

John H. Towers Papers

A Finding Aid to the Papers in the Naval Historical Foundation Collection in the Library of Congress



**Manuscript Division, Library of Congress
Washington, D.C.
2003**

Contact information: <https://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mss.contact>

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Prepared by Manuscript Division staff

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Collection Summary

Title: John H. Towers Papers

Inclusive Dates: 1830-1989

Bulk Dates: 1906-1955

ID No.: MSS81197

Creator: Towers, John H. (John Henry), 1885-1955

Extent: 5,000 items

Extent: 15 containers plus 4 oversize

Extent: 8 linear feet

Language: Collection material in English

Location: Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

LC Catalog record: <https://lccn.loc.gov/mm93081197>

Summary: United States Navy officer and early naval aviator. Diaries, naval and personal correspondence, memoranda, orders for duty, aviation logs, speeches and writings, biographical notebooks and sketches, photographs, reports, scrapbooks, blueprints, charts, and newspaper clippings documenting Towers's naval career and his participation in naval aviation from its inception in 1911 to World War II and after.

Selected Search Terms

The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the LC Catalog. They are grouped by name of person or organization, by subject or location, and by occupation and listed alphabetically.

People

Churchill, Clementine, 1885-1977--Correspondence.

Forrest, Nathan Bedford, 1821-1877.

James, Henry, 1843-1916--Correspondence.

Norton, Reuben S. Reuben S. Norton papers.

Towers, John H. (John Henry), 1885-1955.

Towers, Pierrette Anne. Pierrette Anne Towers papers.

Towers, William M. William M. Towers papers.

Organizations

Pan American Airways Corporation.

United States. Navy--Aviation.

United States. Navy--Cruise, 1907-1909.

United States. Navy--Officers.

Subjects

Aeronautics, Commercial.

Aeronautics, Military.

Curtiss-Wright aircraft.

Naval aviation.

Transatlantic flights.

Voyages around the world.

World War, 1939-1945--Aerial operations, American.

World War, 1939-1945--Campaigns--Pacific Ocean.

Places

Georgia--Description and travel.

Georgia--History--Civil War, 1861-1865.

Louisiana--New Orleans--Description and travel.

Mississippi--Description and travel.

Rome (Ga.)--History.

United States--History--Civil War, 1861-1865.

Occupations

Aviators.
Naval officers.

Acquisition Information

The papers of John H. Towers, admiral, naval aviator, and advocate of naval aviation, were deposited in the Library of Congress by the Naval Historical Foundation in 1991, 1993, and 1994. The deposits were converted to gifts in 1998.

Processing History

The papers of John H. Towers were processed in 1993 and revised in 2002 by Melinda K. Friend. Additional material received in 1994 was incorporated into the collection in 2003.

Transfers

Some photographs have been transferred to the Prints and Photographs Division of the Library where they are identified as part of these papers.

Copyright Status

The status of copyright in the unpublished writings of John H. Towers is governed by the Copyright Law of the United States (Title 17, U.S.C.).

Access and Restrictions

The papers of John H. Towers are open to research. Researchers are advised to contact the Manuscript Reading Room prior to visiting. Many collections are stored off-site and advance notice is needed to retrieve these items for research use.

Preferred Citation

Researchers wishing to cite this collection should include the following information: Container number, John H. Towers Papers, Naval Historical Foundation Collection, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Biographical Note

Date	Event
1885, Jan. 30	Born, Rome, Ga.
1906	Graduated United States Naval Academy, Annapolis, Md.
1907-1908	Served aboard the battleship <i>Kentucky</i> as part of the Great White Fleet circumnavigating the globe
1909-1911	Helped outfit the battleship <i>Michigan</i> for a transatlantic voyage
1911	Ordered to take flying lessons offered to the navy by Glenn H. Curtiss, Hammondsport, N.Y. Established navy's first air installation at Greenbury Point near Annapolis, Md.
1912	Tested new aircraft, Curtiss Flying School, North Island, San Diego, Calif.
1913	Survived crash over Chesapeake Bay near St. Michaels, Md., that led to development of seat belts for airplanes Designated Naval Aviator Number Three (actually was second naval officer to receive his wings) Commanded first air unit in fleet maneuvers in the Caribbean from Guantanamo, Cuba

1914 Executive officer, Naval Air Station, Pensacola, Fla.
 Commanded four-plane air unit aboard the battleship *Mississippi* and the cruiser *Birmingham*, Veracruz, Mexico
 Assistant naval attaché, American embassy, London, England, to observe airplane and airship developments

