



Mission: History

Studiorum Historiam Praemium Est

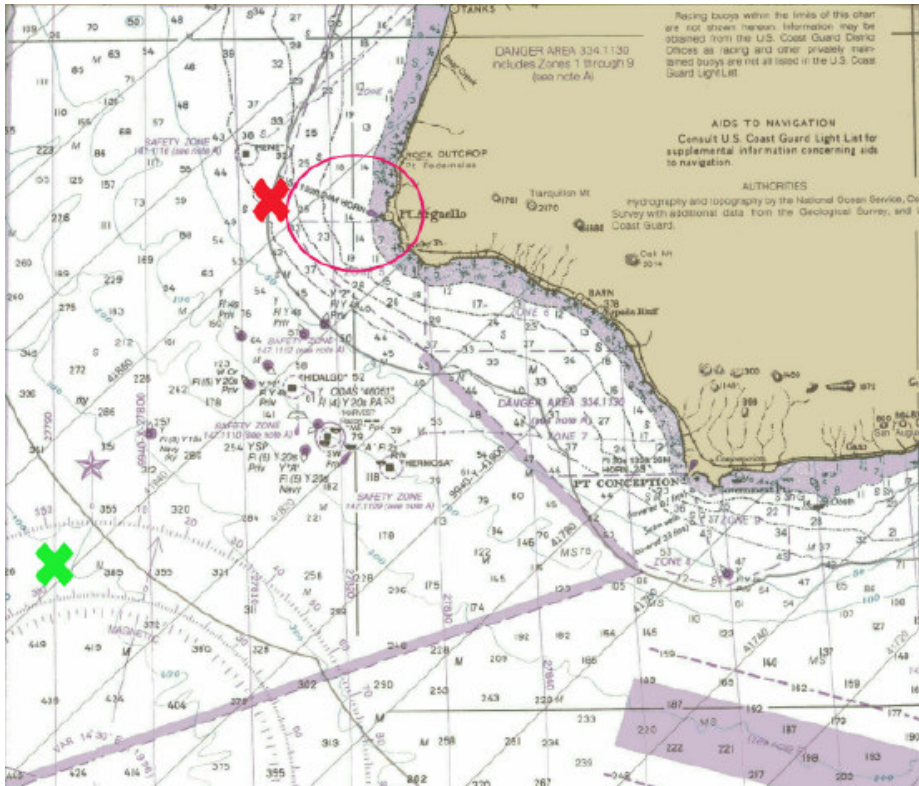


Volume 2, Number 9

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11 September 2000

1923: Train Wreck at Arguello



Rocky California Coast Claims Seven Destroyers

Steaming south, offshore of California, time and fuel can be saved by sailing through the Santa Barbara Channel, guarded on the north by Point Arguello and Point Concepción. The passage has been well known to mariners since the Gold Rush or before and Point Arguello has been marked by a light since 1881. A radio beacon was added early in the 20th Century. Surf, seas, tides and weather are predictable.



ARGUELLO LIGHT dates almost from the Gold Rush. These facilities were built in 1881 and have since been modernized.

On 8 September 1923, the U.S. Navy Destroyer Squadron 11 under Capt. Edward H. Watson in USS *Delphy* (DD 261) was steaming on a heading of 150° off the coast, south of San Luis Obispo, when Watson ordered a 95° left turn to make the approach to Santa Barbara Channel. It was 2100 and dark. DesRon 11 was making 20 knots. Marine stratus obscured the sea.

The ships were making too much speed, 95° was too much of a turn and, worst of all, the squadron wasn't where Watson thought it was when he began

STEAMING AT 20 KNOTS on a bearing of 150° and in heavy fog, Capt. E. H. Watson ordered a change of course to 95°, which would have sent his destroyer squadron right down the Santa Barbara Channel (the shaded area at the lower right of the chart), if he had been where he thought he was, likely the green "X." He was not at the green "X" but at the red "X" and his maneuver put half his ships on the rocks at Point Arguello.

1925: Airship *Shenandoah* Goes Down in Ohio

When the Navy Bureau of Aeronautics was established in 1921, Rear Admiral William A. Moffett was named its chief. Moffett was enthusiastic about all aspects of naval aviation, including rigid, lighter-than-air flying ships, called airships or dirigibles.

