



DIRIGO FLYER

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Three Men in a Plane: Part I The Story of the First French Atlantic Flight

By René Lefèvre

Reprinted from *The National Air Review*

The value of first person accounts of exciting aviation events is illustrated by the following story. René Lefèvre, navigator of the "Yellow Bird," tells his story of their trans-Atlantic flight in 1929. If you have a story to tell, let us know so we may tape it or write it down so it is not lost.

On June 14th, 1929, the radio and the press announced that a French aircraft, the "Oiseau Canari," had taken off from America, bound for Paris, and had landed safely near Santander, Spain, after a nonstop flight of twenty-nine hours, with a stow-away on board!

Here is the story.

The Crew

All three of us — Assollant, Lotti and I — were young. In 1928, the year our plans started to take shape, Lotti was thirty, Assollant was twenty-three and I was twenty-four.

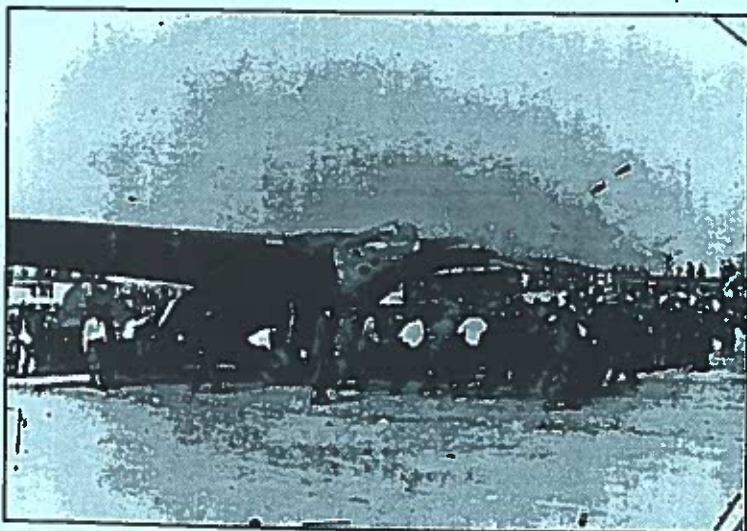
Assollant and myself had been trained by two famed French aviators, Commandant Weiss and Capitane René de Vitrolles. Despite our youth, we felt sure we were sufficiently

experienced to risk such a tough undertaking for those days — an Atlantic crossing by air. But the way in which our cherished ambition passed from the dream stage into reality was most unexpected. During a banquet Assollant spoke about our idea to his neighbor at the table. You may imagine his surprise, and joy, when a few days later he received a phone call saying that a certain young man, who had some money, was keenly interested in the idea. Assollant arranged to meet him. His name was Lotti, and his parents owned a hotel in Paris. It was not long before he was as enthusiastic about it as we were. Since he was paying 200,000 francs toward what was now a project, he wanted to take part in the flight. This was easier said than done, for his parents had no desire that their son should share in such a hazardous adventure. Thus, if he was to fly with us, he had to do it clandestinely. The romantic story of our flight was beginning to unfold.

By the way, Lotti's financial contribution was not sufficient to cover the entire costs of the attempt. Assollant's parents had to come to the rescue by mortgaging their house for 100,000 francs.

The Aircraft

With the financial problem more or less solved, it remained for us to look around for a suitable aircraft. In those days aircraft capable of spanning the Atlantic nonstop were extremely rare. Lotti had the good fortune to stumble on a designer who had three-quarters completed a mono-plane destined for an attack on the distance record. It was a wooden aircraft, powered by a 600 horse-power liquid-cooled engine and originally designed for carrying eight passengers. But it could be transformed so as to carry about 1,000 gallons of fuel. Its cruising speed of 120 mph and top speed of 150 mph made it one of the fastest commercial aircraft of its day. It was capable of staying on the wing for forty-two hours and covering 5,000 miles without refueling. As the shortest distance between France and the USA amounted to about 3,000 miles, we had enough margin for safely overcoming any headwinds that might prevail.



The French Bernard Monoplane "L'Oiseau Canari (Yellow Bird)" being towed to the Pine Point end of Old Orchard Beach on June 13, 1929 for take-off on its trans-Atlantic flight.

"Yellow Bird," continued on page 2

"Yellow Bird," *continued from page 1*

The firm of Bernard Co. let us have this aircraft, without engine, for 300,000 francs — 200,000 on the nail and the remaining 100,000 after successful conclusion of the flight. But the Société Hispano-Suizo made us a gift of two engines and furthermore placed its engineers and mechanics at our disposal. This generous aid was a precious contribution toward the success of our undertaking, and we appreciated it all the more as the government — which usually subsidized such flights substantially — gave us no help at all.