1915 Married Elizabeth Haseltine "Lily" Carstairs (divorced 1923)

1915-1916 Acting naval attaché, London, England

1916 Commanded naval aviation, office of the chief of naval operations (later designated supervisor of the Naval Aviation Flying Corps)

1917 Assistant director of naval aviation
 Mobilized American naval air forces for World War I

1919 Promoted to lieutenant commander
 Commanded Seaplane Division One which made the first transatlantic flight (only the NC-4 plane was successful)

1919-1920 Executive officer, aircraft tender *Aroostook*
 Senior aide to Pacific Air Detachment commander Captain Henry C. Mustin, San Diego, Calif.

1920 Commanded the tender *Mugford*
 Received the Navy Cross

1921-1923 Executive officer, Naval Air Station, Pensacola, Fla.

1923-1925 Assistant naval attaché concurrently in London, England; Paris, France; Rome, Italy; the Hague, Netherlands; and Berlin, Germany

1925-1926 Bureau of Aeronautics, Washington, D.C.

1926-1927 Executive officer, first aircraft carrier, *Langley*

1927-1928 Commanded the *Langley*

1928-1929 Head, Plans Division, Bureau of Aeronautics, Washington, D.C.

1929-1931 Assistant chief, Bureau of Aeronautics

1930 Married Marie-Louise-Anne-Pierrette (Pierrette Anne) "Pierre" Chauvin de Grandmont
 Promoted to captain

1931-1933 Chief of staff, Battle Force Aircraft (carrier) commander Rear Admiral Harry E. Yarnell aboard the aircraft carrier *Saratoga*

1933-1934 Attended Naval War College, Newport, R.I.
 Assigned Naval Torpedo Station, Newport, R.I.

1934-1936 Commanded Naval Air Station, North Island, San Diego, Calif.

1936-1937 Chief of staff, Battle Force Aircraft (carrier) commander Vice Admiral Frederick J. Horne aboard the *Saratoga*

1937-1938 Commanded the *Saratoga*

1938-1939 Assistant chief, Bureau of Aeronautics

1939 Promoted to rear admiral

1939-1942 Chief, Bureau of Aeronautics
 Mobilized American naval air forces for World War II
 Member, Joint Chiefs of Staff

1942-1944 Commander, United States Naval Air Forces, Pacific Fleet, as a vice admiral
 Aviation advisor, Pacific Fleet commander Admiral Chester W. Nimitz

1944 Deputy Commander in Chief, Pacific Fleet and Pacific Ocean Areas
 Awarded Legion of Merit

1945 Awarded Navy Distinguished Service Medal
 Commander, Main Fleet Headquarters, Pearl Harbor, Hawaii
 Commander, Second Carrier Task Force
 Commander, Task Force Thirty-eight off Japan aboard the aircraft carrier *Shangri-La*
 Commander, Fifth Fleet, aboard the battleship *New Jersey* as an admiral

1946-1947 Commander in Chief, Pacific Fleet and Pacific Ocean Areas aboard the aircraft carrier *Bennington* at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii

1947	Chairman, General Board, Navy Department Retired from the navy
1948-1953	Vice president, Pan American Airways
circa 1952-1954	Member, Public Policy Committee of the Institute of War and Peace Studies
1953-1955	President, Flight Safety Foundation, New York, N.Y.
1955, Apr. 30	Died, St. Albans, N.Y.

Scope and Content Note

The papers of John Henry Towers (1885-1955), pioneering naval aviator, span the years from 1830 to 1989, with the bulk of the items concentrated in the period between 1906 and 1955. The collection reflects a career devoted to naval aviation from its inception in 1911 to World War II and after. Featured in the papers is Towers's continuing effort in behalf of growth, recognition, and advancement of naval aviation. The papers are divided into the following series: [Diaries](#), [Personal File](#), [Biographical Notebooks](#), [Miscellany](#), [Addition](#), and [Oversize](#).

The [Diaries](#), 1939-1950, are arranged chronologically and include Towers's years with the United States Navy and Pan American Airways. His naval diaries covering the period from his last months as a captain until his retirement as an admiral, 1939-1947, and reveal Towers's zeal and advocacy for naval aviation. Missing from the naval diaries are the entries from 3 October 1942 to 22 August 1943. The Pan American Airways diaries, 1948-1950, record Towers's first three years as a vice president of that organization. They focus on meetings and conferences, sometimes with former naval aviation associates, and relate to aircraft and airline equipment.

