

USS FLORIDA Supports 1919 NC-4 Transatlantic Flight

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In April 1913 the London newspaper The Daily Mail offered a prize of £10,000 to "the aviator who shall first cross the Atlantic in an aeroplane in flight from any point in the United States of America, Canada or Newfoundland and any point in Great Britain or Ireland" in 72 continuous hours". Glenn Curtiss designed a seaplane, 'America', for the competition but the competition was suspended due to the outbreak of war in 1914.

Late in WW I, the US Navy recognized a need for a patrol aircraft to provide cover for American shipping in the Atlantic. The design was completed in September 1917 and four NC (Navy-Curtiss) flying boats were ordered featuring an advanced hydrodynamic hull design powered by three 400 hp Liberty engines. NC-1 flew for the first time on 4 October 1918 but the three-engine design was deemed inadequate for transatlantic flying and development of NC-2 to 4 was suspended while a fourth engine was included in the design. NC-2, with engines mounted as tandem pairs, flew on 12 April 1919, but the design proved unsatisfactory. NC-3 and NC-4 flew on 23 April and 30 April, respectively. These planes retained the original three-engine configuration with the fourth engine added as a 'pusher' behind the central engine [Figure 1]. NC-1 was later reconfigured using parts from NC-2. It was decided to enter the NC machines in the renewed Daily Mail transatlantic competition.

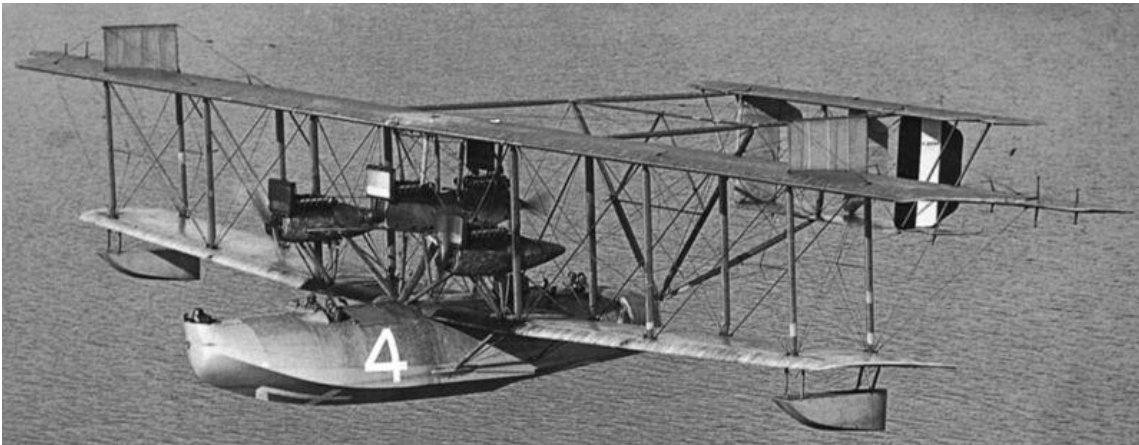


Figure 1: NC-4 showing the three in-line engines and the central 'pusher' engine

In April 1919, the Atlantic battleship fleet returned to New York City after maneuvers in the South Atlantic. The procession into New York Harbor, past the Statue of Liberty, was led by the destroyers DALE (DD 290) and FLUSSER (DD 289) followed by a column of eight dreadnoughts: OKLAHOMA (BB 37), NEVADA (BB 36), ARIZONA (BB 39), FLAGSHIP PENNSYLVANIA (BB 38), UTAH (BB 31), FLORIDA (BB 30), NORTH DAKOTA (BB 29) and DELAWARE (BB 28). In addition to the battleships, the

fleet included thirty-two destroyers, numerous supply ships and several submarines. The mighty armada came to anchor in the Hudson and North Rivers for a two-week respite for the 30,000 sailors. During this period, their next deployments were decided and USS FLORIDA was assigned to support the transatlantic flight [Figure 2].

