

Chatham Naval Air Station

AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE

by spencer grey

People whose houses are located on Nickerson Neck in Chathamport most likely know that between 1917 and 1922, 36 acres of their neighborhood was the location of one of the Naval Air Stations that were established in the expectation that the United States would most likely be drawn into the war that was causing turmoil in Europe. Germany had deployed a number of their U-Boats throughout the Atlantic Ocean, and they clearly would be a threat to navigation in this area. Before construction of their houses had begun, there were large sections covered with cement, the remains of the floors of the hangars.

The base consisted of living quarters for the personnel stationed there, hangars, a boat house, a hospital, repair shops, maintenance buildings and a pigeon loft. The latter was required because radio communications between the planes and the station were not reliable, but pigeons could be counted on to carry messages back to the base.

Once the support buildings were in place, four Curtiss R-9s were delivered to the station. A few months later, four Curtiss HS-11 flying boats arrived at the Chatham Depot and were trucked to the base, where they were assembled. Once in service, these planes were used to patrol two areas, one to the north and another to the south, to keep a watch out for U-Boats in the surrounding waters. Because of the real possibility of a crash landing, the planes were equipped with emergency rations, water for three days, a flashlight, a flare pistol with red and green cartridges, a sea anchor, life preservers, a signal book, and local charts. One of the planes in each squadron was equipped with a radio transmitter that enabled it to be in communications with the base, but radios were not totally reliable, hence the homing pigeons, which could be counted on to take a message to the base at any time.

The plans flew at 1,000 feet, enabling them to keep track of ships in the area, usually circling around a ship for hours while looking for U-Boats that could threaten the vessel. Two planes were out on patrol at all times, while two other planes remained on standby at the base, ready to assist any patrol plane in distress. These planes and their crews were expected to be airborne in seven minutes in order to be within the acceptable range of time for response. Somewhat later blimps were used to assist in the patrols, and a large blimp hangar was built at the air station. The blimps cruised at 35 miles per hour and had a range of 900 miles.

Fortunately, there were very few encounters with German U-Boats, but on one occasion there was a report of a U-Boat that had already sunk five ships shelling a tugboat off Orleans. Nine of the Curtiss HS11s were ordered to investigate. One of the first planes to arrive on the scene lined up the target in its sights so that the bomb would catch it directly amidship, but when the bombardier pulled the release lever the bomb did not move. The plane circled around for a second attempt, but again the bomb did not release. Determined to hit the target, the bombardier climbed out on the wing of the plane to release the bomb by hand. The bomb fell and landed a few feet astern the U-Boat but failed to detonate. A second plane came to their assistance and dropped a bomb which landed just off the boat's starboard side, but it too failed to explode. At this point the sub had had enough and submerged.

Another of Chatham's early encounters with aircraft at the time was with the famous NC-4 when it attempted to win the 10,000 British pound prize offered by the London Daily Mail for the first plane to successfully fly from

the United States to Europe. The United States Navy decided to go for the publicity the challenge offered by deploying three of its best planes, the so-called “Nancy” planes, the NC- 1, the NC-3 and the NC-4. Not long after the takeoff, the NC-4 developed engine trouble and landed in the ocean some 80 miles off Chatham. Having summered in Chatham, the commanding officer ordered his pilot to cruise to the west so that they could get assistance there. Clearly, he made the right decision because one of the few men familiar with that engine, George Goodspeed, lived in Chatham.

Once Goodspeed had worked his magic, the NC-4 took off and joined the other two planes that were waiting in Halifax. On May 16, 1919, the three planes headed for the Azores, which was their refueling place in the Atlantic. Both the NC-1 and NC-3 got lost in the fog and landed in the Atlantic to wait for their rescue. The NC-4 succeeded in reaching the Azores, where it refueled and took off for Portugal to complete the first trans-Atlantic flight and make history. If it hadn't been for its landing in Chatham and the presence there of George Goodspeed, the story of the flight never would have made it to the history books.

