



DIRIGO FLYER

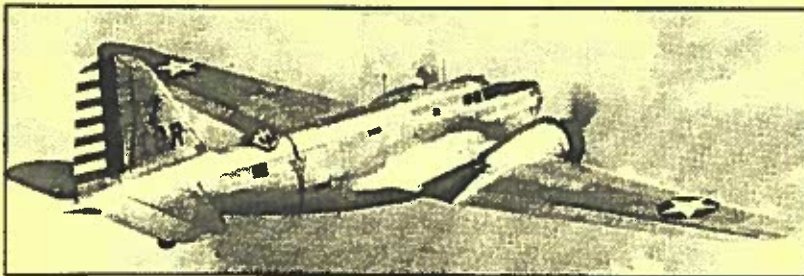
Vol. VIII, No. 6 June 2000

Newsletter of the Maine Aviation Historical Society
P.O. Box 2641, Bangor, Maine 04402 • 207-941-6757 • 1-877-280-MAHS (in state)
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Phantom Crashes Maine's Worst Aircraft Disasters — That Never Happened!

By Peter Noddin

If you read about many aircraft crashes or "missing" aircraft incidents, you will find that in many cases people report flares, parachutes, distress shots, and explosions that turn out to have nothing to do with the incident. This has nothing to do with peoples' truthfulness or their willingness to help authorities with the emergency. Anyone who investigates accidents for a living, as I have for most of my career, will tell you that eyewitness accounts are the least reliable of all evidence collected at the scene of a mishap. Under the stress of an unexpected event, each individual will see things just a little differently due to their expertise, experience, level of excitement, etc. Flares and crash noises are often common things noticed for the first time during the heightened awareness hearing about an aircraft mishap. Whenever several people discuss their observations, there is a natural tendency to "average" their statements so that they all sound more similar. This isn't bad or good — it's just human!



B-18A of the 18th Reconnaissance Squadron operating from Mitchel Field, New York, on August 8, 1940. (USAF photo)

An interesting twist on this is a reported crash of an aircraft that actually flew on unscathed. Maine has had several such incidents of interest.

World War II brought with it a serious case of "war nerves" in the U.S. The attack on Pearl Harbor and U-boat warfare off the Atlantic coast brought on an intense alertness for unusual activity. This awareness later proved justified when German

spies actually landed on the Maine coast and U-boats engaged in combat with Navy patrol craft near our harbors.

Just three weeks before Pearl Harbor, on Saturday, November 15, 1941, a B-18 "Bolo" bomber from the Bangor Air Corps Base missed Bangor in the fog. It was returning from bombing practice at Langley Field, Virginia. It ran out of fuel and crashed on a remote ridge next to the "Thousand Acre Bog" near Lee. The crash and expedition to recover the bodies of the four crewmen was front-page news on Monday morning. That's when residents of the North Amity area, just south of Houlton, began reporting a plane crash near the New Brunswick border the previous Thursday.

A local farmer, learning of a plane missing from Skowhegan, reported seeing a plane "turn over in the air" and the pilot parachute out. A girl on a nearby farm had seen a single engine silver aircraft with its engine "missing" come down in a roll and a "package" fall out of it. She also heard the aircraft crash in the nearby woods and later saw what might have been a red flare shoot up from the same area.

The plane from Skowhegan turned out to be safe on the ground and a two-day air and ground search of the area failed to reveal a crash. No other aircraft were reported missing in the area that day, and the search was called off. Low flying RCAF aircraft were common in the area by late 1941, so the incident could have been a pilot showing off his skills. Some local legends attribute this incident to some type of smuggling "drop"

operation that was noticed by the locals. It is very intriguing, however, to note that several people who likely knew very little about military aviation all gave such a vivid description of a pilot "going out over the side" !

On the morning of Thursday, July 24, 1942 a B-17 bomber flew over the Macomber corner area between Dexter and Dover Foxcroft at treetop level. This was a common sight by this point in the war. What sets this one off from the others is that at least twelve people were convinced that it crashed into a wooded

"Crashes," continued on page 3

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

See schedule for details.

MAINE AVIATION HISTORICAL SOCIETY

President's Report

May 13, 2000

The many committees tasked with work are each working to meet their assigned goals. All committees can use more help. It is time for involvement by the membership of MAHS to make this museum become a living thing. We have a good start, but can use more workers to share the load.

