



DIRIGO FLYER

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The Presque Isle B-26C Crash



Photo: Glenn L. Martin Aviation Museum

A Martin B-26C-5 Marauder bomber built in Omaha, Nebraska. The same model that Lt. Robertson was flying when he crashed in Presque Isle.

By Jim Chichetto

One of the things that makes Maine's aviation history so interesting to me is the seemingly unconnected threads which run through stories which suddenly hook into some other story or a person. Often times as I research a story, I find out that I have been to a location or met a person who was involved while doing another story. These connections, when they come to light, show just how close the aviation community is in Maine.

The following short story happened over 50 years ago in a Presque Isle farm field, but some of the threads that make up this story run all the way up to the present.

Death came swiftly and suddenly for 1st Lt. Bert Robertson and his flight crew on Saturday, June 26th, 1943. While making a high speed pass over his father-in-law's farm, the B-26C he was flying was seen to drop one wing downward and then sideslipped until a wing tip hit the ground. The aircraft crashed into a potato field killing the aircraft crew. On the ground four farm workers also died when struck by wreckage as the plane impacted the ground.

The Martin B-26 "Marauder" was designed by the Glenn L. Martin Co. of Baltimore, Md. to meet the USAAF Proposal 39-640, of March 11, 1939. The Army wanted a high speed medium bomber, it had to be able to carry 3,000 lbs. of bombs and have an operating range of 3,000 miles. A speed of between 250 to 350 mph was desired and a useful ceiling of between 20,000 and

30,000 ft. was called for. Its defense was supplied by four .30 cal. machine guns and its high speed. Because of the war in Europe, this aircraft was to be put into production right from blueprints. This led to a number of early accidents and a bad reputation among aircrew who didn't fly it.

During early testing the bomber suffered from nose gear failure, due in large part to the testing of production aircraft which had not yet been armed or had radios and other military gear installed. These lighter weight aircraft had great speed and high speed handling, but the center of balance was off and it handled poorly on final approach. A hard landing caused nose gear failure and resulted in a number of crashes. The other major flaw with the early B-26s was the failure of the Army to train maintenance crews in the servicing of the new Curtiss electric propellers. These new props sometimes failed during take-off and the crew could not recover quickly enough. Slogans like "a plane a day in Tampa Bay" and nicknames like the Widow Maker soon dogged the B-26.

The aircraft proved to have greater performance than its designers had thought. Power gun turrets with .50 cal. guns, self-sealing fuel tanks, a take-off speed of 130 mph in only 2,500 ft., with a bomb load of 5,800 lbs. A top speed of 315 mph loaded made this the aircraft of choice for hard small targets. A top speed of near 350 mph and a small turning radius soon made

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this the bomber of choice for those pilots who had wanted fighters. It could outrun some older pursuit aircraft and had handling and guns which gave it a chance against newer fighters. In combat the B-26 proved its value and by the end of the war had the record as the safest bomber in European combat. It seemed that if an aircrew could survive basic training, they had a good chance of surviving the war.

First Lt. Robertson had been an Army ferry pilot for over a year and a half. His ferry flights had taken him to Africa, England and the Mid-East. A well-known local pilot, he had taken off from the Presque Isle Airport before the accident happened. The irony of surviving flying new untested aircraft and bringing back war-weary planes across the Atlantic in all types of weather, just to die trying to pull a show-off stunt right over his own home was almost too much for local people to believe.

Lt. Robertson was a native of the Greenville Junction, Maine area. He learned to fly in Maine and was a member of the Maine State Police. While stationed in Aroostook County he met his future wife. After they married they lived in a small house on her father's farm. When WWII came Robertson joined the Army Air Corps. At 26 he was "too old" for combat and was assigned to the Air Transport Command. He was based in Memphis, Tennessee between flights and lived there with his wife. They still maintained the house in Presque Isle and he would stay there whenever he was passing through. He had done so the night before the crash.

The USAAF said this B-26C, serial number 41-35181, was on a routine training mission when it went down. Local people who saw the accident said that he was buzzing the farm when he lost control and crashed. Given the number of people who saw the accident and his local reputation as a "hot shot" pilot, the Army had no problems hanging a pilot error on this accident. The fact that this new aircraft was loaded with cigarettes when it crashed was never mentioned in the Army report or the local papers. Having flown "across the pond" for a year and a half, one has to wonder how much "cargo" was transported in this manner on those flights.

