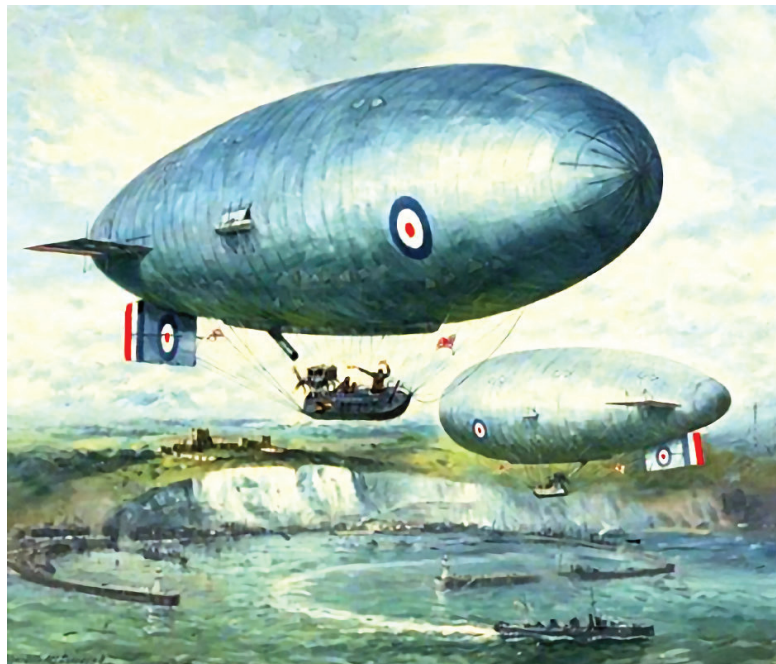


They Went to England to fly Airships: Remembering Fifteen U.S. Naval Aviators (LTA) in World War I

by Clifford A. Presley



Two Sea Scout Zeros (SSZ) airships circle over a convoy in this painting. (From the Fleet Air Arm.Museum)

Early in WWI, Britain began a systematic development of the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS) lighter-than-air section. Accordingly, the coast of England being the most exposed portion of the British Isles to the European theater of war and the gathering place of the major portion of the Allied fleets and provided the location for several large Royal Naval Air Service stations from which airships would prove to be a formidable deterrent to German U-boats.

With great success, while performing reconnaissance, patrolling, convoy escorts and looking for mines, airships were responsible for driving the U-boats underwater and out of harm's way; when previously, they had been free to attack every type of allied vessel from the smallest trawler to the largest battleship.

As an example of the value of airships being a deterrent, the log from one captured German submarine was found to contain the following entry: "Sighted airship – submerged." Even when submerged to a considerable depth, in some waters U-boats could still be seen by sharp-eyed observers in airships, who learned to look for tell-tale signs such as trails of oil in water and gulls flying in the wake of a periscope. Except for one incident, no ship was sunk by a German U-boat while escorted by an airship. When America declared war against Germany on April 6, 1917, England and France had already been at war with Germany for three years and were running short of qualified officers for airship duty.

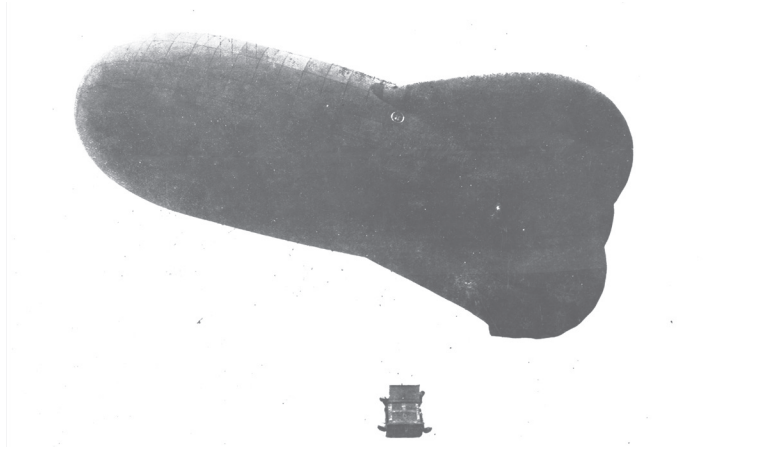
On November 9, 1917, seven U. S. Naval Aviators (Dirigibles) who had just completed the Navy's first lighter-than-air pilot training course near Akron, Ohio, were sent to France. One was ordered to Naval Headquarters, Paris to oversee dirigible operations and training. The other six were ordered to the French Naval base at Paimboeuf to immediately start flying airships. This deployment would mark the beginning

of U.S. Navy lighter-than-air (LTA) operations in Europe.

Reaching out to England

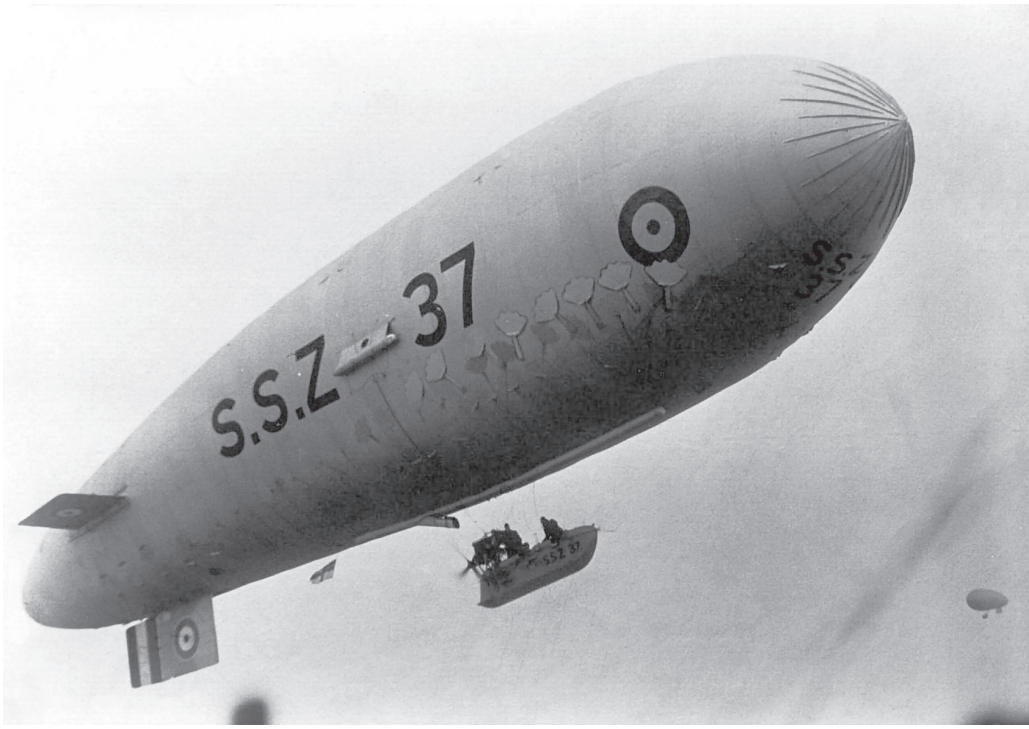
On August 20, 1917, 15 U.S. Navy Seamen, most of whom had enlisted that summer for training in aviation, were enrolled in the first Army and Navy aviation ground school class held at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology during WWI. After completing ground school on October 14, 1917, they volunteered to go to England to be the first Naval Aviator cadets taught to fly airships by the Royal Naval Air Service. They left New York for England on October 28, 1917.

