

# *Dirigo Flyer*

Newsletter of the Maine Aviation Historical Society  
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**Volume XV No. 4**

**July - August 2007**

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**MUSEUM NEWS: THE SEPTEMBER MEETING HAS BEEN CANCELLED AS MANY MEMBERS WILL BE ATTENDING THE GREENVILLE SEAPLANE FLY-IN.**

**THE MUSEUM WILL BE CLOSING FOR THE YEAR ON SEPTEMBER 9. THIS IS EARLY THIS YEAR AS THE PEOPLE WHO HAVE KEPT IT OPEN ALL SUMMER ARE BURNED OUT AND THERE IS A LACK OF ADDITIONAL VOLUNTEERS FOR SEPTEMBER AND OCTOBER.**

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With the recent removal of the old hangers at Sanford, we thought that it might be appropriate to remember some of the original purposes of these buildings and their WWII origins. We have been given permission to use the following which was printed in the May 1991 issue of the Windsock. Written by Edward C. Lyon, it is slightly abridged due to space restrictions in this newsletter. It concerns the training base at Lewiston which mirrors the Sanford facility.

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## **THE ROYAL NAVY AT LEWISTON-AUBURN AIRPORT**

On Dec. 7, 1942, Royal Navy Squadron 850 was ordered to report to H.M.S. Blackcap, a Royal Navy shore establishment in Lancashire, England. At 2:30 a.m. we were awakened and ordered to report to the galley and after roll call hustled to the nearby train station where we were put on a train for Scotland.

When we arrived dockside at our destination, we could see three aircraft carriers and one large passenger liner anchored out in the bay. We boarded the passenger liner which was the Queen Elizabeth and set sail for an undisclosed destination. As we had also embarked 500 German and 2500 Italian POWs from North Africa it was surmised that we were headed for Canada or the U.S. as the Canadian Home Guard had been charged with guarding POWs.

After five days we arrived at Halifax, Nova Scotia where it was 20 below and dock workers were on strike. We and the ship's crew did the unloading while the Home Guard took charge of the prisoners. In the unbelievable cold we had to locate our own personal gear from a disorganized heap of a thousand kitbags, hammocks, suitcases, gas masks, and steel helmets, then board a train so old fashioned it had hard wooden seats and no bunks.

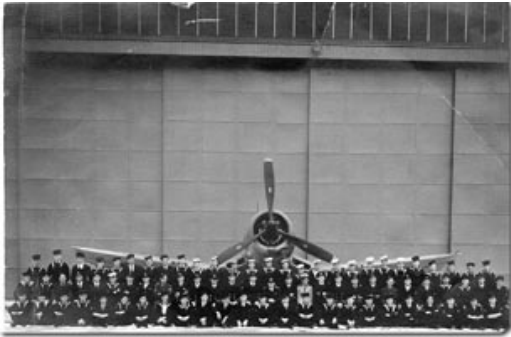
We traveled up the Nova Scotia peninsula and across Quebec stopping the rail yards of Montreal. We entered the U.S. via northern Vermont, thence to New York and finally to Asbury Park, NJ arriving about 6 a.m. We were marched to a couple of hotels taken over by the Navy and whistled the "Colonel Bogey" march the entire way.

After two days we were shipped out to Providence, Rhode Island, again arriving miserably cold and unexpected. We had to wait for over two hours for transportation to Quonset Point Naval Air Station and when we did arrive at the gate no one had alerted the Marine guard which caused another wait in the cold.

At Quonset we were quartered in old wooden barracks with another British squadron which had its old Fairey Swordfish biplanes hangered across the street. Christmas was less than a week away and we were getting restless with nothing to do but sweep the hanger. Our payroll had not caught up with us but the Red Cross lent us \$20. Also, no one

puts on a finer Christmas Day menu than the U.S. Navy but for many a 20 year-old with \$20 in his pocket and a foreign uniform on, the lure of town was stronger.

Around the first of Jan. 1943, we received six SNJ-4s which the Army called AT-6s and British and Canadians called Harvards. The mechanics soon got used to the Pratt & Whitney engines and the airframe mechanics also quickly learned about metal skins and electricians the art of Yankee wiring.



