



# DIRIGO FLYER

Newsletter of the Maine Aviation Historical Society

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*Editor's Note: This issue is being assembled on the 2015, Memorial Day weekend. It seems appropriate that the feature article be memorial-related. Gerald Adler, one of only two crewmembers to survive the tragic 1963 crash of a USAF B-52 on Elephant Mountain (near Greenville, ME), wrote the following account of a commemorative gathering at the crash site this year - 52 years after the event.*

*The Maine Air Museum is proud to have Jerry Adler as a long-term member and contributor. We are grateful to him for giving us permission to re-print his words here.*

## Elephant Mountain 17 January 2015

On 24 January 1963, in the Moosehead Lake region, the weather was cold, the snow was deep and the wind was "blowin' a gale". At approximately 1452L, a B-52C, tail number 53-0406 stationed at Westover AFB in Massachusetts, approached the southern ridge of Elephant Mountain northeast of Greenville, Maine. Flying low level, at 500 feet AGL, and at 275 Miles per hour, the aircraft entered an area of aggressive wind turbulence. The B-52, not designed for low level flight, began to pitch violently, causing the vertical stabilizer to depart the aircraft. The aircraft immediately entered a 40 degree nose down attitude and crashed. Three members of the nine-person aircrew managed to egress the aircraft before it hit the ground. Two survived.

The rescue effort mounted after the crash was extensive. It included over eighty members from local, state and federal agencies including rescue specialists from the U.S Air Force and the Maine Air National Guard. Since there was no easy access to the area of the crash, heavy equipment was brought in to drive a five mile long road through the forest clogged by four to six foot snow drifts. Two rescue teams were mounted. One would follow the route to be taken by the heavy equipment. Another, entering the woods at Katahdin Iron Works near Brownville Junction, would follow the flight path of the aircraft prior to the crash. The next day the searchers, with the help of an Air Force rescue helicopter, brought the survivors, pilot LtCol Dante Bulli and weapons systems operator Capt Jerry Adler, and the body of co-pilot

Maj Robert Morrison, off the mountain. In the days that followed, the bodies of the other crewmembers, LtCol Joe Simpson, Maj William Gabriel, Maj Robert Hill, Capt Hebert

Hanson, Capt Charles Leuchter and TSgt Michael O'Keefe, were recovered by the searchers. Since the location of the crash was so remote, and once the crash investigation was completed, the Air Force decided to leave the remains of 53-0406 where it had come to rest.

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The Maine Air Museum is located at  
98 Maine Avenue adjacent to  
Bangor International Airport

In the years that followed, the site became the rendezvous of day hikers and snowmobilers. These visits took their toll, with pieces of the aircraft taken from the site and all types of graffiti left in their place.

Enter the Moosehead Riders Snowmobile Club. Beginning in 1993, the club took on the mission of protecting the crash site. With the help of the land owner, Plumb Creek Timber Company, and other civic organizations including Post 94 of the American Legion and Troop 120 of the Boy Scouts of America, the club has made the crash site more accessible. With the help of the 101<sup>st</sup> Air Refueling Wing of the Maine Air National Guard, extensive signage has been added to help in this effort. For the last fourteen years, the unit's Honor Guard has participated in the annual commemoration ceremony held each year around the date of the crash.

The weather on 17 January 2015 wasn't much better than it was 52 years before. The wind was not as strong and the snow wasn't as deep but, the brilliantly clear day sporting windy sub-zero temperatures was a grand example of winter in the Great State of Maine. In the forenoon, a diverse group of individuals gathered at the Moosehead Snowmobile Riders' clubhouse in Greenville to participate in a ceremony of strong significance to all present.

The Maine Air National Guard was represented by unit members Col John Thomas USAF/Ret, HG/Bugler, LtCol Thor Noyes, HG/OIC, Chaplin LtCol Richard Bach, MSgt Adam Hurlburtt, and MSgt Bill Mulherin, USAF/Ret, HG/member.

