

"Pensacola: Personal Remarks by Eugene A. Coffin, Senior."



Rear Admiral E.A. Coffin, USCG

Editor's note:

In our continuing effort to place narratives and documents relating to the history of Coast Guard aviation on our website, we have posted a copy of this interesting letter and an accompanying narrative. Both were written by a pioneer Coast Guard aviator, Rear Admiral Eugene A. Coffin, Sr., USCG (Ret.). They were found in a folder that was donated to the Coast Guard Academy library in 1967.

In both documents, RADM Coffin, one of the first few Coast Guard aviators, describes his time at the Naval Aviation Training Station at Pensacola, Florida after he entered flight training in November, 1916, and the years leading up to the U.S. entry into World War I. Of interest are his recollections regarding some of the other characters who were part of the Pensacola story, including Elmer Stone and the woman who would later tempt the King of Great Britain to abdicate his throne! Coffin's thoughts on how the First World War changed the tempo of the training program and the terrible consequence of that change is enlightening. So too is his description of a crash, from 600 feet in the air, while training under

the instruction of Elmer Stone. It was the first recorded "tailspin" anyone at Pensacola had witnessed. Fortunately, both aviators survived.



Eugene Coffin was born on 10 March 1888 in Foochow, China (left--courtesy of his grandson). He was the son of a tea merchant and a missionary doctor. He was appointed a cadet in the Revenue Cutter Service School of Instruction in October 1907 and graduated with a commission as Third Lieutenant on 21 January 1910. After a number of tours aboard cutters, he applied for flight school and was accepted. He was among the first class of Coast Guard aviators to graduate from Pensacola on 22 March 1917. He was designated as Naval Aviator No. 59 and Coast Guard Aviator No. 8.

He went on to a long and distinguished career with the Coast Guard, including service during both World Wars. His final assignment was as Commander, 14th Coast Guard District. He retired as a Rear Admiral on 1 April 1950. His Coast Guard career spanned 42 years, five months, and 26 days, all on active duty. RADM Coffin passed away on 20 January 1972 and was buried at sea.

"Pensacola: Personal remarks by Eugene A. Coffin, Senior, Re. Nov. 1916"

In accordance with a request I had put in, in April 1916, I was ordered to Pensacola for flight training with the Navy, the Navy having agreed to take a certain number of Coast Guard officers for training in aviation. I was one of the lucky few who went down there. I was ordered to report to the senior Coast Guard officer at Pensacola who was Commander C. E. Sugden. I arrived there in November of 1916.

My first flight in any sort of an airplane was made with Lt. Cmdr. Earl Spencer of the Navy, who was head of the flying school at Pensacola. He was then the husband of Wallis Warfield, later to become Mrs. Simpson and after that the Duchess of Windsor. She was there with her husband and was a little slip of a thing, very pleasant. They had been married only a month or so. Spencer was a tall, slender, handsome fellow with a black mustache which he twirled in a dashing manner. After the Spencers were divorced he also remarried. . .he is dead now.

After my first flight, Earl Spencer came back and gave a lift to my morale by telling me and the other officers as well that he thought I was a natural born aviator. During my first six months at Pensacola we were not at war and things were done leisurely with no pressure at all on anyone. Spencer would come down in the morning and look at the sky and if there happened to be a cloudy sky he would decide it was not good flying weather and go back up town.

However, in April of 1917 when we entered the war, all this was changed. Spencer was replaced by an officer named R. W. Cabaniss who was a driver. Student aviators came in in droves and were killed off at the rate of about one a week --- they were too eager. It was in April of 1917 that I had my first airplane crash. I was still under instruction, practicing landings. My instructor was a lad now dead, named Elmer Stone.

In June 1917 I completed flight training and was designated Naval Aviator No. 59 by Josephus Daniels, then Secretary of the Navy. After I received my designation, they kept me at Pensacola in charge of the training of new enlisted recruits who were arriving at the rate of a hundred a week. I was commanding officer of a battalion of these recruits. I had to see that they got up on time in the morning, had their breakfast, cleaned their quarters, got to their various duty stations, and went to bed on time. I was a regular wet nurse.

From Pensacola, I went to the Naval Air Station at Montauk Point on Long Island. I was at Montauk during the winter of 1917 and left there in September 1918 and went to Rockaway Naval Air Station, also on Long Island.



**Captain Eugene August Coffin with the Duke & Duchess of York,
courtesy of his grandson.**

COPY

Santa Barbara, California
6 December, 1953

Dear Wells:

The picture [**] arrived several days ago and I am glad to have it. In March, 1917, when the picture was taken, I had just turned 29 and in less than a month later the country was in World War I. The six officers standing there were all student aviators, trying to pass endless written examinations and flight tests to win their coveted wings, and - - - though it is nearly 37 years ago - - I can remember the taking of that picture as though it was last month.

Some of those men have been dead a long time - - - from plane accidents and natural causes - - - and all of them retired from active duty before I did. And those Curtiss training planes were really something! When there was no breeze to head into, it took anywhere from ten to twenty minutes to get them off the water. Full speed in the air was 70 M.P.H. and it took all of half an hour to climb to 6,000 feet.

Early in April while I was still under instruction, Lieutenant Stone and I spun into the Bay from 600 feet - - - the first tailspin they had ever seen there. The plane was completely washed out and I had a broken nose and split upper lip.

I remember that when I arrived at the Station in December, 1916, I was taken out for my first hop by the senior flight officer, one Lieutenant Earl Spencer, USN. He was the first husband of Wallis Warfield - - - now the Duchess of Windsor, and just a skinny slip of a girl in those days.

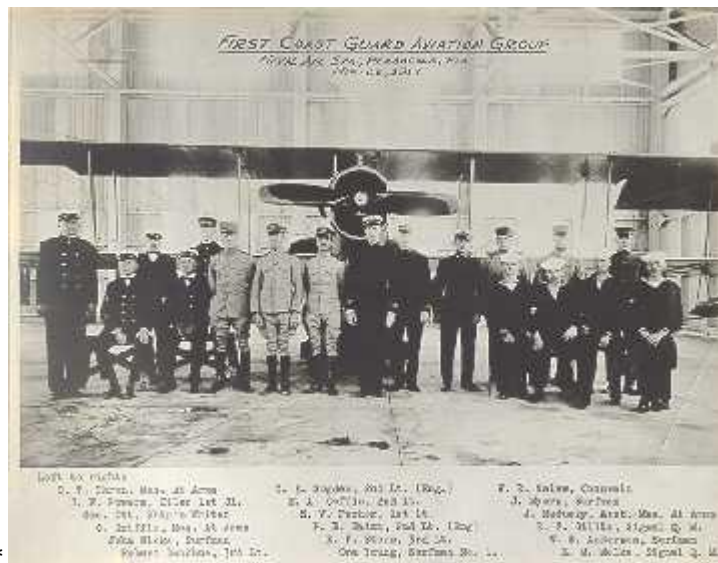
That picture brings back a lot of memories - - - thanks again for sending it to me.

Sincerely,

E. A. Coffin
Rear Admiral, USCG (Ret.)

EAC:mbc

to: Paul N. Wells, YN1, USCG
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