

The First Aerial Photograph of Solomons?

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A photograph in the collections of the Calvert Marine Museum—identified as P-3112—is believed to be the first aerial photograph ever taken of Solomons Island, Maryland. It is a low oblique view taken from southeast of Sandy Point, the southernmost tip of Solomons Island. Research indicates that the exposure—dated 18 October 1923—was made by a naval aviator during a period when seaplanes were training in the Patuxent River area. Not only is the photograph of interest in itself, the circumstances under which it was probably taken provide an interesting bit of history on the use of the Patuxent

River by the U.S. Navy between the two world wars—a period prior to the establishment in World War II of naval land facilities on Cedar Point in St. Mary's County, and at Point Patience and the Dowell peninsula in Calvert County.

The first clue to the origin of this photograph is that it carries National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) identification number 80-G-463428. Record Group 80-G is NARA's code for the extensive collection labeled "General Records of the Department of the Navy, General Photographs, 1918–1945." The number



Figure 1: First aerial photograph of Solomons? The view is generally in a northwesterly direction, with the Patuxent River on the left, The Narrows in the center, Back Creek on the right, and Solomons in the bottom foreground. A U.S. Shipping Board surplus ship lay-up site was situated off the wooded area at the extreme upper left of the photo from 1927 to 1941. That site and fields to the north have been part of a U.S. Navy reservation since 1942—first an ordnance testing station, and since 1970 a recreation center. Sandy Point is at bottom left of the photo. The isolated cluster of buildings along the island's southeast shore has housed the Chesapeake Biological Laboratory since 1925. The land projecting in from right center is the lower end of the Dowell peninsula, location of U.S. Naval Amphibious Training Base, Solomons from 1942 to 1945, and now a marina. (NARA Photo 80-G-463428; CMM Photo P-3112, 18 October 1923)

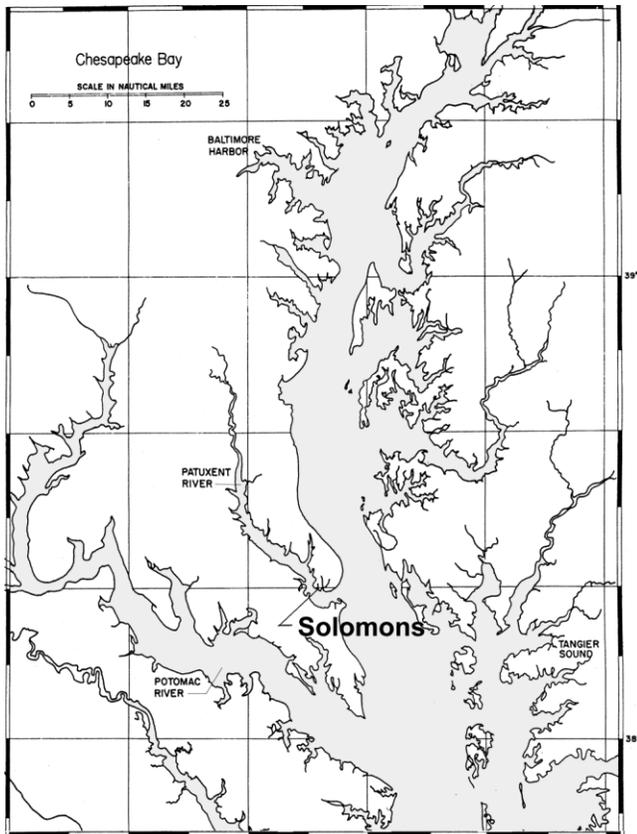


Figure 2. Solomons is located at the very tip of the peninsula between the Patuxent River and Chesapeake Bay, 5th grid square from the top and third in from the left. Courtesy Calvert Marine Museum.

Florida, and for the next several months conducted operations along the East Coast, eventually tending seaplanes “engaged in formation bombing exercises on stationary and towed targets.”²

The *Wright*’s first visit to the Solomons area was on 11 September 1922 when she joined converted minesweepers USS *Teal* (AM-23) and *Sandpiper* (AM-51), and thirteen F-5Ls of Scouting Plane Squadron 1. Starting three days later, the flying boats practiced bombing targets towed by *Teal*—“miniature” bombs dropped from 1,000 feet and (presumably) full size bombs from 3,800 feet. Also included in the exercise was bombing of stationary targets from 5,000 feet. Bombing practice concluded on 22 September, and the *Wright* departed for Hampton Roads the following day.³