The [Personal File](#), 1906-1962, contains biographical sketches of Towers as well as correspondence, diplomatic papers, miscellaneous personal records, and speeches and writings. Included in the correspondence are letters written by Towers to family members while he was sailing with the "Great White Fleet." His letters to his wife Pierrette discuss the navy "old guard" and its resistance to naval aviation, visits to Pacific islands during World War II, the success of aircraft carriers against the Japanese around Manila in the Philippines, and a trip to Japan for Pan American Airways. The naval correspondence consists of letters and memoranda regarding naval directives and plans. Two items among the miscellaneous letters are notes penned to Towers by the expatriate writer Henry James. The orders for duty file represents a chronological record of Towers's naval assignments, and his speeches and writings reflect the varied audiences to which he spoke and wrote on the subjects of naval aviation and aircraft. Towers's article "The Great Hop," published in *Everybody's Magazine* in November 1919, recounts the "sailing" of his NC-3 airplane into the Azores after it had crashed into the sea during the first transatlantic flight in May 1919.

The [Biographical Notebooks](#), 1845-1969, were assembled during an effort by Pierrette Anne Towers to gather information on her husband's career for a biography she planned to write. Although, she never achieved her goal, she turned over the notebooks and other papers to Clark G. Reynolds, who published a biography of the admiral in 1991 entitled, *Admiral John H. Towers: The Struggle for Naval Air Supremacy*. The notebooks are divided into two categories: chronological and subject. The chronological notebooks documenting the full span of Towers's naval career include copies of his diaries interspersed with photographs, correspondence, memoranda, transcriptions of letters and tape recordings, newspaper and magazine clippings, photocopies of correspondence, notes, and excerpts from biographies and autobiographies of military leaders. Typed copies of documents on blue paper represent duplicates of photocopies that were in the possession of Pierrette Anne Towers which had become too fragile or difficult to read.

Subject notebooks in the series, 1845-1967, cover various topics and persons highlighting Towers's career. Five notebooks contain excerpts from the biographies and autobiographies of Henry Harley Arnold, Lord Hastings L. Ismay, George C. Kenney, Ernest J. King, and Marc A. Mitscher. A notebook titled "Transatlantic Flight" contains photographs of the flight crews and the NC airplanes as well as weather charts and original naval memoranda used on the flight. Another notebook, "Chronology of U.S. Naval Aviation," is Arthur B. Cook's copy of a manuscript prepared by Harold Blaine Miller as a companion to Miller's book *Navy Wings*. Other notebooks contain information on the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland, transcriptions of personal letters from Towers to Pierrette Anne Towers before their marriage, and a carbon copy of his statement as a member of the board of inquiry investigating the Shenandoah dirigible disaster in 1925.

The [Miscellany](#) series includes aviation logs for Curtiss and Wright airplanes; navigation charts, reports, and a scrapbook pertaining to the transatlantic flight of 1919; blueprints of flying boats; Towers family photographs; and Pierrette Anne

Towers's correspondence, including a note from Clementine Churchill. A register of visitors to the Towers's home in Honolulu, Hawaii, contains notable signatures and references to the testing of the atomic bomb.

The [Addition](#), 1830-1900, contains photocopies of a travel journal kept by Towers's maternal grandfather, Reuben S. Norton, on his trips from Massachusetts to New Orleans, Louisiana, and various places in Georgia in 1830, as well as typewritten transcripts of Norton's diary, 1861-1895, while he lived in Rome, Georgia, primarily during the Civil War. Included also are typewritten reminiscences by Admiral Towers's father, William M. Towers, written in 1900 recounting his Civil War service with General Nathan Bedford Forrest.

