

# FOUR-PIPER AT WAR

THE FLUSH-DECK FOUR-STACK DESTROYERS WERE QUICKLY OBSOLETE AT THE END OF THE GREAT WAR BUT THEY WOULD SAIL ON AND FIND A NEW WAR IN WHICH TO FIGHT

BY R.K. SCHRADER



Born John Henry Nottingham in 1823, his father died when he was a young boy and prior to entering the Navy his mother had his surname changed by act of the Virginia Legislature to her maiden name of Upshur in order to benefit from her family's notable Naval tradition (her two brothers were Cmdr. George Parker Upshur, soon to be commandant of the Naval Academy, and Abel Parker Upshur, US Secretary of State).

**B**orn on 5 December 1823, John Henry Upshur went to sea at the age of 17. Starting out as a midshipman, he served with the US Navy's Mediterranean Squadron that followed through with assignments in the West Indian and African Squadrons. During the war with Mexico, he sailed aboard *St. Mary's* and later fought ashore in the battle at Vera Cruz. After a stint at the US Naval Academy and at the Washington Navy Yard, he returned to sea aboard *USS Supply* and had the honor of participating in Commodore Perry's historic cruise to Japan.

Lieutenant Upshur had nearly 20 years of seafaring experience when the Civil War broke out at Fort Sumter on 12 April 1861. Serving initially as the executive officer aboard *Wabash*, which helped to free Port Royal, South Carolina, from Confederate forces, he was promoted to the

rank of lieutenant commander in 1862 and given the command of the large steam frigate *Minnesota*. Throughout the rest of the conflict, he sailed and fought along the Atlantic coast, mostly in blockading actions including the campaign against Wilmington, North Carolina, in January 1865, which effectively closed the last Confederate port.

Upshur attained the rank of commander in 1866 and captain in 1872. Serving at sea and on land, he went on to become a commodore in 1880 and then had the honor of commanding the Pacific Squadron from 1882 to 1884. Promoted to flag rank in October 1884, R/Adm. Upshur continued on active duty until retiring from the US Navy in June 1885. He lived on until the age of 93.

"Destroyer Number 144," as she was originally

designated, was built by William Cramp and Sons at its shipyard in Philadelphia in 1918. She was a *Wickes*-class destroyer laid down on 19 February 1918 and launched on 4 July 1918. In honor of the dedicated naval officer, she was named *USS Upshur*. Built of a design to replace the "thousand tonners" that fought overseas in World War One, she was commissioned at the Philadelphia Navy Yard on 23 December 1918 with Cmdr. William Tomb as her first captain. Her armament consisted of four 4-inch guns, two .30-caliber machine guns, and a dozen 21-inch torpedo tubes. She was capable of 35-knots. The new warship then hastened to the choppy waters off Newfoundland after her shakedown to participate in a very historic event.

## TRANSATLANTIC BEACON

By the spring of 1919, the US Navy was preparing to achieve a great aviation milestone: The first crossing of the Atlantic by aircraft. The Curtiss flying boats, the NC-1, NC-2, and NC-4, each with a wingspan of 126 feet, were readied for the long flight from Rockaway, Long Island, to Lisbon, Portugal. They were to fly up to Trepassey Bay in Newfoundland and then traverse the expanse of the Atlantic via the Azores.

Of course, such an undertaking was formidable. Babe Ruth hadn't even joined the Yankees and Charles Lindbergh was yet to fly in an aircraft. Flying was

looked upon by the general public as a precarious way to travel. Crossing the Atlantic by air was deemed an impossible feat by many. Indeed, in the previous year of 1918, during the inauguration of the US Air Mail Service between Washington, DC, and New York, the pilot became lost and landed in a field in southern Maryland! A few days later, with instructions to keep Chesapeake Bay on his right, the same pilot got lost again.

