



DIRIGO FLYER

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Newsletter of the Maine Aviation Historical Society • 101 Monroe Avenue, Westbrook, Maine 04092 • 207-854-9972

The Search for the "White Bird": Part II

By Jim Chichetto

On Sunday, October 27th, members of the MAHS gathered for another "White Bird" search northeast of Ellsworth, Maine. Twenty people gathered at the meeting spot and car-pooled to a site near the one we had visited just two weeks before. We had determined at that time that we needed to check one area of the mountain more thoroughly. The goal today was to do that.

Members were much better prepared for the hike this time. Metal detectors, lunches, compasses and three GPS units were brought. Bill Townsend brought three members of the local ham radio club, Bob Carter, Geoff Anthony and Russell Smith, to help with the radios. It was great to have the radio contact. It helped us coordinate our search pattern and, when we split up into two groups, it allowed each group to keep the other informed of their location and intentions.

Once we had arrived at the base camp, Cliff Haines, Leo Boyle and Larry Closson set up the stove and waited for us to thrash into the woods. We made a two-prong reconnaissance and then decided to head up to the side of the mountain which we wanted to check. We headed in at about 12:00 p.m.

Jim Rivers lead the way up to the spot we had picked out to search. Once there, we spread out in a line down toward the bottom of the mountain and did a sweeping pattern back toward the Jeep trail. Once again, we ventured into the cuttings. It was slow going, but we did do a pretty good job looking for the ledge with a step pattern on it. After about an hour of looking, we had searched the lower extremity of the mountain and headed back to the trucks. We didn't find it, but we had a nice hike.

Once back to the trucks we ate lunch and studied the map. Jim Rivers has made 17 trips in the last six years to an area near this site looking for the engine last seen back in 1952. Each trip has added information to the local knowledge. After we had talked to him it was decided that we may try the site he has been checking out next. It is in a direct line of flight from where we were and less than a mile by air. He believes the engine was hauled off for scrap years ago, but that he has twice seen the ledges where it was over the years. Working with only one or two people it has been slow going. If we can field another 15 people to hike in his prime target area, we may well find the

ledges he is seeking. Once we find them the metal detectors will do the rest. We have set the date for the next hike as Sunday, November 10th. We will once again be meeting at the Maine Coast Mall parking lot at 9:00 a.m.

We will have more information at the November 9th MAHS meeting.



LeAnne Schwarz, Sue Cummings and Jim Chichetto ford the beaver-dammed railroad tracks barefoot on the MAHS "White Bird Search I," October 12, 1996.



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The Flying Lobster Experience

By Tedford M. Blaisedll

As told to Rich Frangella, November 1994

In the Vol. III November 1995 Dirigo Flyer, we ran an article by Rich Frangella on the Martin Mariner "Flying Lobster." Rich has sent us the enclosed article of his which was published in the Mariner/Marlin Newsletter for September 1995. Thank you, Rich, and we hope to publish a couple of Rich's pictures in a future Dirigo Flyer. If anyone has any pictures of this operation, please let Leo know so we can help Rich in his research. Just call you editor.

I came to the Flying Lobster operation while on vacation at my home (1948-49?). I had just resigned from American Overseas Airlines. Their merger with Pan Am put my number in the co-pilot range, so I made arrangements to go with Johnny Long as a captain with the Flying Tigers Airlines flying Los Angeles to Tokyo.

The Flying Lobster had one PBM-5 at that time and an embryo organization in place. Being well-known to the Caruso boys and keeping a Widgeon at the airport, they mentioned to the "Lobster" that I might help them out. I had a lot of seaplane and amphibian time since the '30s. Their pilot was Tommy Tomlinson, an ex-Navy jock. They had two excellent crew chief mechanics: George Curtis and Henry Zieke who was the leader. He and I went to Norfolk and obtained another PBM for \$3,500. I read the instruction manual (Pilot's Handbook) and with Zieke's coaching had no trouble flying it to Maine. It was not the -5A amphib; it only had beaching gear.

The operation was financed by a New York lawyer, Harry O. Lee, and a Boston financier by the name of Addams. Lee was also connected with The Flying Lobster Restaurant, a really plush place, located in Manhattan, New York.

I obtained a co-pilot locally, Johnny Buckner, who was later shot down over North Korea flying a B-29. We made eight trips to Lewisporte, Newfoundland. The crew consisted of pilot, co-pilot, crew chief and a helper. We carried between 12,000 and 20,000 pounds of lobsters per trip which was grossly overloaded. Loading was very carefully carried out and checked by the crew chief and myself to keep the MAC to 16.2%. During our stops we had to tie up to a mooring buoy. The PBM was a BIG machine to grab a buoy and stop, even on a windy day.

