

WW I DIARY RECOUNTS AIR/SEA SAGA

WE ARE NOT positive of our location, but are going to sea. Send help. If you should not find us, say we died game to the end."

Such was the message Ens. Kenneth R. Smith sent by carrier pigeon from his seaplane drifting somewhere in the Bay of Biscay on 23 November 1917. With water rising rapidly and the prospects of rescue all but abandoned, the young Naval Aviator and his two crewmen faced the end.

It was Naval Aviation's first airplane to crash land while on a combat patrol in Europe in WW I. The communication and air/sea rescue techniques were a far cry from the effective speed of such operations today.

Base of the crashed seaplane was a little fishing village of about 3000 inhabitants 18 miles from St. Nazaire, called Le Croisic. The United States had established there on the French coast its first Naval Air Station overseas as a part of WW I operations.

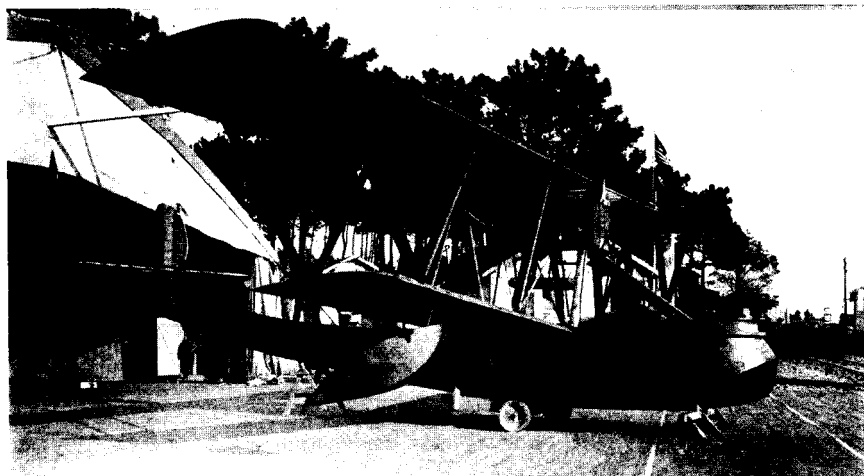
In *The History of the Yale Unit*, it is pointed out that young Smith and fellow members of the unit, which had become part of Naval Aviation, were sent to Le Croisic in order that the American forces might "help to drive German submarines farther away from the coast and to protect the immense amount of transport traffic in and out of Saint-Nazaire

"The air station was situated on a tiny island separated from the main street of the village by a moat or canal. A rugged indentation of the coast formed a little sheltered harbor which was favorable for seaplanes at high water. An eighteen-foot rise and fall of tide, however, made it necessary to lower machines by means of a crane when the bay was mostly sand and mud."

The building of this station on the Bay of Biscay commenced on 26 July 1917 when 19 German prisoners started to level the ground on which were later erected hangars and barracks.

By 29 October, three ensigns, 13 enlisted men (two of whom were pilots), and 11 observers arrived, some from the United States and others from the French flying schools at Tours and St. Raphael.

Though the first flight from Le



TELLIER FLYING BOAT, TYPE USED BY ENS. SMITH, WAS FRENCH SINGLE-MOTORED SEAPLANE

Croisic was made 13 November 1917, it was not until five days later that the first patrol flight was made and operations officially started. From that date, weather permitting, patrol and convoy flights were made regularly with six French seaplanes of the Tellier type. Communication facilities were inadequate, and since the time and position of passing convoys were uncertain and there were no adjoining air stations to cooperate in escorting convoys along the coast, long flights were necessary.

A contemporary record gives this schedule: "At the commencement of patrol and convoy flights, an 'Alert Section' consisting of one fourth of the total handling crews, two observers and two pilots, was put on watch. They stood watch from daylight to darkness, always holding two planes in readiness with bombs attached, all instruments and equipment either in the planes or close at hand, so that it was but a matter of five minutes to lower the planes and get off the water in case a submarine warning was received."

On 20 November when two German mines were reported off Les Grands Cardinaux, two seaplanes were sent out and the district was patrolled, but the mines were not discovered. On 22 November submarines were sighted south of Belle Isle and a seaplane was sent out on patrol, piloted by Ens. Kenneth R. Smith with Homer N. Wilkinson, Electrical Mechanic, and T.J. Brady, MM2C.

The Tellier, which carried only enough fuel for a four-hour flight, failed to return. The search was begun, but even with some idea of where the aircraft might be, it could not be found.

