

PROJECT  
MIDNIGHT GHOST



Writings from *TIGHAR Tracks*  
1985-2016

Project Midnight Ghost: Writings from *TIGHAR Tracks*, 1985 – 2016.  
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# MIDNIGHT GHOST

Project Midnight Ghost started with an unconfirmed legend of an aircraft crashing in the Maine woods. It has grown into a well-established theory of the fate of l'Oiseau Blanc and its 1927 disappearance, carrying crew Charles Nungesser and François Coli with it into oblivion. Search operations throughout 1984 explored the use of several types of technology, all with disappointing results. Finally, in the fall of 1984, search teams were organized and sent into the hills west of Round Lake, Maine, on foot, with metal detectors and magnetometers. No spectacular results were expected from this approach, and none were achieved, but it had to be tried.

Meanwhile, Project Midnight Ghost has raised public consciousness of the flight to such an extent that formerly unknown reports of sightings have come to light over the winter. These reports, each independently of the others, establish a logical and sequential line from Newfoundland To Round Lake. The line is consistent with the intentions of the crews and the performance of the aircraft. They are the only unexplained aircraft sightings/hearings beyond Newfoundland on May 9, 1927.

The first one is in Nova Scotia, where two separate lobster fishermen saw an aircraft on the right day at the right time. Their evidence is reported in the May 13, 1927 edition of the Bangor Daily News. A trip to Nova Scotia is planned for the summer to confirm this report.

In addition to the evidence of Anson Berry and Ray Beck, two more sightings/hearings have surfaced in Maine. A first-hand report from Norman Foss places l'Oiseau Blanc 13 miles ESE of Round Lake on May 9, 1927, sputtering and coughing and very low. Foss is now in his mid-seventies but remembers the day clearly—airplanes were very unusual over Washing-

ton County then. Very shortly thereafter, Mr. and Mrs. Everett Scott heard an airplane over the TWP 19 road, which is just east of Round Lake. While both the Scotts are dead, their story is well known in Machias, and, in any case, is merely one of many better-supported reports.

No foot expeditions are planned to Round Lake for the spring. TIGHAR is awaiting the results of an overflight of the hills with a highly specialized radar. Details cannot be released because the device is highly classified, but TIGHAR has been assured that the radar could find anomalies to search closely if the arrangements can be made to use this new technology.

Research will continue, in Nova Scotia and in Paris. The next issue of the newsletter will have details of interviews and answer any questions from members. If the new radar is deployed on behalf of Project Midnight Ghost, a search expedition will be mounted as soon as the results of the tests have been released to TIGHAR, or at the end of the black fly season if it's still summer. A call will be made for volunteers. Watch this space!



# TIGHAR TRACKS

newsletter of

**The International Group for Historic Aircraft Recovery**

Spring 1985

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Vol. 1 No. 2

TIGHAR would like to welcome its new members, those who joined at Sun'n'Fun and those who have come on since. Welcome aboard! and thanks for your support. We couldn't do a thing without you.

Our horizons have expanded in the last few months. In addition to the expeditions which are the centerpiece of our efforts, we have made some very special plans designed to boost the aerospace industry in general. We are in the process of putting together a one-hour TV special, using Project Midnight Ghost as the dramatic background for a documentary on our research and recovery efforts. This, in turn, will be expanded into an educational program, aimed at middle school students, to get them turned on to aviation and aerospace science at an early age. It will introduce them to logic and critical thinking, scientific method, research techniques, archeology, basic navigation, basic aerodynamics, meteorology, all in the context of our aviation historical investigations.

This program--the first in a series--will inspire young people with the fascination of flight at a time when a critical shortage of aerospace engineers, scientists, and pilots looms on the horizon. Negotiations are under way with a film company, and we hope to begin work as early as July. Any member of TIGHAR who has a background in the field of education, particularly those who are currently teaching, is urged to get in touch and make a contribution of expertise and opinion to this project.

We are, of course, continuing with the old projects and always looking for new ones (see the rest of this newsletter). Be sure to stop in and visit us at our booth (D-4) at the Oshkosh fly-in July 26 through August 2. We will have firm dates on a couple of expeditions at that time. Bring your friends and encourage them to join. See you soon!

## MIDNIGHT GHOST

Those who have been following Project Midnight Ghost closely will recall that actual search operations are presently awaiting the employment of some very sophisticated and highly classified radar technology by the Air Force. While NASA is helping us arrange that rather large favor, we have become aware of the possibility that Shell Oil has a very similar device known as Graph Trax. If that is true it may provide a good "Plan B" in the event the Air Force mission falls through. Anyone with knowledge of Graph Trax or connections at Shell is encour-



aged to contact us here in Delaware.

Meanwhile, on the pure research side, TIGHAR president Pat Thrasher and executive director Ric Gillespie will be meeting in June with French officials in Paris. This will be the first time that the two groups investigating the Nungesser-Coli disappearance on both sides of the Atlantic will have the opportunity to exchange information in person. Ric and Pat will also be meeting with the surviving members of the families of the crewmen. We'll report on those meetings in the summer issue.

# MIDNIGHT GHOST



On October 18, 19, and 20, TIGHAR returned to the Round Lake Hills of north-eastern Maine to continue the search for l'Oiseau Blanc, the White Bird of Charles Nungesser and Francois Coli. A team of 22 TIGHAR members from 10 states conducted operations in the Maine wilderness assisted by many enthusiastic local volunteers. The expedition resulted in new evidence regarded to be of such significance as to prompt an immediate return to Maine on November 8, 9, and 10 to try for discovery before the weather closes in for the winter. We have decided, in the interest of security, to withhold the new evidence from publication until we've had a chance to check it out thoroughly. If it turns out to be the real thing, TIGHAR members will be among the first to know. If it's a bust, we'll tell you that too.

As we prepare to head north once more, it is appropriate that we take a moment to restate our ultimate goal and review our accomplishments so far. It was 58 years ago when Nungesser and Coli "vanished like midnight ghosts." Had they succeeded in their Paris to New York attempt they would have beaten Lindbergh by almost two weeks. It is tempting to speculate on how the development of aviation might have taken a different course with a French victory replacing the triumph of the Lone Eagle. What is certain is that the drama of their attempt and the agony of their disappearance had a profound affect upon the world's response to Lindbergh's success. Unraveling the riddle of their fate will in no way discredit his achievement, but will instead solve one of aviation's greatest mysteries. It is the human compulsion to know the truth that fuels our efforts.

The task is awesome. The trail is 58 years cold and fraught with false leads and side-tracks. All that can be expected to survive of the wood and fabric aircraft are its massive twelve cylinder engine and a scattering of debris from cowlings, fuel tanks, etc. This wreckage, scant as it is, is likely to be almost completely buried deep in heavily forested wilderness. Against these odds are marshalled the cooperative efforts of TIGHAR, the National Air and Space Museum, the French Musee de l'Air and Bureau de l'Aviation Civile, the families of the crew, and the technological assistance of NASA.

Two years of work have resulted in a compelling body of evidence that the aircraft crashed near Round Lake in Maine. It is now a matter of finding the needle in a well-defined haystack. A series of expeditions last year began the process of narrowing down the search area, and we hope that this year's efforts will pay off with a discovery. When the aircraft is found, it will be meticulously excavated and analyzed so as to learn as much as possible about the final moments of the flight. Then the remains of l'Oiseau Blanc will be flown in a French aircraft to New York, and so complete its journey. Nungesser and Coli will then return to Paris to receive the belated tribute of their countrymen.

# MIDNIGHT GHOST

In May TIGHAR will return to northeastern Maine for the largest expedition to date in the epic search for the remains of l'Oiseau Blanc--the White Bird of French transatlantic aspirants Charles Nungesser and Francois Coli. Had their 1927 Paris to New York attempt succeeded they would have beaten Lindbergh by nearly two weeks. Vanished in Lindbergh's words, "like midnight ghosts," the two World War I heroes may at last be found it two years of TIGHAR research pay off. Last fall two TIGHAR expeditions resulted in further evidence that the flight ended on a remote forest hillside in Maine. TIGHAR has found a witness who, while hunting in 1970, came upon what appears to be the crash site of l'Oiseau Blanc. A sketch made by the witness shows features of the site which are unique to that aircraft. The witness is able to identify the general area but not the specific location so that we are faced with searching about a mile of hillside which, since 1970, has suffered considerable spruce budworm damage. Areas which were once quite open are now extremely dense with new growth. TIGHAR members who participated in Midnight Ghost '85 can testify to the formidable nature of the terrain to be covered.

In the past we have run search operations over a weekend, staying at a motel in the nearest town and commuting to the search area by FWD and on foot. This time we will establish a base camp in the search area and conduct continuous operations over a two and a half week period from May 9th through Memorial Day weekend (May 26th). Members will be able to register and participate for all or whatever portion of the time fits their schedule. A formal Notice of Expedition and registration form will go out to members soon.

One unique aspect of Midnight Ghost '86 will be the use of backpack Loran. Special units provided by Racal Megapulse will enable us to bring ground navigation in the search area under precise control and greatly increase search efficiency. Search team management and communications will be improved through helicopter support and airborne radio relay. This will be, by far, the biggest effort yet mounted to find l'Oiseau Blanc. We have every reason to anticipate success. This time.... This time....



**Is this the wreck of the White Bird?** A hunter sketched this scene showing an engine he saw half-buried in the woods. The relative dimensions are correct for the 450 h.p. Lorraine-Dietrich. The protrusion on the extreme left of the engine matches the unique ram air intake of l'Oiseau Blanc. When he made the sketch, the hunter had never seen a photo of the aircraft or its engine.

# MIDNIGHT GHOST

## **The Puzzle's Missing Piece?**

A compelling body of evidence points to the wilderness north of Machias, Maine as the long sought resting place of l'Oiseau Blanc, the White Bird of Charles Nungesser and Francois Coli. Had the giant white biplane completed its non-stop Paris to New York flight on May 9, 1927, its heroic crew would today hold the honored place in history won less than two weeks later by Charles Lindbergh. Instead, Nungesser and Coli vanished, in the words of their successor, "like midnight ghosts."

Over the past two years TIGHAR has examined and re-examined every shred of available evidence which might yield a clue for the solution of the mystery. Accepting nothing on faith and tracing information to the original sources TIGHAR has seen traditionally held theories fall away and new information bring fresh insight into the problem. Slowly the pieces of the puzzle have come together but it also has become increasingly apparent that a key piece is missing.

Witness reports reliably trace the path of l'Oiseau Blanc to an area about 15 miles north of Machias, Maine. The only witness to the flight's end was woodsman Anson Berry who heard, but did not see, an aircraft approaching from the east. He told friends that he believed the aircraft crashed into the Round Lake Hills. In 1984 and 1985 search operations combed those hills but the results were negative. Then in late 1985 a new witness came forward with an account of an engine he had seen in the woods in 1970. His testimony was subjected to rigorous scrutiny and judged to be genuine. What he described could very well be the wreckage of l'Oiseau Blanc. The trouble was, he saw it two miles south of the Round Lake Hills. How could that be reconciled with Berry's account?

## **May 9, 1927—A Turn of Fate**

New York is a forgotten dream as the White Bird, on its last dregs of fuel, pushes inland over coastal Maine. The crew is consoled in the knowledge that they have accomplished the first east to west crossing of the Atlantic, and with every minute they remain aloft the quartering tailwind helps add miles to their world record for non-stop distance. Scudding through the base of the lowering overcast they are reassured by the many lakes that slide by below, testimony to their wisdom in selecting an aircraft with water landing capability.

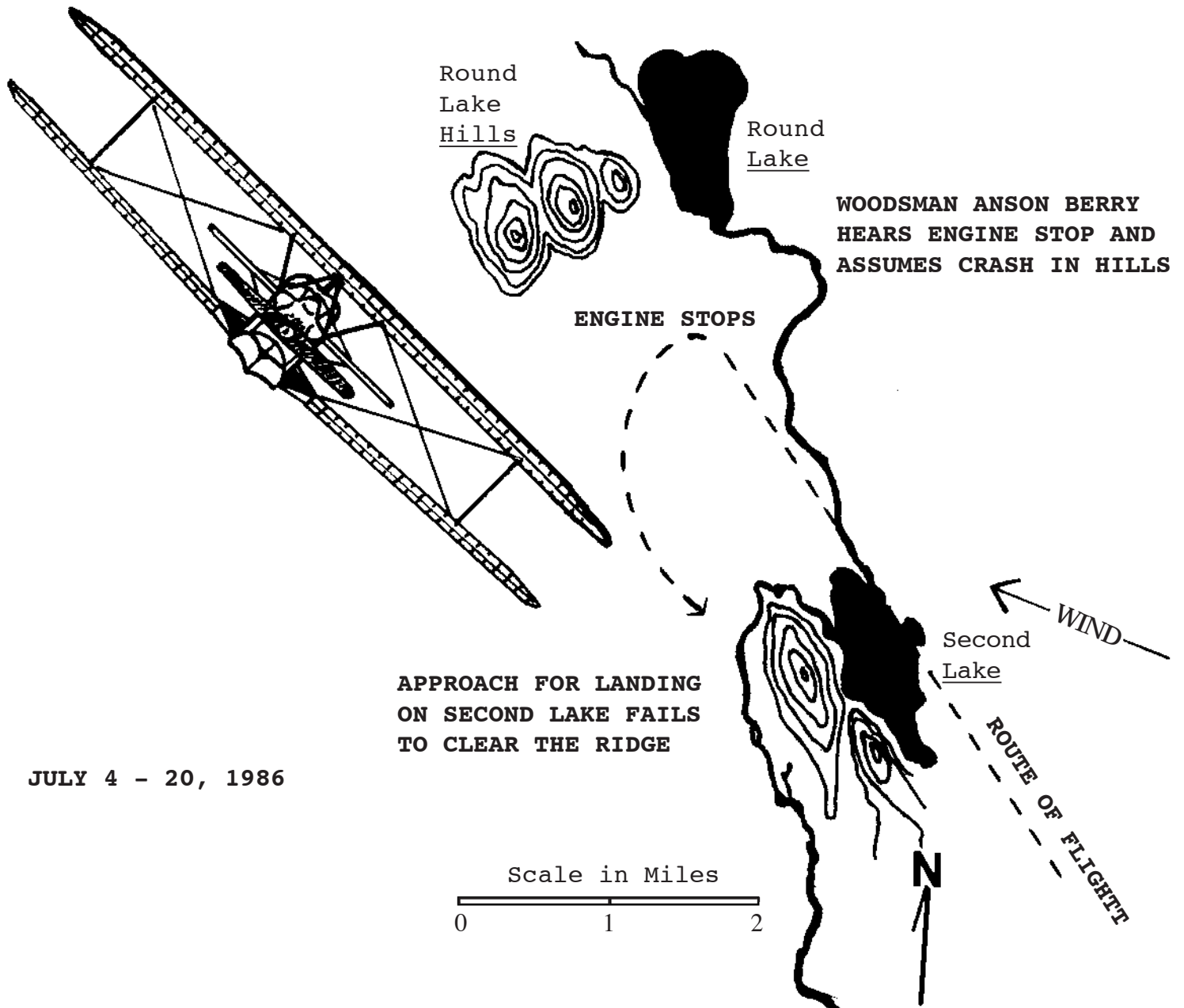
It is in the forty-second hour of flight that the engine of the White Bird finally sputters and dies. The failing light and gathering mist have almost eliminated forward visibility, but they have just passed over a lake which is more than adequate for a safe landing. Nungesser begins a gentle instrument turn back around to the left while Coli engages the mechanism which locks the twelve foot propeller in the horizontal position, in preparation for a water landing.

Below, Anson Berry has traced the sound of an approaching aircraft from his canoe near the foot of Round Lake. As the sound comes near it sputters and stops, and he knows what that must mean. What he cannot know is that the unseen aircraft has begun a silent turn back to the south. For Nungesser and Coli, the helpful tailwind has now become an enemy, widening and slowing their turn back to the lake, until the mist reveals not welcoming water but a wall of trees. If a faint ripping crash echoes through the hills and reaches the ear of Anson Berry, still gazing expectantly toward the Round Lake Hills, it only confirms his expectations.

## The Search

Is a turn back toward Second Lake the puzzle's missing piece? It fits all the other known pieces and explains why nothing was found in the Round Lake Hills. After verifying this theory's feasibility with in-flight simulations, a decision was made to mount a full scale search of the new area. The search, set for July 4-20, will be by far the largest and best equipped to date. A campsite is being established in the search area using tents and equipment provided by the Maine National Guard. Navigation on the ground and management of the search grid will enjoy unprecedented accuracy through the use of Loran units donated and specially modified for field use by King Marine, Racal Megapulse, and Stead Aviation. All TIGHAR members should have received a Notice of Expedition including registration information for all or any part of the operation. Anyone who did not receive a Notice and would like to should contact TIGHAR at 302/378-8700.

# MAY 9, 1927



JULY 4 - 20, 1986



# MIDNIGHT GHOST

On the morning of May 8, 1927, a large single engined biplane climbed heavily away from Le Bourget field near Paris. Behind on the dewy turf a crowd of well-wishers, mechanics, flappers, chambermaids and celebrities breathed a collective "Bon voyage" as the chalky white Levasseur PL8, popularly dubbed "l'Oiseau Blanc" (the White Bird), faded into the mist. The sound of its engine, so strident moments before, now blended with the soft rumble of storm clouds hulking on the eastern horizon. As the curious and the hopeful dispersed after their all-night vigil, they were haunted by images of the dawn: ...the glare that split the darkness as hangar doors were rolled open, and an electric charge surged through the crowd: "This is it. They're going to go." ... Francois Coli, his black monocle and mischievous smile exchanged for a simple patch and a hard expression befitting the master navigator charged with guiding the first non-stop flight between Paris and New York .... Charles Nungesser, his scarred jaw set against the prospect of 40-odd hours at the stick in a cockpit open to the weather of the North Atlantic, flashing his golden smile only once, as he caught a rose thrown by a little girl ....

The next day another crowd gathered 3,700 miles away to welcome the arrival of the White Bird in New York. Although the plane carried no radio, eager reports from those who had seen or heard its passing had tracked its progress. But despite assurances of imminent arrival, no white biplane emerged triumphantly from the lowering clouds. Nungesser and Coli, in the words of Charles Lindbergh, who ten days later succeeded where they failed, had "vanished like midnight ghosts."



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Nearly sixty years have passed and yet another crowd gathers in the early morning chill and damp; once more the curious and the hopeful have come seeking a glimpse of l'Oiseau Blanc. But they are not spectators; they are searchers who have traveled hundreds, in some cases thousands, of miles to this obscure spot deep in the wilderness of northeastern Maine. Although from a wide variety of backgrounds, they share a common conviction--that the flight of the White Bird ended not far from where they stand. The searchers are under no illusions about the immensity of the task confronting them. The evidence that has brought them to this area is a jigsaw puzzle of witness reports which fit together to make a compelling, if incomplete, picture. But witnesses, no matter how convincing, do not constitute historical proof. That will come with discovery of the physical remains of the flight and, after sixty years, precious little of a wood and fabric airplane will survive. The greatest obstacle they face is the ability of even a seemingly small section of this forest to impede, conceal and devour whatever enters it. In the face of such frustrating odds and air of self-deprecating humor helps keep spirits high. It would be a grave error for anyone to mistake their good humor for lack of commitment.

Statistics alone cannot begin to convey the effort which has brought Project Midnight Ghost to its current level of international recognition and respect, but they do provide some measure of the project's scope: three years of research, ten search expeditions, 104 volunteer searchers over 5,000 collective hours of wilderness search operations, technical assistance from 10 corporations and 5 government agencies in the U.S. and France, over \$50,000 in contributions from corporations, foundations and individuals. Yet Project Midnight Ghost will never result in a restorable airplane for any museum. The spark that fires all this effort is the human compulsion to know the truth--to solve the mystery of the White Bird.

**PROJECT MIDNIGHT GHOST**  
**Summary of Research and On-site Operations**  
**May--September 1986**

May 8--11 On-site evaluation of Loran C as search management aid.

**Results:** Inadequate resolution obtainable in search area due to signal interference.

June 30--July 3 Pre-expedition gridding and set-up.

**Results:** Northern sector of search area gridded by conventional surveying methods.

July 4--21 Expedition IX.

**Results:** Northern sector searched; central sector gridded and searched.

August 11-13 Witness interview and aerial photo survey.

**Results:** Detailed testimony recorded on videotape; aerial photography of southern sector taken.

August 27 Archival photo research, Washington, DC.

**Results:** Early aerial photography of search area revealed anomalies for on-site investigation.

September 7--11 Pre-expedition set up.

**Results:** New campsite in southern sector cleared and set up.

September 12--22 Expedition X.

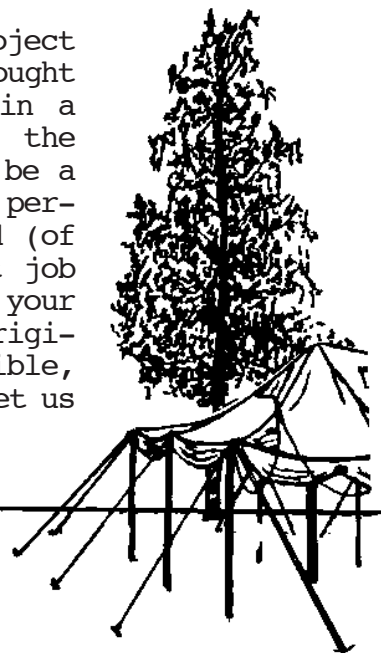
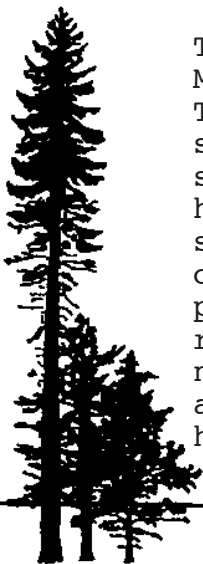
**Results:** Western half of southern sector gridded and searched. Reconnaissance of eastern half.

**Overall results: Narrowing of search area by approximately 80%.**

An intensive effort is being planned for late April/early May, with the objective of bringing the project to a successful conclusion in time for the 60th anniversary of the flight. A Notice of Expedition will go out to members when dates and details are finalized, but start planning around that time-frame now!

**ATTENTION SEARCHERS**

The search expedition of 1986 not only brought Project Midnight Ghost closer to finding l'Oiseau Blanc, they brought TIGHAR members from all over the country together in a special camaraderie. We would like to memorialize the summer's experiences in yearbook format. This would be a hard-cover album featuring the archeological and the personal aspects of the expeditions, including maps and (of course) photographs -- lots of 'em. To do the best job possible we need your help. Send us your suggestions, your recollections, and your photographs (we'll return the originals). We'll let you know about cost as soon as possible, and we'll shoot for publication by the end of March. Let us hear from you.

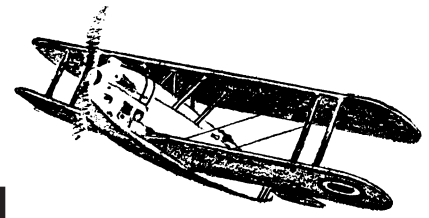




## The Summer of the 59th Year

### High Points, Low Points, and Lessons

- Lesson --** The moose fly is the only insect known to attack in combat formation. High squadron often uses deer flies as fighter cover.
- Low point --** Jerry consumes 1.5 times his weigh in lobsters, clams, corn and pie at the 4th of July bash, then demonstrates the Technicolor yawn.
- High point --** Rain-soaked searchers in the northern sector behold an apparition: the Angel of Death is among them.
- High point --** Rocky materializes out of the murk and joins the search. "I only drink fruit juice in the woods" soon becomes "Will this \$10 cover the beer I'll drink tonight?"
- Low point --** Water buffalol, Steve 0.
- High point --** Nine pounds of fresh-caught Atlantic salmon grilled with dill butter over an open campfire.
- Lesson --** When a man tells you he does not play the bagpipes--believe him.
- Low point --** Ric and Dutch run an all-day recon and later learn that, in the spirit of Christopher Columbus and Jim Reed, they didn't know where they were going, they didn't know where they were when they got there, and didn't know where they'd been when they got back.
- High point --** Roland Nungesser (Charles' nephew) and assistant Francoise Millet arrive from Paris escorted by Nicolas Durieux of the French Embassy. Upon bringing them and the press to the camp for a diplomatic tour, Ric and Pat discover too late that two cases of beer arrived earlier and the troops have found Phil's peach schnapps. An international incident is narrowly avoided when George, Tyler and Ralph decide they can speak French and corner Mademoiselle Millet.
- High point --** Roland Nungesser asks to see the wine list at Graham's Restaurant in Machias.
- Lesson --** When a guy has been in the woods for a week it's not fair to make him share a tent with ten high school kids, especially when one is a seventeen year old blonde who moans in her sleep.
- High point --** The Bermuda Triangle and the Devil's Triangle are joined by the mystery of Mary's Triangle.
- Lesson --** You don't know the meaning of trust until you've cut point in thick stuff with somebody else's machete singing in your ear.



# CURTAIN CALL

Every once in a while history loses its head and goes all dramatic. Sometimes the scene is pure pathos, as when the Titanic went down on her maiden voyage and when Challenger blew up on its most emotionally loaded flight. At other times, history provides its dramas with a happy ending. One of those times was the spring of 1927.

Lindbergh's solo New York to Paris flight galvanized a generation and heralded the dawn of international air travel. It was an heroic achievement, but the flight itself does not explain the public's phenomenal reaction to it. To understand what was really going on in 1927 we must look at the way history set the stage for the Lindbergh flight.

## ACT I

The opening act was played in 1919, with a flurry of spectacular transatlantic flights. In rapid succession the NC-4 leapfrogged to England via the Azores and Portugal; Hawker and Grieve disappeared at sea only to miraculously turn up alive and well after all hope had been lost; Alcock and Brown flew non-stop from Newfoundland to Ireland; and finally the British airship R-34 flew nonstop from Scotland to New York, then turned around and flew back to England. Amid public speculation that transatlantic air travel would soon become routine, Raymond Orteig set a \$25,000 prize for the first non-stop flight in either direction between Paris and New York.

## ACT II

There followed an intermission of several years, during which various long distance flights were accomplished but no serious bid was made for the Orteig prize. The curtain went up again in 1926 when French ace Rene Fonck prepared a giant tri-motored Sikorsky for the Paris flight, only to lose the ship and two crewmen in a fiery take-off crash. Across the Atlantic another French attempt met a similar fate when the Potez 25 biplane of Paul Tarascon and Francois Coli burned after an accident. Tarascon, the pilot, was out of the picture with injuries, but his navigator was destined for a major role in the transatlantic drama's climactic scenes.

## ACT III

April 1927. Five aircraft and 10 aviators are on stage. Byrd's tri-motored Fokker stands on its nose following a test flight and the audience gasps. On April 26 real tragedy strikes as Davis and Wooster are killed in the crash of their Keystone. Chamberlin's Bellanca is ready to go and seems more than capable, but petty wranglings among the flight's promoters paralyze the effort. Repairs to Byrd's Fokker are nearly complete when, on May 8, word is flashed that Nungesser and Coli have successfully taken off from Paris and are expected in New York the next day. Joyful expectation turns to concern and then alarm when their white biplane fails to appear, and must be presumed down somewhere en route.

For nearly two weeks headlines chronicle the frantic search, the families' anguish, and the false hopes and cruel hoaxes which punctuate the mystery. Byrd announces he will not attempt a flight while Nungesser and Coli are still missing. Chamberlin and company, although willing to try, are still embroiled in legal battles. In the midst of this turmoil a young airmail pilot makes a cross country flight with the announced intention of flying on to Paris alone. As hope fades that Nungesser and Coli will be found alive the press brands Lindbergh the Flying Fool, but on his arrival at Le Bourget the evening of May 21 he is instantly the Lone Eagle.

