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Newsletter of the Maine Aviation Historical Society
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Old Orchard Beach and "The Roma"

In this issue, we continue our exploration of the aviation history of Old Orchard Beach with a new article by Frederick R. Hamlen. We thank Leonard E. Opdycke, editor of Skyways Magazine, for granting us permission to reprint this exciting story.

By Frederick R. Hamlen

In June 1928, summer came slowly to the beach. Permanent residents, still wrapped in cold-weather gear, were walking their beloved strand just as they had all winter long, fair weather or foul. But in the evenings, more and more lights could be seen in the beach houses all the way from the Saco River to the mouth of the Scarborough River at Pine Point. Presently, the indomitable Stanislaus Zysbisco was to be seen walking along at an astonishing rate, for all the weight that he carried, exercising his little troupe of dogs. Harry Jones was seen oftener now, pattering around his Stinson SB-1 along with Joe Snow as they prepared for the new passenger-carrying season. Now and then he would give a ride around the beach area. And, for the first time, his plane was to be seen taking off whenever the flooding tide began rising too high for usual beach operations, and heading for the Portland Municipal Airport, which was approaching completion following the famous Aeronautical Act of 1926.

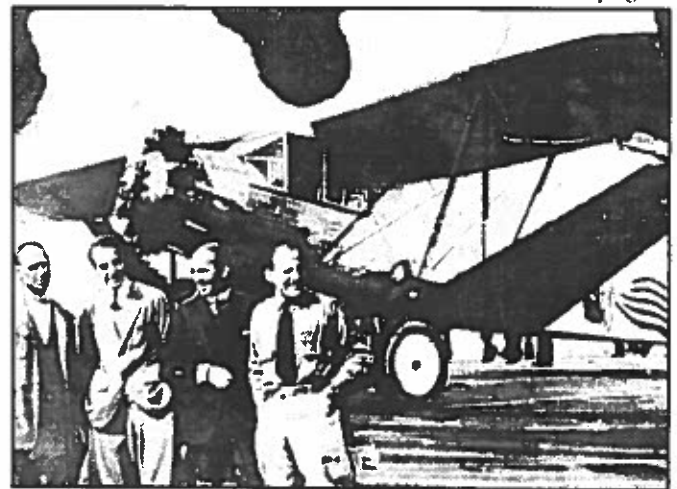
By the summer of 1928, the new airport's great and beautifully lighted hangar had been all but completed, along with an administration building and a 5-million candlepower rotating beacon which, on a clear night, could be seen by pilots as far away as Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Three grass runways, one 3,200 feet long, were being laid, and the entire boundary and all obstacles were being illuminated with a government-approved type of airport lighting. By mid-July, Captain William C. Hammond (World War pilot and instructor in France) had been appointed as Field Manager, while Robert "Red" Chew of the Curtiss Flying Service had been put in charge of the hangar and machine shop services.

On the aviation front, as the weather and water warmed, activities around the hangar at Old Orchard Beach increased, what with all of the "visiting firemen" dropping in to see Harry in their colorful biplanes. Although they couldn't help but note

the faster pace in flying, they may have been disappointed by the absence of any "big flights". There was no way for them to know, through July, August and early September, that there was anything at all in the offing. As a matter of fact, many of them had to be told the sad story of Frances Grayson and "The Dawn" in as much as the tragic misadventure had occurred long after many of them had left the summer before.

On Friday evening, September 14th, 1928 a huge aircraft appeared from the direction of Saco to the southwest. The few beach strollers saw her slowly and majestically "fly the beach" then swing around and in to a landing quite near Harry Jones' hangar at 6:45 PM. Eyes, fast growing aviation-wise, were quick to take in the salient details. She was gigantic, and seemed all the more so because of great triangular shapes which joined the outer wings with the fuselage. She was light blue and yellow. And upon the rear flanks of her fuselage were images of the Stars and Stripes entwined with the red, white and green flag of Italy. Just forward of this, and situated under the wing, was the name, "Roma", in huge block letters. The vertical tail was a tall and angular affair which reminded some of the onlookers of an airplane they had seen in the newspapers about

"Roma," continued on page 3



The crew of the "Roma": Roger Williams, pilot; Pietro Bonelli, Navigator; Cesare Sabelli, Pilot, Dr. L.M. Pisculli, Medical Observer. (Photo via Leo Boyle)

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Monthly meetings
are held at 10 a.m.
on the second Saturday
of each month
at various locations.