On arriving in England, they were sent to Royal Naval Air Station Rochampton for training in tethered kite balloons and free balloons. After qualifying as balloon pilots, they were sent to Royal Naval Air Station Cranwell for training at its school for dirigible pilots. Both non-rigid and semi-rigid airships



Initial training was at RNAS Rochampton in tethered kite balloons similar to this one. (U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command, NH 112840)

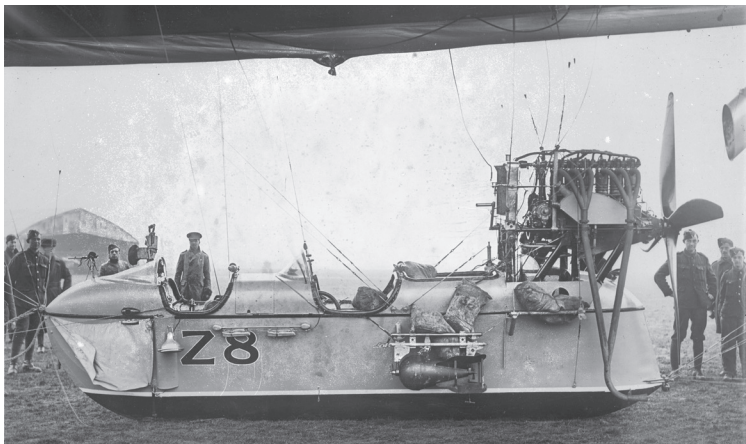
American Aviation Historical Society Journal, Spring 2022



The cadets then transitioned to rigid and non-rigid airships, such as this Sea Scout Zero (SSZ.37), which was eventually sold to the U.S. (Naval Heritage and History Command)

were among the craft there in which they would become experts. Theory of flight, navigation, signaling, patrolling, escorting, bombing and squadron maneuvers were among the arduous tasks they had to master, and they became so proficient flying airships they earned the admiration and respect of both their commanding officers in the Navy as well as their British comrades.

After being certified as dirigible pilots by the RNAS on February 27, 1918, the men were ordered to active duty with various Royal Naval air stations along the coast of England and Scotland as officers in the United States Naval Reserve Force (USNRF); however, since there was to be an expected delay before they would receive their official confirmation as Ensigns and Naval Aviators (Dirigibles) from Naval Headquarters in



Sea Scout Zero airships were prevalent along the south coast of England with flight frequently being eight hrs in duration. Here is a typical gondola of the Sea Scout Zero. (Provincial Archives of Alberta)

Washington, D.C., they were directed by Naval Headquarters in London to go ahead and start wearing ensign insignia on their uniforms.

In retrospect, their exploits as lighter-than-air pilots during the war have been rarely written about, overshadowed by speedier, more exciting airplanes, but the airships they flew were to be an effective countermeasure against German submarines and helped tip the balance of power at sea in favor of the allies. As a measure of proof how effective they became, letter after letter of commendation, and recommendations for decorations, were written for them.

Their achievements were such that on June 22, 1918, Brig. Gen. Edward M. Maitland, Superintendent of Airships, RAF, wrote a letter to Adm. William S. Sims, commander of all U.S. Naval personnel assigned to RNAS Dirigible stations, about eight of the men who had accumulated the

highest number of hours they had flown up to that time:

"It is desired to bring before your notice the most excellent work which has been done by the United States Naval officers who were lent for training. Since their graduation all these officers have done very useful patrol work. The work done by Ensign (Philip J.) Barnes has been especially noticeable; the officer, besides being the captain of his ship, is also in charge of a mooring-out station, which is run very efficiently and to the present station's entire satisfaction, and it is suggested that its officer deserves to receive special recognition.

With about half the complement strength, Ensign Barnes (in May and June 1918) operated the Royal Air Stations at Lowthorpe, Yorkshire to the utmost satisfaction of the Royal Air Force, for which success he was named to command His Majesty's C-9 non-rigid airship, and after a brilliant series of exploits with this ship he was further honored by the Admiralty.

During this time Ensign Barnes was also the first pilot to fly a single-engine (Sea Scout Zero) SSZ class airship for a period of more than twenty-four hours, winning the world's record at the time by a non-stop flight of twenty-five hours and forty minutes. Shortly after, not being content with this record, he increased it by making a sustained flight of thirty hours and eighteen minutes, a feat which brought a special commendation by the Commanding General. While convoying ships, in which he was engaged for a total of more than two hundred hours without the loss of a single ship from any cause, Barnes destroyed nine enemy mines which had been planted in the shipping lanes off the British coast."

Yours faithfully,
E. M. MAITLAND



Group photo of the 15 Naval Aviation cadets taken at RNAS Station Rochampton on December 1, 1917. Standing – Left to right: Eugene I. Wolfe, Alfred Gardner, Ralph Hawthorne Norris, Max. J. Baehr, Jr., Donald H. Merrill, Robert L. Piper, Jr., Goerge Dana, Anderson, Albert A. Bailey, Thomas R. Punnett. Seated - Left to right: Addison C. Burnham, Jr., Thomas E. McCracken, Philip J. Barnes, unidentified English officer, Norman J. Learned, Joseph Warren Homer, Jr., Harrison S. Goodspeed. (From the author's collection)

From the letter to Admiral Sims, here are the actual number of hours flown by those eight men.

	Hours	Minutes
Ens. George D. Anderson	368	0
Ens. Philip J. Barnes	254	20
Ens. Harrison E. Goodspeed	174	41
Ens. Joseph W. Homer, Jr.	301	10
Ens. Norman J. Learned	214	40
Ens. Donald H. Merrill	90	45
Ens. Ralph H. Norris	143	15
Ens. Robert L. Piper, Jr.	245	35

What is interesting in the report from Maitland, which lists the number of hours only eight of the men had flown up to that date, Ens. George Anderson had the most, Ens. Joseph Homer, was second, followed by Ens. Norman Learned and Ens. Robert Piper, who had flown over 200 hours each.

The flights were intended to be long and some could last over 20 hours. To maximize the amount of daylight for patrols, takeoffs could be made before dawn and landings might take place in near-total darkness, with only hurricane lanterns held by ground crews to provide basic illumination. Also, 20 hours is a long time to be airborne in an open cockpit, so the Royal Navy Air Service provided a standard ration pack for each crew member, with salted bacon or a sandwich, bar of chocolate and a flask of tea.

The Aviators

George Dana Anderson Naval Aviator #666 (LTA)

Born in Denver, Colo. on June 6, 1895 – Massachusetts Institute of Technology two years 1916 – three years at Boston University – Sigma Alpha Epsilon and Phi Delta Kappa. Entered as Seaman 2nd class at Boston, Mass., June 19, 1917. – August 19, 1917, entered Naval aviation ground school at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and completed course on October 14, 1917 – Sailed for England on October 28, 1917 – RNAS Roehampton for balloon pilot training – RNAS Cranwell for airship pilot training – Qualified as airship pilot by the RNAS on February 20, 1918 – Sent to RNAS East Fortune, Scotland, for seven months doing fleet reconnaissance, anti-submarine patrol, and convoy duty. Rated U.S. Naval Aviator #666 (LTA) and Ensign at Paris, France on May 16, 1918 – Flew approximately 500 hours of patrol duty. In October 1918 commissioned Lt.(jg.) and ordered to Kingsnorth, England, for course in design and



rigging of airships. On November 15, 1918, sent to U.S. Naval Aviation Headquarters, London, attached to the Bureau of Construction. Sailed from St. Nazaire, France and arrived in New York on December 24, 1918 – Assigned to Office Chief of Naval Operations in Washington, DC on April 1, 1919. On September 1, 1919, appointed Aide for Aviation Recruiting – Assigned to NAS Pensacola, Fla. – Honorable Discharge September 20, 1921. Boston University class of 1931. BS and MA Harvard Graduate School of Education 1937. Died January 18, 1984, in Fremont, California.