The Mariner was carefully towed and gingerly docked to a small pier where we loaded the crated lobsters. The lobsters were packed into cedar crates which were soaked in brine. Each crate weighed about a hundred pounds making them quite a load. Crates were crammed into all available compartments. The lobsters would make a clicking sound that could be heard over the noise of the R-2800s in flight.

On return trips to Newfoundland we carried lobster bait in 55 gallon drums, placed far aft for balance. The bait was chopped fish heads and tails or leavings from a sardine factory. It was put in the sun to rot. The riper it became, the more the lobsters liked it. You can't image the odor, after a while you didn't notice the smell too much. Upon our destination at

Boothbay Harbor, unloading was accomplished by tossing the crates from the waist hatch into the water to be picked up by a waiting boat.

The flying was interesting and I really enjoyed the trips. The PBM had a nice big flight deck with a hot plate (galley). We ate lobster on every trip back. The PBM drove like a Cadillac. It was very comfortable. However, I did not like the Curtiss Electric props. They were unreliable and had a tendency of "running away." On take off the co-pilot's duty was to keep his hands on the manual control toggle switches in anticipation of trouble. Having flown planes with these props before, the P-47 Thunderbolt, C-46 Commando and Martin's B-26 Marauder among others, I knew what to expect.

Home base was Bar Harbor where there was a nice ramp at the airport which borders Frenchman's Bay. We flew into Rockland and Boothbay Harbor where it was cheaper to truck lobsters from those locations to New York. My instrument approach was made by using the ADF on a commercial radio tower and picking up the lights on the high-tension electrical lines over a bridge. Night landings were a little tricky. You never were certain that there would be a lobster boat or pleasure craft anchored in the bay with no lights.

Sometimes we would make an instrument approach to Gander Airport and hedgehop to Lewisporte sixty miles away. On calm days I had to go to the whole length off the fjord, about six miles on the step, until we hit some ocean swells to become airborne. Then circle over water until you had 1500 feet altitude and then follow the river at Botwood inland. By the time we were over the interior of Newfoundland, we were up to 5000 feet above several river lanes as emergency landing places.

An amusing incident: On arrival in the general location of Lewisporte we found the weather to be zero-zero. I elected to go to nearby Gander Airport and make an instrument landing. There was heavy airline traffic so I was about number five in line for my turn to "land." On final approach I informed the tower that we were a flying boat with no wheels. The tower acknowledged in a routine manner. Knowing the airport and the surrounding terrain, I made my approach and flew over the runway. I then dropped into nearby Gander Lake which was just beyond the airport.

After a suitable interval the tower inquired as to my location as he could not see me (there was about a half mile or less of visibility). I replied that I was on the lake. Suddenly the tower burst into a frenzy of activity. "How long can you float? Help is on the way!," etc. All the while I was proclaiming that I was a boat! Well, all kinds of emergency equipment arrived. We concurred and the crew did accept a ride to the terminal.

Later there were two flyable PBMs and later during the operations, a mechanic running up the engines broke the tie-downs and damaged one of the planes. I only heard that long after I left to go to the Flying Tigers that some outfit damaged the other boat on a rock in the bay. Flights had to be timed to the tides, we have a 9'-12' tide and unless you know Frenchman's Bay, it is easy to get into trouble.

Search for the "White Bird" III

Searches I and II have been completed and oh, what we have learned! Search III will be held on Sunday, November 10, 1996 at 9 a.m. EST. As before, we will meet behind McDonald's in the parking lot of the Maine Coast Mall Shopping Center in Ellsworth. The same rules apply to this search as the last two. If you're going in the woods, please make sure you have a compass, matches, lighter, canteen and food for lunch and snacks, a GPS and metal detector that you know how to use, and a digging tool. A tight search area has been selected and we plan to cover this area thoroughly based upon Jim Millet's recollection and drawings and Jim Rivers' previous ground work. Each participant will sign in and receive a map of the area to be searched. As in previous hikes, no communication with the news media at this time, please. The last of Bill Townsend's limited edition MAHS Air Crash Investigation caps will be available at the November 9th meeting and, if any left, at the November 10th hike at \$12 each — get yours while you can.