See calendar for details.

Maine Aviation Historical Society President's Report Read at the February 2001 Membership Meeting

As I begin my term as President, I cannot overlook the feeling that the challenges seem enormously large. However, I also know that this organization has some great people who are willing to "do what it takes" to get the job done. I want to take just a moment to personally thank a few individuals who have kept things going for so long, that it would be a shame not to mention their efforts. This organization owes a great deal to Jim Chichetto, Leo Boyle, Charles Brantner, Carl Sederquist, Al Cormier, Bill Townsend, Ed Armstrong, Mike Cornett, and Les Shaw. These nine individuals have, by their individual efforts and sacrifices enabled this organization to continue and grow. It is time for the rest of us to step up to the task (myself included).

I have just retired from the Maine Air National Guard (Jan 30, 2001). I am now ready to take on the responsibility of increasing our membership, public support, and most importantly, increasing the quality of services to our members. With this in mind, I would like to outline my agenda for this term of office as your President.

1. First priority will be to increase our membership. This will be accomplished by not only adding new members to our roles, but by bringing back those members whom for various reasons decided to leave the society. Many of these individuals have a sincere love for aviation, and are valued members to this organization.
 2. Increasing the level and quality of membership services. This will be accomplished by better communication on the part of the elected officers and board members with the membership. The newsletter will continue to be a tool for providing the membership with stories and historical information about Maine Aviation, but this tool must also be better utilized in communicating vital information to the membership. Communication is the key to keeping our membership strong, and the newsletter is a great way to enhance this goal.
 3. Aviation related activities, need to be the focus of this organization. Recently we have gone in a direction away from the principles in which this organization was founded. We need more activities relating to Maine Aviation History. More guest speakers, more hikes, more involvement in social events. We need to get back to being an Aviation Historical Society. Many of our membership have gone away because they joined to be part of a fun organization, an organization of people who share a common bond, the joy of flying and the love of aviation history. We need to return to that type of organization while still continuing to build a museum that will have to be run like a business if it has any chance of surviving. With this in mind, I have formed new committees that will focus on these key areas. I have appointed a chairman for each of these committees, and have tasked these individuals to head-up the various activities associated with these assignments.
 4. Finally, I want to outline the agenda for our museum. Progress has been steady but slow. However, two things must be considered when you look at where we have been, and where we have come so far. First, we have begun this museum project with virtually no public support or funding. As we sit here today, the new Maine Discovery Museum is having it's grand opening. I looked into this event with an eye on the history of this project's development. What I found was truly an eye opener. This project started more than 5 years ago. It ran into the same problems we have seen with public support and funding. The project evolved over a period of time and was originally know as the Eastern Maine Children's Museum. Two problems came about from that title. The first was that the museum was only about Eastern Maine. The second was that the museum was only for Children. This narrowed the group of people who would pay to attend this attraction. Thus the name was changed. It is really a Discovery Center. A Learning Center. None of the displays have any historical value, as they are all new. It is more of a scientific learning center then a museum.
- The Maine Discovery Museum as it is now called, is a definite asset to the community, but I truly believe that the Cole Land Transportation and eventually the Maine Air Museum will truly be the premier museums in Eastern Maine. We are well on our way to achieving our goals. We need to be patient and determined to see this through. It may take another two years, but that will still be less time than the Maine Discovery Museum took to open its doors.

"Roma," continued from page 1

a year before. Some even recalled the name of Clarence Chamberlin and the "Columbia". At the very top of the rudder appeared the registration numerals NX4864, and below them were the words BELLANCA K.