Max Joseph Baehr, Jr. Naval Aviator #1085 (LTA).

Born in Saint Paul, Neb., on February 17, 1896 – University of Berne, Switzerland, one year – University of Nebraska, three years Chemistry and on fencing team. Entered as Seaman 2nd Class in Washington on August 7, 1917 – On August 19, 1917, entered Naval aviation ground school at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Completed on October 14, 1917 – Sailed for England on October 28, 1917 – Sent to RNAS Roehampton for balloon training and RNAS Cranwell for airship pilot training. Qualified as airship pilot by RNAS on February 27, 1918 – Assigned to RNAS East Fortune – Rated Naval Aviator #1085 (LTA) and Ensign from Paris on May 7, 1918 – Ordered to NAS Paimboeuf – Assigned Naval Headquarters London – Released from active duty on May 10, 1919 – Honorable Discharge September 30, 1921, as Lt. USNRF. Died February 7, 1970, in Los Angeles, California.



Albert Adgate Bailey**Naval Aviator #1086 (LTA)**

Born in Newport News, Va., on September 3, 1894. – Randolph Macon College 1915, BA Academic – Johns Hopkins Univ. School of Medicine, Md., in 1921 – Kappa Sigma, The Pithotomy Club – Entered as Seaman 2nd Class at Baltimore, Md., on July 31, 1917 – On August 19, 1917, entered Naval aviation ground school at MIT, course completed October 14, 1917 – Sailed for England on October 28, 1917 – Qualified as RNAS airship pilot on February 27, 1918 – Rated U.S. Naval Aviator #1086 (LTA) and Ensign at Paris, France May 6, 1918 – RNAS Pembroke, England – USNAS Paimboeuf, France – USNAS Guipavas, France, where he was pilot, watch and divisional officer – NAS Hampton Roads, Va. – Honorable Discharge July 30, 1921, as Lt.(jg.). Died September 26, 1965, in Newport News, Virginia.



Zodiac Vedette dirigible VZ-13 – Returned to U.S. on January 22, 1919 – Released from active service February 3, 1919. Honorable Discharge June 24, 1921. Awarded U.S. Navy Cross, “*For distinguished service in the line of his profession as Commanding Officer of a dirigible engaged in patrol and convoy flights in the War Zone, in which operations he did exceptional work, pushing his flights to the limits of physical and material endurance.*” Died April 11, 1951.

Alfred Gardner**Naval Aviator #1093 (LTA)**

Born in New York, N.Y., on November 8, 1896 – Harvard University AB, Class of 1918 – Fox Club – Harvard Law School, LLB in 1922. Entered as Seaman 1st Class at Boston, Mass., April 3, 1917. Called to active duty on May 15, 1917 – August 19, 1917, entered Naval aviation ground school at MIT, completed October 14, 1917 – Sailed for England on October 28, 1917, and arrived November 4, 1917 – Sent to Balloon School, Royal Naval Air Station Roehampton on November 10, 1917 – RNAS Cranwell for airship training on December 20, 1917 – Qualified as airship pilot by the RNAS on February 27, 1918 – Ordered to Royal Naval Air Station Howden on March 2, 1918 – To Paris, France, on May 5 – Rated U.S. Naval Aviator #1093 (LTA) and Ensign at Paris, France, on May 7, 1918. – Assigned to U.S. Naval Air Station Paimboeuf for North Sea patrol duty. Editor of base paper called *Gas Valve* – Promoted to Lt.(jg.) October 1, 1918 – Returned to United States aboard the SS *Princess Juliana*. Arrived in New York on December 17, 1918 – Awarded U.S. Navy Cross, “*For distinguished service as CO of dirigibles engaged in patrol and convoy flights in the War Zone, in which operations he did exceptional work, pushing his flights to the limit of physical and material endurance and upon occasion broke all records for length of flight for this type of aircraft.*” Released from Active Duty, December 30, 1918. Honorable Discharge April 2, 1921. Died May 19, 1978.

**Philip Jameson Barnes****Naval Aviator #670 (LTA)**

Born in Minneapolis, Mich., on March 30, 1894 – Attended Williams College, Class of 1919 for two years. Enlisted as Seaman 2nd Class at Boston, MA March 6, 1917 – August 19, 1917, entered Naval aviation ground school at MIT where he was Detachment Commander, completed course October 14, 1917 – Sailed for England on October 28, 1917 – Qualified as airship pilot by the RNAS on February 27, 1918 – Assigned Command of RNAS Howden, England – Rated Naval Aviator #670 (LTA) and Ensign by Paris letter while aboard USS *Melville* in London on May 16, 1918 – Awarded Royal Air Force Cross by Edward, Prince of Wales on November 13, 1919 in Washington, D.C. Received Letter of Commendation from the U.S. Secretary of the Navy Franklin D. Roosevelt on November 11, 1920. Honorable Discharge March 5, 1921, as Lieutenant. Died June 17, 1956.

**Addison Center Burnham, Jr.****Naval Aviator #1088**

Born in Cambridge, Mass., on October 28, 1896 – Harvard University 1919 AB in English – Pi Eta Club. Enlisted as Seaman 2nd Class at Boston Navy Yard on June 27, 1917 – August 19, 1917, entered Naval aviation ground school at MIT – Sailed for England on October 28, 1917 – Balloon pilot training at Royal Naval Air Station Roehampton – Dirigible pilot training at RNAS Cranwell November 4, 1917. Ordered to RNAS Polegate, England, on February 20, 1917 – Qualified as airship pilot by RNAS on February 27, 1918 – Rated U.S. Naval Aviator #1088 (LTA) and Ensign at Paris, France, May 7, 1918 – Ordered to U.S. Navy Air Station Paimboeuf, France on May 10, 1918. In October 1918 was Captain of

**Harrison LaGrande Goodspeed****Naval Aviator #669 (LTA)**

Born in Ann Arbor, Mich., on August 23, 1894 – Univ of Michigan 1918 Engineering, two years – Track – Delta Kapa Epsilon. Entered as Seaman 1st Class at Newport, R.I., April 24, 1917 – August 19, 1917, entered Naval aviation ground school at MIT. Course completed October 14, 1917 – Sailed for England on October 28, 1917 – Sent to RNAS Station Roehampton. Next to RNAS Cranwell – Qualified as airship pilot by RNAS on February 27, 1918 – Sent to RNAS Howden – Rated U. S. Naval Aviator #669 (LTA) at Paris on May 16, 1918 – Assigned NAS Paimboeuf as Divisional Officer – Bay Shore, N.Y. – Honorable Discharge April 23, 1921, as Lt.(jg.). Died October 24, 1973, in Grand Rapids, Michigan.



**Joseph Warren Homer, Jr.
Naval Aviator #668 (LTA)**

Born in Boston, Mass., on April 11, 1897 – Attended MIT 1919, two years in engineering – Entered as Seaman 2nd Class at Boston, Mass., on June 26, 1917 – On August 19, 1917, entered Naval aviation ground school at MIT. Course completed October 14, 1917 – Sailed for England on October 28, 1917 – RNAS Roehampton and then RNAS Cranwell – Qualified as airship pilot by RNAS on February 27, 1918 – Ordered to Polegate, Sussex, for observation and convoy work over the English Channel. Captain of airship Sea Scout Zero SSZ.39. Rated U. S. Naval Aviator #668 (LTA) and Ensign at Paris, France, May 16, 1918 – August 13 to RNAS Portsmouth, then Howden and East Yorks – August 23 to RNAS East Fortune, North Berwick, Scotland, and was 3rd Officer on the R-29 the largest rigid airship in service at that time doing North Sea patrols of one or two days. On October 8, 1918, ordered to Wormwood Scrubbs, London, to study the design and construction of the R-34, which would make the first flight across the Atlantic on July 6, 1919. – Stricken with influenza and died of broncho-pneumonia at the U.S. Naval Hospital, London, England on November 9, 1918.