The popular impact of Lindbergh's flight can only be explained in the context in which it was made. Like the other contenders, he was a professional willing to take a calculated risk. For him the reward was fame such as few have ever known. For Nungesser and Coli the reward was death and oblivion. After sixty years, perhaps it is time for them to take a well-deserved curtain call.



# DRAMATIS

## CHARLES EUGENE JULES MARIE NUNGESSER

Charles Nungesser was born in Paris on March 15, 1892. His parents separated in 1902, and he lived with his mother. He had an active, athletic childhood. He aspired to a career as a race car driver, but was expelled from technical school for winning a bet by walking a sixth floor window ledge blindfolded. He became a professional boxer at age 16 and was undefeated in nine bouts as a lightweight. Later that year he emigrated to Argentina. He became a race car mechanic, and by the age of 17 was one of South America's better known race drivers. He taught himself to fly by stealing an aircraft in Rio de Janeiro, and soon became a stunt pilot for a traveling air circus.

Nungesser returned to France at age 22 at the outbreak of the war in August 1914. He was refused by the air service and enlisted in the cavalry. After winning two medals for heroism in the opening days of the war, his transfer to the air service was approved, and he was posted to an observation squadron. At this squadron he took off against orders and shot down his first enemy aircraft, winning the Croix de Guerre, a transfer to fighters, and sixteen days confinement to quarters. His first mission as a fighter pilot resulted in further disciplinary action for doing stunts over a German airfield. He ended the war as the most highly decorated Allied pilot, the third highest-scoring French ace (45 victories), and with a reputation for being indestructible after 17 major crashes and injuries failed to ground him.

Nungesser's postwar career included a failed flying school in France, a barnstorming tour of the United States, and a starring role in a U.S. film, "The Sky Raider." He married American socialite Consuelo Hatmaker in 1923, and was divorced from her in 1926. In 1927, at age 35, he joined with Francois Coli in the Paris-New York attempt. He disappeared May 8/9, 1927, during the transatlantic flight.



*Musee de l'Air*

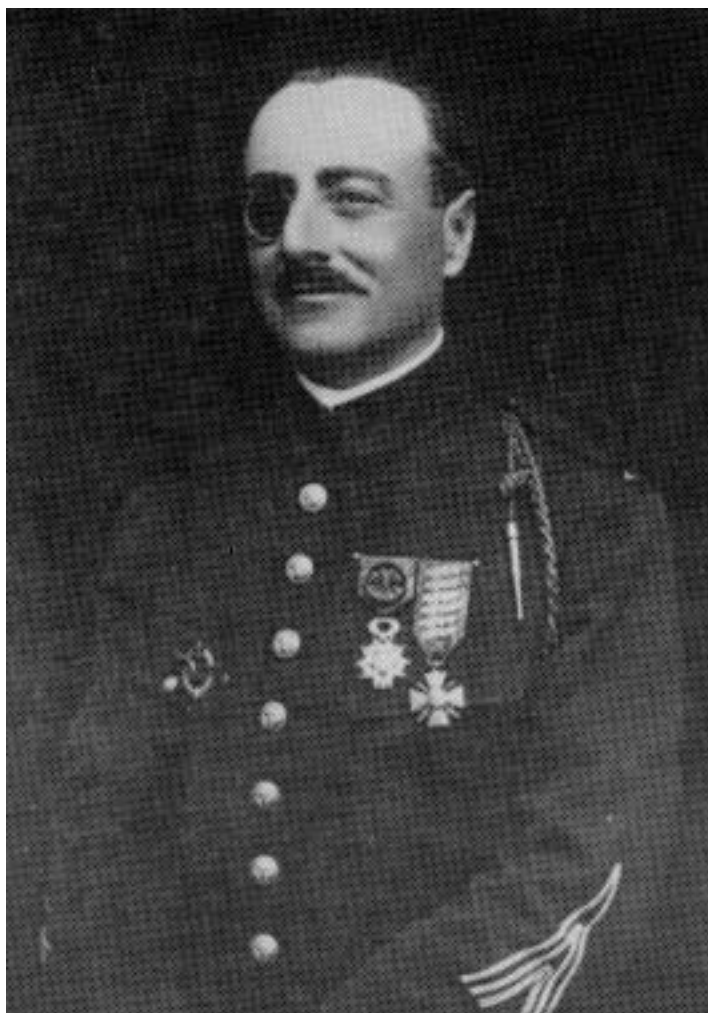
# PERSONAE

## FRANCOIS COLI

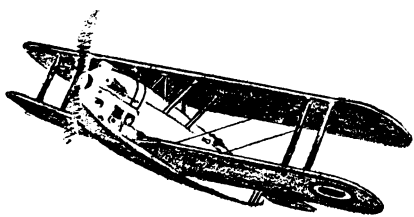
Francois Coli was born in Marseille on June 5, 1881 to an old Corsican family of strong maritime traditions. He was an excellent student but decided to go to sea rather than pursue an academic career. In 1905, at the age of 24, he obtained a Superior Diploma as "Captain of Long Distance." He had a successful career as a sea captain for 14 years. During this time he married Juliette Hugues and had three daughters, Myriam, Lucie and Camille. When war broke out, no ship was available in the French Navy, so he volunteered as an infantry private. In February 1915 he was promoted to Lieutenant, and then to Captain the following June. He was wounded twice and suffered severe frostbite in his feet. Because of this, he transferred to the air service on January 19, 1916. He became Commander of the Escadrille des Coqs and finished the war with three more wounds, including the loss of his right eye, and many decorations.

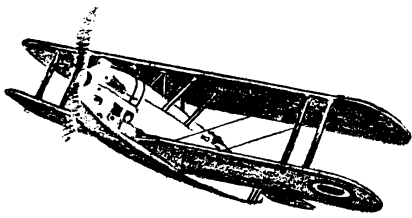
Following the war, Coli became a long-distance flyer. On January 26, 1919, he achieved the first double crossing of the Mediterranean with Henri Roget. This was an over-water long distance record. On May 24, 1919, again with Roget, he set a long distance record from Paris to Kenitra, a distance of 2,200 km. He was injured in the crash at the end of the flight. In 1920, with Sadi-LeCointe, he made further long distance flights around the Mediterranean.

In 1923, Coli began planning a nonstop transatlantic flight with Paul Tarascon. Tarascon and Coli were, in 1925, the first official registrants for the Paris-New York Orteig prize of \$25,000. Late in 1926 an accident destroyed their transatlantic aircraft and Tarascon was severely burned. A new aircraft was sought and Tarascon relinquished his place as pilot to Charles Nungesser. Francois Coli disappeared May 8/9, 1927, attempting to fly the Atlantic non-stop between Paris and New York.



*Guillot-Coli Collection*





# MIDNIGHT GHOST

As Project Midnight Ghost begins its fourth season of search operations, we find ourselves with public interest, international recognition, search capability and technological support far beyond anything we've had before. We need it. May 9 marks the 60th anniversary of the disappearance of l'Oiseau Blanc, and we're pulling out all the stops to find its remains by that date.

Because the lingering Maine winter will keep us off the hills until late April, we're using the time until then to make the best preparations possible. As we go to press, final arrangements are being made for TIGHAR, in cooperation with the Smithsonian's National Air & Space Museum, to hold an investigative seminar at the museum on March 4 and 5. The seminar's purpose is to evaluate all the evidence gathered in three years of research and to investigate the applicability of a wide range of technology for employment in this year's search. Scientists, scholars and authorities from all over the United States will be helping us make sure that when we go back to Maine we'll have the best chance possible of finding the White Bird. TIGHAR is indebted to the Smithsonian Institution and especially to the management and staff of the National Air & Space Museum, not only for making their facilities available to us but for their help in recruiting Smithsonian scientists and scholars from all around the Mall to participate in this event.

Journalistic coverage of the project has always been good but has now reached national and international prominence. We'd like to especially thank members Stephan Wilkinson, whose article The Search for I'Oiseau Blanc in the Feb/Mar issue of Smithsonian's Air & Space Magazine so perfectly captured the magic of the Nungesser/Coli story, and Len Morgan, whose Vectors column, Airplanes Unearthed, in the March issue of Flying has filled TIGHAR's mailbox with new members. Press coverage of the project will continue to grow, and while publicity will not find l'Oiseau Blanc, it can help find the funding which makes possible the technology which will find it.

## NOTICE OF EXPEDITION



TIGHAR now plans to conduct ground search operations in Maine from Saturday, April 25, through Saturday, May 9. A variety of considerations make it impractical to camp in the search area this time around, while the availability of better technology both increases our chances of success and reduces our personnel needs. We will therefore be staying at a motel in Machias, eating breakfast and dinner in town, and lunch in the field. TIGHAR members may volunteer to participate for all or any portion of the search, but we must limit the total number of searchers at any one time to twelve. A \$50/day fee will cover all food, lodging and transportation while participating in the search. Registration will be on a first come, first served basis.

If you are a TIGHAR member and wish to register for this spring's Project Midnight Ghost search operations, please write to TIGHAR, P.O. Box 424, Middletown, DE 19709. Include the dates you wish to participate and a \$50 registration fee. When your registration is accepted you will receive an information packet and an invoice calculated at \$50/day (we count the day you arrive but not the day you leave). The registration fee is in addition to the expedition fees and is only refundable in the event we are unable to accept your registration. Please include your telephone number(s) with your registration, so we can reach you and offer you alternative dates if your choice is filled. Participants are responsible for their own transportation to and from Machias, which is located on U.S. Route 1 in the extreme northeast corner of Maine. The closest commercial airports are Bar Harbor (one hour by rental car) and Bangor (two hours by rental car). Machias has an excellent general aviation airport (Halifax sectional), and air taxis are available from Bangor and Bar Harbor.



# MEMBER-TO-MEMBER

## WHEN I WAS THE ONLY GIRL IN THE WORLD...

Whenever anyone launches into a new adventure such as Project Midnight Ghost, I am sure there are those fears and apprehensions. YOU know the ones: will the food be 50 ways to cook SPAM, how bad can the latrine really be, what if I hate these people on sight, and so forth. Well, I am no different, and I was the only searching female of the project in July, as Pat spent most of her time driving the Land Rover back and forth to town to fetch food, searchers, food, beer, food.... I worried about the food, the facilities, and most of all if I could keep up, carry my own weight--and how well would I be accepted.

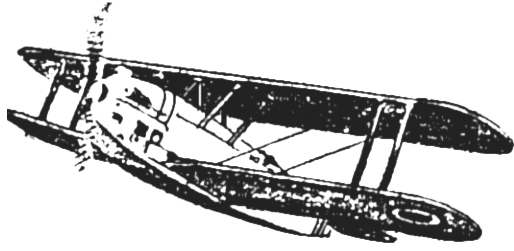
I am here now to tell all you TIGHAR women out there: you don't know what you missed. TIGHAR and the members of the Midnight Ghost team are some of the best people I know. They are from all walks of life, each different, but sharing a love of aviation and a desire to preserve its history. I'm sure that common goal is what led to such quick friendships and rapport. The group made me feel relaxed, secure, and an integral part of the team. We mutually endured the rain and bugs, talked of home, and spent many long hours working to bring the White Bird to her rightful home.

As for the next TIGHAR adventure--count me in, and this time, I'm sharing the fun. Husband Ted will be there too!

--Mary Lynn Foster Becker



*Photo by Weldon*



Oh, every heart hopes  
you may yet be found!

Dear Captain Gillespie,

You may imagine how I felt when I read [in the newspaper] the article about your proposed "Project Midnight Ghost Expedition." I rushed to my very old files, found my Nungesser poem, and had [a copy] made which I enclose.

The fact that all three Philadelphia newspapers--The Inquirer, the Evening Public Ledger, and the Bulletin printed the poem on May 19, 1927, shows the general excitement that flight engendered. Two days later, May 21, 1927, Lindbergh made his thrilling flight, and the Nungesser story dropped out of the headlines. Nobody seemed to care .... As for my poem, people remember it by saying, "Oh yes, you once wrote a poem to Lindbergh, didn't you?" Thus do the facts of history become distorted....

--Mary Wickham Bond, Philadelphia, PA  
(Mrs. James Bond)

## WRITES POEM TO NUNGESSER

### Unknown Fate of Heroic Flyer Inspires Miss Mary F. W. Porcher

The undetermined. fate of Captain Charles Nungesser, missing French aviator who with Captain Francois, Coli has not been heard from since they hopped off on their non-stop flight from Paris to New York, has prompted a poem by Miss Mary F. Wickham Porcher, society girl.

Miss Porcher is the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Samuel Porcher, Chestnut Hill. She is well-known in local literary circles. Two years ago she received the Browning Medal for the best original poem submitted by members of the Browning Society. Her poem on Nungesser is built on the same meter as Shelley's famous "Ode to the Skylark." It follows:

### TO NUNGESSER.

(With apologies to Shelley)

Hail to you, brave spirit!  
Bird you tried to be,  
Flying to heaven, or near it,  
In your ecstasy.  
To conquer air and leap across the sea!

Higher still and higher  
From the earth you sprang,  
The hearts of men afire  
With a hope that rang  
From shore to shore, but not without a pang.

For though great ships sail over  
The foaming, heaving sea;  
Though thoughts may swiftly cover  
Vast spaces easily,  
Air conquered by man's wings is yet to be.

But are you lost, Nungesser?  
Are you still onwardbound,  
Aerial aggressor,  
And scorner of the ground?  
Oh, every heart hopes you may yet be found!

Or has the "White Bird" flown  
Into the setting sun,  
Leaving your fate unknown  
To any mortal one,  
A fate that even you could not outrun?

Brave spirit! Though you fly  
Into the atmosphere  
And choose at last to die  
In some far-distant sphere,  
Know well your memory will linger here!

MARY WICKHAM PORCHER

# NEW EVIDENCE

Expedition #11: April 25-May 10, 1987

It was exhilarating and it was exasperating. It was by far the most successful expedition ever. And yet, ultimately we failed once more to achieve our final goal. We have not yet found the White Bird.

It's difficult for some people to understand how and why we keep going back, as we will in July, to once more press the search and perhaps once more come back empty-handed. Some find it difficult to fathom how we can be convinced that we're getting closer, like a child playing cold/ hot, when we still don't have the first piece of confirmed physical evidence that what we're looking for is there at all. We've been called obsessed (and worse) by some, while others have urged us to abandon our step-by-logical-step methodology in favor of pursuing the revelations of psychics and dowzers. It is tempting, in the light of such criticism, to comment upon the popular demand for instant gratification and say a few things about scientific method versus magic—but we won't. We'll talk instead about the new clues we found in Maine.

As we all remember this whole thing started with a story about a woodsman named Anson Berry who claimed to have heard a plane crash near Round Lake north of Machias, Maine. Local speculation has always been that the crash Berry heard could have been the missing French airplane so much in the news at that time. While many coincidences make the possibility worth investigating, we must remember that the story is now 60 years old and Anson Berry has been dead for 51 of them. Sifting truth from legend has been a difficult process, and only very recently have some puzzling aspects of the story begun to make sense:

- Any aircraft, not to mention a crashing one, would have been remarkable in Maine at any time in the late 1920's and early 30's. There has never been a documented connection between the incident and the specific date of May 9, 1927-until now.

*“The mark of any good theory is that it makes coordinated sense of a string of observations otherwise independent and inexplicable.”*

—STEPHEN JAY GOULD  
*Hens' Teeth and Horses' Toes*

- Because an airplane's passing would have been so remarkable it is inconceivable that Berry was the only local person to hear it. We now know that he wasn't.
- The legend always held that Anson Berry didn't go to look for the plane because that's just the way he was. New facts and some new questions about Anson Berry provide much more insight into a character far more complex than was previously supposed.

In 1984 the Round Lake Legend received some measure of corroboration when we learned that Everett and Abigail Scott had reported hearing an aircraft pass low overhead as they drove along the Township 19 Road northeast of Round Lake. They later assumed they had heard the same airplane Berry reported. But the Scotts were long dead when we heard of their experience and there was no firm date for the incident.

It wasn't until our most recent trip to Maine that we were able to find not only other witnesses to an aircraft's passing but document the connection between that incident and May 1927. Harold Vining is 78 years old, active and sharp, a man of impeccable reputation in the community. Harold Vining may also be the last living witness to the end of the White Bird. He remembers clearly stepping outside the back door of the family farm house, as a boy of 18, and being amazed at the sound of an airplane as it passed over the house. He had been following news reports of the impending transatlantic flights about to take off from New York, but he dismissed the possibility that this was one of those aircraft. It was going the wrong way-towards New York. The Vining home stood, and still stands, on a hilltop about 2 miles northeast of the Township 19 Road and about 4 miles northeast of Anson Berry's camp. This spring Harold Vining stood in that same dooryard and traced a line across the sky for us, referenced to landmarks unchanged in 60 years. He told of how the

## PROJECT MIDNIGHT GHOST

sound of the motor receded in the direction of what he knew back then to be Anson Berry's domain until, very suddenly, it stopped "...like you'd cut it off with a switch."

Lola Downing, now 56, remembers another afternoon a few years later, when as a young girl she stood in the dining room of her family's house as her mother told her, "I know it's true because I heard it myself. That airplane from Europe came over before Lindbergh." She remembers especially that her mother, Mary Gould, was upset that local people had not done more to find the plane. We don't know where Mary Gould was when she heard the plane but the house where she lived in 1927 is just a few miles northeast of the Vining farm.

It seems incredible that after 60 years of silence we should be able to reconstruct with some degree of certainty the last nine minutes of the flight of the White Bird. Yet Harold Vining has given us a line of flight, referenced to fixed points, which agrees with the testimony of Berry, the Scotts, and Mary Gould. Being able to track those last nine minutes gives us the encouragement to persevere in the search, but it's tracking the last nine seconds that will give us the wreckage of the airplane. The secret of those final moments seems to have gone with Anson Berry to his grave—so we've done some digging.

### The Man Behind the Legend

"He'd have said, 'I was just trying to make my living fishing. If somebody wants to make a fool of himself in an aeroplane, it's nothing to me.'" So Iva Berry, Anson's daughter, explains why her father didn't go to look for the airplane he heard crash nearby on a foggy afternoon. To the people of Washington County, it's an explanation with a familiar ring. In many ways Anson Berry has himself become a legend. Tough, competent, feared by many, trusted by his friends, he kept to himself and made his own rules, a sort of Clint Down-Eastwood.

But a closer look at the real Anson Berry reveals much more. Following the death of his wife in childbirth, he gave the infant Iva to his sister and in 1909 went West to Montana. He worked there as a cowboy and a logger until 1916, when he returned briefly to Maine to ask his brother Carl to come back out West with him. Anson returned to Montana and Carl followed soon after, but the next year, 1917, Anson came back to Maine and went up river to five by himself in the woods. Carl Berry was never heard from again. No one seems to be able to explain Anson's second and permanent return from Montana, but rumors



IVA BERRY COLLECTION

Anson Berry

of trouble with the law are consistent with his subsequent behavior. If indeed he was "laying low" the Round Lake Legend starts to make much more sense.

At the same time, upon closer examination the tough-guy image doesn't hold up. The same man who sported an antiquated .45 revolver and a brace of ugly hunting dogs when he came to town prized nothing more than the flower gardens which surrounded his woodland camp. The man who hurled a gift grind-stone into the river upon discovering that it was second-hand would travel miles to take a friend a loaf of his famous sourdough bread. Not at all the misanthropic hermit of the legend, Anson Berry was a complex and, ultimately, a tragic character whose true role in the tragedy of the White Bird we may yet discover. The TIGHAR advance team arrived in Machias to Organize the Search on April 19, and immediately discovered that all previously accessible access into the search area was inaccessible.

## NOTES FROM THE FIELD

### Expedition #11: April 25—May 10, 1987

*“Now,” said Rabbit, “this is a Search, and I’ve Organized it—”*  
*“Done what to it?” said Pooh.*  
*“Organized it. Which means—well, it’s what you do to a*  
*Search, when you don’t all look in the same place at once. ...”*  
*“Is Piglet Organized too?”*  
*“We all are,” said Rabbit, and off he went.*  
 —A. A. MILNE *The House at Pooh Corner*



*“Look, we’re just going to have to leave it here, walk back out to the main road and worry about towing it out later.”*

When the searchers arrived on the 25th they were briefed on an ingenious solution to the problem.

*“Okay, we’ll be driving in as far as this point on the map, then we’ll walk these last couple inches. Questions?”*

*“Yeah. What’s the scale of that map?”*

Search operations got underway and were rewarded on April 20 with the discovery of a bone which was identified by an orthopedic surgeon and the county medical examiner as a human tibia—a shin bone. Despite media pressure for a dramatic announcement the decision was made to have the bone evaluated by a forensic anthropologist. The answer came back: right tibia of a young moose. It was a welcome verdict because a human bone would have raised far more questions that it would have answered. The find did, however, demonstrate the thoroughness with which the team was searching.

*“Terrific. We comb the woods for the White Bird and come up with Bullwinkle.”*

On the 29th the Aerospatiale Twinstar helicopter arrived equipped with FLIR Systems’ forward looking infrared. Over the next three days aerial sweeps were flown over the search area guided by helium filled marker balloons. Both the FLIR and the helicopter performed spectacularly despite less than ideal weather conditions. Pilot Ron Manning held a steady search platform in very gusty conditions as Dave Likes Manned the FLIR. An eyeball team scanned the ground visually and struggled with the inevitable consequences of the turbulence.

*“Abhh ... TIGHAR Leader this is Alpha Hotel. We’re going to set down at the LZ for a minute to let some stomachs settle.”*

In the end the insulating properties of the very dense moss in the area prevented an adequate thermal return just as everyone had expected, but that in no way lessened the significance of the Aerospatiale/FLIR contribution to the search effort.

Another boost to the operation came with the arrival on May 3 of Marilyn Greene, an internationally known professional investigator with an enviable record of success in search and rescue. With her help the search team was able to at last locate an area which fit the description given by Jim Reed, the hunter who in 1970 found an engine in the woods which fits

the description of the White Bird’s 450hp Lorraine-Dietrich.

On May 9, through the generosity of two TIGHAR members and searchers (you know who you are and we know who you are and we thank you) Jim Reed was brought back to the search area and was able to confirm that the area identified did indeed match his recollections.

**Notice:** The following will make sense only to veterans of Project Midnight Ghost search operations. We apologize for the frustration to other members and encourage you to come along next time.

It is now quite certain that Jim came through the “neck” between the foot of the big heath and the heath beside the river, and moved northward into what is a surprisingly open area relatively untouched by the budworm and never logged. There is a whole series of clearings up through there which look just like his sketch of where he saw the engine. The area has not yet been gridded and searched and that is one of July’s target areas.



*Search leader Ric Gillespie and the Aerospatiale Twinstar. The forward looking infra-red turret is visible under the nose.*

## ONE LESS LOOSE END?

By Geoffrey Hurlbut

*Geoff Hurlbut is a TIGHAR member from Randolph, NJ with an extensive background in art and photography, as well as history and aviation.*

The Nungesser and Coli flight has its share of mysteries, and some of them may never be solved, even if the remains of L'Oiseau Blanc are found. One of those loose ends, and an admittedly minor one, concerns the color of the flight suits Nungesser and Coli wore for their transatlantic attempt. References indicate that the suits were yellow, but photographs of the duo in their flight gear show the suits to be a dark color. The common assumption, based on the look of leather oilskin, or rubber protective gear, is that the suits are brown or black.

I have not seen the written references regarding yellow suits, but if they are reliable, then I believe that the suits in the photographs are actually yellow. This is because the black and white film in common use then had the effect of making yellow appear a much darker color.

The most widely used film during the first quarter of the 20th century was orthochromatic. An improvement over ordinary, or monochromatic, film, which is sensitive only to blue light, orthochromatic film is sensitive to blue and green light. Used without filters, orthochromatic film reproduces yellow with grey-tone values equal to blue, and red is reproduced as black. Panchromatic film, which is sensitive to blue, green and red light and reproduces colors in tones approximating their visual brightness, only became commonly available in the 1930's.<sup>1</sup>

Reference to this coloring effect is mentioned in Profile #51 of *Aircraft in Profile*, Vol. 3.<sup>2</sup> This reference concerns the Gee Bee racers, circa 1931, but the effect can also be seen in photos of the aircraft "L'Oiseau Canari," which made its first transatlantic attempt in the fall of 1928.<sup>3</sup> As apparent from the name (Yellow Bird), this plane was painted a bright yellow. In the photos, however, the aircraft appears to be as dark as the natty, and probably business-blue, suits its crewmembers are wearing.

This does not prove that the suits Nungesser and Coli are wearing in the photos are yellow, but it is a probable explanation. Proof could be found in the form of the original negatives, which might either indicate, or be tested to identify, the film type.

<sup>1</sup>Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1964), p. 92.

<sup>2</sup>Peter Bowers, "The Gee Bee Racers," in *Aircraft in Profile*, Vol. 3, ed. Martin C. Windrow (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, Inc.), p. 5.

<sup>3</sup>Edward Jablonski, *Atlantic Fever* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1972), p. 274.



PHOTO OF MUSÉE DE L'AIR

*Nungesser and Coli in the cockpit of l'Oiseau Blanc, dressed for the traverse of the Atlantic. Note flying suits which appear to be brown.*

### Note to Loose End

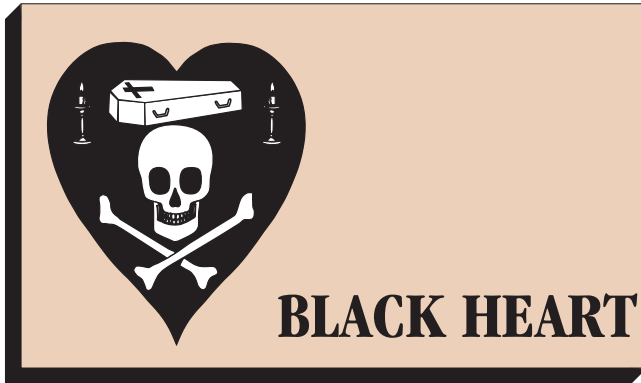
The references to yellow flight suits occur in at least two books:

Dale M. Titler, *Wings of Mystery* (New York), p. 126: "The two men, dressed in yellow flying coveralls, climbed into the cockpits..."

Jack Huttig, *1927 Summer of Eagles* (Chicago, 1980), p. 24: "At 4:50 a.m. Nungesser and Coli appeared beside their airplane in yellow leather flying suits that had wires for electrical heating."

These are not original sources, nor is either book footnoted. Both books contain other details known to be incorrect, but inaccuracies and contradictions are, unfortunately, the rule rather than the exception in the folklore of the White Bird. On the other hand, the problem of flight suit color is one of scant rather than conflicting information. They are seldom mentioned, but when they are they are described as yellow.

*Editor*



In an historical investigation riddled with mystery and what can only be described as an undercurrent of surrealism, one of the most intriguing details is the famous Coeur Noir—Black Heart—insignia emblazoned on the sides of the White Bird. It was the personal trademark of Charles Nungesser, featured, with variations, on all of his aircraft throughout World War I and his postwar career. On one level it is pure Hollywood—a stroke of marketing genius from a man who built his fame around contempt for death. But there’s much more to it than that—a lot of stuff going on that provides insight into his character.

The central feature of the device—a death’s head—was the traditional insignia of the Totenkopf Hussars, a well-known German cavalry unit. In the first days of World War I, Private Nungesser of the French cavalry distinguished himself in a bizarre incident involving a frantic chase in a captured German staff car—a Mors. In decorating the young hero and granting his transfer to the air service a General quipped that he was a Hussar de Mors, a pun on hussar de mort (death). It was apparently this incident which prompted Nungesser’s adoption of the death’s head, and the simple skull and bones appear on the nose of his first operational aircraft. As the war, his fame, and his injuries grew, the insignia evolved into a complex piece of individual heraldry. The significance of its separate components is unexplained and somewhat puzzling. The candles and coffin with a cross have strong religious overtones. The candles are lit; the coffin is closed and presumably occupied—but by whom? Is the emblem an illustration of what awaits the enemy or is it something else? And why the heart?

