enthusiasts. This all changed on 18 September 1910 when Benoist made his first solo flight as the pilot of a Curtiss type biplane that he had bought from its builder, Howard Gill. He swiftly progressed to the giving of exhibition flights around the area. During these, he sustained injuries from a crash but soon recovered and on 22 December 1910 he became the first person in St Louis to gain an Aeroclub of America pilot's licence.

The Aerosco Flying School, based on Kinloch Field close to New Orleans, was set up early in 1911 and, because of the reputation and goodwill earned by the earlier Aerosco organization, rapidly attracted students from all parts of the USA. Benoist then bought out his partner, moved to larger premises in the outskirts of St Louis and changed the company's name to the Benoist Aviation Company. At this time, he was joined by Tony Jannus,² initially

as a design assistant but later as a test pilot. Together, they branched out into the construction of proven existing designs of aeroplanes. Their first original product, the Benoist Type XII 'School Plane' (so called because of its intended purpose and expected date of launch) was itself closely based on the earlier Curtiss design upon which Benoist learned to fly but it incorporated a number of practical innovations³ devised by Benoist's ever fertile brain. It is thought that the company built about five machines of this design. Using one of them, Tony Jannus piloted Captain Albert Berry of the US Army over the Jefferson Barracks in St Louis, to make the first ever parachute drop from an aircraft in flight. This stimulated Benoist's mind and thinking of future need to drop troops from an aircraft in flight he rearranged the Type XII from a 'pusher' to a 'tractor' configuration, thus allowing the troops to

Formal studio portrait of Tony Jannus.



Contemporary side view drawing of the Benoist Type XII.