**Thomas Everett McCracken
Naval Aviator (LTA)**

Born in Brooklyn, N.Y., on March 30, 1898 – Columbia University 1919, two years in Math, Economics – Track – Zepa Psi. Enrolled as Seaman 2nd Class at Newport, R.I., on April 16, 1917. Applied for transfer to Naval Aviation in July – August 19, 1917, entered Naval aviation ground school at MIT, and was one of 15 graduates of Flight “C” at MIT. Completed ground school on October 14, 1917 - Left New York for England on October 28, 1917, aboard the “USMS” – Arrived RNAS Roehampton on November 6, 1917, for balloon pilot training until December 7, 1917 – RNAS Cranwell on December 16, 1917, for airship training. Qualified as airship pilot by RNAS on February 27, 1918 and received certificate #80A – In March, assigned to RNAS East Fortune, Scotland, as 2nd pilot of airships for anti-sub patrol where he did 182 hours of convoy and submarine duty – Received a letter of Commendation dated April 27, 1918, from the French Ministry of the Marine for being among the U.S. Navy crew that flew the French built dirigible Astra Torres (AT-1) on April 17, 1918, from Naval Air Station Paimboeuf for 25 hours and 43 minutes in a wind of 5 to 12 meters during the course of which three convoys were escorted for 13 hours and 50 minutes in a zone mined and patrolled. This length of time in the air was considered nothing short of phenomenal in 1918 when compared to what airplanes of that day could do – Rated U.S. Naval Aviator (LTA) in USNRF, Class 5 from Paris, France, on May 7, 1918. Ordered to U.S. Naval Air Station Paimboeuf, France, on May 10, 1918, where he was Intelligence Officer. Letter of Commendation dated June 18, 1918, for landing of airship AT-1 in adverse weather conditions following the loss of drag rope. By September 15, 1918, had logged 154 hours of anti-submarine patrol duty as first pilot of airship AT-1 – September 16, 1918, assigned to U. S. Naval Air Station Guipavas, France, and arrived September 25, 1918 – Appointed Lt.(jg.) USNRF on October 1, 1918 – November 8, 1918, detached from U. S. Naval Air Station Guipavas, France – November 12 to December 8, 1918, assigned to Royal Naval Air Force Station Kingsnorth, England, for special temporary duty as first pilot of rigid airship R-38 (ZR-2) that was being assembled for delivery to the U. S. Navy – On December 19, 1918, assigned to U.S. Naval Air Station Hampton Roads, Va. – Detached from active duty on March 3, 1919 – Honorable Discharge as Lt.(jg.) on April 16, 1921 – Died January 17, 1977, in Volusia, Florida.



**Norman Jackson Learned
Naval Aviator #673 (LTA)**

Born in Alba, Pa., on April 8, 1896 – Army-Navy Academy in Washington, D.C. 1917. Entered as Seaman 2nd Class at Washington, D.C., on August 2, 1917 – On August 20, 1917, entered Naval aviation ground school at MIT – Sailed for England on October 28, 1917 – Sent to RNAS Roehampton, England next to RNAS Cranwell – Qualified as airship pilot by RNAS on February 27, 1918 – Rated U.S. Naval Aviator #673 (LTA) and Ensign at Paris, France, on May 16, 1918 – Assigned to RNAS Felixstowe. Was part of “Dover Patrol,” arguably the world’s first combined-arms (land-sea-air) operation, set up to establish control over the English Channel – Arrived in New York aboard RMS *Aquitania* on February 28, 1919 – Assigned to Naval Aviation Detachment (lighter-than-air) in Akron, Ohio, as expert on blimp design and construction. Detailed to the Goodyear factory to oversee the production of the Navy’s new C-Class blimps – By July 1919 was flying American made blimps and was appointed second-in-command at NAS Cape May, N.J. (lighter-than-air) – Detached from Cape May and sent to NAS Bay Shore, Long Island, N.Y. (seaplanes) – Honorable Discharge August 1, 1921, as lieutenant – For his leadership role in sinking a U-boat on September 16, 1918, as captain of Sea Scout airship SSZ-1 on November 13, 1919, he was awarded the Royal Air Force Cross (AFC) in Washington, D.C., by Edward, Prince of Wales. Died August 28, 1965.



Note: Inadvertently, during the war a few pilots were never assigned an actual Naval Aviator rating number; however, Thomas Everett McCracken’s official date of designation was May 7, 1918, which should have entitled him to a rating number between 606 and 609.

Donald Hersey Merrill
Naval Aviator #672 (LTA)

Born in Somerville, Mass., on January 22, 1896 – Tufts University 1919, two years in Engineering. Entered as Seaman 2nd Class at Boston, Mass., March 29, 1917 – On August 19, 1917, entered Naval aviation ground school at MIT and completed October 14, 1917, as member of Flight C – Sailed for England on October 28, 1917. Sent to RNAS Roehampton and RNAS Cranwell – Qualified as airship pilot by RNAS on February 27, 1918 – Rated U.S. Naval Aviator #672 (LTA) and Ensign at London, May 16, 1918. Engaged in patrolling the west coast until July 1918. Sent to Paris, then assigned to U.S. Naval Air Station Paimboeuf – Captain of Zodiac Vedette dirigible VZ-7 – Returned to U.S. on June 22, 1919, and sent to NAS Norfolk, Va. – NAS Bay Shore, Long Island, N.Y. – NAS Hampton Roads 1919 – In August 1919 sent to Coco Solo, Panama – Honorable Discharge September 30, 1921, as Lt.(jg.). Died October 6, 1970, in Gardner, Massachusetts.



Ralph Hawthorne Norris
Naval Aviator #671 (LTA)
Naval Aviator #3022 (Heavier-than-Air)

Born in Chelsea, Mass., on March 29, 1893 – Graduated from Dartmouth College 1915, – Football – Kapa Sigma. Entered as Seaman 2nd Class at Boston, Mass. – August 19, 1917, entered Naval aviation ground school at MIT and completed the course on October 14, 1917 – Sent to RNAS Roehampton for balloon pilot training – On December 10, 1917, assigned to Royal Naval Air Station Cranwell and qualify as a dirigible pilot by the RNAS on February 27, 1918 – Assigned to Royal Naval Air Station Pembroke, Wales. From there to RNAS Mullion, RNAS Cornwall and next to U.S. NAS Paimboeuf. – Rated U.S. Naval Aviator #671 (LTA) and Ensign at London, England, May 16, 1918 – Unofficially credited with sinking two German submarines – Returned to the U.S. on December 15, 1918 – Assigned duty at Montauk Point, N.Y., in charge of the C-4 airship – Rockaway – Bay Shore, N.Y. – North Island NAS San Diego – USS *Burns* and *Aroostook* – NAS Pensacola – NAS Hampton Roads – USS *Ajax* – Balboa, Canal Zone – promoted to Lt. USN on January 2, 1922 – Qualified as Naval Aviator #3022 (heavier-than-air) at NAS Pensacola, Fla., on June 9, 1922 – Retired (medical) June 1, 1937 as Lt. Commander. Died April 19, 1958.