Organization of the Papers

The collection is arranged in six series:

- [Diaries, 1939-1950](#)
- [Personal File, 1906-1962](#)
- [Biographical Notebooks, 1845-1969](#)
- [Miscellany, 1878-1989](#)
- [Addition, 1830-1900](#)
- [Oversize, 1912-1951](#)

Description of Series

Container	Series
BOX 1-2	<p><u>Diaries, 1939-1950</u></p> <p>Typewritten diaries interleaved with carbon copies of correspondence, memoranda, and newspaper articles chronicling Towers's duties and activities during his naval career and while a vice president of Pan American Airways.</p> <p>Arranged in chronological order.</p>
BOX 2-4	<p><u>Personal File, 1906-1962</u></p> <p>Biographical sketches, family and naval correspondence, diplomatic papers and passport, medical records, orders for duty, and speeches and writings.</p> <p>Arranged alphabetically by type of material and chronologically therein.</p>
BOX 5-13	<p><u>Biographical Notebooks, 1845-1969</u></p> <p>Unbound notebooks, organized by Pierrette Anne Towers, containing photographs, correspondence, memoranda, transcriptions, newspaper and magazine clippings, photocopies of correspondence, notes, and excerpts.</p> <p>A group of chronological notebooks are arranged by year. Subject notebooks are arranged alphabetically by subject headings provided and organized by Pierrette Anne Towers.</p>
BOX 13-14	<p><u>Miscellany, 1878-1989</u></p> <p>Aviation logs, family photographs, reports, essays, correspondence, scrapbooks, and other items arranged alphabetically by type of material and either chronologically or alphabetically therein.</p>
BOX 15	<p><u>Addition, 1830-1900</u></p> <p>Photocopies of a travel journal, a typewritten transcript of a diary, and of a typescript of Civil War reminiscences.</p> <p>Arranged alphabetically by name of writer and then by type of material and chronologically therein.</p>
BOX OV 1-OV 4	<p><u>Oversize, 1912-1951</u></p> <p>Blueprints, charts, registers, and scrapbooks.</p> <p>Organized and described according to the series, folders, and boxes from which the items were removed.</p>

Container List

Container	Contents
BOX 1-2	Diaries, 1939-1950 Typewritten diaries interleaved with carbon copies of correspondence, memoranda, and newspaper articles chronicling Towers's duties and activities during his naval career and while a vice president of Pan American Airways. Arranged in chronological order.
BOX 1	1939, Feb. 2-1942, Oct. 2 (4 folders) 1943, Aug. 23-1946, July 1 (4 folders)
BOX 2	1946, July 2-1950, June 29 (4 folders)
BOX 2-4	Personal File, 1906-1962 Biographical sketches, family and naval correspondence, diplomatic papers and passport, medical records, orders for duty, and speeches and writings. Arranged alphabetically by type of material and chronologically therein.
BOX 2	Biographical sketches, 1942-1962, undated Correspondence Congratulatory, 1942 Family Towers, Mary C. (sister), 1906-1909 Towers, Mary N. (mother), 1908 Towers, Pierrette Anne Grandmont (wife), 1928-1951
BOX 3	Towers, William M., Jr. (brother), 1908-1955 Miscellaneous, 1915, 1929, 1947-1955 Naval, 1932-1948 (2 folders) Diplomatic papers and passport, 1916, 1923-1925 Medical records Eye care, 1933-1939, undated General, 1947 Orders for duty 1906-1920 (2 folders)
BOX 4	1921-1947 (2 folders) Speeches and writings Speeches 1926, 1951-1953, Address at Princeton University, Princeton, N.J. 1931 Feb. 25, Address before the American Society of Mechanical Engineers, New York

Personal File, 1906-1962

Container	Contents
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Apr. 23, "Modern Development of Aircraft," Daughters of the American Revolution Convention, Washington, D.C.

1939

Jan. 11, "Mutual Problems in Air Transportation--Military and Commercial," Detroit, Mich.

Oct. 27, Address at Navy Day, Atlanta Athletic Club, Atlanta, Ga.

1940, Dec. 3, Address at Association of Commerce dinner, Norfolk, Va.

1941, Mar., Statement before the Truman Committee, United States Senate

circa 1945-circa 1955, "Strategic Employment of Naval Forces..."

circa 1948-circa 1955, Address at the University of Georgia, Athens, Ga.

1952, Oct. 24, Address before Aviation Commandery

1953, Feb. 9, Address on aviation topics

1954

Jan. 18, Address at Naval Air Station, Norfolk, Va.

