



FIRST ALOFT

THEODORE ELLYSON WOULD HOLD THE TITLE OF US NAVY AIR PILOT NO. 1

BY MARSHALL WAINWRIGHT

Theodore Gordon Ellyson, the first Naval officer to qualify as an aircraft pilot and distinguished pioneer of US Naval Aviation, was born on 27 February 1886, in Richmond, Virginia. Appointed as a Naval Cadet at age 16, he entered the US Naval Academy in Annapolis from the Third District of Virginia during June 1901 and was graduated with the Class of 1905 on 9 January of that year. After two

years at sea — then required by law before commissioning — he was commissioned Ensign in the US Navy on 31 January 1907 and subsequently advanced as follows: Lieutenant, junior grade, on 31 January 1910; Lieutenant, 16 September 1910; Lieutenant Commander, 23 May 1917, and Commander on 1 July 1918.

During the five years following his graduation from the Naval Academy, he served consecutively at sea aboard

USS *Texas* at Guantanamo, Cuba; USS *Missouri*; as Watch and Division Officer of USS *Pennsylvania* and later USS *Colorado*; and on US *West Virginia*, USS *Rainbow*, and USS *Shark* on Asiatic Station.

After his return to the United States in April 1910, he commanded USS *Tarantula* until November of that year, then had duty in connection with fitting out the USS *Seal* at the Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock

Company at Newport News, Virginia. He commanded her briefly after commissioning on 2 December 1910.

Ordered on 23 December 1910 to Los Angeles, California, Ellyson was assigned to accept an offer put forth by pioneering aviator Glenn Curtiss. The pilot and aircraft builder had offered to train a Navy pilot free of charge. Curtiss had the vision to modernize the US Navy with the use of fixed-wing heavier-than-air flying machines. Once with Curtiss, the young lieutenant cooperated with his instructor in the design of pontoons that could be affixed to an aircraft. These machines were given the rather unwieldy name of hydroaeroplanes. During February 1911, Curtiss made a flight in one of these machines and history was made when he took Ellyson along to become the first passenger in a hydroaeroplane.

That same month, on the 17th, Lt. Ellyson observed the use to which these craft might be employed aboard ships. On that day, Curtiss took the hydroaeroplane aloft from North Island and flew alongside the USS *Pennsylvania*, which was at anchor in San Diego. Ellyson was in a rowboat and directed Curtiss by hand signals during the flight. Alighting in the water, the craft was then hoisted aboard the battleship. It was then lowered back into the water, took off, and returned to North Island. Ellyson, in cooperation with Curtiss, began to work on a device from which an aircraft might be launched from a ship.

By now, Ellyson had mastered flying an aircraft via instruction provided by Curtiss and on 7 September 1911, he went aloft in a Curtiss pusher equipped with a slotted pontoon that was launched from a wire cable attached to a dock at Hammondsport, New York. However, this was a system that had numerous flaws and the pair then worked with the Naval Gun Factory in Washington, DC, on a more efficient catapult device.

During July 1912, Ellyson took the controls of the new Curtiss A-1 at Annapolis and attempted a catapult launch. This was not successful and further redesign work was carried out. The catapult was then mounted on a barge at the Washington Navy Yard.



Ellyson's first command would be the early submarine *Tarantula*.



Ellyson and other Naval aviators with a Curtiss flying boat and a Curtiss Pusher.

On 12 November 1912, Ellyson made a successful takeoff with the A-1 using this device — thus the concept of operating aircraft from Navy ships was born.

From the time Ellyson began instruction in aviation until 29 April 1913, he devoted all of his time to active flying and



Commander Ellyson at NAS Anacostia. He would also obtain a great deal of experience at sea and this helped him with some of the concepts for aircraft that could be operated from a ship's deck.

Theodore Ellyson at the controls of a Curtiss Pusher.