November Meeting

Prior to the third hike, we should have plenty to talk about, so Bill Townsend has arranged for us to meet on Saturday, November 9th at 9:00 a.m. at Acadia Air at the Bar Harbor Airport in Trenton. Bill has arranged a tour of the airport, including many old pictures and a special surprise. In addition, Bill will tell us about his participation in the Teacher in Space Program, a sure to be treasured event. Later, for those who wish, we'll hike to a crash in Bar Harbor.

December Meeting

For those of you in Southern Maine and New Hampshire, don't despair. The December meeting will be held at 9:00 a.m. Saturday, December 14th in the Conference Room of the Terminal at the Portland International Jetport. We will try to arrange an interesting program — more in the next *Dirigo Flyer* — and we need your help. Let Leo know what you can contribute. The reason we have been in the Bangor/Northern Maine area so much lately is because this is where the active members, the growth and the spark-plugs for our future are gathered. Let's have some life and active participation in this area and show them there's life down south!

Oops!

We apologize for the error in pagination in the October *Dirigo Flyer*. I picked them up Tuesday morning upon arriving back from Philadelphia in the middle of the flood Monday night, and it was a question of getting them in the mail or — no one's complained, so I guess you all figured it out.

32nd Annual Northeast Aero Historians Meeting

Members Jack Denison and Leo Boyle attended the Northeast Aero Historians meeting in Philadelphia on October 18-20. A great time was had and Ray Noll is to be congratulated for planning and running a great meeting. Don't forget, 1999 will be here before we know it, and the MAHS will be hosting it again, so keep this in mind.

Jack flew in and had no problems, but Leo drove and ran into the same rainstorm that hit Maine on Monday and didn't get to the hotel until 8 p.m. Friday. We took a cab to the Science Museum in the pouring rain to hear Ray Noll talk about Cubs and Carl Gunter tell the Pitcairn fixed-wing and autogyro story. Nick D'Apuzzo, aero engineer, told of life in Brewster during WWII, a different point of view and most interesting. Dr. William Trimble spoke on the naval aircraft factory based upon his recent book on the subject.

It was time for lunch, but a distinguished gentleman in suit and tie was ushered into the auditorium and assisted to the podium. To our surprise, it was none other than Frank Piasecki, helicopter pioneer, and he charmed and enlightened the aero historians for over an hour — lunch could wait! John Schneider spoke on American helicopter development, and Peter Wright, Sr. spoke on the commercial usage of the "whirlybird." After the aviation history panel on local aviation history, Jack and I opted for a tour of the Science Museum and their aviation exhibits.

The socializing, meeting old friends, meeting new friends, and having a fine dinner amidst all these friends capped off a great day. Leo had an opportunity to talk with Tom Crouch of the NASM, present him with a picture of the NASM's Domenjoz Bleriot in Houlton in 1932, and get his advice on when (or if) we find the "White Bird." His banquet speech on the Wright Brothers was superior.

On Sunday we had a tour of the American Helicopter Museum in West Chester, PA, just opened the day before and certainly worth a visit. We then returned to Philadelphia for a tour of a new Boeing 777 in British Airways colors, sans interior and on test — up to date with the latest! Jack had to take a bus to New Hampshire from New York and Leo arrived in Maine at the height of the storm (Kittery to Westbrook, Maine in four hours) but all was fine, and next year we go to Elmira, New York (Soaring Museum) or Hammondsport, New York (Curtiss Museum). Save some time around the Columbus Day weekend next year and join Jack and me. You'll never regret it!

Mystery Photo Still a Mystery

As of this date (10/30/96), no one has guessed the Mystery Photo in the October 1996 issue.

... 1938 ... Near Goldsboro ...

I thought we gave it away, or doesn't anyone want an MAHS T-shirt? Let's get this one so we can have a good new one in the next issue.

First Plane Crash at Stroudwater

By Neal Strange

A westerly breeze was of little help cooling the usual throng of spectators milling around planes parked at the Stroudwater Flying Field on a humid Sunday afternoon in mid-July 1928. But discomfort was soon brushed aside by fascination as they watched the graceful Jenny biplanes take to the air.

The flying field's only runway at that time, ran east and west. The east end brushed against the shore of the Fore River and the west heading ended at Westbrook Street. Across the street and directly in line with the runway, a towering, seventy-five foot elm tree challenged all aircraft violating its air space.

The runway, a twelve hundred foot grass covered strip, was sufficiently long enough to take off and clear the tree as long as the pilot began his run at the extreme east end, and then only if a strong west wind prevailed. Most take-offs at the field in 1928 were toward the east, landings to the west regardless of wind direction because of the runway's proximity to the street and the tall obstruction beyond.