(The word "dirigible" means capable of being directed, and dates from the 16th Century. In 1881, the *Saturday Review* noted that "For eighteen years ...

no attempt was made to render balloons dirigible." The adjective became a noun in 1907.)

With Moffett's backing, two partially completed battle cruisers changed course while on the ways and became aircraft carriers. At the same time, construction began on America's first dirigible at the Naval Aircraft Factory in Philadelphia. The airship was a copy of the captured German Zeppelin L-49, but lift would be

(Continued on page 6)

(Continued on page 2)

One After the Other, Seven Ships of DesRon 11 Rush to their Doom

Squadron Commander Disbelieved RDF Position When 2 Miles Off Coast

(Continued from page 1)

the turn. It later came to light that he had disbelieved the accuracy of a Point Arguello radio signal. Following the turn, Point Arguello was dead ahead, and distant only about two nautical miles. The Point Arguello light may have been hidden by the fog.

But, did Watson order a 95° left turn, or did he order his ships to turn to a bearing of 95° magnetic? Many accounts of the disaster say that it was a 95° left turn but a turn *to* 95° would have put him on course to clear the Santa Barbara Channel with room to spare on both sides — *if* he had been at 26° N. Lat, 121° W. Long, to pick one spot in the ocean, safely offshore from the California coast. And testimony at Watson's hearing established that he was not where he thought he was.

The destroyers began crashing onto rocks and into the shore only six minutes after making the fateful turn and could have been only two nautical miles from shore, with 20 knots bent on, when Watson pointed his destroyer squadron directly at the jagged rocks between Point Arguello and Point Pedernales, just to its north. The spot, at the mouth of Honda Creek, is sometimes called "The Devil's Jaws," for the numerous wrecks there despite Arguello Light.

Delphy was in the van and five or six minutes after making the fateful turn she crashed hard on the rocks off Point Arguello. Like the cars of a derailed railroad train crashing into a mountainside, DesRon 11's ships followed *Delphy* onto the rocks, seven ships in all, in what would turn out to be the Navy's greatest ever peacetime loss.

One after the other, the ships followed *Delphy* at 20 knots — *S.P. Lee* (DD 310), *Young* (DD 312), *Woodbury* (DD 309), *Nicholas* (DD 311), *Fuller* (DD 297), and *Chauncey* (DD 296). Flares were fired and sirens sounded in an attempt to warn the ships following, and they were successful to the extent seven destroyers in the squadron were spared.



ALL SEVEN DESTROYERS are visible. At the upper left is *Nicholas*, behind her is *S.P. Lee*, barely discernable against the rocks is flagship *Delphy*, next is the capsized *Young*, and to her right *Chauncey*. On the rock offshore are *Woodbury* on the left and *Fuller* at bottom.



BROKEN IN TWO, *Delphy* lies on her starboard side, with her bow, including the bridge, in front of her. *Young's* bottom is in the background and *Chauncey's* mast is visible beyond the rocks.

One of the destroyers that did not run aground was USS *Farragut* (DD 300). She was sixth in line, and though two ships following her rode onto the rocks, she was saved by the seamanship of her captain, Lt.Cdr. John F. McClain, who maneuvered her through the melee and even touched bottom.

Delphy's hull hit the rocks amidships, breaking the ship in half, her stern set-

ling beneath the surface. *S.P. Lee* threaded her way through the rocks until she ran aground and broached, parallel to a small beach. *Young's* hull was ripped open by a jagged rock and she capsized to starboard within a minute and a half, trapping many sailors in her engineering spaces. *Woodbury* ran up on a large rock outcropping that came to be known as Woodbury Rock. At first,

(Continued on page 4)

1925: Navy Attempt to be First to Fly from California to Hawaii Ends 450 Miles Short; World's Record for Long Distance Flight Claimed

Plane Runs Out of Gas, But Sails the Last Leg

In the mid-1920s, the Naval Aircraft Factory developed the first U.S. flying boat with a Duralumin hull, the PN-8. The aluminum alloy proved more seaworthy than wood, was lighter and required less internal framing. That translated into a greater payload.