The crash made front page news in all the Maine papers. The crash site on Carl Rassmusson's farm on the Parkhurst Siding Road was close to town. That local people also died made the story strike even closer to home. As bad as aircraft accidents were, being killed on the ground by a crashing aircraft seemed like really poor luck. A man, Alfred Winters, age 38, of Fort Fairfield, and his 9-year-old son Alfred Jr. were killed by aircraft debris along with the team of two horses attached to a wagon. Two female workers were also killed on the ground. Elousie Newton, 19, and Anne Theriault, 25, both of Caribou were working as rock pickers as the aircraft struck. With a local man at the controls of the aircraft even the Army could not blank out the news. The standard "training mission" was given as the aircraft's reason for flying that day. The dead flight crew was listed as: 1st Lt. Bert Robertson of Greenville Junction, Maine; 2nd Lt. Herbert F. Myers of Portland, Maine; 1st Lt. Edwin M. Hankinsen of Morrice, Michigan; S. Sgt. John M. Kuser of New York, New York; and S. Sgt. William H. Jochim of Louisville,

Nebraska. Details from the Army investigation revealed that the aircraft was heading toward the base when it crashed. There was no radio contact or any report of problems prior to the accident. The local paper printed pictures and told how the aircraft had struck wing first, destroying the farm wagon being used to haul rocks away from the potato field. The aircraft then cartwheeled down the field, killing the farm workers and crewmen as it was torn apart by the repeated impacts. When it stopped, only small twisted parts remained of this once new aircraft. One engine was found about 3000 feet from the first point of impact. From descriptions of the crash and the location of debris, it was clear the aircraft was really moving when it came to grief. Local people rushed into the field, but there was little they could do for the victims. The aircrew was killed on impact as were three of the four people on the ground. The fourth victim soon died as did the surviving horse. The field was littered with debris and thousands of packs of cigarettes. This bomber had not been empty on its eastward trip. While no mention of this "cargo" was in the papers, the locals who arrived at the scene had no problem helping to pick up these hard to get items and word soon spread.

The exact accident cause was never released to the public. Did the aircraft hit a thermal updraft as it flew low across this plowed field, causing one wing to lift? Was there a wind gust, or was it just a combination of weather and poor judgment in flying too close to the ground? Having been at his house the night before, it was quite possible that Lt. Robertson knew that the rock pickers would be out and decided to show them the aircraft close up. Imagine how a 9-year-old boy would feel watching a pilot he knew put on a show just for him! Whatever the reason, the thrill turned tragic and in a few seconds it was all over at the cost of nine lives.

I had read about this crash in the Bangor Public Library about four years ago. They have the Bangor Daily News on micro-film and I was doing some research. Since this was a crash in a cleared field near the city, it had been cleaned up. I filed the information away and didn't check it again until Clay Carkin (MAHS #17) sent me some copies of the Presque Isle Star-Herald from 1943. He has relatives in the County and had come across this news article while visiting. I now knew the pilot's history and some other details.

I added this information to my files and didn't think of it until early January 1996. I happened to pick up a used book on B-26s at Dave's Bookstore in Old Town. I wanted it for reference in case I needed aircraft details on a B-26. While reading it the next day, I found a letter written in Presque Isle and sent to Mr. Wendell Hartt of Millinocket, Maine. It seems that Mr. Hartt had given a talk in Presque Isle in the early 1990s and had spoken about this B-26 crash. The author of the letter was in attendance and had enjoyed the talk so much he wrote a letter sharing a few facts about the crash he knew. It seems he had gone to high school at the same time as Lt Robertson. He mentioned the dare-devil type of actions which Robertson was known for. He then went on to tell how a friend of his was at the crash site that day and had seen the field littered with the

cigarettes. It was mentioned that many people were helping themselves to these items, which seems natural given the thrifty nature of people during wartime.

I stopped by Dave's Bookstore and asked him about Mr. Hartt. Wendell Hartt was born and lived in Millinocket, Maine. He had polio and was wheelchair-bound much of his life. He worked for Great Northern Paper as a dispatcher for 40 years and was a noted historian. He published a book of true stories about life up country before he passed away a couple of years ago. His widow was selling off his book collection and I had bought one of his books, complete with the letter.