The only explanation recorded is Nungesser’s cryptic response to a reporter’s question regarding the emblem’s presence on the White Bird. He said, “The strong heart does not fear death even in its most terrible aspect.” The enemy in 1927, the North Atlantic, could not be intimidated with a painted symbol. Is the coffin Nungesser’s? The prior acceptance of death is a potent psychological potion for bravery. When l’Oiseau Blanc rolled down the runway at Le Bourget, was François Coli riding with a pilot who was, in his own mind, a dead man?

## GROUP EFFORT

### Expedition #11: April 25–May 10, 1987

The contributions made by the corporations and individuals listed here made the success of Expedition 11 possible. The only reward they will get is your recognition of the fact that they cared.

**Aerospatiale Helicopter Corporation, Grand Prairie, TX**  
Three days’ unlimited use of an Aerospatiale AH355 Twin-turbine helicopter with crew. The machine was ferried from California to Maine especially for TIGHAR.

**Berkely Industries/Narco Avionics, Laguna Beach, CA**  
Two HT830 hand-held transceivers for TIGHAR’s use in the spring and summer expeditions.

**Champion International, Bucksport, ME**  
Unlimited access to the paper company land, and the donated expertise of their forest inventory department.

**FLIR Systems, Inc., Portland, OR**  
Forward-looking infra-red unit with technician for use with Aerospatiale helicopter.

**Graham’s Restaurant, Machias, ME**  
Use of Banquet Room as TIGHAR headquarters throughout the search and hospitality for the TIGHAR team bordering on formal adoption.

**James W. Sewall Company, Old Town, ME**  
Aerial photo/maps of the highest quality whenever needed. The Sewall Company has been absolutely invaluable to Project Midnight Ghost from the very beginning.

**James Sparaga, DMD, Machias, ME**  
Boundless generosity in permitting TIGHAR’s use of vehicles, equipment, office facilities, etc., etc. May we have a moment of silence for the Rover, please?

**Kaysam Corporation of America, Paterson, NJ**  
Twelve four-foot diameter promotional balloons for aerial search sector demarcation.

**Littlebrook Airpark, Eliot, ME**  
Unlimited use of a Cessna 150 aircraft for aerial coordination, reconnaissance and photography throughout the search.

**Michael Rodericks, Trumbull, CT**  
Artwork for the production of the Nungesser/Coli commemorative poster.

**Penobscot Air Service, Ltd., Owl’s Head, ME**  
Transportation for Jim Reed to and from the island of Vinalhaven.

**Robert Dabrowski, Marlborough, NH**  
Use of a truly awesome off-road vehicle affectionately known to the TIGHAR team as The Beast.

**Ed Stead/Stead Aviation, Manchester, NH**  
Custom photo/map overlays for search area navigation and management.

**Wearguard, Inc., Hingham, MA**  
Fifteen hard hats for search team use.

## NOTES FROM THE FIELD

### Expedition XII: July 10—August 4, 1987

One of the first rules of investigating is to stay focused—methodically run down your leads one at a time—don't jump around. Ever since November of '85 our search had centered on an especially enticing description of an engine in the woods, and four major expeditions had doggedly gridded and searched the region where the hunter who saw it said he had been. No one who was there will ever forget the gentle pleasures of the Second Lake country or the tender mercies of the Diamond Match Road. By the end of Expedition XI in May we felt we had "Jim Reed's engine" cornered and July's effort was determined to find it (see *TIGHAR Tracks*, Summer 1987, Vol. 3 No. 1).

Then on June 4 came the phone call with Sherman Graham of Graham's Restaurant in Machias, Maine:

"Fellah was in yesterday and said he'd found a piece of metal up in the woods about eight years ago—thinks it might have been from the airplane."

"Did you get his name?"

"Ayuh. We dragged him into the back room, put him in front of the video camera and got the whole story."

Clark Matthews, none the worse for his interrogation, described finding what sounded very much like a gusset used in vintage aircraft construction, and the hill where he found it fell exactly on the line of flight established by witnesses. It was a small piece of evidence that fit very nicely with all the other small pieces, but not at all with the fabled engine in the woods almost three miles away.

It was decision time. Which hunter's recollection—which ghost—should we chase? When in doubt, philosophize. In the 14th century an English monk and TIGHAR member named William of Occam held that the simplest solution to a problem was most likely to be the correct one. Perhaps because it cut through all the moose manure his principle became known as Occam's Razor. When applied to our situation it became obvious that for Jim Reed's engine to be that of l'Oiseau Blanc required a complex pre-crash scenario for which we had no evidence. But for the aircraft to have crashed on the hill where Clark Matthews found his gusset, dubbed Clark's Hill in a flash of genius, supposed only that the aircraft ran out of fuel, descended in the fog, and hit the first thing that got in its way. With Expedition XII the search for the White Bird shifted to Clark's Hill.

In 1979 when Clark had found the gusset he could think of no apparent explanation for the badly rusted plates of steel. He was deer hunting and carried the piece of debris with him for a short way before putting it down on an inviting shelf of rock as he passed one of the many boulders that dot the



"Curiouser and curiouser!" cried  
Alice.

—Lewis Carroll,  
*Alice's Adventures  
in Wonderland*

hillside. In July of '87 we set ourselves the task of finding the rock in the hope that the gusset was still there. This was real progress. We had spent two years in the Second Lake area searching for an engine that looked like a rock, with no success. Now we were looking for a rock that looked like a rock, and getting the same results. Clark had given us precise qualifications the rock must meet to be the right one. It sounded easy. Try it sometime. No rock—and yet everything else fit. This had to be the area.

There was something else, too. There had been a forest fire here—small and a long time ago—but unmistakable if you looked closely. How long ago? A little dendrochronology and local research provided the answer: 1927. Suddenly we were forced to consider a whole new factor. What about a fire? That would explain why the wreckage was never found. Did the crash start the fire? It certainly could have, but there is no mention of a forest fire in any of the folklore. Yet a fire did happen here, and in 1927.

Clark's Hill wasn't giving us many answers but it was doing great at questions. Then came July 22:

"Watcha got?"

"I dunno. Little piece of something. I was checking out a magnetic anomaly that turned out to be nothing. I popped out a root by hooking my fingers under it and this popped out with it."

"Probably just a piece of old bark."

"Maybe—but I don't think so. It's way too even and regular. Almost looks manufactured. I want Al Lewis at the University to look at it."

Dr. Alan Lewis, botanist at the University of Maine Machias, had never seen anything like it either. Over the next few days we carefully excavated over six feet of the stuff—all in a straight line but broken into many pieces. Subsequent analysis at Colonial Williamsburg, George Washington University's Forensic Chemistry department, and a top Canadian forest products lab told us only that we had something man-made, probably between 40 and 100 years old, and made



originally from plant material none of them could identify. We did, however, find an excellent description of what we had in a 1927 book on aircraft construction techniques. The material was used in the attachment of fabric to wing ribs, and the broken strip we had found matched exactly the chord of the lower wings of l'Oiseau Blanc. So maybe there were some answers there after all.

### Expedition XIII: Oct. 4–Nov. 16, 1987

The engine-in-the-woods has become as much of a legend as the airplane it came from. Over the years so many hunters have seen it—all in different places—that we joked of publishing A Field Guide to the Engines of Washington County. The logic of its survival as the largest and most identifiable remnant of l'Oiseau Blanc is undeniable, but so is the fact that, as with the Loch Ness monster, the harder you search the less you find. Still, the massive twelve-cylinder Lorraine-Dietrich has become the symbol of instant success in the search for the White Bird, and for twelve expeditions we had all anticipated the moment of discovery. Someone was going to stumble, notice an odd shape, clear away some moss, and suddenly there would be rays of sunlight and the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. But archaeological realities, it seems, have shocking disregard for our pre-conceived notions. The breakthroughs of Expedition XII had come only when we stopped searching for what must be there and started to pay attention to what was there.

In October Expedition XIII returned to carry out a survey dig of the eastern face of Clark's Hill. Independent scientific analysis of the evidence found in July strongly supported our suspicions that we had the right place and that the strip of material we had recovered was part of l'Oiseau Blanc. Where was the rest of the airplane? We already knew that there was nothing on or near the hill to fulfill the engine-in-the-woods prophecy. Could it be that everything was now completely buried? Archaeologists with field experience in New England were unanimous in their opinions: "Sixty years? In that country? What did you think you were going to do? Trip over it?"

The survey dig was two weeks of measurements and grids, metal detector sweeps and test holes dug with dental tools. The result was frustrating. We discovered more of the same stuff we found in July within a few feet of the original find, but the rest of the hill face yielded nothing. How could part of the airplane be on the hill but not the rest of it? A tree strike was the obvious answer, but if the airplane had hit a tree and kept going it could be anywhere within a fan-shaped area beyond Clark's Hill. It was as if the White Bird had flown out the back door.

On October 17 it was back to compasses, machetes, running lines, measuring lines, plotting fines, then sweeping lines with magnetometers and metal detectors. The only

consolation was that ground visibility was much improved over the impossible conditions we'd faced in the summer. That is what accounted for our almost immediate discovery of the long-sought rock upon which Clark Matthews had placed the gusset he found in 1979. The gusset was gone, but the rock unmistakably fit the complex formula of qualifications Clark had given us. With the rock finally located we were able to place with some accuracy the spot on the hill where Clark had found the gusset. Now we had two specific points where debris had landed and that gave us the post-tree-strike line of flight we needed. Calculations of mass, velocity, and trajectory pointed to a sliding, slightly downhill crash behind Clark's Hill to the southwest. We found evidence of a second tree strike and just beyond, right where we had calculated first ground impact should have occurred, we started getting metal detector indications of debris in the ground. But when we excavated the targets no recognizable metal was there—just bits of magnetic gravel in the soil. What was going on? Was this a freak deposit of natural ore, or was it the remains of man-made metal?

By this time it was mid-November. The money was more than gone and the Maine winter had arrived with a vengeance. We left with a very strong feeling that we had been following the 60-year-old crash trajectory of l'Oiseau Blanc, and that the main body of wreckage must be only a few hundred feet beyond our last excavation. We gave samples of our magnetic gravel to the University of Maine for analysis, and waited for the verdict. It came on Christmas Eve with a message from Dr. Harold Borns, director of the University's Institute for Quaternary Studies: "You have iron-cemented soil with the iron being derived from man-made metal. That should make you pretty happy." Hal Borns is a master of understatement.



"... They were the footprints of a gigantic hound!"

—A. CONAN DOYLE  
The Hound of the Baskervilles

## Affairs of the Heart



À COEUR VAILLANT  
RIEN D'IMPOSSIBLE  
MEME DANS SES  
ASPECTS TERRIBLES

In the last issue of TIGHAR Tracks (Vol. 3, No. 2) we traced the known origins of Charles Nungesser's famous Coeur Noir—the black heart that was his personal trade mark through WWI, and which was emblazoned on the fuselage of l'Oiseau Blanc. We also indulged in a little hangar psychology about what the macabre insignia might say about its owner's approach to life—and death.

Since then some intriguing new clues have emerged to help decipher this enigmatic coat of arms and give us a little clearer look at the psyche of one of aviation's most colorful characters. The central death's head, Nungesser fans will recall, is a legacy from an early wartime incident involving a wild ride in a stolen enemy car, a medal and a general's pun. Now it seems that the basic heart design has its roots in a French proverb that dates from the days of chivalry.

Our suspicions were first aroused when we asked Nicolas Durieux, then transportation counselor at the French Embassy, for a translation of Nungesser's statement reported in the American press as, "The strong heart does not fear death even in its most terrible aspects." M. Durieux looked a bit baffled and said, "But in French you would not say that."

"Whaddya mean?" we asked politely.

"The part about death—you would not say that—you would say 'À coeur vaillant rien d'impossible'—it is an old expression. In English it means 'To the valiant heart nothing is impossible' but the feeling is stronger in French."

TIGHAR member Jean Taquet helped us complete the translation and suddenly, instead of a morbid and rather awkward statement of bravado, we have a lyrical declaration of a knight's maxim:

À coeur vaillant rien d'impossible  
Même dans ses aspects terribles.

Because it sounds so neat in French, and because we suspect that most TIGHAR members share our ignorance of French pronunciation, we're going to risk a sackful of outraged letters from members in France and attempt a phonetic rendering:

Ah coor vi-yahnt reeyen dim-poss-eebl

Mem dahn sehs ah-speh teh-reebl

So the emblem which even today makes a lot of people uncomfortable is not at all the crude or even sinister device our cultural conditioning has us perceive. It is, instead, a genuine piece of personal heraldry conceived and carried by an individual who saw himself as a modern manifestation of medieval chivalry.

Now how about the coffin and the candles?

## Is There a French Major in the House?

One of the most difficult barriers we face in Project Midnight Ghost is also one of the oldest—language. Much of the original source material so necessary to the investigation has never been translated, and English language secondary sources have often proved inaccurate. But this past winter TIGHAR and the University of Delaware knocked quite a hole in the language barrier. Through the good graces of Dr. Bonnie Robb, head of the French Department, two senior undergraduate French majors, with the dedicated assistance of Dr. René Coulet du Gard, undertook the translation of the 1984 French government report, Nungesser et Coli Disparaissent à Bord de l'Oiseau Blanc, Mai 1927. This 90-page in-depth inquiry was the product of a two-year investigation carried out by the Bureau of Civil Aviation. It is a veritable treasure trove of thoroughly researched information, highly detailed and often quite technical. In an attempt to glean some information from it we had paid for rough translations of some sections, but a full interpretation was far beyond our means. The University of Delaware project was therefore a great opportunity for TIGHAR to obtain research information previously inaccessible, while providing an unusual, and as it turned out very popular, for-credit project for the students. Under Dr. du Gard's guidance, Mary Beth Medley and Jacqueline Dougherty spend fifty-five hours completing the translation.

TIGHAR plans to make the English language version of the report, Nungesser and Coli Disappear Aboard the White Bird, May 1927, available to the members as soon as copyright clearance is obtained and production funds found. In gratitude to the translators, all copies will carry a full credit to their efforts.

## L'Oiseau Blanc and the Lindbergh Legacy

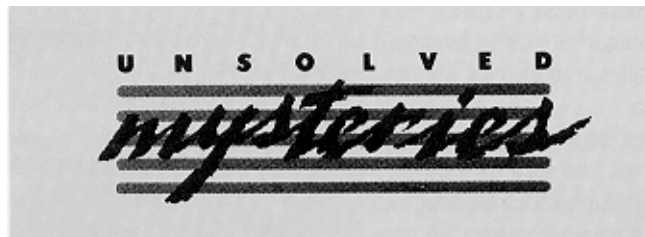
There has been, and perhaps inevitably will be, a great deal of nonsense published and broadcast about TIGHAR's discoveries in Maine and how it all affects Lindbergh's record. The fact is, the solution of the Nungesser/Coli mystery provides important new insights into the pivotal events of 1927, but does not in any way change Charles Lindbergh's place in history. A quick look at the facts makes this obvious.

- Lindbergh was not, of course, the first to fly the Atlantic. By some counts he was the 92nd. Nungesser and Coli cannot threaten a record the Lone Eagle never held.
- Lindbergh was the first to fly non-stop between New York and Paris. That's what Nungesser and Coli were

attempting to do in the opposite direction. He made it. They didn't.

- In making the New York/Paris flight, Lindbergh also made the first successful continent to continent crossing of the Atlantic. By reaching Maine from Paris it might seem that the French aviators would take that record, until you remember that such flights must be successful. In the end, that qualification settle any discussion about changing the record books.

The point of Project Midnight Ghost has never been to detract, displace, or debunk. The purpose of the investigation has been, and continues to be, to discover, to understand, and to honor.



Four days of Expedition XIII in October were spent with Cosgrove-Meurer Productions of Hollywood, California, filming a segment for NBC's hit series *Unsolved Mysteries*. Hosted by Karl Malden, this innovative show recreates the events surrounding current unsolved mysteries, using, wherever possible, actual locations and individuals involved. Public participation is encouraged in an effort to draw useful information from the viewing audience, and the program's record in that respect is quite impressive. The segment on Project Midnight Ghost is a bit of a departure for them—most of their mysteries being criminal rather than historical—but for TIGHAR it's a welcome chance to reach an estimated 31 million households.

At the time TIGHAR Tracks went to press the network had still not decided when our piece would air. Television is a black art, and any attempt to predict what will appear and when is madness, but if we find out in time we'll put out a TIGHAR Tracks Extra alerting our members.

## “The Far Side”



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Throughout Project Midnight Ghost's wilderness expeditions the cartoons of Gary Larson have been universally popular among the TIGHAR volunteers. Lines of searchers sweeping through the woods have typically maintained their line discipline and spirits by shouting back and forth, "I love the one where the penguin . . ." Perhaps we identify with Larson's wilderness themes, but it's more likely that spending vacation time in a hackmatack swamp (that's Maine-ese for thick and nasty) gives one a special appreciation of the straight-faced madness of his characters. Whatever the psychology, we're grateful to Gary for helping us keep things in perspective.

Project Midnight Ghost Expedition XIV is scheduled to begin in mid-April depending on weather and funding. Its objective is to find and positively identify the main body of wreckage from the crash of l'Oiseau Blanc.

## GROUP EFFORT

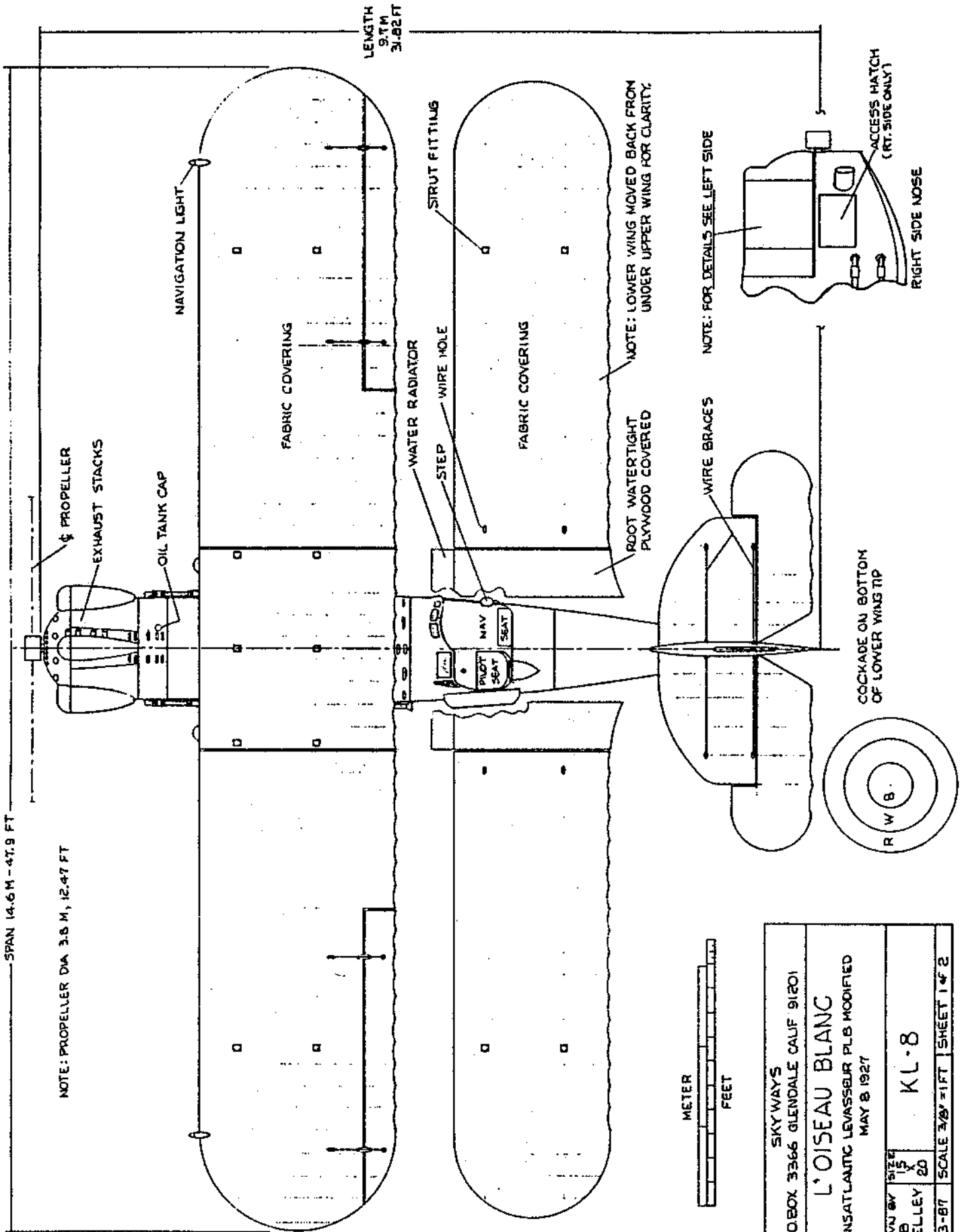
TIGHAR's members continue to be the driving force that makes the foundation's work possible. Response to the Expedition XIV funding campaign has been good with another \$3000 raised toward our \$20,000 goal and 31 more members adding their names to the list of Project Midnight Ghost supporters. If you're not aboard yet, send your tax-deductible contribution to TIGHAR, 1121 Arundel Drive, Wilmington, DE 19808.

Members' contributions are the all-important proof of broad popular support which makes corporate support possible. The following companies have made significant donations of money and/or services toward Expeditions XII, XIII, and the upcoming Expedition XIV.

AAR Oklahoma, Oklahoma City, OK  
Aerospatiale Helicopter Corporation, Grand Prairie, TX  
All the Write Stuff, Newark, DE  
Associated Aviation Underwriters, New York, NY  
Avon Products, Inc., Newark, DE  
Champion International, Stamford, CT  
Exxon Corporation, New York, NY  
Falcon Jet, Teterboro, NJ  
Federal Express, Memphis, TN  
FLYING Magazine, New York, NY  
Georgia-Pacific, Woodland, ME  
Graham's Restaurant, Machias, ME  
Hampton Equipment Company, Lancaster, NH  
Homeport Computers, Bangor, ME  
Irving Oil Company, Ellsworth, ME  
Kelco Industries, Milbridge, ME  
Locke Office Products, Bangor, ME  
Maine Army National Guard, Augusta, ME  
Maine Wild Blueberry Company, Machias, ME  
Nanticoke Homes, Greenwood, DE  
Narco Avionics, Fort Washington, PA  
New England Telephone, Portland, ME  
R.H. Foster, Inc., Machias, ME  
Schonstedt Instrument Company, Reston, VA  
Stead Aviation, Manchester, NH  
Thomas Diczno, Inc., Calais, ME  
Timelines, Inc., Groton, MA  
United Airlines, Chicago, IL  
White's Electronics, Sweet Home, OR

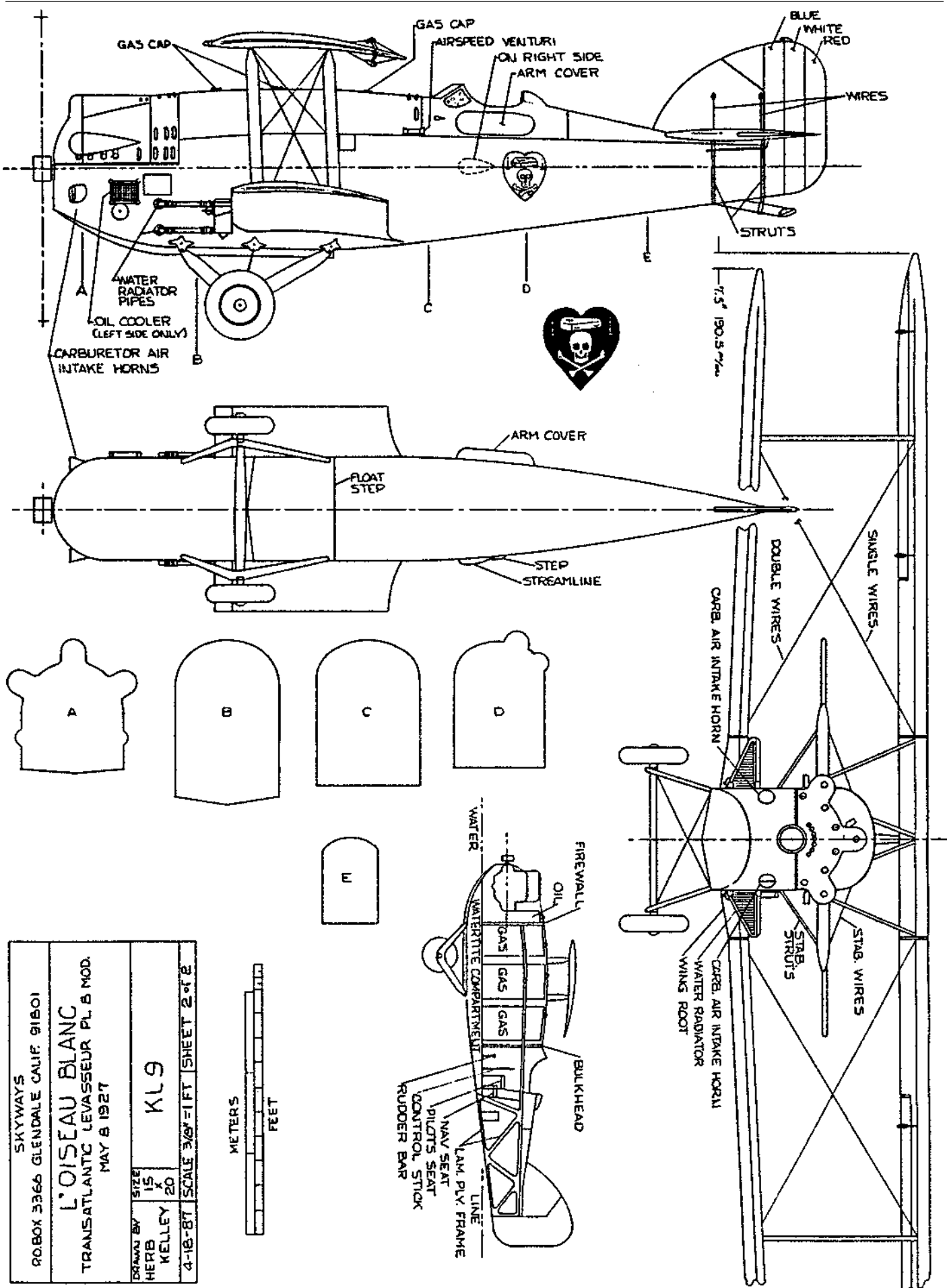
Considerations of space and propriety do not permit us to list the many, many scholars, scientists, and technicians who have donated their time and expertise to help us analyze evidence and materials. TIGHAR is blessed with the enthusiastic support of leading authorities in a wide range of forensic and analytical disciplines. Often the work they do for the foundation is with the full knowledge and endorsement of their employers, be they government, university or institute; but sometimes they just go ahead and help us out. So we'll mention no names and just say THANK YOU.

# PROJECT MIDNIGHT GHOST



SKYWAYS	
ROBOX 3366 GLENDALE CALIF 91201	
L'OISEAU BLANC	
TRANSATLANTIC LEVASSEUR PLB MODIFIED	
MAY 8 1927	
DRAWN BY HERB KELLEY	SIZE 1/2 20
4-23-87	SCALE 3/8" = 1 FT SHEET 1 of 2

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SKYWAYS  
 9080X 3666 GLENDALE CALIF 91801  
**L'OISEAU BLANC**  
 TRANSATLANTIC LEVASSEUR PL. B MOD.  
 MAY 8 1927  
 DRAWN BY  
 HERB KELLEY  
 SIZE  
 15 X 20  
**KL9**  
 4-18-87 SCALE 3/8"=1 FT. SHEET 2 of 2



# PROJECT MIDNIGHT GHOST

## NOTES FROM THE FIELD

### Expedition XIV: April 17–May 21, 1988

For five weeks of what was one of the coldest and wettest springs on record, the TIGHAR team conducted field operations in Township 18 Eastern District of Washington County, Maine. Depending upon the orientation of the observer, the team's activities were either a heroic example of disciplined wilderness archaeological survey work carried out under adverse environmental conditions, or a distressing exhibition of clinical obsessive-compulsive behavior, with overtones of masochism. Judge for yourself.