Some of the pilots had flown SNJs but most had all their experience with biplanes. So the pilots had to get a minimum of 30 hours in monoplanes before they could fly the TBFs which we were shortly to receive. All the mechanics and fitters from seaman to Chief were British but the pilots were a mixed bag: mostly British but a few Canadians, and a couple of New Zealanders. There were no American personnel whatsoever and the Wright-Cyclone engine of the TBFs proved to be somewhat of a challenge.

Around May 1943, the first F4U Corsairs were delivered to us. No one had ever seen one before. Not even the Americans, as the only people who had them were the Marines in the Pacific. We had our hands full training new units as old ones shipped out. In many cases taking some of our personnel with them and leaving some of theirs. In six months we trained ten TBF and F4U squadrons and our unit was re-designated the 738th Training Squadron and ceased to be an operational squadron.

In August 1943, an advance party flew up to the Lewiston-Auburn Airport while the remainder of my unit traveled by train. We were transported to the airport from the railroad station by a long box-type truck trailer which was later used as a "liberty" bus and became known in the twin cities as the "cattle truck."

The L/A Airport was a U.S. Naval Air Facility staffed by American Naval personnel under the jurisdiction of the Brunswick Naval Air Station. The station commander was L/C MacDonald USN and the Marines provided about a dozen security guards. U.S. Navy men worked the stores, mail crew, galley cooks, and some public works crews, but all flight personnel and ground staff were Royal Navy. We had at our disposal, two dozen TBFs, 18 F4Us, and four SNJs. Later we received some F4F Wildcats which were old Navy rejects, but we got them serviceable and airworthy.

Although we would receive a few more mechanics from time to time, others would leave for sea duty so we no longer formed squadrons. We just instructed pilots and aircrews on either the TBFs or F4Us. The pilots would have to fly so many hours to get familiar with the aircraft and then proceed to Brunswick where they would get their own planes; do more landings and some shoot up and bomb runs off the Maine coast. They would then proceed to a carrier at sea or pick up one of the "banana boats" then being built in shipyards throughout the U.S.

The 738th Squadron continued to train both air and ground crews at L/A Airport until Jan. 1945, when the remnants of the old 850th Squadron was transferred to Brunswick where it remained until V-E Day.

About a dozen of us married local girls and some went to live in England while others stayed locally. There are three F4Us in Sebago Lake which were never found.

On Nov. 11, 1944, in co-operation with the American Legion, a contingent of Royal Navy men marched in the local Armistice Day parade. It was agreed that we would have a fly over with one of the TBFs dropping a wreath in the Androscoggin River just as the parade was to cross the bridge. The bomb armourers worked all week to get the flowers to drop, but they were too light to fall off the bomb hook. They didn't want to weight the wreath in fear it might hit somebody on the ground if it went astray. But it proved to be a wasted effort as the wreath blew to pieces in the slip stream when the bomb bay doors were opened.

It has been 45 years (in 1991..ed note) since the Lewiston/Auburn Airport has served as a Navy base. The control tower was dismantled and one runway is now a taxi-way to the new terminal building. Also the barracks were dismantled and for a time used for dormitories by Bates College to handle the overflow of returning G.I. students. But some of us will still get together once in a while and reminisce about the good old days.

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## President's Report

We have had a good summer with more people stopping by than we had last year. However, we will be closing for the year on September 9th. As in prior years we have had three people who have, for the most part, kept the Museum open for the summer. They are burned out and so the decision was made to close. We have the Air Show in Brunswick the following weekend and the one at the Portland Airport the weekend after that.

The September meeting will be cancelled as many are going to Greenville and others were not able to make the meeting. The next meeting will be on October 13th at 10:00 A.M. at the museum.

We are running behind on the budget for the year as well. This is mostly due to the coast of fuel oil last winter. We have discussed not trying to heat the Museum this winter and moving pictures and other artifacts that might be damaged into the heated break room.

It is that time of year to discuss Officer and Board Members for the coming year. We should have a slate of Officers at the November meeting so we can mail the ballots out in December. The Board terms of Dan See and Stan Smith will expire this year. We should address this in October so we can make sure the individuals will serve and be ready in November to present a slate.