Meanwhile, on the Tellier as the hours passed, so did hope. Thinking they faced death, Ens. Smith wrote an account of what had happened. The very use of the past tense reflected his sense of finality. His notes are now part of Naval History.

Thursday, Nov. 22, 1917

Weather conditions were not ideal for flying, clouds being very low and quite a sea running.

After leaving Le Croisic, we started south steering course 195. On reaching Ile d'Yeu, found our drift to be considerably to the East. After picking up Point Breton on Ile d'Yeu, we sighted a four-masted bark, in ballast with auxiliary engine, to the N.E. We circled over her a number of times, increasing our radius on each turn until we were nearly out of sight of Ile d'Yeu. We then left the bark and headed for Ile d'Yeu. After searching the shore for mines and submarines, returned to Pt. Breton.

From Pt. Breton we steered course 29 for 45 minutes. We then headed due East for 30 minutes at altitude 50 meters. Motor died and we were forced to make a tail-to-wind landing. We found it possible to land the Tellier in rough water. Dispatched at 2:30 P.M. pigeon with following message:

"Left Ile d'Yeu at 1:10 P. M., headed 29 for 45 minutes. Then direct East 30 min. had to come down, big sea running. Send all aid. . . ."

Could not tell for certain our location. We

took watches during the night. One bailed while the other two slept. As we could not get motor started, we thought over all possible things that could happen to it. Wilkinson found left gas tank had not been feeding; but too late to fix it as we could not see. Passed a very uncertain night. We knew they would do all possible things to help us.

Friday, Nov. 23, 1917.

Sent pigeon at 7:40 A.M. and message as follows:

"Sighted last night two lighthouses on starboard bow which we considered Ile d'Yeu. Send torpedo boats and aeroplanes. Have no food. We are taking in water. We are not positive of our location, but are going to sea. Send help. If you should not find us, say we died game to the end."

Put in a new spark plug, cleaned magneto, shifted gasoline from left to right tank. We were all so seasick that we could not work to best advantage. Bailed water out of boat. Wilkinson finally got motor started at 11:40 A.M. Saw hydroplane and "blimp" to the North of us. Did not give up hope. Beautiful day. Got motor going and started to taxi towards Ile d'Yeu. We were not making much headway on account of the sea. Our left pontoon had filled with water.

Finally decided our only hope was to try and get machine off water. As a result of trying, I broke left wing and got ourselves into a hell of a shape. Things began to look black. There was no finding fault with anyone. Could not help marveling at the morale of the men. It was a case of heroic bravery on

their part to see their only hope smashed.

We took watches during the night, first lying on wing, then bailing, then sleeping. Wilkinson turned to and got all ready to cast adrift the left wing. We all decided to die game to end

Wing began to crumble. We all decided to let it stay on as long as possible. Sea began to grow bitter towards evening, and the water began to come in. We all hoped that we would be able to ride out the night. Very uncomfortable night and we were all growing very weak. Very long night. Our hopes were beginning to go very low, but no one showed it.

Saturday, Nov. 24, 1917

Day finally came. Wing getting near to boat as it crumpled. It was heart-rending. We had to bail and stay out on wing-tip. As waves came over, we began to feel lower and lower. It was finally decided to cast off wing, and let what might come. We tried to get other wing ready to cast off, but we could not get off nuts as we were so weak and tools were very inadequate.

We were going over gradually on starboard side. We were all on port side trying to keep her righted. We then saw that there was no hope of us staying up much longer unless we could get wing off. We had just about given up everything when Wilkinson let out a yell that something was in sight. We were not able to believe our eyes. We thought it was a submarine, but we did not care. If it was a submarine, we hoped it would blow us up and end it all.

IT WAS no U-boat. It was a French destroyer that picked up Smith and his two companions southeast of Rochebonne and took them to La Pallice. Along with patrol boats, motor torpedo boats and destroyers in the area, the French DD had heard of the missing seaplane via telephoned requests for search all along the coast.

The rescue destroyer had arrived none too soon. The badly damaged plane sank within minutes after the crew was taken off. The men suffered from exposure, but all recovered.

