

Celebrating the First Trans-Atlantic Flight. No, It Wasn't Lindbergh's.

A Navy seaplane flew from Queens to the Azores in 1919, eight years before the Spirit of St. Louis. It took three weeks. It was not nonstop.



By **James Barron**

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The first trans-Atlantic flight? Lindbergh seems the obvious answer. But that would be wrong.

Yes, Charles A. Lindbergh belongs in the history books — for the first nonstop, solo flight across the Atlantic.

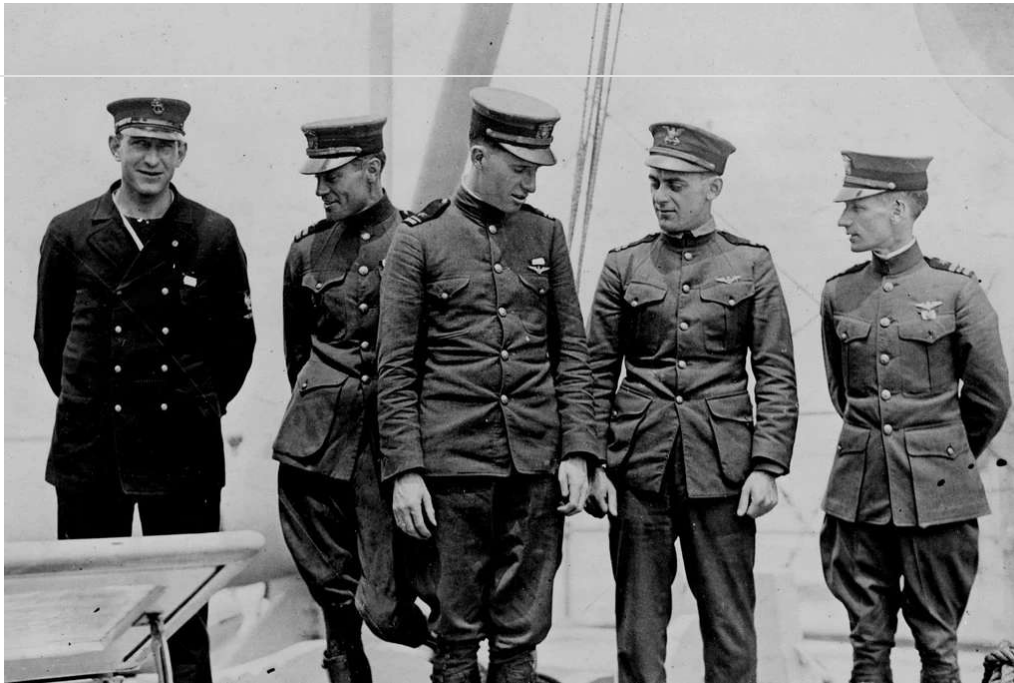
But note the words nonstop and solo. Lindbergh was not the first aviator to cross the Atlantic Ocean. His record-setting achievement was flying to Europe alone in the cockpit without stopping.

So, who got there first? Six Navy and Coast Guard crewmen in 1919, eight years before him. Their mammoth seaplane, known as the NC-4, left Rockaway Beach in Queens 100 years ago Wednesday.

Theirs was no nonstop flight — they stopped in several places along the way for repairs and refueling — and the going was slow. Lindbergh made the trip in less than a day and a half. They took almost three weeks. At every stop, they had to wait for parts to be delivered or bad weather to clear before they could take off again.

At the time, what they accomplished was front-page news, including in The New York Times. But unlike the Wright brothers or Amelia Earhart later on, the NC-4 and its crew have been largely forgotten.

“This was lost to history, eclipsed by Lindbergh,” said Robert Schwach, a retired New York City police lieutenant. “It just didn’t seem fair.”