I mentioned the letter to Leo Boyle and he asked me to write a story about the B-26 crash. At the January 1996 MAHS meeting I mentioned the story about the book and letter. When I got to the part about Wendell Hartt dying and me buying up some of his books, Clay Carkin said, "I knew Wendell. He wrote articles for Windsock. I didn't know he died." Another connection made.

About this time Neal Strange (MAHS #9) asked me about a B-17 which crashed while being ferried in Maine. He mentioned that he had a friend from Portland who was killed ferrying aircraft, but Neal had never known the how and where, etc. I asked him what his friend's name was. He said, "Herbert Myers." That name was right in front of me, 2nd Lt. Herbert F. Myers was flying in Lt. Robertson's aircraft that fateful day in 1943. I passed my copies and notes over to Neal and said, "He was flying in a B-26, not a B-17." Neal read it over and said it was nice to know what had happened to his old flying friend after all these. Sometimes these threads really come together and bind the present with the past. Through people, history lives on.

Welcome, New Members!

133. **Grady Sharpe** (*Antique Airplanes*)
RR 9, Box 366
Augusta, Maine 04330
207-622-6508
134. **Parker Tyler**
P.O. Box 247
Fairfield, Maine 04937
207-453-2168
135. **Eric Farrar**
13 Dow Street, #8
Portland, Maine 04101
207-761-9288



CATCH THE MAHS EXCITEMENT!

Need help? Have ideas? Want to get involved?

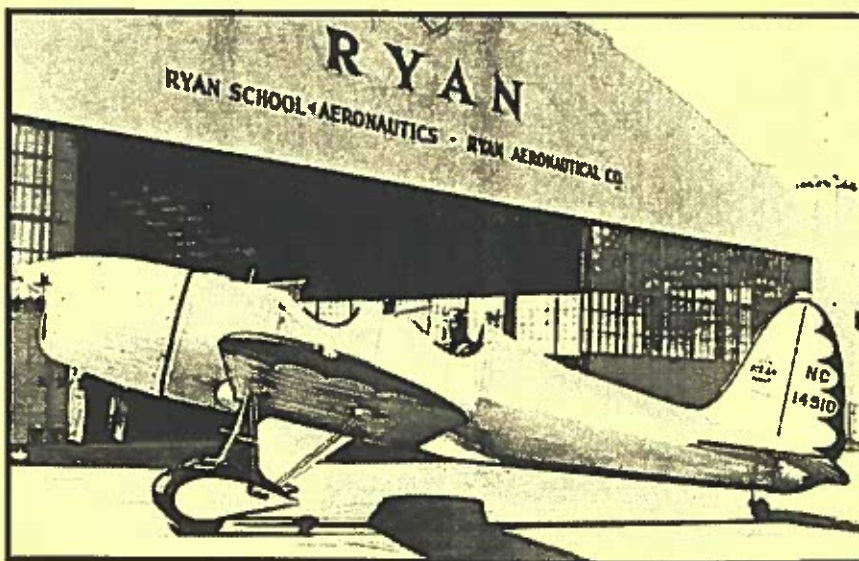
Maine Aviation Historical Society

101 Monroe Avenue
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or call (207) 854-9972

If you are not yet a member, join today
and help preserve Maine's aviation heritage.

Enjoy the *Dirigo Flyer!*

The Persistent Mystery of the Missing Ryan



Peter Dana and his record setting Ryan "STA" Sport Trainer, NC 14910, c/n 103.
Photo taken June 1936 in San Diego, California.

— Norm Houle Photo

Ev Cassagneres writes in his new book, The New Ryan, as follows:

"Not too many years ago I listened to a reliable friend and restorer of many fine antique airplanes relate the story of one Ryan ST that apparently was landed on a frozen lake (late fall?) in Maine, taxied up onto solid ground, and put into a barn or garage of some sort and left there. My friend said that the fellow who knew exactly where it was died before he was able to go with him to take a look at it. The story was heard about 1970 or 1975. So there it sits waiting for someone to find it."

Does anyone have any ideas?