Old Orchard people had become very familiar with the Ryan, the Stinson monoplane, the gaunt Fokker and the ungainly Sikorsky. So they were delighted to see a new type, especially one so efficient looking. The little group grew into a small crowd as they pressed in to find out more about the enormous craft coming in. They saw the windows of the lofty control cabin were slid back, revealing the faces of two pilots who, with elbows akimbo, leaned outward in order to have a better forward view of whatever was just ahead of them. Below either window were stenciled the names: Cesare Sabelli, Roger Q. Williams and Piero Bonelli. In side the window just to the rear of the wing they could vaguely make out the face of a third person.

The big Bellanca approached the edge of the concrete apron in front of the hangar and, with a mighty blast of the radial engine, was horsed around so as to be parallel with the hangar. Then the noise stopped as a metal propeller materialized out of its gleaming disk. Harry Jones moved forward from the apron as the two pilots, taking off their helmets and goggles, clambered from the left window to a footrest just below. From there it was an easy step onto the root of the broad batwing and onto the ground. The tall, slim man with a Mediterranean look and coal-black eyes introduced himself as Sabelli. A much shorter man with a leathery but pleasant face said that he was Williams. When a door at the left side of the rear cabin opened, the third man stepped out and was introduced to Harry Jones by the pilots as Dr. Leon M. Pisculli. Behind the pince-nez spectacles were a pair of squinted eyes, and there was a rather rascally or devilish look to his features.

It was clear to the onlookers that there was another impending late-season attempt at the Atlantic Ocean, the destination being Rome. But most of all they wanted to know more about the unusual configuration. They were able to catch something about one Giuseppe M. Bellanca and his sesquiplane. This was his first attempt at the design and construction of a big airplane.



The Bellanca K "Roma" at Old Orchard Beach, September 1938. (Photo via OOB Historical Society)

The batwings were actually lift struts incorporated into the design to help out with the all-up loading of the ship. The inward sections of the struts carried the wheels. In that manner the drag on the plane could be reduced to allow the engine to carry aloft about 1,000 extra pounds of fuel! The engine was a Pratt & Whitney Hornet, of 500 hp. While it was a fairly new item on the market, it had an older brother of smaller size and horsepower known as the Wasp.

The onlookers also heard that the "Roma" would leave forthwith for the Portland Municipal Airport where she could be kept safely under cover in the new steel and glass hangar while the crew awaited the arrival of Piero Bonelli, their navigator and radio man.

The meeting on the beach, where newspaper people and cameramen got a few shots, was extremely brief—hardly more than five minutes. Harry was heard to assure the newcomers that down at the Hotel Brunswick in town absolutely everything was in readiness for the convenience and comfort of the crew, mechanics, advisors and people of the press. Dr. Pisculli was seen to be escorted to a waiting car in which he would precede all the rest to the hotel.

Sabelli and Williams clambered back into their craft and started up the big Hornet. No warming was necessary. The "Roma" was taxied down to the hard sand and pointed up the beach. Spectators, now used to the ferocious noise of aircraft engines, were delighted to see her given the gun and with tail up become airborne in about eight seconds.

The airport only a few miles to the northwest stood out "like a sore thumb" as Manager Hammond had lit all the boundary lights the moment the phone rang with the word of the takeoff from Old Orchard Beach. Sabelli was delighted with what he saw from the air and experienced when landing at 7:05 PM on the beautiful turf.

The "Roma" was taxied directly up to the open doors of the hangar where the engine was shut down. The pilots remained in the ship while the eager mechanics plus a few spectators pushed her inside. There Sabelli and Williams climbed down to be cordially welcomed by William Hammond as the hangar doors were closed.

Escorting the two men through the lounge adjoining the hangar, Hammond collected the reporter from the *Portland Press Herald* and everybody retired to his office in the

"Roma," continued on page 4

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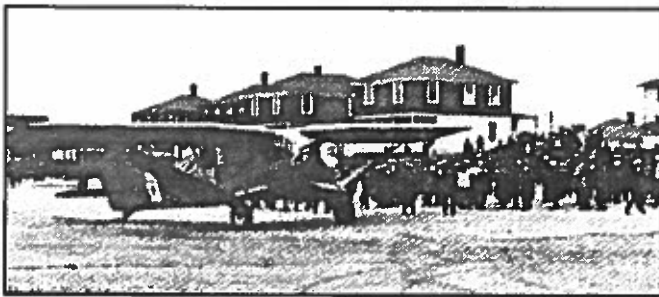
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"Roma," continued from page 3

administration building. Sabelli remarked, "We appreciate your courtesy in making us welcome here. The convenience of keeping our plane in the hangar until the takeoff will make it much easier for us all." The slim Italian then declared enthusiastically, "This field is simply wonderful!"