Robert Lawrence Piper, Jr.
Naval Aviator #667 (LTA)

Born in Tyrone, Pa., on September 3, 1894 – Univ of Michigan one year – Sigma Phi Epsilon. Served in England as pilot in the Royal Flying Corps prior to joining U.S. Naval Reserve Force –



Entered as Seaman 1st Class at Newport, R.I., on April 3, 1917 – and reported for active duty – On August 19, 1917, entered Naval aviation ground school at MIT and completed the course on October 14, 1917 – Royal Naval Air Station Roehampton & RNAS Cranwell – Qualified as airship pilot by RNAS on February 27, 1918 – Rated U. S. Naval Aviator #667 (LTA) and Ensign on May 16, 1918, by Commander, U.S. Naval Forces Operating in European Waters, 4 Place d'Lena, Paris, France – Reported RAF Station, Capel, England, on May 16, 1918 – Reported to RAF Station Kingsnorth, England, on July 8, 1918 – August 10, 1918, reported for temporary duty to U. S. Naval Headquarters, 30 Grosvenor Gardens, London, England – August 31, 1918, ordered to proceed to the U.S. Naval Air Station Paimboeuf, France, for duty where he was appointed ordnance officer. Last flight made December 7, 1918. Detached from active duty at Paimboeuf on December 11, 1918 – Return to the United States via St. Nazaire on the USS *West Alsek*, which arrived in New York on January 22, 1919 – February 21, 1919, on leave at home in Tyrone, Pa. – Reported for duty at NAS Cape May, N.J. to fly Heavier-Than-Air craft – Involved in accident flying Curtiss HS-2L, serial number #2256 – Naval Hospital Cape May, N.J. – U.S. Naval Hospital, League Island, Pa., for treatment on October 20, 1919 – Honorably discharged from active duty after treatment November 10, 1920 – Honorable Discharge on September 30, 1921. Died May 7, 1946, in Saint Petersburg, Florida.

Thomas Roosevelt Punnett
Naval Aviator #1033 (LTA)

Born in Catonsville, Md., on April 13, 1902 – Attended Hoosac School in Hoosic, N.Y. – Entered as Seaman 2nd class at Washington, D.C., July 31, 1917 – August 19, 1917, entered Naval aviation ground school at MIT and completed course on October 14, 1917 – Sent to RNAS Roehampton, and RNAS Cranwell, England for LTA training – Qualified as airship pilot by RNAS on February 27, 1918 – Rated U.S. Naval Aviator #1033 (LTA) and Ensign while at NAS Paimboeuf – NAS Brest, France – NAS Bay Shore, N.Y. – Separated as Ensign under honorable conditions May 7, 1919. Died April 5, 1963, in Buffalo, New York.

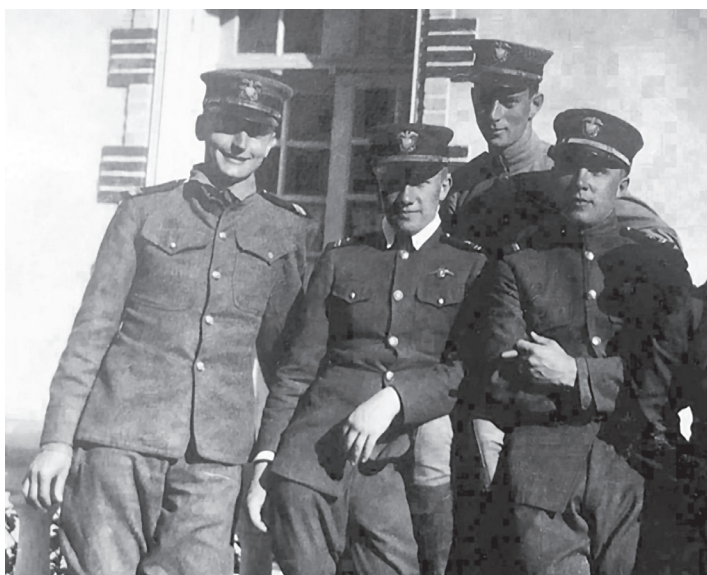


Eugene Lewis Wolfe
Naval Aviator #1105 (LTA)

Born in Baltimore, Md., on August 20, 1892 – Cornell University Class of 1914, BS in Mechanical Engineering, Soccer, Varsity Lacrosse Squad – Entered as Seaman 2nd Class at Baltimore, Md., on July 24, 1917 – Entered Naval aviation ground school at MIT – Sent to Royal Naval Air Station Roehampton in London – Sent to RNAS Cranwell, October 26, 1917. Completed airship pilot training with class R-31 on February 27, 1918 and received RNAS Airship Pilot certificate #82a –



Assigned to RNAS Howden on February 28, 1918 – Rated U.S. Naval Aviator #1105 (LTA) and Ensign at Paris, France on May 7, 1918 – On May 11, 1918, assigned to U.S. NAS Paimboeuf, France – Assigned to Naval Aviation Headquarters, Paris, France, on July 9, 1918 – September 7, 1918, assigned to U.S. NAS Brest, France – Promoted to Lt.(jg.) on October 1, 1918 – On December 13, 1918 was copilot of twin-engine French built airship “Captaine Caussin” that escorted the ship carrying President Woodrow Wilson into Brest Harbor along with American delegates for the Versailles Peace Conference – Departed Brest, France, aboard the SS Levithan on February 3, 1919 – Navy Department, Washington, D.C., on February 24, 1919 – Relieved from active duty April 30, 1919 – Honorable Discharge as Lt.(jg.) July 23, 1921. Died September 1945 in Ruxton, Maryland.



Left to right: Unknown, Thomas E. McCracken, Eugene L. Wolfe, Harrison L. Goodspeed. (From the author's collection)

Naval Aviator (LTA) Wings

In 2002, J. Duncan Campbell, a founding director of the Company of Military Historians, wrote in its quarterly journal, issue 213, about a “mystery” Navy wing badge that had been recently found on a WWI uniform that had belonged to Lt.(jg.) Eugene L. Wolfe, Naval Aviator 1105 (LTA), but it did not resemble any Naval Aviator badge he had ever seen before. It had U.S. letters mounted on top of an anchor just like U.S. Naval Reserve buttons and both wings were curved



downward, similar in style to wings worn by pilots in the Royal Flying Corps and Royal Air Force; consequently, he called a friend that collected Navy insignia who said to compare the wings with photographs of three U.S. Navy airship pilots in volume two of *New England Aviators 1914-1918*, by George Anderson, Addison Burnham and Joseph Homer. All three had identical wings on their uniforms and had been trained to fly airships in England.

Along with the uniform came an extensive collection of written material preserved by Wolfe that made it possible for Campbell to determine that the three men and Wolfe were in a unique group of 15 men that had volunteered to go to England on October 28, 1917, to learn how to fly airships. Hence, with a trace of speculation, the wings were made in England for airship pilots!

Campbell also realized that late in 1917, or early 1918, Naval Headquarters in London should have received a report that official wing badges had finally been authorized for Naval Aviators by the Secretary of the Navy, in Change 12 to *United States Navy Uniform Regulations* dated September 7, 1917. They were only described as being, “a Naval Aviators device, with winged non-pierced foul anchor two and three-quarters wide with letters ‘U.S.’ is hereby adopted to be worn by qualified Naval Aviators. The device will be issued by the Bureau of Navigation to officers and men of the Navy and Marine Corps who qualify as Naval Aviators and will be worn on the left breast.”



Wherefore, after the cadets were qualified as airship pilots by the Royal Naval Air Service in February 1918, wing badges were designed for them by J.R. Gaunt & Son Ltd., in keeping with the description given in Change 12, except they had “jumped the gun” a bit. However, they had no reason to hesitate, any oversight might have been avoided in the United States, but not in faraway England because in less than five weeks after Change 12 to Uniform Regulations was announced, a Change 14 was made, that repeated the description in Change 12, except for the following, “the letters ‘U.S.’ have been omitted.”



Change 14 to Uniform Regulations was also published in USN Bureau of Navigation Circular 40-17, dated November 20, 1917, but who can say if or when Naval Headquarters over in London got the news?