Upcoming MAHS Meetings (Tentative) and Calendar of Events

February 9	9 a.m.	Conference Room, Portland International Jetport Terminal
March 9	9 a.m.	Bangor Area
April 13	9 a.m.	Lewiston Area
May 11	9 a.m.	Rochester, NH Area
June 8	9 a.m.	Brunswick Area
July 6-7	10 a.m.	Military Air Show, Owls Head Transportation Museum
July 19-21	10 a.m.	Brunswick Naval Air Station Air Show
August 10	9 a.m.	Sanford Area
September 14	9 a.m.	Miller Field, Newburgh, Maine
October 12	9 a.m.	Biddeford Municipal Airport
November 9	9 a.m.	Open
December 14	9 a.m.	Conference Room, Portland International Jetport Terminal

Hikes to be announced will include Big Spruce Mountain (*White Bird*), F-101 crash site, Elephant Mountain (B-52) and others.

The meeting sites can be flexible. We are looking for suggestions on locations for many of these meetings. Call Leo or Jim if you can help. The same goes for suggestions on the weekend hikes — let us know. We are also looking for guest speakers, slide shows, etc. Scott Grant has volunteered to handle the scheduling of our meetings and arranging for speakers and slide shows., etc. Please contact him at 207-774-4438 (207-761-9288 business) or 225 York Street, #3, Portland, ME 04102 if you have any ideas or can be of help.

January Meeting Notes

The January meeting was held at the Portland Jetport Conference Room on January 13th. A goodly number were in attendance. The results of the election for the Board of Directors includes the four officers elected last month plus Norm Houle, Jack Denison and Scott Grant. The Board met and approved the by-laws, the naming of attorney David A. Lourie as Clerk of the Corporation and his hiring to obtain our non-profit status. Currently, we have been approved by the state, the papers are completed for the IRS and, as soon as they are signed by the president, will be submitted by fax. Discussion was also held on the creation of other classes of membership, and will be discussed further at the February Board meeting. Much interesting history was discussed and hangar flying done, some of which resulted in our lead story this month.

Picture Identification

Member Walt Humphrey sent us a note from Florida and member Norm Houle called from New Hampshire regarding the picture in the last *Dirigo Flyer*. The aircraft is at the Lewiston-Auburn Airport in Auburn, Maine and the hangar in the photo still exists on the airport. The Waco Cabin and the Cub were both owned by Henry M. Dingley of Auburn, and the year was 1939. The hill behind the Waco was the Martindale Country Club, and Walt's home was directly behind the Waco's cabin. He also remembers Roland Maheu starting his plane in the air.

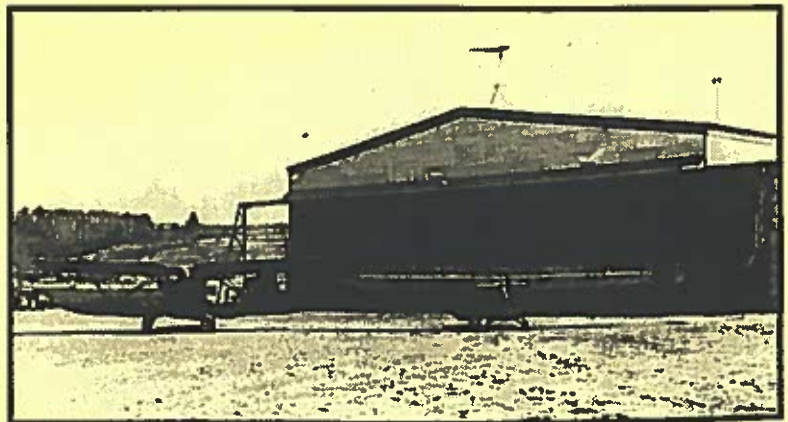
Thanks to you both for your great help.

