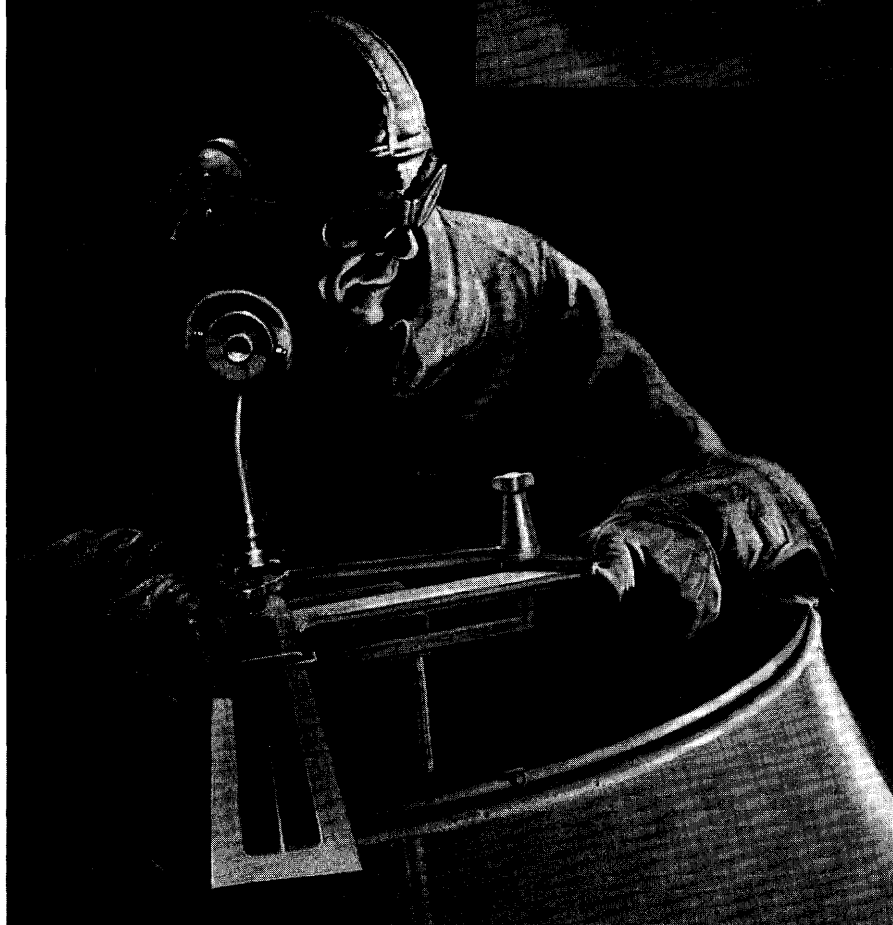


## THE FIRST FLIGHT ACROSS THE ATLANTIC



Cdr. Ted Wilbur

**R**EAD'S PLANE was faster than the others. He had noted this feature after the departure from Rockaway; it was very difficult to keep from getting ahead of Towers in the flagship. But if he slowed down too much to keep in proper position, the big NC-4 became harder to handle. Soon he was far ahead and forced to compensate for his speed by making a complete circle, coming up behind the formation. Looking down, through the fading light, he could see the whitecapped ocean, dotted with icebergs. As it grew darker, it was difficult to make out the other two planes. The NC-4 turned on its running lights; Ens. Rodd sent a

message requesting the others to do the same. Nothing happened. The NC-1 and NC-3 remained obscure in the dimness of the twilight sky.

The sun set quickly behind heavy cloud banks. By the time it was completely dark, maintaining formation was out of the question. The NC-1 had long been lost to view and, as the outlines of the NC-3 grew less distinct, it was evident each plane was on its own. When Read's computations indicated they were south of course, he ordered a slight left turn and the NC-3 disappeared entirely. They had 1,200 miles to go.

John Towers later said, "Those who think that having destroyers 50 miles apart made navigation as easy as 'walk-

ing down Broadway' should have been with us that evening. It was not until darkness came on and they began to fire star shells at five-minute intervals that I could think of anything but finding the next destroyer. They could not be expected to be exactly on position, and if we didn't find them just where we expected them, there was always the question, are they wrong or are we?" Sometimes both were.