The air show is just around the corner and we have been working to bring vintage air craft and equipment to the show. We need members to help staff the displays and booths. We need you to sign up, show up and do the job for us. Let us know how you can help.

There will be a number of hikes during the summer. Check the web page for upcoming hikes and information. If you want to be contacted for a hike, add your name to the list.

We are moving forward, but there is still a ways to go before this building is a functioning museum we can all be proud of. The Air Show will be a good kick off for our fundraising drive and each of us needs to be able to talk up the positive aspects of the museum and MAHS.

The Civil Air Patrol Visits the Maine Air Museum



Civil Air Patrol members visit the Maine Air Museum, April 15, 2000. (Photo credit)



The history of the Civil Air Patrol fascinates today's members at the museum. (Photo credit)



CAP members inspect the museum's J-57 jet engine. (Photo credit)

"Crashes," continued from page 1

ridge a short distance from the highway. Most reported something strange about the sound of the engines and that the plane flew into a depression between two ridges and failed to come out the other side. Its engines were said to abruptly stop. One witness actually saw it fly into one of the ridges, but saw no fire or smoke.

Sheriff's Deputies and State Police responded to the telephone reports of the crash. Local men hiked into the woods to search the area. Dow Field rolled a "crash wagon" and detachment of men as well as an aircraft to search the area.

By 4 p.m. the search was called off. No sign of a crash could be found. No New England base was missing a bomber. At least one witness remained firm in his belief that the plane had crashed and would be found. While a *Bangor Daily News* reporter phoned in his story that evening, the witness repeatedly cut in on the rural party line to "correct" the assertion that it had only been a crash scare.

While not technically a "crash" scare, an incident occurred a few weeks later near the Washington County town of Beddington that illustrates how "war nerves" can deceive multiple witnesses about an object falling from the sky. Several people saw what they reported as two parachutes fall from the sky into a wooded area. Under one was a large container, and the second lowered a man to the ground. Police responded, the National Guard was called out and roadblocks were set up to prevent the man from reaching Bangor. A search of the wooded area eventually turned up a military weather balloon.

The final case, dubbed the "Phantom Plane" incident by the media, happened long after WW II on the afternoon of Thursday, October 19, 1961. A fisherman driving on Route 1 near Gouldsboro saw a large four-engine plane fly across the road at about 600 feet and disappear behind a ridge a mile or two away. He never saw it reappear and reported it as crashed. Over 50 reports eventually came in of an aircraft flying low about that time. They varied in description from a four-engine bomber to a twin-engine flying boat.

A ground search of the area and brief air search by a helicopter from Dow AFB failed to reveal any wreckage. Later that evening it was apparent that no airline or military unit was

missing an aircraft that could have been in the area. Two KC-97 tankers and at least two patrol aircraft from Brunswick Naval Air Station had been flying low in the general area that afternoon, but all were safe. The decision was made not to continue searching on Friday.

From detailed statements from witnesses taken by state troopers, one containing a partial tail number, it was determined that the plane had been a two engine patrol aircraft from Brunswick that had returned and landed safely.

In looking back at these incidents as history, it is important not to be judgmental or sarcastic about what people reported. My files also contain a few cases where a piece of information was not volunteered until later on due to fear of embarrassment or fear of getting involved. In these cases that vital clue might have saved a flyer, reduced his stay in the woods, or shortened a family's uncertainty about the fate of a loved one. As a public safety official, I always tell people to call at the point that they think they have an emergency. We need time to get there and don't mind the "easy calls" where everyone's fine and we just go home. I'm sure that the majority of air search and rescue crewmen that have served over the decades have had similar feelings.

The B-18 crash near Lee was initially reported the following morning by three hunters who walked a considerable distance to town to call the Bangor Air Base. After telling about the low flying airplane, the sound of the crash and the visible fire on the ground several miles from their camp, the officer on the other end told them that no such aircraft was missing. It had erroneously been reported as having landed safely in Augusta. Frustrated, they returned to camp to be joined that evening by Army officers very much interested in what they had seen and heard! Without the bold determination of these woodsmen to tell their story, the plane and crew could have remained missing for decades.

The final analysis of these incidents is that a dozen or perhaps as many as 20 aircrew feared dead, landed safely and continued to serve their country. They were fortunate not to be victims of one of Maine's numerous military air tragedies, just victims of one of Maine's phantom crashes!