For the first time, a contingent of airmen from Westover ARB, MA, was present. SMSgt Dan Howard, TSgt Todd

Laskey, TSgt Will Passmore, TSgt Chad Solar, SSgt Sharon Mekal and A1C Chad Solar traveled at their own expense to be part of the ceremonial party. Their parent unit, the 439<sup>th</sup> AMW/AFR, carries forth the heritage and has the same home station as the crash aircraft's

unit, the 99<sup>th</sup> Bomb Wing had. Lt Col Noyes was impressed by the sincerity of these airmen. They had researched the history of the demise of 53-0406 and took it upon themselves to initiate their participation in the ceremonies. In LtCol Noyes' words, "These airmen were truly exceptional, and terrific examples of the current and next generation (of the Air Force) and I for one was grateful for their participation."

Mr. Kelly Hinkle representing Wreaths Across America was also present. In a conversation with Cherryfield, Maine, resident and Honor Guard member and bugler MSgt Peter Duston USA/Ret., Kelly learned of the coming ceremony and wanted WAA to be a part of it. He made the trip from Cherryfield that morning to participate.

MSgt Mulherin reports that after a hearty noon meal prepared by club members, MRSC president John Cobb was presented a commemorative plaque by the Westover contingent. The attendees then moved outside to the first of two wreath-laying ceremonies. The first, presided over by President Cobb, was performed at the side of one of the engines from 53-0406 that had been brought down from the crash site and positioned on a small grove of trees on the clubhouse grounds. The Westover contingent presented our Nation's colors. Two wreaths were placed here. The first was presented by American Legion Post 94. The second was the Wreaths Across America wreath placed by Mr. Hinkle. Col Thomas performed a solemn rendition of Amazing Grace. Chaplain Bach provided the invocation.

On the ride to the crash site that followed, LtCol Noyes notes that, "the temperature was subzero and the speed of the snowsleds drove the cold in deep." He goes on to say that, "Elephant Mountain is remote, rugged and cold in January. I could not help but try to imagine what the survivors bore throughout that long cold night in 1963. The pain of injury," (both LtCol Bulli and Maj Adler had sustained major injuries. Maj Adler's were career ending.) "frost bite and loss of (their) brothers must have been unbearable at the time, but bear it they did."

More than twenty snow machines made the trip. Many of them had carried more than one person. LtCol Noyes goes on to relate the arrival at the crash site had had a great effect on the Westover airmen. He says that it showed in their eyes as they studied the pieces of the wreck that stuck up through the snow cover.

Greenville Police Chief Jeff Pomerleau, the club's supervisor for the care of the crash site, noted later that the mood, as it always is, was quiet and respectful as the attendees gathered around a five foot tall obelisk in the center of the site. It leans against arguably the largest piece left of 53-0406, the tail gunner's compartment. On the smoothed surface of dark-colored stone are inscribed the names of all of 53-0406's crewmembers.

Col Thomas was instrumental in organizing the finer details of the ceremony. He consulted with the different parties to assure that all the military requirements of such a ceremony were met.

As at the clubhouse, President Cobb conducted the service. Members of the Maine State Warden's Service presented the colors. A rose was placed on the monument as the name of each crewmember was read. A wreath was laid at the base of the obelisk by Post 94. Chaplain

Bach offered words stressing the pride and honor the bombers crew undoubtedly felt in their service to their country. After the Chaplain's final prayers, the Westover airmen ceremonially folded our Nation's colors. Col Thomas then sounded Taps. As the twenty four solemn notes rolled through the winter-bare forests in that snowy mountainside, all present were quiet in their own thoughts and prayers. Our flag was then presented by the Westover airmen to President Cobb for safe keeping.

After some quiet conversation, those present mounted their snowsleds and made their way down Elephant Mountain, leaving the site quiet again, cradling its given responsibility in its own peace.