An Officer Who Scorned Red Tape

In place of help the government placed obstacles in our path. After a first attempt which failed — ending in Casablanca — our military superiors, influenced by the critical remarks in the press, ordered Assollant and myself to return from Casablanca immediately to our military base at Le Bourget, not giving us enough time even to repair our aircraft. Then we were formally forbidden to undertake any record flight at all. Since there was no way of taking off from French soil, we had to change our plans and consider a flight in the other direction, thus from the USA to France.

This meant shipping our aircraft to New York. As Lotti's funds were running low, we had no choice but to approach his parents, whose acquaintance we had just made. They agreed to help us again, but still on the condition that their son would not take part in the flight.

Meanwhile, there were many other problems still to be solved, such as acquiring the necessary documents and choosing a port for embarking, for instance. Our aircraft was not registered with the French Air Ministry, so that no documents were forthcoming. Again and again we approached the airworthiness commission, but they demanded the impossible of us. For example, they ordered us to install position lamps. Imagine what useful purpose they could have served over the Atlantic — a desert sky in those days — and especially as we were trying to cut down weight to a strict minimum. There was no doubt that the authorities were bent on making matters as difficult as possible for us.

Negotiations with French shipping companies were equally fruitless. In the end we discovered that the only way of transporting our aircraft to the USA was in an American ship, which did not stop in France but only in England. That meant flying to England and, as we had no papers, we risked having our machine seized by the British authorities.

The British Air Attaché in Paris advised us, confidentially, to risk the flight all the same and to try "wangling" matters once we were on English soil, though under the condition that if the British nevertheless created difficulties, we should not mention his name.

Assollant and I took off for England in the "Oiseau Canari" early in the morning of April 19th, 1929. As a matter of fact, we got away by the skin of our teeth. Upon our arrival at Orly, the airport manager received us with an ironic smile: what in heaven's name were we doing at the airport so early in the morning? With an expression as innocent as we could muster,

we explained that we wanted to test our radio equipment. To our great surprise, he informed us in no uncertain tones that "we could tell that to the marines!" and that he knew quite well we were going to England. Taking advantage of our dismay, he triumphantly brandished the morning newspaper before our faces — disclosing our plans in black on white! It happened that, on the previous evening, we had dined with a journalist friend of ours. Apparently his friendship for us had not gone beyond the bounds of his professional zeal. Well, there was nothing else we could do but admit the news was true. But at this moment we discovered that there lived at least one official whose heart was not of stone. He actually agreed to our suggestion that he shut his eyes to our departure; after all, he was not expected to call the police to prevent our take-off as "trial flights around the field" were perfectly legal, and in any case the weather forecast was not favorable for a flight to England. He told us he'd give us an hour's start before reporting our "crime" to the Air Ministry.

Old Orchard Beach

Upon arrival in the USA I assembled the "Oiseau Canari" — "Yellow Bird" as the Americans called it — and wired Assollant and Lotti that everything was ready. Roosevelt Field, where we carried out the final check flights, was too small for taking off with the machine fully loaded. Before leaving France we had expected to find an impressively long, wide runway. As a matter of fact, such a runway had been constructed specially for Byrd, but it had since been neglected and nothing remained when we arrived.

Finally, we discovered a suitable strip of sand in the State of Maine, 300-odd miles northeast of New York. But there was no hangar, in fact no form of shelter for our aircraft. This was not exactly the best thing for a wooden aircraft, to be exposed to the rain, brine-laden air, and sun while we were waiting for suitable weather. Nevertheless, it struck us as being wiser than to risk an abortive take-off at Roosevelt Field.

Every day the New York Weather Bureau cabled us its forecast. You might be surprised to learn that we had to pay the costs of the telegrams to a private company, which received the weather reports from ships out at sea. In those days there was no such thing as an international weather service, and it was a matter of luck whether the forecasts turned out to be accurate.

After several days' waiting we finally received news of acceptable weather conditions. All the same, we judged it wiser to deviate somewhat to the south, as we might otherwise encounter the southern edge of a fairly strong depression.

Our take-off was fixed for June 13th and we started filling our tanks in advance. As the wind conditions were favorable, we filled up with a hundred gallons less than normally in order to render the take-off safer. And so that the tail skid would lift up easier, we placed all the loose goods, such as warm clothes, pocket lamps, food, maps, and so forth in the nose of the aircraft.