FUN VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

We need volunteers to work on the Maine Air Museum Building 98 at Bangor cleaning up, painting and repairing the display building and aircraft restoration.

We also need project leaders for each of the aircraft we are restoring. Contact Al Cormier at either MAHS telephone number listed on the masthead or Jim Chichetto at 207-269-3281 evenings. Call today!



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From Biplanes to Bombers

By Jules J. Arel

The first recorded instance of an airplane landing in the shiretown of Houlton occurred on a warm, sultry July afternoon in 1914 when Prof. F.J. Terrill, on a flight from Worcester, Mass. to Nova Scotia, needing fuel and feeling hungry, circled over a large open field next to a farmhouse on the outskirts of town. After making several low passes he landed and taxied up to the farmhouse. Within half an hour, a crowd of people, including small children, barking dogs and clucking chickens, were milling around his small biplane.

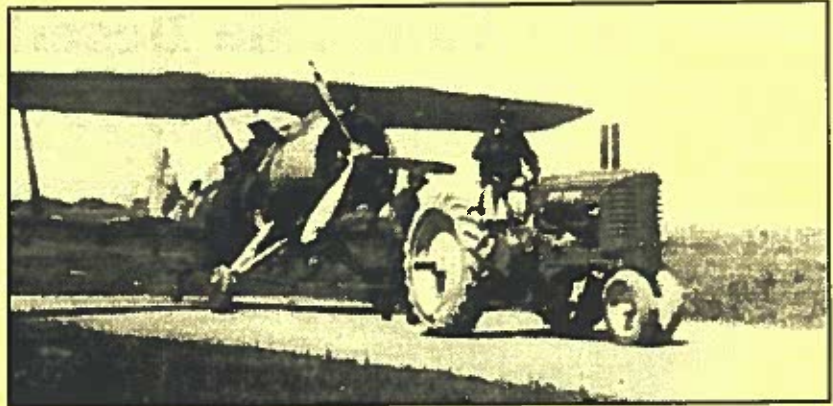
Following Prof. Terrill's departure that afternoon, things returned to normal— almost. A few townspeople began thinking of what the airplane might do for the economy of their remote Maine town. The visit caused a number of young boys to begin dreaming of someday being able to fly in such a fantastic machine. Some of those same boys eventually found themselves flying in the "war to end all wars." After World War I and throughout the '20s and '30s, many of these fliers became enamored with aviation and took to barnstorming around the country. Their sole ambition was to earn enough money to keep flying; any surplus was spent on food.

One of the original barnstormers in northern Maine was James "Jimmy" Colton. Jimmy was an original. Hard living and hard drinking, he arrived in Houlton in 1930. He gained immediate attention by wrecking his beautiful WACO F-2 on arrival. He became the idol of many a farmboy who yearned to learn to fly. In order to keep himself supplied with food, gas and liquor (not necessarily in that order), Jimmy worked as a flight instructor during the week and barnstormed on weekends.

One of his first students was a tall, slim lad from Cary, Maine, by the name of Hillus Cunliffe. Hillus was only a teenager when Lindbergh completed his historic flight across the Atlantic and became the young man's everlasting hero. He took to hanging around the field on Garrison Hill, located on the east edge of town.

Jimmy and several other fliers had prevailed on the Houlton town fathers to grade and roll a usable turf strip. There were no hangars, and gas was brought up the hill in 55-gallon drums. After just four hours and 20 minutes of dual instruction, paid for mostly by doing odd jobs around the airstrip, Hillus soloed in Jimmy's WACO-10. The WACO-10 had a reputation for being one of the most difficult and dangerous airplanes to learn to fly. Almost 40 years later Hillus reminisced, "If I'd known then what I know now, Jimmy wouldn't have gotten me in that thing with a block and tackle."

Another of Jimmy's students was Cedric Osgood, whose love of airplanes and desire to fly was all-consuming. Cedric was just one of a number of youngsters (some would later make their marks in aviation) who vied with one another for the few jobs available working around the airplanes and the field. The boys were usually paid off in flying lessons, which is exactly what they wanted. On weekends, Cedric would accompany



"Helldriver" being towed across the border from Houlton. (Norm Houle Photo)

Colton as he barnstormed his way across Aroostook county. They would pick out a small town, and in order to advertise their arrival, would buzz the town at ever decreasing altitudes until a crowd gathered to watch them. Once on the ground, Cedric was kept busy collecting money and running to the local gas station to feed the busy red WACO.

