

The Aviator

For the first time in the history of aviation, Glenn H. Curtiss yesterday performed the feat of launching his hydro-aeroplane from the water into the air, and after remaining in the air one minute and 21 seconds, alighted upon the water. He repeated his performance at will, skipping about Spanish Bight, off North Island, and circling around the craft in the harbor, with the ease and grace of the ordinary sea-bird.

--San Diego Union, January 27, 1911.

The early months of 1911 would be a remarkable time in the history of aviation, particularly for pioneer flyer Glenn Curtiss. The 33-year-old former motorcycle racer was America's most accomplished aviator: winner of prestigious speed races, a successful aircraft builder, and a respected consultant to the military.

Curtiss arrived in San Diego on January 3, 1911, searching for a site for a training school to teach Army and Navy flyers. He found it on the north end of the Coronado peninsula. The scrubby, flat terrain was perfect for building runways. It was isolated—removed from curious crowds that could interfere with his work. The peninsula also had firm, sandy beaches, and the calm water of “Spanish Bight”—a mile-long strip of shallow water that once separated North Island from Coronado—was ideal for the aviator's planned water experiments.

The aviator was determined to sell the U.S. Navy on the importance of airplanes to its fleet. The service took notice on January 18 when a Curtiss-trained pilot, Eugene Ely, successfully landed and then took off from a platform built on the deck of the battleship USS *Pennsylvania* in San Francisco Bay.

The Navy was intrigued but skeptical of a runway on a ship. Secretary of the Navy George von L. Meyer told Curtiss: “show us you can land your plane, not on an interfering platform on a fighting ship, but on the sea alongside . . . then I shall be ready to say that the Navy Department is convinced.”

To fly from the sea Curtiss removed the landing gear of his 60-horsepower biplane and replaced the wheels with wooden floats or pontoons. The main pontoon was about five feet wide and over six feet long. A smaller pontoon replaced the nose wheel.

On January 20 the flight team dragged the hydroplane into the water of Spanish Bight. Wearing bicycle inner tubes around his body as a life preserver, Curtiss taxied the plane up and down the narrow inlet. The first experiment showed that seawater flowed over the pontoons, slowing down the plane. Modifications were made to add buoyancy. The plane taxied faster but the day ended when Curtiss skidded on the beach and smashed a pontoon.

After overnight repairs and more modifications, Curtiss was ready to try going airborne. A witness to the first takeoff attempt was thirteen-year-old Joseph Jessop. The future yachtsman and jeweler had become a useful assistant on the team, bringing gasoline out to the plane in a rowboat. In an interview with the San Diego Historical Society in 1988, Jessop remembered:

My job was to take a gallon at a time out and he'd run back and forth and try and get off the water. Well, what happened was the water was like glass and he couldn't quite get enough air under the pontoons to get off.

Well, about eleven o'clock in the morning . . . the breeze came up and by golly he went down toward the end of North Island and started back and darned if he didn't get off about six feet and flew about two or three hundred yards and down again and that was the first time an airplane had ever gone off the water.

America's first flight from water would go unwitnessed by reporters but on January 26—after more days of fine tuning his plane—Curtiss was ready for a public demonstration. This time he took off and landed several times, reaching a height of 150 feet on one run and a distance of two miles. “A new epoch,” wrote a reporter from the *Union*, “a combined conquest of the air with conquest of the sea.”



The Curtiss hydroplane being pulled into the sea at Spanish Bight, January 1911. Courtesy San Diego Aerospace Museum.

