

The First Solo Flight of Alfred A. Cunningham

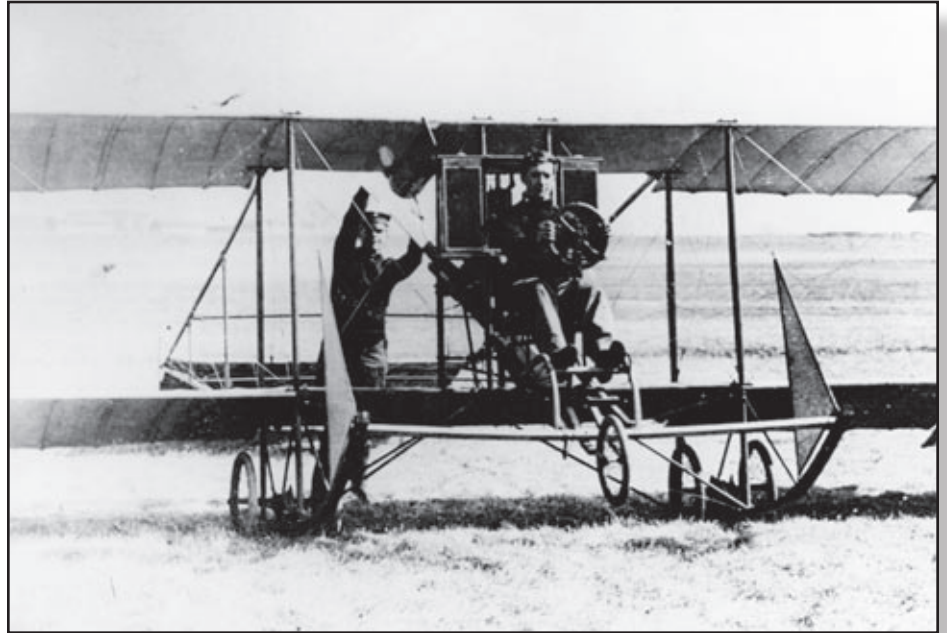
By Donald Macaulay

The first Marine aviator and the beginning of Marine Aviation happened at an exact moment of time and place. It happened when Marine First Lieutenant Alfred Austell Cunningham soloed a plane at Marblehead, Massachusetts in August 1912, one hundred years ago. At that moment he became our first aviator and Marine aviation was now underway. Why then? Why there? Well, the Marine Corps decided to develop an aviation department to expand its capabilities to match the other services and those abroad. The kickoff was assigned to Cunningham whose first flying duty included not only learning how to pilot an airplane but also studying the aviation world, especially military aviation and how it might be used.

Now let's remember that this is all happening within the first decade of manned flight. Brave men were in open cockpits with flair and confidence while talented designers were pushing the state of a new art—airplanes. These men were writing the first historic chapter of aviation. Keep in mind that there were only a handful of pilots, even fewer instructors, and certainly no Pensacola or Randolph Field. The few Army pilots and Naval Aviators trained others. The Marine Corps had none. Thus to qualify, Cunningham was sent to Marblehead to learn to fly and soak up knowledge from aviation pioneer, Starling Burgess.

So why Marblehead and why Starling Burgess? Let's meet him. Burgess grew up in an atmosphere that produced what Bostonians call Brahmins. It's a starchy crowd. He was educated at Milton Academy and Harvard, both proper preps, but he balked at walking the worn path of his class to the law, medicine, or letters. Burgess was bent on putting his mind and creative juices to scientific things with a mechanical twist, so he began designing sailing yachts. In 1905, he founded a boatyard in Marblehead.

It was the perfect setting; the former colonial town had rich traditions of seafaring, shipbuilding, and more recently serious yacht building and yachting.



While stationed at the Philadelphia Navy Yard in 1911, Cunningham tries to "crank" his rented airplane.

The town's history included providing the first manned warship to George Washington's Navy, as well as providing the soldier/seamen who rowed the general and his troops across the Delaware before the Battle of Trenton.