After cruising the eastern seaboard, *Wright* departed for the Caribbean in January 1923. There she supported Scouting Plane Squadron 1 in fleet training exercises. An official navy history summarizes the “next two years” (1923-24) of the ship’s life as “spent ... off the eastern seaboard ... , operating out of Hampton Roads and Newport in waters that ranged from the Virginia Capes to the Virgin Islands.” While this information supports speculation that *Wright* was in the Patuxent during the period the aerial photograph was taken, it is otherwise not very useful. It is noteworthy, however, that *Wright* was redesignated AV-1 (heavier-than-air aircraft tender) on 11 November 1923. In early 1925 she departed for Pacific waters. Her subsequent history is not concerned with the

thus indicates that the photograph was taken by or for the Navy Department. Adding weight to this assumption is a second NARA photograph—80-G-454195—also in the museum archives, cataloged as number P-2429. This photograph shows “Seaplane No. 10,” an F-5L flying boat, taking off from the Patuxent River on 4 October 1923, just two weeks before the date of the aerial photograph of the island. The caption on this photograph states that the seaplane was associated with the USS *Wright*.¹

The *Wright* (named for Orville Wright) was launched on 28 April 1920 at Hog Island (Philadelphia). Shortly thereafter, the ship was converted at Hoboken, New Jersey, “to a unique type of auxiliary vessel—a ‘lighter-than-air aircraft tender.’” On 20 July 1920, the *Wright* was designated AZ-1, the only naval vessel ever to hold the AZ classification. She was commissioned on 16 December 1921. After additional yard work, the *Wright* reported to Key West on 11 March 1922 for duty with Scouting Plane Squadron 1. During 1922 she saw service in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, then Key West,

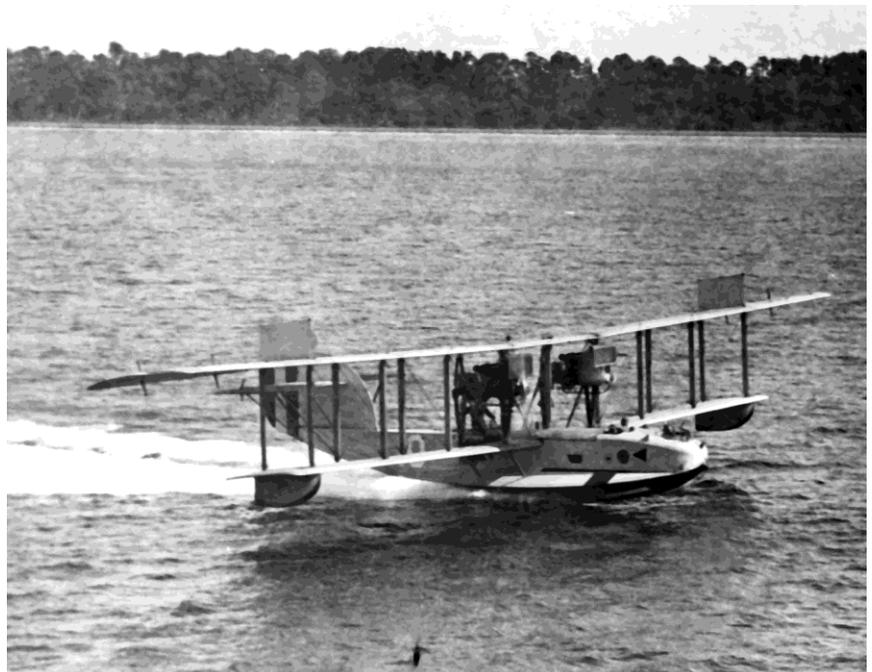


Figure 3: F-5L flying boat No. 10 (NARA Photo 80-G-454195; CMM Photo P-2429, 4 October 1923)