One Saturday morning, Cedric had no sooner finished changing the oil and fueling the WACO, when Colton climbed into the cockpit and asked Cedric to prop the engine. One pull of the prop and the engine coughed to life. Thinking the airplane was going to be taxied across the field, Cedric lay on his stomach on the wing, next to the fuselage, holding on to the leading edge of the wing and letting his feet hang off the trailing edge. Suddenly, Colton applied full power and the airplane roared into the air with Cedric, bug eyed, his screams drowned out by the engine, hanging on for dear life. Once around the field, 100 feet off the ground, and Colton landed. It took Cedric 15 minutes before he could find the strength to stand up. All that time Jimmy Colton, tears streaming down his cheeks from laughing so hard, couldn't get out of the cockpit.

In November 1934, the town of Houlton decided to construct a full-fledged airport to replace the three fields being used for flying: the field on Garrison Hill; Ketchum Field, located on the corner of the "B" road and the North road; and Bird Field, located on the Bird farm adjacent to the state armory. The new airport would eventually be named Houlton Army Air Field, Houlton Air Base, and finally Houlton International Airport.

Between 1935 and late 1936, work progressed slowly on the airport primarily because, like many early airports, its geographic location left much to be desired. It was situated in a narrow, marshy north-south valley adjacent to the U.S.-Canadian border, where it was flanked by parallel hills to the east and west. In January 1937, as a result of a \$75,000 grant from the WPA and the hiring of 30 workers, the tempo of construction picked up. By May, a dirt and gravel runway 3,000 feet long by 50 feet wide had been completed. Two local pilots, Irving Cummings and Tom Stantial, built a small hangar, bought a new Taylor Cub, started flight instruction along with charter service, and hoped to sell new Taylor Cubs for only \$1,270, with \$425 down and 12- to 18-months financing. The

complete solo training course was \$60.

A milestone occurred on September 8, 1937, as 2,000 people gathered at the airport to await the arrival of the first flight of a Boston & Maine Airways, Stinson Tri-motor airliner, featuring scheduled air service connecting Houlton with Bangor and Boston. On board were Maine Governor Lewis O. Barrows and Congressman Ralph Owen Brewster, who delivered speeches praising the new air service to Aroostook County. This was followed by band concerts and an elegant reception at the Northland Hotel, which was attended by the "who's who" of the community. A week after the start of scheduled air service, Houlton hosted an air show that included among others, Jimmy Colton and Hillus "Tailspin" Cunliffe. Hillus acquired the nickname "Tailspin" because of his affinity for spinning airplanes. In this instance, he would be parachuting.

He had developed an act called, "The chute that didn't open." It consisted of taking a piece of cloth 20 to 30 feet long attached to a 20-foot piece of rope which was hand held.

"Jumping at 4,500 feet, I would freefall for 3,000 feet while letting the cloth stream out above me. We had an old boy on the PA system (Tommy Baker), who could make a J-3 Cub taking off sound like a trans-Atlantic flight. He would scream and holler and carry on something fierce. Men would pray, women would scream, and children would cry. I'd ride that thing down to about 1,500 feet then pop the main chute."

During his career, "Tailspin" jumped 1,143 times, served as a Naval flight instructor, and saw action in World War II in the battle for Rabaul and the straits of Mindanao in the South Pacific.

By January 1938, after only three months, B&M Airways announced it was suspending Sunday flights for lack of passengers. The following month the airline began offering free flights to any lady accompanied by a male paying passenger. With the exception of the war years, the lack of passengers would continue to plague the airport and remain the major cause of erratic air service to this day.

Jimmy Colton left Houlton as dramatically as he had arrived. In March 1938, he, along with two of his nephews and

Hillis Cunliffe, boarded his ski-equipped WACO and started to take off from Bird Field. They never got off the ground. The small plane hit a stump and careened into a stand of spruce trees. Although the plane was totally demolished, none of the passengers was injured. Jimmy left town the same day, never to return.

