

DIRIGO FLYER

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The Houlton Connection: Helldivers Across the Border

By Charles Francis

One of the strangest caravans ever seen in the Maine woods wound its way along the narrow, two lane road linking Houlton, Maine and Woodstock, New Brunswick on June 10, 1940. The caravan or convoy was made up of camouflaged Curtiss SBC-4s Helldivers bearing the markings of the French Tricolor. The planes were being towed along the fir-lined road by cars,



trucks and tractors driven by Houlton area residents like farmer Arnold Peabody, who had brought his tractor. The planes were kept on the narrow road by uniformed French naval officers and sailors, who made sure wings were kept clear of telephone poles and trees. Scattered among the French naval personnel were men wearing the uniform of the United States Navy, all identifying insignia carefully obscured. How was it that this strange procession came to be snaking its way through the forest stretching between Houlton, Maine and Woodstock, New Brunswick?

The answer is threefold in nature. In part, it relates to France's desperate need for aircraft, especially dive bombers, to offset Germany's far superior air force. It also relates to the Neutrality Act passed by the United States Congress at the insistence of isolationists who wanted to keep America out of another European war. But, mostly, it relates to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's desire to aid the beleaguered nations of western Europe who were now just beginning to feel the effects of the Nazi Blitzkrieg, which had rolled across most of Poland in just over a thousand hours.

The French air ministry had seen the writing on the wall as early as 1937. At an international air meet in Switzerland in the summer of that year, the Dewotine 510, France's best fighter plane, had been totally outclassed by the German Dornier 17m and Bf 109B. Realizing that the French aircraft industry was incapable of retooling in time to produce military aircraft competitive with that of the Luftwaffe, Pierre Cot, the French

Amold Peabody tows an ex-U.S. Navy Curtiss SBC-4s Helldiver across the border at Houlton, Maine with his tractor on June 10, 1940.
(Norm Houle Collection)

air minister, sent a delegation to Franklin D. Roosevelt to plead for modern military aircraft. Heading the delegation was Baron Amaury de la Grange, an old, close friend of Roosevelt.

The Baron's pleas did not fall on deaf ears. President Roosevelt authorized, by executive order, the sale of 1000 new planes to France. Roosevelt's only request of de la Grange was that the Baron keep the matter strictly confidential in order that the isolationists, who wanted the United States to stay out of the war and had pushed for the Neutrality Act, not be alerted. Unfortunately, for France, de la Grange found that American aircraft manufacturers were just beginning to gear up for military production and that United States Navy and Army Air Corps backorders had first priority. Slowly, however, some new American fighter planes made their way to France. In fact, the first two air battles between France and Germany were won by American made Curtiss 75s fighters. However, the French air ministry now belatedly realized it needed dive bombers to offset the now greatly feared German Stukas that had so decimated and demoralized the Polish infantry. And herein lies the story of the Curtiss Helldivers that were towed through the forest from Maine to New Brunswick.

By 1939 the French aircraft industry was producing top flight fighter planes. However, as the air ministry had foreseen no need for dive bombers, the call for help again went out to Franklin Roosevelt. On Roosevelt's orders, the Navy designated fifty Curtiss SBC-4s Helldivers as surplus and turned them over to the Army Air Corps. The fifty planes were stationed on naval reserve aviation bases scattered across the country. In April of 1940, naval reserve officers were called up

"Helldivers," continued on page 4

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Monthly meetings
are held at 9 a.m.
on the second Saturday
of each month
at various locations.
See schedule for details.

A Message from Your President . . .

First I would like to thank Jim for doing such a great job — it will be hard to follow him. I hope you all will give him your thanks and I hope to do as good a job as he did.

About me: I started with MAHS seven years ago and have seen the growth that has begun in the group. I came to Maine from Newport, Rhode Island and have always had an interest in aircraft and their history. I stayed in Maine in the summers growing up and learned a lot about WWII days and aircraft from my grandfather who also had an interest. I continue to love hearing stories from people who flew planes from the past.

