

New York Tribune
May 24, 1914

Vera Cruz Bares Secrets To Airmen

*Naval Aviator and Correspondent in Hydro-aeroplane Take City Unawares with
Cruise Over Her Towers and Fortifications.*

To anyone who landed with the army it seems as though he had lived in Vera Cruz for many years. He knows it as he knows his home town. He cannot extend his knowledge. To the east stretches the Gulf of Mexico. In every other direction his way is blocked by outguards and patrols. Beyond the outposts he may not go.

So the only escape from Vera Cruz is straight up in the air. For three weeks I have been seeking permission to escape in that direction. This morning, aided and abetted by the flying men of the navy, I escaped. From this angle I obtained a very good view of Vera Cruz, but the view you get of it from the back of a slow moving pony and from a marble-topped table in front of the *Diligencias* is just as good. At least, such as will satisfy your correspondent for some time to come.

The strategy board of the navy aviators is on the *Mississippi*, of which Lieutenant Commander Henry Mustin is captain. With Mark Bristol he coaches aviators as at Yale Walter Camp teaches another dangerous science.

Like Camp, Mustin has practised what he preaches. That he is the mechanical genius who invented the telescope sight used in all turrets on all guns in our navy is not enough, he has also his master's ticket as an air pilot, and when he sends an aviator aloft to arrest a derelict cloud or photograph heat lightning he is only sending him over a course Mustin has already steered.

Has Three "Flying Fish"

Under Mustin the actual flying fish are J. H. Towers, the only man that ever fell three thousand feet and lived to tell about it; Sauffley, of North Carolina, who has had an ancestor serving as officer in every war in which our country has ever been engaged, and Patrick N. L. Bellinger.

At present Towers is at Tampico with his wings clipped, and at Vera Cruz the Ichiban No. 1 topside aviator is Pat Bellinger. In a former existence he was called "Midshipman Easy Jack Harkaway Charles O'Malley."

Still, for a navy hero, Pat Bellinger is a good name, too. He looks the part. He has a very young face, and tanned the color of a McClellan army saddle; his hair is yellow, his eyes are blue, and he is always smiling. The beauty doctors of health, clean living, clean thinking and the daily exercise of taking a fall with death have given him the look of a Greek god and one of Lyendecker's captains. He is much too good to lose. Were he my son—and he is young enough—I would give him a good talking to for taking such risks, and then, in order to keep him out of danger, make him a paymaster of an admiral.

The mother ship of the airships is the *Mississippi*, but their present nesting place is on the beach to the south of the city. They lie on the hard sand, guarded by sentries and cared

for by a detail of twelve mechanics, picked men from different ships, who sleep in open tents and by day live in bathing suits.

Rowboat or Pie Plate

There are two hydro-aeroplanes of the Curtiss model. In one you sit in a rowboat and, as in a monoplane, can see only the bottom of the rowboat and the distant horizon line. In the other you sit on a tin pie plate and dangle your legs. To obstruct your view of the earth from which you have been so foolish as to take leave there is nothing.

We chose the one in which the view was least obstructed. In case of a fall, Ensign Stolz, who, in the vernacular of the wardroom, is a “master” aviator, buckled me into an air mattress like the breastplate of a baseball catcher. I said I could swim better without it, and besides, with sixteen battleships in the harbour, each one with launches riding from the boom, we soon would be picked up.

“But you will be unconscious,” said Stolz. “They always are.”

The mechanics in bathing suits shoved us off. Below us was a punt like a decoy boat in which you go duck shooting. It just touched the surface, sending back two waves of spray behind us. The engines roared like motor cars with their mufflers off. So far it was like a ride in any high power motor boat.

Apparently with the intention of ramming it we were pointed at a stone breakwater. We were going very fast and the breakwater was only one hundred yards away. One of two things must happen—we must stop or some one must remove the breakwater. But young Bellinger had a better idea. He spun his wheel or pulled a lever and the punt, dripping and glistening with water like a duck, rose from the surface and the breakwater sank from beneath us.

Pass Over Battleship

We continued to rise. As steadily as an express elevator in a skyscraper building on imaginary rails, up an invisible staircase we climbed toward the sun. Between my feet I saw the fighting tops of a battleship. Yesterday, from the deck I had leaned back to look up at them. The white clad sailors in them had seemed as far away as if cut off from the rest of the ship.

As the acrobat on the trapeze up under the roof of the circus tent now we looked down upon them. They were as small as eggs in a nest seen from the highest branches of a tree. For the great *New York*, the greatest battleship in armament and in tonnage in all the world, we began to feel a certain pity. She was so unwieldy, so helpless, young Bellinger had but to soar higher and drop a bomb. We pictured a flock of air birds, each with her Bellinger, swooping out of the sky and descending like hawks upon these giant battleships.

What would avail then their twenty-five knots an hour while we were moving at sixty? Against a descending hail of bombs of what use would be their fourteen-inch guns or their sharp shooting marines? They might as well hope to hit a falling star or a meteor as the marines bringing down the airship. They could bring down the pilot, but not if the bomb fell first.

Look Into Fortress

We were over the fortress of San Juan de Ulua, spying upon her secrets that for three hundred years had been hidden by her walls. Now the same walls that have survived the bombardment of the warships of American, France and Mexico helped her not at all. Science

and the courage of the air pilots and the gasoline motor had laid bare all that had been hidden. It was as though with one hand we had and had seen what they were preparing for dinner.

We began to turn toward the land, and as the planes tilted I could not discover any good reason why, if they continued to tilt, they would not spill me into Caleta Reef. I had been up before in a monoplane with Tommy Sopwith, and had sat comfortably in a sort of bathtub in Wright biplanes. The seat was part of the frame, and there had been a brace for your feet and a steel stanchion to cling to, and I had clung to it until I squeezed off the paint. But in this hydroplane of Bellinger's there was nothing to grasp except the tin pie plate upon which I sat.

So I clung to that. It was like trying to lift yourself with your own boot-straps. I could not complain about it. The 60-horsepower engines made that futile, but appealingly I glanced at Bellinger to get me back on even keel. He only smiled reassuringly, but as he is always smiling that did not help. Afterward I saw a great many things, but I had other matters to occupy me. The most important was how to balance on a flat frying pan while five hundred feet above sea level and while progressing over a city at a rate of sixty miles an hour.

Tents Like Chicken Coops

I saw our outposts, saw the clouds on the yellow sand hills, saw Bellinger take his trusty right hand from the wheel and point at lines of chicken coops that proved to be the wall tents of a two-company post, and I wished he would not. Below us, like a colored map, lay Vera Cruz, the tower of Benito Juarez no larger than a salt cellar, the lighthouse no higher than a Grand Army monument.

Then again we began to bank and spiral, and I decided Vera Cruz was the ugliest city I had ever seen. Bellinger pointed at the beach, where lay the other biplanes and where in the surf machinists were waiting for us, little dark spots on the green water, and then at seventy miles an hour we began to sweep toward them. Down a great toboggan slide of air, and without so much as splashing our feet, we slid into the harbour, and the men in the bathing suits wanted to know what I thought of it, and I was still so scared that I told them.

On closer observation and as seen from an open cab I find Vera Cruz a beautiful city, but, I repeat, "Pat" Bellinger is too valuable to waste. He can serve his native land best by not leaving it.

(Source: *Chronicling America*, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030214/1914-05-24/ed-1/seq-1/>)