

A Celebration Not to be Missed

AT THE ATWOOD

by Don Broderick

Our Executive Director recently received word from Deputy Chief of Staff Robert Schwach of the New York City Council; he was offering an invitation to the Atwood and the Chatham Historical Society, asking if we have any interest in participating in the Centennial Celebration, in May of 2019, for the first successful trans Atlantic flight of the U. S. Navy Seaplane NC-4, in May of 1919. I was copied on this email and my Boss asked for my feedback on this significant invitation.

As an Atwood House volunteer, quietly cloistered in the depths of the Archives Department, and one who just also happens to be a retired Navy pilot, this sounded like a dream mission that I had to snag! At the time, I was still recovering from knee surgery, so as I excitedly stood up, I nearly tripped over myself as I stumbled down the narrow hallway, in a lopping fashion, to the likes of the classic movie character (played by Charles Laughton) Quasimodo in THE HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME.

Entering our Director's office and wanting to politely and officially offer my services to represent the CHS at this historical celebration... I recall somewhat now embarrassed, blurting out, "Send me Boss....send me!!"

Mr. Schwach was reaching out to the Chatham Historical Society as he is apparently aware that NC-4's success was clearly, in part, due to the natural talent of one man residing here in this quaint little seaside town of Chatham, population 1,737 in 1919.

Three NC (Navy-Curtis) seaplanes (NC-2 had been cannibalized earlier for parts to keep NC-1, 3, and 4 flying) departed Rockaway Naval Air Station, Rockaway, NY, at 10am. 8 May, on a course for Halifax, Nova Scotia, their first re-fueling stop. Passing Cape Cod, NC-4 suddenly(!) lost both of her centerline engines (two of four). LCDR A.C. "Putty" Read Aircraft Commander was forced to land in the Atlantic approximately 60 nautical miles from Chatham. Read was duly aware of NAS (Naval Air Station) Chatham since he had spent several years of his childhood living in Chatham where his father had been a Baptist Minister. The crew of six proceeded to water-taxi throughout the night reaching their emergency destination NAS Chatham in the early morning hours. Winds and sea state must have been in their favor as the open cockpits were apparently not overcome by sea spray or freighting flooding. Whatever the situation, the very fortunate crew were assuredly exhausted upon their arrival in Pleasant Bay at day break. The flight log made no mention of any difficulty navigating the famous and dangerous Chatham Bars. Engine repairs began almost immediately but the trained Navy mechanics soon realized they needed local help from one George Goodspeed, a well-known and naturally talented local mechanic who was somewhat experienced with the V-12 400hp Liberty engine.

During engine repairs it was discovered that part of the tail assembly (vertical and horizontal stabilizers were damaged by fire and/or hot engine oil) and had to be hastily repaired. According to author Capt. J. Lacouture USN (Ret.) "One of the engineers, Chief Machinist Mate Howard had his hand chopped off by a propeller during engine test and in-spite of his strong desire to continue with the flight crew, he had to be replaced. Once Goodspeed had worked his

magic, and after a 5-day delay for repairs and weather, NC-4 met up with NC-1 & 3 in Trepassey, Newfoundland on May 15, 1919.

The rejoined division of three aircraft departed on the journey's longest leg, 1,260 miles to Ponta Delgado, Azores. Open ocean air-navigation at that very early time was sketchy at best in daylight, and knowingly dangerous at night, particularly in bad weather, due to very limited attitude flight instruments for reference to the horizon. I can assure you that it took the complete, utter and total attention and courage of all 6 pilots to get safely thru the night following this 15hour and 18minute flight! There are certainly no directional signs in the Atlantic like on our Interstate highway system, so the Navy stationed destroyers with radio homing signals and powerful searchlights along the intended flight path to aid in navigation, search and rescue.

The three intrepid crews pressed on throughout the night and were relieved to see daylight only to be greeted with weather of fog, rain and low cloud covered ceilings. As Capt. Lacouture again states "Unsure of their exact position and afraid of flying into Azore mountains in extremely limited visibility, NC-1 and 3 were forced to land in the rough seas damaging the planes so much they were unable to continue flight, with NC-1 sinking and NC-3 water taxiing, and being towed to Ponta Delgrada several days later. Meanwhile NC-4 by reason of good navigation and a break in the weather made it to Horta and on to Ponta Delgrada."

After rest and refueling NC-4 continued on to Lisbon and Plymouth, England and welcomed as heroes!! No lives were lost in this dangerous endeavor.

I'll keep AT THE ATWOOD readers posted if and when I get this once in a lifetime assignment..... please stay tuned!