I have lived ten years in Maine, worked first at Sunday River, seven years ago started a pizza shop in Portland with my father. I met Leo, got involved with the group and have been working hard ever since. I have met many interesting people through these years who have helped the group and been involved in Maine aviation history.

Our goal for 1999 is to move forward on the museum, making a home for MAHS to save our history in and to show it off to people who visit us. It will take a lot of planning and hard work on everyone's part. As your President, I would like to hear your ideas, comments and anything you can do to help. I will work with the Directors to write a long-range plan — let us hear yours from you.

I hope to talk with each of you at some point in time in '99.

Scott Grant

MAHS News In Brief

• December Meeting •

The December meeting of the Maine Aviation Historical Society was held December 12th at the Portland International Jetport. Although only eleven members were present, a spirited discussion ensued. The future of MAHS was thoroughly aired. The lease of the building at Bangor International Airport, what to do with it, how to raise funds to run it, displays to be made, and acquisitions of aircraft headed the list. A Board of Directors meeting will be held early in January for appointments of committees, chairmen, development of a five-year plan, and fund-raising. The Board of Directors will also meet at 9 a.m. at the Maine Air National Guard facility in Bangor at 9 a.m. on January 9, 1999. Members are welcome to attend this meeting and hear the results of the earlier meeting. The general meeting will begin about 10 a.m. and we hope to have a good program. This is an important meeting to hear the plans for 1999 and make it a great year for MAHS. Please try to attend — see you there.

• 1999 Election •

The officers and directors as nominated on your 1999 ballot were all elected and are listed in the column to the left. Board of Directors terms expire on December 31 of the year listed next to their address on the list.

• Don't Forget! •

A red dot on your label means you won't hear all the exciting news about our museum, more great stories of Maine aviation history and people, more interesting pictures from Caribou and Scarborough and much, much more. Renew today and don't miss an issue!

We regret the passing of Donald M. Howland, 77, a lifelong pilot who served with the Flying Tigers in World War II who died recently at a Portland hospital.

Mr. Howland fell in love with flying when he was eight years old and got an airplane ride at a fair. He made his last flight a few weeks ago.

After graduation he went directly into the Army Air Corps, attaining the rank of first lieutenant. He served with the 14th Air Force under Gen. Clair Lee Chennault and with the Flying Tigers. He was a combat check pilot, training B-24 Liberator crews and flew B-24 bombers. He also belonged to the Ferry Command before being discharged. While in the Air Corps, he flew "Hump" missions over the Himalayas and was involved in a crash during one of his 50 bombing runs. Mr. Howland was a commercial pilot for more than 50 years, with over 25,000 hours of flight time, and was the last pilot for Atlantic Airways. He was a multi-engine instructor for more than 40 years. He also operated a seaplane flying service for 16 years in Naples, giving thousands of airplane rides.

The Search for the "White Bird" — The Mystery Continues

By Jim Chichetto

During this past eleven months since the "White Bird" article was published in the *Bangor Daily News* (12-13-97), interest has once again burned brightly in the fate of the two French airmen and the location of their aircraft. Numerous leads were sent in by readers and found their way to members of the MAHS. Some interesting new material was learned and the direction of our search was once again moving back eastward along the 240 degree flight path. As each bit of information was collected and checked out, plans were made to have a fall hike at the most promising site.

A flight by a P-3 flying a soil survey was done this summer and they overflowed two of our sites. We have yet to receive the data from this flight, but have hopes of seeing it before next spring. The U.S. Navy has offered to fly all of our crash site locations over the next few years as they map the state soils, but the estimated cost of \$30,000, while a bargain for the equipment and knowledge it would bring MAHS, is beyond our funding at this time. Perhaps in time we will be able to work at funding this project, but for now it is on the back burner.