At about the same time, Packard, the motor car company that owned the world's land speed record, produced a 475 horsepower engine which, with a reduction gear, would drive a propeller at speeds appropriate for aviation. Two of these engines were fitted to a PN-8, which was renamed PN-9. With Lt. Dutch Schildhauer and Lt. K. R. Kyle at the controls, the plane flew around southeastern Pennsylvania for 28 hours, 35 minutes and 27 seconds, a world endurance record.

That got the Navy thinking — why not a flight from San Francisco to Hawaii? It was intended that the flight be made by three planes, a lone PN-9 manufactured as such, a PN-8 converted to a PN-9 by fitting the Packard engines, and a PB-1 built by William E. Boeing. As with the 1919 flight of the NC "Nancies" across the Atlantic, the Navy would dot the sea with a line of ships stretching from California to Hawaii, to aid in navigation.

The flight would be commanded by Cdr. John Rogers, Naval Aviator No. 2, who would be navigator of PN-9 number 1. His pilot was Lt. B. J. Connell and the crew was rounded out with Aviation Pilot S. R. Pope as copilot, Chief Radioman O. G. Stantz and Aviation Machinists Mate W. H. Bowlin. Problems with the PB-1 could not be overcome, so a decision was made to go with the two PN-9s.

On the afternoon of 31 August 1925, the two heavily-laden flying boats lumbered off of San Francisco Bay and headed west — it took Rogers' plane two tries to get off the water. Shortly after passing over the first station ship, *William Jones* (DD 308) at about 1730, an oil pressure failure forced the second PN-9,



THE CREW OF THE PN-9 poses before leaving for Hawaii. From left to right, Aviation Pilot S. R. Pope, copilot; Lt. B. J. Connell, pilot; Cdr. John Rogers, aircraft commander and navigator; Chief Radioman O. G. Stantz; Aviation Machinists Mate First Class W. H. Bowlin — sailors all.

commanded by Lt. A. P. Snody, to land in the sea. *William Jones* took the airplane in tow and Rogers continued on alone.

Rogers had problems of his own. The big Packard engines were consuming about six gallons more of fuel in each hour than had been anticipated. On top of that, he was bucking headwinds, where it had been thought that he would be able to find tailwinds at some level. At daybreak on 1 September, he passed USS *Langley* (CV 1), marking the 1,200 mile station. At this point, Rogers was pretty sure he would not make it to Hawaii, but when he reached USS *Reno* (DD 303) at mid-morning he picked up a tailwind and his hopes rose.

By the time the PN-9 passed USS *Farragut* (DD 300), its hull fuel tanks were dry and the tank in the upper wing was small. There was confusion when USS *Aroostook* (AK 44) told Rogers he was to the south of the ship while his dead reckoning showed him to be a few miles north of his projected track. Rogers believed *Aroostook*, and turned north, taking him farther from his intended line. At that point, 1615 on 1 September, the big Packards quit for lack of fuel, 25 hours and 23 minutes after leaving San Francisco Bay.

Connell made a perfect dead stick landing in calm seas and the crew of PN-

9 settled back to wait for a ship to bring gasoline so it could resume its flight. But the search, led by Cdr. W. R. van Auken in *Aroostook*, was searching the wrong patch of sea. PN-9's batteries had enough power for Rogers to listen to the searching ships, but not enough to transmit and give a correct bearing.

Rogers, now aware that his navigation was better than that of *Aroostook*, reckoned he could reach Oahu if he could cause the PN-9 to drift only a few degrees off the direction the wind was pushing him. The fabric was cut from the lower wings and fashioned into sails which were stretched between the wings, and tail-first PN-9 set a rhumb line course for Hawaii. Food ran out after about three days, and water was critical, though a catch basin rigged to get rainwater helped. A merchant ship passed within five miles without seeing the downed plane.

On the morning of 8 September, Oahu was seen on the horizon, but it was apparent that their course would take the airmen past the island. Floorboards were taken up and fashioned into leeboards to improve lateral control of PN-9 and Rogers set his course for Kauai. If he missed that island, there would be nothing but the vastness of the Pacific in front of him.

(Continued on page 8)



BROKEN IN HALF, *Nicholas* lies to port of the seemingly intact but unsalvageable *S.P. Lee*.



CHAUNCEY is in the foreground, *Young* off her stern, *Woodbury* on a rock and *Fuller* behind it.