The NC-4 crew's effort was "lost to history, eclipsed by Lindbergh," said Robert Schwach, a retired police lieutenant who put the exhibit together.
National Air and Space Museum Archives

Mr. Schwach — the deputy chief of staff for Eric Ulrich, a City Council member whose district includes the Rockaways — has made remembering the NC-4 a mission. He has assembled an exhibition about the NC-4 at the T7 Gallery at Fort Tilden, a former Army base near where the NC-4 took off. The exhibit will open on Wednesday after a ceremony at nearby Riis Landing at 10 a.m., the hour at which the plane lurched across Jamaica Bay and climbed into the sky.

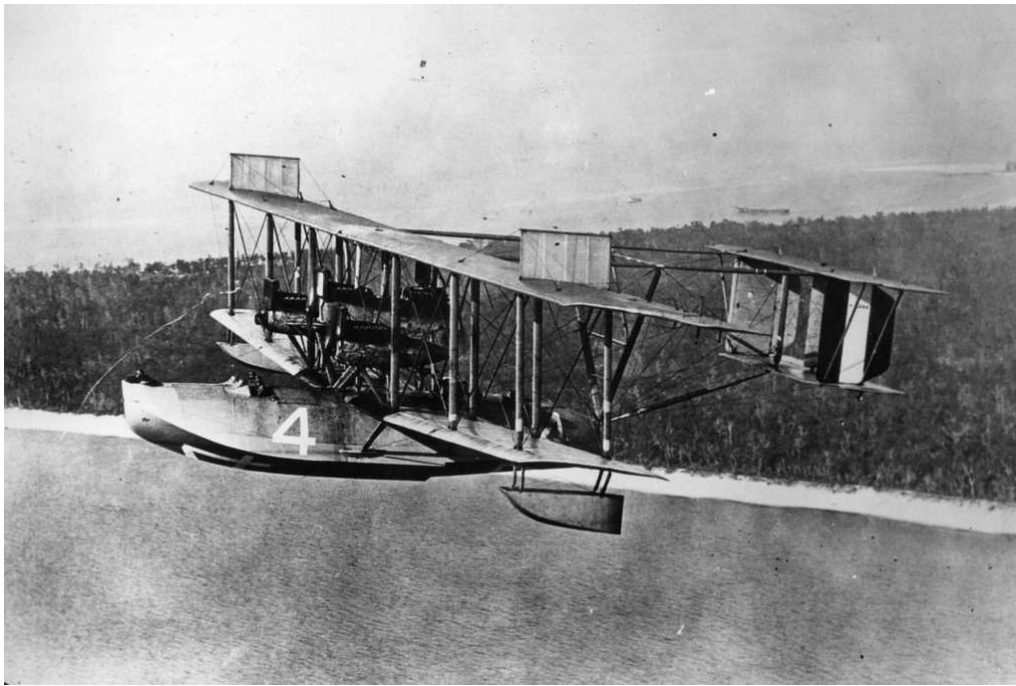
"The goal, really, is to bring the whole story out of history's shadow," Mr. Schwach said.

The story is one of a plane that looked like a mash-up of the Wright brothers' Kitty Hawk and a ship. The NC-4 had biplane wings atop a boat-shaped wooden hull. Its 126-foot wingspan was nine feet longer than that of a modern Airbus A320.

The NC-4 took off with two similar planes, the NC-1 and the NC-3. They had been planned as reconnaissance aircraft to fly over the water, looking for German U-boats, in World War I. But the armistice had been declared before the planes were ready to go.

The Navy, with an assistant secretary named Franklin D. Roosevelt cheering the effort, decided to fly the planes to Europe — and into the record books. Roosevelt had taken a nine-minute ride in another NC plane, the NC-2, during a visit to the Rockaways in April 1919. The NC-2 was dismantled soon after. Components of the NC-2 went into the NC-1, which had been damaged during a storm in Jamaica Bay.

By then, the race was on for the first trans-Atlantic flight. The Daily Mail, in London, was offering a prize of 10,000 pounds, equivalent to about \$670,000 in 2019. Military aviators were not eligible; the contest was open only to private fliers.