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*MAM President, Chuck Byrum, an on-duty member of the fire crew at Dow AFB (Bangor, ME) during the time of the crash, writes his recollection of the crash events:*

#### B-52C crash on Elephant Mountain near Greenville, Maine

On Thursday January 24, 1963 at approximately 1516 Hours a call was made to the Dow AFB, Bangor, Maine Base Fire Department on the crash phone from the Dow AFB, Bangor, Maine Base Command Post that a USAF B-52C Stratofortress bomber out of Westover AFB, Chicopee, Massachusetts had crashed on the side of Elephant Mountain Maine which is near Greenville, Maine. The bomber had taken off from Westover AFB, Chicopee, Massachusetts at 1211 Hours with 9 souls onboard and had no weapons onboard. The mission of this flight was routine: practicing low level navigation to avoid the newest Soviet radar technology and to return to Westover AFB, at 1730 hours. They also advised that Scott Paper Company had dispatched snow plows from Greenville, Maine to clear the road of snow near where the B-52C had crashed. They plowed snow drifts of up to 15 feet out of the 10 mile road getting rescuers within 1.5 miles of the crash site. They had to snowmobile and snowshoe the rest of the way into the crash site. Eighty rescuers from the Maine Inland Fish and Game Department, the Maine State Police, the Civil Air Patrol, USAF Units from Dow AFB in Bangor, Maine (such as USAF Base Air Police, USAF Base Fire Department rescue team, USAF Base B-52 aircraft maintenance personnel, and a USAF helicopter with a doctor and medics for injured Airmen that may need to be transported back to the Dow AFB Base Hospital for treatment in Bangor, Maine), and other volunteers quickly went to work. On the next day the pilot of the aircraft, Lt. Col. Dante E. Bulli was found with a broken ankle where he landed in a tree 30 feet above the ground. Also found was the navigator, Capt. Gerald J. Adler, who struck the snow covered ground about 2000 feet from the wreckage at a force estimated at 16 times the force of gravity. His skull was fractured and three ribs were broken. They were flown back by helicopter to Dow AFB, Bangor, Maine for their needed treatments. The crash was caused by a structural problem. The vertical stabilizer came off the plane, falling to the ground 1.5 miles from where the plane impacted the side of Elephant Mountain. I was on duty that day but did not respond to the crash site. I visited the crash site the summer of 2008,

and it is a site that I will never forget. It brought tears to my eyes as it is a very overwhelming site to see, the vastness of the debris field is very overwhelming, it brought back memories of the Cold War while I was serving in the USAF 10/02/1963 to 10/31/1982 and retiring on 11/01/1982. The below pictures are of Elephant Mountain, pieces of the crashed B-52C near Greenville, Maine, and a picture of a B-52C flying.





Crashed B-52C on Elephant Mountain Greenville, Maine

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*MAM Director, Hank Marois, adds the following footnote about B-52 structure:*

The B-52 was originally designed and developed to be a strategic, high-altitude intercontinental nuclear bomber as was the aircraft type in this story. As potential enemy air defense systems developed to counter the high altitude threat, the Strategic Air Command switched to low altitude mission profiles for which the original aircraft was not designed. The tall vertical stabilizer was vulnerable to low altitude sheer stresses for which the aircraft was not designed to cope. The B-52 underwent a major redesign with the "G" and later "H" models. The vertical stabilizer was shortened and made wider and strengthened to cope with the new low level stresses. During the Viet Nam War the B-52 was used as a high-altitude tactical and strategic bomber. The B-52H is the last of the line and saw service in the Persian Gulf War, and later over Afghanistan in 2001. *HLM*

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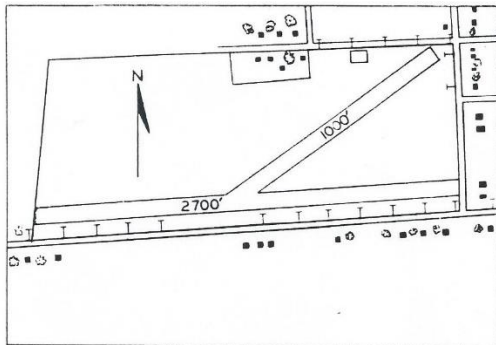
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## CURTISS WRIGHT AIRPORT

