



# *Dirigo Flyer*

Newsletter of the Maine Aviation Historical Society  
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January - February 2007

Welcome to the fifteenth year of the Dirigo Flyer. We are now a bimonthly newsletter. Jan-Feb, Mar-April, May-June, July-Aug, Sep-Oct, and Nov-Dec are the dates of the six issues per year. The newsletters are typed up during the first couple of weeks after the deadline and, hopefully, printed and mailed by the middle of the month. In this issue we feature an article documenting the fate of one of the Old Orchard Beach transatlantic flights.

## **MYSTERY CLOAKS FATE OF FLYER**

**By Phil Mosher**

The following article is used with permission of Phil Mosher who has searched for an answer to the following mystery and has a website ([www.geo-met.com/tommymsmith/](http://www.geo-met.com/tommymsmith/)) devoted to it. This flight is one of the many that left Old Orchard Beach, Maine for a trans Atlantic attempt.

The headline "Mystery Cloaks Fate of Flier" captured my imagination while I was researching a story of an abandoned airplane in Newfoundland.

The article, from a 1941 newspaper, described the finding of a crashed airplane in a remote part of southwestern Newfoundland. The plane, an Aeronca 65-C, was traced to a young American pilot who attempted to fly the Atlantic in 1939. The article went on to say there was no trace of the pilot, only a note. With that, my quest began.

Found in August of 1941 by a crew of a Canadian Digby patrol aircraft of the number 10 Bomber squadron. It was apparent from the plane's registration it was of American origin. The RCAF then turned over the investigation to the USAF 21st Reconnaissance Squadron. The Americans had to wait two weeks until the weather improved enough to send



in a search party. In the meantime, they traced the aircraft's registration number, NX22456, to a Thomas Harvey Smith of 1044 Airway Drive in Glendale, California. When they finally arrived at the crash site, miles north of Burgeo, NF, they found no trace of Smith. Inside the plane they found his note. It indicated that he was going to walk out and was afraid of freezing while asleep. One of the first local people to visit the plane remembers the seat belt was cut and there were no signs that would suggest the pilot was injured from the crash. Veteran pilots who found the plane were absolutely amazed that he was able to



Tom Wallace Collection  
Thomas (Tommy) H. Smith

survive crashing his plane in such a rugged and rocky area. Smith was attempting to fly his “Baby Clipper” from Old Orchard Beach, Maine to the Croydon Airport just outside London, England. He was on what he referred to as a “research flight” to prove that small well-equipped aircraft like his could make the ocean crossing. His flight began on the morning of May 28, 1939, just after low tide, with a crowd of well-wishers cheering him on. His plane roared down the beach for nearly two miles. It left the hard packed sandy beach at 3:47 EST and rose into the dimly lit morning sky. No trace of Tommy has ever been found.

**Smith’s note reads:**

Iced down at 10:40 E.S.T. A.M.  
May 28-1939



*Thomas H. Smith  
Have some food and emergency supplies.  
I’m walking ~~South then will walk~~  
~~west if I hit ocean.~~ North-Northwest  
that is down the mountain. If I can’t  
find a house will try to come back  
to ship. Weather sleeting –Thermo-  
meter dripping – Am afraid to stay in ship  
for fear of freezing while asleep. THS*

**OLD ORCHARD BEACH, Me. (A/P) May 28**

Grim-faced, but ready to smile for photographers. Smith walked the beach for a few moments before entering the plane’s cramped quarters. A short warm-up of the 65-horsepower, four cylinder, Continental engine, and he was away. He wore a tweed suit under a trench coat and was hatless.

For nearly two miles the “Baby Clipper” roared down the beach and disappeared from view in the heavy mist. Finally rising, Smith swept skyward over a beach recreation pier and turned back on his takeoff course. Back-tracking over the spot head had left a few minutes earlier, he then turned out to see.

**Cause of the Crash**

Tommy’s note indicates that an icing condition brought down the plane. His note was written on a page taken from his instrument log. A log entry reveals he was flying at an average height of 1600 ft. ASL for about three hours before the crash. It was very possible that he was flying clear of cloud, that was, until he approached Newfoundland. Just off the coast he encountered a cold front and the plane developed icing conditions. As his aircraft flew deeper over Newfoundland it passed ever rising terrain. When the plane was no longer able to climb, he decided to look for a good place to put down. He went down on a rock area that sloped downhill and to the left. We theorized the plane’s right wheel made contact with a rock. It then caused the aircraft to spin quickly in a clockwise direction, At the point he ran out of semi-level ground and the plane fell into a small hollow. The plane’s tail wheel, propeller and wingtips were damaged which supports the theory of a flat spin landing.