Each ship was required to report by radio the passing of the planes. At each report, the next ship in line was to commence firing the star shells. Then, as the planes approached, a searchlight would be swung repeatedly, from horizontal to straight up, in the direction of the prevailing surface wind. Electric lights would spell out the station number in eight-foot numerals and be situated so as to be viewed from the stern. Each ship would steam slowly along the course of the flight when planes were nearby.

The destroyers had been instructed to fire their guns to the northwest, at an angle of 75° with fuses set for 4,000 feet. The planes were supposed to pass to southward, thereby minimizing danger, or so Towers thought.

When the moon came up, he had climbed through the overcast to make use of the light. The electrical circuits of the NC-3 had been soaked on takeoff, and the plane had neither wing nor cockpit lights. So cruising at 4,500 feet above the cloud layer provided welcome relief for Richardson who'd had some difficulty flying the machine at lower altitudes where he had nothing to see. And it was pleasant up there. Looking down, the pilots could watch the shadow of the plane racing madly over the hills and hollows of the cloud beneath, curiously surrounded by a strange phenomenon — a faint rainbow forming a complete circle, its luminous ring just touching the tips of the shadow of the wings.

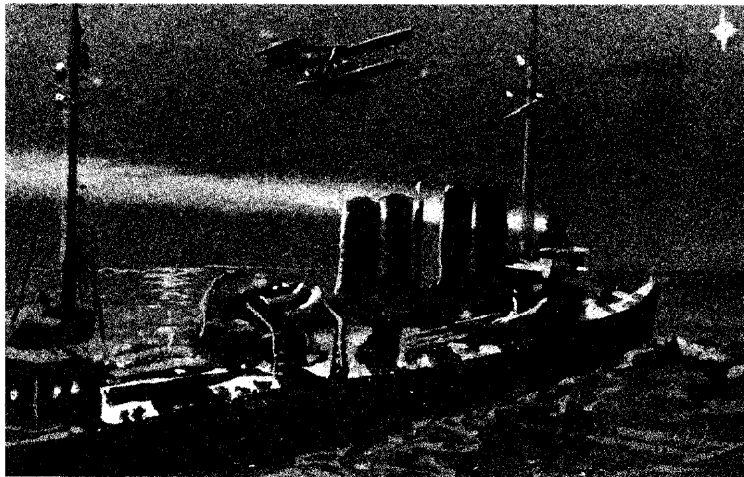
"I had set a course," said Towers, "which was taking us by the destroyers, just south of them, like clockwork, when finally as we approached one, it was apparent we would pass to north of it. I thought it was out of

position and was reluctant to change my heading. Besides, I could see through the thin clouds and thought they could see us, too, so I kept right on. Having timed their shooting, I knew they were due to fire just about as we were in line. Either the destroyer didn't see us or they didn't believe in deviating one iota from their instructions for, right on the second, I saw the flash from the gun. The star shell exploded just under us. I glanced back and in the moonlight both Richardson and McCulloch looked as though they would like to take the navigation out of my hands."

There was another close call. Cruising above the clouds made it easier for the pilots to fly the airplane but harder for Towers to use the drift indicator. Peering down, waiting for a ship to appear through a hole in the overcast so he could make a reading, he suddenly realized he was staring at an aeroplane beneath him. It was the NC-4, and Read had made out the shape of the NC-3, too, against the moonlit sky. Preoccupied, Towers almost missed seeing the NC-1 which was slowly grazing his path, crossing 50 feet above. Pat Bellinger didn't even realize the unlighted NC-3 was there. For a few moments, there was a crowded piece of sky over the mid-Atlantic Ocean.

Otherwise, the night flight proved largely uneventful. Wireless operators were constantly on the job tapping out a steady flow of messages to the various stations. They were able to transmit over long distances and listen in on the progress of each other. Although the performance of the direction-finding compass was disappointing (the antenna was surrounded by wire cables in the hull and also subjected to static interference from the spark plugs), by dawn all three separate aircraft found themselves near station ship #14.