Rockland, Maine's forgotten airport

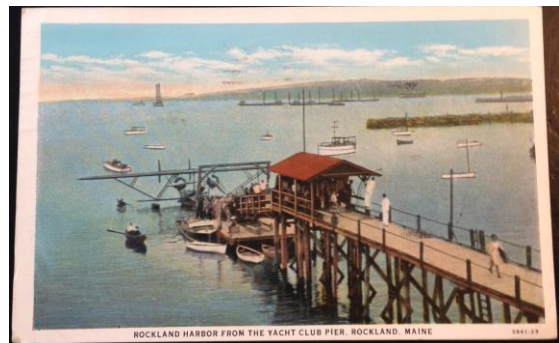
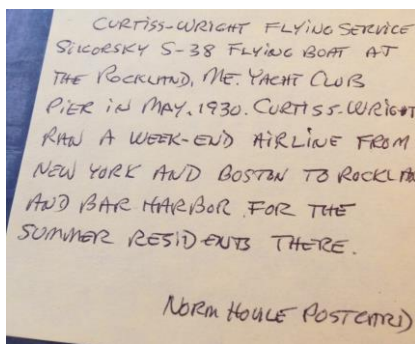
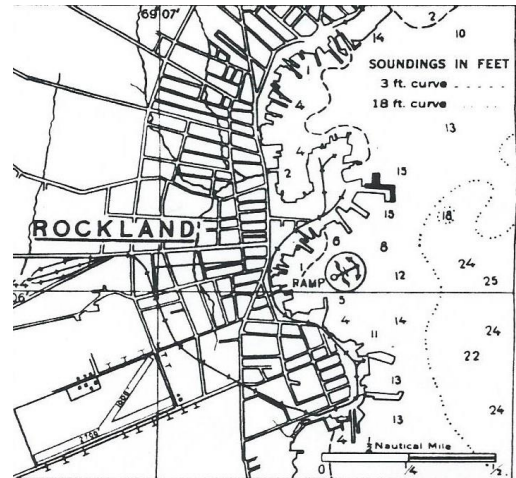
By Norman Houle

The August 1929 flyer of the CURTISS FLYING SERVICE, Co. listed forty (40) bases of operation across the United States from California to Maine. It is interesting to note that three of these bases were in the state of Maine: one in Bangor, another in Portland – called Portland but really just off US 1 in Scarborough – and the third in Rockland. The Curtis Wright Airport was located on the south end of the city. It was where the athletic field of the Rockland District Middle School is today. The airport was bordered on the south by Thomaston Street, north by Holmes Street, and on the east by Broadway. The airport schematic is from the back of an April 1932 U.S. NAVY AVIATION STRIP CHART. Boston Maine Airways – later to be called Northeast Airline – operated out of here in August and September of 1931. Clarence Chamberlin with his Curtiss Condor – civilian transport version of the B-2 Bomber – visited the Curtiss Wright Airport selling passengers rides about 1936. The Curtis Wright Hangar was located right behind where the South End Elementary School is today.



**ROCKLAND, MAINE**  
**CURTISS WRIGHT AIRPORT**

Runways, 1000', 2700'. Surface, gravel. Drainage, good. Facilities, spec. fuel and oil; repairs; hangar. Marking, name "ROCKLAND-CURTISS WRIGHT" on hangar; wind cone. Lighting, none. Obstructions, telephone line and hangar to N.; low buildings to E.; telephone lines and hill to S. Remarks: Land on runways only

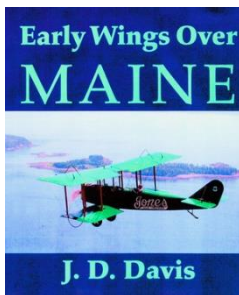


*MAM member, Matt Watkins, provided this shot of the Russian airplane Antonov An-255 as it refueled recently at Bangor International Airport:*



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