



DIRIGO FLYER

Vol. VI, No. 1 January 1998

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

News and Updates for 1998

- The January meeting will be held at the American Legion Hall in Bangor on Saturday, the 17th at 9 a.m. This will be an important meeting so please make an effort to attend — we need your input.
- The holidays have played havoc with our schedules, so please bear with us and the ice storms have prevented us from catching up.
- The by-laws have been changed to increase the Board of Directors to 15 members in order to better handle the increased responsibilities that the Museum is bringing us.
- Renewal dues for 1998 membership have been coming in at a good pace. If you have not sent in your 1998 dues, please do so — this may be the last *Dirigo Flyer* you will receive.

- Pledges have pleased us and we have established a money-market, which now has about three-quarters of our goal in it. We hope to be able to reach the goal by the January meeting in order to start the feasibility study on its way.
- We have received exhibit A of the proposed lease, which is only a rough sketch of the area. Since the site will probably not be surveyed until spring and the new road still needs to be built, we will just continue our negotiations with the Bangor Airport Authority.
- It is with great regret that we announce that for personal reasons, our President, Jim Chichetto, will not seek re-election. Nominations for President and the other offices and Board will be taken through the January meeting and ballots will be distributed with the February *Dirigo Flyer*.

President's End-of-Term Wrap-Up

By Jim Chichetto

During the last two years it has been my privilege to be the President of the MAHS. I have enjoyed the challenges this office has provided me and learned many interesting things. Following along the path Leo Boyle had blazed, we have completed the steps we needed to become a Non-Profit 501(c)3 Corporation. We have also invested about a year in exploring the process whereby we might build a museum in the near future.

The people working on the Museum Committee have worked very hard to bring the group the facts which you all have read and heard in the last few months. MAHS is at the critical point in that process. We have a lease at hand for an excellent site on five acres of land. We have the artist's drawings which show us what this building will look like when it's built. We have set the organizational structure in place to meet the needs of this museum, should this project go forward. The mission statement has been brought forth showing our goals. In the next few weeks our actions will decide the level of commitment to this vast project. Make no mistake about this project, if we move forward we all will have to deal with the many issues which will arise. Fund-raising, building construction, gathering and training a staff, displays designed and built before we ever open the doors. We know what needs to be done, what we don't know is the thoughts of the membership on this project, once the scope of it is understood. This will not be easy, everyone will have to be "hands-on" to make it work.

During these last two years the MAHS has been working on two other projects. The on-going "White Bird" search and

working with the State on Aircraft Artifact Recovery. The "White Bird" search has netted us good press in the last three years, both in the US and in Europe. We have made some good progress on the site we have been checking on. We hope to use technical help to further chase down this lead.

This last spring, I wrote to the State of Maine about their duties and responsibilities as they concern the aircraft which are on State owned or controlled property. In May Leo Boyle and I met with J.R. Phillips, Director of the State Museum, Ed Churchill, Chief Curator and other staff members about the mission of the State in this area. We then met with the Dr. Bob Bradley, the Assistant Director of the Maine Historic Preservation Commission. We discussed the role they would play in any aircraft recovery effort. On Oct. 31, 1997, Leo and I held another joint meeting with the State and a group of people who have applied to locate, ID and raise historic aircraft. On behalf of the State, we have been working to set up the guidelines for permits, outlined the steps which must be done before this project can go forward. As of Oct. 31st, we have a working relationship with both groups to move forward with this project. We expect to have a side scan survey, video and still photographs of the aircraft involved before this spring. Once this information is collected, a permit for the recovery of these aircraft will be written. MAHS will be working closely with the State during this process.

I hope you will all give the incoming officers the same level of support you have all given me in the last two years. Thanks for your help and keep up the good work.

The Last Flight of the Swamp Rat

By Verne Bovic via Clay Carkin

Before I ever saw the Swamp Rat I heard about it. Playing fan-tan or in the crowd checking the duty roster or after briefing, one pilot would say to another, "We're flying the Swamp Rat, damn it!" or "Something always goes wrong with that plane. I swear it's spooked." The only good thing anyone said for it was that it always made it back to base in spite of the myriad of glitches that always went with a mission in 008, the Swamp Rat's tail number. The plane didn't have a good reputation. An old B-26 B or C that had been with the group a long time, it had suffered through many missions. Maybe too many. Everyone thought it should have been honorably retired long before the 391st flew from its base in England to its new base in Roye-Ami, France.