With the coming light, the weather worsened. Clouds grew thicker and soon the sky was completely overcast. Dropping down between the billowing layers, Towers spied a ship through a thin spot in the haze. It was well to the south and assuming it to be #15,



**STATION SHIPS EVERY 50 MILES MARKED THE NC'S COURSE**

he changed his course accordingly. He was wrong, and it was the last ship seen.

Running into fog and heavy rain squalls, the NC-3 tried different altitudes, all to no avail. Rising above the fog they would find themselves in clouds so thick they couldn't see their wingtips. Visibility reduced to yards, the pilots were in trouble. Turbulent air would shake the wallowing, plunging plane and, with the primitive instruments of the time, it was difficult to tell which end was up. Rain, driving in the pilots' faces, induced drowsiness. After more than 12 cold hours seated in one position, Richardson almost passed out from the prolonged strain. He hadn't had any sleep in over a day. It took two doses of strychnine

from Towers' medical kit to bring him around.

Aboard the NC-1, Mitscher and Barin were in a worse predicament. The wing which had been transferred from the NC-2 at Rockaway created an unbalanced condition. It required the efforts of both men to keep the seaplane level, an agonizing process. Marc Mitscher was a small man, and Barin's injured wrist reduced his normal efficiency. Neither man could take the time to rest. In the bow Pat Bellinger tried to navigate in pea-soup fog and keep track of their position. He strained his eyes searching the wet mist, his concern mounting by the moment, for he feared that there was a real danger that they might run down another of the planes.



**CLOUD-SHROUDED MT. PICO WAS A POSSIBLE HAZARD IN THE AZORES**

# THE FIRST FLIGHT ACROSS THE ATLANTIC



**FIVE BATTLESHIPS** served as weather stations for the NC flying boats. In sea conditions such as those shown at left, the NC-1 and NC-3 made landings. In painting at right, hazardous rescue of the NC-1 crew is conducted by the Greek ship, *Ionia*.

they were in a steep, banking turn. A victim of vertigo, Stone was about to lose control and all Read could do was wave his arms helplessly in the bow. But then the sun reappeared against a patch of blue and the NC-4 was straightened, shooting up towards clearer air. They had almost spoiled their day.

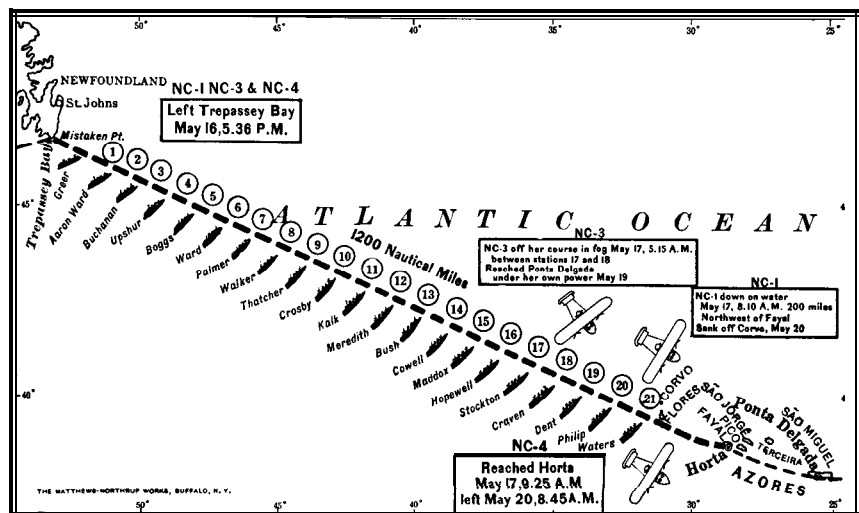
Towers and Bellinger had been less fortunate. By 11:00 A.M., Towers figured he must be in the vicinity of the islands, but he knew by now that he was off course. The NC-3 had been in solid fog since station ship #13 and now they had only two hours fuel left. Fearful of running into a mountain, he decided they might do better to set the boat down on the water and wait for things to clear up. Descending to 500 feet, they could make out the surface of the ocean. From that height it didn't look too bad so he signalled Richardson to make a landing. The power was cut and down they went. Just as they neared the surface, Towers finally saw the huge swells, but now the settling plane was committed; he couldn't call for power for fear of meeting a wave with throttles wide open. Richardson hit the first crest fairly hard, dropped into a deep hollow and zoomed up the far side. They had expected to stick to the surface but instead shot back into the air, smashing full onto the peak of the