Embroidered wings of LTJG Eugene L. Wolfe, Naval Aviator 1105 (LTA) made by J. R. Gaunt of London. (Courtesy of Russel B. Wilson)



Embroidered wings of Ensign Robert L. Piper, Jr., Naval Aviator 667 (LTA) made by J. R. Gaunt of London. (Courtesy of Michael B. Piper)

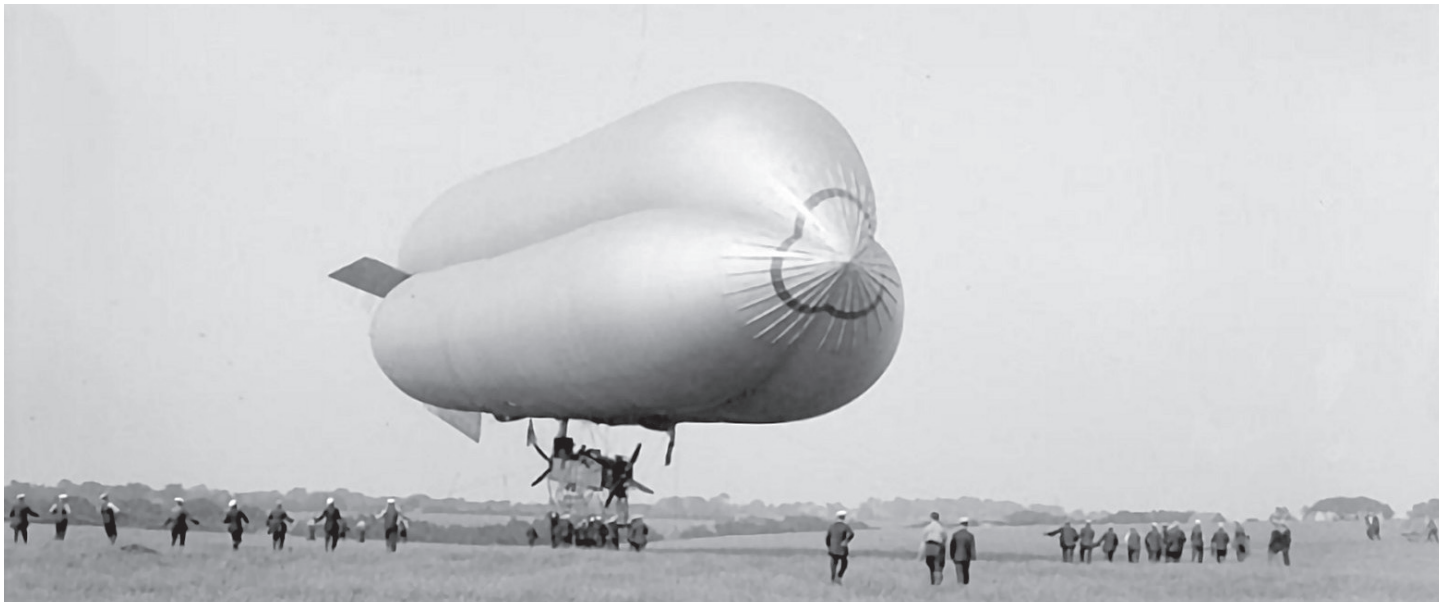
The company J. R. Gaunt of London employed several highly skilled woman who made all types of hand-embroidery insignia. However, although the basic design of the hand-embroidered wings worn by of the men mentioned in the article was the same, the wings were not always 'exactly' identical depending on which woman had made them (note the slight differences in the patches above).



WWI Uniform of Lt (jg) Eugene L. Wolfe (Courtesy of Russell B. Wilson)



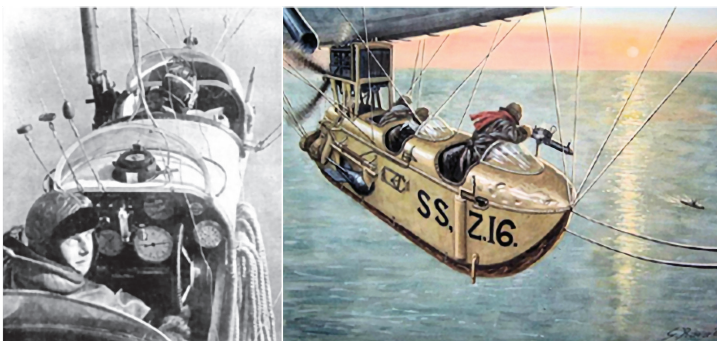
U. S. Naval Aviators often wore wing badge insignia that had been made from thin gold-bullion wire thread that had to be hand-embroidered on a fabric background; however, they could also wear all metal wings that had been stamped out of a thin sheet of gold or bronze. Wings made of bronze by J. R. Gaunt of London. (Courtesy of Russell B. Wilson)



The 60-metre long Coastals had a top speed of 47 mph, but a flight duration of up to 20 hours. The five-man crew consisted of a pilot, a coxswain, an observer, a radio operator and a mechanic. Here C-23a departs on a patrol. (From the author's collection)

Flying an Airship

Below is a gondola, also called the control car, for an SSZ type airship. The gondola provided maximum comfort and freedom for observation over a wide swath of ocean and carried a three-man crew – the forward position being occupied by an observer who was responsible for a wireless transmitter using Morse code, the Lewis machine gun, and two 65-lb bombs. The pilot sat in the middle behind the observer, and the engineer sat in the back directly in front of a rear-mounted, water cooled, six cylinder, 75-hp Rolls-Royce Hawk engine that drove a nine-foot diameter four-bladed pusher propeller. The top speed was about 50 mph. Average range was about 900 miles.



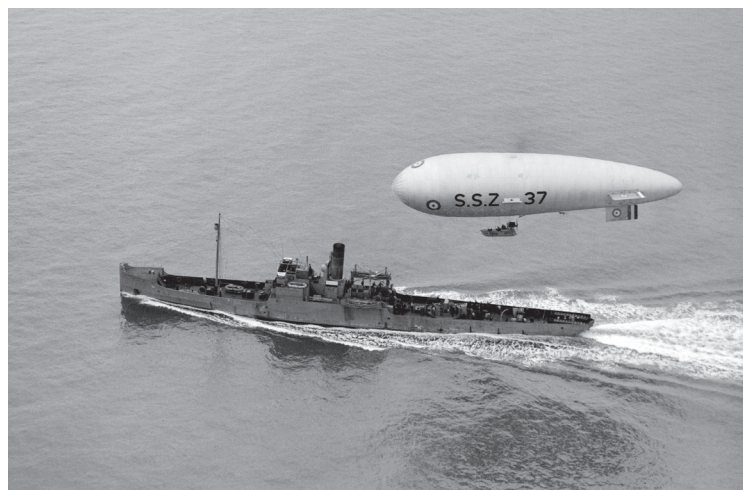
The gondola of the Sea Scout Zero. (From the author's collection)

The average duration of patrols was about eight hours but there were several instances when they exceeded 24 hours and the record, set by SSZ.39, was 50 hours and 55 minutes.

The ground crew would lift the gondola up and walk the airship out of the aerodrome to a spot suitable for takeoff. The process of ballasting the airship was then carried out. When the gondola started to lift a little the ground crew would slacken up. Ballast is either taken in or thrown out as required, so that

the gas bag could barely lift the gondola off the ground. The engine would then be started before the ground crew would let go. With the elevators tilted slightly up the ship would start to rise, always into the wind. On reaching about 400 feet the pilot would straighten out, for it was at this height that patrols were mainly flown. The ship would be steered to the desired compass heading in normal conditions, but in heavy winds the ship would be very buoyant in the air and could be difficult to handle.

