Eugene Burton Ely was the first pilot to fly an airplane from the deck of a ship. He took his historic flight on November 14, 1910, at Hampton Roads, Virginia. After the Wright brothers refused to make the attempt, Ely successfully took off from a deck constructed on the cruiser USS Birmingham. He landed about two miles away.

Two months later, on January 18, 1911, Ely successfully executed the first airplane landing on a ship. He took off from Selfridge Field near San Francisco. Pilots today wear special helmets and flight suits, but those did not exist yet. For this flight, Ely wore a padded football helmet and bicycle tubes as a survival vest. Ely made the first landing of an airplane on the cruiser USS Pennsylvania anchored in San Francisco Bay.

Then, Ely made the world's second nautical takeoff by flying the plane from the ship back to shore.

Afterwards, Ely demonstrated the airplane’s scouting capabilities for the U.S. Army. On February 20, 1911, Ely enlisted as a private in the California National Guard and was subsequently commissioned a Lieutenant in June 1911, becoming the National Guard's first aviator. The U.S. was not at war in 1911, but they wanted to know how airplanes could help support American troops. Seven years later, American troops were glad that Ely and the U.S. Army studied these capabilities.

Adapted from: http://www.hill.af.mil/About-Us/Fact-Sheets/Display/Article/397438/eugene-ely/
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Eugene Burton Ely  
(1886-1911)

Eugene Ely developed a reputation as an expert navigator. He publicly demonstrated his skills across the country. He also delivered the Army's second airplane. (The first Army plane was a Wright airplane.) Ely again demonstrated the military value of the airplane to the U.S. Army. He then trained Army personnel to fly. His brief, but brilliant career, was cut short on October 19, 1911. He was killed in a tragic airplane crash during a demonstration at the Georgia State Fair.

Ely's flights for the U.S. Army and the National Guard showed the Navy how aircrafts could land and take off from ships. President Herbert Hoover recognized the significance of Ely's contribution by posthumously awarding him the Distinguished Flying Cross on February 16, 1933.

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