



# Dirigo Flyer

Newsletter of the Maine Aviation Historical Society

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## They Took to the Skies

### Part Two of a Three-Part Series Commemorating the Maine WWI Aviator One Hundred Years Ago

Dave Bergquist and Bob Umberger

Shortly after the Armistice of November 11, 1918, that brought the Great War to an inconclusive end, prominent Boston citizens promoted an exhibit of New England aviators. This exhibit, which included a portrait of each aviator and a brief biography, was so well received by attendees, that the sponsoring patriots published a thousand copies of a two-volume work titled New England Aviators. It is from this collection, for the most part, that the authors identified our "Maine WWI Aviators." Each had a significant Maine connection, either through birth, through education within our state during their formative years, or through their college education. While these twenty-five flyers represented less than 1% of the Maine men and women who answered the call to serve their country, they were like many of their fellow American citizens (15,000 flyers) who took to the skies to meet the enemy.

The United States had only two "flying fields" in April 1917. While a panicked Congress immediately appropriated \$80,000,000 to build training fields and encampments, it would take some time before these facilities were operational. Consequently, many early aviators were directly attached to French or British flying units for flight instruction after attending a brief ground school conducted at an American university or college.

One of these aviators, Edward Wilson Atwood of Portland, was only 20 when he enlisted. After completion of ground school at M.I.T., Atwood was sent overseas to France and attended the Ecole de Bombardement Aerien at Le Crotoy, Somme. Charles Kingman Perkins, a graduate of York High School, completed his ground school at Cornell University and then sailed for France. He was trained to fly at Issoudun, the great flying school built by the Americans on French soil during the summer of 1917 and staffed primarily by French aviation instructors.



2nd Lt. Atwood, Air Service, USA

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

**At the end of the silent film era, and at the very first Academy Awards, the Oscar for the best picture production (1927-1928) went to WINGS**



The poster above commemorates Paramount Studio's 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary screening of the epic WWI aerial effects movie, WINGS.

The film has incredible WWI dogfight scenes using real WWI planes with authentic pilots doing real acrobatic stunts. Some have called this film the Star Wars movie of 1927 (of course without the fake sound effects). The film's fictitious romantic plot has two young American boys going to France to be fighter pilots. It is also about the girl left behind who joins them in the war as a nurse. The cast includes Clara Bow, Buddy Rogers, Richard Arlen and even Gary Cooper.



*"The British bury a young American aviator." (from War Birds)*

Similarly, Phillip Merrill Payson of Portland enlisted in June, 1917, and was immediately sent to ground school at Oxford University. He was then attached to the 30th squadron at Newcastle, England, for flight instruction. It should be noted that British flight instruction, while successful, was less formal and more daring than the French approach of "gradual absorption of the knowledge of the art of flying." (For a real taste of what Americans who were attached to British flying units experienced, read Elliott Spring's War Birds, Diary of an Unknown Aviator. Thirty-four young American aviators were killed in England during flight instruction in 1917-18. The US

Air Service preferred the more methodical and safety-conscious French approach of gradual progression for aviator training and copied much of it. This eventually resulted in the Army's three-tier pilot instruction of primary, basic, and advanced. Payson became a member of the RAF's 55th squadron until he was transferred to the 166th Aero Squadron, US Air Service in October 1918, but not before he earned a reputation as a keen and efficient pilot of great ability. Later, he was recommended to receive the DSC for his actions in the Meuse-Argonne campaign as part of the 166th Aero Squadron.



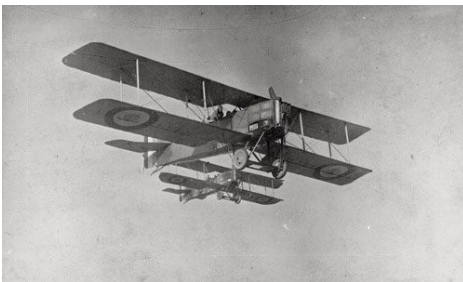
*"A British Flying Officer about to board his Sopwith Dolphin." (from War Birds)*

Henry Joseph Leavitt of Sanford, took a different approach to getting "over there" as a pilot. He enlisted in the Royal Flying Corps, the predecessor to the independent Royal Air Force, in early summer 1917. He trained in Canada and then was attached to the 65th Squadron, R.A.F. The British units, for the most part, were stationed along the northern sections of the expansive Western Front. In action over the lines in May, 1918, Lt. Leavitt experienced mechanical trouble with his aircraft and was forced to land behind the German lines. He was imprisoned until shortly after the Armistice. (Henry Leavitt came from a long line of Maine fighting men: his great-great grandfather served in the Revolutionary War, his great grandfather in the War of 1812, and his uncles in the Civil War.) Leavitt's path to war was not uncommon for Americans anxious to fight, particularly before the American declaration of war. While technically illegal, young men seeking adventure volunteered for the RFC or for one of the French escadrilles.

