



Lt. C. E. Ruttan

**I**N 1917, fully engaged in “the war to end all wars,” the United States was concerned about antisubmarine warfare. Transport of suitable bomber planes from America to Europe was a risky business. Ironically, ships carrying aircraft capable of combatting U-boats were being sunk by submarines. One officer regarded the transaction as a “masterpiece of insanity.” Besides, although production of patrol seaplanes was on the upswing, deck space and shipping holds were at a premium; human cargo and essential equipment had priority.

As a solution, the Navy decided to build its flying boats large enough to cross the Atlantic under their own power. Operating from European bases, they would then obviously have sufficient range to reach the center of German submarine activity.

However, at this time the longest nonstop flight accomplished was about 1,350 miles, flown under ideal conditions and in the vicinity of a landing field. (In 1914, the German aviator Boehm had remained aloft 24 hours on what was actually an endurance flight.) The suggested route across the Atlantic was over 1,900 miles, over an area not well known for ideal flying weather: Newfoundland to Ireland.

The idea, even in 1917, really wasn't farfetched. Nor was it new. The challenge had existed for years and, as early as 1910, attempts were made to cross the Atlantic by air. First, there were balloons, nonrigid airships, successful only in provoking interest. Then, prompted by foresight (and good business sense), England's Lord Northcliffe threw down his gauntlet.

With a vast string of publications, Northcliffe was the British William

## THE DREAM: *An anti-sub aircraft capable of flying the Atlantic*

Randolph Hearst. Possessing a taste for aeronautical events and a keen understanding of the portents of the aeroplane, the perceptive lord pronounced a prize of 10,000 pounds for the first successful trans-Atlantic flight. He published his decree and the conditions for the \$50,000 competition in his London *Daily Mail* on April 1, 1913.

The award would go to the first aviator to cross the Atlantic by plane, either way, between the North American continent and any point in Great Britain or Ireland, within 72 consecutive hours. The aeronaut was required to complete the trip in the same craft in which he started. Intermediate stoppages would be permitted only upon water and, if the pilot had to go aboard ship during repairs, he would resume his flight from approximately the same point he went on board.

Following the *Daily Mail's* sensational announcement, French and Italian aviators were quick to enter the lists while, in America, Rodman Wanamaker, heir to the Philadelphia mercantile fortune, revealed a contract with Glenn Curtiss to build a large flying boat.

Glenn Hammond Curtiss, who had been the first man to successfully fly an airplane from water, had harbored a consuming desire to fly the Atlantic before anyone else. To assist him in his

long-awaited project, the Navy sent an advisor to the Curtiss plant at Hammondsport, N.Y. The young officer, Lt. John H. Towers, Naval Aviator #3, had been taught to fly by Curtiss. They were close friends.

The craft was to be named *America* and, for a while, it was presumed the pilots would be Curtiss and Towers. However, under pressure from his wife, Curtiss had greatly restricted his personal flying activities. He suggested that a Navy man be placed in charge and that Towers should be plane commander.

The Navy Department flatly refused. Trouble on the Mexican border might require the use of aeroplanes. Towers was put on recall alert. He would be permitted to continue in an advisory capacity, but trans-Atlantic flight was out of the question.

Work on Curtiss' dream progressed. The \$500 entry fee was posted. Towers' place was taken by one of the finest pilots in England, John Cyril Porte, lately of the Royal Navy. Porte had been invalided out of submarine service when he contracted tuberculosis. On expectation of a short life, he had taken up flying and did very well at it. By late July 1914, Towers had gone off to Tampico, the *America* had completed her trials, and Cyril Porte was ready to go. August 15th would be the date.

On August 3, Germany declared war on France, the next day on Great Britain. World War I was on: the *America* was sold to England as a prototype for 50 patrol seaplanes; Cyril Porte devoted his attention to the Royal Naval Air Service; the trans-Atlantic flight was off; the London *Daily Mail's* prize was postponed.