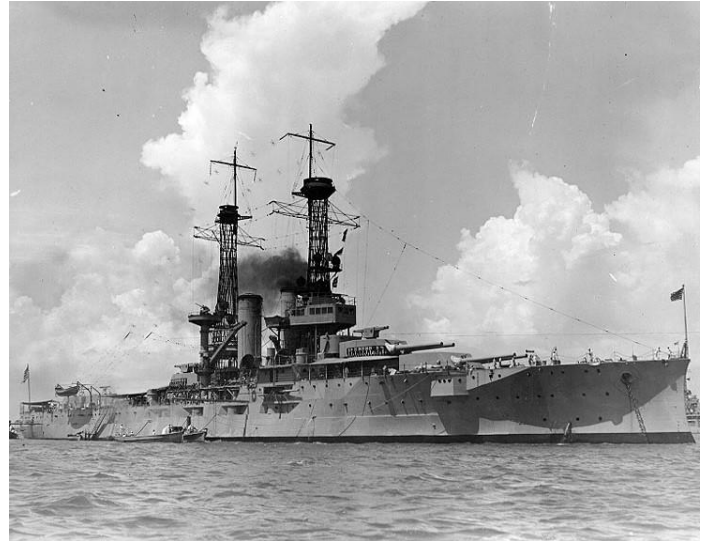


Figure 2: USS FLORIDA (BB 30), 23 April 1919.

The deployment of USS FLORIDA (BB 30) will be followed throughout the balance of this article through the letters of Seaman R.J. Johnson to his parents in Webster, New York. The letters span the time from the arrival of the battleship fleet at New York City to completion of the transatlantic flight of NC-4 at Lisbon, Portugal.

Letter 1, on pictorial Knights of Columbus/ War Activities stationery, is dated April 24, 1919 and is enclosed in a #6 envelope with 3¢ US tied by Locy Type 1z U.S. NAVY APR 24, 1919 hc, [Figure 3]. Relevant content: "We are laying here in the North River and expect to coal ship

tomorrow. We take on 1500 tons and two months stores... the way things look they are going to scatter ships across the Atlantic for that flight. I don't know just where we will go."