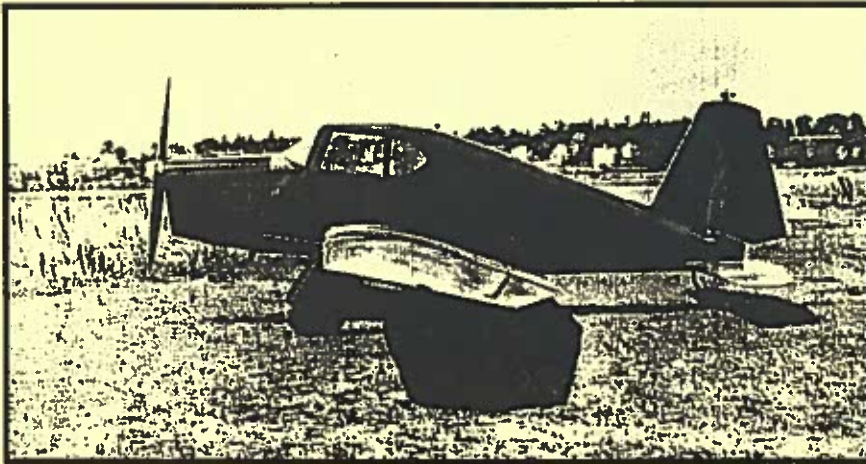
1996 Dues

We are pleased by the number of members who have renewed their membership by paying their dues and assuring themselves of another year's issues of the *Dirigo Flyer*. As paper, postage and printing costs seem to keep going up, we need your help in the form of dues to keep your *Dirigo Flyer* growing and coming to your mailbox. If you haven't renewed yet, do so now and help us continue to grow and serve you better. It's still only \$20.00 annually, a best buy!

February Meeting Date

The February meeting will be held at the Conference Room at the Portland International Jetport at 9 a.m. on February 10th. Bring along any photos, books, slides, etc. to pass around and any exciting stories to tell. Our featured guest will be Tom Casagrande, recently retired from the service, who will show us slides and tell of his experiences flying the latest jets and helicopters. Plan now to attend so you won't miss this exciting meeting and speaker.





????????????

Can anyone help us on this photo?
 Danny Duggin gave it to Charlie Gabelman. The aircraft (what is it?) was owned by Walter Frederick Thomas who was from New Hampshire and was in the aviation section of the U.S. Army signal corps in WWI. It bore registration number 717Y and the photo was probably taken in the late '30s or shortly after WWII.

*Watch for reviews of these two books in next month's
 DIRIGO FLYER.*



Martin Aircraft, 1909-1960

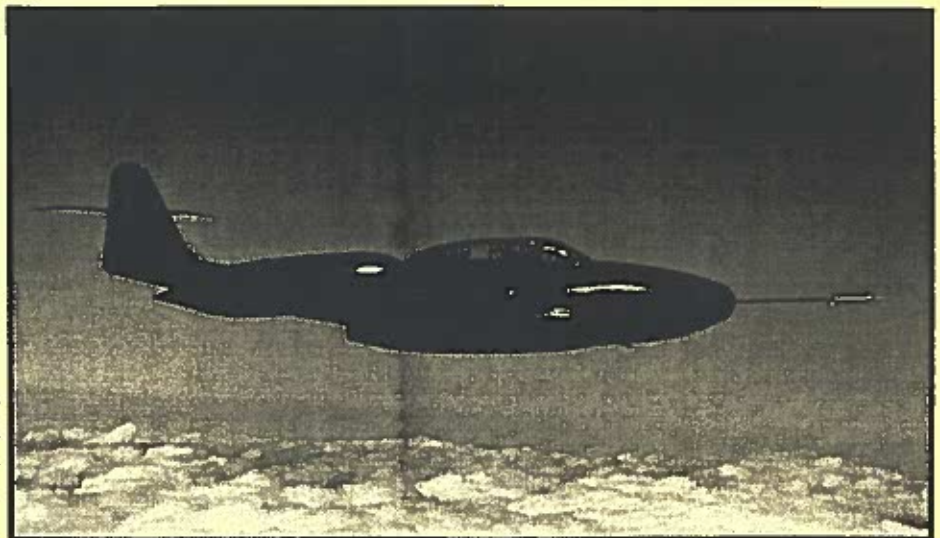
by John R. Breihan, Stan Piet
 and Roger S. Mason

Publisher: Narkiewicz, Thompson,
 Santa Ana, CA. 1995. \$29.95

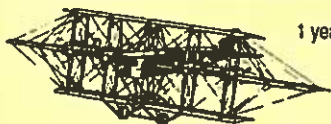
Northrop F-89 Scorpion

by Gerald Balzer and Mike Dario
 Aerofax, Inc. Datagraph 8

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As of this issue, ads are now available in the Dirigo Flyer. Rates are \$5.00 for three issues per column inch, \$18.00 per year. A full page (2 columns, 8 inches) is \$80.00 for three issues. Call Leo Boyle at 207-854-9972 for annual rates.

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Next Meeting:
**Conference Room
Portland International
Jetport**
February 10, 1996
9 a.m.