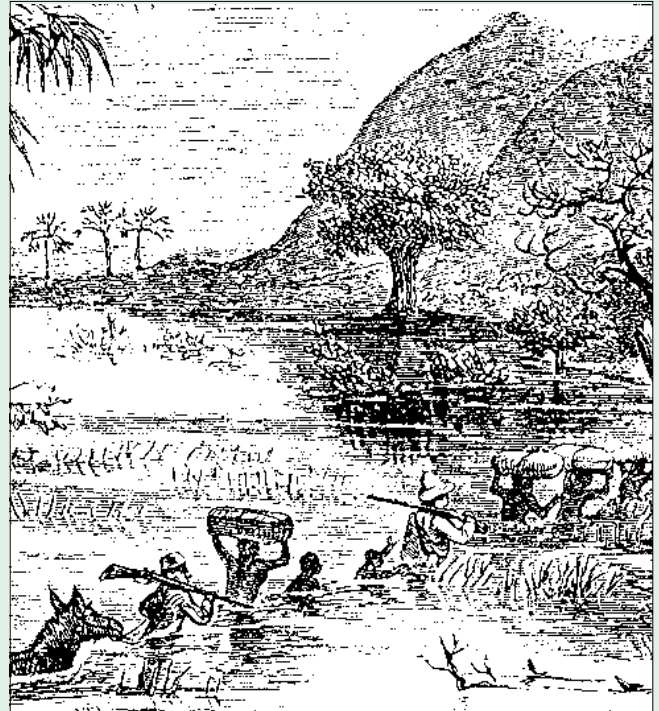
A typical day began with breakfast at 0700 followed by a briefing at 0730 in the TIGHAR research center—a euphemism for about three cubic yards of files, charts, and aerial photographs assembled at one end of the banquet room in Graham's Restaurant in Machias, Maine. Briefings were concise, giving the volunteers essential information concerning the day's objectives while demonstrating the leaders' concerns for the well-being of the crew: "Anybody sick? Anybody hurt? Good. Today we're going to hit Section 5. Dutch will be on the brush cutter. If you're clearing for him remember to stay behind and to his left or we'll be calling you Stumpy."

By 0800 the team was aboard the van and en route to the site, ten miles of country road and five miles of logging road that became as familiar as any commuter route but with considerably less traffic. With the van parked in an abandoned logging yard, a short walk brought the team to Admin, a small administrative area with all the comforts of home, provided of course that you live in a shelter-half beside a fire pit. Here were performed certain rituals, such as the fueling and sharpening of the Stihl power equipment, battery checks and calibration of the White's Electronics metal detectors, and whatever it was people did over behind those rocks. The object of all this preparation—the purpose which had brought these people thousands of miles to spend vacation time doing manual labor in a cold drizzle—was the tracking of an elusive phenomenon known as "hot dirt."

When Expedition XIII had ended amid November's first snows, the White Bird's crash trajectory had been traced across the face of Clark's Hill and down its back slope (see *TIGHAR Tracks*, Vol. 4 No. 1, Notes From the Field). There, pockets of intensely conductive soil were discovered and were later confirmed to be the remains of

*The Kolokolo Bird said, with a mournful cry,  
'Go to the banks of the great grey-green, greasy  
Limpopo River, all set about with fever-trees,  
and find out.'*

—Rudyard Kipling, "The Elephant's Child"



man-made metal, ferrous in composition, small in mass, and distributed in a distinctive linear pattern. It was apparent that something had happened there a long time ago that had distributed small bits of metal over the ground along a particular line. The metal itself was gone now, broken down by years in the damp acid soil, but its signature was still there, detectable with technology carefully selected and calibrated. The trail of hot dirt began just where all the other evidence indicated the descending aircraft should have begun striking treetops. Would the trail of hot dirt lead to the wreck of l'Oiseau Blanc? The only way to find out was to follow it, and that was the job of Expedition XIV. The problem was very much like that of tracking an animal, except that each "footprint" could only be found by passing the 11-inch disc of a pulse induction metal detector directly over it. The only way to assure thorough coverage of the area was to first clear it of any vegetation that would inhibit a clear sweep of the disc, then lay out ten foot square grids with string to give the operator reference

lines by which to search. Any hits within a square were marked with orange painted tongue depressors, and subsequently excavated to determine the origin of the signal. Once a ten foot square grid had been cleared, swept, and any hits excavated, a block plan sketch was completed and the results later transferred to a master chart of the area.

The normal procedure was for the morning to be spent in brush clearing. Cutting, hauling, and piling small trees and underbrush is hard to romanticize, but volunteers who won't trim the rose bushes at home worked like a chain gang to clear a section to be searched. Lunch was a cold sandwich by a smokey fire. In the afternoon, precision replaced brute force as the cleared section was carefully surveyed and gridded. The search sweep often seemed anticlimactic as a block that took over an hour to clear and grid was swept with the metal detector in ten minutes. "5G4 is clean. No hits."

But bit by bit the trail emerged, revealing its character and its course. "Okay, I've got another strong hit over here. It's really starting to look like this whole thing is curving off to the left." And, in fact, it was. By the end of the fifth week a distinct and highly predictable path of debris had traced a line stretching far longer than had been expected and leading down into an as yet unsearched swampy area. Was this indeed the faint trail left over 61 years ago as two and a half tons of wood, fabric, aluminum and steel rejoined the earth it had left 40 hours before and an ocean away? From hilltop to swamp was nearly 2,000 feet with a 100-foot drop in elevation. Could a pilot, even the redoubtable Nungesser, keep his ship aloft over that trajectory in the face of at least three tree strikes? Expedition XIV had come to find answers. Instead it found new questions.

### Epilogue

To answer those questions, TIGHAR enlisted the aid of NASA/Langley's Subsonic Aerodynamics Branch and the Bureau of Technology of the National Transportation Safety Board. A complete technical description of the aircraft, including its anticipated weight and configuration at the time in question, was submitted to NASA along with the trajectory traced by Expedition XIV. Could this airplane do this? The answer was yes. For the NTSB the question was: "In a practical rather than a theoretical sense, is this the sort of crash trajectory that might be expected under the circumstances described?" The answer, once again, was yes.

In September, Project Midnight Ghost will return to Maine, to the swamp at the end of the line. There are more answers there—perhaps the final answers to the fate of Nungesser and Coli. And there's only one way to find them.

## GROUP EFFORT

Expedition XIV was supported by more individual and commercial sponsors than any previous Project Midnight Ghost field operation. In addition to the 109 TIGHAR members who made contributions specifically in support of the expedition, there were 15 commercial sponsors who made financial contributions. They are:

AAR Oklahoma	FLYING Magazine
American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics, Hampton Roads Section	Georgia-Pacific Hampton Equipment Company
Associated Aviation Underwriters Champion International Corporation	Kelco Industries Maine Wild Blueberry Company
David Clark Company, Inc.	Nanticoke Homes, Inc.
Ellsworth Building Supply, Inc.	New England Telephone
Exxon Corporation	Ronson Aviation

STIHL power field equipment for Expedition XIV was provided courtesy of Hampton Equipment Corp. of Lancaster, NH.

Locke Office Products of Bangor, ME, provided a copier for the TIGHAR Research Center in Machias.

White's Electronics of Sweet Home, OR, made a gift to TIGHAR of two PI1000 pulse induction metal detectors.

### Calvin & Hobbes



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# CAST YOUR BREAD UPON THE WATERS

In the autumn of 1987, TIGHAR received a telephone call from the office of the Governor of Maine, concerning an inquiry that office had received about Project Midnight Ghost. They really didn't know what to do with it — some man in the Philippines seemed to want to know a great deal about the project. They did, however, know how to reach us. So we took down the address, which was long and complicated, and there was no question about it: the inquirer was a Brother in a Marist monastery in the far south of the Philippine archipelago. We sent him a TIGHAR Tracks, and some reports on Project Midnight Ghost, and a letter telling him what we had done just that fall. We also mentioned that we had a member in the Philippines, one John Humphreys, an Englishman who worked (for that matter, still does) for the Ford Foundation in Manila.

In July of 1988, we sent John Humphreys' renewal notice to him, with a note scribbled on the bottom of it mentioning our correspondence with the Marist Brother. We received back from John not only his renewal (which is always nice) but a note, and then a telephone call (NOT from the Philippines) describing his encounter with Brother Reginald. We were so touched we asked him to write up the story for the next issue of TIGHAR Tracks, and here it is:

In March of this year business took me to the town of General Santos in the Southern Philippines. Having to interview several persons at the local college, which is run by a religious order, I was invited to spend the night in the guest room of the Brother's "convento."

On the evening of my arrival I was sitting in the Brothers' common room, reading and drinking coffee, when a young Brother whom I had not met previously joined me. After we had introduced ourselves he asked me if by any chance I knew another man named Humphreys who lived in Manila and who belonged to "some group that restores old airplanes." He was asking on behalf of Brother Reginald, he said; Brother Reginald would very much like to get in touch with this man. I hastily explained that I was, indeed, none other than (to my knowledge) TIGHAR's only Philippine-based member. I asked how he had come to learn my name.

He told the following story. Brother Reginald was one of the oldest Brothers in General Santos. He had lived in the Philippines for decades. A regular listener to Voice of America broadcasts, he had recently heard a program about Project Midnight Ghost; having been born and raised in that part of New England which we now suspect to be the last resting place of Nungesser and Coli, he had been avid for more details of the search. He had written to the Governor of Maine, whose office had put him in contact with TIGHAR, which in turn had given my name. Since I live in Manila, at the other end of the archipelago from General Santos City, it was pure luck that my work took me not only to Brother Reginald's town, but precisely to the guesthouse of his Order. As soon became evident, there was little chance that he would ever have visited me in Manila.

The young Brother asked whether I would mind taking the time to meet Brother Reginald. I told him I would be delighted. He led me out of the guest quarters, and several blocks through the lively streets. We eventually turned into the garden of a small house

and entered a ground floor room through a side door. Brother Reginald was sitting on his bed. I went over and shook hands with him.

He was obviously a very sick man. Although he rallied to greet me courteously, and his eyes were full of lively intelligence and humor, he was too weak to leave his bed, and I spent the next hour sitting at his side while we talked about the mysterious fate of the White Bird. He kept grinning with disbelief at the fact that I had landed unexpectedly on his doorstep just as he had given up all hope of ever meeting me; he seemed to regard it wryly as a sort of minor miracle.

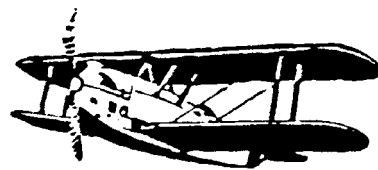
## Brother Reginald ...seemed to regard it wryly as a sort of minor miracle.

Although not previously an aviation enthusiast, his imagination had clearly been caught by the quest for those two vanished French heroes. His enthusiasm was a cheering sight as he pored over TIGHAR expedition reports and plotted crash sites on a map of New England. Afterwards I wondered at the roots of his fascination — perhaps it was merely that the episode reminded him of his far-away home, but I think it more likely that what engaged his interest so intensely was a curious amalgam of the courage of the two pilots, the abiding mystery of their disappearance, and the intelligence and dedication of the effort to throw light on their fate.

I didn't want to tire Brother Reginald, so I left him just as the sun was setting, with a promise to send him, from Manila, all the additional TIGHAR material on Project Midnight Ghost. Three days later I was back in the capital, and the same day I sent Brother Reginald a packet of TIGHAR documents by air courier.

About a month later, I received a letter from one of the Brothers in General Santos. It announced with sadness the peaceful death of Brother Reginald, and thanked me both for visiting him, and for sending him the additional materials. They had arrived two weeks before his death, and he had been thrilled to receive them. I was very glad to read that. Although I only met him once, I will remember for a long time that frail but brave old man, sitting in his bed in that sunset room, gazing at the drawing of the White Bird, and the inscription of Charles Nungesser's famous motto: "The strong heart does not fear death, even in its most terrible aspects."

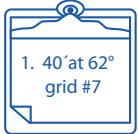
—John Humphreys  
Member #206



*À coeur vaillant rien d'impossible  
même dans ses aspects terribles.*

# PROJECT MIDNIGHT GHOST

On May 8, 1927, twelve days before Charles Lindbergh's New York to Paris flight, Charles Nungesser and François Coli vanished "like midnight ghosts" attempting the same feat in the opposite direction. For over 60 years the disappearance of the French heroes and their white biplane l'Oiseau Blanc has been one of aviation's great riddles. For the past four years TIGHAR has been conducting an investigation to determine whether a remote section of the Maine woods holds the answer.



## Notes From the Field

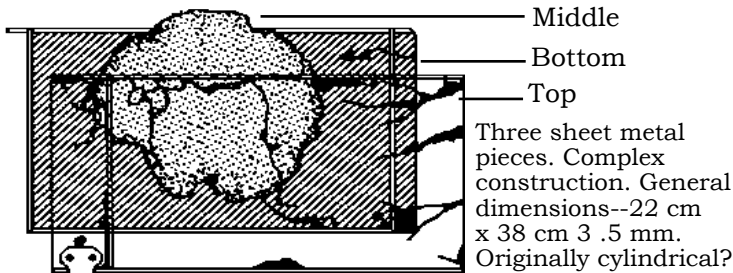
Expedition XVI — April 7 - 30, 1989

### Pushing the Line

Last fall Expedition XV confirmed that around 1974 someone used horse drawn logging equipment to haul something very heavy (perhaps airplane wreckage) out of the Round Lake Hills — an area where no logging has been done since before 1927, and where tradition holds that the airplane came down. Six weeks of intensive operations by TIGHAR volunteers back-tracked that hauling job two thirds of a mile through the forest by the excavation of an intermittent but distinct line of metal debris. Most of the material recovered consists of broken or discarded relics of the hauling operation itself (sled hardware, horseshoe nail, a tobacco tin, a shirt button), but two pieces, the now famous "grem-lins," remain unidentified and are suspected of being aircraft hardware which fell off the load. This spring we continued to push the line, tracking the route back toward its origin point which, if we're correct, will also be the crash site of l'Oiseau Blanc containing positively identifiable remains. This time we were able to trace the line of travel another third of a mile to a point where it seems to make a sharp turn not necessitated by the terrain. At more than a mile from the logging road where they ended up we suspect we're now close to their starting point.

### The Flounder

We also excavated another artifact along the trail which, so far, has defied identification. In accordance with established TIGHAR procedure we've assigned it a nonsense name so as not to prejudice the identification process. We'd like to hear from anyone who can help.

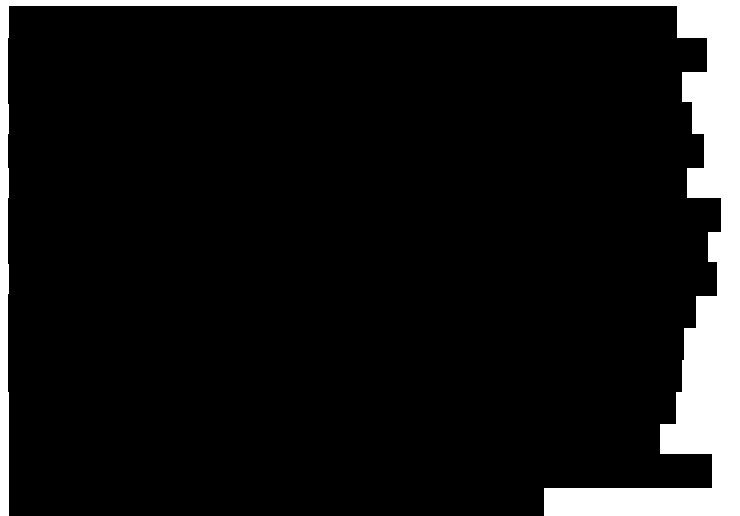


A \$1,000 reward for information leading to the recovery of pieces of the airplane was put up by TIGHAR member H.N. Crecelius of Stockton, California. We'd never tried this approach (couldn't afford to) and it did bring an interesting, though still unresolved, response. A message was left on our answering machine some-time during the night of April 20. A middle-aged man's voice with a Downeast Maine accent said, "I think I've got somethin' you've been lookin' for for quite a while, ... but ... uh ... ten thousand and we'll talk. I'll be in touch." That was all and so far, he hasn't been in touch. Hoax or genuine greed?

### More Media Frustration

On May 3 NBC's television series Unsolved Mysteries finally got around to airing the piece they filmed with TIGHAR in Maine over 18 months ago. Despite the delay we didn't receive confirmation of the date in time to do a mailing to the membership. On top of that the show gave out an incorrect phone number and mailing address to people who called their 800 number with information. We have, however, salvaged some leads with the help of the producer and we're working on those now.

Now in its fifth year, TIGHAR's search for the White Bird has become something of an epic in itself. We're determined to see the investigation through, to find the answer to what happened in this remote patch of wilderness. The work continues.





## Midnight Ghost Update

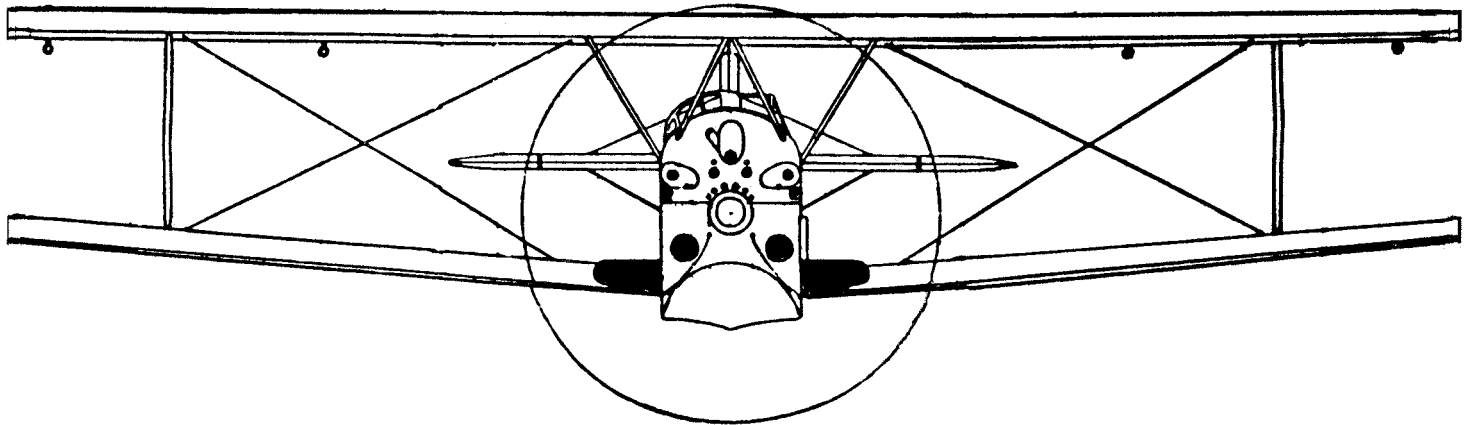
Leads continue to come in from the May 3rd airing of the NBC Unsolved Mysteries segment on TIGHAR's work in Maine. The most promising include yet another reported engine-in-the-woods sighting (this makes nine so far), and a remembered article in Argosy Magazine describing the discovery and possible removal of the engine of the White Bird from the Maine woods. We checked archival copies of the magazine from 1949 to 1959 and there's nothing there. Earlier and later issues still need checking, as well as copies of True Magazine, a similar publication. The magazines appear to be available only at the Library of Congress. Any volunteers?

The gremlins and the flounder continue to mystify experts. TIGHAR member Pete Luce recently met with the director of the Musée de l'Air in Paris and we hope to see some increased cooperation there. Meanwhile, we've made some progress on the mysterious French cigarette case allegedly found long ago in the search area. It turns out the tiny inscriptions on the inside are Japanese characters — possibly a phonetic rendering of a foreign (to Japanese) name. Hey — maybe Nungesser and Coli were captured by the Japanese and taken to Saipan!

# TIGHAR TRACKS

A PUBLICATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL GROUP FOR HISTORIC AIRCRAFT RECOVERY

## XVIII



### PROJECT MIDNIGHT GHOST

EXPEDITION XVIII: April 16 — May 16, 1990

Spring comes late to Washington County, Maine. When most of us are enjoying the blooming of dogwood and azaleas, Downeasters are watching the ice finally leave the lakes and the last of the winter snows shrink in the shadow of the wooded hills. In late April the loons return — not just the feathered variety but, for the past five years, another kind known locally as “those people from away looking for that French airplane.”

Seventeen TIGHAR expeditions have made the search for l’Oiseau Blanc so much a fixture of the local scene that the thrill of nearing the long sought resolution of the

mystery is tempered by a paradoxical sadness that soon it may all be over. But before Project Midnight Ghost becomes a matter of monuments and reunions, there must be more hard logic and hard work, more cold searchers swinging cold steel, and more cold, hard cash to fund the effort.

TIGHAR members are encouraged to participate in Expedition XVIII as volunteer searchers (see box on page three). This special double issue of TIGHAR Tracks will review the new developments and discoveries which make this spring’s expedition one we’re looking forward to with great excitement.



Reviewing the evidence, Paris, Jan. 1990. L to R: Clément-Pascal Meunier, author of the French government report; Jean Taquet, Director, TIGHAREurope; Richard Gillespie, Executive Director, TIGHAR. TIGHAR photo by P. Thrasher

## Over the Coals

France takes her heroes seriously. Imagine, if you will, the United States government using federal funds to conduct a two year, in-depth study of the disappearance of, say, Amelia Earhart, more than fifty years after the fact. And yet that is precisely what the government of France did in 1981. Prompted by allegations that the flight of the White Bird ended in an ignominious crash in the English Channel soon after takeoff, the Bureau of Civil Aviation of the Ministry of Transportation (equivalent to the U.S. FAA or British CAA) launched a full investigation headed by General Engineer Clément-Pascal Meunier. In 1984 an exhaustive 96 page report concluded that the aircraft was last seen departing the west coast of Ireland, on course and in good weather, and that subsequent research into its fate should focus on North America.

It was M. Meunier, author of the French government report, who met with TIGHAR representatives in Paris, January 16, 1990, to evaluate the evidence Project Midnight Ghost has gathered over the last five years. On his recommendation the Committee for the Memory of Nungesser and Coli has now officially endorsed TIGHAR's work, pledged to conduct fund-raising in France on TIGHAR's behalf, and plans to send its two senior officers, Fernand Andreani (Legion of Honor holder, retired Concorde captain, holder of the Paris-New York speed record for scheduled commercial flights) and Roland Nungesser (nephew to Charles, prominent French politician), to Maine during Expedition XVIII. 🐾

## The Strange Case of the Strange Case

It was during Expedition XI (April-May 1987) that Thomas Lynch of Wakefield, Massachusetts read of TIGHAR's work in the Boston papers. He called to say that he had a cigarette case allegedly found in the late 1920's "in the woods near the lakes north of Machias, Maine." What prompted his call was the opinion of an antique dealer who had told him that the case was probably either French or German, manufactured during the early years of this century, and of a style popular with aviators during World War I. Mr. Lynch generously donated the case to TIGHAR's investigation.

Upon examination it was apparent that this was, indeed, a very strange item to come out of the Maine woods. Attempts to confirm its origins only added to the mystery. The birds on the cover are storks, commonly associated with World War I aviation in France through the famous Stork Squadrons (Escadrilles Cigognes); however, the motif is distinctly Oriental with tiny, crudely rendered markings on the inside of the case, corresponding to Japanese phonetic characters of no discernible meaning. As for the case's probable place of manufacture, the Smithsonian and a number of other art conservation laboratories came up dry. So we sent the case to France to see if any help could be had there.

Through the efforts of the Committee for the Memory of Nungesser and Coli of the prestigious Aéroclub de France, the cigarette case was recently identified by M. Maurice Gruson (whose credentials fill up half of his stationery) as being "surement un article de fabrication français" made between 1900 and 1920. Because the chain of possession of this artifact is not documented, it can never be diagnostic; that is, proof in itself that l'Oiseau Blanc crashed in Maine. Confirmation that it is, indeed, French and of the correct period was, however, enough to prompt the Committee for the Memory of Nungesser and Coli to commission a thorough review of TIGHAR's work to date. 🐾

TIGHAR photo by P. Thrasher





"Votre modèle est surement un article de fabrication Français."


# The Significance of the Magoon Sightings

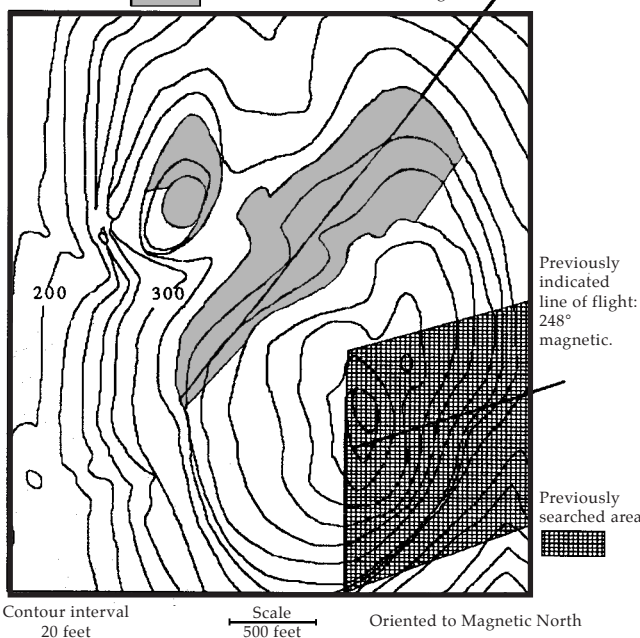
Sometimes all it takes is one piece of a jigsaw puzzle to make a confused and contradictory picture suddenly make sense. The sighting of a "strange looking white airplane" by Evelyn and Robert Magoon as it circled their parents' farm in 1927 (see TIGHAR Tracks Vol. 5 Nos. 3 & 5) has had that effect on TIGHAR's search for the crash site of l'Oiseau Blanc.

Prior to the Magoon's testimony, the line of witnesses seemed to correspond with Coli's planned route and indicated an impact on one of the eastern sides of the three Round Lake Hills. However, a thorough search of those areas revealed no airplane wreckage. Woodsman Anson Berry who heard the plane crash in 1927 is reported to have initially thought that the impact occurred "somewhere between the second and third hills." That area was searched with no result.

But the Magoon sightings revealed a course change dictated by terrain and weather which would bring the airplane into the fog shrouded hills on a significantly different line. This more northerly approach opens up large areas of the western or "back" side of the third and largest of the Round Lake Hills as forest likely to contain the impact point. Previously considered illogical as a search area, this region of dense spruce and hemlock growth is unexplored country to Project Midnight Ghost. Adding to the anticipation of this spring's search of the area is a 1984 recording of an interview with Anson Berry's youngest brother Clarence in which he says, "Anson always said that airplane come down up in back of Third Round Lake Hill somewhere." 

Possible impact areas assuming collision with ground from level flight at 340 to 400 altitude msl. 

Line of flight indicated by Magoon sightings: 211° magnetic. 



## HOW TO PARTICIPATE

APRIL 16 — MAY 16



## EXPEDITION XVIII

Participation in Expedition XVIII is open to all TIGHAR members.

Completion of the Introductory Course in Aviation Archeology is recommended but not required.

This is a Category II TIGHAR Expedition: Moderate difficulty; participants should be in good physical condition with good stamina.

The expedition base is Machias, Maine. By car: about an hour and a half north of Bar Harbor on U.S. 1. By airline: major carriers serve Bangor; from there Machias is about 2 hours by rental car. By general aviation: Machias has an excellent 3,500' paved and lighted airstrip with avgas (no JetA) available.