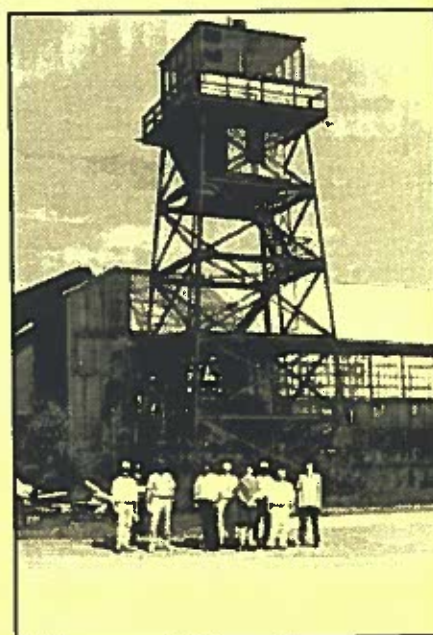
Because of increasing tensions in Europe, the Roosevelt administration was beginning to take a hard look at the northeast, with an eye to developing large air bases for possible use as jumping off points to Europe. Being located in the northeast corner of the state, Houlton was selected for expansion into an air base.

Thanks to WPA funds, work on the airport continued throughout 1939. During the spring and summer months, the Civil Aeronautics Administration installed an ever-increasing variety of weather observation instruments in the Boston & Maine Airways office. In the fall, the National Youth Administration (NYA), another New Deal program, began construction of an aviation mechanic training center on the west side of the airport. This complex would eventually consist of four large log-cabin style dormitories, a mess hall, administration building, director's quarters, and a large hangar and machine shop with classrooms. The facility served as a training and rehabilitation center for school dropouts and juvenile delinquents who were recommended by local school and police officials.

Under the extremely able direction of Harold Robinson, the center was responsible for training almost 200 aircraft and engine mechanics before its relocation to central Maine in

With Hitler's invasion of Poland in September 1939, Roosevelt was determined to provide military assistance to England and France. Because of restrictions contained in the Neutrality Act, the U.S. was unable to legally provide direct aid to the beleaguered English and French. In order to circumvent the restrictions, a plan was devised whereby U.S. aircraft would be flown to a point as close to the Canadian border as possible and, by some means yet to be determined, the aircraft would be transferred to Canada for shipment to the Allies. That point close to the border turned out to be the Houlton Airport.

To Be Continued...

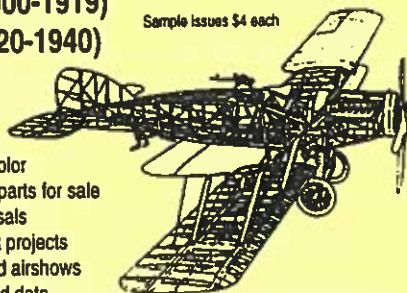


The Houlton Airport World War II tower last year during an MAHS visit. (Don Saunders Photo)

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The Island Crop Dusting Company Early Aviation in the North Country

By Jimmy Higgins



This "computer generated" book is a very readable story about barnstorming, flying and an airport in the period from 1934 to World War II. Jimmy Higgins was an "airport brat" and this is his story of the flying characters and operations at a northern Maine airport, namely Caribou.

He covers all the operations at the airport, including crop dusting, and all of the people involved, although he admits to changing some of the names to protect the guilty. The author went on to serve in the U.S. Army Air Force in World War II for six years. He has spent over 40 years in aviation and aerospace, writing and editing all types of media.

You won't find this book in Barnes & Noble or Borders or your local bookstore. You can order it toll-free at 877-BUY-BOOK for \$10.95 plus \$3.00 postage or on the web at www.buybooksontheweb.com. It is a little gem that belongs in your Maine Aviation History collection.

Wings Over Istanbul: The Life and Flights of a Pioneer Aviator

By Dorothy Polando

Dorothy Polando has brought together the stories and remembrances of husband Johnnie Polando's interesting life throughout the age of flight. Born in 1901, he became a mechanic before learning to fly, and in the late '20s he met Russell Boardman, a well-known aviator who had just bought the Bellanca "American Legion" which he renamed "Cape Cod." Before they could make a long-distance flight that fall, the "Cape Cod" caught fire while refueling and burned the fabric off one wing and the fuselage. Guiseppe Bellanca repaired and modified the plane that winter. By July 1931, they had decided to try for the long-distance record which stood at 4911 miles. If they flew from Floyd Bennett Field to Istanbul, Turkey, they would cover 5011.8 miles and break the record.

The story of that flight is exciting enough, but even more fun are his years of flying throughout New England (including Maine) and Florida. A thoroughly enjoyable book, it is available in many bookstores or from Peter E. Randall, Publisher, Box 4726, Portsmouth, NH 03802-4726 for \$14.95 plus \$4.00 postage.

