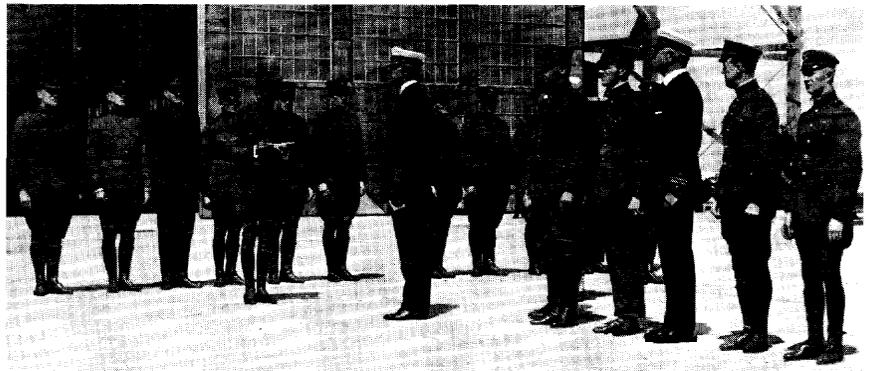
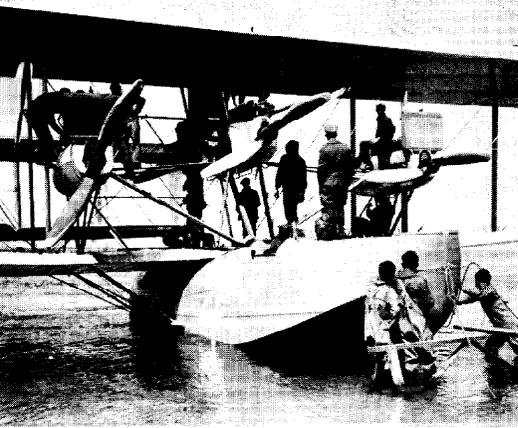


THE FIRST FLIGHT ACROSS THE ATLANTIC



COMMISSIONING of Seaplane Division One took place May 3, 1919, the first ceremony of its kind. It gave Towers a status equivalent to that of a commander of a division of ships.

ON THE 21ST of April, Towers and the TA group moved to Rockaway. Three days later, at a conference with the captains of the ocean station ships, he gave the starting date as the 5th of May. During the last days of April the ships were observed leaving New York harbor, and the press knew something was up. While the significance of the forthcoming full moon had escaped them, they could see by the preparations at Rockaway that the *Nancy's* were nearly ready. Furthermore, there were now two British teams at Newfoundland and a third was on the way.

All told, there had been nine British entries posted for the *Daily Mail's* prize, but the two already at St. John's seemed a good bet. Harry Hawker and Royal Navy LCdr. Mackenzie Grieve had a Sopwith; Captains Raynham and Morgan a Martinsyde. Both aircraft were single-engined biplanes. They announced their intentions to fly directly to Ireland. The only thing delaying them was poor weather.

Foreign skepticism greeted the Navy's insistence that its interest was solely of a scientific nature. To the Europeans it was obvious that America wanted to be first, in spite of the diplomatic overtures about sharing ships and what-not. The Navy's statement that the NC program was simply a "development of a wartime project" was derided by the press.

Actually, when Lord Northcliffe re-established the prize after the war, the rules had changed a bit. No longer

were "ocean stoppages" permitted and "machines of enemy origin" were barred. Thus the NC's and the giant German bombers, respectively, were neatly eliminated. Furthermore, the United States had made no attempt to file an entry fee, and the American crews were forbidden to accept any possible prize money, even if offered — or earned. It was to be just a well-organized, all-Navy endeavor.

Credece was lent to this announced policy when, in an unprecedented ceremony on the third of May, the three flying boats were placed in regular Navy commission, just as if they were ships of the line. John Towers formally assumed command of NC Seaplane Division One. His orders, signed by Franklin Delano Roosevelt, acting Secretary of the Navy, gave Towers a status roughly equivalent to that of a destroyer flotilla's commander. Towers chose the NC-3 as his "flagship" and then made the crew assignments for which so many had waited so long. Richardson was to be chief pilot of the NC-3. Naval Aviation pioneers Patrick N. L. Bellinger and Albert C. Read were detailed to the NC-1 and NC-4 respectively. Walter Hinton was to be one of the pilots of the NC-4. A lieutenant commander named Marc Mitscher, who had originally been slated to command the NC-2, was to be a pilot of the NC-1. LCdr. Richard E. Byrd was ordered to go aboard the NC-3 with Towers, but to proceed only as far as Newfoundland.

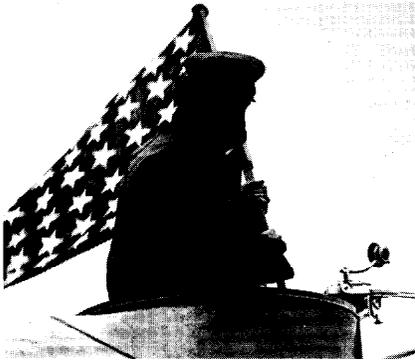
Meticulous as the planning had been, the Navy was taking no chances.

There was an extra card up its sleeve — a long-range airship. The C-5, a non-rigid gas bag with an open-cockpit, power/control car slung beneath, may have been ungainly in appearance, but it was capable of travelling long distances through the air. Recent experience had indicated it could easily reach the Azores and, likely enough, the continent of Europe. The C-5 was ordered to proceed to St. John's where her commander would be joined by LCdr. Byrd who would navigate her across the Atlantic.