Upon reflection, we developed a number of logical deductions from his note. We feel the note can be broken up into three basic parts: 1. “Iced down at 10:40 EST” 2. “going to walk South then West if I hit Ocean” and 3. “I am walking North-Northwest to try to find a house”.

We think the first and second parts were written quite close together, perhaps within an hour. The time between the second and third parts is much longer. The ink is actually lighter in the third part (image of the handwritten note is on the website...Ed). This could be because of damp paper, or cold ink. There is also a change in the objectives between parts two and three. Part two explains an ambitious drive to the coast. While part three is a short-term goal of survival. He is now worried about where he is going to sleep. He walked south perhaps for hours, but for some reason returned to the plane. He then changes his note, saying he was going to look for a house. If he cannot find one he would try to return to the plane. It seems he never did return. The plane crashed at 10:40 AM EST. The sun at that location would set at 6:33 PM EST. That gives

him about 8 hours 13 minutes to walk south, return, re-write the note then look for a house. If his walk south was hours in duration, then it might explain why he was now concerned where he was going to sleep. The north-north-west route would lead him down to Top Pond Brook, about 2 miles away. I do not think he would attempt to cross the river unless he saw a cabin on the other side. The best information we have is that there were no cabins in that area. He may have reached the river but ran out of daylight and could not get back to the ship. He would have little choice but to travel south along the east side of Top Pond Brook.

### **The Search for the Pilot**

What happened to Smith is subject to speculation. Some believe he managed to walk out and start another life. Rumors have him surfacing in Miami, while others place him in the Air Corp. Perhaps working as an operative inside Germany before the United States formally entered the war.

Rumors aside, if one looks where his plane went down one would logically assume he traveled south towards Burgeo only 30 kilometers away. This settlement would most likely be marked on his maps. There is some evidence to support this view. Local people say an empty box of Smith and Wesson cartridges was found beside the plane. Also spent cartridges were located about a half mile to the south and more a further 10 kilometers away. The later shells were discovered on the north side of a river called Dry Pond Brook. A friend gave Tommy a small caliber revolver the day before the flight in the event he went down in a wilderness area. The speculation from an experienced guide is that Smith drowned while trying to cross Dry Pond Brook.

In our expedition in 2000, we traveled to an area about 10 kilometers south of the plane. A local person directed us there. He said there was a large rock arrow on top of a hill. The arrow was covered in lichen and was thought to be very old. We thought it significant since it was located between the community of Burgeo and the crash site. After visiting the location of the arrow (pictures on the website...Ed) we found it looked more like a Christian cross than an arrow. There was no doubt it was old, perhaps of the same time period as the crash. Later, we talked to a knowledgeable guide and he indicated it was a cross and was made long ago and had nothing to do with Tommy's crash.

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## **PRESIDENT'S REPORT**

Well, Spring is just around the corner and it seems to be warming up a bit each day. We will be back in the Museum for meetings starting in April. Things are quiet during the winter but we are still getting some work done.

To bring you up to date, we have been approved by the City to postpone the repayment of the roof loan for 5 more years. The paperwork has all been submitted and we are all set. The sales tax and settlement with the city has been completed, including the rent for next year. The new brochures are back from the printers and look good. We have 2000 so they should last awhile.

Al is working with the city to get the navigation light that is being replaced in Bangor. Norm and John are working on getting a 3/4 scale aircraft for display. Hank is working to get a display from the company in Hancock that makes Astronaut Gloves and I am sure there are many more things which I can't recall. We are looking good and in April we need to start planning the activities for the coming year.

Help us out this summer by donating your time whenever you can. Staffing is our most important need.  
...Les Shaw

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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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## **GUARDIAN ANGLES**

A first-hand account by Al Cormier.

There is no doubt in my mind that Guardian Angels exist. If they didn't, there is no way I would still be roaming this earth. As a nineteen year-old Aviation Cadet I had a lot to learn and the career path I had set out on was not the safest or most forgiving.

