

Brunswick Aviator Made History with Transcontinental Flight

Lieutenant William DeVoe Coney was the first person to successfully complete a solo transcontinental flight in under 24 hours. In February 1921, Coney made the 2,070-mile flight from San Diego's Rockwell Field to Pablo Beach, today's Jacksonville Beach, in a record-breaking flying time of 22 hours and 27 minutes.

Born in Atlanta in 1893, Coney spent most of his childhood in Brunswick. His parents were Martha Ann Dillon Coney and Edgar Fairchild Coney. His father was a partner in both the South Atlantic Towing Company and Coney & Parker, a local coal and coke business. William DeVoe Coney went to Georgia Institute of Technology before entering the Army Air Service in 1917. He spent most of World War I as a flying instructor. At the time of his solo attempt, he was a member of the 91st Aero Squadron.

Coney's plane was a DeHaviland-4, a large biplane leftover from World War I. The plane's inauspicious nickname was the "flying coffin" because it was large and unwieldy to fly. The 27-year-old pilot worked with mechanics at Rockwell Field to enlarge the fuel tanks in his airplane to necessitate only one refueling stop, planned for the halfway point at Dallas' Love Field.

Lt. Coney took off from San Diego on February 21st at 6:55 p.m., carrying a package of

official mail from the commander of Naval Air Station San Diego to the commander of Naval Air Station Pensacola, two bottles of hot coffee, and four pounds of chocolate. Ten hours later he was forced to land near Abilene, Texas, to partially refuel and repair the engine. It was a full day before he could fly to Dallas for his planned stop. He took off on February 23rd at 11:00 p.m. for the final leg of his journey.

At 7:27 a.m. the next morning, Lt. Coney landed on the sands of Pablo Beach, breaking the airtime record. He was greeted by well-wishers, including many of his relatives from Brunswick and Atlanta. A few days later, Lt. Coney flew his plane to Brunswick. According to the local newspaper, "the entire city turn[ed] out to greet and cheer him when he landed on the local aviation field."

Shown here are photographs of Lt. Coney and his DeHaviland-4, taken during the trip to Brunswick. A month later, the intrepid aviator was critically injured while attempting to break his own record on a cross-country flight back to California. He was thrown from the cockpit during a forced landing in Mississippi on March 26th and died at a hospital in Natchez a few days later. After services at St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Brunswick, Lt. Coney was buried in Palmetto Cemetery.