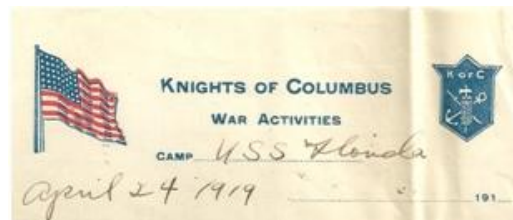


Figure 3: Knights of Columbus letterhead

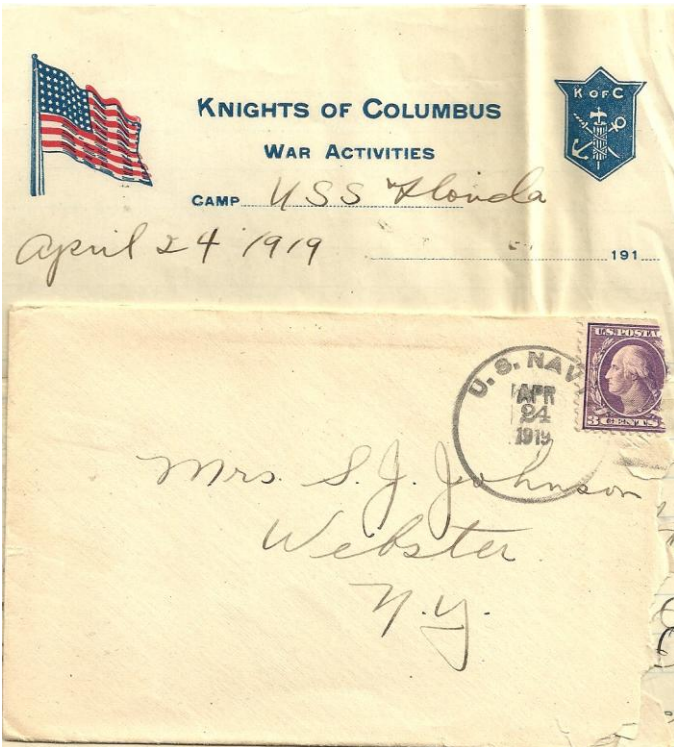


Figure 3: Envelope and enclosure, 24 April 1919

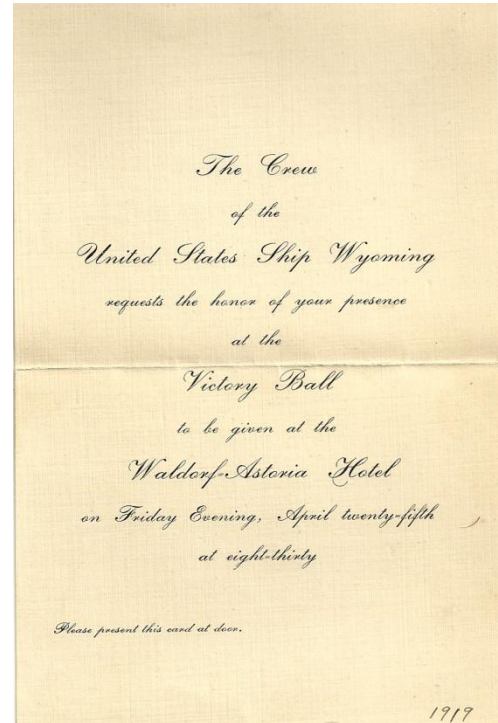


Figure 6: Invitation to Victory Ball at Waldorf-Astoria

Letter 2, on pictorial Knights of Columbus/War Activities stationery, dated 27 April 1919. Enclosed in a #6 envelope with 3¢ U.S. tied by Locy Type 1z, U.S. NAVY APR 28, 1919 hc, [Figure 4]. An invitation to the “Victory Ball” sponsored by USS WYOMING [Figure 5], at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel on 25 April is also enclosed, [Figure 6].

Letter 2 Relevant content: “the New York paper yesterday showed a diagram of where the ships will be stationed. USS FLORIDA is the furthest over, (between Ponta Delgado, Azores) and the coast of Ireland.”, [Figure 7].

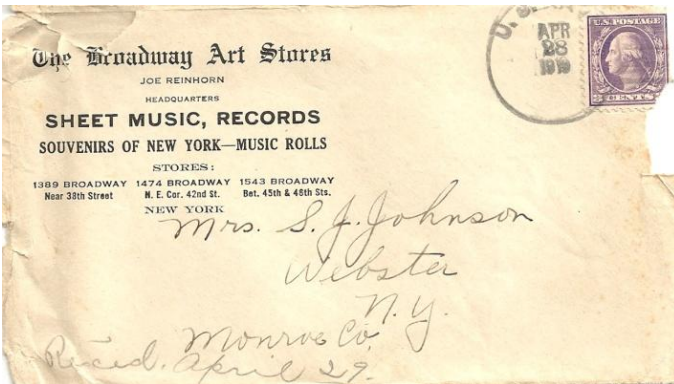


Figure 4: Locy Type 1z, U.S. Navy hand cancel 28 APR 1919.

