

CAPTAIN WASHINGTON I. CHAMBERS, U. S. NAVY, DECEASED

Washington Irving Chamber was born in Kingston, New York, on April 4, 1856. Appointed a cadet midshipman from the 13th Congressional District, New York, on June 9, 1871, he entered the U. S. Naval Academy, and completed the four year course in June, 1876. After serving as Passed Midshipman aboard the USS PENSACOLA, later in the PORTSMOUTH, he was commissioned Ensign to rank from November 30, 1878. He was subsequently advanced in rank as follows: Lieutenant (junior grade), January 1, 1886; Lieutenant, May 29, 1891; Lieutenant Commander, July 13, 1899; Commander, April 21, 1905; Captain, December 7, 1908. His transfer to the Retired List of the Navy in that rank dates from June 30, 1913, but he continued on duty until November 8, 1919 when relieved of all action duty after forty-eight active years in the Naval Service.

From the time he was first commissioned a naval officer, Captain Chambers served in many ship types, including the USS MARION, barge; ALERT, a gunboat; THETIS, a yacht, which cruised to the Arctic area for the relief of the Greely Expedition (Army-1884); PETREL, a gunboat; ATLANTA and MINNEAPOLIS, cruisers, 1891 and 1895; PURITAN, monitor, 1897; Executive Officer of the ANNAPOLIS, gunboat, 1900; thereafter in command of the FROLIC, schooner, 1902; NASHVILLE, gunboat, 1905; FLORIDA, monitor #9, 1906; and the battleship LOUISIANA, 1909.

The shore duty he had, alternated with sea duty, included tours at the Bureau of Navigation, Navy Department 1883; at the Naval War College, Newport, Rhode Island, 1893; Navy Department Bureau of Ordnance, as Recorder of the Armor Board, 1897; Torpedo Station, Newport, Rhode Island, 1898-1902. He was a member (1904) successively of the Navy Department General Board, the board on Rules for the Construction and Classification of Steel and Iron Vessels; the board on proposed rules governing Steamboat Inspection Service; and again in the Bureau of Ordnance as Assistant Chief of the Bureau in 1907; and as Assistant to the Aide for Material, 1909.

His interest in and pioneering in the field of aviation dates from early 1910 and he was practically alone in his belief that the Navy needed aviation. After acting as an official observer at aviation meets at Belmont Park, New York, and Halethorpe, Maryland, he felt that a convincing demonstration should be brought directly to the attention of the Navy in general. Approaching the Wright Company with the proposal that they fly one of their planes from the deck of a battleship, Wright declined, but the Curtiss Company agreed to make the attempt. With Eugene Ely as pilot, a flight was made, November 14, 1910, from a platform constructed on the bow of the USS BIRMINGHAM at Hampton Roads, Virginia. The good impression received from this experience resulted in the offer by Curtiss to teach a naval officer to fly at their camp in San Diego, California, free of charge, as no funds for such instruction were available.

Captain Chambers investigated every phase of aviation of that time, and recommendations were made to Congress. The first appropriation of \$25,000 for aviation was included in the 1911-1912 Naval Appropriation Act, and he was detailed to the Bureau of Navigation to devote his entire time toward the establishment of a naval aviation service. As aviation was considered to be "a dangerous plaything" by many officers in the various bureaus of the Navy Department, and since cooperation of the bureaus was absolutely essential, Captain Chambers assignment was an exceedingly difficult one. The success of Naval aviators and flights made in a few subsequent years contributed much to the growing conviction of its worth.

In connection with the establishment of an aviation experiment station, Captain Chambers had temporary duty at Hammondsport, New York, Annapolis, Maryland, and Dayton, Ohio. In October 1913, the Secretary of the Navy appointed Captain Chambers Chairman of the Board to make a careful study of the needs for an aeronautical organization within the Navy. Policy outlined included important recommendations for an aviation training station to be established at Pensacola, Florida. These were later approved, and the first Naval Air Station was built in January 1914 on the site of the abandoned Navy Yard there, where all available aeronautical material, planes and pilots were ordered.

On January 8, 1914, he was detached from Bureau of Navigation, and to the Division of Operations, Navy Department, for special duty. During this period of service, recommendations to the Navy Department caused the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations to be set up (1915) and Captain Chambers continued to serve under the first Chief throughout the World War, and until relieved of active duty on November 8, 1919.

Captain Chambers died on September 23, 1934, near Chillicothe, Ohio, while enroute to Washington by train.

Captain Chambers was entitled to the Spanish Campaign Medal, Philippine Campaign Medal, Cuban Pacification Medal, and the Victory Medal for World War I service.