The formidable elm tree grew on pasture land owned by a dairy farmer, Mr. Larrabee. Each time the roaring OX5 engines labored to lift the Jennys above the tree, his grazing cows, startled by the sound, would scatter, requiring a frequent round-up. Understandable, Mr. Larrabee lacked enthusiasm over the new airfield across from his farm.

When the airfield owners contacted Mr. Larrabee for permission to remove the tree, citing the extreme hazard to departing aircraft, he firmly denied their request with: "It's the only shade for cows in the whole pasture."

Lynwood Nichols, a pioneer aviator and owner of a Jenny at the Stroudwater Field, had just finished tinkering on his plane's engine when a spectator approached and asked to purchase a short ride. He had never flown before and preferred his first flight to be brief. Nichols consented to the young man's request, but as he had just completed some engine adjustments, decided to take the plane up for a short test hop alone and then return for his passenger.

The west wind continued to blow as Nichols took off and climbed toward the last afternoon sun. Lingered spectators and the waiting passenger watched as he cleared the mighty elm and, after circling several time, approach the field to land. But as the plane traveled above the runway, it appeared to increase speed and its spoke wheels failed to touch the ground.

Whether he was blinded by the sun or misjudged his altitude, Lynwood was never sure. With most of the runway behind and the plane still airborne, he opened the throttle in a gallant attempt to go around. The OX5 strained to lift the shuddering biplane clear but to no avail. The steadfast elm claimed its first (and only) victim as the Jenny burrowed into its top branches amid a shower of broken limbs, leaves and shreds of silver fabric.

For a brief moment all was quiet as the astonished crowd and passenger-to-be stared at the nesting airplane. Seconds later the entire front section of fuselage and wings separated from the



The remains of Lynwood Nichols' Curtiss "Jenny" after landing in the 75' elm tree in the background. Robert Tinkham Sr. and daughter Eleanora pose for Henry Tinkham's photo. (Photo: Sherman Tinkham Files via Neal Strange)

tail and plummeted to the pasture along with pilot Nichols, unscathed but slightly bewildered, still strapped in the rear cockpit. The aft fuselage and tail assembly remained aloft tangled in limbs, but it was later retrieved by comrade pilots and added to the assorted pile of wreckage below.

Nichols, having regained his composure after receiving first aid in the form of a moderate dose of prohibition gin administered in the nearby kitchen of Dr. Strange, accepted the

Continued next page

More from the Maine ...



General Chuck Yeager at the Maine ANG Open House at Bangor, 8/11/96. (John Miller Photo)

Upcoming MAHS Meetings and Calendar of Events

- November 9 9 a.m. Acadia Air, Bar Harbor Airport, Trenton, Maine. (Details on page 3.)
 November 10 9 a.m. "White Bird" Search III. (Details on page 3.)
 December 14 9 a.m. Conference Room, Portland International Jetport Terminal

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.

Continued from previous page

loss of his beloved Jenny, but hurried to cover the exposed OX5 engine with canvas in case of rain.

By sundown most of the curious spectators had left the scene along with the unnamed passenger-to-be who may have had second thoughts regarding air travel. The incident inspired Mr. Larrabee to reconsider and shortly thereafter granted permission to remove the tree, much to the relief of pilots at the Stroudwater Flying Field.

Remnants of the ill-fated craft were thrown into a gully near the old airstrip as were damaged and discarded airplane parts from later mishaps. The gully and its contents has long since been filled and graded over to permit construction of runway 18/36 at the present Portland International Jetport.

... ANG Open House at BIA



U.S. Army parachutists prepare to land at Bangor International Airport at the Maine ANG Open House, 8/11/96. (John Miller Photo)

Welcome New Members

169. Mrs. Betty Bennett (*P-51s, Air Museums*)
 6533 E. Victoria
 Tucson, AZ 85730
170. Norman Brown (*Maine Aviation*)
 RRI, Box 377
 Woodland, ME 04694
171. Glenn Gibbons (*FAA Inspector*)
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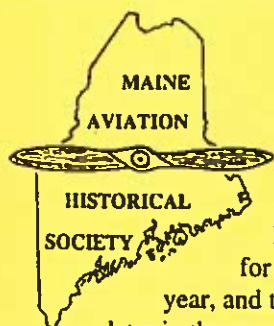
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Wreckage Search
(Details on Page 3)
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