On July 6, 1920, US Navy seaplane pilots used a radio compass to locate and navigate their way to a ship 100 miles offshore, marking the first use of radio navigation by an aircraft.

Prior to this, pilots navigated mostly by following the roads on the ground below. Of course, Navy pilots had no roads to follow in the ocean, making navigation mostly dependent on memory and buoys and landmarks if there were any.

Radio compasses, also called radio direction finders, had been around since 1902 and worked by comparing the signal strength received by a directional antenna as it points in different directions. This allowed for bearings to be based on the transmitting source.

In this occurrence, the Navy installed a radio lab on board the USS Ohio. The ship was cruising off the mid-Atlantic coast on July 6, 1920 when a twin-engine seaplane left Hampton Roads, VA, supplied only with the knowledge that the location of the ship was somewhere within a 100-mile radius of Norfolk, VA. The crew was able to use the on-board receiver with a pointer to establish an accurate bearing to the ship. They found the ship and circled back to land by tuning in a radio station in Norfolk and established a heading using the receiver and pointer.

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For more moments in tech history, see this blog. EDN strives to be historically accurate with these postings. Should you see an error, please notify us.

Editor's note: This article was originally posted on July 6, 2012 and edited on July 6, 2019.