The Military’s First “Aircraft Carrier”
USS Birmingham
As heavier-than-air aircraft developed in the early 20th century, various navies began to take an interest in their potential use as scouts for their big gun warships. In 1909 the French inventor Clément Ader published in his book *L’Aviation Militaire* the description of a ship to operate airplanes at sea, with a flat flight deck, an island superstructure, deck elevators and a hangar bay. That year the US Naval Attaché in Paris sent a report on his observations. A number of experimental flights were made to test the concept. Eugene Ely was the first pilot to launch from a stationary ship on November 14, 1910. He took off from a structure fixed over the forecastle of the armored cruiser *USS Birmingham* at Hampton Roads, Virginia and landed nearby on Willoughby Spit after some five minutes in the air.

On January 18, 1911, he became the first pilot to land on a stationary ship. He took off from land and landed on a similar temporary structure on the aft of *USS Pennsylvania* anchored at San Francisco’s waterfront - the improvised braking system of sandbags and ropes led directly to the arrestor hook and wires system in use today. His aircraft was then turned around and he was able to take off again.

Naval aviation was born over a century ago, and technological advancements since then has produced the centerpiece of US naval forces today; the modern aircraft carrier of the fleet.

The Southern Museum of Flight is both proud and honored to have on display a number of artifacts associated with the *USS Birmingham* and Ely’s first flight.

A number of Curtiss Pusher original and reproduction aircraft exist, and reproductions of the design date as far back to the era when the aircraft was in production, mostly built by private parties. On display in the Early Aviation Hangar, our visitors can view a full-scale replica of a Curtiss “Pusher” suspended from the hangar’s ceiling. There is also a scale model of the *USS Birmingham* on display that was expertly crafted by a long-time member of the museum. Countless hours were spent with construction drawings ensuring all details were accurately reproduced in this model, and it shows!

But perhaps the most historic and significant artifact (and the only known remaining part of the original *USS Birmingham*) is the actual stern-located name plate. This has to be a “one-of-a-kind” piece of history and one that has immense significance to the City of Birmingham, and to the great state of Alabama.

The Birmingham was laid down at Quincy, MA on August 14, 1905, launched on May 29, 1907, commissioned on April 11,1908.

She was decommissioned at Philadelphia, PA on December 1, 1923 and sold for scrap on May 13, 1930 (minus the invaluable stern plate shown above!)
A perpetual National Veterans Award was created in Birmingham for America’s first official National Veterans Day observance as authorized by Congress. The award is presented at the National Veterans Award Dinner. This year, the Award Dinner will be on the evening of November 10th, in the Sheraton Birmingham Ballroom, at 2101 Richard Arrington Blvd., and will be honoring those service members who have participated in the Covid 19 response. The events will begin at 5:00pm, with a reception prior to the awards dinner.

The 2021 National Veterans Day Parade is scheduled to begin downtown at 1:30PM in the afternoon of November 11th and run until 4:30PM. The National Veterans Day organization will post all the finalized information on their website: (www.nationalveteransday.org)

The Southern Museum of Flight is proud to participate in this historic event as they have done in years past.

Make plans to attend and be part of this great historic and patriotic event!

In 1945, after serving in the Navy in World War II, Raymond Weeks returned to his family in Birmingham and envisioned a national holiday that would honor war veterans. He picked Nov. 11, a date that was designated as Armistice Day marking the end of World War I on the “the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month of the year.” Weeks felt the day should be set aside to honor all veterans of all wars.

So the next year he wrote a letter and personally delivered his petition for a “National Veterans Day 1947” to then Army Chief of Staff, General Dwight Eisenhower.

Because of Weeks’ unrelenting commitment to honor those who bravely served the United States during times of war, the first “Veterans Day” event was held on November 11, 1947 in Birmingham.

In 1954, President Eisenhower officially changed the designation of Armistice Day when he signed a bill which made Veterans Day, November 11th, a federal holiday. The bill was proposed by U.S. Representative Edward Rees of Kansas.

For 38 years after that, Weeks, dubbed the “Father of Veterans Day,” served his hometown of Birmingham as Director of the National Veterans Day Celebration.

Then on November 11, 1982, President Ronald Reagan presented Weeks with the Presidential Citizens Medal.

The President described Weeks as a person who “…devoted his life to serving others, his community, the American veteran, and his nation.”
The U.S. Navy is looking at ways that a new jet trainer aircraft could help the service to completely overhaul the way it trains its aviators. The planned successor to the current Boeing T-45 “Goshawk” could be employed across a number of roles in naval aviation — not just training brand new pilots. In fact, the advent of the new trainer could result in Naval Aviators tackling their very first flight to the aircraft carrier in a front line strike fighter, after they have already earned their coveted ‘wings of gold.’

Recent advances in technology and a number of other factors mean the Navy’s approach to operations from the aircraft carrier could be changing. Still, there is bound to be major controversy surrounding such a move considering the deeply ingrained aviator-focused culture within the Navy’s air arm.

A request for information (RFI) was released in May 2020, with a view to acquiring a land-based jet trainer by 2028. The RFI said that rather than being able to land and take-off from the carrier like the current Goshawk and its predecessors, such as the TA-4J “Skyhawk”, the new trainer would be limited to conducting Field Carrier Landing Practice and carrier touch-and-go landings.

Until now, U.S. Naval Aviators have been required to fly approaches to carriers with uncompromised levels of skill, with very little margin for error.

This requires skilled throttle and control column inputs to nurse an aircraft down onto the deck with precision in order to catch one of the arresting wires.

However, the advent of new flight control software has almost done away with the need to wrestle an unforgiving carrier-borne aircraft onto a narrow flight deck. In addition to the new flight control software, Navy aircraft can make use of the Instrument Carrier Landing System (ICLS) and the Automatic Carrier Landing System (ACLS) to aid safe recoveries, especially in inclement weather.

The confidence gained during the current training process has always been seen as a rite of passage in carrier aviation - they go to the boat solo and this process is invaluable. The new process will change something that has been in place for decades.

It’s now easier to land on the carrier with Precision Landing Mode (PLM) or Delta Flight Path (DFP) technology, but it is not automatic. But carrier qualification is more than catching the wire - it is the exposure to the carrier environment and how an individual deals with it. The ability to master the pattern, the nuances, the communications, and the stress are still part of the Navy’s competitive advantages.

A final decision on the next training aircraft has not yet been made.