After the mission was completed and the ship returned to the air station, the aircrew would signal the ground crew that they were ready to land. The pilot would then blow air into the forward ballonnet driving the gas aft and making the nose heavier than the tail. After the ship was approximately 30 feet above ground the pilot would then straighten out, shut the engine off and drop the trailing rope for the ground crew to grab and haul the ship down.



SSZ.37 flies over a coastal patrol boat. (Imperial War Museum, Q48005)

FLYING AIRSHIPS; a Naval Aviator (LTA) Writings

We have some first-hand accounts experienced by these aviators in the form of extracts from letters sent home by Ens. Joseph W. Homer.

London, Sunday, Dec. 9, 1917

We have made our solo balloon flights and are now ready for balloon pilot's licenses. It was a lot of fun going up in a balloon all alone, 'was up over the clouds 4,000 or 5,000 feet where you can't see the earth or anything. That isn't high, but the balloons we use aren't much good except for training. From now on we will be using the real blimps.

The other night we went up for a night flight and went over London. We got home about midnight, and about three hours later the air raid of 25 Goth's started (Gotha twin-engine bombers). . . .

Our job will be to escort transports and supply ships through the danger zone into port, by going out to meet the ships in our airships. . . .

The real front is only about 80 miles from here, and yesterday we heard the guns thundering all day. . . . But you could never know there was a war here – it's so peaceful. . . .

And beyond the hills the War, in all its horror of the latest enormous Hun offensive – I don't feel a bit like killing anyone, but in a few minutes an orderly will report my ship ready, and I'll slide over the hills and away in the Channel to hunt for U-boats.

Polegate, May 12, 1918

Yesterday, I went on patrol at 6 A.M. and got into the fog (we are almost always out of sight of land) and flew around for about four hours. I was just going to lay a course for home when I sighted land to the south where it ought not be. On investigation it was Cape Barfleur. So, I flew inland until I reached a French Airship Station and landed there for a few minutes. . . . Then I went home (about 80 miles, arriving at 7 P.M. 13 hours over the water). It was just a matter of sticking to it Coming home I laid a course and arrived within two miles of the place I headed for, steering 70 miles out of the 80 by compass only, so you see you can get along pretty well without seeing land. . . . Am Captain of a ship of my own now, her name is "Sea Scout Zero 39" and she has "SSZ 39" in enormous letters on the envelope. . . .

Have been for five hours without seeing anything except gray sea below and gray fog all around – and have come home when it was so thick that I couldn't see the station a quarter of a mile off – just had to find the beach, then find the town I knew, then follow roads and railways about a 100 feet off the ground until I got to the station.

Sunrise viewed from the air in his airship (undated)

The sunrise over the clouds is gorgeous – sublime – incomparable – untellable. One doesn't feel very poetic after one has been out in the darkness and fog all night – but when the sun rises and lights up the tops of the mist one forgets the war., the cold, the cramped legs, and glories in the beauty of the scene. The sun comes up out of its cloud of gray, turning it to a shell pink. Then, as it climbs higher, it sets the whole sea of clouds sparkling and seeing – a myriad of rainbows, a mass of majestic, rolling, heaving beauty. There is no use in my trying to explain it – one must be in it and surrounded by it – the only bit of humanity in all the vast firmament – then only can it be appreciated.

On September 8, 1918, Ensign Homer wrote from East Fortune, where he had been made 3rd Officer of the RNAS Ridged Airship R-29:

Skipped all intervening types of ships and have gone from the smallest to the largest ship in the service. The C.O. of my ship is a peach of a boy and I'm all happy. It seems funny to go to bed a thousand feet up in the air! But very nice. . . . We do patrols of one or two days usually. . . .

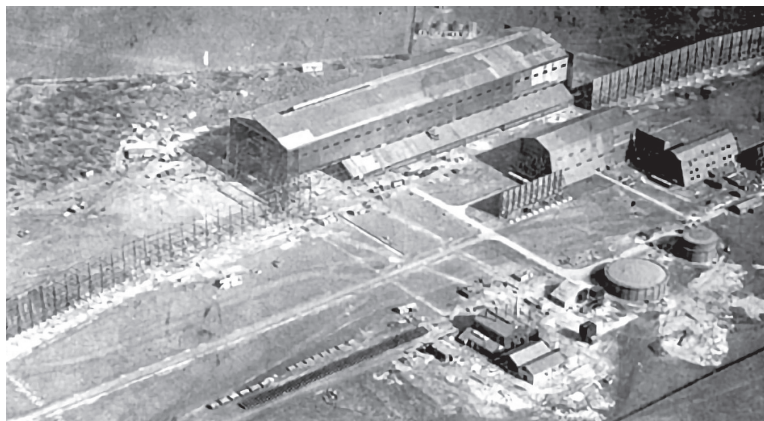
Previously, Ensign Homer's Commanding Officer had written on August 17, 1918:

GROUP HEADQUARTERS, ROYAL AIR FORCE
WARSASH, HANTS

My Dear Ensign Homer,

It is with much regret that you leave this Command to go to bigger ships. However, it is all for your good, and that is the only consolation that I have personally. During the time you have been under my command at Polegate and the Mooring-out Stations you have set a very high example in all-round efficiency in anti-submarine patrols and you are destined to do big things, I think, before this war is over. Au revoir, and the best of good luck go with you. I am

Yours very sincerely
FRASER
Lt.Col., R.A.F.



Royal Naval Air Service Air Station Cranwell, England airship hangar. To the right are the kite balloon and SSZ coastal sheds. There are two windbreaks built at both ends of the hangar to shield the airships when leaving and entering. (From the author's collection)



Naval Air Station Brest, France. (Naval History and Heritage Command)

U.S. Naval Airship Stations Overseas

In the European theater during WWI airships operated only from air stations located in England and France, from which they carried out anti-submarine warfare by patrolling and escorting convoys in the waters of the English Channel and North Sea.

The air stations that would eventually be operated by the U.S. Navy were located in Brest, Guipavas, Gujan, La Pallice, La Trinite, Paimboeuf (all in France) and Castletownbere, Berehaven Harbor in Ireland. Several other air stations were planned but never materialized.

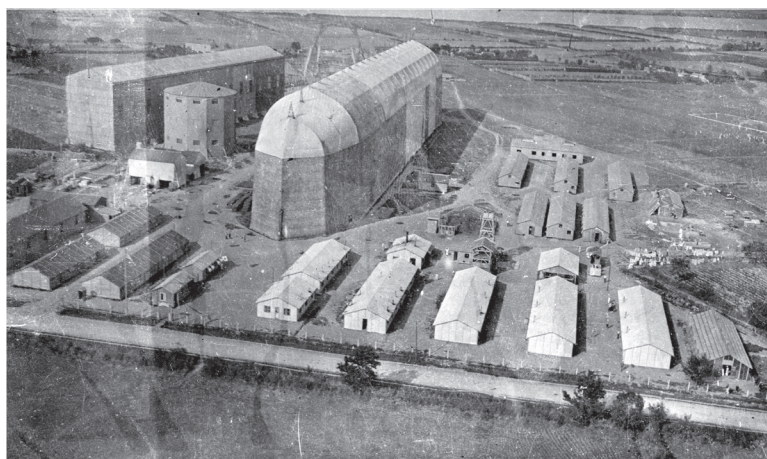
Naval Air Station Paimboeuf was the foremost dirigible station on the French coast. Initially under French control until March 1918, its purpose was to supplement the patrols and escorts in the vicinity of the mouth of the Loire River and give protection to troop ships.