ON SUNDAY MORNING, the day after the disaster, the citizens of Lompoc came to view the wreckage and are here gazing on the unfortunate *S.P. Lee*, with the broken *Nicholas* behind her. The entire lot of seven ships was sold to salvagers for about \$10,000.

Woodbury's Resting Place Now Called Woodbury Rock

(Continued from page 2)

Woodbury's damage seemed slight and Cdr. Louis P. Davis, her captain, attempted to back her off. But her fire-room was soon flooded, all power was lost, the ship settled on the bottom and breakers began to punish the ship.

Fuller followed her sister to *Woodbury Rock*, grounding on the shore side. Lines were stretched from both ships to the rock and the crews clambered to safety. *Chauncey* grounded close in-shore, just in front of the capsized *Young*. She rigged lines to the cliffs and both her men and *Young's* used them to reach safety. *Nicholas* was not hard aground and her captain, Lt.Cdr. Herbert Roesch, thought he could save her if he could find a way out, but it was dark and he was trapped by the rocks and the wrecks of other ships. By morning, the ship had a 25° list and it was evident from the groans of her hull that she was in danger of breaking up. Roesch ordered the ship abandoned and the entire crew was brought safely ashore.

Twenty-three lives were lost at Point Arguello, 20 of them in the unfortunate *Young*, which capsized almost immediately. That the disaster did not cost more lives was due in part to individual acts of courage by some sailors and the leadership of some officers.

Though *Young's* boilermen and engineering crew were trapped, her captain, Lt. Cdr. William L. Calhoun rallied his men to the port side of the ship, ordering them to stick with their ship and not jump into the treacherous sea. Chief Boatswain's Mate Arthur Peterson jumped, carrying a line through the pounding surf to *Chauncey*, 75 yards away. A life raft from *Chauncey* made 11 trips to and from *Young* along Peterson's line, bringing his surviving ship-mates to safety. The chief was cited for his heroism.

In what could be called a display of leadership or just plain foolishness, Lt.Cdr. Walter D. Seed dove from his ship into the turbulent water and was cited "for great bravery in swimming a distance of about 75 yards through a rough and turbulent sea in order to test the feasibility of and make arrangements for the salvage of his crew."

(Continued on page 5)

Sailors Respond to Debacle With Courage and Initiative

(Continued from page 4)

Frank M. Moon, a machinists mate first class aboard *Fuller*, was another who braved the sea, and was cited "for extraordinary heroism in swimming with a line from the *Fuller* to a rock ... in order to salvage the crew of that vessel." *Fuller's* entire whaleboat crew was cited "for displaying courage in volunteering and manning a whaleboat which they pulled throughout the night in the face of constant and imminent danger." Each member was presented a silver Lifesaving Medal Second Class by Assistant Secretary of the Navy L. C. Andrews. *Fuller's* fireroom crew was also cited, for staying at their posts "until driven out by the inrush of rising water."

Farragut was mentioned earlier as avoiding the chaos through brilliant seamanship, but luck probably had a great deal to do with it, as there is not much room for seamanship in five minutes at 20 knots on a foggy sea at night. But the ship's name evokes an odd coincidence.

Capt. Watson, who navigated so poorly off Point Arguello, was the son of Lt. John C. Watson who had been navigator of USS *Hartford*, a month shy of 59 years earlier at Mobile Bay. It was he who had been standing on *Hartford's* poop, closest to then-R. Adm. David Glasgow Farragut, and heard, passed on and reported the famous order: "Damn the torpedoes! Full speed ahead, Drayton! Hard a starboard! Ring four bells."

1803: Preble Reaches Tangiers, Replaces Disgraced Morris

Commodore Edward Preble in the frigate USS *Constitution*, 44, sailed into Tangiers on 13 September 1803 to assume command of the American Mediterranean Squadron.

Preble replaced Commodore Richard V. Morris who sailed home to face a court of inquiry, though his blockade of Tripoli had met with limited success.

Preble's captains, none more than 30 years of age, were William Bainbridge, Stephen Decatur, Charles Stewart, Isaac Hull, Richard Somers and John Smith. All would make their mark in the Navy.

Morris was censured for "inactive and dilatory conduct" and subsequently dismissed from the Navy.



ANOTHER VIEW of *Nicholas* at left and *S.P. Lee* on the right.