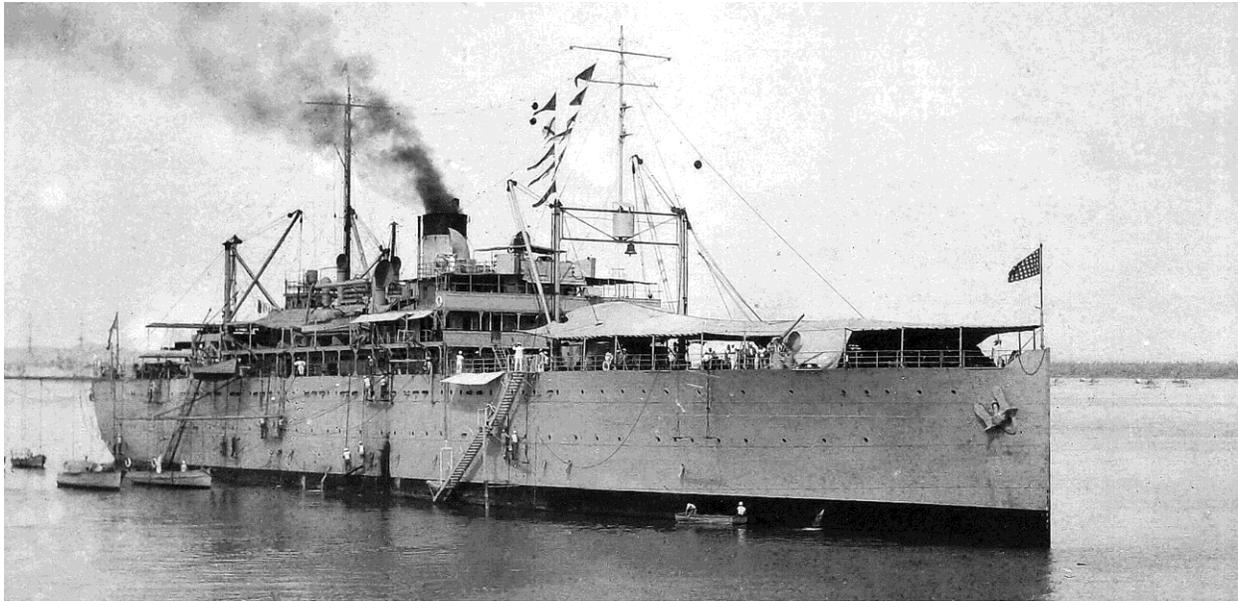


Figure 4: USS Wright (AV-1) at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, April 1927 (retrieved from Wikipedia, 20 May 2008)

Patuxent area.⁴

More details on the activities of the *Wright* in 1923 are provided from her logbook. At that time the *Wright* was flagship for Commander, Aircraft Squadrons, Scouting Fleet—in October 1923, Captain Walter R. Gherardi. The tender herself was commanded by Commander L. R. Leahy, and assigned to tend Scouting Plane Squadron 1. The squadron, led by Lieutenant Commander J. E. Monfort, comprised two divisions of six F-5Ls each. The planes were numbered consecutively, and “10” was commanded by Lieutenant (JG) D.P. Thompson.⁵

The *Wright* arrived at Solomons late on 3 October 1923, after a trip from Narragansett Bay off Newport, Rhode Island, by way of Hampton Roads. She again joined her old companions *Teal* and *Sandpiper* with thirteen F-5Ls. She anchored in 5.5 fathoms, and logged bearings of 300° to Sandy Point spar buoy; Drum Point light 31°; and Pearson's Wharf, 150°.⁶

The following day—Thursday, 4 October, the date the NARA photograph of “Seaplane No. 10” was taken—witnessed intensive air activity. Second Division F-5Ls took off at 0906, with First Division planes following at 0920; all had landed by 1130. *Wright*'s log records three flights for number 10 during the day: 0906 to 1010, 1054 to 1125, and? to 1612. A Vought seaplane from the USS *Langley* (CV-1) landed in the afternoon and was moored astern of *Sandpiper*. Air activity was also heavy on 5 October, but Saturday the sixth was quieter. *Sandpiper* left the Patuxent at 0557. Captain Gherardi followed three hours later on a flight to Hampton Roads aboard F-5L number 5. He returned at 1500. The week ended with a peaceful Sunday.⁷

The next week was given over to intensive training. One of the F-5Ls landed on the morning of 8 October

to deliver camera guns, then took off for Anacostia. In a ceremony at 0915, Scouting Plane Squadron 1 was awarded an excellence in gunnery pennant. From noon to 1600, all of the squadron's planes were “engaged in towed sleeve machine gun practice, camera gun practice and bombing practice” The planes held “gun and bombing rehearsal runs” again on the ninth. Dummy bombs were reported dropped in the afternoon. An F-5L from Washington landed at 1610, Captain Harry E. Yarnell and crew staying the night aboard *Wright*. Yarnell left at 0808 the next morning, and practice flights occupied the remainder of the day. Dummy bombs were again dropped in the harbor on Thursday the eleventh. The ship's log noted that fifteen gallons of oysters were received from H. M. Woodburn and Company that day “for use of general Mess” The F-5L crews carried out camera gun practice over the harbor on Friday morning, then settled in for another quiet weekend.⁸

