

Flight Ops in Washington, D.C. – A Century Ago!



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By David F. Winkler

In his book *Selling Sea Power: Public Relations and the U.S. Navy, 1917-1941*, Ryan Wadle lamented that following World War I, the Navy's culture inhibited its leaders from publicly advocating for a strong navy to defend the nation and interests abroad. The Washington Naval Conference of 1921–22, which led to the scrapping of battleships under construction and other tonnage restrictions, should have served as a wake-up call. Yet the Navy maintained its public reputation as “the Silent Service.” Instead, Navy leadership looked for others to champion sea power. This past October 27 marked the centennial of Navy Day. Long credited as a Navy League of the United States initiative, Navy Day fell on the birthday of the recently deceased President Theodore Roosevelt – a staunch supporter of sea power. In *Selling Sea Power*, Wadle exposed the behind-the-scene role of the Office of Naval Intelligence to coordinate with the Navy League to create a day of national sea power celebration.

The Navy's First Aircraft Carrier

One naval leader who broke the silent-service mold was Rear Admiral William Moffett. Recently selected to head the new Bureau of Aeronautics (BuAer), Moffett found his new fiefdom was being challenged by Brigadier General Billy Mitchell, who argued for a consolidation of Army and Navy air components into a new service along the lines of what had been accomplished in Britain with the establishment of the Royal Air Force towards the end of World War I. In his advocacy for

a separate service, Mitchell was a publicity-generating machine and exploited the aerial bombings of decommissioned German and American battleships off the Virginia Capes to argue his case before Congress.

Fortunately for Moffett, his publicity toolbox had recently taken on a big addition with the recommissioning of the former collier USS Jupiter as the Navy's first aircraft carrier, USS Langley. With the first launching and landing of airplanes occurring just prior to the first Navy Day in October 1922, Moffett made sure camera crews from all major media outlets were on hand to capture the events. As for that first Navy Day celebration in Norfolk, Langley welcomed thousands of visitors who desired to see the ship they had been reading about in the newspapers.

With cold weather arriving, Langley left for Pensacola to further develop flight operation protocols and increase capacity to land and launch ever larger and heavier aircraft. When warmer weather returned to the Mid-Atlantic, Langley departed Pensacola to return to Norfolk, anchoring at Hampton Roads late on May 28. The next morning Langley moored starboard side to pier 2 at the Naval Operating Base in Norfolk. Captain S.H.R. Doyle departed the ship for the nation's capital to meet with Moffett and other Navy officials to preview a forthcoming ploy to impress national leaders and the public about naval aviation during annual Shriners Week celebrations scheduled for mid-June in the nation's capital. Moffett had already arranged for an impressive static display of 10 naval aircraft including NC-4 to be placed around the base of the Washington Monument. Flyovers would be conducted by Anacostia- and Quantico-based Navy and Marine Corps aircraft. Moffett wanted Langley's planes to join the mix. Earlier in May the BuAer chief had recommended to the CNO, Admiral Robert E. Coontz, that Langley be part of the showcase as the flight demonstrations would put, "the accomplishments of the Navy and naval aviation before the people throughout

the country." Upon completion of the meetings, Doyle returned to Norfolk to prepare his ship for a relatively short journey.

Departing Norfolk on the morning of June 1, Langley reached the mouth of the Potomac River at 3 p.m. with the minesweeper Sandpiper following astern. Not desiring to arrive in the nation's capital before sunrise, Langley anchored off Blackstone Island off Southern Maryland at 10:30 p.m. and then raised the hook just before 4 a.m. to proceed upriver. At 8:20 a.m. wind conditions were acceptable to launch four aircraft piloted by Lieutenant Commander Griffin, Lieutenant Dillon, Lieutenant James R. Kyle, Jr., and Boatswain Feher to fly ahead to NAS Anacostia. At 9:23 a.m., with Mount Vernon and the tomb of the first president off the port beam, Langley rendered honors as prescribed in Navy Regulations. At 11:11 a.m., Langley moored starboard side to the berth at the Washington Navy Yard. Waiting ashore were the four pilots who had flown off three hours earlier.

USS Langley Wows Washington

On Sunday, June 3, the crew of the Langley welcomed 1,198 Washingtonians and others to tour their unique vessel. The next day, Langley casted off from the Navy Yard and proceeded to a spot off Hains Point, a short distance away from the Army War College at Fort McNair. Once anchored, the presidential yacht Mayflower came alongside. In addition to President Warren G. Harding, Moffett, the Navy's General Board and several other dignitaries worked their way up to the flight deck to observe Lieutenant Commander Griffin, Lieutenant Brow, Ensign C.D. Palmer, and Boatswain Feher take off and land with their Navy biplanes. With the flight demonstration's successful conclusion, the visiting dignitaries departed, and Langley returned to the Navy Yard.

On Tuesday, Langley's flight demonstrations recommenced off Hains Point as the Shriners Convention kicked off with a

parade of 25,000 marchers and one of Langley's Vought aircraft, pulled along by 30 of the ship's crew. Flight operations continued for the next few days with only minor weather disruptions. Following another weekend at the Navy Yard with heavy visitation, the Mayflower came alongside during a torrent of rain. Captain Doyle again welcomed the president and members of his cabinet for a Monday tour lasting 45 minutes. At 4:02 the next morning, Langley hauled in lines from the Navy Yard dock for the last time as she headed down the Anacostia and the Potomac to return to Hampton Roads that evening. Following an overnight anchoring, Langley once again returned to Naval Operating Base for some maintenance and repair work.

Back in Washington, President Harding felt "stronger than ever" about the Navy's plans for fleet aviation and reconfirmed his support for funding to convert the planned battlecruisers Lexington and Saratoga into operational aircraft carriers. Moffett appreciated presidential support, but it was Congress who paid the bills. To further press his case to Congress and other internal and external constituencies, Moffett became open to the concept of transitioning Langley from an experimental to an operational carrier. Admiral Coontz formalized the concept when, on June 25, 1923, he signed the notice titled "Naval Aeronautical Organization for Fiscal Year 1924." Put into place just six days prior to the start of the 1924 fiscal year, the document, drafted by Moffett's bureau, spelled out intent to transfer Langley to San Diego to serve as flagship for the Commander, Aircraft Squadrons, Battle Fleet. In the interim, the CNO directed "...Langley will conduct flying-off and flying-on experiments with operating allowance of airplanes previously authorized."

Ironically, the success of Langley's visit to Washington undermined the timetable for getting the ship to the West Coast. Nearly two weeks prior to Coontz signing off on the

1924 plan for aeronautics, the CNO's biweekly operations conference that brought together representatives of the various bureaus featured Langley as the lead item. Citing the success of the experimental carrier's DC port call, the minutes recorded: "We are now trying to arrange a trip for the Langley along the New England Coast this Summer for exhibition purposes." With port visits to New York, Newport, Portland, Portsmouth, and Boston, Langley would sell the viability of naval aviation to tens of thousands of onlookers who gasped in amazement as biplanes continuously lifted off and then turned around and landed on the ship that eventually gained the moniker "The Covered Wagon."

David F. Winkler provides content for the weekly Tuesday Tidings naval history e-letter sent out by the National Maritime Historical Society. Visit www.seahistory.org to get on the distribution list.

Sources: *Ryan D. Wadle, Selling Sea Power: Public Relations and the U.S. Navy, 1917-1941, University of Oklahoma Press (2019); Deck Logs USS Langley National Archives Washington DC.*