

THE INCREDIBLE MISSION OF THE NC-4, THE U.S. NAVY PLANE THAT MADE HISTORY

by Don Broderick

As with all of Chatham's related history, the Atwood Museum Team did its very best to recognize, reconstruct, and celebrate the 100th Anniversary of the first flight across the Atlantic, in May of 1919, by the NC-4 (Navy-Curtis Seaplane). Thankfully, the Cape Cod media joined in to celebrate this aerial feat!

So, is there a big deal here? Yes. After much research on the topic, we were soon asking: why are so many Americans unaware of this historical event? Stick with me here, as I use a few other historical events to possibly explain why the NC-4's flight in America's early days of aviation was overshadowed.

With twenty-three years as a Naval Aviator, who has studied the United States Navy's historical leadership in the theater of world conflict for strategic knowledge and inspiration, I realized I had NEVER HEARD of this milestone flight, until I moved to Chatham! I kept hearing about great naval leaders like John Paul Jones, victorious Admirals Dewey, Nimitz, Spruance, Mitscher, Byrd, and MacArthur. Yes, I know, MacArthur was a general, but his inspirational plan and victorious Korean Battle of Inchon (see, I'm not biased) was an ambitious, amphibious invasion supported by 261 Naval vessels with 75,000 Marines and troops.

One day several years ago, I was walking along Strong Island road on Nickerson Neck. Upon reaching the end, I was happy to see and smell Pleasant Bay, again. As I held my nose high to sniff in the salt air, I nearly stumbled onto a rock with a mounted plaque. Erected by the Chatham Historical Society in 1978, the plaque honored the flight of NC-4 and the Chatham people who helped make this historic effort succeed.

So, why was this singular, daring aviation flight in May 1919 forgotten so quickly by the United States? Simple, it was overtaken by, physical and societal changes occurring here and abroad.

World War I started in 1914, and we entered it in 1917. The "Great War" ended on November 11, 1918. The world rejoiced. Building war planes was no longer necessary. According to master storyteller Martin W. Sandler, in his book *1919*, it was "a year that changed America." The Temperance movement took over. Prohibition was enacted. Labor strikes were occurring. Women won the right to vote. Race riots announced "the beginning" of the civil rights movement. A deadly influenza gripped half the world. Then Prohibition initiated much of the organized crime that was coming our way, evidenced by the very lucrative "happy hour" on Cape Cod called rum running. Now, that was a hiccup in history.

The attempt to cross the Atlantic by NC aircraft was officially endorsed by then Assistant Secretary of the Navy Franklin Delano Roosevelt. The plan was approved by the Navy Department in 1918. In the interest of promoting my former employer, the birth of naval aviation came into this world in 1911 when the surface Navy's umbilical cord was cut. Seven years later, the order was given to fly the Atlantic. A remarkable and risky decision considering how basic and rudimentary aircraft instruments and design (fabric and wire) were at that time. However, the NC's were terrific on fuel mileage....1 MPG.

Bottom line here, let's never forget the challenges the three crews of six, in three seaplanes, NC's - 1, 3, and 4, faced: Open cockpits, cold rushing air at altitude, 85 mph cruising speed, 65 mph stall speed, nearly unbearable decibel levels (talk about tinnitus!) of four roaring V-12 Liberty engines with no mufflers situated right above and behind the cockpit. The only way all crew members could effectively communicate was by passing hand written notes from one crew station to the next. Navigating basically by D/R, or dead reckoning, with the help of several naval destroyers' radios along the longest leg of flight, fourteen plus hours at night. It was an incredibly dangerous environment while maintaining control of spacial orientation (wings level attitude). Along with their emergency water rations, the crews' energy was bolstered by ham sandwiches and coffee.

What were the odds? As it turned out, not very good. Only one plane in three succeeded. NC-1 and 3 got lost in dense fog just before reaching the Azores at dawn and had to land on the ocean to fix their position. They could not take off again due to the high seas. Incredibly, all aircrew members were safely rescued with no serious injuries!

NC-4 was the only aircraft to safely land at Ponta Delgada, Azores where they refueled, rested and continue on to Lisbon. Their successful crossing culminated when they landed in Portsmouth, England to great fanfare worldwide!

The NC-4 exhibit at the Atwood Museum contains a video, artifacts, a detailed model and cockpit and pictures, all available for viewing but only until the end of October. It's worth a trip to visit our special place, which also includes many other interesting exhibits.

Take my word for it, visitors and members say, "it's great and it's fun!"

Don Broderick – Archivist and Lecture Committee Chair at the Atwood Museum, Home of the Chatham Historical Society