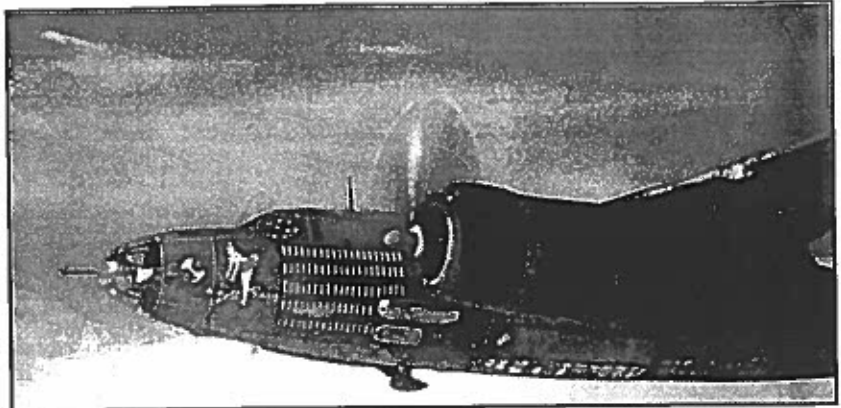
The first time I ever saw it was at our base at Roye-Ami. Parked in a revetment distant from the other planes, as if in quarantine, it seemed to me to have spectral qualities. Dented, dirty, weather worn and flak patched, its black paint scraped and faded, it sat forlornly in the damp, low ceilinged French weather of October and November 1944. Below the pilot's window in a large yellow scrawl was its name, Swamp Rat. I can still see it sitting there, solitary, dark and a little foreboding.

At this time I was the co-pilot of an instructor crew; that is, everyone on the crew — except the co-pilot — had been an instructor in his specialty until the summer of 1944 when the crew had been formed at Barksdale Field. I hadn't been an instructor in anything, having come to Barksdale directly from Advanced Flying School in Frederick, Oklahoma, where I had flown the not so exciting or exacting AT-17 or "bamboo bomber." Because he had been an instructor at Barksdale for the past year or so, the first pilot of our crew, Lt. Clayton Abraham, simply continued instructing. Whenever he could, he put me in the left seat and showed me how to fly the B-26 because he said he didn't want me along just for the ride. I found the B-26 both exciting and exacting.

Our base in England had been very large, comfortable, well-run and well-manicured. The runways were long, wide and undamaged. The only usable runway at Roye-Ami wasn't as long as those in England; it and the revetments where the planes were parked were next to and sometimes part of the war-battered village. Nevertheless, it was a nice place to come home to.

Soon after we arrived there, when I checked the duty roster the night before one of our missions, I saw that we were assigned the Swamp Rat. Oh well, I thought, maybe the left engine won't start. It did.

After briefing — our target was a tank repair depot, "not much flak, probably no fighters. It should not be too difficult" — as we sat around the worn dining room table in the front room of the large farm house we were quartered in, playing fan-tan, someone said, "I see you've got 008. Good luck. Maybe a wheel will fall off before you taxi out." It didn't.



A Martin B-26, a relative of the Swamp Rat.

Because we were the number six ship in the low flight, we were the last to join the long line of B-26's waddling towards the runway with their heavy loads of bombs, gasoline, fifty caliber machine guns and their ammunition and the six human beings who hoped their plane would get all this stuff off the ground and into the air.

Every seventeen seconds a plane would begin its takeoff run. By the time we began rolling, the thirty-sixth ship in a thirty-six formation, the air along and around the runway was pretty churned up. We would do a lot of bouncing as we got airborne and tried to fit ourselves into the left turning, climbing flight we were part of, being aware of the still too close speed-blurred earth off the left wing and the increasing nearness of the number four ship whose wing we were to fly slightly behind and above, finally leveling, climbing, settling down for the two hour ride to the target.

On this morning, 008 took a long time getting itself unglued from the runway. At the end of the runway, Abe motioned to me to pull the wheels up. The plane flew level momentarily then began a slow climb towards the low flight. When Abe had the plane where he wanted it, he motioned to me to take over. From our position, I could see the number four ship better than he could. While we were still in the climbing left turn, the right engine backfired once, then twice; but each time it recovered strongly, so that except for the expletive I murmured, Abe and I just looked at each and shrugged.

The trip to the target went without incident. We had some trouble keeping up with the flight and we had to run the engines pretty hard to keep ourselves tucked into the formation; but everything checked out all right so we put it down to the plane's age and reputation and let it go at that.

The briefing officer was right; there were no fighters and not much flak, just enough to let us know the Germans were down there firing at us. And since they had had five flights before us to practice on, the light flak got pretty accurate by the time we hit the IP and began our bomb run, but we weren't aware of taking any hits. Flying the bomb run was a tense and

"Swamp Rat," continued on page 4

"Swamp Rat," *continued from page 2*

sweaty business; if you were flying the plane you concentrated on keeping your plane tucked in the formation; everybody else just waited for the bombs to fall and the exhilarating diving left turn out of there. In spite of our sense of relief, not long after we had picked up our heading back to Roye-Ami and a free shot of bourbon, the left engine began to backfire, sputter and lose power. At a low power setting it was at least pulling its own weight so Abe didn't shut it down and feather the prop. The right engine, already overheated from the trip to the target, couldn't be run at a high power setting very long; so we slowed down, began to lose altitude and watched the group pull away from us. It was a lonely feeling.

