

Early US Navy Operations at Shearwater

The first aircraft to fly from Halifax were US Navy Curtiss HS-2L biplane flying boats. The seaplane base was actually established at Baker's Point south of the city of Dartmouth overlooking Eastern Passage but was known as "US Naval Air Station Halifax". Lieutenant R.E. Byrd (USN) was the station's first commanding officer who also acted as the liaison officer between the American and Canadian governments on naval aviation matters. Lieutenant Byrd later became an Admiral renowned for his polar exploits. The US Navy (USN) flew six HS-2L's from Halifax from August to November 1918 on anti-submarine patrols to protect convoys from lurking German submarines outside Halifax's strategic harbour. The USN also operated a seaplane base at Sydney NS where an additional six HS-2L's flew anti-submarine patrols to protect convoys en route to or from Halifax. The HS-2L's at both Halifax and Sydney flew approximately 400 hours on patrols and were augmented by several kite-balloons also used for anti-submarine duties. It was intended that the USN conduct the aerial anti-submarine patrols until the fledgling Royal Canadian Naval Air Service could be formed and assume the air patrol duties. However, the First World War came to an end before the Canadian Naval Air Service became operational and subsequently disbanded. After the war ended in November 1918 Byrd returned to the United States and the USN donated the 12 HS-2L's that were stationed at Halifax and Sydney, the associated spares and ground handling equipment to the Canadian government. These aircraft formed the nucleus of the newly formed Canadian Air Force in 1920 and subsequently became Canada's first bush planes.

Lieutenant Byrd returned to Halifax on May 8, 1919 when two US Navy-Curtiss (NC) flying boats, NC-1 and NC-3, landed at the former US Naval Air Station Halifax, then under the control of the Canadian Air Board, on their historic world's first trans-Atlantic flight. Three of the four NC flying boats that were built, NC-1, NC-3 and NC-4, had taken off from the US Naval Air Station at Rockaway NY on the first leg of their trans-Atlantic flight, however, the NC-4 developed engine trouble and had to divert to the air station at Chatham Mass. Therefore, only the NC-1 and NC-3 remained overnight on 8 and 9 May at Halifax, their first scheduled stop, before proceeding to their next stop at Trepassey Newfoundland. Lieutenant Byrd was the "Trans-Atlantic Team's" navigation project officer and one of two navigators on NC-3. His task was to verify the performance of the navigation instruments on the Rockaway-Halifax-Trepassey legs. Much to Byrd's disappointment the plan called for him to remain behind in Trepassey and not accompany NC-3 on the trans-Atlantic legs to the Azores, Lisbon and on to England.

Shortly after take off from Halifax on 10 May one of the aircraft developed a crack in its wooden propeller and had to return to Halifax to be replaced, but it was discovered that neither aircraft carried spare hub plates. Byrd's previous duty in Halifax proved helpful as he recalled that when he turned the 12 HS-2L's over to the Canadians he had also given them spare hub plates. Since Byrd had left only a short time ago he still had many friends in Halifax and was able to call on them for the required spare hub plates. The aircraft was quickly repaired and departed for Trepassey with minimum delay. Due to fortunate weather delays in Newfoundland, NC-4 caught up, with an

intermediate stop at Halifax, to NC-1 and NC-3 at Trepassey on 15 May. The next day all three aircraft departed for the Azores.

Because of a fortunate sighting of land through a hole in the undercast only NC-4 arrived at its intended destination, the island of Horta in the Azores. The NC-1 landed on the water in fog several hundred miles from Horta and broke up in the rough seas; the crew was rescued by a USN destroyer that had been pre-positioned in the area. The NC-3 also landed on the water because bad weather obscured the mountainous islands in the Azores and the crew was afraid of flying into the peaks. Similar to the NC-1, NC-3 encountered heavier seas than anticipated and after a harrowing two days of riding out a storm a very badly damaged NC-3 water taxied into the port of Ponta Delgada on the island of San Miguel in the Azores. Only the NC-4, commanded by Lt. Cdr. A.C. Read, was able to continue on and successfully complete the first trans-Atlantic flight from the North America to England, arriving in Plymouth on 31 May 1919 via the Azores, Lisbon and Ferrol del Caudillo (Spain). Total flying time from Rockaway NY to Plymouth England was 57 hours 16 minutes.

Post Script:

Two weeks later British Capt. John Alcock and Lt. Arthur Brown made the first non-stop crossing of the Atlantic from St John's NF to Galway Ireland in a Vickers Vimy bomber on 14/15 June 1919. Total flying time was 16 hours 27 minutes.

On 20/21 May 1927 Charles Lindbergh made the first non-stop solo crossing of the Atlantic from Long Island NY to Paris in the Ryan built "Spirit of St. Louis". Total flying time was 33 hours 39 minutes.

Prepared by
Colonel ESC Cable OMM, CD (Ret'd)
Shearwater Aviation Museum Historian