TWO COUPLES gaze down on Watson's flagship, *Delphy*, three people stand on *Young's* hull, a small boat heads to shore from *Woodbury* and a 4-inch gun of *S.P. Lee* is visible at left.



NO TIDE will be high enough to refloat *S.P. Lee*; all the kings men won't put *Nicholas* together.

Shenandoah's Public Relations Value Outweighed Weather Concerns

Airship's Skipper Feared Worst from Ohio Squalls

(Continued from page 1)

provided by helium rather than flammable hydrogen. Because helium has only 93 percent of the lifting power of hydrogen, the American dirigible would need more room for gas bags, so a section about 33 feet long had been added in the middle of the airship, making her 682 feet long.

On 10 October 1923, the airship was christened *Shenandoah* and two days later the order went to all commands that "*Shenandoah* is added to the Navy list and assigned for special duty to the Naval Air Station, Lakehurst." She had become USS *Shenandoah*. Within a few months, *Shenandoah* had become a familiar sight in the skies of the Northeast and was a favorite topic of newspapers wherever she went. Her seventh flight was an ambitious 2,000 mile trip to the St. Louis air races and in October 1924 she flew to the Pacific and back without incident.

A ship's place is with the fleet, even an airship, and these flights were all publicity stunts. The public ate them up and the Navy ate up the public interest. It was to be *Shenandoah's* undoing.

The Navy had announced in 1925 that *Shenandoah* would make a tour of Midwestern state fairs over the Labor Day weekend, which ended on the first Monday of September, as it had since 1882. Cdr. Zachary Lansdowne, *Shenandoah's* skipper was a native of Ohio and wasn't sure he wanted to confront the line squalls and thunderstorms he knew he would find at that time of year. The Navy, however, had put off the trip before and would not do so again, and *Shenandoah* had close to 30,000 miles under her belt.

In the early afternoon of 2 September 1925, *Shenandoah* was made ready for the trip. Her gas bags were filled to 90 percent (they would expand with altitude, and at 4,000 feet would be 100 percent full), her fuel tanks filled with aviation gasoline and 9,000 pounds of water ballast loaded on. In an airship, releasing ballast caused the ship to rise and releasing helium caused it to descend – there was no replenishing of



OVER LOS ANGELES on her Pacific trip of 1924. *Shenandoah*, more than twice the length of a football field, captured the imagination of Americans everywhere, and the Navy sought to exploit that enthusiasm by showing her wherever it could. The fair circuit proved her undoing.



TOWNSPEOPLE of Noble County, Ohio, gather around the forlorn tail section of *Shenandoah*. By the end of the day, souvenir hunters had picked the wreckage clean.

either while in flight.

By midafternoon, *Shenandoah's* complement of 41 officers and men was aboard, augmented by two observers, and shortly before 3:00 p.m. she slipped her mooring to the Lakehurst mast and headed west, water streaming as she gained altitude. At midnight, the Alleghenys astern, meteorologist Lt. Joseph B. Anderson gave his captain his weather report. It was not as bad as Lansdowne had feared, so the skipper decided to get a little sleep. He was back in the cab at 3:00 a.m.

A storm was building to the west and *Shenandoah* was making little progress against strong head winds. Lansdowne ordered her taken down to 2,000 feet, hoping to find better conditions. There were none, and the airship struggled on for two more hours, getting nowhere. At

5:00 a.m., the sailor manning the dirigible's elevators told Lansdowne that the ship was rising and the elevators had no effect. The skipper ordered a course change to the south, and the rudder had no effect. He ordered two of the five engines speeded up, and that had no effect. *Shenandoah* was in the grip of the weather.

She had been in the grip of the weather before. On 14 January 1924, she had been ripped from her mast at Lakehurst by a strong gale, leaving her nose structure at the mast. Her crew had shored up her bow and she successfully rode out the storm.

This storm was different. A line squall had formed directly above *Shenandoah* and was sucking her into its boiling clouds. When the airship reached 5,000 feet, Lansdowne ordered helium

(Continued on page 7)

Shenandoah's Terrifying Ordeal in Thunderhead; Ship Ripped to Pieces

(Continued from page 6)

released, both to save the gas bags and to halt the ascent. He couldn't release too much gas though, for if the airship's ascent abruptly ceased, she could rocket downward before ballast could be released. As the ship rose to 6,300 feet, the skipper sent Anderson up the ladder connecting the control car to the body of the airship with orders for men to stand by the emergency valves.