Leading the way to the fall site were Jules Arel and Don Saunders. After reading, letters and phone calls, they traveled to Pembroke, Maine to interview and tape a Maine guide who had an interesting story about finding an engine stuck in the ground in the woods over 20 years ago. After speaking with him and listening to his description of the parts he saw, they were convinced he had seen the French aircraft's engine. They later showed him a photo of the engine and it matched up in detail to what he had seen. Together the three drove to the area in which the sighting had been, back 20 plus years ago. The interviews and the other data already collected gave MAHS the idea that this site should be checked out and a hike was set up for November 29, 1998.

Eleven men walked into the woods on a clear, crisp Sunday morning: the Maine guide, nine MAHS members and a guest. We searched the area in a wide loose manner to get a feel for the terrain. We found the blacked wood of an old forest fire on either side of the search area. This linked up with the 1927 report of a forest fire which started in the Round Lake area about the



"White Bird" Search, 11/29/98: (l to r) Jim R., Don Saunders, Bill Robertson, Bill Townsend, Jim Chichetto, Rob Rohr, Brian Raymond, Carl Sederquist, Brian Wood, Jules Arel. (Rob Rohr Photo)

time the aircraft went missing. It is uncommon to have forest fires that early in the Maine woods, but a photograph taken back then clearly shows smoke rising from the woods near the search area. The many sightings, heard reports and local legends all point to this area. It is within a few miles of Round Pond and to the best of our knowledge, no one has ever come up with any solid information about sighting or heard an aircraft in flight beyond this part of Downeast Maine.

After two sweeps in the primary search area it was agreed to try this again in the spring with more people and equipment. Further research by Don and Jules and our host will continue during the coming winter months. People with information need to be tracked down and questions asked. With luck, by next spring we will have even more details to zero in on our objective.

As with all our hikes, we had a good time and enjoyed the fine weather and interesting conversation. On one of these hikes we may find the "White Bird," but for now we are enjoying the quest, companionship and adventure in the woods of Maine.



Jules Arel is barely visible in the thick woods encountered on the November 29, 1998 "White Bird" search. (Rob Rohr Photo)



Member Don Saunders catches many of the searchers ready to set out on the "White Bird" quest. (Don Saunders Photo)

"*Helldivers*," continued from page 1

to fly the planes to the Curtiss plant in Buffalo, New York for refurbishing. From Buffalo the planes would be flown to Halifax, Nova Scotia, where they would be put on board the French aircraft carrier *Bearn* for passage to France. The Helldivers would never reach France, however. This incredible odyssey would end on the French island of Martinique in the Caribbean.

The Helldivers and pilots that flew into Buffalo in April came from all across the United States. They came from Oakland and Seattle on the west coast. They came from Kansas City, St. Louis, Minneapolis and Glenview, Illinois in the midwest. And they came from Brooklyn and Anacostia on the east coast.

At the Curtiss plant in Buffalo, the Helldivers were fitted with 7.7mm machine guns, new navigation instrumentation (most of which was to prove defective), bomb racks and new seats to accommodate the French backpack parachute. In addition, all United States Navy markings were removed and replaced with civil export registration letters and numerals. These ran from NX-C4 to NX-C54. The planes were painted with unique camouflage patterns consisting of random green stripes on a gray background. The French Tricolor was appended to rudders and wing tips. As a final step in the subterfuge of getting the Helldivers out of the country, all the naval reserve pilots were hired by Curtiss, at \$250 apiece, and they covered up all the naval identification markings on their uniforms.