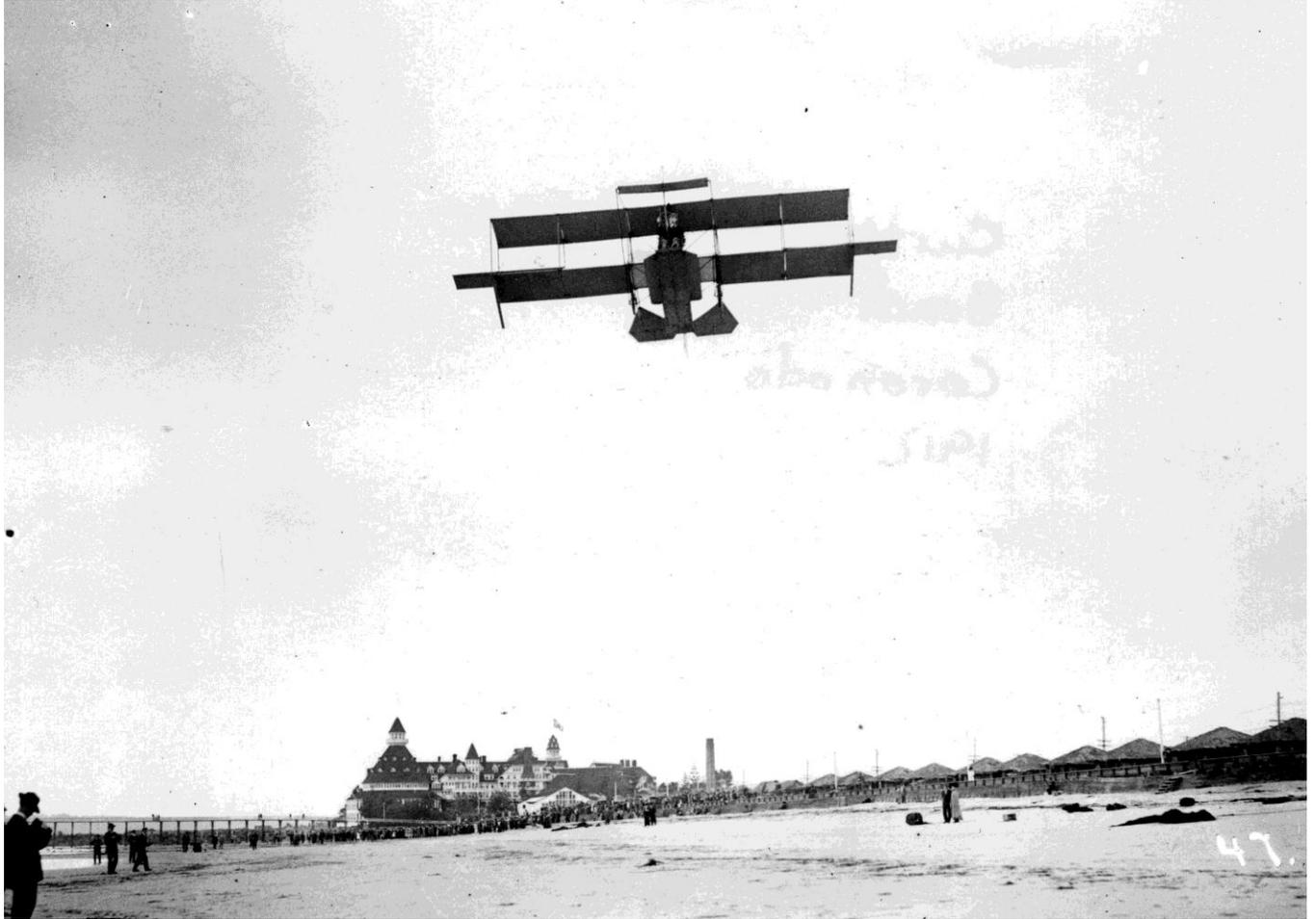
Curtiss made a more dramatic flight the next day, flying over the harbor while several Navy ships blew their whistles and sailors stood on the decks and yelled. Newspaper headlines across the country cheered the flyer's exploits.

By February 17, Curtiss believed his plane design would satisfy the requirements of the Navy. He called Captain Charles Pond, whose battleship *Pennsylvania* was now in San Diego harbor, and asked if he could fly over and be hoisted aboard ship. “Come on over right now,” the Captain replied.

Curtiss lifted off from Spanish Bight and landed about four minutes later in the water alongside the *Pennsylvania*. The ship's crane lifted the flyer and his plane on to the deck. Ten minutes later, the process was reversed and Curtiss flew back to North Island.

The final evolution of the Curtiss hydroplane was an aircraft with retractable wheels in addition to pontoons. The world's first “amphibious” aircraft--called the *Triad* (land, air, and water)—would be the first airplane ever ordered by the Navy.

Glenn Curtiss, the “Father of Naval Aviation,” spent two more years in San Diego, training dozens of pilots at his School of Aviation on North Island. The federal government took over the property in late 1912 and established the Signal Corps Aviation School, renamed Rockwell Field in 1917.



With Hotel del Coronado in the background, Glenn Curtiss flies over Coronado, January 1911. *Courtesy San Diego Aerospace Museum.*

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