Williams went on to praise the landing conditions at Old Orchard, and he expressed surprise that not all of the flights had originated from there. Both men then explained that "Roma" had departed Hartford, Connecticut, about 4:30 PM, without Piero Bonelli. He had returned to New York to study all the current weather data with "Doc" Kimball. This was partly because new threats were being posed by the advent of a hurricane around Miami which looked as though it might sweep up the coast. They said that, in fact, "Roma" and its crew had been poised at Roosevelt Field and ready to go for about six weeks, but inopportune winds had thwarted their efforts to take their heavy load into the air. Bonelli, they added, would be along momentarily, and at the moment, should the weather be promising, they would fly "Roma" over to the beach, fuel up, load supplies and get going.



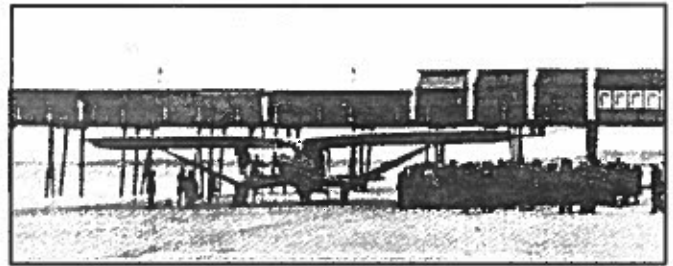
"Roma" on the beach, warming up for a test hop. (Photo via OOB Historical Society)

In the short time remaining before their departure for the Hotel Brunswick, they told Hammond and the Portland news reporter a bit about the presence of Dr. Pisculli and described the proposed flight course. Dr. Pisculli, a gynecologist from the Bronx and New York City, had been developing an interest in aviation medicine. During the latter stages of flight planning, he had requested to go along as a passenger to make detailed observations of the stresses and strains upon pilots on long distance flights. Furthermore, he had reportedly underwritten the cost of the plane to a considerable extent (the figure reported varying from \$13,000 to \$16,000). If this is what happened, it would appear that the proposition was something that could not be ignored.

In regard to the flight, Williams and Sabelli declared that the "Roma" would be flown on a rhumb line rather than the shorter but more complicated-to-fly great circle course. Thus, staying nearer the major shipping lanes, they would strike out from Old Orchard on an easterly compass heading. Flying over about 3,200 miles of open ocean, they would pass 200 to 300 miles north of the Azores. After about 30 hours, they should hit the coast of northern Spain at a point barely above the Portuguese border. Then traveling over the Pyrenees, they should reach the Littorio Airport in Rome in another 15 hours. The

overall distance would be somewhat less than 4,450 miles. They hoped to leave the beach with their heavy load at a low tide early in the morning so that the first, precarious hours, while heavily laden, might be undertaken during daylight. The night-flying phase would then be easier.

As the time for their departure arrived, Sabelli got up and, with a dramatic flourish of his hand, declared that there was absolutely nothing to do now but wait for the arrival of Bonelli and cooperation from the weather.



In the shadow of the pier, ready for takeoff. (Photo via OOB Historical Society)

At the Brunswick Hotel the next day, the 15th, and from all that can be garnered from newspaper reports of the time, Mrs. Williams was there and so was Piero Bonelli. On hand also was a Mr. Baker of the Standard Oil Company of America as well as Frank J. Stashak, Pratt & Whitney engine expert. Baker assured the crew that next to Harry Jones' hangar a large fuel tank had been buried with an attached force-feed pump. This would be filled with gasoline which might be used at any time.