The seaplanes were at it again Monday morning, and were “holding individual machine gun practice” in the afternoon. USS *Cormorant* (AM-40) anchored in the Patuxent the next morning, and its commander paid an official visit. This Tuesday was a relatively quiet day, but air activity picked up again on Wednesday and continued through Saturday. On 18 October—the day the aerial photograph of Solomons (80-G-463428) was taken—the log records twenty-two separate takeoffs and landings between 0814 and 1600, but unfortunately makes no mention of a photographic mission. *Wright*'s mess received “from J. E. Lore and Son 250 lbs. fish, H. M. Woodburn Co. 15 gals. oysters” that day. Friday was quiet, with *Cormorant* noted as having “stood down the river and anchored off Solomons” at 1650. Saturday was unusually busy. Of particular note is that F-5L number 3

took off at 1528, “commenced bombing with live bombs” at 1723, and was back on the Patuxent four minutes later. The week, and the period of intensive training, ended quietly.⁹

F-5L number 3 made one flight over the harbor Monday morning to test her engines, and *Cormorant* stood out at 1120. Otherwise, the day was uneventful. Tuesday morning dawned with twelve F-5Ls and one DT seaplane moored close inshore. F-5Ls number 9 and 12 “went adrift due to heavy wind” before 0400. At 0620, number 9 “got clear of the beach and proceeded to Solomons Island and moored to a mooring buoy,” but number 12 remained aground until the early afternoon. While *Wright* began making preparations to depart, *Sandpiper* stood in and dropped anchor at 2230.¹⁰ On Wednesday, 24 October 1923, the F-5Ls took off for Hampton Roads, and the DT seaplane was hoisted aboard *Wright*. She left the Patuxent at noon and headed down the Chesapeake Bay on her way to Charleston, South Carolina.¹¹

While *Wright*'s log thus does not specifically document the taking of the aerial photograph of Solomons Island, it does clarify the circumstances under which the photograph was probably taken.

Notes

This article from *Warship International*, Vol 44, No 4, 2007, is a minor rewrite of an identically titled piece originally published in the *Bugeye Times* (Quarterly Newsletter of the Calvert Marine Museum) 13 (Summer 1988): 6-7.

1. The F-5L had a 4-man crew and was armed with 4 x .30-cal.

machine guns and 4 x 230-lb. bombs. It was 49 feet long, with a wingspan of 104 feet and weighed 13,000 pounds gross. The aircraft was powered by 2 x 400 h.p. engines. It had a maximum speed of 90 knots, a range of 830 nautical miles, and a service ceiling of 5,500 feet. The navy operated some 230 of the aircraft between 1918 and the late 1920's. U.S., Navy Dept., Naval Historical Div., *Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships* (hereafter *DANFS* by vol. and year). Vol. V (Washington, DSC, 1970): 582-583.

2. *DANFS* III (1981): 480-481.

3. U.S., National Archives and Records Admin., Record Group 24, Dec Log No. 1 (285-1), Log Book of the USS *Wright*, Dec. 16, 1921 to Dec. 31, 1922 (hereafter *Wright* Log by year): 788, 796, 798, 802, 804, 806, 808, 810, 814, 818; *DANFS* III (1981): 481, gives the dates of this Solomons visit as 15-24 Sep. 1923. As an historical noted, the *Wright* also reported a visit by USS *Cheyenne* (BM-10) during her stay at Solomons. The *Cheyenne* was an old monitor assigned to Maryland units of the U.S. Naval Reserve Forces—formerly the Maryland Naval Militia (MNM). Officers from the *Cheyenne*, led by Capt. Charles F. Macklin, dined aboard the *Wright* on the evening of 20 Sep. For details about the MNM, see Merle T. Cole, “Maryland’s Naval Militia, 1891-1940,” *Maryland Historical Magazine* 90 (Spring 1995): 56-71.

4. *DANFS* III (1981): 481 and IV (1969): 537-538, 550.

5. *Wright* Log (1923): 791-792.

6. *Ibid.*: 777, 781, 803, 805.

7. *Ibid.*: 807, 811, 813, 815.

8. *Ibid.*: 815, 817, 819, 821, 823, 825, 827, 829.

9. *Ibid.*: 831, 833, 835, 837, 839, 841, 843.

10. *Ibid.*: 845, 847.

11. *Ibid.*: 849, 851, 855, 859.