Other Maine men also took a circuitous route into WWI combat flying. Sumner Sewall (Part three of this series will focus on his story as Maine's only Ace and lifelong friend of American Ace of Aces, Eddie Rickenbacher) left college in early 1917, before the American declaration of war, and joined the American Ambulance Field Service as an ambulance driver. Similarly, William H. Turgeon, Maine's first flying game warden, enlisted early-on in the Army as a chauffeur. Later, he worked his way into flight training while in France and was eventually assigned to the 13th Aero Squadron.

The US Government worked around the clock to get the country "caught up" for participation in the Great War, which many thought would drag into 1920. The Army's Supply Division feverishly built training camps and aviation fields in order to train new pilots. By the early spring of 1918, thirty-five such facilities across the southern tier of the country were complete and had begun their training missions. Bangor's own Clark Robinson trained at the newly opened Post Field, Fort Sill, Oklahoma. The Air Service assigned him to the 8th Aero Squadron; he sailed for France in August 1918. Later that fall, he was shot down over the lines and was captured by the Germans along with his injured observer. But Robinson and his observer managed to escape together with some French soldiers five days later and made it to the allied lines. Robinson brought out valuable intelligence, learned as a result of his adventure, and was thus commended by General Mason Patrick, Chief of the Army's Air Service. (Clark Robinson was a member of a well-known Bangor family. His grandfather was an established clothier headquartered in the Wheelwright-Clark building which still stands in the heart of downtown Bangor. Also, the family home on French Street escaped the Great Fire of 1911 and continues in use today. During WWII, Robinson was a major with the Army Air Forces and was killed in a 1943 plane crash in Burma. He is buried at Punchbowl.)

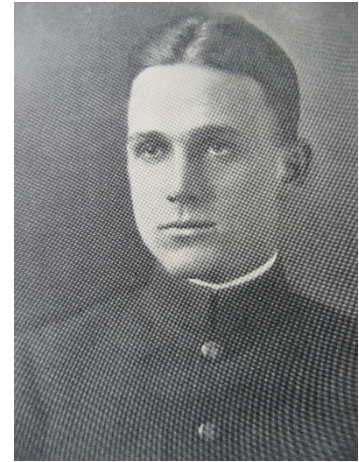
The Whitehouse brothers of Portland, sought aviation training through the Navy's Flying Corps. The younger brother, Robert Treat (Jr.), left Harvard during his sophomore year and enlisted in the Navy. After ground school at M.I.T., the Navy sent him to Hampton Roads for flight instruction. In February 1918, he was assigned to the Naval Air Station at Moutchic-Lacanau France for seaplane piloting and bombing. Later, he flew submarine patrol out of the Navy's base at Le Croisic near the mouth of the Loire River near the port of St. Nazaire. This harbor city served as the major disembarkation port for American soldiers coming across the Atlantic. Meanwhile, his older brother by two years, William Penn, trained to be a lighter-than-air, or dirigible, pilot and received his commission as an ensign in October, 1917. He was one of the Navy's first dirigible pilots and was stationed in France at Paimboeuf to conduct anti-submarine patrols and to escort convoy transports to the port of St. Nazaire. He piloted the dirigible that escorted the US liner *George Washington* into the port of Brest; on board was President Woodrow Wilson.



*The French Breguet 14B2 Bomber*

Maine's small number of WWI aviators experienced a high casualty rate (16%). Lt. Raymond Clyde Taylor, born in North Sullivan, was shot down and killed in an air battle with German Fokkers and Pfalzs on September 16, 1918. He was piloting a French Breguet 14B2 as part of the 96th Aero Squadron. American aviators flew either British or French aircraft; the first American built warplane (under British contract), the de Havilland DH4 with Liberty motors, did not enter combat until mid-fall 1918. In fact, in a May 1918 letter home, Lt. Taylor complained about the lack of American military supplies: "We want guns, bullets, and planes and we want them badly."

Navy Flying Corps pilot Roger Conant Perkins, schooled in York, fell to his death in March 1918 when the seaplane he was piloting suddenly crashed off Key West, Florida. Later that month, Ensign Michael Joseph Delehanty, a Bowdoin College graduate, was killed in an air accident at Pensacola. Combat and accidents were not the only causes of an early death for Maine aviators. Toward the end of the conflict, a spreading influenza took its toll on combatants and civilians alike. Ensign Laurence Hill Cate, another Bowdoin student, succumbed to pneumonia following influenza in October 1918 at Pensacola. He was 21.