The first U.S. Navy patrols from Paimboeuf were made on February 24, 1918, while the air station was still under French control. Its patrol area extended from Brest to Rochefort but it was not until April or May that it became an efficient operational unit and as more Americans arrived, the

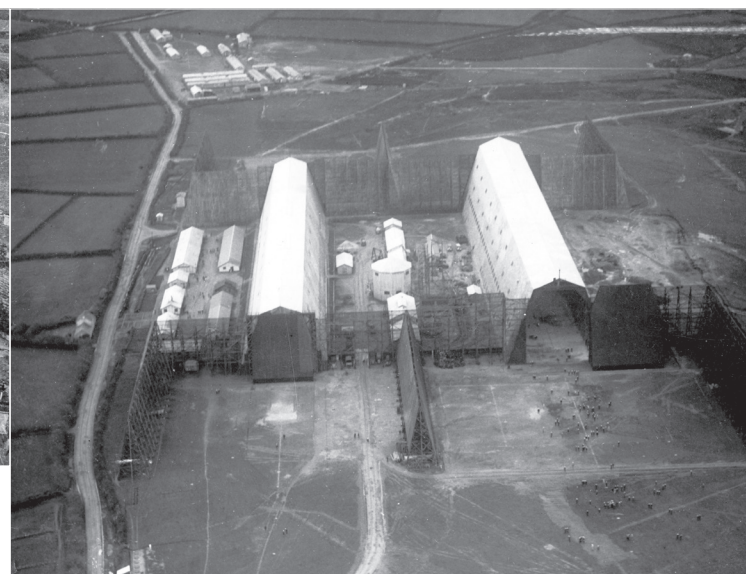
French gradually withdrew their personnel for duty elsewhere. During this period of transition, the station was under dual control. Paimboeuf was officially established a U.S. Naval Air Station on March 1, 1918. One dirigible, the French built Astra Torres (AT-1), was turned over to the Navy at the same time. Eventually the Navy would acquire five French airships in all.

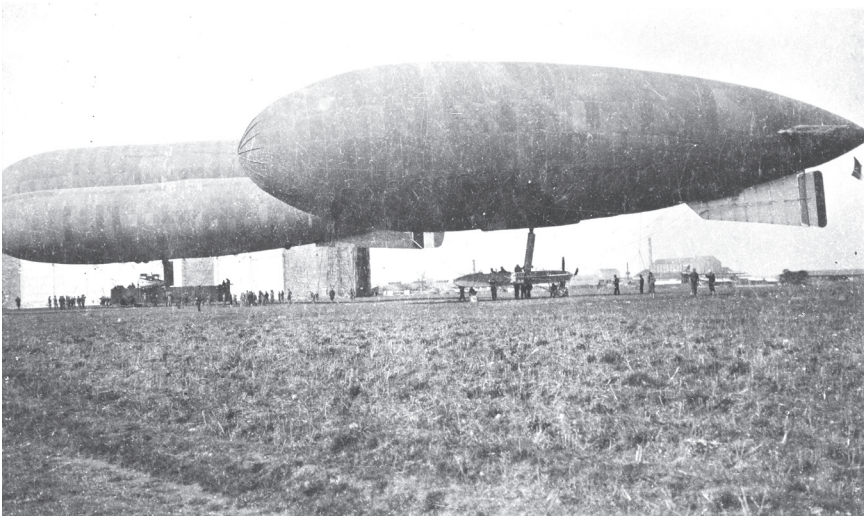
Paimboeuf engaged in a variety of operations with its assigned dirigibles. In a report written by Ens. Addison Burnham, "Large incoming convoys, both troopships and cargo ships, used Belle Isle, some 40 miles above Paimboeuf as a landfall. They would split there and proceed both up and down the coast. These large convoys, coming once or twice a week, were of course our first task, and subject to weather conditions, we met them from 10 to 90 miles out. Next in importance, were the daily convoys, eight to 20 or 30 ships, passing up and down the coast." Besides patrol duties and training, Paimboeuf performed experimental work. On June 9, 1918, a submarine listening device was tested aboard the airship Astra Torres (AT-1).

On August 17, 1918, the Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Franklin D. Roosevelt, visited the station and made a flight in the AT-1.



Naval Air Station Paimboeuf (above) and Naval Air Station Guipava, France (right). (Naval History and Heritage Command)





The French designed Astra-Torres AT-1 that Roosevelt flew in, behind Zodiac Group Vedette Zodiac VZ-3 at NAS Paimboeug. (Naval History and Heritage Command, NH 112915)

was being chased down on the surface until she dived at which time the drifters having fired repeatedly on the submarine began dropping depth-charges. Then Ensign Learned's airship began dropping bombs over its location and eventually three loud explosions occurred deep below the water's surface and a large black oil slick announced the U-boat's destruction and all her crew. Whatever the cause of the submarine's final demise, all service vessels and Ensign Learned's airship shared in the victory."

What was the significance of Learned's effort that led to the sinking of a German U-boat? He was the only U. S. Naval Aviator to direct surface craft that led to the sinking of a U-boat during the war.

For his leadership role in sinking the U-boat, on the morning of November 13, 1919, at an official ceremony held in the Ballroom of the Belmont House in Washington D.C., the Prince of Wales, personally bestowed the Royal Air Force Cross medal on Lieutenant Learned and two other U.S. Navy airship officers for their distinguished service with the Royal Navy Airship Service, Ens. Philip Jameson Barnes and Lt. Comdr. Zachary Landsdowne. Ensign Barnes had set a world endurance record flying 30 hours and 18 minutes in Sea Scout Zero airship, SSZ.23, over Royal Naval Air Station Lowthorpe, near Newcastle-on-Tyne, Yorkshire, England, on May 29 and May 30, 1918. Lt. Commander Landsdowne had served as U.S. Naval Liaison Officer to the Admiralty in London during the war, and as a U.S. Navy observer aboard the British rigid airship R-34 that flew the world's first non-stop trans-Atlantic crossing in July 1919. Landsdowne would later command the ill-fated rigid airship ZR-1 USS *Shenandoah*. ➔

Sinking a U-Boat

Sinking a U-boat was a rare occurrence and during WWI, only two U-boats were sunk by the U.S. Navy. According to all official reports, across all U.S. naval anti-submarine operations in the European theater against both German and Austrian forces, a total of 12 German U-boats were confirmed damaged or seriously damaged during U.S. Navy operations.

Ens. Norman J. Learned, Naval Aviator 673, was stationed at the Royal Naval Air Station at Folkestone in Kent, Southern England. On the afternoon of September 16, 1918, as captain of Sea Scout Zero airship - SSZ.1 he took off to fly a routine anti-submarine patrol mission over the English Channel. At a point between Cap Griz Nez, France and RNAS Folkestone, he spotted a streak of oil on the water, stretching out into the distance directly toward England. Suspecting the presence of a German U-boat, he followed the oil slick for half an hour until it ended in a widening patch, indicating that the U-boat was now stationary. At that location, about seven miles offshore from Folkestone, he signaled by wireless radio for a nearby fleet of patrol boats called drifters. Drifters were privately owned fishing trawlers requisitioned by the Royal Navy and redeployed as minesweepers and anti-submarine patrol boats. They released depth charges over the spot and Ensign Learned dropped his two bombs. These were followed by two explosions at once and another a little later. The U-boat was sunk, and it was later learned to be U-103, one of the last of 203 U-boats destroyed by British and Allied forces during the war.

An eyewitness to the U-boat sinking named Duncan McMillan, was a deckhand aboard one of the drifter named *HMD Calceolaria*. Recalling the event, he said,

"The highlight of Calceolaria's war time career came on September 16, 1918, when drifters HMD Calceolaria, Young, Crow, East Holme, Fertility, and Pleasants were ordered to hunt down and follow SSZ.1 which was on coastal patrol in the English Channel. A German U-boat



Fishing trawler call a drifter used by the Royal Navy for anti-submarine patrols. (From the author's collection)