To be continued . . .

A Visit to the Maine Air National Guard: Part I

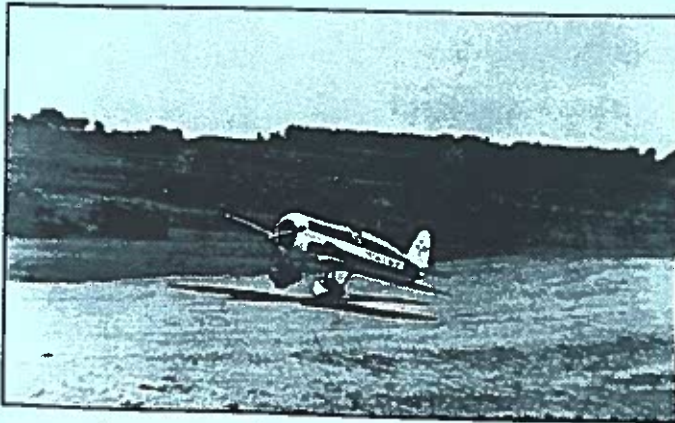
By Jim Chichetto

On a recent Saturday afternoon, John Miller, Clay Carkin and myself were guests of Steve Welch and the Maine ANG in Bangor, Maine. Clay, John and I had made contact with ANG members during the Guard Open House this past summer and were interested in seeing what history was recorded and displayed at the Base HQ. Clay had set up the trip and we spent two hours looking over the display, asking questions and checking out the Visual Information Center. We came away with some great photos, new information about the Guard's history and some ideas for future displays.

It's all there: mementos, photos, equipment and awards won by the 132nd Fighter Squadron and later by the 132nd Air Refueling Squadron. Both sides of the hallway are covered with photos showing the early days of the 132nd as they transitioned from twin engine bombers into an ANG fighter group. Dow Field in Bangor was the site chosen for the unit's base of operations.

The Bangor airfield was named Dow Field during WW II, after Oakfield native Lt. James F. Dow, who died in a stateside training accident in June of 1940. Dow Field had been a busy place during WW II with most aircraft leaving for or coming from the ETO stopping over at Dow. When it closed after WW II, only the birth of the ANG saved it from being totally mothballed. The 132nd arrived with men and aircraft. The first assigned fighter aircraft was the Jug, the P-47.

The Republic Thunderbolt was a strong and solid aircraft which suited the style of flying that these post WW II aviators engaged in. Based on the 1936 designed P-35, the P-47s flown at Dow in 1947 were some of the best piston driven fighter aircraft ever built. A heavy aircraft by WW II fighter standards, the P-47D versions could climb up to 42,000 ft. and had a top speed of about 426 mph. During WW II, these aircraft excelled in the ground attack fighter-dive bomber role, as well as pure air to air dog fighting. While not as sleek or quick as the P-51s, the P-47s could absorb a great deal of battle damage and still make it home. By the time the war was over, the eight .50 caliber machine guns, rockets and up to 2,500 lbs. of bombs it could



(left) Captain Frank Hawks flies into the Darling Air Field (Youngs Corner), Auburn, Maine, on Sunday, August 2, 1931. He was flying the very famous 1929 Travel Air Model R "Mystery Ship," NR1313, Texaco No. 13. (Ellis Roakes Photo via Norm Houle)

carry made the P-47 one of the most feared aircraft in Europe. Airmen fresh out of the Army Air Corps were used to the Jug. While the pilots flew the P-47s for missions, other aircraft were also flown for both training and supply missions.

The T-6 Texan, C-47, a B-25 and a B-26 were actively flown at Dow. The T-6 was the final aircraft men had to master before they were assigned to their primary training schools. If you were good and mastered it quickly, you might get that slot into single engine fighter school. If you were steady, but not outstanding, you ended up in multi-engine school, which of course lead to bombers and transports. The T-6 was a great trainer with a ceiling of 21,500 ft. and a top speed of about 205 mph. It was in use from the early 1940s into the late 1950s as a trainer and a squadron hack. The Maine ANG flew theirs into the mid-1950s before it was phased out in favor of the T-33. One MAHS member, Reid Campbell, recalled that things were a little more relaxed back then. He mentioned that he once took his pregnant wife, dressed in flight overalls, for a flight in the T-6. It was the only chance he had to get her up in the aircraft before they started a family, so he made the most of it. Loops, rolls and a couple hours of enjoying the view made it a flight to remember. America had won the war and there were no real enemies in sight yet; life in the Guard was fun. Photos on the Heritage Wall show men working on P-47s and various other WW II vintage aircraft. Uniforms from that era have the WW II look. For many Guardsman, it was a great way to serve their country and get paid to fly and work with aircraft; in short a perfect job. Korea would change all of that, and the Guard would be involved in the fight.