The NC-4 had biplane wings atop a boat-shaped hull. Its 126-foot wingspan was nine feet longer than that of a modern Airbus A320. Hulton Archive, via Getty Images

But the Navy's sights were set on a place in history, and the Navy deployed its resources in case there was trouble. A string of destroyers moved into positions along the route, each about 50 miles from the next — close enough, officials hoped, to handle rapid rescues, if necessary.

For the NC-1 and the NC-3, the first leg of the flight was uneventful. They arrived in Halifax, Nova Scotia, as planned, about 10 hours after leaving Queens.

But the NC-4 went down in the waters off Cape Cod, only a couple of hours after leaving Queens. One engine had radiator trouble; another exploded. The NC-4 could not fly on the two remaining engines, but it could sail. "They acted as a boat, basically, using the engine to push them in the water" to the naval air station in Chatham, Mass., Mr. Schwach said. There, mechanics got the engines working again.

Between the repairs and bad weather, the crew had to wait six days before departing for Halifax on the morning of May 14.

Later that day, the NC-4 had propeller problems. Mr. Schwach credits someone who was just along for the ride — not officially a member of the crew — with requisitioning ship propellers that were

adapted for the NC-4: Richard E. Byrd, then a junior Navy officer who had been working on navigational methods and equipment for the NC seaplanes. He became famous a few years later as a polar explorer.

From Halifax, the NC-4 flew to Trepassey, Newfoundland, where it caught up with the NC-1 and the NC-3 — and Byrd disembarked. “From Newfoundland on was the longest leg,” Mr. Schwach said, “and they needed the least amount of weight.”



Mr. Schwach heard about the NC-4's feat from his father, who served in the Navy.
Heather Walsh for The New York Times

The NC-1 and the NC-3 went down in the water after leaving Newfoundland and were damaged; the crews were rescued. But the NC-4 kept going, though it did not make it to the planned landing spot in the Azores, the islands in the North Atlantic off Portugal.

It got only as far as Horta, in the central Azores, about 175 miles west of Ponta Delgada, where the pilots had planned to land. Bad weather forced another delay — three more days of waiting out the rain and the clouds before making the two-hour flight to Ponta Delgada.

It flew to its destination, Lisbon, on May 27. Later it flew to Plymouth, England, and the crew took a train to London, where the commanding officer, Lt. Comdr. A. C. Read, met Winston Churchill and the Prince of Wales.

“Within the U.S., my sense is there was a lot of pride in the NC-4's accomplishment,” said Laurence M. Burke II, a curator at the National Air and Space Museum in Washington.

But Dr. Burke added that “the broader perception” was that the NC-4 was overshadowed by two British aviators who won The Daily Mail’s prize a few weeks later and, eventually, by Lindbergh.

“The NC-4 is harder to understand because they didn’t do it nonstop,” he said. “Where are your goal posts, basically? Lindbergh, he started here, he ended there.”

With the NC-4, Dr. Burke said, “Do you date the crossing from New York to London, or Canada to Portugal?” (The NC-4 is now on display at the National Naval Aviation Museum in Pensacola, Fla.)

Mr. Schwach, 51, heard about the NC-4 from his father, Howard Schwach, who served in the Navy during the Vietnam War, on an aircraft carrier in the Mediterranean. Howard Schwach read up on naval aviation in the ship’s library and remembered the story of the NC-4 later, after he retired as a middle-school teacher and became the editor of a weekly newspaper in the Rockaways.

Mr. Schwach put the exhibit together with a \$7,000 City Council appropriation to the Queens Historical Society and help from the Rockaway Artists Alliance. He has already booked a number of school field trips to see the posters, photographs and small model of the NC-4 that he has installed in the gallery. He does not expect long lines at the door.

“I realize that this is not competing with a Van Gogh exhibit,” said Mr. Schwach, who was in charge of a police unit responsible for handling crowds before he retired. “I don’t have any delusions that we’re going to need my crowd-control expertise to fight people back.”

James Barron is a Metro reporter and columnist. He is the author of the books “Piano: The Making of a Steinway Concert Grand” and “The One-Cent Magenta” and the editor of “The New York Times Book of New York.”

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