In a myriad of press conferences, many additional details concerning "Roma" were given to Boston and Portland newspaper reporters. The total fuel capacity would be 1,400 gallons, although "Roma" with its Hornet consuming high octane at the rate of 21 gallons per hour would require only 1,150 gallons. Some 500 to 700 gallons would be contained in a large fuselage tank situated at the ship's center of gravity and separating the pilots from Bonelli, the navigator, and Pisculli, the medical observer. Twenty-nine five gallon tins would be stored in the space between the top of the tank and the roof of the cabin. These would be emptied by hand into the main tank as the supply needed replenishing, the tins then being thrown overboard. The remainder of the fuel supply would be contained in wing tanks.

As to flight and engine instruments and navigational aids, there was a specially designed (probably by RCA) short wave set with a range of 2,000 miles. Located aft in Bonelli's radio compartment, the entire apparatus was suspended on rubber shock-cording in order to reduce the annoying vibrations from the Hornet. "Roma's" signature was WRCA. Additionally, Piero Bonelli had another excellent instrument to work with. This was a new type of drift meter (probably by Pioneer) with a specially gridded, rotatable lens which the observer could sight through until the passage of objects on the earth's surface were seen to be paralleling the longitudinal lines on the grid.

"Roma," continued on page 5

"Roma," continued from page 3

Thus, the wind drift correction was read directly and incorporated into the pilot's compass heading. Bonelli would read the drift about every hour and then, by means of a communications tube specially designed by Pisculli, call it in to Sabelli and Williams. Before this latest improvement it was necessary to drop a smoke bomb to the surface and then turn back to read the wind drift. If there was any shortfall in equipment, it was the replacement of a rubber raft with individual kapok-filled life jackets.

During the 15th and the three ensuing days while the crew waited, discontent began to gnaw at the mind of Cesare Sabelli. Whether intentionally, or otherwise, the newspaper people crowded around Roger Q. Williams and directed the great majority of their questions to him. I am unable to say why this thing happened. Whatever the reason, Sabelli was commencing to feel left out of things. He was feeling short changed. He after all was the commander of the flight. Everybody knew that perfectly well, which was part of whatever it was that was chewing away at him. Newspaper people further referred (correctly) to Sabelli as Commander Sabelli. But they quoted Williams as Pilot Williams. And that was correct also. Except that Sabelli was a pilot as well. It is probably true that Roger Williams, a well known and highly experienced flier, did do the lion's share of the work during all of the flight testing which occurred between April 1928, when the Bellanca K was completed and granted a registration, and mid-August when load and engine tests were carried out at Brainard Field, Hartford. Nevertheless, Cesare Sabelli felt certain that the press was attempting to down play him. Presently he blew up. As my cousin would say were he doing this narrative, "There was a terrible, terrible explosion."

Piero Bonelli had very little to say about the forthcoming flight after his arrival. But now it was the Doctor's turn to come into the limelight. To the locals his part in the flight was still a puzzle, especially as his name had not appeared with the others just under the pilots' windows. Already it had been leaked that he was a backer of the flight. (What the locals did not know, and were not told, was that he had not been recorded as a member of the North Oceanic Airways Corporation, the outfit to which Giuseppe Bellanca had sold the ship in late March 1928.) It was explained to the press that he was, additionally, the medical advisor on the flight. He thus would be the first physician ever to observe fliers under the strain of long flights.

For the journey he had prepared special food consisting mainly of biscuits, four of which at each meal would be the equivalent of 5,000 calories. These were already put up in air-tight cans. For liquid there would be oranges, distilled water and coffee. Pisculli explained that he had, further more, prepared sensitized paper which would be used as a check on the presence of deadly carbon monoxide gas in the cockpit. As he drew on his cigarette, his mischievous eyes glinted behind the pince-nez glasses. "This gas might have asphyxiated the crews of some of the transatlantic fliers who were never heard from after they had taken off."

Further, he planned to make periodic checks on the pulse, respiration and blood pressure of the crew members. He was going to take along equipment with which to elaborate upon those tests and make notes on his observations. It was his opinion that it was the breakdown of human machinery, and not the engine, which had been the cause of so many transatlantic flights ending in disaster. (The press corps could see easily that the doctor was going to be a very busy man indeed, perhaps busier than the regular crew members who already had their hands full. They failed to ask him just how he was going to accomplish much of this when the crew was to be split up by the presence of the large fuselage fuel tank surmounted by a clutter of five gallon gasoline tins.)

