

# Early days of aviation a sight over Palos Verdes

By Dennis Piotrowski and Monique Sugimoto | Posted: Wednesday, March 29, 2017 3:59 pm

Not long after the Wright brothers piloted the first successful heavier-than-air machine near Kitty Hawk, North Carolina in 1903, early rickety planes were navigating the skies near Los Angeles.

Indeed, Los Angeles with its favorable climate became a center of aviation as early as 1909. One newspaper at the time described the area as an “epoch-marker in world progress of air navigation.”

The Palos Verdes Peninsula played a part in this early aviation history, foreshadowing the South Bay’s much larger role in the aerospace industry that followed in later decades.

The genesis of this history can be traced to America’s first significant airshow at Dominguez Field in what is now Carson.

This “flying circus” was held over 11 days in January 1910. It attracted some 226,000 spectators who witnessed passenger balloons, dirigible races and daredevil aviators flying early monoplanes and biplanes.

During this festival, world-famous French aviator Louis Paulhan flew his Farman Biplane more than 20 miles over San Pedro, Point Fermin and what would soon become Fort MacArthur.

According to the Los Angeles Herald, Paulhan “swung in for a great, graceful sweep over the Palos Verdes Hills” before returning to Dominguez Field. This was likely the first powered flight over the Peninsula.

A few years later, the Peninsula would become known for one of aviation’s early tragedies.

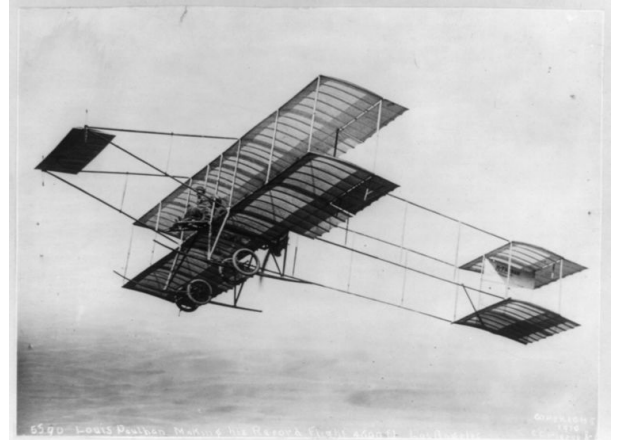
On December 14, 1912, Horace Kearny and his passenger, newspaper reporter Chester Lawrence, attempted a flight from Newport Beach to San Francisco.

In “Soaring Skyward,” author Claudine Burnett notes that this trip was an attempt to break existing distance records by flying nearly 500 miles with a passenger.

The plane had a four hour supply of gasoline and Kearny expected to make the journey in seven hours of actual flying time with a stop in Ventura to refuel.

Kearny nicknamed his pontoon-equipped hydro-aeroplane “Snookums” after his fiance, and carried an emblem of the Sigma Chi fraternity given to him by students at USC to deliver to its Berkeley chapter.

Ten thousand spectators lining a wharf in Long Beach saw the duo fly by a little after 1 p.m. The plane was just 15 feet above the water.



## 1910 Los Angeles International Air Meet

Paulhan making a record-breaking flight at the Los Angeles International Air Meet, Dominguez Field, 1910.

Another crowd witnessed the plane disappear into the fog as it passed San Pedro. Shortly thereafter a steamship captain reported the plane flying by Portuguese Bend.

These would be some of the last confirmed sightings of the plane.

When Kearny and Lawrence failed to appear near Point Dume, the only land they were supposed to travel directly over, the worst was feared.

The local media was besieged with inquiries and wireless messages were sent to vessels along the coast to search to no avail.

A ranch hand near Point Vicente said he saw a plane during the time frame round the point “suddenly lurch as if caught in a changing current of wind and then drop down behind a high bluff...”

Another eyewitness stated he faintly saw what may have been Kearny’s plane nearing Point Dume, about a mile offshore and about three or four hundred feet in the air.

A few days later wreckage from the aircraft was found near the coast and Lawrence’s corpse was found near Rocky Point. Kearny’s body was found about a mile away entangled in a kelp bed.

This fatal plane crash, one of the first in the state, did not deter the growth of the nascent aviation industry that forever changed the social and economic fabric of the South Bay and Southern California.

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