**T**HE NC-4, however, was well in the lead. During the night, Read and his crew enjoyed the flight. His navigation was working out well and the sight of green-white star shells arcing through the sky was most impressive. Some were observed from 50 miles away. The engines never missed a beat and, as they drove along beneath the heavens, the lines of purplish exhaust flame tracing through the bracing wires made a reassuring sight. While Stone and Hinton took turns at the controls, Read made tours of the compartments. Although others had a chance to catnap, Rodd stuck to his radios. Read, as commanding officer and navigator, had much to do and little inclination to lie down for a rest.

With dawn his confidence grew.

Happily munching a sandwich, nibbling chocolate and drinking steaming coffee from the thermos bottle, he savored the idea of having his first trans-Atlantic air meal. At 6:30 (Azores time), after passing through a foggy area, he picked up destroyer #16 in the clear. Then the weather deteriorated. Visibility grew less and he couldn't quite make out #17. At 7:45 they discovered how bad fog could really be.

The sun disappeared completely and Read motioned for a climb. The fog was so thick he could hardly see the pilot when suddenly he sensed something was wrong. His head began to swim, direction became confused and he felt the wind against his face increase. The boat compass in his cockpit was spinning wildly, and a brief glimpse of the sun above revealed

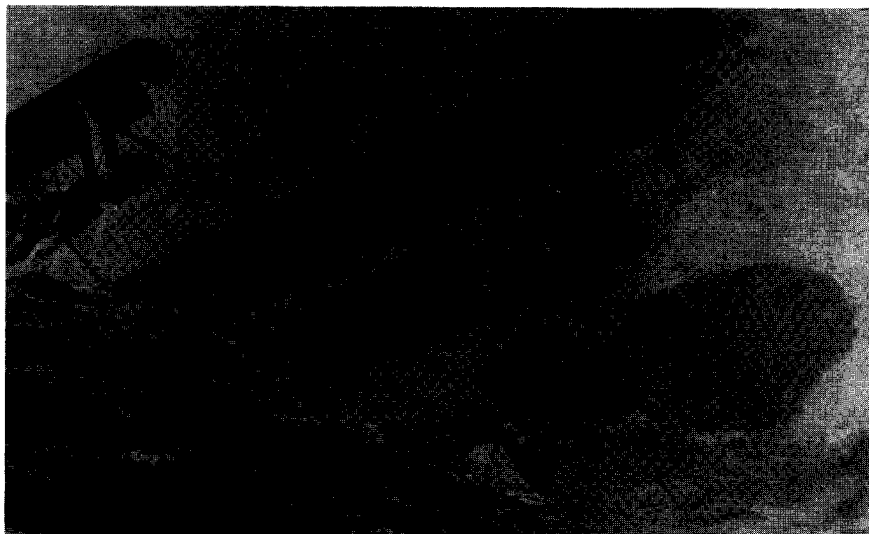


third wave. Struts on the forward center engine buckled, control wires went slack and hull frames split. Fortunately, no one was seriously injured, but it was apparent that flight could not be resumed.

Bellinger had made the same decision as Towers. For some time, the NC-1 had been flying at an altitude of 75 feet. Navigation was impossible and, down that low, the crew couldn't reach anyone with the radio. Mitscher was ordered to put her down. The seas were 12 feet high, aggravated by 25 knots of wind and a ground swell. The NC-1 hit a large wave square on, then lurched into a yawning trough where the lower section of her tail was carried away.

Two crews were derelict on the Atlantic, their lives dependent of the integrity of Richardson's hull design. Unaware of their positions (Bellinger was north and Towers south), destroyers started searching elsewhere.