Thank you all for the things you have done for the Society and Museum this summer. Enjoy the Fall.  
.....Les Shaw

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## REQUEST FOR INFORMATION

### Information wanted about the Eastport, Maine Airport.

The Dirigo Flyer is looking for any information about the Eastport, Maine Airport during or before WWII.

Who built the airport and when was it built?

Did the United States Navy operate out of there during WWII?

Are there any aircraft pictures taken at Eastport?

If you have any information about the Eastport Airport, please send same to:

Norm Houle, Maine Air Museum, PO Box 2641, Bangor, Maine 04402

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## Books available through the Maine Air Museum.

*Memoirs: With an Angel By My Side* by member Alfred Cormier.

His flying life as told by Al and available exclusively from the Maine Air Museum. \$16 at the museum, \$20 via mail order. To order, visit, call, or email the museum.

*The United State Air Force in Maine, Progeny of the Cold War* by John Garbinski

Another exclusive book from the Maine Aviation Historical Society. Softbound, 134 pages, 151 illustrations.

\$20.00 (plus \$3.00 postage and handling). To order, visit, call, or email the museum.

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## WHAT'S NEW AT THE MUSEUM



Our display of Brunswick Naval Air Station memorabilia with many of the hats and patches obtained by Mike Cornett.

## The Bear and Buff

They flew the skies of the big “A”  
Aroostook County that is to say  
It guarded the pathways to our wonderful land  
Remember the enemy had a Northeast plan.

The Bear and the Buff as they were called  
Never did drop their awful payload  
For if they did I hope you understand  
It would have been the end of the human plan.

The Bear and Buff faced off many times  
With many mock battles with no headlines  
How bad do you wonder would it have been  
If the Bear and the Buff decided to drop in.

The Bear and the Buff past stars of glory  
Angels of war that flew so fast  
Sons of God they flew these planes  
Some of our sons went down in flames

I just asked to bring the planes here  
So the world won't forget past sacrifices made  
The Bear and the Buff, Loring and Maine  
End of an Era, none remain.

.....Douglas J. Plenge

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## Buy a Brick and Support the Maine Air Museum

The Maine Air Museum is proud to announce the new Memorial Pathway Program. To successfully carry out and reach the museum vision, and to help refurbish Building 98, the Maine Air Museum needs the financial support of businesses and public community leaders and individual private citizens. To this end, the museum board has established a means for receiving your monetary donation and recognizing your gift permanently in the museum pathway and wall of honor. These donations are fully deductible.

Details available on our web site: [www.maineairmuseum.org](http://www.maineairmuseum.org) or from the museum by request.

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## Bush Pilots of Moosehead

*Here is one of the numerous self-reliant Moosehead Lake bush pilots, as seen through their eyes and the eyes of those reporters and the people who interviewed and knew them. (submitted by Norm Houle)*

One of the self-reliant individuals was aviator Percy G. Billings, pilot for the Guy Gannet Publishing Company. A chapter was devoted to this man in a book, *Sportsman Say*, written by veteran newsman Gene L. Letourneau, who regularly wrote a column of the same name in Gannet newspapers. Here is a bit of what Gene had to say:

The brilliant waters of Moosehead Lake mirrored the cloudless summer sky. I was standing on a Greenville seaplane base dock when suddenly a small group of children appeared from nowhere.

“ ‘Here comes Percy,’ one of them exclaimed with exuberant enthusiasm.

“Their eyes soon focused on an airplane circling the bay. It was, to all appearances, much the same as the many pontoon aircraft you might see on any clear day at the famed Moosehead Lake flying bases.

“There was, however, something different about the manner in which this particular plane was coming in for a landing. There was no flamboyant maneuver as it cleared the row of buildings along the shoreline with plenty to spare. When the pontoons kissed the water the children clapped their hands with glee.”

Percy Billings secured his plane and the children immediately swarmed around him, said Gene.

Percy acknowledge each of them with a pat on the head, picked up the smallest one and sat him in the plane's pilot's seat, then repeated the process with each child. This was a regular ritual for him and it was one of the many reasons why everyone held him in such high esteem.