I let the gunners know the problem and told them to keep their eyes open for fighters.

"Don't worry your little head," the tail gunner said.

"It makes the cheese more binding, doesn't it, lieutenant?" the top turret gunner, the crew chief, said.

"Sure does, sergeant. Watch that left engine "
"Gotcha."

We were slow and sinking. We were at seven thousand feet, but we were just passing through on our way to six.

"Anything I can do?" I asked Abe.

"Watch the cylinder head temps and the oil pressure. And smile."

Then, "Listen, if this thing won't hold altitude at thirty-five hundred, we'll have to bail out."

008 continued its slow descent. Both engines began misfiring. It was impossible to synchronize the props and the plane began a low grade arrhythmic trembling that varied as the left engine died, sputtered then caught again. Well, I thought, we're over France now so if we have to jump...

"Hey, there's a black B26 coming up behind us," the tailgunner said.

"Keep your eye on him."

"Don't worry..."

It could be a pathfinder. They were all painted black and they often latched on to friendly flights going back to France, since they had no group of their own. It could also be a German B-26. We had been told at briefing that the Germans, using captured B-26s, had been infiltrating home bound B-26 groups and shooting down whatever they could. A crippled loner was fair game.

"He's getting too damned close."

"Point your guns at the pilot."

"He didn't like that much. He's gone."

"Must have been a pathfinder,"

"Tough."

By the time we were well into France, we had vibrated our way down the thirty-five hundred feet. 008 gave no indication she was going to stop there.

"Call the crew. Tell them to get ready to bail out. When they get in the radio compartment we'll open the bomb bays. They can go out there."

One after another, the crew appeared in the radio compartment and stood behind us watching the engine instruments jump around.

"Where's the tailgunner? Abe asked. No one knew. I tried to get him on the intercom. No answer. We waited. Finally he appeared, looking as they say in Maine "some upset." He stood in the radio compartment with his parachute in great white folds in his arms. "I caught the D ring on the gun handle and popped the chute." It was very quiet in that noisy still descending airplane. The gunner said he'd jump out and take his chances... Like hell. We'd been together too long for that. The bombardier and I began to argue about which one of us was going to give the gunner his chute. It was an argument going nowhere when Abe said, "There's a fighter base off our left wing. We'll go in there. I think we can make it. I want you on the controls all the time. When we hit, keep the nosewheel up or we'll never make that runway."

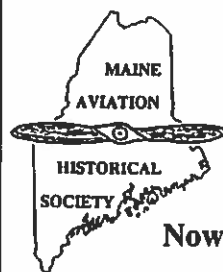
We were losing power fast. With both engines about to quit completely, the Swamp Rat was earthbound in a hurry. The glide angle of the B-26 was notoriously acute.

The crew took their crash positions in the radio compartment and we began a shallow left turn into the bad engine, something we'd been warned against endlessly in advanced school and with some violence at Barksdale. As we turned on approach, over the nose of the plane, I saw a long space of rough green field racing toward us. At the last moment, I put the wheels down and almost simultaneously we hit the ground hard and rolling.

"Keep the nose wheel up!" Abe yelled. I was doing my best. With one foot on the pedestal and the other braced against a fuselage former, I pulled that yoke with all the force my 147 pounds of brute strength could muster. We bounced and banged and lunged across that field until we rolled to a stop right in front of a flight of P-47s bomb-loaded and ready to take off. They had to wait — not too happily, I'm sure — while we managed to get 008 off the runway into the grass so they could take off and go to war.

The last time I saw her, 008 was sitting in the grass, big, battle scarred, war weary, oil dripping from her engine, a monument to things almost gone wrong.

When we got back to our squadron at Roye-Ami, we were congratulated, not for having gotten back safely, but for having left the Swamp Rat where no one would have to fly her anymore.



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Happy New Year!