Before and after World War I, the Burgess yard designed and built America's Cup winners and dozens of other innovative racing yachts. From his focus on the sea, like many who dreamed with an inventor's glint, Starling Burgess shifted his eyes to the sky. The Wright Brothers had already made their historic flight, and he and dozens of others wanted to join the game. This is where the story of Starling Burgess, the aviation pioneer, begins.

Burgess had the tools and the know-how to match or exceed his rivals. His experience gave him an edge: the design of an airplane incorporates many aerodynamic proofs

and hydrodynamic solutions (when it came to seaplanes). The controls were similar (rudders, wing/sail shape). All this was in the bank of knowledge Burgess had to draw on when he turned to airplanes.



First Lieutenant Alfred A. Cunningham, the first Marine aviator, stands in front of a Curtiss airplane.

the Plans to Celebrate

As for the actual construction of planes, the Marblehead shipwrights knew how to build for stress and strength yet saving weight—the bane of the designer/builder. The properties of the materials: spruce, turnbuckles, pulleys, fasteners, and 19-strand wires, were standard on planes and boats. Burgess, with a newly recruited co-designer, went to work producing a long parade of airplanes, some experimental (one supposes they all were), others built in quantity for the Army, Navy and for Canada. Here he competed with Wright, Curtis and others.

Airplanes went from design to flight in a matter of months. His stuff was brilliant. And ever the eccentric, Burgess had seven wives (some common law) in the very puritanical Marblehead. And how did he get away with that, you ask? The local historic society responds casually as if the answer is obvious, “He designed fast boats!”

Now to our Marine, let’s get a sense of him. Alfred Cunningham was born in 1882. He joined the Marine Corps at the age of 27, was commissioned at Quantico and served at the Marine Barracks in Philadelphia. A curious side note is that he joined up with the inten-



A U.S. Navy Burgess K-36 taxis in Marblehead Harbor circa 1918.

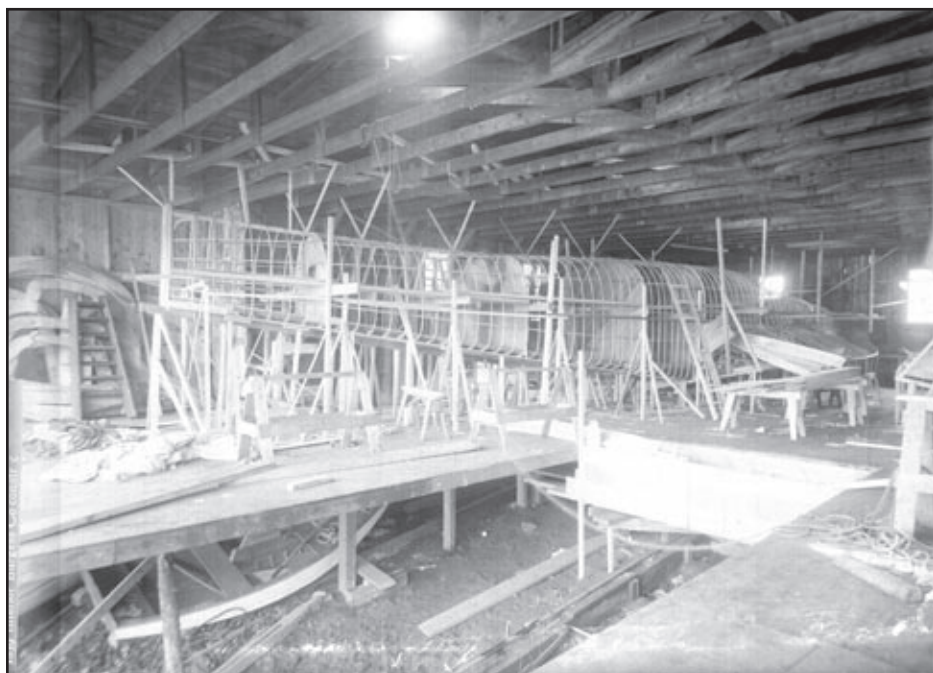
tion of flying, of being part of Marine aviation, which at that point didn’t exist! He had first flown in a hot-air bal-

“He designed fast boats!”

loon – and like so many of us – he left his heart in the sky. On his own he rented a plane (with sticks for frames, fab-

ric for surfaces) at twenty-five bucks a month and gave himself “lessons” (the plane never got off the ground). More important, he started pestering ranking Marines about the importance of aviation, pestering that went on throughout a career, which lasted until 1935, when he retired as a Major (he was later promoted to Lieutenant Colonel). Cunningham was for the Marine Corps what Admiral Tower was to the Navy and Billy Mitchell to the Army Air Corps. With a varied and wide-ranging career, Cunningham served in the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, and Haiti, Pensacola, and various Marine bases.