Before Anderson could return, *Shenandoah* began falling. She dropped all the way to 2,500 feet and then leveled off. Before anyone could draw a breath in relief, she shot up again, and this time the storm was twisting her in a circle. Anderson heard the sound of tearing metal and knew the airship was breaking up. Navigator Lt. Cdr. Charles E. Rosendahl, who had been supervising ballast release, was in the forward part of the dirigible. Looking down, he saw a large section of the ship's skin tear away and watched as the control car fell away, taking Lansdowne and seven others to their deaths. Anderson had nearly fallen through that hole, but grabbed a portion of a broken catwalk and saved himself.

Shenandoah had broken into three pieces. Her bow was now a balloon, far above the other two parts, with Anderson, Rosendahl and five others. The tail section, 350 feet long, was the largest part and was falling fast, weighted with three engines. The center section was the smallest and was dropping like a rock, but its two engines fell free and what little helium remained slowed its descent. It skidded down a hillside and crashed to a stop against some trees. All four aboard that section were injured, but they survived. Four mechanics in the engine cabs were killed.

The tail section, with 18 men, bounced off a hilltop, where trees scraped off its three engine cabs. Freed of the weight, it then drifted until it caught against a tree and swung around. Men jumped out and ducked the wreckage above them. All eighteen got out alive.

In the bow section, which was rising ever higher, Rosendahl took charge, managing the helium to stop the ascent.



THE NOSE SECTION of *Shenandoah*, where it came to rest on Ernest Nichols' farm. As a free balloon, it had taken Lt. Cdr. Rosendahl, Lt. Anderson and five men on a wild ride before Rosendahl, manipulating helium and water ballast, brought it more or less gently to the ground.



SIGHTSEERS GAPE at the wreckage of *Shenandoah's* center section. Four crewmen survived with injuries in this rubble, but four mechanics perished when their engine cabs broke free and plummeted to earth.

Anderson couldn't let go of his precarious perch to grab a line so Lt. Roland G. Mayer lassoed him and pulled him to comparative safety. Rosendahl had one bag of helium and one bag with 1,600 pounds of water to maneuver with, so he decided to land the balloon. As the section approached the ground, Anderson spotted farmer Ernest Nichols on the ground and shouted for him to grab hold of some dangling cables. Nichols snubbed a cable around a fence post, which promptly broke, but the balloon had been yanked downward and settled on the ground. The men jumped out, made lines fast to trees and fence posts and asked Nichols to get a rifle so they could shoot some holes in the gas bag.

By 7:00 a.m., *Shenandoah* was on the

ground, in three big pieces and some smaller ones scattered over 12 miles of Ohio. Fourteen men had died in the crash and 29 had survived, some of them injured. Nearby farm families in Noble County did what they could for the survivors, but soon came crowds of city folks as if on a picnic, and they brought their tool boxes. By nightfall, the three sections of the airship had been picked clean.

Two other airships were built in the United States, *Macon* and *Akron*, and a fourth was purchased from Germany, *Los Angeles*. *Akron* crashed in the Atlantic off Barnegat Light in 1933, taking Admiral Moffett with her, and *Macon* crashed in the Pacific off Big Sur in 1935. Only *Los Angeles* died a natural death, that coming after the Hindenburg

(Continued on page 8)

Fliers Reach Kauai Under Sail, Towed In

(Continued from page 3)

At daybreak on 10 September, with *Aroostook*, now joined by *Langley*, *Faragut* and *Reno* in searching the waters where the PN-9 was thought to have landed, the fliers spotted Kauai dead ahead. As they were planning how to get the airplane through the surf, the submarine *R-4* arrived and took the plane in tow to the port of Nawiliwili on the other side of Kauai.

