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Gateway News Release

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Gateway National Recreation Area's Floyd Bennett Field Hosts Historic Military Aircraft Marking 100 Years of Naval Aviation

Gateway National Recreation Area's [Floyd Bennett Field](#) received a replica of the 1911 Ely-Curtiss Pusher Friday, May 20 after the historic aircraft landed to commemorate the [Centennial of Naval Aviation](#). Veteran pilot Bob Coolbaugh, who flew the plane to Floyd Bennett Field in Brooklyn, built the replica himself over a three year period to celebrate this year's observance. The historic replica aircraft will be on display at the former airfield through Friday, May 27 during [New York City Fleet Week](#).

"Floyd Bennett Field is hallowed ground," said Coolbaugh, a former U.S. Navy carrier pilot. New York City's first municipal airport opened on May 23, 1931—80 years ago today. "Think of the great pilots who flew here as part of some record-setting flight—Wiley Post, Amelia Earhardt, 'Wrong Way' Corrigan. They were living in the moment. This lets me revisit the edge."

Hangar B, the home to Floyd Bennett Field's collection of historic aircraft, is open Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday to the general public. Volunteers from the Historic Airplane Restoration Project (HARP) will be on hand to explain a variety of aircraft to the public, including those used when Floyd Bennett Field served as a Naval Air Station within the Naval Air Reserve System. For information on specific events, call the Floyd Bennett Field Visitor Center at 718-338-3799.

Weather permitting, Coolbaugh hopes to take off from Floyd Bennett Field, fly over [Governors Island National Monument](#), [Statue of Liberty National Monument](#), and the [U.S.S. Intrepid Sea, Air and Space Museum](#)—all sites within New York Harbor. During his years as a Navy carrier pilot, Coolbaugh served on the Intrepid's last cruise. A high resolution camera will take photographs every 30 seconds over the right shoulder of the pilot.

The aircraft is a replica of the model used in 1911 by aviation pioneer [Eugene B. Ely](#) to land on the deck of the armored cruiser USS Pennsylvania. Later that day he successfully flew off the cruiser. (He had flown from the U.S.S. Birmingham the previous fall.) Within a year, the United States Navy purchased its first aircraft and began the development of a naval aviation program.

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Coolbaugh, along with his “Curtiss crew” of six friends and pilots, built the replica Ely-Curtiss Pusher specifically to celebrate the centennial. No planes from naval aviation’s first decade existed in flying condition. Coolbaugh, who flew for People’s Express and Continental Airlines after his enlistment in the Navy, has restored old planes for 25 years because he said he never could afford a new one. A bamboo frame supports fabric-covered wings and a tricycle undercarriage. The entire craft weighs about 1,000 pounds and flies best at about 55 miles per hour and has only one seat.

The replica is different from the original in one major respect. Modern digital test equipment records flight data, including a photo and video camera to record the flight. “Nobody alive has flown a Curtiss Pusher,” said Coolbaugh. “There’s no one to ask for advice, no real concept about what’s going on.” Scientists at the [Naval Air Station Patuxent River](#) in Maryland will analyze how the plane handles. A simulation will be developed, allowing people a chance to simulate flying the Ely-Curtiss Pusher. Meanwhile, Coolbaugh said, “You have to fly it with a lot of patience.”

The Ely-Curtiss Pusher will appear at a total of 19 shows to promote the centennial and this is the sixth location on tour. Coolbaugh hopes to log 300 flight hours in the craft, which will generally take place in one-hour increments throughout the celebration. The Ely-Curtiss Pusher will be one of the attractions at [EAA AirVenture](#) in Oshkosh, Wis., an annual air event attracting more than a half million aviation enthusiasts from around the world.

Coolbaugh respects aviation pioneers such as Ely for the risks they took. “It’s a young man’s game,” said Coolbaugh. “Ely never had a ship to practice [on], yet this 26-year-old kid with 120 hours of flying experience landed on the deck of a ship. He was the best pilot in the world for about 14 months and then he was dead.” Coolbaugh believes that in today’s risk-averse environment, naval aviation could never have occurred because “it took a different mindset than what most people possess today.”

On Friday, May 27, Coolbaugh will depart Floyd Bennett Field for Philadelphia, which celebrates its own Navy Week through Sunday.

About Gateway National Recreation Area

Established in 1972, Gateway National Recreation Area has more than 26,000 acres of marshes, wildlife sanctuaries and recreational athletic facilities, miles of sandy beaches; indoor and outdoor classrooms; picnicking and camping areas, as well as historic structures and military installations, airfields, a lighthouse, and adjacent waters around New York harbor. The park offers urban residents in two states a wide range of recreational opportunities year round. With more than nine million visitors a year, it is the third most visited national park in the country. For information about Gateway's upcoming public programs, see the park's Web site at <http://www.nps.gov/gate/index.htm>

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