Percy began his lifelong love affair with aircraft during World War I when, as a volunteer in the French army, he led a crew that salvaged plane parts – which proved to be an excellent basic education in aircraft mechanics. Once he returned to the states and scabbled enough money together, Percy barnstormed and provided transportation for those in need of a plane before teaching at a cadet flying school during World War II. It was to his great credit that none of the more than 1,000 students he trained were ever involved in a mishap due to pilot error.

When Percy began flying for Guy Gannet, the newspaper publisher had beautiful lodge on the shores of Moosehead Lake (Forest Park) as well as one on Chemquassabamticook (Ross Lake) more than 80 air miles north of Greenville. Mr. Gannet used both of these lodges for part of his company's public relations function, and countless people from all walks of life were flown back and forth by Percy. One such passenger was newly elected governor of Maine Edmund S. Muskie. While they were coming in for a landing, Muskie, who was a photography buff, had poked his long lens camera out the window to take a shot. Just as he was about to click the shutter the lens fell off into Moosehead Lake. "There goes my telescopic lens" Muskie yelled to Percy over the whine of the engine. After the plane landed and taxied the passengers to the docks, Percy went back out on the lake, this time in a rowboat, with an anchor, length of rope and a buoy. He asked his buddy Gene to do the rowing. Percy marked the place where the lens fell and after dark, when the choppy waters calmed, the two men again went out, this time with a flashlight attached to a long pole and a newt. When they got to the spot marked by the buoy, Percy lowered the flashlight into the dark water, and there was the camera lens. In no time he had netted it and brought it on board. Governor Muskie was very surprised to get his telephoto lens back and continued using it for some time after it dried out.

Percy once said that his favorite time to be up in the air was during an eclipse. "You could look down and see the shadow of the airplane, a funny-looking faint shadow with a circle around it." He said. "I always made it a point to fly during an eclipse."

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The *Dirigo Flyer* is published bimonthly by the Maine Aviation Historical Society, a non-profit (501c3) corporation. P.O. Box 2641, Bangor, Maine 04402-2641.

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#### Association Officers

President Les Shaw, Brewer, Maine 04413 [les\\_shaw@umit.maine.edu](mailto:les_shaw@umit.maine.edu)  
Vice President: Norm Houle, Barrington, NH 03825-0563 [Livefreeandfly@aol.com](mailto:Livefreeandfly@aol.com)  
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Treasurer: Joe Quinn, Levant, ME 04456, [jwquinn@adelphia.net](mailto:jwquinn@adelphia.net)

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The Maine Air Museum is located at the 98 Maine Avenue adjacent to the Bangor International Airport.  
44° 48' 2.10" North 68° 48' 36.02" West

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September 15-16, 2007

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**NEXT MEETING:** The September meeting is cancelled and the next meeting will be at the museum on **October 13**, at 10:00 at the Museum in Bangor.



## Maine Aviation Historical Society Maine Air Museum \* Membership Form

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City, State, Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

Special Interests: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

Dues are for one year, and membership will expire in the month you joined.

Annual membership includes six newsletters!

Mail payment to:

Maine Aviation

Historical Society

PO Box 2641

Bangor, ME 04402-2641

| Membership                | Fees         | Benefits   |
|---------------------------|--------------|--|
| Regular                   | \$25 annual  | Newsletter, Museum Admission   |
| Family                    | \$35 annual  | Newsletter, Museum Admission   |
| Corporate                 | \$100 annual | Newsletter, Museum Admission   |
| Supporting                | \$100 annual | Newsletter, Museum Admission, 4 free passes                              |
| Lifetime                  | \$500*       | Newsletter, Lifetime Membership Number, Museum Admission, 10 free passes |
| * 2 annual \$250 payments |              |  |

We need volunteers: docents, mechanics, maintenance, librarians and exhibit specialists, etc.

Please call me. I want to be active in the organization.

I cannot join now, but would like to help. I am enclosing a check for \$\_\_\_\_\_.

Contributions over \$20 are tax deductible within the limits of the law.

I wish to support and obtain membership by purchasing a memorial book.

**DIRIGO FLYER**  
**MAINE AVIATION HISTORICAL SOCIETY**  
**PO BOX 2641**  
**BANGOR, ME 04402-2641**