Searchers stay at a modern, comfortable motel and eat breakfast and supper at a local restaurant. Lunch is a sandwich in the field.

TIGHAR will provide daily transportation to and from the search area.

Participants are responsible for their own transportation to and from Machias, Maine, and for their accomodation and meal expenses during their stays.

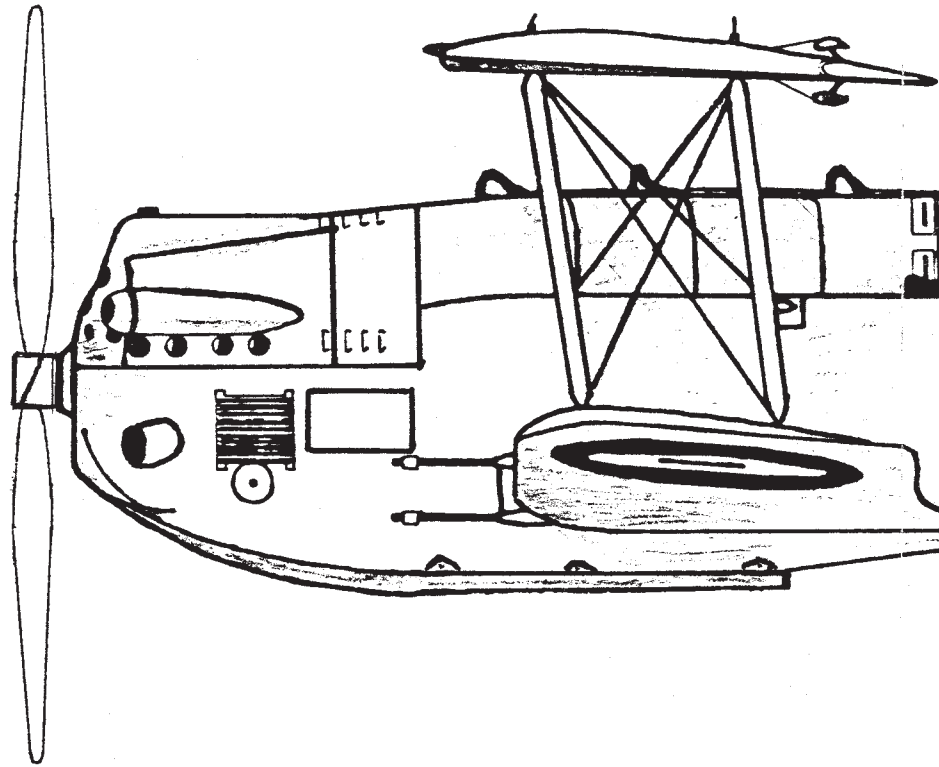
Each participant also makes a \$100 contribution toward the general cost of the expedition.

Experience has shown that four days is a practical minimum for participation, while one week is about as much as the average volunteer can take before his or her body (or mind) gives out.

The search effort can efficiently use only about six volunteers at any one time, so early coordination with TIGHAR headquarters is essential to schedule your participation.

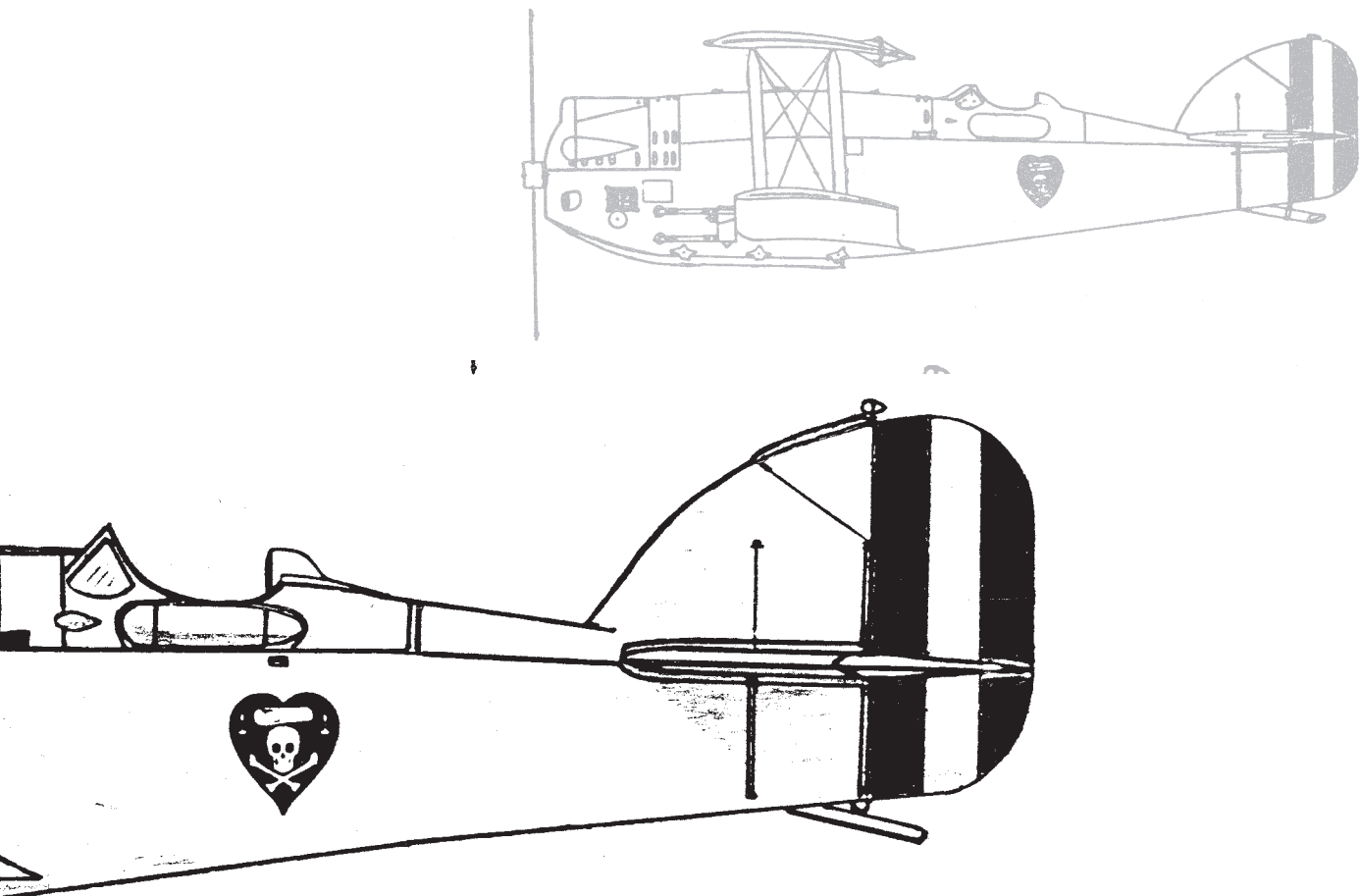
**TIGHAR members wishing to participate in Expedition XVIII should call Project Director Richard Gillespie during normal business hours at 302/994-4410.**

# L'Oiseau Blanc



L'Oiseau Blanc during early tests (no nav lights yet). Coli stands in the cockpit. The hatch in the nose provides access to the manual primer for starting. Photo courtesy Musée de l'Air.



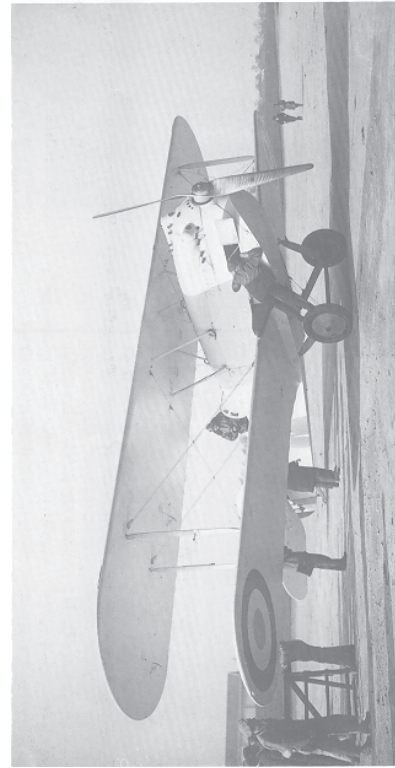
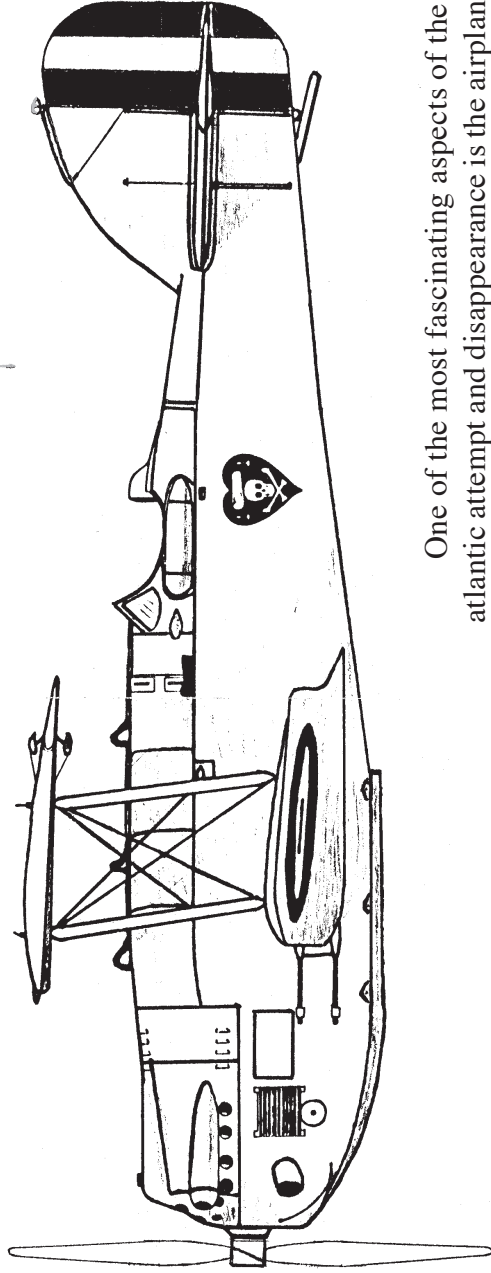
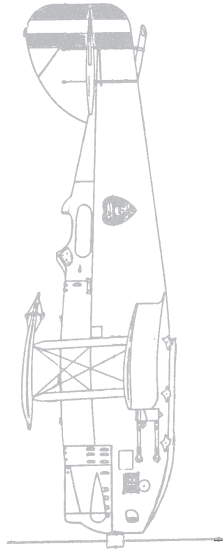


One of the most fascinating aspects of the Nungesser/Coli transatlantic attempt and disappearance is the airplane itself. Like the Spirit of St. Louis, it was a special one-off modification of an existing design; and like Lindbergh's Ryan it was hand-built in a very short time (February 15 to April 15, 1927). But unlike the NYP, good information about its construction is very difficult to obtain. If detailed technical drawings ever existed they were apparently lost when the manufacturer, Levasseur, went out of business before WWII. The aircraft itself, of course, vanished in 1927. For TIGHAR, the compiling of reliable technical data on the machine has been a process of constant research, verification and revision. For the past two and a half years we've used a profile (small drawing above) based on Herb Kelley's three view appearing in *Skyways* magazine (No. 3, July 1987). In January of this year access to the Musée de l'Air's archives at Le Bourget enabled us to refine shapes and features resulting in a new profile as shown above. Some details worth noting are:

- Nose and hull lines are sleeker. Once the gear was jettisoned after take-off, l'Oiseau Blanc had admirably clean lines for a biplane.
- There were navigation lights on the leading edge of the upper wing and on the vertical fin (not the rudder).
- The lumpy features on the fuselage top are not gas caps, but fuel hoses which come vertically out of the three tanks to run aft along the exterior to the cockpit. We don't know why.

Not shown in this drawing is the large Navy anchor which was painted on the tail along with the words P. Levasseur, Type 8. Although totally a civilian venture the aircraft wore the red, white and blue French military markings and, of course, Nungesser's black heart — *son fétiche*.

# L'Oiseau Blanc



L'Oiseau Blanc during early tests (no nav lights yet). Coli stands in the

One of the most fascinating aspects of the Nungesser/Coli transatlantic attempt and disappearance is the airplane itself. Like the Spirit of St. Louis, it was a special one-off modification of an existing design; and like Lindbergh's Ryan it was hand-built in a very short time (February 15 to April 15, 1927). But unlike the NYP, good information about its construction is very difficult to obtain. If detailed technical drawings ever existed they were apparently lost when the manufacturer, Levasseur, went out of business before WWII. The aircraft itself, of course, vanished in 1927. For TIGHAR, the compiling of reliable technical data on the machine has been a process of constant research, verification and revision. For the past two and a half years we've used a profile (small drawing above) based on Herb Kelley's three view appearing in *Skyways* magazine (No. 3, July 1987). In January of this year access to the Musée de l'Air's archives at Le

## **EXPEDITION XVIII**

As this *TIGHAR Tracks* goes to press Project Midnight Ghost Expedition XVIII is ready to depart for eastern Maine to resume the search for L'Oiseau Blanc, the White Bird of vanished French aviators Charles Nungesser and François Coli. The snows of the sixty-third winter since their disappearance have left the wooded hills of Washington County and, from April 16 to May 16 TIGHAR search teams will comb the hillside now suspected of holding the long sought crash site. Eighteen TIGHAR members have registered to participate in the expedition, and will be coming from places as diverse as California, Connecticut, and Kansas.

In Paris on April 3, 1990 a press conference was held at the Aéroclub de France at which Roland Nungesser, nephew of Charles Nungesser, prominent French political figure, and Secretary of the Comité pour le Souvenir Nungesser et Coli (Committee for the Memory of Nungesser and Coli) encouraged French support of TIGHAR's efforts. Jean Taquet, Director of TIGHAREurope, received the compliments and best wishes of five generals, two astronauts and a bevy of government dignitaries as well as media representatives. It is hoped that this attention will result in financial aid for the project.

On May 4-6 Monsieur Nungesser and the Committee's President, Fernand Andreani (Legion of Honor, retired Air France Concorde captain, and holder of the Paris to New York commercial speed record) will visit Expedition XVIII in Maine.

## **PROJECT MIDNIGHT GHOST EXPEDITION XVIII 4/16—5/16, 1990**

Call it perseverance, conviction, or just plain stubbornness, TIGHAR's search for l'Oiseau Blanc continues to comb the Maine wilderness for the lost French flyers described by Charles Lindbergh as having "vanished like midnight ghosts." Evidence continues to mount that Nungesser and Coli's White Bird crashed in the Round Lake Hills of Washington County on May 9, 1927. This spring's expedition, the eighteenth since 1984, meticulously gridded and searched over 2,440,000 square feet of the third and highest of the three hills. Twenty-five TIGHAR volunteers battled steep and treacherous terrain, one of the wettest springs on record, and the infamous Maine black flies to eliminate one of two areas now suspected of concealing the scant remains of the wood and fabric aircraft. In October Expedition XIX will tackle the remaining area. Use the registration form in this issue of *TIGHAR Tracks* (see *Engagements Volontaires*) to sign up for some of the most miserable fun you'll ever have.

# THE TOUGH ONE

On October 1 TIGHAR teams will begin the 19th expedition in search of the French transatlantic fliers who vanished, in Lindbergh's words, "like midnight ghosts" just days before his New York to Paris triumph. Over six years of work, countless hours of searching by TIGHAR volunteers, usually under uncomfortable and sometimes hazardous conditions, something over \$200,000 raised, virtually all in contributions of less than \$100— Why? Why the persistence? Why the sacrifice? Why the dedication?

Bone stupid, that's why. Or so it seems in the darker moments when a promising lead has, once more, turned out to be a dead end. But there are other reasons, of course.

There's the challenge of attempting the nearly impossible. Finding an essentially biodegradable airplane that crashed over sixty years ago, from which the bigger metal bits, like the engine, have very likely already been salvaged — that's a pretty good definition of difficult.

There's the knowledge of the forgotten historical significance of the Nungesser/Coli flight: The realization that had they made it to New York, Lindbergh would not have flown the Atlantic, would not have become America's greatest 20th century hero, would not have pioneered the airline routes he later explored, would not have inspired a whole generation of American youth who designed, built and flew the machines that won World War II, and who now sit in the board rooms of the world's great aviation companies. How different would our world be were it not for the events of that foggy day in 1927 when the White Bird did not arrive in New York?

Perhaps we continue the search because each time we've thought we were up against a blank wall, some new piece of evidence or testimony has emerged like a ray of light. This exhilaration of discovery is the energy that drives all research, whether historical or scientific. It's the ultimate human addiction — the thirst for knowledge.

Then, too, there is something we call "the curse." It's the force of the story itself, the gothic romance that is the tale of l'Oiseau Blanc, captivating the searcher and creating in him or her a feeling of being part of the story by the very act of searching. And, of course, that feeling is absolutely correct.

Finally, we continue to search for the White Bird because the project has shown itself to be the best of proving grounds for aviation archeological techniques. By constantly testing and revising investigative logic, witness interview style, metal detection procedures, search patterns, artifact excavation, and a host of other disciplines, we have developed skills that have brought success to other, less difficult, projects.

So that's why TIGHAR will be back in Maine for the month of October— because we must. As Charles Nungesser said, "To the valiant heart nothing is impossible, even in its most terrible aspect."



*TIGHAR conducts business as usual during expeditions in Maine. Mail is forwarded, or you can write directly to TIGHAR, P. O. Box 73, Machias, ME 04654. From October 1 through October 27 you can phone expedition headquarters in Machias at (207) 255-8800. A machine will take your message and we'll return your call in the evening when we come in from the field.*

On May 8, 1927, Charles Nungesser and François Coli, in their *Levasseur PL.I, l'Oiseau Blanc*, made the first successful take-off of an aircraft carrying sufficient fuel for a continent-to-continent crossing of the North Atlantic. Departing le Bourget Field near Paris, they set out to make the 3,700 miles non-stop flight to New York, only to vanish, in the words of Charles Lindbergh, "like midnight ghosts."

VOLUME 6, #5, PP. 5—7; NOVEMBER, 1990

## NOTES FROM THE FIELD

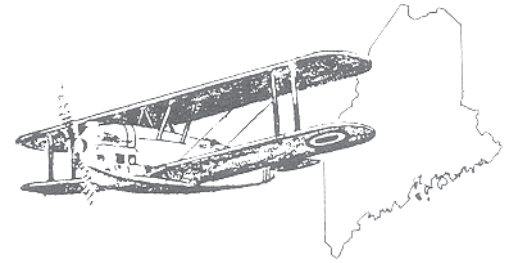
### Project Midnight Ghost

#### Expedition XIX: October 1—27, 1990

TIGHAR's nineteenth expedition to eastern Maine has returned with important physical evidence concerning the fate of Nungesser and Coli. The discovery of a small metal artifact near the top of Third Round Lake Hill in Washington County, Maine, may mean that TIGHAR has finally located the crash site of the White Bird, and seems to confirm suspicions that the remains of the aircraft have been salvaged. The discoveries of Expedition XIX complete a jigsaw puzzle that began with a find three years ago.

During Expedition XIII in October, 1987, two artifacts were unearthed near a logging road one mile south of the Round Lake Hills. At first assumed to be hardware for a horse harness (a broken horseshoe and a harness buckle were found in the same spot), the two items turned out to be unidentifiable in the United States. Dubbed "Gremlins" for their bug-eyed appearance and exasperating nature, the artifacts continued to baffle researchers until this year, when two European sources identified them as a type of buckle originally developed around the time of the Franco-Prussian War (1870) and subsequently used on French flying coats during and following World War I. (To date, however, no one has been able to produce solid documentation, so TIGHAR must consider the identification tentative.) From microscopic, metallographic, and microprobe analysis, we know a great deal about the physical properties and history of the Gremlins. What we have learned supports the theory that they came from *l'Oiseau Blanc*.

We soon determined that the Gremlins were part of a distinct trail left by someone hauling something very heavy out of the woods using a horse and a logging sled. A careful examination of available records and the forest itself confirmed that no logging has been done in this area; nor could any other explanation be found for the type of stuff we were digging up. Given unusual artifacts associated with an unexplained activity, we

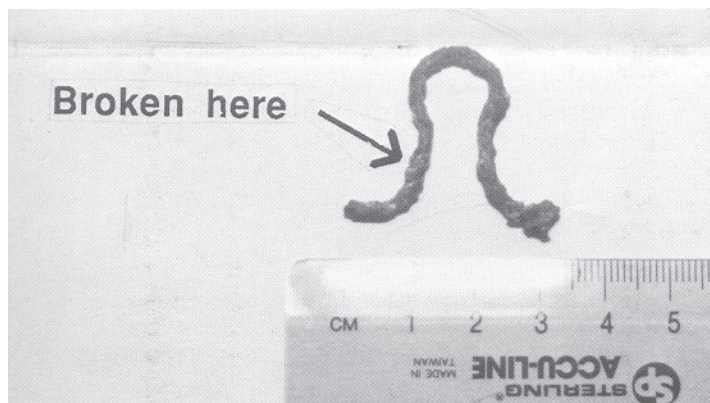


developed the hypothesis that the Gremlins were airplane debris which fell off the load as someone hauled the White Bird out to the road. The only way to test the hypothesis was to backtrack the trail to its point of origin. If we were right, that point would be the airplane's crash site; if we were wrong, the site would reveal what our mysterious haulers had been hauling.

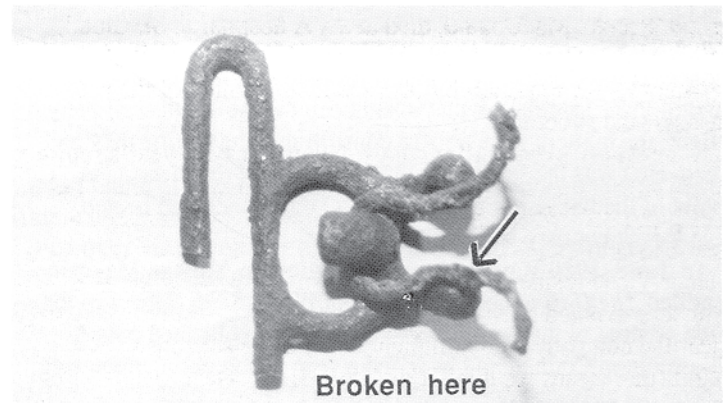
Backtracking an invisible trail by sweeping vast areas of wilderness with metal detectors has taken three years. At one point they turned. We went straight; that cost us 1989. But last spring Expedition XVIII found some wire near the top of Third Hill. It looked like their kind of junk, but it wasn't distributed along a clear line of travel as other debris had been. Was this where the trail began?

Expedition XIX found the answer. Further debris recovered at that site makes it clear that this is, indeed, the origin point of the trail; but the real prize was a tiny, twice-broken loop of steel which has exactly the dimensions, proportions, and characteristics which the loop to fit a Gremlin's hook should have. It not only links the entire trail together, but it also establishes that the operation that left it behind involved the recovery of metal that had lain in the ground for years.

In April 1991, Expedition XX of Project Midnight Ghost will conduct an examination of the site in an attempt to find other relics of *l'Oiseau Blanc*. Meanwhile, now that we have found a mate for the Gremlins it may be possible to find the documentation necessary to establish their identity conclusively. TIGHAR members who wish to participate in Expedition XX and/or assist in identifying the Gremlins should contact Project Director Richard Gillespie. 🐾



Charlie Sivert (TIGHAR #0269) of Olney, Illinois, got two metal detector "hits" 18 inches apart which turned out to be the broken loop. The break had occurred through the middle of a previously formed rust concretion (proving that it happened after the object had lain in the ground for many years). The 18 inch separation of the two pieces establishes that the break did not occur *in situ*.



Perfect fit. Two Gremlins (the one shown here has been cut for metallographic testing) were found more than a mile from where Expedition XIX excavated the loop. Note that the break occurred at precisely the point of maximum stress as if someone had tried to mate or demate the device after it was rusted and brittle. Such a break, at waist level, could account for the 18 inch separation of the pieces in the ground.

# THIS MUCH WE KNOW

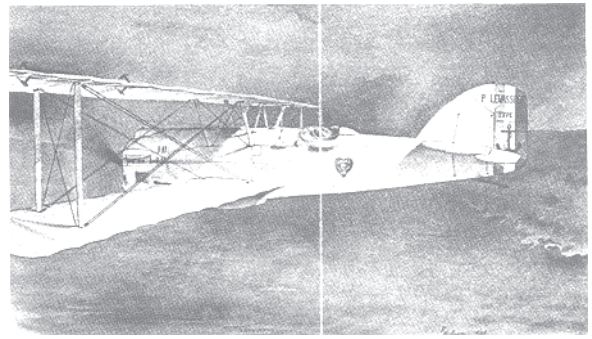
On Monday, May 9, 1927 no fewer than eight residents of Washington County, Maine, witnessed the overflight of an aircraft which by time, route, and description could only have been l'Oiseau Blanc. The final witness, woodsman Anson Berry, heard the aircraft crash "up in back of Third Round Lake Hill."

On Wednesday, November 7, 1951 Raymond C. Beck of Chatham, New York saw "a very large engine, protruding at an angle from the forest floor" while he was hunting on the western (the "back" in local parlance) side of Third Round Lake Hill. Beck was following the township border marked on trees with yellow paint and, concerned about getting lost, was not far from "the yellow line" when he saw the engine.

In what was probably November of 1974 at least three persons used an old logging sled and a medium sized draft horse (about 1800 pounds) to haul a very heavy load from a spot very near the yellow line (now marked in blue) on the western side of Third Round Lake Hill to a newly constructed logging road about one mile away. Whatever made up the load was gathered from at least three or four locations within a area a few hundred feet square. Lengths of wire of a type commonly used to bind hay bales were twisted together and fashioned in such a way as to secure the load. However, due to the unevenness of the ground and the weight of the item(s) carried, the wire frequently broke and had to be replaced. The material being removed from the woods was not limited to large objects. Small metal items which had lain in the ground for many years were collected and at least three of these were dropped during the salvage process. These three pieces, found and recovered by TIGHAR in 1987 and 1990, have been tentatively identified as fastenings used on French aviation apparel during and following World War I. Two of the three artifacts clearly exhibit damage due to abrupt and powerful tensile stress, and metallographic examination of one artifact indicates exposure to temperatures in excess of 650° C (forest fires don't get that hot). One of the artifacts was broken during the salvage operation.

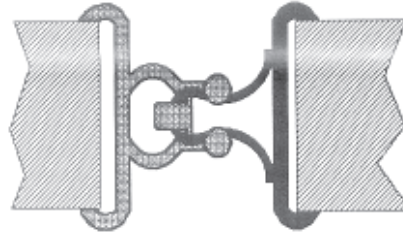
In 1974 or 1975 Robert Gunou of Warren Michigan saw a brief program on local television which told of two hunters who had found, and after much difficulty removed, an old engine and aircraft debris from the Maine woods. Learning of an old story concerning a woodsman who had heard an airplane crash in the fog and of local speculation that it had been the pre-Lindbergh French flight, the hunters were able to confirm that the engine they had recovered was the same type used in the lost French airplane. The point of the television piece was that "the French had beaten Lindbergh but they were killed."

In June, 1980 Ray Beck read an article in *Yankee Magazine* entitled "The Unfinished Flight of The White Bird." This was the first account of the Anson Berry legend ever published outside Washington County, and included a map which outlined the area where the airplane was thought to have crashed. Beck immediately recalled the engine he had seen in that same area in 1951 and returned there to locate it. However, despite his very specific recollections, his familiarity with the terrain, and repeated attempts to retrace his steps (once with TIGHAR in May, 1984), Beck could not find the engine.