On Sunday, September 16th, "Roma" was flown to the beach where, at the hangar, she was fueled enough for a test flight. It is not known if Bonelli was with the pilots, but Frank J. Stashak, Pratt & Whitney engine expert, was. And his sharp ear detected something out of order. Upon landing, he inspected everything about the power plant and concluded that the big propeller was out of alignment, perhaps as much as an eighth of an inch. He also discovered a leak in the main tank, right near the dump valve. That could be easily and quickly repaired, but the prop was another matter—far more serious.

"Roma," continued on page 6

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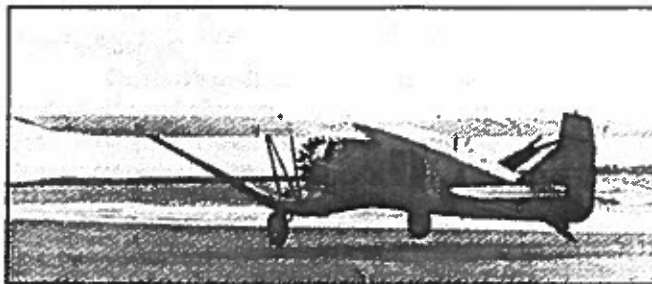
"Roma," continued from page 5

His immediate recommendation was that the propeller be sent to the factory for repairs or for replacement. Sabelli, on the other hand, insisted that nothing was wrong, and Williams agreed with him. The prop was O.K. for the flight and they were anxious to be gone. Had Giuseppe Bellanca, who'd arrived at Old Orchard Beach when he heard that the flight attempt was imminent, known about this, his opinion and remarks would undoubtedly have cooled the ardour of the fliers. As it was, Stashak lost the argument. But on that Sunday evening no serious thought was given to putting the ship into final readiness for an attempt the next day at low tide, and all "Roma" personnel, including Bellanca who remained (it seems) ignorant of Stashak's finding, retired to the warmth and comfort of the Brunswick Hotel.

On Monday, the 17th, a pea soup fog shrouded the beach during most of the day. However, toward evening there were signs of its lifting. Hopes for the next day rising, the crew and all mechanics and attendants went into action. At 9:00 PM, with a small crowd of 500 on hand, the main tank began receiving its load of Socony fuel. It was fully fueled by 2:00 AM on the morning of the 18th, and then 29 five gallon tins of fuel were placed atop the main tank, ready for transferal by means of a spout and hose. Next, in the wee hours, Piero Bonelli supervising, the right wing tank was filled with 240 gallons of fuel, after which, while Bonelli retired to the hotel for a little more sleep, the left wing tank was similarly filled. The few remaining observers were deeply impressed by the jealous manner in which the mechanics carefully guarded the chamois strainer which was used to ensure the avoidance of sand in the fuel. While all this was going on, the specially formulated food and fruit were put on board. Piping hot coffee in thermos bottles would be placed on board at the last moment.

On Tuesday morning, September 18th, the men were up early, knowing that the tidal conditions would be optimal between 9:00 AM and 12:30 PM. Commander Sabelli was hoping to be off at 11:00.

Roger Williams and Piero Bonelli were in the hotel dining room that early morning, enjoying some peace and quiet as well as a sumptuous breakfast. Mrs. Williams was there as well, for the most part looking on with her hands clasped below her chin and a wistful expression on her face. Then they joined the rest at the hangar.



"Roma" at liftoff. (Photo via OOB Historical Society)

The fog was gone, but as low tide approached, the early morning stillness was transformed into a breeze which soon became a very stiff crosswind from the west. "Roma" could be taken off either way—from the pier and towards Prouts Neck, or the other way around. In either case, the "Roma" would be drifted toward the wet sand and water. So, at 10:15, Commander Sabelli, in consultation with the others, called the flight off for the morning. There was still a slight chance for the late afternoon. But because of the flight plan this was called off as well and the flight and ground crews, having "buttoned up" "Roma", returned to the comfort and warmth of the Brunswick. "Roma's" tanks remained filled—she was ready to go and so were the crew.