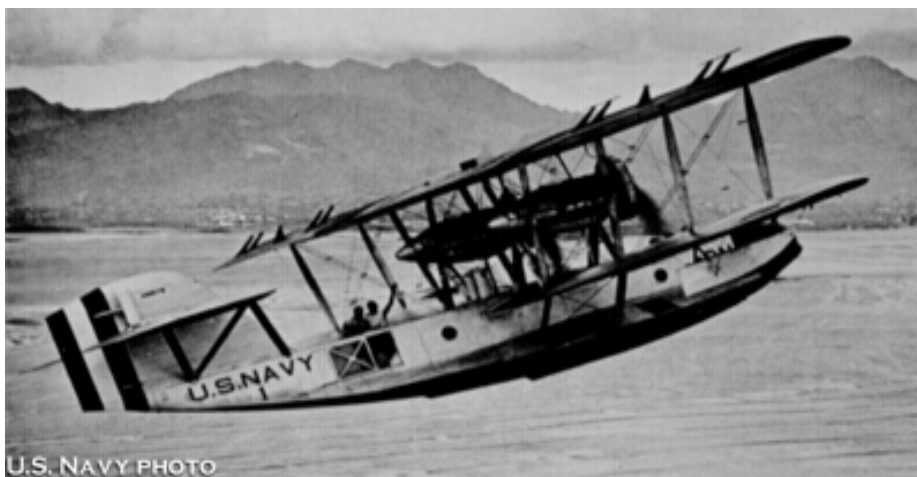
On 11 September, Rogers and his crew were taken to Pearl Harbor aboard USS *Macdonough* (DD 331) where they were given a heroes' welcome by territorial dignitaries. Honolulu even named its new airport after John Rogers and he was promoted to Assistant Chief of the Navy's Bureau of Aeronautics.

On 27 August 1926, Rogers was at the controls of a Navy airplane approaching the field at the Philadelphia Navy Yard when the plane spun into the Delaware River. Rogers died that afternoon at the local Naval Hospital.

In PN-9 a year earlier, he had set an official world's record by flying 1,841 statute miles without refueling, but he had had to sail 450 miles to reach his destination.



U.S. NAVY PHOTO
SIGNIFICANT REPAIRS were needed after PN-9 was towed to Pearl Harbor, but repaired she was and is shown here flying off Waikiki.



U.S. NAVY PHOTO
JUST SHOWIN' OFF. PN-9 cavorts for the photographer with Diamond Head in the background.

1941: 'Greer Incident' in Atlantic Prompts Roosevelt's Order to U.S. Ships to 'Shoot on Sight' when Threatened

Following Adolph Hitler's declaration in the spring of 1941 that the seas off Iceland were to be considered a "danger zone" for neutral shipping, wolfpacks of German U-boats waited in the waters southeast of Cape Farewell to prey on east-bound Allied convoys. Mariners called it "Torpedo Junction."

On the morning of 4 September 1941, USS *Greer* (DD 145), an old four-piper, was steaming alone from Argentia, Newfoundland, to Reykjavik, Iceland, carrying mail and supplies for the U.S. base at her destination. She was commanded by Lt.Cdr. L. H. Frost.

At about daybreak, *Greer* was warned by a British patrol plane of the presence of a U-boat and began zigzagging at 20 knots. Presently, the sub was detected and Frost kept it bow-on. At about 1030, a British plane dropped four depth charges without result and still *Greer*

kept her bow pointed at the U-boat.

At 1248, *Greer's* lookouts saw the impulse bubble of a launched torpedo. The sub had fired, and then fired again. Both missed. *Greer* counterattacked with eight depth charges, lost contact, and dropped another 11 ash cans when contact was made at about 1512. Apparently, neither side hurt the other.

A week later, President Roosevelt went on the radio to say "From now on, if German or Italian vessels enter the waters, the protection of which is necessary for American defense, they do so at their own peril. The orders which I have given as Commander-in-Chief of the United States Army and Navy are to carry out that policy at once."

That was the famous "shoot on sight" order that enabled U.S. naval forces to defend western waters. It was a "short of war" declaration of war.

Airships Paved Way for Blimps

(Continued from page 7)

disaster at Lakehurst in 1937. The experience gained in working with the rigid airships paid dividends in World War II when the smaller, non-rigid blimps drove German U-boats from the Atlantic shore.

How to Get in Touch

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Submissions are not encouraged because of constraints on the time available for editing. If such are sent, they should be sent as e-mail attachments in Microsoft Word 6.0 or as type-written copy, double-spaced, accompanied by a 3½-inch diskette containing the submission in Microsoft Word 6.0 for Windows.

Quite welcome are suggestions of events for coverage. Please offer suggestions two months ahead of the anniversary of an event.