As the Cold War heated up, the mission of the Guard became more serious. In 1948 the unit was equipped with F-80C Shooting Stars. Designed during WW II by a design team lead by Kelly Johnson for Lockheed, the F-80 was America's first combat jet fighter. A few did fly missions at the tail end of WW II in Italy, but none were involved in aerial combat. The F-80C models flown by the 132nd had a 42,750 ft. ceiling and a top speed of about 570 mph. By the time the Korean War had broken out, the F-80s in the USAF were giving way to the newer F-84s and F-86s. Once the shooting started, the F-80s were used mostly as ground attack aircraft. The F-80, like the newer F-84, turned out to be excellent ground support aircraft, although that was not their designed function. The Mig-15 changed the

Maine ANG, continued on page 4

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Maine ANG, continued from page 3

USAF's ideas of dog fighting in straight wing jet fighters and boosted the rapid improvement of the F-86 Sabre. For 21 months during the Korean conflict, men and equipment were shifted around to meet the needs of a country at war halfway around the world. The speed of the new jet age made Washington rethink its national defense. Suddenly the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans weren't the major barrier to aggression that they had once been. Air defense plans were made and the ANG became a critical part of the overall plan. Long range all weather interceptors were needed and, as the new designs were being drawn up, stop gap aircraft came into being as a temporary fix.

In 1953 the graceful North American P-51H Mustang was assigned to the 132nd. The F-80Cs had gone to an active USAF unit, the 49th FI Squadron. The P-51H was sleek, fast and fun to fly, but nowhere near as tough as the old P-47. With a 41,000 ft. ceiling and a 487 mph top speed, the pilots were still flying within the WW II envelope. The Mustang would serve until the 132nd received their new all weather fighters. The plans called for the unit to fly F-94s, making use of the on-board radar and unguided missiles and guns. The Guard's role in America's defense was now that of bomber killer. The Russians now had atomic weapons and long range aircraft with which to deliver these weapons to the United States. The USAF was tasked with knocking out these invaders before they could get too close to the US mainland. The ANG was tasked to hunt down the survivors and destroy them before they could reach our cities. The Air Force had been upgrading the old F-80 design into the T-33 trainer. One of these aircraft was redesigned into a two place all weather fighter. The T-33 was an F-80 with 38.5 inches added to its fuselage to allow a second seat to be installed. The F-94 was a redesigned version of this new T-33 design. It had a stronger engine, afterburner and on-board radar, with a radar operator in the back seat. By the time weapons were added, the additional weight had turned this aircraft into a slow underpowered aircraft, but it was the best we could do for a quick fix. (At this time the F-89 was being flown, but that design was already being overtaken by the F-100, 101, 104 and 105 series of aircraft. The Mig-21's speed in Korea had badly frightened the USAF and we needed faster aircraft pronto.)


The F-94 was not as nimble as the F-80, but it did supply

the 132nd with a stable weapons platform which had all weather capabilities. With a ceiling of 51,000 ft. and a top speed of 585 mph, the F-94 gave the 132nd an aircraft which could fly above the clouds, and with its 1,200 mile range it could stay up there for some time. The F-94 used a two man crew so RIOs needed to be trained. After ground schooling, radar operators were trained in Bangor by having them fly radar intercepts from scopes mounted in the B-25. Five scopes were set up and the B-25 was flown night and day against live targets to help prepare the radar officers for their new roles. Many hours of flight training were needed to build a good all weather interceptor unit. Once pilots, RIOs and the aircraft left the ground, things needed to be done correctly, both in the air and on the ground. Photos of air crews working on F-94s, F-94s in flight and base operations from that time period adorn the walls of building 505. While the F-94 was not a "pretty" aircraft, it did serve its designated purpose while the newer aircraft were being produced. Flying it was not as much fun as the old single seat fighters but two seat all weather aircraft were the wave of the future.