*Chief Quartermaster Perkins, US  
Navy Flying Corps*

**Part Three, in an upcoming Dirigo Flyer, will tell the story of Sumner Sewall of Bath who became Maine's only WWI Ace**

Points of Interest

- 1916 (March) - French approved formation of the Escadrille American (American Squadron), the all-American volunteer unit later renamed the Lafayette Escadrille.
- 1916 (June) - First American-born volunteer was shot down over France: H. Clyde Balsey from Pennsylvania survived.
- 1917 (April 6) - The United States declared war on Germany.
- 1917 (May) - The draft was enacted for all males ages 21 to 30.
- 1917 (June) - Germany increased airplane monthly production from 1,000 to 2,000 over the next several months to confront America's entry into the Great War.
- 1917 (October) - The first American built de Havilland DH-4 (under British license) took flight.
- 1917 (November) - The US Navy began combat missions using the French Tellier flying boats, the T.3, a two-man craft with a machine gun and equipped with two 75 lb. bombs.

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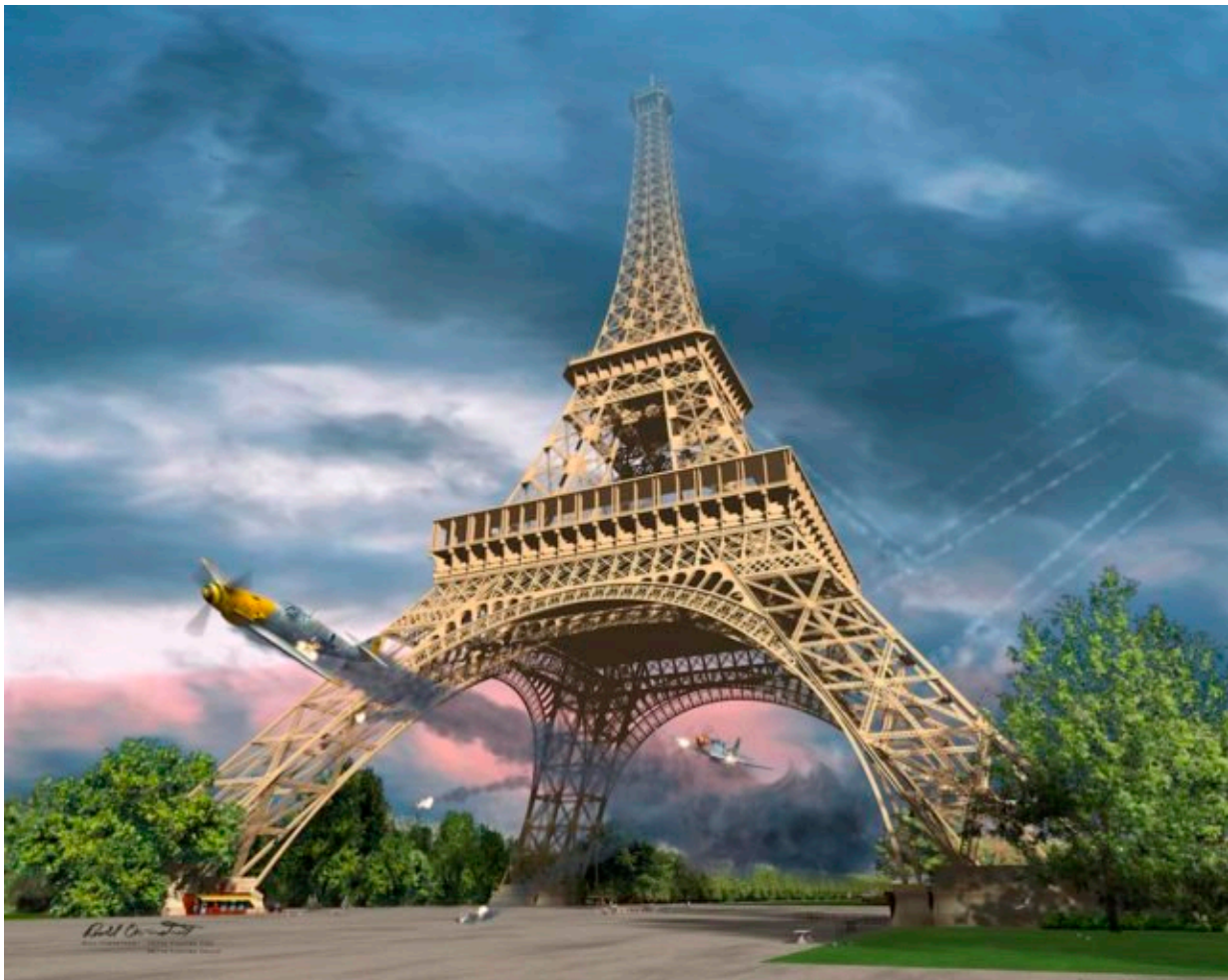
## FAMOUS FIGHTER PLANE LANDS AT BIA