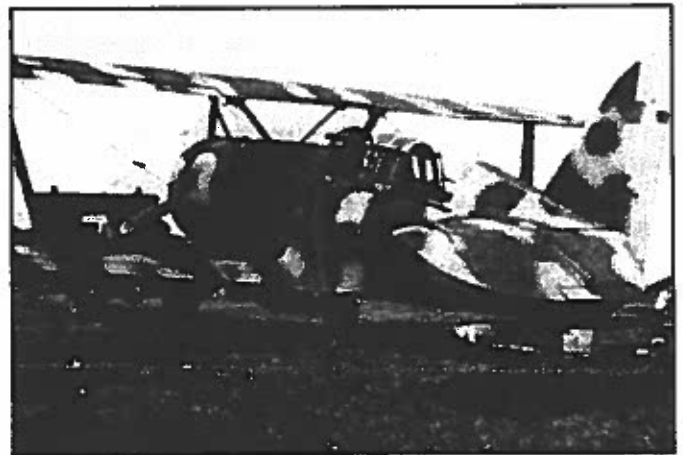
From Buffalo, the Helldivers were to proceed to Houlton with stopovers at Burlington, Vermont and Augusta, Maine. As not all the planes would be ready to take off at the same time, it was decided that as soon as any three were ready, they would take off and fly together. One group of three was led by Lieutenant W.E. Larnard, who had flown in from Glenview, Illinois. (In the course of the war to come, Larnard would rise to the rank of rear admiral.)

The flight of Lieutenant Larnard and his two companions, Lieutenants Wilson and Sommermeyer, to Burlington was uneventful. The fact that Larnard's plane was a part of the group would prove to be a stroke of luck, however, as it was the only one with functioning navigation instrumentation. The day of the flight from Burlington to Augusta was one of low, heavy cloud cover. This meant traversing the White Mountains would be exceedingly dangerous, especially for planes flying blind. Undaunted, the three set out, flying in a tight V with Larnard at point. Several hours later, the three landed in Augusta.

Another Helldiver pilot was not so lucky. This was Lieutenant Allan Lullman from St. Louis. Lieutenant Lullman's plane crashed and exploded, killing him as he tried to land at Mariaville, New York during a snow storm.

As hostilities in Europe worsened, the United States built up its military. One aspect of this buildup was the improvement of airports. And one airport that saw expansion was Houlton Airport, now Houlton International Airport. In fact, early in 1940, Houlton Airport had been awarded \$30,000 for construction of living quarters for students attending the National Youth Administration Training Center there. The center trained young

men to work in aircraft plants. Houlton, then, was prepared to receive the forty-nine Helldivers. In addition most Houlton residents were in sympathy with the war effort and opposed to the policies of the isolationists. Many people living in the area either had relatives or close friends in Canada, which was already a belligerent. One Houlton resident, Colonel Frank Hume, who had commanded the 103rd Regiment at the front during WWI, had written an open letter to President Roosevelt in 1936 criticizing his support of the isolationist policy of limiting immigration from Europe. Local papers like the *Pioneer Times* carried articles that were openly critical of what was considered to be the government's misguided policy of not letting the Helldivers take to the air from Houlton. It comes as no surprise then that there was no shortage of volunteers to help tow the Helldivers across the border to Woodstock.



Another Curtiss SBC-4e at Houlton about to be towed across the border to Woodstock, New Brunswick, Canada. (Norm Houle Collection)

The Helldiver convoy left Houlton the morning of June 10, 1940. By that time thousands of Houlton area residents had visited Houlton Airport to view the planes and wish the pilots well and *Bon Voyage*. Arriving in Woodstock around midday, the Helldivers took off for the Royal Canadian Air Force Base at Dartmouth, Nova Scotia from a farmer's muddy field. It was flying across the Bay of Fundy that the naval reserve pilots encountered their last problem. The contour maps the pilots had been given did not match what they saw below them, an especially vexing situation when flying visually. Then one pilot remembered that the tides in the Bay of Fundy fluctuate as much as fifty feet. All that was needed was to get over land and search for identifiable landmarks. Once over Nova Scotia everything was clear flying. By 18:00 all the Helldivers had landed and forty-four were on board the *Bearn* by midnight; there was no room for the remaining five as there were already 164 Curtiss fighters on board. The next morning the *Bearn* set sail with its escort the *Jeanne d'Arc* for France. Unfortunately, there is a sad postscript to this story of American planes that came from as far away as California to be used in the cause of French freedom.