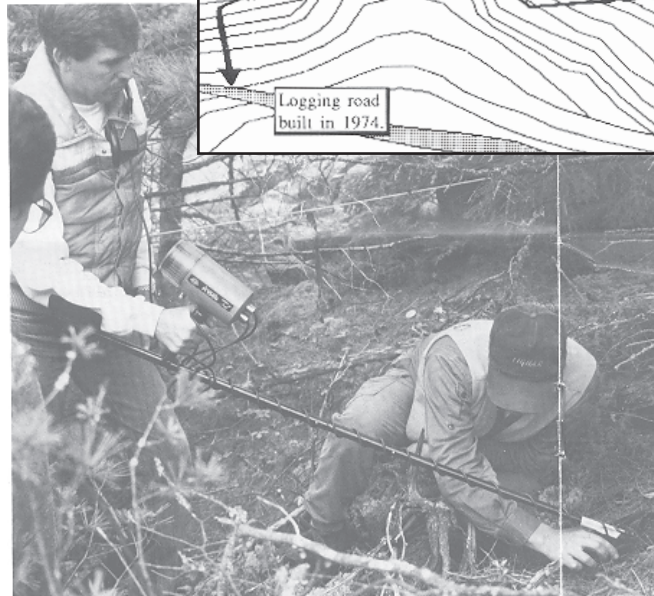
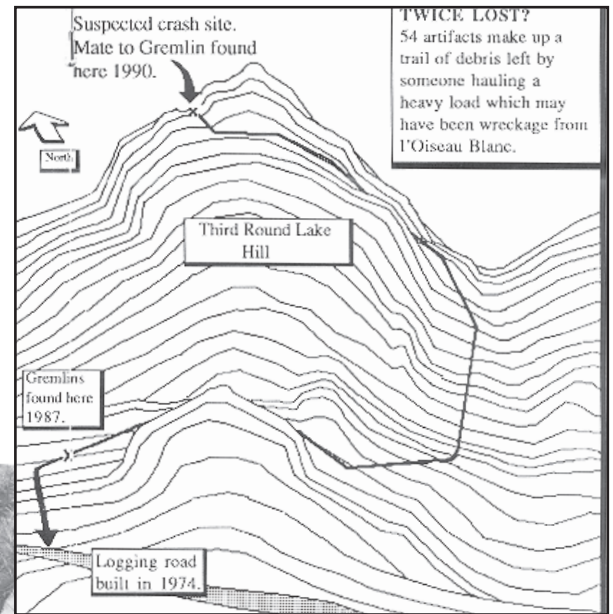


painting by Robert Gillespie

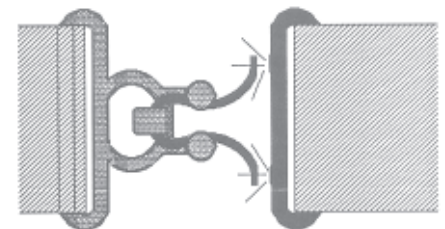
l'Oiseau Blanc



Theoretical Reconstruction of Gremlin Fastener



Alan Olson (TIGHAR #0119) and TIGHAR Executive Director Ric Gillespie pinpoint a metal detector hit during Expedition XIX.



Theoretical Tensile Failure of Gremlin

# WINGS OF THE MORNING

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The traditional version of the Anson Berry Legend holds that the reclusive woodsman was fishing late in the afternoon of May 9, 1927 when he heard an airplane approach from the northeast, pass overhead in the fog, and crash somewhere in the Round Lake Hills. But the version told within the Berry family differs in that the event is said to have happened in the morning. Does it matter which version is correct?

We know from original French records that l'Oiseau Blanc's route to New York was to pass directly over Washington County, Maine. If everything went as planned, the flight was expected to arrive in New York between noon and 3:00 p.m. However, if New York proved unattainable the plan was to make for Montreal so as to at least set an impressive distance record. Knowing its departure time, its fuel on board, and the fuel consumption/power profiles to be used on the flight, we can say with some certainty that, if it was still aloft, l'Oiseau Blanc would run out of fuel around 5:00 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time. Therefore, a report of the aircraft over Washington County, still four hours' flying time from New York, in "late afternoon," does not track with the crew's known plans. If they were that far behind schedule they should have been proceeding toward their alternate, not their primary destination. [For more information on this subject, see *Nungesser & Coli Disappear Aboard l'Oiseau Blanc*, produced by the Government of France and published in English by TIGHAR, \$50.00.]

If, however, the Berry family is correct and the aircraft was heard during the morning hours, then l'Oiseau Blanc was on schedule and on course for New York when it was lost. This corresponds with the assessment of the French Meteorological Service which, in its later analysis, could find no headwinds which would have put the flight significantly behind schedule. Indeed, Nungesser and Coli chose their date of departure specifically because a rare combination of weather systems promised favorable winds for the East to West crossing. The forecast failed only in predicting clear skies along the American east coast rather than the low ceilings and visibility which in fact developed. Of further interest is the fact that fog, so much a part of the Anson Berry Legend, is a morning phenomenon on the inland lakes of coastal Maine and is rarely present late in the day.

For over sixty years it has been assumed that Nungesser and Coli were lost at sea, victims of their own naïve conviction that the North Atlantic could be crossed "the wrong way." Original records show, however, that the flight of the White Bird was a brilliantly conceived and meticulously planned effort with an excellent chance of success. If TIGHAR's suspicions are correct and the flight ended in the morning hours of May 9 in the Round Lake Hills of Maine, then the complex series of events which ultimately resulted in Lindbergh's triumph was a much closer thing than anyone has ever imagined. 🐾



## Expedition XX April 13 — 29, 1991

### *The 20th Maine*



In 1863 one of the Civil War's most famous volunteer regiments, the 20th Maine, turned the tide of the battle of Gettysburg on the slopes of a hill called Little Round Top. This spring, TIGHAR's 20th Maine, a volunteer regiment of members comprising the foundation's 20th expedition into the hills of remote Washington County, Maine, will continue the investigation into the fate of l'Oiseau Blanc. The White Bird of French transatlantic aviators Charles Nungesser and François Coli "vanished like a midnight ghost" on May 9, 1927. Had the Paris to New York flight arrived as expected, Lindbergh's solo crossing just ten days later would never have occurred but, as it happened, the mysterious disappearance of the French WWI heroes significantly heightened the effect of the Lone Eagle's success. And now, 64 years later, after more than six years of research and field work, TIGHAR has pieced together most of the strange story of what became of the airplane and its crew.

Still, some major questions remain, such as: Who removed the wreckage from the wilderness crash site *circa* 1974? What was their motivation? And most important: Where is it now? Some 54 artifacts found so far tell a fairly detailed story of the salvage operation, just as six witnesses from 1927 describe the route of flight that ended in the crash on Third Round Lake Hill; while another witness confirms the wreck's presence at that spot in 1951.

This 20th foray into the now familiar, but no less rugged, search area will use new metal detection technology provided by White's Electronics of Sweet Home, Oregon, to try to find more artifacts left behind or missed by the salvagers. At the same time, new investigative efforts in the local community will attempt to discover who took what and where they went with it.

In the chill and damp of the Downeast spring, TIGHAR's 20th Maine will face its own battle on its own hill, and perhaps find its own place in history.





## Notes from the Field

### Project Midnight Ghost Expedition XX: April 15 — 30, 1991

The 18 TIGHAR volunteers who searched the Maine woods as part of Project Midnight Ghost Expedition XX arrived with hopes of finding the final answer to one of aviation's greatest riddles: the disappearance of Charles Nungesser and François Coli aboard the White Bird in their 1927 Paris-to-New York attempt. They came away not with dramatic discoveries, but with bits and pieces of hard-won information to add to the jigsaw puzzle. Such is the nature of archeology.

The purpose of Expedition XX was to prove or disprove the hypothesis that the site identified by Expedition XIX on Third Round Lake Hill was the crash site of l'Oiseau Blanc and was where salvagers had collected the wreckage for removal in 1974. Expedition XX disproved that hypothesis. The site was meticulously excavated and, although some additional material was found, there was simply not enough debris there for this to have been the original crash site. Also, a reconstruction of the hauling operation evidenced by the artifacts, when compared with a survey of forest development at the site, makes it clear that the salvage had to have occurred much earlier than 1974 (more like 1954). A broader survey of the rugged high terrain along the hill's ridgeline found no evidence of a hilltop treestrike.

In summary, we have strong testimonial and circumstantial evidence that the White Bird crashed on Third Round Lake Hill, Washington County, Maine, but no physical proof unless and until

we can estive identifi-artifacts we We have incon-physical evidence tion which describes a

to a logging road over a mile away. We have two independent reports of a television documentary broadcast c. 1974 which allegedly depicts precisely the scenario indicated by the rest of the evidence: the Nungesser/Coli aircraft crashed in Maine and was later found and removed from the woods. Bill Alexander, #0403E, of Grand Rapids, MI, and Don Ward, #1134CE, of Leesburg, VA, are presently spearheading a renewed effort to track down that documentary. Members wishing to assist should contact Bill directly (see your TIGHAR Directory). Richard Pingrey, #0908C, of Selah, WA, is running down some leads on artifact identification. Meanwhile, Project Director Ric Gillespie is starting to pull together seven years of research into a comprehensive project book similar to that written for the Earhart Project. No field work in Maine is planned for the fall of 1991 due to the time constraints imposed by The Return to Nikumaroro. Field work next spring will depend upon the results of the continuing research into this, the most difficult, and to many, most fascinating of TIGHAR's investigations.



establish position of the have in hand. t rovertible of a salvage opera-

trail from the hilltop to



## Drawing a l'Oiseau Blanc



TIGHAR's oldest and most difficult project, the search for The White Bird of French transatlantic aviators Charles Nungesser and Francois Coli, is pressing forward thanks to the efforts of Jay Veith (TIGHAR #0767CE), Bill Alexander (TIGHAR #0403E), and Don Ward (TIGHAR #1134CE) who have been trying to track down various reports of television and magazine accounts describing the discovery and removal of the wreckage by hunters. It's the most tedious kind of research, hunched over a stack of old magazines at the Library of Congress or squinting at poorly microfilmed newspaper articles. So far, although they've uncovered a wealth of information, the elusive source of all the rumors has not yet been found – but their search goes on. It's one thing to glory in the grandeur of the Maine woods, but it's another to fight boredom and frustration in the solitude of archives and libraries. We salute their commitment.

# MIDNIGHT GHOST STORY

VOLUME 7, #5, P. 7; DECEMBER, 1991



It has happened again. Everytime TIGHAR's marathon search for the lost French transatlantic flight, described by Lindbergh as having "vanished like a midnight ghost," reaches what seems to be a dead end (see "Drawing a L'Oiseau Blanc," *TIGHAR Tracks* Vol. 7, No. 4), the ghost materializes to beckon us on. This time the apparition appeared in the form of yet another witness to a television documentary which supposedly detailed the discovery and removal of the plane's 450 H.P. Lorraine-Dietrich engine from the Maine woods.

The spectre first spoke through one Robert Gunou who, in 1987, said he had seen the show at his home near Detroit, Michigan "sometime in the early seventies." We turned the broadcast industry upside down and shook it, but nothing fell out. Faulty memory, a hoax, a fluke, dead end. Then, in 1990, we were working on The Earhart Project with Dirk Ballendorf, Professor of Micronesian Studies at the University of Guam. It was over pizza at a little Italian place not far from the National Archives that the phantom next appeared.

"Yeah, I saw that show."

"Sure, Dirk."

"No, I'm serious. It was when I was still living here in D.C. Had to be sometime before '77 when I moved to Guam. I remember sitting right there in the apartment watching a show about how these guys had found an airplane wreck in the Maine woods and it turned out to be The White Bird of Nungesser and Coli. The point of the show was that it proved that they had crossed the Atlantic before Lindbergh, but that's about all I remember."

More research. Bill Alexander (TIGHAR #0403E) and Don Ward (TIGHAR #1134CE) tried every source they could think of and came up with zilch. Well, even a professional historian can have a distorted recollection. There's just no record of any such show. Wild goose chase. Forget it.

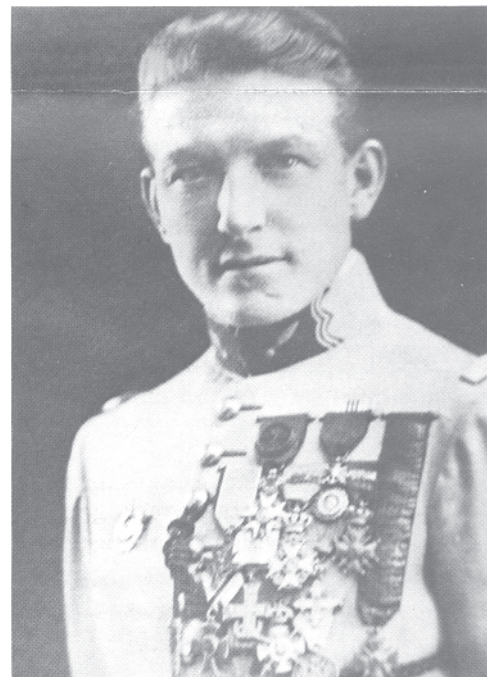
Time for another appearance by you-know-who. It's November 16, 1991 and World War One aviation devotees are in Washington for the opening of a new gallery at the National Air & Space Museum. At a dinner that evening Bill Nungesser (TIGHAR #0759CE) is holding forth, as he has been known to do from time to time, about TIGHAR's search for his illustrious ancestor's airplane. Sitting beside him is a man who, at the appropriate point in the narrative, chimes in with, "Yup, I remember that show. Must have been – oh – 1972." But in the heat of the moment, Bill forgets to get the man's name. Who was that guy? (Cue theme music from *The Twilight Zone*.) Under threat of bodily harm from several TIGHAR researchers, Bill is now tracking down the identity of this latest witness.

## AND THE SEARCH GOES ON

Jay Veith (TIGHAR #0767CE) has undertaken to assemble all the known printed articles and documents on the Nungesser/Coli disappearance into a bibliography of sources. It's a daunting task but Jay has become as much at home among the research resources of Washington, D.C. as he is among the wild woodlands of Washington County, Maine. He could use a hand, though, especially from anyone who has access to computerized magazine index services (CompuServ, Dialog, BRS, etc.). If you'd like to help, he's in the TIGHAR Directory or just call TIGHAR headquarters.

And in yet another branch of Project Midnight Ghost, Oscar Blue (TIGHAR #0820) of Hancock, Maine is looking for anyone who served at the Army Air Field in Bangor, Maine during August of 1942. Oscar is running down a lead concerning an unidentified airplane wreck allegedly seen during an aerial search at that time. If you were there then he'd like to hear from you.

Project Midnight Ghost is TIGHAR's oldest, and in many ways most challenging investigation. Over the past seven years there have been 20 expeditions supported by countless hours of archival research in the U.S. and in France, and yet we still don't know what became of The White Bird. At times we've backed away from the project, frustrated and convinced that it's a dead end street, that whatever became of the two brave fliers is not only unknown but unknowable after all these years. But whenever our resolve has weakened, or circumstances have dictated that our attention turn to other projects or issues, TIGHAR members have taken up the torch and moved the investigation forward (helped by an occasional nudge from the ghost). Like Ahab and the white whale, TIGHAR seems destined to hunt the White Bird, and who are we to argue with destiny?



*Charles Eugene  
Jules Marie  
Nungesser, pilot  
of l'Oiseau  
Blanc*

*Photo courtesy Musée de l'Air*

# Project Midnight Ghost



On May 8, 1927, the Levasseur biplane "L'Oiseau Blanc" took off from Le Bourget airfield, Paris, on an attempt to fly to New York. Piloted by Charles Nungesser and navigated by François Coli, the wood and fabric aircraft disappeared somewhere between the west coast of Ireland and New York City. No trace of it was found in spite of extensive sea and land searches.

In April 1984, Ric Gillespie and his brother, Bob, went to Machias Maine to check out some local stories concerning an airplane which crashed in the hills of Washington County in the spring of 1927. Based on folk tales of a woodsman named Anson Berry, the story claimed that an airplane had crashed in the hills which rise to the west of Round Lake, and that it was "that French airplane." This trip to Machias was the first of many, and formed the foundation of Project Midnight Ghost, TIGHAR's search for l'Oiseau Blanc and her lost crew.

Following Expedition XX in April 1991, Jay Veith, TIGHAR #0767CE, volunteered to re-examine the entire Anson Berry legend in the light of all the information gathered over the years. His research, conducted independently but with full access to the TIGHAR files and contacts, is extensive. The report by Jay which appears below on the questions of weather and route is but a small part of the work he has done in the last year. Field work in Maine is scheduled to resume with Expedition XXI in October, 1992.

Project Midnight Ghost's 20th expedition in April, 1991 began with high hopes as a body of evidence pointed to an area southwest of Third Round Lake Hill as the probable crash site. The failure of that search to find any conclusive artifacts caused profound frustration, and led to the Project taking a new direction. TIGHAR decided to apply the research methodology and standards developed in the Earhart Project to the Anson Berry story, and I volunteered to tackle the job.

By going back to the beginning of the flight and re-examining the evidence, I hoped to find out if an overflight of Anson Berry by l'Oiseau Blanc could have occurred. With the help of other TIGHAR members (you know who you are and I thank you), research on l'Oiseau Blanc has quietly continued for some months. During the course of nine research trips to Washington and one to Paris, Project Midnight Ghost has uncovered much new evidence and exploded some myths about the last flight of Charles Nungesser and François Coli.

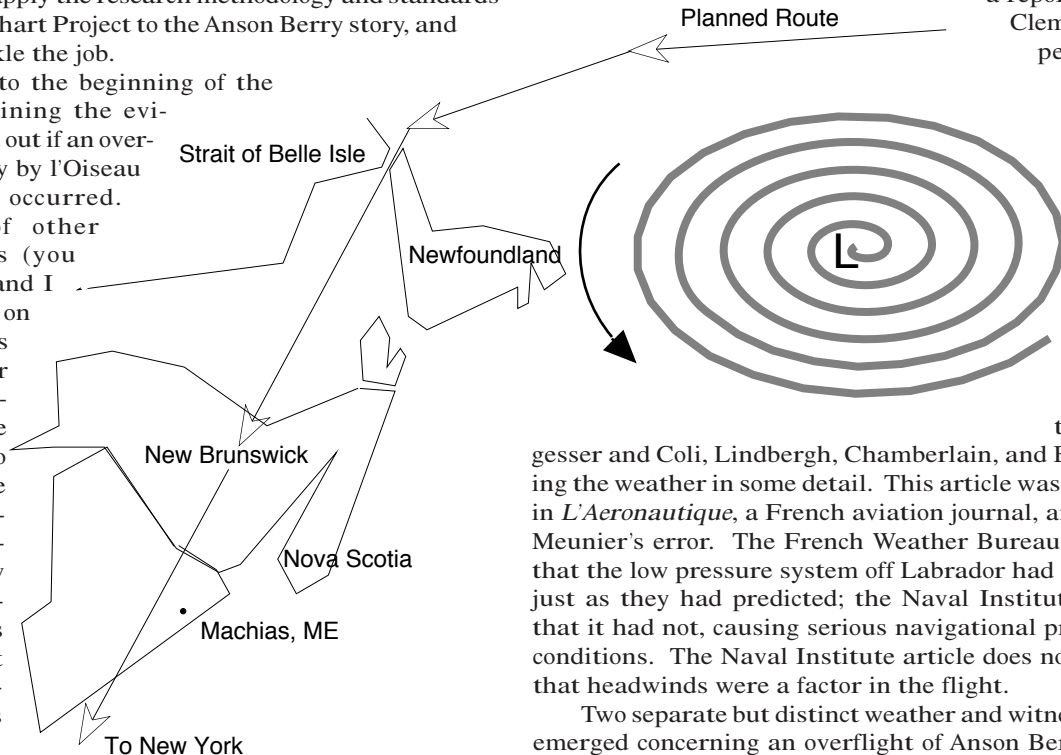
**Myth #1: Headwinds.** There should have been no headwinds on Coli's planned route. However, "Doc" Kimball, the noted American meteorologist, publicly stated that the crew would face headwinds. He based this on erroneous information about their flight plan, which originally called for them to fly a great circle route through St. Johns, Newfoundland. Kimball was unaware, as were most people, that Coli had modified the route to strike land at Belle Isle, Newfoundland, instead, where there was a prominent light house. By riding above a low pressure system moving east from Labrador, Coli planned to take advantage of the easterly winds offered by the counterclockwise flow of the air, giving them at the least no headwinds, and possibly providing some tail winds. Because the prevailing winds blow from west to east across the Atlantic, Kimball's error was not readily detectable without original

source research. The assumption that headwinds delayed Nungesser and Coli quickly became "fact," and is recorded as such in most secondary sources.

**Myth #2. The Washington v. Paris weather reports.** There is no official Washington weather report, even though such a report is mentioned in Clement Meunier's paper describing the flight. Two U.S. Navy officers published an article in the U.S. Naval Institute magazine in 1927 giving an analysis of the flights of Nun-

gesser and Coli, Lindbergh, Chamberlain, and Byrd, and discussing the weather in some detail. This article was reprinted in 1928 in *L'Aeronautique*, a French aviation journal, and is the basis for Meunier's error. The French Weather Bureau reported in 1928 that the low pressure system off Labrador had moved to the east just as they had predicted; the Naval Institute article claimed that it had not, causing serious navigational problems and icing conditions. The Naval Institute article does not, however, claim that headwinds were a factor in the flight.

Two separate but distinct weather and witness scenarios have emerged concerning an overflight of Anson Berry. One is based on no headwinds, and postulates a morning crash. The other calls for headwinds and an afternoon crash. Either one could have resulted in the aircraft flying over Anson Berry in the vicinity of Round Lake. Further work in the Round Lake Hills seems to still be our best hope for finally solving the mystery of the midnight ghosts.



## New Focus

As announced in the Expedition Notice and Project Bulletin recently mailed to all TIGHAR members, we've shifted the search for l'Oiseau Blanc, the White Bird of vanished French transatlantic aviators Charles Nungesser and François Coli, from Maine to Newfoundland.

TIGHAR's operations near Machias, Maine have been based upon anecdotal accounts which describe sightings (and hearings) of the missing plane and its wreckage. The stories were all we had upon which to formulate a hypothesis which was then tested by means of some twenty search expeditions. What we proved, despite hopeful leads and cryptic finds, was that we could find no conclusive evidence that l'Oiseau Blanc crashed in Maine.

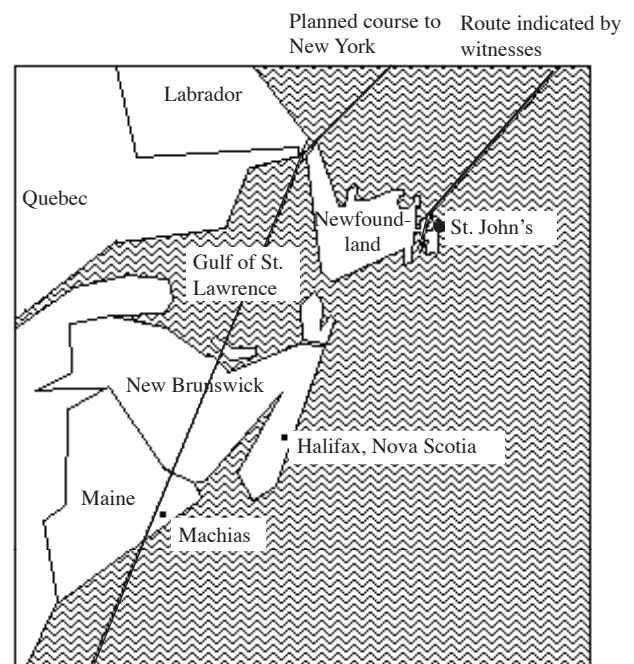
The new information from Newfoundland does not provide proof that the aircraft came down there either, but the evidence appears better than anything we ever had in Maine. Earlier this summer, TIGHAR received photographs of two pieces of what appear to be very old aircraft debris found in the marshy back



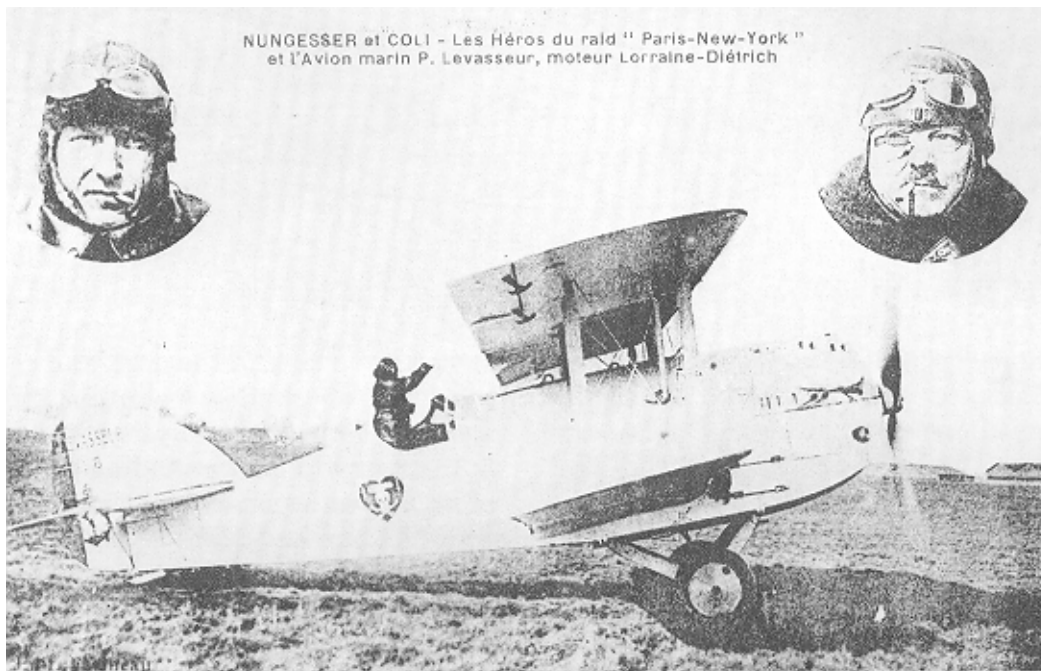
country of the Avalon Peninsula and brought to a museum in St. John's. Our initial comparisons with photos of l'Oiseau Blanc show a possible match. What is particularly interesting is that both artifacts are alleged to have been found at a site which lines up well with the aircraft's last position and heading as reported by witnesses.

In Newfoundland, as in Maine, there are many accounts of the passage of an aircraft in May of 1927. However, there is an important distinction between the two groups of sightings. The witness reports in Newfoundland are not anecdotes related many years after the event, but testimony gathered and written down within days of the occurrence. At least seventeen contemporaneous accounts describe a large white aircraft that comes in off the North Atlantic at the northern end of the Avalon Peninsula and passes over the tiny settlement of Gull Island at about 9:15 A.M. on May 9, 1927. It then flies down the coast and over the town of Harbor Grace shortly after 9:30 A.M. (the times and distances compute correctly for l'Oiseau Blanc) and continues on to the southwestward. The reported line of flight, if extended for fifty miles, passes over the area where the artifacts were allegedly found.

In mid-September TIGHAR's Executive Committee will travel to Newfoundland to examine the artifacts and possibly borrow them for laboratory testing. Field work in Newfoundland aimed at finding the main body of the wreck the artifacts came from has been scheduled for October 17 – 31, 1992.



# Project Midnight Ghost



*Although it might be mistaken for a cigarette ad, this "Carte Postale" celebrates the lost French heroes.*

*—From the TIGHAR Collection.*

People sometimes get a bit confused about TIGHAR's oldest (and, in many ways, favorite) project. We're often asked about our search for The Midnight Ghost, or The White Ghost, or sometimes it's The Gray Ghost (there was even one guy who asked about The Blue Goose). But there's no confusion about the project's almost mystical allure. We've come to call it "the curse" – the obsession with finding the answer to aviation history's greatest riddle. So if you're a new TIGHAR member, read on at your own peril. The rest of us have no choice.

