
2

Love at First Flight

“A CURIOUS HAPPENING,” John Rodgers said of his cousin’s first-ever view of an airplane. “He seemed to experience some sort of transformation, as if he were about to sprout a pair of wings himself.”

That happening—one link in the chain of circumstances that set Cal Rodgers to the launch of his transcontinental flight—took place the afternoon of April 14, 1911, at the Wright Flying School at Simms Station, eight miles northeast of Dayton, Ohio.

The first link in the chain had been cast three months earlier while Lieutenant John Rodgers, USN, was stationed aboard the USS *Pennsylvania*¹ in San Francisco Bay. As assistant to the senior engineer, Lieutenant Rodgers was privileged to witness at close hand Eugene Ely’s landing of a Curtiss biplane on the *Pennsylvania*’s deck.* Enthralled by the event, he had volunteered to man an experimental box-kite array² moored to the

*Ely’s flight (Jan. 17) was the first to terminate aboard ship. (Earlier, Nov. 14, 1910, he had achieved the first flight from ship to shore—from the USS *Birmingham* to Willoughby Spit, Va., two and a half miles distant.) On the *Pennsylvania*, a platform 85 feet long and 25 feet wide was constructed. To arrest the flying machine, a cable was stretched across the platform and tied at both ends to weighted sandbags.