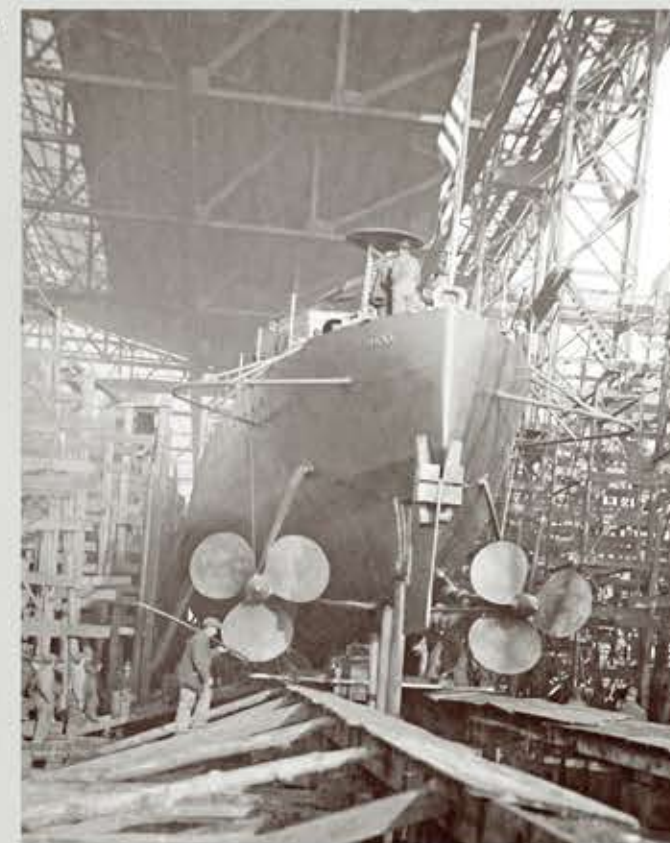
Incredibly, he kept the Bay on his right throughout the flight — until he had made nearly a complete circle. (Fortunately, the pilots on the New York-Washington route had their wits about them, and successfully made the trip in three hours and 20 minutes.)

So, how could the Navy flying boats navigate nearly 1400 miles over the open ocean between Newfoundland and the Azores? What about weather? What if there were low clouds and

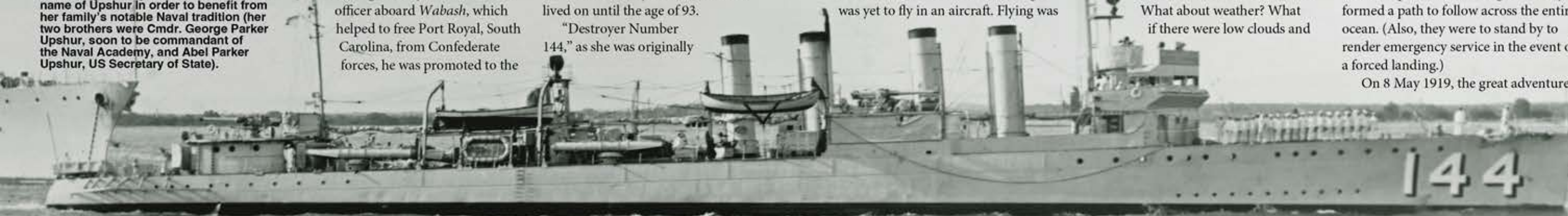
poor visibility?

To assist the flying boats with navigation, the Navy stationed 21 destroyers along the intended flight route between Trepassey Bay and Horta. Positioned approximately 65 miles apart, they were equipped with powerful searchlights and rockets to light up the night sky, each with a beacon in the expanse of the sea for their companions aloft. Together, they formed a path to follow across the entire ocean. (Also, they were to stand by to render emergency service in the event of a forced landing.)

On 8 May 1919, the great adventure



*Wickes*-class *USS Bell* prior to launching and showing the propellers to advantage.



*USS Upshur* (DD-144) photographed during 1931 at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.