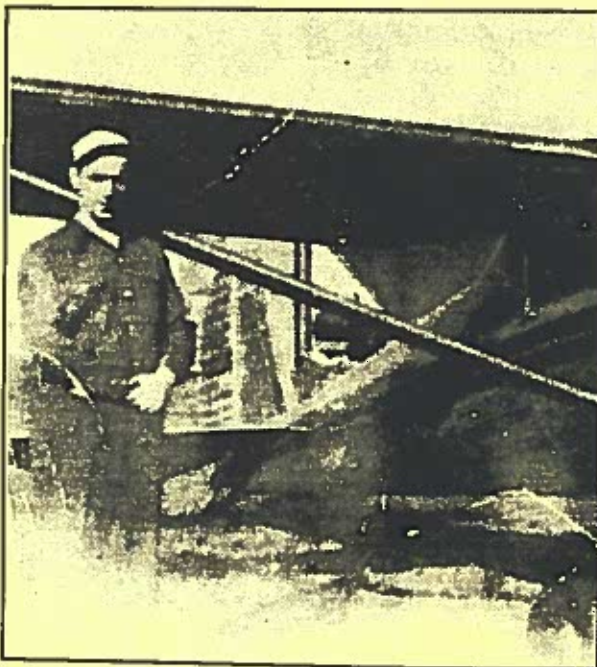
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MAHS "Classified" Nostalgia

HELP WANTED



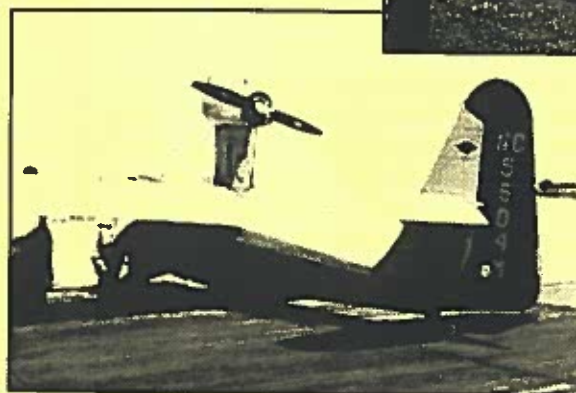
Member Dan Bilodeau's grandfather at Maheu's Airport in West Minot with his new Luscombe 8A. This aircraft is now the museum's, and you can help in its restoration. (Dan Bilodeau Photo)

FOR SALE

Young Robert Richard posing in front of a Luscombe aircraft on Court Street, near the RR station in Auburn, Maine, 1948. (Norm Houle Photo)



QUACK-QUACK



A Goodyear "Duck" GA-2 at Northeast Aviation in Portland, in 1947. The aircraft, one of 16 built, was touring aircraft dealers. This one stayed in Portland about a week. (Norm Houle Photo)

Upcoming MAHS Meetings and Calendar of Events

- June 3-4 All Day Boston Air Show, Hanscom AFB, MA. Thunderbirds. (CANCELLED)
 June 9 All Day Lindbergh Crate Day, Canaan, Maine.
 June 10 10 a.m. MAHS Meeting, Maine Air Museum Building, Bangor, Maine.
 June 30-July 2 All Day Maine Chapter Antique Airplane Association Fly-In, OHTM.
 July 8 8 a.m. Spurwink Farm Fly-In Breakfast, Cape Elizabeth. FMI: 207-839-6630.
 July 8 10 a.m. MAHS Meeting, TBA.
 July 26-Aug. 1 All Day Oshkosh Air Show, Oshkosh, WI.
 August 5-6 10 a.m. Transportation Spectacular and Aerobatic Show, Benjamin's GeeBee, OHTM.
 August 5-6 All Day EAA Chapter 736 Fly-In, Norridgewock. FMI: 207-634-2156.
 August 12 10 a.m. MAHS Meeting, TBA.
 August 12 All Day EAA Chapter 87 Fly-In, Merrymeeting Field, Bowdoinham.
 August 12-13 All Day Great New England Air Show, Westover ARB, MA. Thunderbirds.
 August 18-20 All Day Igor I. Sikorsky Seminar, Bradford Camps, Ashland, ME (see ad)
 August 19-20 All Day Bowman Field Fly-In, East Livermore.
 Sept. 2-3 All Day Radial Round-Up, Bethel. FMI: 207-824-4321.
 Sept. 9-10 All Day Greenville Seaplane Fly-In, Greenville, Maine.
 Sept. 30-Oct. 1 All Day 75th F. S. Reunion, Bangor, Maine.
 Fall 2000 All Day Air Force Association Cold War Symposium.
 October 14 10 a.m. MAHS Meeting, TBA.
 November 11 10 a.m. MAHS Meeting, TBA.
 Nov. 2000 All Day Cole's Land Transportation Museum Reunion.
 December 9 10 a.m. MAHS Meeting, TBA.