In the corner of one display case is a flight crew helmet with the name F. Lovejoy on it. On May 11, 1955, Floyd Lovejoy of Burnham, Maine was a UMO student and a 2nd Lt. flying as an RIO in an F-94 piloted by 2nd Lt. Earl Pardy of Winterport, Maine. They were trying to make it back to Dow when their aircraft crashed and burned near a creek on the Odlin Road in Hampden. Both men were hurt, but made it out of the aircraft as flames started setting off the 2.75 FF rockets which were mounted around the nose of the aircraft. The fire burned for some time and explosions kept everyone away until the early morning. The ANG would lose other F-94s, but then flying fighters is a risky business, even in peace time. *To be continued.*

Welcome, New Members!

- | | | |
|------|---|------------------|
| 204. | David L. Whitemore
264 Wiswell Road
Brewer, ME 04412-5314 | 207-989-2928 |
| 205. | John Patrizi (<i>B-17 Desert Rat Restoration</i>)
321 Iowa Court
Frankfort, IL 60423 | 708-388-5510 x20 |
| 206. | Jim McCurdy (<i>Aviation, Autos, Motorcycles</i>)
152 DeWitt Avenue
Bangor ME 04401 | 207-990-4490 |
| 207. | Craig Fuller (<i>Aviation Archaeology</i>)
566 March Avenue
Healdsburg, CA 95448 | 707-431-2242 |
| 208. | Terence Spencer
11 Mt. Desert Drive
Bangor, ME 04401 | 207-947-1372 |
| 209. | Brian F. Swartz (<i>Military Aviation</i>)
183 Main Rd. North
Hampden, ME 04444 | 207-862-4204 |
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More from the MAHS Scrapbook . . .



President Jim Chicetto helps set up the MAHS display in Hangar 5 at BNAS during the Great State of Maine Air Show on July 18-19. We met lots of new people and many members stopped by to visit. (Leo Boyle Photo)

On June 20th, Sue Chicetto was lucky enough to be at the Augusta Airport and photograph these two who had just landed there . . .



. . . They're probably on their way to Ardito's for breakfast!

One That Got Away . . .

Probably the last picture of the old tower moments before it was lowered to the ground and gone forever. Member Maurice Cloutier of Utah took this picture of the Portland General Aviation Terminal in 1990. If you know of any aviation-related structures slated for demolition, let the Society know right away.



MAHS News and Notes from All Over — Mark Your Calendars!

Prominent Visitors

Arriving in Maine on Friday, August 15, will be Bill Nungesser of Riverhead, New York, grand nephew of Charles Nungesser, pilot of the ill-fated and elusive "White Bird."

With him will be his special guest, Laura Leveziel of St. Mandé, France. Ms. Leveziel is town archivist and attaché to the mayor of St. Mandé, which is the birthplace of Charles Nungesser. She is the curator of all the material on Charles and the "White Bird" and acts as Bill's liaison in France.

We will be reviewing and bringing them up to date on our previous searches. We expect to visit one or more of the sites on Saturday and Sunday, August 16 and 17. We will meet as before in the parking lot behind McDonald's in Ellsworth at 9 a.m. on Saturday, the 16th.

As before, come prepared for hiking in the woods: fly dope, sunscreen, appropriate clothing and shoes and, of course, compasses, GPS's and magnetic detectors. We will probably have a press briefing for the media *after* leaving the site or on Sunday. It is possible we will visit other sites — more details will be available Saturday morning or at the August 9th meeting at the Portland International Jetport.

BNAS Air Show

Due to all the late-breaking events, next month's newsletter will have more details on the Brunswick Naval Air Station show, things that are going on and the museum site in Bangor. For now, suffice it to say that things are progressing well and the Airport Manager is pursuing the idea with the city's planning, engineering and public works departments.

Another Hike Planned

On Labor Day weekend (August 30, 31 and Sept. 1), a hike is planned to the Fort Mountain C-54 crash site in Baxter State Park. This is a moderately difficult hike. Call Brian Wood at 207-985-6479 to let him know you're coming and for more info on when and where to meet, what to bring, etc. He has a cabin reserved.

August Meeting

The August meeting of the MAHS will be held on Saturday, August 9th in the Conference Room at the Portland International Jetport in Portland. See you there!

Another Famous Face in Maine



This handsome gentleman standing beside his Piper Pacer 135 at Old Town, Maine on June 13, 1952 is none other than famous aviator Max Conrad on one of his jaunts across the Atlantic, this one to Scandinavia.

Photo submitted by another handsome gentleman member who used to fly out of Old Town at that time.

... Don't Forget These Important Dates ...

The next MAHS Meeting is on Saturday, August 9th in the Conference Room at the Portland International Jetport ... and the next "White Bird" search with special guests Bill Nungesser and Laura Leveziel on August 16 and 17. Be There!