My flying career started out at a small private facility in Mississippi, near Jackson, that had been taken over by the Army Air Corp South East Training Command. After finishing pre-flight training in Montgomery, Alabama, my class was shipped by rail to this facility. It was a small field, no runways, just a level grassed area on which you could take off and land in any direction according to which the wind was blowing. The plane we would train in was a single engine bi-plane known as the Stearman PT-17. It brought back the days of World War I in France as the movies so often depicted it.

There was probably no trainer better suited for the novice aviator. It was rugged, easy to fly and a great aerobatic performer. It had two open cockpits, the instructor sitting up front and the lowly cadet in the rear. My first few flights were a disaster. Sitting in the rear, not knowing what was coming next, I was prone to get air sick. For the first few lessons it seems all I did was hang on. My instructor, a civilian, didn't seem to get discouraged. Even when I had problems keeping the plane going in a straight line after landing, he very patiently corrected for me.

One day we were practicing landings at an auxiliary field, he asked me to pull over to the side. He got out, I thought to smoke a cigarette, so I sat there. Finally he said, "What are you waiting for? Take this thing around and give me a good landing."

With my heart thumping as loud as the engine, I took off and landed. My first solo! What a thrill! After that, it was all fun and games. I was having a ball with little thought that my Guardian Angel might not be enjoying it as well as I. Especially, when the hours flight was finished, the practice was to put the plane in a spin to descend from five thousand to two thousand feet. I can visualize him in the front seat hanging on with both wings. But I was assured that he had not left me when I came in for a landing at the end of one day. I entered the pattern in the usual manner and turned on final approach, brought back the throttle to reduce power but felt it go limp in my hand. I had too much power to land and barely enough to stay in the air. I staggered around the field with my poor Angel trying to hold the ship in the air until I could make another try at landing. This time, on final, I turned off the master switch and killed the engine, made a dead stick landing and rolled to a stop half way down the field. Everyone came running to see what kind of trick I was trying to pull but changed their mind when a mechanic discovered that a cotter pin had slipped out of the throttle linkage. I know that I didn't land that plane all by myself.

The next time the Angel saved my neck was in Goldsboro, N.C. I had just graduated from flying school, been recalled early from my ten day leave at home and was waiting in this embarkation camp ready to go overseas. The air base was a training field for P-47 fighters. There was no way I was going to fly one of those to keep up my monthly flying time but they did have a small two seat observation plane that I could use. I went over one morning to check it out for an hour. As I was going out the flight line an airman asked if he could go for a ride with me. I assented and we went out to the plane. At the runway I had to wait while a group of P-47s took off and then we followed.

After flying around for an hour it was time to return so I came back to the field and entered the pattern. I was coming in on final approach, ready to land, when another group of P-47s rolled out to take off but when I applied power to go around the engine quit. I couldn't land on the runway so I looked down and found we were over a physical training area, several large fields but all occupied by groups of men exercising or marching. Directly below was a small field with a ditch at each end. I made a quick circle, dropping like a rock, just crossed the first ditch before touching ground, slammed on the brakes and came to a stop inches away from the other ditch. My passenger never said a word, just got out and ran. I sat in the plane until I was surrounded by

emergency vehicles and everyone from the surrounding fields. The mechanic discovered something wrong with the carburetor had caused the engine to quit. The operations officer asked me if I'd like to fly it out but I refused when I felt a prod in the butt from my Guardian Angel. He'd done enough for one day.

Robert Lee Scott, Jr. who flew with the Flying Tigers claimed God was his Co-pilot. I had to do with second best but he worked overtime.

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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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### NEXT MEETINGS

The March meeting of the Maine Aviation Historical Society has been cancelled due to a variety of reasons, people being away, the meeting place in Sanford temporarily unavailable, etc. The April meeting is scheduled for April 14th at the Maine Air Museum in Bangor.

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**September 15-16, 2007**

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### Factoid

With all that is being written about World War II, a common mistake is the use of USAAF to represent the Army Air Force during the period. The US was never used in documents at that time. The correct usage is simply AAF.

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### Association Officers

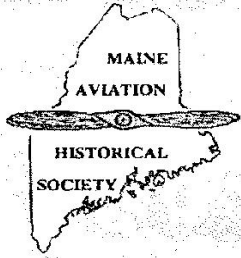
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The Maine Air Museum is located at the 98 Maine Avenue adjacent to the Bangor International Airport.

**44° 48' 2.10" North    68° 48' 36.02" West**

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

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

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

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

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

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_

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  
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Bangor, ME 04402-2641

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

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 brick.

**DIRIGO FLYER**  
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