Shortly after 05:00 on May 8, 1927, a large white biplane staggered aloft from Le Bourget Field outside Paris loaded with 3800 liters (1,004 U.S. gallons) of fuel. For the first time in history, an airplane capable of flying non-stop from Paris to New York had made a successful take-off with enough fuel to complete the flight and win the coveted \$25,000 Orteig Prize. The airplane, officially a Levasseur PL-8, but known to the French public as l'Oiseau Blanc (say Lwazo Blahnk or the White Bird), was a modification of a naval observation type. Powered by a single twelve-cylinder, liquid cooled Lorraine-Dietrich engine of

450 H.P., the aircraft featured landing gear that was jettisoned after takeoff and a sealed plywood hull to permit a water landing. The plan was to set the aircraft down in New York harbor beside the Statue of Liberty (a French gift to the United States) approximately forty hours after its departure from Paris.

At the controls was Charles Eugene Jules Marie Nungesser, the most highly decorated Allied pilot of the Great War, third highest scoring French ace (45 victories), the most sought-after airshow performer of the Roaring '20s and star of one of the first aviation films ("The Sky Raider," filmed on Long Island in 1925). Beside him in the cramped open cockpit was François Coli, decorated wartime escadrille commander, noted long distance record-setter and perhaps the finest aerial navigator of his day.

Physically, the two war heroes were what we would today call "challenged." Nungesser, 35, had literally crashed his way to fame. He had a complete set of gold teeth, a gold palate, a platinum wrist, a silver ankle, an aluminum plate in his head, and metal pins in most of his arm and leg bones. (If he were alive today he'd still have to

fly the Atlantic himself. He'd never make it through the airport metal detector.) His personal coat of arms – a black heart with death's head, coffin and candles – was emblazoned on the White Bird's fuselage. Coli had frozen his feet and lost his right eye during the war. His black monocle became a trademark (although he wore a more practical patch when flying).

The departure of Nungesser and Coli caught the other competitors for the Orteig Prize on the ground. In New York, Richard Byrd's Fokker Trimotor "America" wasn't yet ready and Charles Levine's Bellanca WB1 "Columbia" was tied up in a dispute over who would be its pilot. Charles Lindbergh, for his part, was still in San Diego completing acceptance trials on his Ryan. When the news arrived that the French aviators had made a successful departure Slim abandoned his plans to fly the Atlantic and began considering a flight to Hawaii.

The day after it left Paris the French flight was reported seen at various points along the route to New York and a huge flotilla gathered in the harbor to welcome its arrival. But the White Bird never showed up and, one by one, the many sightings were explained away. As Lindbergh later wrote in his book *The Spirit of St. Louis*, "It's May 9th. Step by step newspaper headlines have followed Nungesser and Coli ... only to have them vanish like midnight ghosts." Resuming his original plan, Lindbergh flew to New York and, on May 20th, into history.

Human events commonly sweep in broad patterns but at other times they turn more abruptly, as if on a hinge, pivoting on a single pin. May 9, 1927 was one of those times. Had Nungesser and Coli arrived in New York, Lindbergh would not have flown the Atlantic and a whole generation of Americans would not have been fired by the example of the Lone Eagle. Without the headstart inspired by Lindbergh's achievement, would the U.S. aviation industry have been capable of the phenomenal expansion called for at the outbreak of World War Two? And if not, what would have been the consequences?

In 1984, Project Midnight Ghost (named for Lindbergh's characterization of the mystery) was launched to try to discover what really happened to the White Bird and, in 1985, the need for vol-

unteers to help in the search prompted the founding of TIGHAR. For seven years the investigation has sought, without success, to find physical evidence to confirm a large body of anecdotal accounts indicating that the White Bird crashed in the wilderness of coastal Maine. Now, as described in the last issue of *TIGHAR Tracks* (Vol. 8, No. 4, page 8, "New Focus") the discovery of new evidence has shifted the search to the Avalon Peninsula of Newfoundland. It's a change we make with great reluctance – not only because we would rather that the White Bird had made it further toward its goal, and not only because TIGHAR has poured thousands of both man-hours and dollars into research and field work in Maine, but also because, for so many TIGHAR members, our semi-annual trips to Washington County have become something of a tradition. After twenty expeditions the names of the places where we've searched and suffered, where we've felt the exhilaration of discovery and the pangs of disappointment, ring like the names of old battlefields – Third Hill, The Second Lake Country, Clark's Hill. What veteran of a Project Midnight Ghost expedition will ever forget long evenings huddled over maps at Graham's Restaurant in Machias, or frosty mornings rattling along the Eastern Ridge Road? And most of all, we miss the people – Amy, Sherman, Jim & Kathy, and the many others who have made Machias a second home for TIGHAR. The nostalgia is strong, but the work remains unfinished, the riddle unsolved. Ironically, it is the lessons we learned in Maine that have enabled us to push the investigation eastward another 600 miles to the foggy cliffs of Newfoundland. Whatever success we find there will be through the application of techniques pioneered in the Maine woods. And whatever happens, in October of 1994, we plan to hold a Project Midnight Ghost reunion in Machias to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the investigation from which TIGHAR was born. 🐾



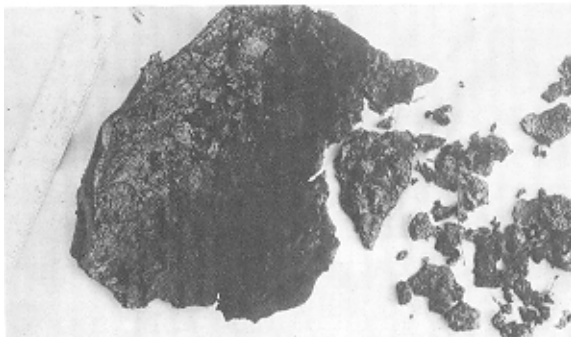
# A Piece Of The Plane In The Pond

In late September 1992, at the Newfoundland Museum in St. John's, TIGHAR examined aircraft debris said to have been found at Gull Pond and suspected of being from l'Oiseau Blanc. Close inspection, however, revealed the structures to be of World War II vintage and the museum to be the victim of an apparent hoax. Nonethe-



TIGHAR Photo by P. Thrasher.

*Artifact 1-21-1, exterior*



TIGHAR Photo by P. Thrasher.

*Artifact 1-21-1, interior*

less, research at the Newfoundland Archives and interviews with surviving witnesses lent further credence to the stories of "the plane in the pond," and it was decided that a survey of the pond was warranted.

A month later we returned and on October 25, 1992, Project Midnight Ghost Expedition XXI recovered an artifact from Gull Pond. Its location, construction and advanced state of deterioration lead us to suspect that this, at last, may be the real thing. The team that made the discovery included Harlan Lanoue (#0074, diver), Paul Squires (#1391, metal detection), Patricia Thrasher (TIGHAR photographer), and was led by Richard Gillespie (TIGHAR Exec.Dir.). This was a Category III operation involving helicopter insertion and extraction, dry-suit diving, high winds, cold rain, a leaky tent and curious caribou (for a full account see PMG Bulletin #4).

For all that, the artifact isn't much to look at – a badly oxidized half-cylinder of ferrous metal roughly 15 cm x 5 cm with what appears to be remnants of bluish-gray paint on its exterior surface and what may be traces of oil on its interior surface. One end of the half-cylinder is slightly narrower than the other, is elliptical in shape, and has what seems to be a finished edge. The other end has a squared-off shape and its edge is bent and ragged. The entire piece gives the impression of having been vio-

lently separated from a larger structure. It was found under 30 cm of water completely buried in about 12 cm of silt and was quite solid when first found. Once removed from the anaerobic protection of the silt it began to deteriorate, and before we could get it to a stable environment portions of the piece had fallen apart. The only other objects found at or in Gull Pond were quite obviously trash left by ice fishermen who began using the pond in the early 1970s with the advent of snowmobiles and ATVs.

In accordance with Canadian law, the artifact (TIGHAR Artifact #1-21-1) was turned over to the Newfoundland Museum in St. John's for safekeeping and conservation pending ministerial permission for TIGHAR to export it to the U.S. for analytical testing. Meanwhile, speculation as to the artifact's identity is focusing on the White Bird's oil tank, visible immediately behind the engine in the photo below. The hypothesis that 1-21-1 may be a section from the bottom of the tank is supported by the artifact's size and shape, and by the oily residue noted on its interior surface. Of further interest is the reported discovery in 1971, in virtually the same spot, of the badly corroded remains of a metal strap and tightening screw device of the type typically used to secure tanks in aircraft. Such a strap is visible in the photo. But was the White Bird's oil tank made of aluminum or steel? Was it painted and, if so, what color and what kind of paint?

Our ability to pursue this lead is a function of the time we can afford to dedicate to the project and that, of course, is a question of funding. The pace at which further research and field work can proceed depends on you, the members of TIGHAR. If you haven't subscribed already, the Project Midnight Ghost Bulletins (\$25) are an excellent way to show your support and, at the same time, keep current on the latest research results. Or, if you'd like to make a special gift to TIGHAR earmarked for Project Midnight Ghost, please contact Executive Director Richard Gillespie to discuss the investigation's specific needs. 🐾

*L'Oiseau Blanc under construction.*

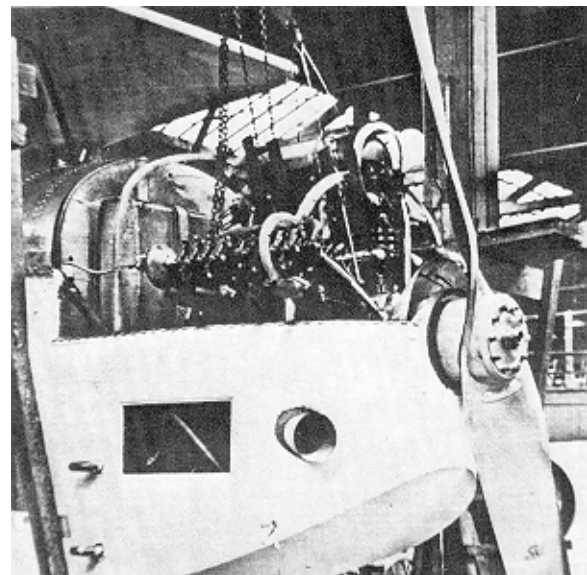
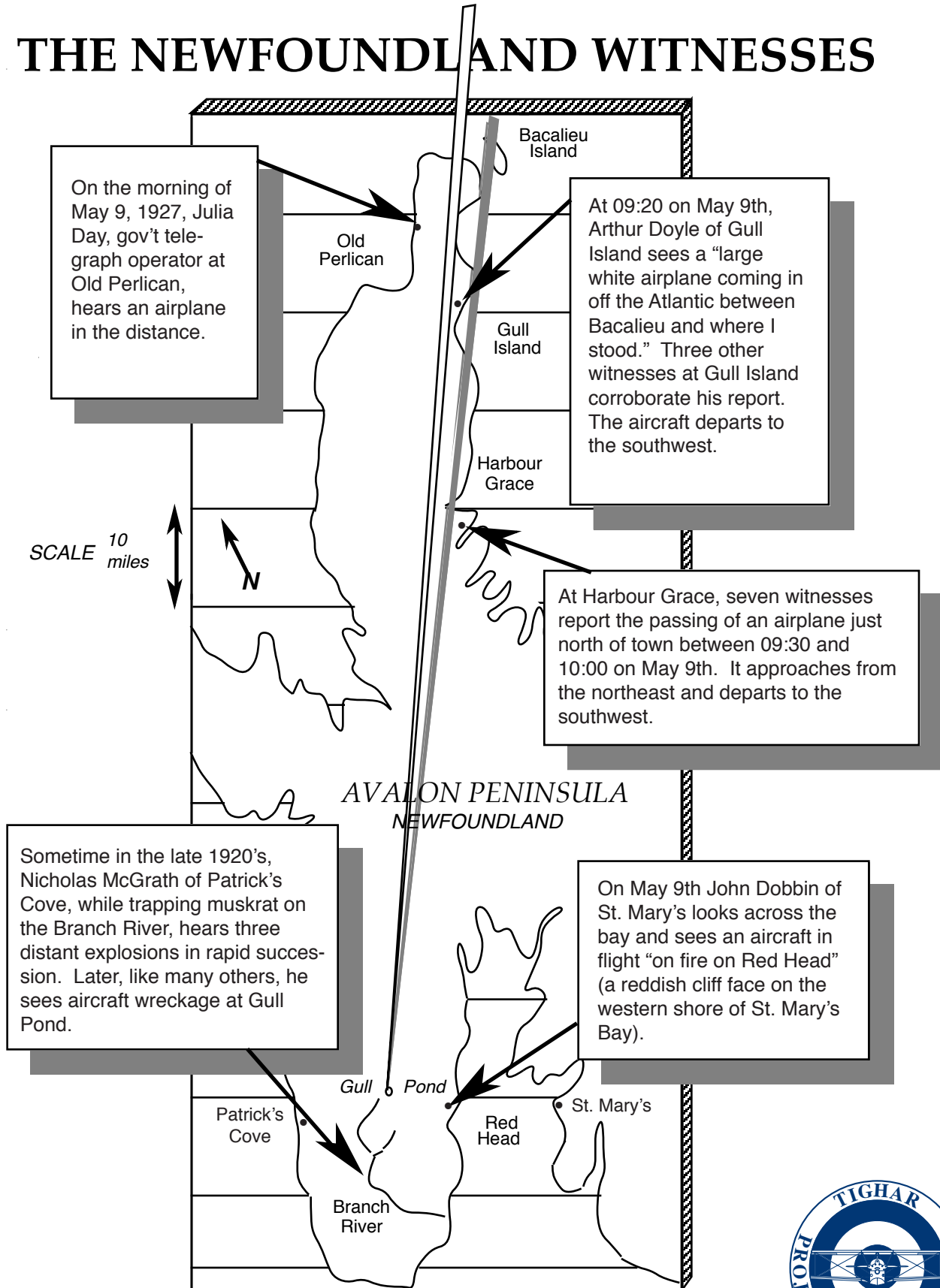


Photo courtesy Musée de l'Air.



# THE NEWFOUNDLAND WITNESSES




# Project Midnight Ghost

On May 9, 1927 Charles Nungesser and François Coli disappeared during an attempt to fly nonstop from Paris to New York in their Levasseur PL8 "l'Oiseau Blanc" (the White Bird). Charles Lindbergh, who successfully made the same flight in the opposite direction just 12 days later, described the French aviators as having "vanished like midnight ghosts."

From 1984 to 1991 TIGHAR conducted twenty searches in the woods of Washington County, Maine based upon numerous anecdotal accounts of a plane crash there in 1927. In 1992 we shifted our search to Newfoundland where contemporaneous records documented the unexplained passage of an airplane on May 9, 1927 on a course that led to a small, remote pond where local legend held that airplane wreckage had later been found. A TIGHAR expedition to the pond in October of 1992 recovered an artifact that may be part of that wreck (see "A Piece Of The Plane In The Pond," *TIGHAR Tracks* Vol. 8 No. 1), but identification of the badly deteriorated section of what appears to be a sheet steel cylindrical structure seemed almost hopeless.

One of the few clues to the artifact's origin may be the remnant of bluish gray paint still visible on one part of the exterior surface. This seems to corroborate the old stories that some of the wreckage seen at the pond many years ago was "robin's egg blue" in color. But the White Bird was, after all, white and its few metal parts were, as far as we knew, mostly aluminum – pretty hard to connect with a

piece of bluish-gray steel. Or is it? Thanks to the dogged research of Jay Veith (TIGHAR #0767CE)\* we learned that there was much more steel in the structure of the PL8 than we would have guessed. But was it painted, and if so, what color? The only known surviving part of the airplane is its landing gear, now on display at the Musée de l'Air in France. A review of our color photographs of this battered piece of history brought a sudden realization that the steel portions of the structure are just as "robin's egg blue" as they can be.

A request has been made of the Musée de l'Air that TIGHAR be permitted to have a flake of paint from the landing gear so that a laboratory comparison can be made with the paint on the artifact recovered from Newfoundland. If our request is granted, and if we get a match, it still won't be conclusive proof that "the plane in the pond" is l'Oiseau Blanc. It would, however, be an important piece of hard evidence and would justify the expense of a thorough search of the pond bottom for other artifacts, such as the 12-cylinder Lorraine-Dietrich engine, which would be conclusive. 

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\* *Dogged research, like misery, loves company. Jay would like to hear from TIGHAR members who are interested in helping with archival research, particularly in the Washington, D.C. area. Look him up in the TIGHAR Directory or call TIGHAR headquarters for his address.*



# AGAINST THE WIND

Our cover this quarter honors one of the most neglected and misunderstood heroes of aviation's Golden Age. As navigator of l'Oiseau Blanc (the White Bird), François Coli vanished along with pilot Charles Nungesser during their attempted east to west crossing of the Atlantic in 1927. His decision to fly against the prevailing wind has often been blamed for the flight's failure and the disappearance of l'Oiseau Blanc became primarily remembered for the demise of its famous pilot.\* Whatever it was that went wrong over the North Atlantic on May 9, 1927 remains shrouded in mystery, but the reasons for Coli's determination to make the trip in the "wrong" direction are well documented.

The mood in Paris was tense that coiled spring of 1927. Some of the world's most famous aviators, including Richard Byrd, Clarence Chamberlain, Bert Acosta and, of course, the redoubtable combination of Nungesser and Coli, were jostling in the starting gate to see who would be the first to link New York and Paris by air. (There was also an unknown named, according to one press account, "Lindenberg.") Among all the competitors only l'Oiseau Blanc would try the crossing from east to west, departing from Le Bourget Field near Paris, dropping the plane's jettisonable wheels after take off, and landing on its watertight hull in New York harbor an estimated 40 hours later. When a journalist asked Coli why, he replied with a wry smile, "Because we are French! If we go there to come here it would appear that we were coming to visit ourselves." The real reasons were less flippant.

Coli had studied the problems of transatlantic flight for many years and had, in 1925, been the first registrant for the Orteig Prize – \$25,000 for the first nonstop flight between

New York and Paris in either direction. Forty-five years old in 1927, Coli had earned a Superior Diploma as "Captain of Long Distance" in 1905 and had been a sea captain until the outbreak of the Great War. With no ship to command he had volunteered for the infantry and frozen his feet in the trenches of 1914. Transferring to the air service, he rose to command the Spads of the Escadrille des Coqs (Squadron of Roosters) and finished the war with many decorations but without his right eye. Although his black monocle and reputation for fearlessness earned him the nickname "The One-Eyed Devil" he was, in fact, a consummate professional, witty, a bit mischievous, and utterly devoted to his wife and three daughters.



*The one-eyed devil.* Photo courtesy Musée de l'Air.

After the war he stayed in aviation and set many long distance records around Europe and the Mediterranean as both pilot and navigator. A convoluted (and still rather fuzzy) series of alliances, crashes and disputes resulted in his partnership with Charles Nungesser and the Levasseur company for the great Paris – New York attempt of 1927. Coli saw the navigation problem this way:

While it is true that the wind usually blows from west to east across the Atlantic, that is the only advantage in making the flight in that direction. The disadvantages are many. The Great Circle route between Paris and New York passes over Newfoundland, a place Coli knew well from his seafaring days. It is a place of storms, of fog, and of ice. An airplane departing from New York encounters this region only 27%

\* Ten years later the phenomenon would be repeated on the other side of the world when another great aerial navigator would be blamed for the loss of another famous pilot.

into its flight and must deal with turbulence and ice while still heavily loaded. In addition, a west to east crossing relies upon good weather in Newfoundland for a last visual position check before setting out across the ocean. And yet at 1927 speeds Newfoundland is about eleven hours from New York, making weather forecasting a roll of the dice. As it turned out, Lindbergh's success was due, in part, to his being able to find St. John's – Lucky Lindy indeed! The other side of the same problem is that an airplane coming toward Europe does not strike land until relatively close to its destination, leaving little chance for mid-course correction.

All of these minuses become pluses when the route is reversed. Western Ireland comes only about five hours after takeoff from Paris so that good weather and an accurate position check can be assured before takeoff. Any difficulties in Newfoundland are encountered with a relatively light airplane, and the whole issue of what Coli called “finding the Earth” is dealt with when the flight is still about 1,000 miles from New York, so that the final third of the flight is conducted in relative safety. The beauty of François's plan, of course, is that the wind does not always

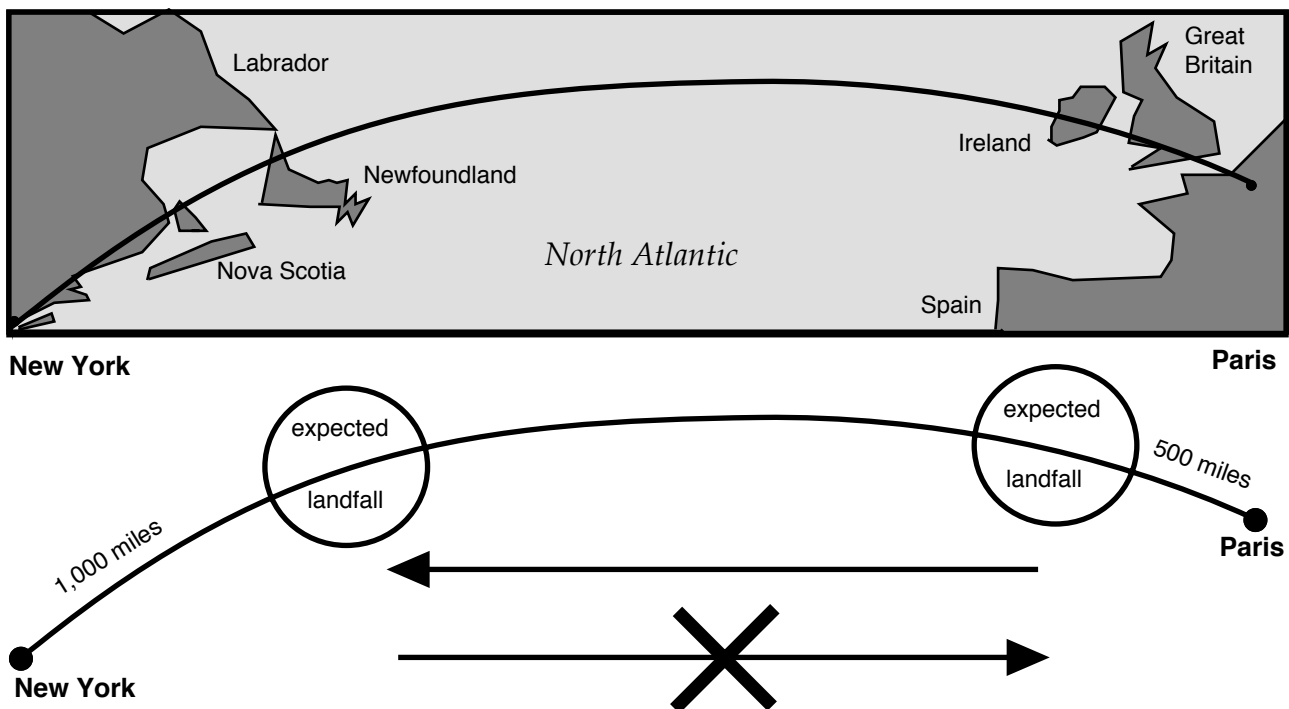
blow the wrong way across the Atlantic. Coli reasoned that by waiting for just the right weather conditions he could avoid headwinds and perhaps even find tailwinds for a Paris to New York flight, and that's exactly what he did. Late on the night of May 7th the French Bureau of Meteorology advised him that two low pressure areas over the North Atlantic offered a unique opportunity. By riding the tops of their counterclockwise flow l'Oiseau Blanc should be able to avoid the storms and actually have tailwinds enroute to New York. This was what he had been waiting for and the decision was made to go.

At 5 o'clock the next morning, after saying goodbye to friends and family, Nungesser and Coli settled into the open cockpit of l'Oiseau Blanc. Nungesser's takeoff was flawless and the grossly overloaded biplane staggered into the air at 05:18. As soon as he was satisfied with the aircraft's performance Nungesser jettisoned the landing gear which fell to Earth to be recovered and eventually enshrined at the Musée de l'Air et de l'Espace. Today it is the only relic of l'Oiseau Blanc or its crew whose whereabouts is known for certain.



# TROUVER LA TERRE

(FINDING THE EARTH)



## Project Midnight Ghost



## The Gull Pond Chronology

Newfoundland is the arm of North America which stretches farthest into the North Atlantic. The Avalon Peninsula, at the island's eastern end, is a hand with outstretched fingers reaching toward Europe. The pinky on that hand is the Cape Shore, a promontory of land fifty miles long by twenty miles wide ending in the cliffs of Cape St. Mary's. A single road, not yet paved for its entire length, girdles the Cape Shore, alternately climbing the fog-shrouded coastal heights and plunging to serve a few seaside settlements such as Gooseberry Cove and Patrick's Cove. Nobody lives inland, known simply as "the country." There the terrain rises to become a wild and barren plateau of high muskeg – a moonscape of boulders and bogs, sprinkled with sodden scrub, criss-crossed with caribou trails, and dotted with shallow lakes. One, among hundreds, is known as the Gull Pond. The name is said to derive from the popularity of its tiny rocky island with seabirds (although we didn't see any there) and, in the local tradition, always includes the article (never "Gull Pond" but always "the Gull Pond"). One of many Gull Ponds in Newfoundland, its obscurity is made complete by the fact that the few maps which show the pond at all label it with an erroneous name.

Today the snowmobile and the ATV have opened the interior of the Cape Shore for recreation. In the old days it was different. Then, only a few hardy "men of the country" ventured inland from the coves to supplement the meager living provided by the sea. They trapped muskrat along the streams in the spring and snowshoed in after "country meat" (caribou) in the winter. And once – long, long ago – some of them heard things and saw things which gave rise to the legend of "the plane in the pond."

The following chronology has been compiled by comparing the information gathered in numerous interviews with the scant documentary evidence available. To help assess the credibility of various elements of the story we have made distinctions among the several types of sources and labeled each element accordingly:

- ★ Designates a contemporaneous written source.
- ⊛ Designates a first-hand anecdote (the later recollections of an eyewitness).
- ☆ Designates a second-hand anecdote (hearsay).

It also helps to know that Patrick's Cove is about 2.5 miles south of Gooseberry Cove on the western coast of the Cape Shore. The Gull Pond is more than 10 miles back in "the country."

### Late spring, 1927

Nicholas McGrath (pronounced McGraw), 48 years old, of Patrick's Cove, is trapping muskrat along the Branch River several miles south of the Gull Pond when he hears three explosions in rapid succession off in the distance. He can not imagine the cause.☆

### Winter 1928

While hunting caribou, McGrath takes a short cut across the ice of the frozen Gull Pond and notices metal jammed in the rocks of the pond's small rocky island. He decides it must be airplane wreckage and wonders if it explains the explosions he heard the year before.☆

### Winter 1932

Patrick "Patsy" Judge of Gooseberry Cove, age 20, recovers a piece of metal from the Gull Pond.⊛

### Winters during 1930s

James Joseph Doyle of Gooseberry Cove, age mid-50s, recovers numerous pieces of metal for use in repairing sled runners.☆

### Winter 1940

Anthony McGrath, age 27, and Ronald McGrath, age 14, (both of Patrick's Cove) see a 4 or 5 foot long piece of lightweight, blue colored metal sticking out of the ice at the Gull Pond. Anthony breaks it off by working it back and forth but decides not to carry it home and "stashes it back in the tuck" (the underbrush) instead. He believes he is the first person to find the metal at the pond.⊛

### Winter, sometime in the 1940s

Patrick McGrath, the teen-age son of Nicholas McGrath, "finally gets to see the metal at the pond."