Upcoming MAHS Meetings and Calendar of Events

- July 31-August 6 All Day Oshkosh EAA Air Show, Oshkosh, Wisconsin.
- August 8-10 All Day EAA Chapter 87, Fly-in, Drive-in, Camp-out, Bowdoinham, Maine (207) 729-8169
- August 9 9 a.m. MAHS Meeting, Conference Room, Portland International Jetport.
- August 9-10 10 a.m. Aerobatic Air Show, Owls Head Transportation Museum
- August 16-17 9 a.m. "White Bird" Search, Meet at 9 a.m. behind McDonald's, Ellsworth, Maine.
- August 30-31-Sept. 1 Fort Mountain C-54 Crash Site Hike. Call Brian Wood (207-985-6479) for more info.
- August 31 10 a.m. WWI Air Show, Owls Head Transportation Museum
- September 5-7 All Day International Seaplane Fly-In, Greenville, Maine*
- September 13 9 a.m. MAHS Meeting, TBA
- September 20-21 10 a.m. Antique Aeroplane Show, Owls Head Transportation Museum
- October 5 10 a.m. Antique Aeroplane Show, Owls Head Transportation Museum
- October 11 9 a.m. MAHS Meeting, TBA
- October 26 10 a.m. Great Fall Auction, Owls Head Transportation Museum. Free admission.
- November 8 9 a.m. MAHS Meeting, TBA
- December 13 9 a.m. MAHS Meeting, TBA

The meeting sites can be flexible. We are looking for suggestions on locations for many of these meetings. The same goes for the weekend hikes — let us know. We are also looking for guest speakers, slide shows, etc. Call Leo at 207-854-9972 or Jim at 207-269-3281 if you have any ideas or can be of help. In addition, we will be scheduling hikes to aircraft wrecks from spring until fall. A hike is planned to the Fort Mountain C-54 crash site in the near future. Contact John Miller, Vintage Wings, 207-234-27877 for information. Stay tuned for further details — it's going to be an exciting year!

* We will have booths at these events. Volunteers needed.

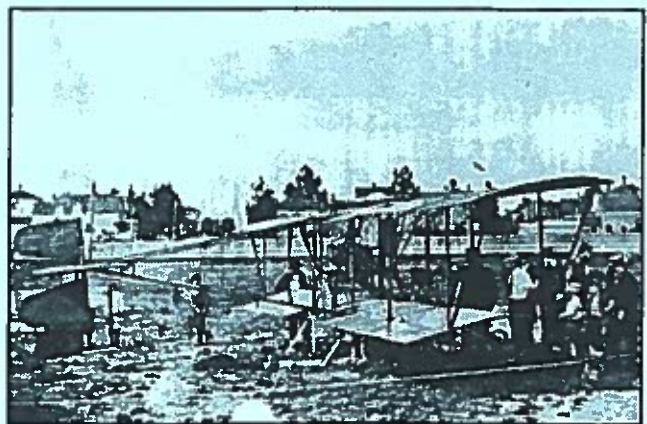
Mystery Photo for August . . .

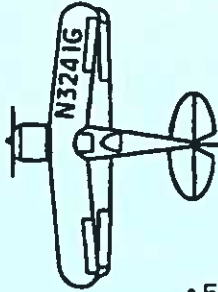


This photo, also submitted by Bill Townsend of Bar Harbor, comes from the Calais area. This famous plane is just across the border after a long flight. Supply type of aircraft, crew and date of the flight to win your MAHS T-shirt and patch.

. . . July Mystery Not Solved

No one came up with an answer for this Curtiss-type biplane in the Calais area. Open for another month for more info, especially plane and pilot and date, for we don't know. Still time to win that MAHS T-shirt and patch!





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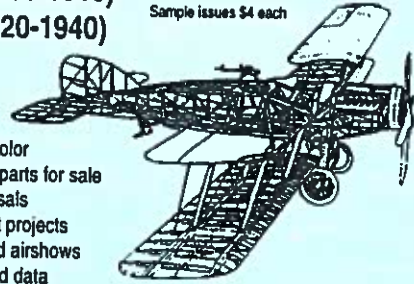
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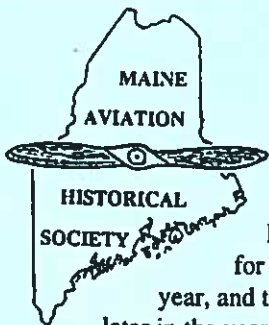
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& Sunday, August 17
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