Jan. 26, Address before the Institute of Aeronautical Sciences, New York, N.Y.

circa 1954, "Early Days of Naval Aviation"

Undated

Address before the National Defense Committee of the American Legion

Miscellaneous

Writings

1919, Nov., "The Great Hop," *Everybody's Magazine*

circa 1919

"Aircraft Navigation in Connection with Trans-Atlantic Flight"

"Story of the N.C. 3," *New York World*

1933-1934, Papers written at the Naval War College

1934, Senior class thesis, Naval War College

Undated

"Flying--As Was"

Partial autobiographical manuscript

"Twenty Years of Naval Aviation, Chapter 1, Hammondsport"

BOX 5-13

Biographical Notebooks, 1845-1969

Unbound notebooks, organized by Pierrette Anne Towers, containing photographs, correspondence, memoranda, transcriptions, newspaper and magazine clippings, photocopies of correspondence, notes, and excerpts.

A group of chronological notebooks are arranged by year. Subject notebooks are arranged alphabetically by subject headings provided and organized by Pierrette Anne Towers.

BOX 5

Chronological

1906-1911

(7 folders)

BOX 6

1912-1913

(6 folders)

BOX 7

1914-1916

(7 folders)

BOX 8

1917-1941

(8 folders)

Biographical Notebooks, 1845-1969

Container	Contents
BOX 9	1942-1944 (7 folders)
BOX 10	1945-1967, undated (6 folders) Subject Arnold, Henry Harley, 1961, undated Biographical data on Towers, 1859-1955 (2 folders) "Chronology of U.S. Naval Aviation" 1911-1914 (2 folders)
BOX 11	1915-1934 (2 folders) Ismay, Hastings L., Lord, undated Kenney, George C., undated King, Ernest J., 1952, undated Mitscher, Marc A., undated Naval aviators Biographical data on associates and contemporaries of Towers, 1905-1969 (3 folders) Photocopies of correspondence 1913 1914 (2 folders)
BOX 12	Pilot's licenses, uniforms, safety apparatus, insignias, 1911-1963 Statement on <i>Shenandoah</i> disaster, personal letters and clippings, 1924-1930 (2 folders) Transatlantic flight of 1919, 1919-1925 (2 folders)
BOX 13	United States Naval Academy, Annapolis, Md., 1845-1908
BOX 13-14	Miscellany, 1878-1989 Aviation logs, family photographs, reports, essays, correspondence, scrapbooks, and other items arranged alphabetically by type of material and either chronologically or alphabetically therein.
BOX 13	Aviation logs Curtiss planes, 1911-1914 Wright planes, 1911-1913 Blueprint of Rodman Wanamaker Trans-Atlantic flying boat, 1914 <i>See Oversize</i> Blueprints of flying boats, 1914 <i>See Oversize</i> Currency, German and Russian, 1909, 1917-1923 Curtiss, Glenn H., biographical sketch, 1878-1913 Genealogy, undated Institute of War and Peace Studies, New York, N.Y., 1952-1954, undated "Lt. T. G. Ellyson and the First Navy Wings," by Elretta Sudsbury, undated Photographs, 1889-1909, 1938-1965, undated

Miscellany, 1878-1989

Container	Contents
BOX 14	Register of visitors to the commander in chief, United States Pacific Fleet and Pacific Ocean Areas, 1945-1946 <i>See Oversize</i> Reynolds, Clark G., correspondence regarding Towers biography, 1979-1989, undated (2 folders) Scrapbooks Autographs of visitors to the Towers home in Hawaii, 1946, undated Christening of the aircraft carrier <i>Roosevelt</i> by Pierrette Anne Towers, 1942-1945 Dedication of Towers Field at the United States Naval Air Station, Jacksonville, Fla., 1960, Oct. 15 Newspaper clippings on Towers's career, 1912-1951 <i>See Oversize</i> Towers, Pierrette Anne, 1939-1943, 1954-1987, undated Transatlantic flight (1919) Navigation charts, 1919 <i>See Oversize</i> Reports, 1914-1919 Scrapbook <i>See Oversize</i> United States Fleet Umpire Instructions, 1932
BOX 15	Addition, 1830-1900 Photocopies of a travel journal, a typewritten transcript of a diary, and of a typescript of Civil War reminiscences. Arranged alphabetically by name of writer and then by type of material and chronologically therein.
BOX 15	Norton, Reuben S. Diary, 1861-1865, 1888-1895 Travel journal, 1830 Towers, William M., reminiscences of the Civil War, 1900
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BOX OV 2*	Scrapbooks *These scrapbooks are extremely fragile and should be served with care. Newspaper clippings on Towers's career 1912-1951 (Container 14) 1939-1942 (Container 14)
BOX OV 3	Transatlantic flight, 1919 Navigation charts (Container 14)
BOX OV 4	Scrapbook (Container 14)