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Bicycle tire tubes served as a makeshift life vest for Eugene Ely on his takeoff from the USS Birmingham in 1910. He landed safely onshore.

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Iowan launched naval aviation era

By Andrew J. Nelson
WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

« Metro/Region

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GREENFIELD, Iowa — It took a guy who grew up 1,000 miles from the nearest ocean to be the first pilot to land an airplane on a ship.

That happened 100 years ago this week, when Iowa native Eugene Ely landed his Curtiss Model D biplane on the deck of the USS Pennsylvania in San Francisco Bay.

"It was easy enough. I think the trick could be successfully turned nine times out of 10," he said afterward. He drank some champagne, ate lunch, and then took off and flew back to shore.

Ely might have needed that champagne. A few months earlier, when he became the first to take off from the deck of the ship — the USS Birmingham off the coast of Virginia — his initial flight path resembled that of a rock.

The plane came so close to crashing that, when Ely landed on shore, his goggles had water splashed all over them.

"He was adventurous," said Lee Ann Nelson, executive director of the Iowa Aviation Museum in Greenfield and a long-time Ely admirer. "He had to be. He was always a daredevil."

Eugene Burton Ely is a name not widely known these days. But a century ago, he was among a few celebrity aviators taking to the air in wood-and-canvas contraptions to dazzle crowds.

His shipboard takeoffs and landings marked the beginning of U.S. naval aviation.

The importance of Ely's feats makes him one of the most important pilots ever to come from Iowa, Nelson said Wednesday.

He might be the most important if you don't count the pioneering Wright brothers, who spent part of their childhood in Cedar Rapids and as adults owned land in Adair County, she said.

Ely was born on a farm near Williamsburg on Oct. 21, 1886, according to the museum. He worked as an automobile mechanic and later became a driver for a Catholic priest in Cosgrove, near Iowa City.

The padre apparently was an automobile enthusiast, as the pair were credited with a speed record between Iowa City and Davenport.

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Ely later moved to the West Coast. In 1909 in Portland, Ore., he purchased a Curtiss airplane. Realizing the potential income from flying exhibitions, he taught himself to fly through trial and error, later refining his skills at a flying school established by aviation pioneer Glenn Curtiss.

Curtiss signed Ely to his exhibition team. During an October 1910 show in Baltimore, Ely was approached by a Navy captain who was assigned to develop naval aviation. He asked if Ely wanted to try taking off from and landing on a ship.

The pilot accepted.

It was a proposition with a great deal of danger. Ely might crash into the ocean or the ship's superstructure. Plus, Nelson said, he didn't know how to swim.

But Ely's willingness to give it a shot is one reason Nelson admires him so much. He represents the best of the Hawkeye State, she said.

"The Iowa work ethic; the determination. It doesn't matter how insane it sounds, the idea, it's: 'Let's see. Let's try it.' I admire that. It's a very Iowa mentality," Nelson said.

In November 1910, on board the Birmingham, Ely strapped on some bicycle inner tubes — a makeshift life-jacket — donned a leather helmet and took off from an 83-foot-long, makeshift wooden flight deck. It plunged downward, wheels dipping in the water before rising.

The following January, he took off from a San Francisco racetrack and landed on the Pennsylvania, a hook hanging from his plane to catch a rope tied to two sandbags. A modern pilot is stopped on a Nimitz class aircraft carrier by a similar though much more sophisticated technique.

Ely continued exhibition flying, giving many Americans their first glimpse of an airplane. Ely and his fellow pilots were pushing the limits of their aircraft, writing the book on how to fly.

"Between the Wright brothers and men like Eugene Ely, we've come a long way," Nelson said. "These guys didn't have a blueprint. They were flying by the seat of their pants."

Just months after his shipboard landing, Ely was dead. Unable to pull out of a spiral, he crashed during an Oct. 19, 1911, exhibition flight at the Georgia State Fair in Macon. A crowd of 20,000 looked on. Ely's neck was broken.

He is buried in a cemetery near Williamsburg, where as late as the 1990s several of his nieces and nephews still lived.

But Ely wasn't forgotten by the Navy or his home state. A Navy ceremony in Norfolk, Va., last November marked the 100th anniversary of his first maritime takeoff there. He was inducted into the Iowa Aviation Hall of Fame in 1994 and will be honored at the aviation museum's 14th annual "Chili Fly-In" on Jan. 29.

Nelson hopes the museum can do more to honor the pioneering Iowa aviator.

"He changed aviation and how we looked at it and how we fought wars," she said. "That moment changed everything."

Correction: In an earlier version of this story, the dates of Ely's birth and death were incorrect.

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