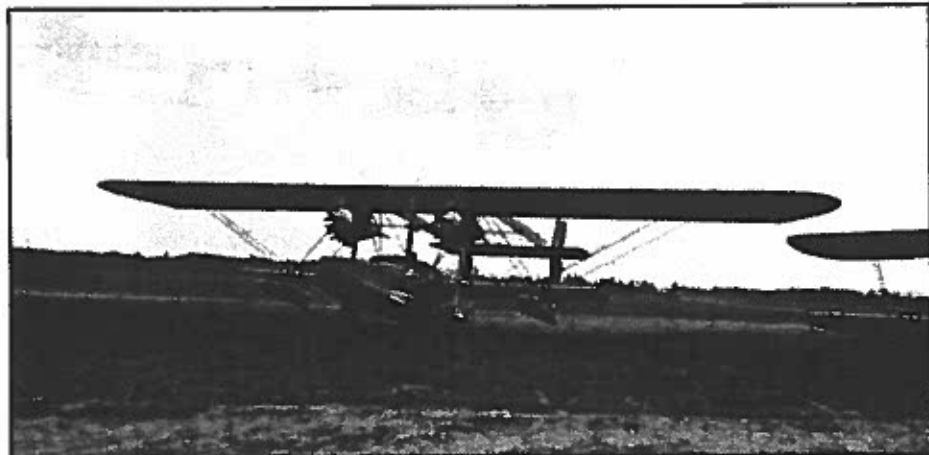
Even as the Helldivers were preparing to leave Houlton,

"*Helldivers*," continued on page 7

Scenes from Portland Airport in Scarborough, 1928

Photos via Rodney Laughton

A Sikorsky S-38 Amphibian, probably belonging to the Curtiss-Wright Flying Services at Scarborough for the air show on September 29, 1928.



People and planes populate the air show at the Portland Airport in Scarborough on September 30, 1928.



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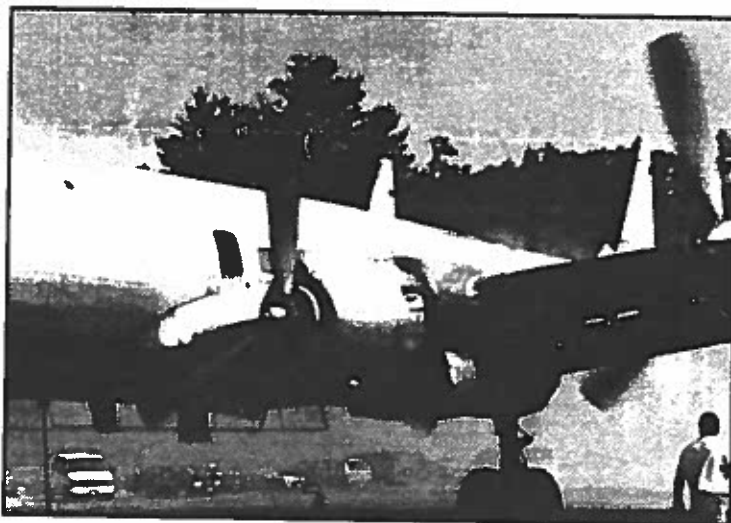
A new standard GD-24 with a 180 hp Hisso E engine at the Portland Airport in Scarborough on September 29, 1928. Only three were built of this model.

Photos from Caribou . . .