More Great Photos from the MAHS Collection



Vultee BT-13 "Vibrator" N56360 at the Fryeburg, Maine Airport, owned by member Fred Walker. (Norm Houle Photo)



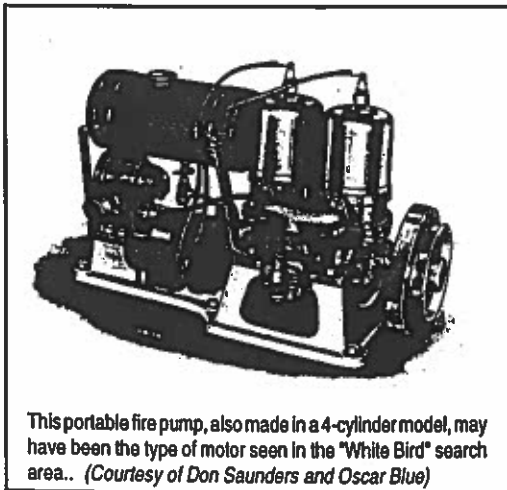
A line-up of Boeing P-26A "Peashooter" pursuit planes at Hickham Field, Hawaii in 1941. (Larry Closson Photo)



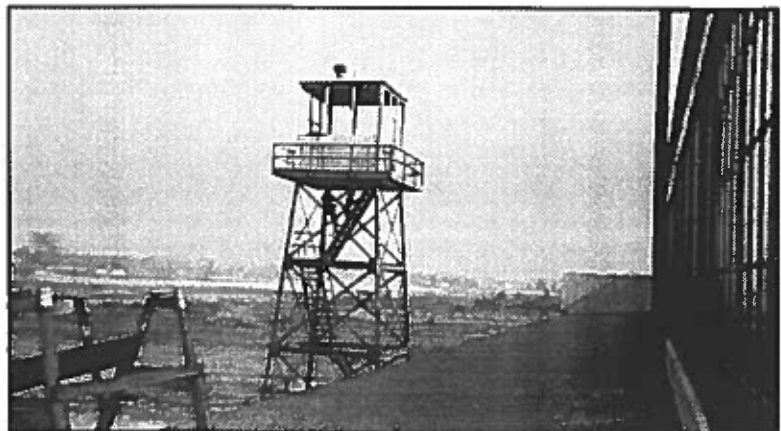
North American BT-9 Basic Trainer at Godfrey Field, Bangor in 1939, with a Boeing Y1B-17 beside it. (Photo via John Miller)



Curtiss Fledgling of Curtiss-Wright Flying Service at Portland Airport in Scarborough about 1930. (Photo via Rodney Laughton)



This portable fire pump, also made in a 4-cylinder model, may have been the type of motor seen in the "White Bird" search area.. (Courtesy of Don Saunders and Oscar Blue)



The new control tower at Dow Field, Bangor in 1940. Photo taken from the top of hangar #1 looking NW. (Photo via John Miller)

The MAHS Collection, continued



Boston & Maine Airways Stinson SM-6000 at Stroudwater Field in Portland on December 17, 1934. (Photo via Norm Houle)



Members Sue Chichetto, Roland Maheu and Ed Armstrong in front of one of Maurice Roundy's Starliners at the November meeting in Auburn. (Sue Chichetto Photo)

Upcoming MAHS Meetings and Calendar of Events

January 17 9 a.m. MAHS Meeting, American Legion Hall, Bangor, ME.

Meeting sites can be flexible. We are looking for suggestions on locations, guest speakers, slide shows, etc. Call Leo Boyle at 207-854-9972 if you have any ideas or can be of help.

Welcome, New Members

230. Daniel See (WWII A/C, 83 AF)
HC 78, Box 84
Bucksport, ME 04416 207-469-0838

231. C. Peter Blouin
57 Green Street 207-622-3133
Augusta, ME 04330 207-622-5566 (camp)
232 Via Napoli
Naples, FL 33999 941-649-0408

232. Harvey Kertzman
c/o Kertzman's
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Quincy, MA 02169 617-479-8118

233. A.A. "Fred" Lane
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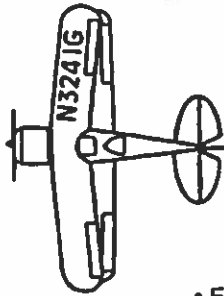


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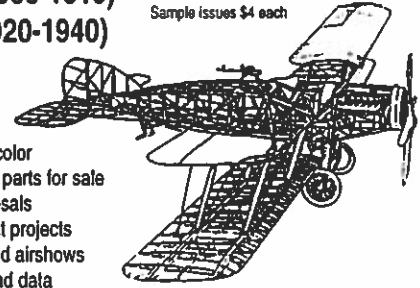
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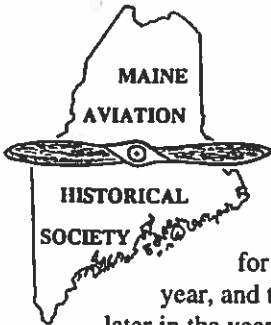
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| * (2 annual \$250 payments) | | |

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101 Monroe Avenue
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COME JOIN US!
Saturday, January 17, 1998
9 a.m.
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