Meeting sites are flexible. Call Scott Grant at 207-775-3404 if you have any ideas or can be of help.

Welcome New Members

353. **Michael A. Giasson** (*Commercial Aviation*)
 145 Rideout Avenue
 Lewiston, ME 04240 e-mail: mag61@ime.net
354. **W. Neal Merry** (*Grumman Amphibians*)
 P.O. Box 1017, Merry Way
 Duxbury, MA 02331-1017 781-934-2437
355. **Alison McCarthy**
 20 Puritan Drive
 Westbrook, ME 04092 207-797-0960
356. **Jerry Crute** (*General Aviation*)
 25 Goldeneye Drive e-mail: jcrute@ngi.net
 Topsham, ME 04086 207-725-8811
357. **Clinton E. Davies** (*CF II*)
 88 Balsam Lane e-mail: cdavie@bdmp.com
 Yarmouth, ME 04096 207-846-4828
358. **Jim Higgins** (*Aviation History, Writer**)
 1828 Kines Drive
 Paso Robles, CA 93446 805-226-8231
 *See review of Jim's new book on page 6 of this issue.

And Welcome Back to:

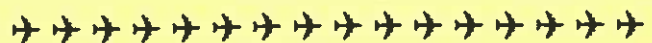
168. **Richard Glueck** (*Education, Archaeology, Space Flight*)
 78 Back Winterport Rd. . e-mail: aurora7@juno.com
 Winterport, ME 04496 207-223-5435

One Fantastic Weekend: Two Night Igor Sikorsky Seminar

Members Igor I. Sikorsky Jr. and Igor I. Sikorsky III are hosting a weekend seminar at the latter's Bradford Camps in Ashland, Maine on August 18-20.

The subject will be the personal life and early careers of Igor I. Sikorsky, including his many experiences flying helicopters and large amphibian craft as well as the world's first multi-engine airplane.

This seminar will be limited to about 20 guests, so please answer their ad (*see below*) as soon as possible if you are interested. We hope to see you there!



Now Here's an Interesting Weekend!
TWO NIGHT SEMINAR on the THREE CAREERS of

IGOR I. SIKORSKY

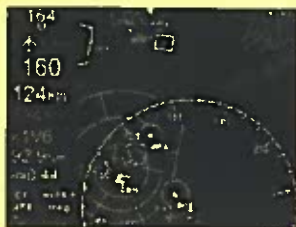
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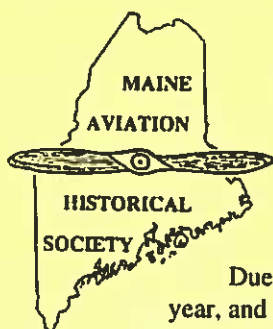


John Miller

115 North Rd.

Newburgh, ME 04444

(207) 234-2777



2000

MAINE AIR MUSEUM MAINE AVIATION HISTORICAL SOCIETY MEMBERSHIP FORM

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Special Interests _____

E-mail _____

Phone _____

Dues are for one year, and membership shall expire in the month you joined.

Annual membership includes
12 monthly newsletters!

Mail payment to:
Maine Aviation Historical Society
101 Monroe Avenue,
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Membership

Dues

Benefits

Student \$12 annual
Regular \$25 annual
Family \$35 annual
Corporate \$100 annual
Supporting \$100 annual
Lifetime \$500*

* (2 annual \$250 payments)

Newsletter, Museum Admission
Newsletter, Patch, Museum Admission
Newsletter, Patch, Museum Admission
Newsletter, Patch, Museum Admission
Newsletter, Patch, Museum Admission, 4 Free Passes
Newsletter, Patch, Lifetime Membership Number, Museum Admission, 10 Free Passes

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

June Meeting

Saturday, June 10, 2000

10 a.m.

Maine Air Museum Building
Bangor, Maine