A busy day at the Caribou, Maine Airport in the mid-thirties. Travel-Air and Bird bi-planes, an Arrow Sport, a Taylorcraft and Cubs, amongst others, are on the flight line.
(Jerry Drake Photo via Norm Houle)

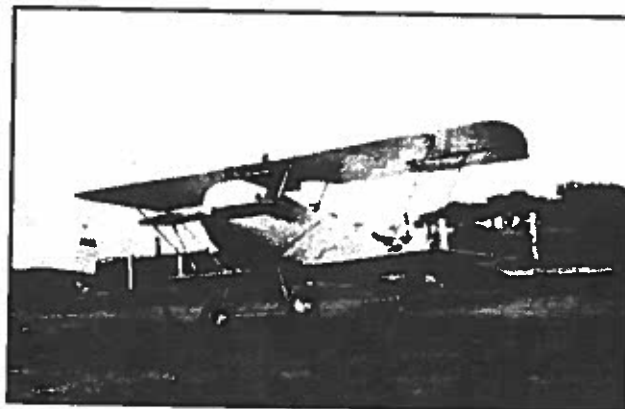
. . . to Auburn . . .



Member Maurice Roundy's Starliner 83H fired up at Auburn. Maurice has now had all eight engines running on his two Starliners here. He'll be working on his third one in Sanford, Florida this spring to bring it home.
(Lloyd Gates Photo)

. . . to this month's Mystery Plane

This photo was taken at the new Portland Airport in Scarborough on September 30, 1928. It may be a 1926 Aerial Mercury. Please let us know if you can identify it, and we will publish it in the next *Dirigo Flyer*.



(Photo via Rodney Laughton)

Upcoming MAHS Meetings and Calendar of Events

January 9, 1999 10 a.m. MAHS Meeting, Maine ANG Facility, Bangor International Airport.

February 13, 1999 10 a.m. MAHS Meeting, Lewiston-Auburn Airport.

March 13, 1999 10 a.m. MAHS Meeting, TBA.

July 3-4, 1999 All Day Great Lewiston-Auburn Air Show, Lewiston-Auburn Airport.

July 24-25, 1999 All Day Great State o' Maine Air Show, BNAS, Brunswick, Maine.

"Helldivers," continued from page 4

France was falling to the Nazis. Between May 26 and June 3, 350,000 British, French and Belgian troops were evacuated across the English Channel in the "Miracle of Dunkirk." On June 10, the day the convoy left Houlton, Italy invaded southern France. On June 14, Paris fell and on June 22, while the *Bearn* was still at sea, France capitulated. Therefore the *Bearn* headed to Martinique, the nearest French port. Here, after some squabbling between the island's governor, who supported the puppet Vichy government, Britain, which wanted the planes, and the United States, which was still neutral, the planes were unloaded. At one point, two young officers opened orders which said "Destroy the planes." They ran around chopping off assemblies and setting fires. By the time they were stopped over half the planes were useless. The rest simply sat rusting in the damp, tropical climate until they too were beyond salvage.

And so ended the odyssey of the Curtiss aircraft that captured the hearts and spirits of so many people in the United States and Canada and especially in the border town of Houlton, Maine.

The author wishes to thank Norman Houle of the Maine Aviation Historical Society for his contributions to this article.

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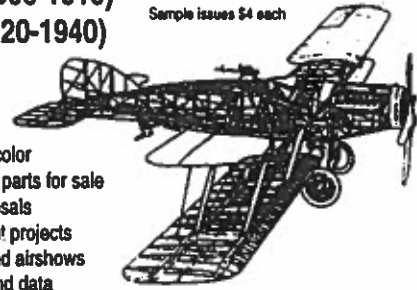


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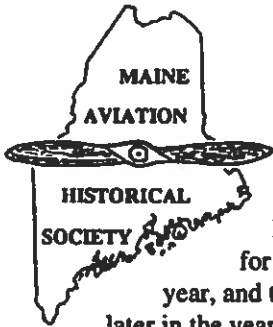
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Maine Aviation Historical Society
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January Meeting
Saturday, January 9, 1999
10 a.m.
~~Maine Air National Guard Facility~~
~~Bangor International Airport~~
~~Bangor, Maine~~

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