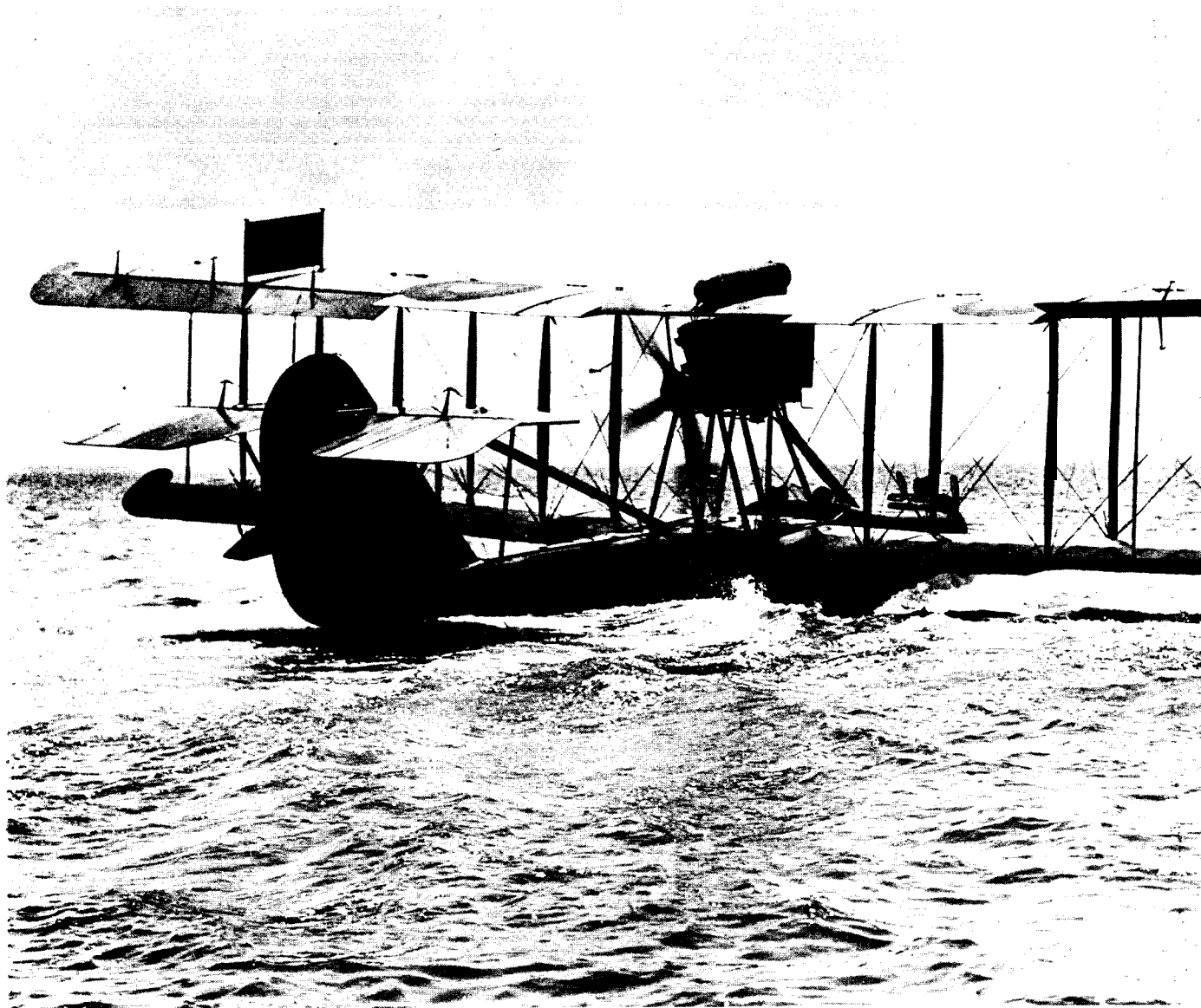
Machinist Wilkinson, in making a report after the rescue, wrote, "[Mr. Smith] was brave and courageous from the first. I never heard a whimper from anyone no matter how close we were to death. The accident was no one's fault"

The officer, who had assigned Ken Smith and his crew to the patrol said, "We learned to equip our planes . . . with every possible emergency appliance." The lesson, "hammered in by experience," taught the Le Croisic officers that signaling devices, a sea anchor and emergency rations were absolute musts, and that since three men constituted too heavy a load, only two should be sent. "All of which was a darned good thing for the rest of us, but rather tough on Ken. He had to be the goat." * * *