Wednesday, September 19th, dawned fair enough, and everything looked good for an early takeoff. It was at this point that Sabelli made what could have been his worst mistake possible. He summoned all of the reporters and led them out behind the hangar. Expecting some really juicy bit of information, they became instead the recipients of a perfectly frightful dressing down by the emotional Italian as he let out his grievances. Dark eyes glowing with pent-up emotion, he reminded them in a long tirade that he too was a pilot and accused them, the press, of being out to discredit him. His "parting shot" could not have come at a worse time. One can imagine the precarious state of mind which he must have placed himself in for the beginning of his flight.

To be continued in the next issue. . .



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Upcoming MAHS Meetings



- March 10 10 a.m.MAHS Meeting, Conference Room, Portland International Jetport.
- April 14 10 a.m.MAHS Meeting, Augusta area (tentative).
- April 14 1 p.m.Memories of Golden Age Flying, Jonathan Miller, OHTM, Owls Head, Maine.*
- May 12 10 a.m.MAHS Meeting.
- May 12 1 p.m. Amelia Lives, Alison Machaiek, OHTM, Owls Head, Maine.
- June 9 10 a.m.MAHS Meeting.
- July 14 10 a.m.MAHS Meeting.
- August 4-5 All Day Transportation Spectacular and Aerobatic Airshow, OHTM, Owls Head, Maine.
- August 11 10 a.m.MAHS Meeting.
- Sept. 8 All Day Greenville International Seaplane Fly-In, Greenville, Maine.
- Sept. 15 10 a.m.MAHS Meeting. Note change of weekend.
- Sept. 22-23 All Day Great State o' Maine Air Show with the Blue Angels, BNAS, Brunswick, Maine.
- Sept. 29-30 All Day Gadabout Gaddis Fly-In, Bingham, Maine
- October 13 10 a.m.MAHS Meeting.
- November 10 10 a.m.MAHS Meeting.
- December 8 10 a.m.MAHS Meeting.

* The Owls Head Transportation Museum will also have their Antique Aeroplane Show on the following dates: May 2 — June 10 and 24 — July 8 and 21-22 — September 2, 16 and 30 — October 14

Welcome New Members

- 404. **James V. Pisini** (*WW II USAF History*)
13 Island Pind Road
Cumberland Foreside, ME 04110 207-781-8696

- 405. **James J. Joyce, Jr.**
16 Marlow Street
Portland, ME 04103 207-871-0901
e-mail: jjoycej1@maine.rr.com

March 2001 Meeting

The March meeting of the MAHS/Maine Air Museum will be held on Saturday, March 10, 2001 in the Conference Room of the Portland International Jetport Terminal. We urge all members, especially those who live in Southern Maine, to attend this important meeting. Our new president, John Garbinski, and other officers and directors will be there, and they are anxious to meet and know as many members as possible. We need you input to make the Society more responsive to your wants and desires.

Our featured speaker will be member Jim Sheppard who was a member of the Tuskegee Airmen in World War II. Jim will recount his experiences with the Airmen and his service in Africa and Italy during the war. This will be a most interesting and informative meeting. Don't miss it!

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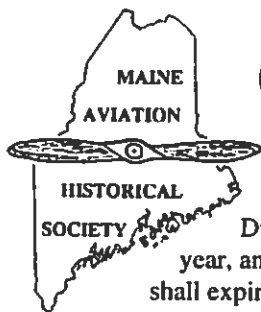
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Supporting	\$100 annual	Newsletter, Decal, Museum Admission, 4 Free Passes
Lifetime	\$500*	Newsletter, Decal, Lifetime Membership Number, Museum Admission, 10 Free Passes
* (2 annual \$250 payments)		

Maine Aviation Historical Society
P.O. Box 2641
Bangor, ME 04402

March Meeting

Saturday, March 10, 2001
10 a.m.

Conference Room
Portland International Jetport