Read wasn't having the easiest time of it, either. Flying along at 3,000 feet between cloud layers, he couldn't see the ships. Relying on his own navigation, he set a course slightly to the south; he knew the Azores were high and he didn't want to chance a confrontation with Pico, which was 7,000 feet. Then, at 9:27, as the NC-4 was passing over an opening in the cloud deck, Read saw what he thought was a riptide — a sign that land was near. Examining the two shades of color, he suddenly realized the darker mass was land; he was staring at the southern tip of Flores, one of the western Azores.

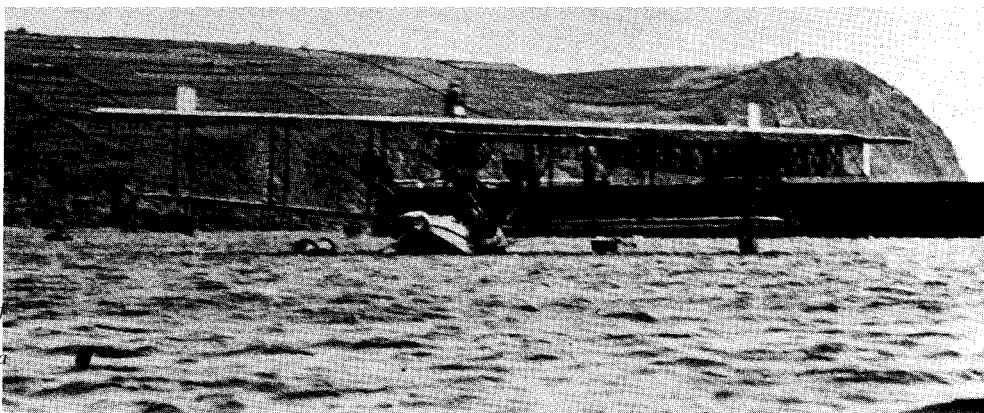
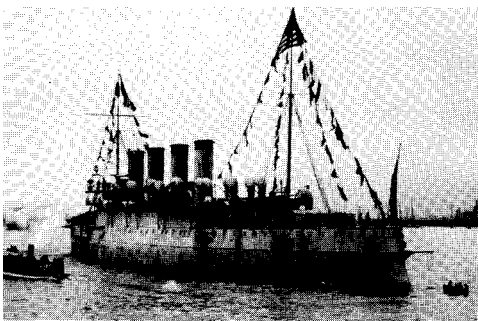


Spiralling down to 200 feet, the NC-4 skirted the island's shoreline. Read and his men viewed the peaceful panorama of farms and cultivated fields with sincere appreciation. Eventually they passed destroyer #22 which was only 250 miles from their destination, Ponta Delgada. But abeam the island of Fayal, they again ran into bad weather and Read decided to put into Horta where he knew the base ship, *Columbia*, had taken station.

Having no accurate charts of Fayal, Read and his crew weren't sure just where Horta lay but they did know it was on the island's southeast end. Groping through the mist, they rounded a point and landed. A few minutes spent taxiing around the small bay convinced them of their mistake, so off they went again, just in time to spot the *Columbia* before the

fog swept in. Seconds later they were safe within the harbor, 15 hours and 18 minutes out of Trepassey.

Meanwhile, out at sea, a raging storm blew up. One hundred miles northwest of Flores, Bellinger's crew hacked wreckage off the hulk as a frantic SOS was keyed. For five grueling hours, the seasick men bailed water from the rolling hull as the NC-1 pitched and twisted on mountainous waves. Mitscher and Barin worked the engines, which were needed to drive the radio generator and help maintain some kind of heading in the wind. Their ordeal ended when the Greek ship, *Ionia*, appeared out of the fog. Attempts were made to take the battered plane in tow, but the violent winds precluded salvage and the original *Nancy* sank beneath the waves. The crew was taken to the *Columbia*.



**LCDR. READ** relaxes (left) in harbor of Horta where he had landed near the USS *Columbia* (above). Just beyond Espamalaca Point (in photo at right), the NC-4 had made its first landing in the Bay of Praia.