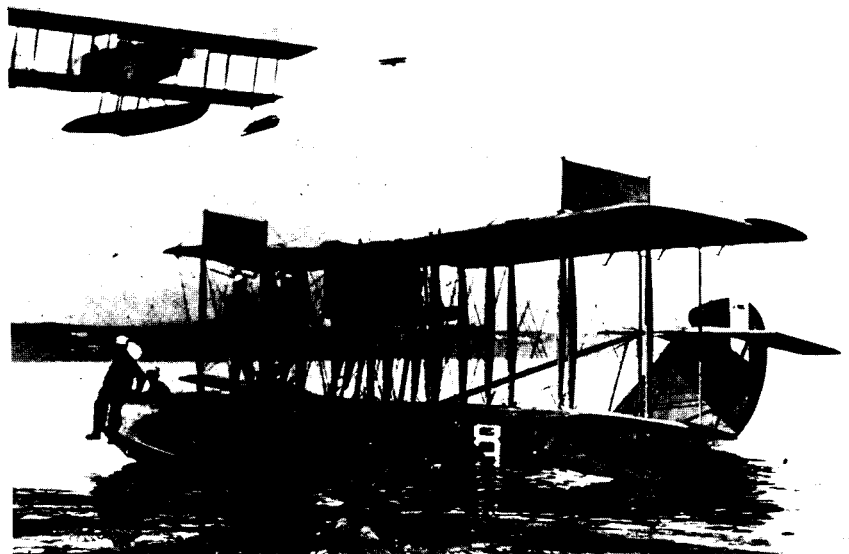
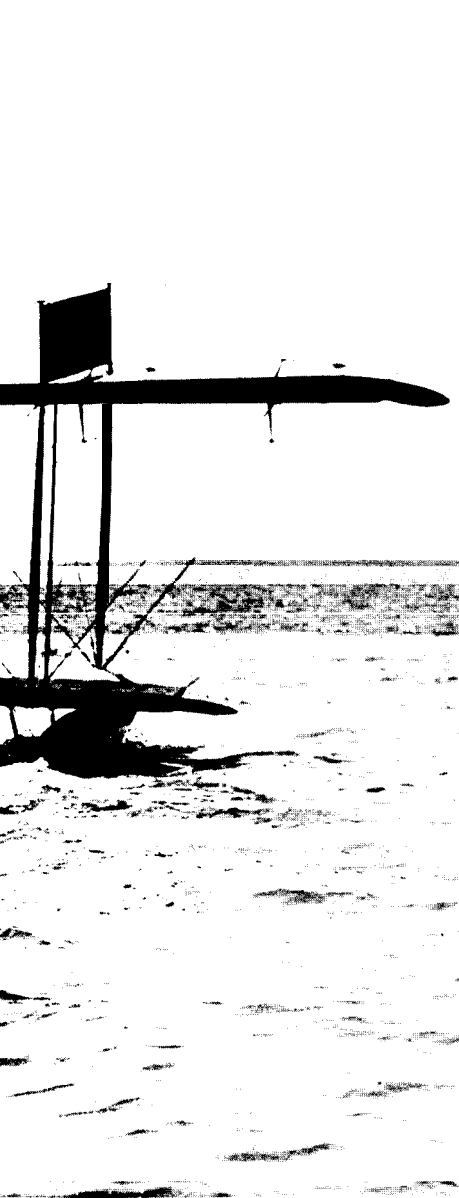
SPRIT OF CAMARADERIE BETWEEN LE CROISIC AND NAVAL AIR STATION WAS MEMORABLE. U. S. NAVY SEAPLANE FLOATS OFF SHORE