At one point early in his career his fiancée insisted he give up flying. That makes Alfred the first (of many) to hear that refrain! The choice between one bird and another was a tough one. Usually the response was something like, “Ah, gee dear, you really can’t put it *that way*.” Indeed, all should note Hemingway’s watchwords; “You love a lot of things if you live around them. But there isn’t any woman...as lovely as a great airplane.” Alas, Alfred caved and gave up flying, but he reclaimed his wings and formed a flying unit that went to France in World War I. There he won the Navy Cross.



The interior of one of the Burgess factories in May 1917.

continued...

"...the sky filled with God's gift of beauty..."

He returned from the war to define the mission of Marine air. He was the de-facto head of Marine aviation, a post formalized later. He went to work to select new aircraft, recruit potential flyers, and develop new tactics, always prodding the generals with his ideas. Cunningham's pestering paid off. Aviation became a key element in the chemistry of the Marine fighting force. And, this adds up to a good and important reason to stop, remember, and to celebrate Cunningham's first solo flight.

As Cunningham's craft eased into the air off Marblehead harbor it was this beginning that led to the Wildcats flying and fighting over Guadalcanal in 1942 to our fighter attack and helicopter squadrons that today keep potential adversaries in awe and at bay. We should forever salute Cunningham's first flight.

The celebration, our/your/his Marine Aviation Centennial Moment will happen in Marblehead Massachusetts, the weekend of August 4 and 5. What a gem the visitors to Marblehead will find! It's a real Yankee town. It holds over 300 Revolutionary War homes on its winding streets that snuggle towards a rock edged harbor. In that harbor over 2500 boats swing from their moorings. It is a town to walk with every street and by-way waiting with surprises. It is an historic town with 18th Century churches and public buildings, small interesting museums, and a harbor entrance with a protecting fort from the war of 1812.

Marblehead has grand and delicious special amenities: restaurants, shops, and B&B's. All this and more to enjoy for to those visiting during "The Marine Aviation Centennial Moment." The organizers include local retired Marines, the Marine Corps Aviation Association (MCAA) New England Chapter, the National MCAA, and the Marine Corps. Current plans will include Marine aircraft on display, a concert by a Marine Band, and plenty of hoop-la. Details will be posted soon at <http://www.flymcaa.org/Home/Events.aspx>. All are invited to stop and celebrate

and toast high to Marine Aviations Centennial Moment. Want to find out more about Marblehead? Take a look at: <http://www.marblehead.org/>

In my mind's eye it's easy to picture that day in August 1912. It is warm, the air is salty, and the sky filled with



A Burgess Model K flying boat shortly after takeoff.

God's gift of beauty. Cunningham's plane is lowered by block and tackle from the factory front whose giant doors face the water. The harbor populated with perhaps three or four-dozen workboats and grand yachts as his tiny seaplane is towed towards the mouth of the harbor to head into the early afternoon breeze. There is a slight chop, a clear sky. Cunningham settles in, and adjusts his goggles, the engine kicks over and, all around the harbor heads swing towards the noise; the Burgess Yard always has a show for the town by the derring-do. Cunningham slides his throttle forward, the engine's pistons quicken; the thumpings smooth...then strengthen...he starts his run. I watch him for just seconds and now can see the hull break the surface. Cunningham is airborne, as is Marine Corps aviation. Yes, at that very moment.

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Mr. Macaulay is a retired Marine and Naval Aviator, who served with VMF-232. He is a proud resident of Marblehead.



The marker for the First Marine Corps' flight. The monument is located in Crocker Park, which looks out over Marblehead Harbor.