Last June 29, a famous WWII aircraft named BERLIN EXPRESS landed in Bangor, Maine, en route from Texas to the famous July 4<sup>th</sup> airshow in Duxford, England. For the complete story of this venture, google “crossing the Atlantic Ocean in P-51B ‘Berlin Express.’”

Why is the name Berlin Express famous? The P51B that landed in Bangor is dressed up exactly like the P-51C Mustang of the WWII 357<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group from which aviator Bill Overstreet famously flew under the Eiffel Tower while in pursuit of a German Messerschmitt Bf 109 a few weeks before D-Day.

Overstreet had named each plane he flew the “Berlin Express” because of his many flights escorting U.S Army Air Force bombers into Germany. To read an interesting July 2013 interview with the late Bill Overstreet, google “WWII Veteran Bill Overstreet and his P-51C Mustang, ‘Berlin Express.’”

The painting below by Len Krenzler depicts Berlin Express’s Eiffel Tower Victory.



*Credit Len Krenzler / Action Art*

### Tribute to Alfred Cormier

February 24, 1924 – December 31, 2017

Al Cormier loved aviation as we all do. He was one of the original Bangor area members of the Maine Aviation Historical Society that stepped forward when the idea came up to start the Maine Air Museum. Al was a collector and tinkerer and loved to find old stuff and make displays and other items for the Museum. He worked tirelessly with the small group of volunteers to transform the old Missile Assembly Building into the future home of the Maine Air Museum. The building was a mess when we received it. It had been used for storage for many years and was in bad shape. With no heat and lack of care the paint was peeling off both inside and out. One back wall had been struck by a snowplow and had the cinderblocks busted or missing. He was instrumental in getting the roof repaired on the building, working with the City of Bangor and Roof Systems of Maine. His ability to locate needed items and to find sources of supplies led to the building you see today. Al was named building superintendent for many years and made sure everything that needed repair or work was scheduled and completed. His vehicle could be seen in the museum parking lot on most days as he tinkered with ideas in the workshop. As he got older he spent less time at the museum but was always willing to help with any ideas or plans. He was a great supporter of the museum and we all missed him and his smile when he was unable to spend the time there. He was a great guy and if you want to learn more about his life, he has a book, "With an Angel by My Side" available at the museum.

By Les Shaw

### MAINE AVIATION FORUM

On February 28, 2018, MAM Director Bob Umberger attended the 10<sup>th</sup> Maine Aviation Forum held at the Owls Head Transportation Museum. This forum was well attended by thirty or so organizations from Maine's aviation community.

Bob set up a display table with MAM brochures, past newsletters, gift shop books, tee-shirts, and other items related to the 2018 MAHS special project on Maine's participation in WWI aviation.





**All dues expire on June 30<sup>th</sup> of each year. If joining mid-year, pay \$2.00 for each remaining month**

Annual membership includes quarterly newsletters

Mail payment to:

Maine Aviation Historical Society  
PO Box 2641  
Bangor, ME 04402-2641

**Maine Aviation Historical Society  
Maine Air Museum \* Membership Form**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City, State, Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

Special Interests: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_

| Membership | Dues                     | Benefits                        |
|------------|--------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Regular    | \$25 annual              | Newsletter, Museum Admission    |
| Family     | \$35 annual              | Newsletter, Museum Admission    |
| Corporate  | \$100 annual             | Newsletter, Museum Admission    |
| Supporting | \$100 annual             | Newsletter, Museum Admission    |
| Lifetime   | \$500*                   | Newsletter, Lifetime Membership |
|            | *2 annual \$250 payments | Museum Admission                |

We need volunteers-docents, mechanics, maintenance, librarians and exhibit specialists, etc.

- \_\_\_\_ Please call me. I want to be active in the organization.  
 \_\_\_\_ I cannot join now, but would like to help. I enclose a check for \_\_\_\_\_  
 (Contributions over \$20 are tax deductible within the limits of the law)  
 \_\_\_\_ I wish to support and obtain membership by purchasing a memorial brick

**DIRIGO FLYER**

**MAINE AVIATION HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

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