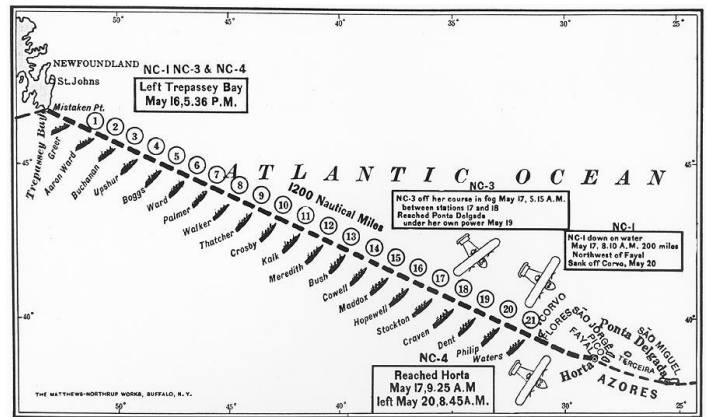


Figure 7: Newspaper graphic showing stationing of US Navy ships between Trepassey, Newfoundland and Ponta Delgado, Azores.



Figure 5: USS FLORIDA in foreground and USS WYOMING

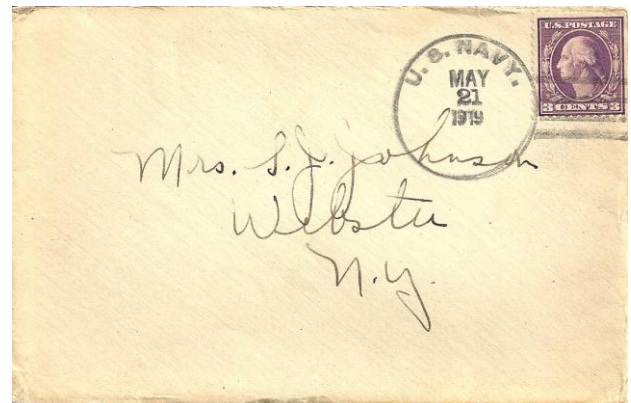


Figure 8: Cover from USS FLORIDA with 3¢ US 21 MAY 1919 hc.

Letter 3 is sequential covering the duration of the cruise, beginning from May 5, 1919. It is enclosed in an envelope with 3¢ US tied by Locy Type 1z U.S. NAVY MAY 21,1919 hc.

Relevant content:

May 5th: “This makes our 6th day out. I suppose we will lie out here until they have made that flight”. [Note: USS FLORIDA departure April 30th]

May 8th: “We are somewhere off the coast of southern France”. [Note: NC-1 and 3 reached Halifax, Nova Scotia; NC-4 at Chatham, Massachusetts]

May 12th: “We are still riding the waves waiting for the flight. We are about 600 miles north of the Azore Islands.” [Note: NC-1 and 3 now at Trepassey, Newfoundland]

May 17th: “We have headed for the Azores to take on coal and supplies. We expect to get there on the 19th.” [Note: NC-4 arrived Horta, Azores on the 19th; NC-1 sunk]

May 20th: “We arrived at the Azores this afternoon. We are the only battleship but there are destroyers. We are anchored about a mile from ...'Ponta De Gada' (sic). [Note: NC-4 arrived Ponta del Gada on this date]

“We are going to coal ship tomorrow (May 21st) and get under-way the latter part of the week”. [Note: MAY 27th, NC-4 left Azores and Arrived Lisbon, with USS FLORIDA on station – the first American Transatlantic Flight. May 31st, NC-4 arrived Plymouth, England completing the flight.]

POSTSCRIPT

14 June 1919, Capt. John Alcock and Lieut. Arthur Brown made the first non-stop flight across the Atlantic, thereby winning the *Daily Mail* prize. They flew a Vickers-Vimy bomber non-stop, from St. John's, Newfoundland to Clifden, Ireland, a distance of 1960 miles in 16 hours, 12 minutes.

REFERENCES

1. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/NC-4>
 2. Nevin, David. *The Pathfinders* (The Epic of Flight series). Alexandria, Virginia: Time Life Books, 1980. ISBN 978-1-84447-032-7.
 3. Smith, Richard K. *First Across: The U.S. Navy's Transatlantic Fight of 1919*. Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1973. ISBN 978-0-87021-184-3.
 4. www.aviation-history.com/navy/nc4.html, pp. 1-8.
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