NAVAL AIRCRAFT OF WORLD WAR I

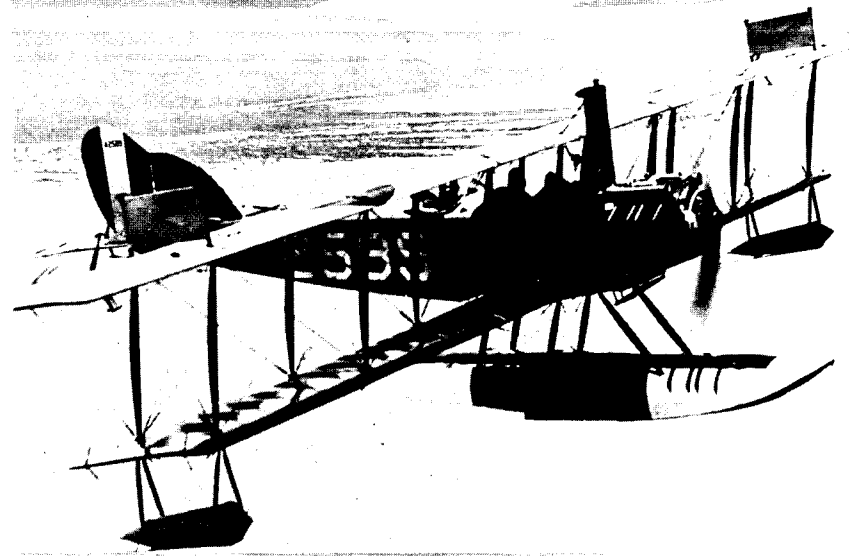


HS-1L PHOTOGRAPHED IN JULY 1919 WAS BUILT BY CURTISS

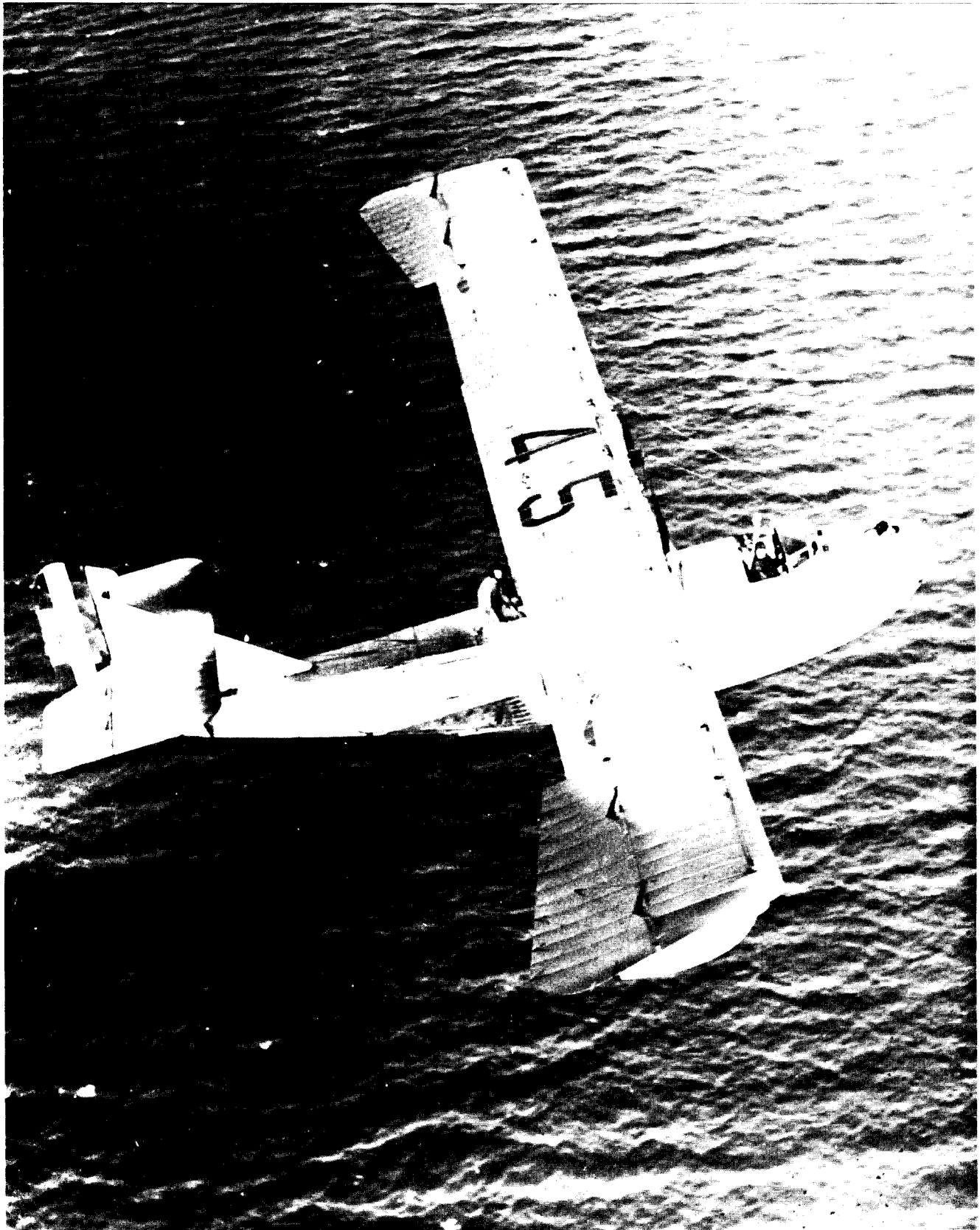
a portfolio



HS-2, SIMILAR TO HS-1, HAD 25 PERCENT MORE WING AREA



CURTISS N-9 WAS NAVY VERSION OF FAMED 'JENNY'



H-16, SHOWN WITH POSTWAR MARKINGS, WAS THE FIRST AIRCRAFT BUILT AT THE NAVAL AIRCRAFT FACTORY