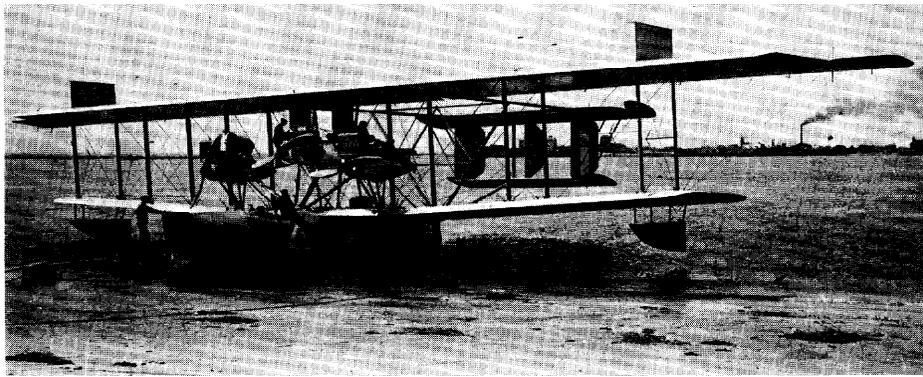
IN SPITE OF the commissioning festivities at Rockaway, and all the ships at sea, the *Nancy's* weren't ready. The NC-4 hadn't been completed until April 30th and, upon her entry into the bay, had taken on 800 pounds of water through leaks. Then she slipped on her beaching carriage and sustained damage to her hull and wing support struts. While taxiing in from her first flight, the control cables to the tail were carried away, a predicament had it happened in the air.

The NC-3 was in good shape, but there was still much work to be done on the NC-1 and NC-4. Navy and Curtiss personnel worked round the clock. Poor weather conditions enabled Towers to predict to the press that a start would probably be made on the 6th of May.

Late the night of the 4th, work was finished. With the NC-1 and NC-4 in the hangar, weary Curtiss men went home, and Navy crews began the



LCDR. BELLINGER puts the ensign aboard ill-fated NC-1. The NC-4 (right) is beached.



fueling operation. This was a lengthy process, each aircraft having nine 200-gallon tanks. It was also a dangerous task, involving electric pumps.

At 2:15 the morning of the 5th, Towers was awakened by shouts outside his barracks room. Lunging to a window facing the big NC hangar a short distance away, he saw the disastrous red glow. Varnished fabric, paint, wood, gasoline and oil were going up in flames!

It was probably a spark from one of the pumps. When the fire broke out, the 20 frantic men within the hangar raced for fire-fighting equipment. Concentrating on sections not yet blazing, they expended hundreds of gallons of chemicals and finally succeeded in dousing the flames. When it was over, portions of the tail of the NC-4 and one whole wing of the NC-1 were gone. Things looked hopeless.

After a survey of the disaster, Towers thought of the dismembered NC-2 which had been cannibalized to refit the NC-1. The NC-2's good wing and tail sections had been carefully stored. Telephones were busy that night, and the Curtiss employees were back on the job before dawn. By midnight of the 5th, the NC-1 and NC-4 were repaired. Monumental effort had put them in flying condition.

In spite of Towers' prediction, the weather did not improve. The dark gray skies provided suitable atmosphere for the indignant black headlines of the next two days. Flying conditions were not acceptable for the leg to Newfoundland, but normal opera-

tions were being carried on from the air station. During this period, as a number of reporters and spectators looked on, anxious to observe the start of the First Flight across the Atlantic, a single-engined seaplane suddenly spun out of the sky into a large storage tank. The startled eyes of the crowd riveted on the blasting crash that instantly killed both pilots.

This tragic diversion from the trans-Atlantic flight was brief. On May 7th Chief Mechanic Howard, a flight engineer of the NC-4, accidentally thrust his arm into the arc of one of its engine's turning propellers, thereby losing a hand. In a daze, Howard walked to the dispensary for first aid treatment, then returned to the site with a hastily bandaged stump and implored Towers to let him go on with the flight. Howard had been with the NC's from the start, working tirelessly on the engine installations. His whole heart and soul were in the project. Regretfully, the commander could not approve the request of a one-handed mechanic. With deep sympathy he watched Howard being driven away to a hospital.

That night Towers told the press that the flight was indefinitely postponed. Prime attention turned to the British preparations at St. John's.

And thus it was that there weren't many reporters around the next morning, the 8th of May, when the "conditions favorable" weather report came through. By 10:00 A.M., with a minimum of fanfare, the NC flying boats were off.

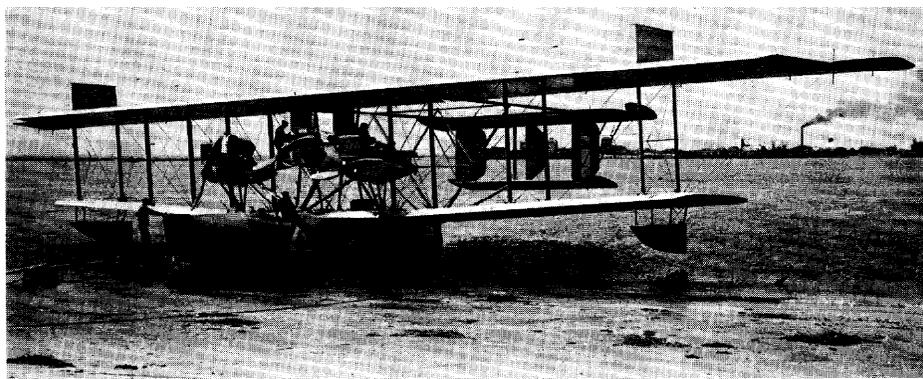


PREFLIGHT tragedies nurtured a gloomy mood. HS-1 crash (above) into an empty hydrogen tank killed both fliers. Mech Howard (below) lost his hand in NC-4 pusher prop, walked to first aid station, then returned, anxious to resume his duties.





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