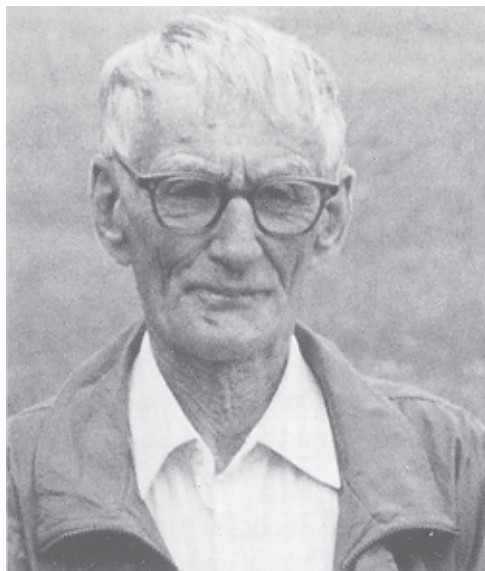
With him are his cousins Leo McGrath, early 20s, and Ignatius McGrath, age unknown.★

### 1947

Patsy Judge, now 35, gives part of the piece he recovered in 1932 to Ralph Martin, 42, a visitor from England and the first “foreigner” Patsy has ever met. Martin returns to England and gives the piece to people at the Avro Aircraft company plant about five miles from his home in Bradford, Yorkshire. Avro writes to Patsy and says that the piece of metal is, without a doubt, part of the White Bird.★

### Summer of 1971

Nicholas McGrath's son Patrick, now 48, goes to the Gull Pond with Hubert McGrath, age 24, and Father Charlie McCarthy, age unknown, to search for pieces of “the plane in the pond.” The priest swims around the small rocky island with a snorkel and mask but all they find is a badly rusted metal strap attached to a tightening device. The artifact is later lost.★



*Patrick McGrath in September, 1992, in Patrick's Cove, the Avalon Peninsula, Newfoundland, Canada.*

*TIGHAR photo by P. Thrasher.*

### Spring 1974

A Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) reporter named Rob Parker hears about “the plane in the pond” and tries to collect enough information to do a story. He interviews local residents including Patsy Judge and learns of the Avro letter. He contacts Avro but they tell him that a fire has destroyed much of their old correspondence and they can not verify the story. Parker flies over a pond in a helicopter but sees nothing and he isn't even sure he has the right pond. Eventually he gives up.☆

### June 1974

Patsy Judge, now 62, writes to Ralph Martin in England, now 69, saying “there is a group searching in the pond where I found this plane and they are trying to deny that I was the first to find this part (in 1932) and trying to say it was years later. So if you could write me a letter concerning the transaction between you and I in 1947 this would prove that I am right.” Patsy has apparently lost the 1947 letter from Avro and now can't remember whether they said the airplane was the White Bird or the Blue Bird. He asks Martin if he “can find out which plane they were searching for here in 1928.” Martin writes back confirming the events in 1947 but says he never had a copy of the Avro letter.☆ (There was no search in 1928 but in the summer of 1927 the Nungesser/Coli Search Expedition used a Fokker Universal on floats to search the Newfoundland coastal areas for the White Bird.)

### October 1992

TIGHAR conducts a metal detector search of the rocky island in the Gull Pond and finds an as yet unidentified metal artifact with blue paint on its surface.

James Joseph Doyle died in 1945.

Nicholas McGrath died in 1971.

Ronald McGrath died in 1980.

Leo McGrath died in 1988.

Patsy Judge died in 1989.

Patrick McGrath, Anthony McGrath, Hubert McGrath, Father McCarthy, Rob Parker and Ralph Martin are still living.

Of all the pieces of the plane in the pond reportedly recovered over the years, only the piece found by TIGHAR is known to still exist. Catalogued as TIGHAR Artifact 1-21-1, the object has been formally loaned to TIGHAR by the Newfoundland Historic Resources Division. We are conducting laboratory tests in cooperation with the Musée de l'Air et de l'Espace in Paris, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in Washington in an attempt to learn as much as possible about the artifact. Meanwhile, our friends at the British magazine *Aeroplane Monthly* are trying to locate any former Avro employees who might remember the 1947 incident. 🐾

# UNFINISHED WORK

*“I propose to fight it out on this line, if it takes all summer.”  
—General Ulysses Simpson Grant, May 11, 1864.*

In ten years of searching for l’Oiseau Blanc, the disappointments, frustrations and dashed hopes have become so familiar that it’s easy to lose sight of how far we have come. Most recently, the TIGHAR volunteers of Project Midnight Ghost Expedition XXIV (March 22—31, 1994) and Expedition XXV (May 21—28, 1994) carried out technologically and logistically complex airmobile operations in one of the most challenging environments on earth and did it with safety, efficiency and precision. That they didn’t find the White Bird is not nearly as important as the fact that the information they did find has put us a giant step closer to our goal.

This summer could see the successful conclusion of TIGHAR’s search for the most historically significant lost aircraft in history. Like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle falling ever more quickly into place, new clues are providing an emerging picture of an aircraft that was lost not once, but many times. As the evidence builds and alternative explanations are eliminated, it looks more and more like the unfortunate plane-in-the-pond was none other than l’Oiseau Blanc. Many questions, however, remain to be answered and the most important pieces of the puzzle must yet be found before the fate of Nungesser and Coli can pass from legend into history.

In July a research and logistics team will return to Newfoundland to make preparations for a major search operation now planned for September. Project Midnight Ghost Expedition XXVI, like all of TIGHAR’s archeological investigations in Newfoundland, will be conducted in close cooperation with the Newfoundland government under a permit issued to Project Archeologist James Carucci, Ph.D. (TIGHAR #1431E). As soon as the necessary approvals are received and dates are set we’ll put out a Project Bulletin.

In the meantime, here’s a summary of what we know so far:

- Contemporaneous written testimony from a variety of witnesses chronicles the passage of an aircraft over Newfoundland’s Avalon Peninsula on the morning of May 9, 1927. The descriptions of the airplane fit l’Oiseau Blanc. There were no aircraft

of any description operational in Newfoundland at that time.




Photo courtesy Musée de l’Air et de l’Espace

Rare photo of l’Oiseau Blanc enroute to the French coast on the morning of May 8, 1927. Note that the undercarriage has been jettisoned.

## BANDITS IN THE HILLS

As if Nungesser and Coli had not suffered enough misfortune, the fullest possible understanding of their fate is now being threatened by a brazenly illegal attempt to “beat” TIGHAR to the discovery of whatever remains of their aircraft. For the past several months a group operating in defiance of Newfoundland’s Historic Resources Act has repeatedly conducted illegal search operations at the Gull Pond with the declared intention of finding the White Bird. By operating outside the law, as well as outside the constraints of ethical archeological practice, it is not uncommon for looters to get quick and dirty results. It was, therefore, disappointing but hardly surprising to learn that a metal artifact suspected of being part of l’Oiseau Blanc has recently been smuggled out of Newfoundland and sent to France for identification. Whatever becomes of the object now, its provenance has been destroyed along with its usefulness as evidence.

This is an old problem in archeology but fortunately, in this case, good strong laws with sharp, pointy teeth are in place. We can only hope that enforcement action will be taken before further damage occurs. 

- The diary of Sidney Cotton, leader of the 1927 Nungesser-Coli Search Expedition, tells of local reports that an aircraft was seen “on Red Head on fire.” Red Head is a coastal headland nine miles from the Gull Pond and, on June 17, 1927 (five weeks after the disappearance) Cotton flew his Fokker Universal over the area “where machine reported crashed.” Whether Cotton searched inland as far as the Gull Pond is not known, but his flight discovered no explanation for the witness reports.

Photo courtesy Newfoundland Archives.



*Fokker Universal “Jeanne d’Arc” of the Nungesser-Coli Search Expedition arrives in St. John’s, Newfoundland aboard S.S. Silvia, June 9, 1927.*

- Local folklore about airplane wreckage seen at, and recovered from, the pond in the late 1920s through the 1940s has been corroborated by recently found government correspondence describing an aircraft wreck “15 to 20 years old” reported seen in 1948. This effectively eliminates WWII as a source of the wreck and puts the event back into a period which greatly narrows the possible identity of the plane-in-the-pond.

- One candidate, “The Endeavor,” lost during a March 1928 transatlantic attempt, has been eliminated thanks to documentation found by Russ Lowe (TIGHAR #1436EC). A letter from the Air Ministry in London dated March 1, 1929 confirms that a serial-numbered wheel from the Stinson Detrioter washed ashore in Ireland that previous December. That leaves only “The Dawn,” the “San Raphael,” and the “Golden Hind” as even remote alternatives to l’Oiseau Blanc.

- An artifact matching the description of debris reported seen at the pond prior to World War Two was recovered by TIGHAR from the shallow water near the small rocky island in 1992. Although too badly damaged to be diagnostic, it confirms that the tales of the plane-in-the-pond are more than folklore (see “A Piece of the Plane in the Pond,” *TIGHAR Tracks* Vol. 9 No. 1, p. 6).

- Another artifact suspected of being part of l’Oiseau Blanc—possibly one of the pieces recovered

in 1930s (see “Found Objects,” *TIGHAR Tracks* Vol. 9 No. 4, December 1993, page 5)—has been illegally salvaged and smuggled to France by a group of looters operating in defiance of Newfoundland’s Historic Resources Act (see “Bandits in the Hills”).

## Bits And Pieces

But if the evidence that the White Bird crashed at the Gull Pond seems to be building, it is also apparent that whatever remains of the largely biodegradable aircraft is now very hard to find. Just how much wreckage was once visible and how much was carried off by people who later visited the site is unknowable, but the most reasonable answer to both questions would seem to be “not much.” Anyone removing debris during the period when such removal is reported to have taken place (1932 to 1941) would have necessarily been traveling on foot or snowshoes (the footing is impossible for horses) and would have had to carry or tow their trophy about 10 miles to the closest village.

The torn, battered or crumpled condition of the debris found at the pond suggests an event of considerable violence. At the same time, the absence of stories describing the discovery, much less removal, of an engine or any other large structure suggests that the main body of wreckage was never found. How much of the wreck, wherever it is, may still survive? The one artifact TIGHAR has found in the pond is made of a low-carbon, fairly ductile steel and exhibits significant loss of structure due to oxidation. When found (with a White’s Electronics PI3000 metal detector) the surviving portion of the object was completely buried in the silt. What clue does that give us about what we can expect to find and where we can expect to find it?



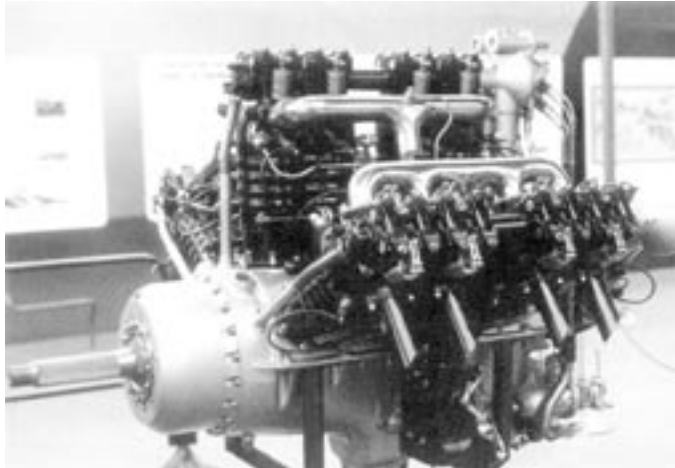
*TIGHAR recovers Artifact 1-21-1 from the Gull Pond, October 25, 1992. Diver Harlan Lanoue, TIGHAR #0074E, far right, is near the spot where the object was first discovered by Paul Squires, TIGHAR #1391CE, inset.*

TIGHAR Photos by P. Thrasher.



## PROJECT REPORT—PROJECT MIDNIGHT GHOST

The aircraft's engine is, of course, the most obvious target for a remote-sensing search. Assuming that the plane-in-the-pond is l'Oiseau Blanc, the engine is a 450 h.p. Lorraine-Dietrich with twelve cylinders arranged in a distinctive W configuration (sort of a V8 with another bank of four down the middle). It's big, measuring about five feet long by four feet wide by three feet tall; and heavy, weighing 906 lbs dry. The crankcase is aluminum as are the pistons, but the cylinders are milled out of solid billets of steel and encased in thin steel water jackets. It seems reasonable to postulate that the twelve and



*Twelve cylinder Lorraine-Dietrich engine of the same type as installed in l'Oiseau Blanc. TIGHAR photo by H. Lanoue.*

a half foot long, forged aluminum propeller is still attached, as may be the copper pipes and radiators of the cooling system. How the corrosive forces in the pond might react with this carnival of dissimilar metals is anybody's guess, but it is difficult to imagine that the engine would not survive, if only as a heavily corroded mass.

## A Pond In Name Only

The word "pond" evokes images of gold fish and willow trees but such are in short supply at the the Gull Pond. Nearly a mile long and, in places, half a mile wide, it covers an area of 33 hectares and is perhaps best described as a lake on a high barren plateau. The surrounding terrain is muskeg – a marshy, windswept moonscape of rock and moss crisscrossed with caribou trails and dotted with tangles of gnarled underbrush. Low scudding fog and rain are

the rule in this place that gets fewer days of sun than anywhere in North America except the Aleutians. Water depth in the pond ranges from about one foot near shore to not much more than six or seven feet in the deeper areas where silt covers a clay subsurface. Much of the bottom, however, is a painful jumble of slime-covered, angular boulders which, we have learned to our chagrin, includes highly mineralized material dropped there 10,000 years ago by the glacier that carved the land. In the center of the pond the boulders rise to form a small rocky island and it is here that wreckage once lay strewn about or "jammed in the rocks."

In a typical year, ice forms on the pond in December and builds to roughly two feet in thickness before breaking up in April. Significant portions of the pond freeze to the bottom encasing rocks and boulders (and anything else) in blocks of ice which, in the spring, become miniature icebergs driven by the wind. The effect of their powerful grinding action is readily apparent along the shoreline. What they might do to aircraft wreckage over the course of sixty-seven winters can only be imagined.

But in spite of all the forces and factors, natural and human, that have kept the fate of l'Oiseau Blanc hidden for all these many years, it is becoming increasingly apparent that our favorite saying is as true as ever: nothing vanishes without a trace.



*The Gull Pond*



*TIGHAR photo by P. Thrasher*

# NOTES FROM THE FIELD:

## Expedition XXVII

September 15 – 24, 1994



*Project Director*  
*Project Archeologist*  
*Remote-Sensing Technician*  
*Team Physician*  
*Logistical Support*  
*Newfoundland Coordination*  
*Cape Shore Volunteers*

*Richard Gillespie (Exec. Dir. TIGHAR)*  
*James Carucci, PhD (TIGHAR #1431CE)*  
*Kenton Spading (TIGHAR #1382CE)*  
*David Scott, M.D. (TIGHAR #1393 CE)*  
*Joseph Hudson (TIGHAR #1689C)*  
*Russell Chafe (TIGHAR # 1876N)*  
*William Roche, Donald Nash, Leo Linehan*

**I**T IS AN AXIOM of all search operations that negative results are results nonetheless. That was cold comfort to the battered TIGHARs who returned emptyhanded from the latest scouring of the frigid waters of the Gull Pond. This was the most intensive search of the pond to date with four team members living on-site for nearly a week. Areas were marked off with buoys and examined using a Geonics EM-61 electromagnetic sensing instrument (sort of an industrial strength metal detector). Where the water was too shallow or clogged with weeds, hand-held White's Electronics PI3000 underwater metal detectors were employed. On some days, shoreline searches were conducted

by local volunteers flown in by helicopter.

It was expensive, uncomfortable, and thoroughly puzzling. That an aircraft crashed at the Gull Pond in the late 1920s is almost certain. That the aircraft was l'Oiseau Blanc, the White Bird of vanished French transatlantic aviators Charles Nungesser and François Coli, appears highly probable. If the wood and fabric biplane burned on impact, as suggested by contemporaneous reports, then the wreckage was immediately reduced to its few metal components. Local tradition holds that metal debris was long ago

retrieved from the pond by various individuals. Whatever survives has been subjected to the pond's highly corrosive environment for nearly seventy years and, we can say with some certainty, is now very hard to find.

What next? It is apparent that we need either better luck or better technology.

While we're waiting for the luck we're researching the technology. Meanwhile, the local group searching the pond in defiance



*Archeologist Jim Carucci, L, takes Joe Hudson's report of a shoreline search. TIGHAR photo by R. Gillespie.*

of Newfoundland's Historic Resources Act (see *TIGHAR Tracks* Vol. 10 No. 1, "Bandits In The Hills") continues its operations heedless of government threats. Rumors abound about what they may have found but because they disdain accepted archeological procedures and ethics it's difficult to separate fact from fiction. We at TIGHAR can only continue to pursue our investigation according to our standards of full compliance with appropriate regulations and public disclosure of our findings.



*Dave Scott, L, and Kent Spading use the Geonics EM61 to search the pond for metal hits. TIGHAR photo by R. Gillespie.*



# AN ADVENTURE IN NEWFOUNDLAND

## Project Reports

**T**IGHAR members who take the Introductory Course In Aviation Archaeology are often surprised at our somewhat unorthodox opinion of adventure. Although not particularly romantic, it is a viewpoint born of experience – in particular, expeditions such as Project Midnight Ghost Expedition XXIV.

The objective of the operation was to use a Geonics EM31 instrument to map the electrical conductivity of the bottom of the Gull Pond, an isolated lake high on the muskeg-covered interior of the Cape Shore arm of Newfoundland’s Avalon Peninsula. If the survey revealed the presence of a significant electromagnetic anomaly it might well be the wreckage of long-lost l’Oiseau Blanc. Accuracy was of paramount importance but the only way to collect data along absolutely straight lines on the surface of the windy lake was to do it on the ice in the dead of winter.

There are several ways to get to the Gull Pond, all of them bad. The previous October, Project Director Richard Gillespie and John Clauss (TIGHAR#0142CE) had walked the five miles in (or rather, up) from the nearest road. Carrying only light hiking gear, the trip had taken 4.5 hours each way. Transporting sufficient people and gear to actually accomplish anything at the pond means taking a much longer route overland in large tracked vehicles (which are not available) or flying in by helicopter (the pond is too shallow for float planes). Aside from the expense, there are two disadvantages to airmobile operations: limited load capacity and the Newfoundland weather.

The plan called for Gillespie and the other team members, Veryl Fenlason (TIGHAR #0053CE), Kenton Spading (TIGHAR#1382CE), and Newfoundland archaeologist Roy Skanes, to fly to the Gull Pond from St. John’s (about a

45 minute flight) at first light in a Bell Jet Ranger chartered from Canadian Helicopters. Meanwhile, local TIGHAR member Gary Hebbard (#1865) would load the EM31 and other field gear into his car and drive from St. John’s to a gravel pit along the road which would serve as a landing zone (LZ). After dropping off the team at the pond, helicopter pilot Ron Whiffen would fly down to the road and bring Gary and the gear up to the pond where he would shut down and stand by. At the end of the day the procedure would be reversed. The biggest concern would be fuel. There would be nowhere to refuel during the day, and the planned flight time would be close to the

Jet Ranger’s maximum. From the Project Director’s field journal and notes:

**Fri. 3/25/94**

0330 Wakeup

### Ad·ven·ture (əd·ven·cher) n.

1. Terror and discomfort remembered in an atmosphere of luxury and security.
2. What happens when things go wrong.
3. The natural result of inadequate planning.

- 0410 Ron Whiffen called to confirm weather.
- 0500 Gary picked up gear and left for Cape Shore. We left to pick up lunches and go to airport. The donut shop on Torbay Road no longer makes sandwiches that early so we had to go to the other one. Delay made us a few minutes late.
- 0615 Pulled pitch for the Gull Pond. Old Bell 206B CF-GNLF, Ron Whiffen, me, Veryl, Kent, Roy. Very heavy. Pulling 90% power to get airborne. Ron not at all sure she’d fly at that weight but she did.
- 0700 Overhead the LZ but no sign of Gary. Checked along road but no luck. Flew up to the Gull Pond and off-loaded people and gear. Went back down with Ron to see if Gary arrived yet.

0730 Landed at LZ. Still no sign of Gary. He's had 2.5 hours to make a 1.5 hour drive. He has the EM31 and the rest of our gear. I kick myself for putting us in this bind. We shut down to wait. It's all we can do. Just then he shows up. He took the long way down from Whitborne.

0800 Finally on site with all gear and people.

1030 I am not happy. We have beautiful conditions. Clear skies, calm winds, not cold, hard smooth ice – and we're not collecting data. It's taking way too long to lay out the lines and the rope has become hopelessly tangled. The operation is floundering, Gary is strolling around out on the ice without an immersion suit. If he goes through we'll have to abort. I'm on my knees trying to untangle and splice rope. I've cut up my hands on the ice and the blood is making it hard to tie the lines. Time to do something different.

1100 Big improvement. We're collecting data. I rounded up Gary and put him ashore untangling rope. I then told Kent, Veryl & Roy that we had to accept less accuracy in favor of a system that let us actually get some work done. In ten minutes we had a good system working.

1145 Kent dumped his first two lines of data and looked at them on the laptop. Good news and bad news. The first line is junk but the second line looks good and we appear to have strong indications of metal. We either have metal in the pond or a system malfunction.

1245 Kent runs some test lines and checks the calibration. Everything looks normal. We run two more lines and look at the data. We're getting classic metal hits as

we pass the island. We'll run two more lines and look at it again. Important to dump and save often. We must not lose this data.

1330 We've collected two more lines. We'll eat lunch while Kent downloads the data, takes a look at it on the software, and backs up to floppy. Meanwhile, I'll do some scouting with the PI [White's Electronics Pulse Induction metal detector] down in the area where we seem to be getting an interesting response.

1400 The weather has closed in until we can't see the island from the chopper. I'm out on the ice with a PI when I see Roy running toward me. Ron wants to leave ASAP. I concur. We've got what appear to be some good data. We've got what we came for. The ice is getting dangerous and the visibility is rapidly going to nothing. Let's get out of here.

1430 We pack up but must take all the gear and Gary down to the LZ then come back for the boys. After discussion it is apparent that I must go with Ron to help him find his way back. He needs somebody in the left seat to read the topo map and I'm the only one who knows the terrain

between here and the road from walking in with Clauss back in October. I hate to leave the guys here. If we can't get back in they'll have to walk out and in those suits it would be hell. As we head down to the LZ we sneak around to the north side of St. Mary's Sugarloaf then follow a stream downhill. The weather clears after we're well down over Castle Ridge and we drop Gary at the LZ and head back up the mountain. This is no fun. My biggest concerns are that we won't be able to find our way back in before fuel forces us to abort or that Ron will decide that it's too dangerous. This is old fashioned scud-running. On the first try



*A welcome sight on the muskeg: Canadian Helicopters' 206B CF-GNLF. TIGHAR photo by P. Thrasher.*

Ron attempts to retrace our path down but we can't find the right stream and the thicker fog and rising ground to the south keep pushing us north. After a few minutes we are hopelessly lost in unfamiliar terrain and have to go back down to the coast to reorient and try again. Fuel is low and I know that this will be our last try. I spot a little peninsula on a pond where Clauss and I crossed in October and I tell Ron that I know exactly where we are. This time we'll take a straight shot up the mountain staying as low as possible. Most of the time it feels like it would be faster and a whole lot safer to just get out and walk, but between map and memory I'm able to keep us on course. The visibility lifts just enough so that I'm able to pick out St. Mary's Sugarloaf and we pop over the ridge and there's the pond. We pick up three happy campers then fly back down to wave to Gary. It's 1500 and we're on our way home. The fuel is tight but we're OK.

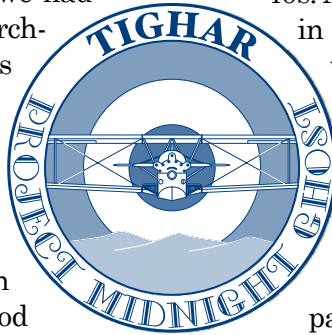
**I**t took another major expedition, and thousands of dollars, to establish that the apparent "metal in the pond" was nothing but some rocks with an unusually high electromagnetic signature. The Newfoundland Department of Mines & Energy had assured us that the geologic background at the pond was "very flat" prompting the experts at Geonics to interpret the big spikes in our data as metal. When they turned out to be rocks the Mines & Energy folks explained that "very flat" meant (to them) "not worth mining." Once we had an accurate geological picture of the pond, Geonics was able to recommend slightly different technology which has given us reliable results on subsequent searches. There is still a great deal of area to be examined at the Gull Pond. The challenge now is to find a way to cover it economically while minimizing the adventure.



# The Ghost Re-Appears

It was September 21, 1994 and we had hit a dead end. Ten years of searching for l'Oiseau Blanc had led us from the hills of coastal Maine to the high muskeg of Newfoundland. Now we stood tired, cold and empty-handed on a remote and desolate lakeshore, out of time, out of money, and out of ideas. Our only consolation was the knowledge that we had stood like this in other places at other times (too many places, too many times) and always, eventually, answers had emerged. Sometimes, it seems, a project needs to just sit and simmer for awhile. Keep the heat on and, sooner or later, something new will bubble to the top. Early this year, sixteen months after that bleak day on the muskeg, we heard a tiny but distinct “pop.”

The puzzle which had stumped us was truly perplexing. On May 9, 1927, twelve days before Lindbergh landed in Paris, two French aviators disappeared in an attempt to make the same trip, but in the opposite direction. Although their heralded arrival in New York didn't happen, an airplane fitting the description of their large white biplane, l'Oiseau Blanc (the White Bird), was seen over Newfoundland's Avalon Peninsula by as many as seventeen separate witnesses. The reported track of the aircraft passed northeast to southwest toward the Cape Shore, a coastal peninsula the interior of which is a wilderness plateau dotted with shallow lakes. A strong local tradition holds that one of those lakes holds the wreck of an airplane. That story is supported by archival documents confirming that, in 1948, airplane wreckage on an island in a lake was reported to the Newfoundland authorities. The debris was judged to be 15 to 20 years old and the Civil Aviation Division, after checking its records, dismissed it as probably belonging to one of “a number of aircraft (which) left Europe about twenty years ago of which no trace has since been found.” The exact location—a small rocky island in a lake known locally as the Gull Pond—was pinpointed for TIGHAR by Cape Shore residents who say they saw wreckage there in the early



'40s. An initial TIGHAR search of the island in 1992 recovered a single piece of debris which might be from an aircraft but is too badly deteriorated to be diagnostic. This did, however, seem to confirm the Gull Pond as the point of origin for the plane-in-the-pond stories. If an airplane crashed here the wreckage on the island should logically be part of a larger debris field which would include the all-important engine(s). To test that hypothesis a program of methodical visual and remote-sensing searches of the pond bottom was begun. Two years, six expeditions, and many thousands of dollars later we had covered enough of the submerged real estate surrounding the island to convince ourselves that there just ain't nothin' there. Something was fundamentally wrong with our hypothesis—but what?

The “pop” of new information which might re-open the investigation came in the form of a casual comment by a Newfoundland resident who remembered that early versions of the plane-in-the-pond story mentioned a different pond. The idea that we might be looking in the wrong body of water was one we had considered and rejected many times. The problem, of course, was the credible testimony of eyewitnesses who saw wreckage at the Gull Pond and our own recovery of an artifact there. Mysterious airplane wreckage at two ponds in the same region just didn't make any sense—or did it? Part of the plane-in-the-pond legend holds that an early discoverer of the wreck brought metal parts home to use as sled runners. What if the material seen and found at the Gull Pond was actually a stockpile of salvaged parts brought part way home from a site farther away? That would explain the absence of a debris field. Instead of discovering the crash site, perhaps we only cleaned up the last remaining piece of a salvor's stash. This may turn out to be yet another dead end or it could be the answer to one of aviation history's greatest riddles. Until we know which we're not much inclined to mention the name of the other pond.



# À COUVER VALLIANT



*Next year will be a landmark anniversary of aviation history's most important disappearance.*

*No, not that one.*

*Navigator François Coli stands in the cockpit to guide pilot Charles Nungesser as he taxis l'Oiseau Blanc across a flower-strewn field. TIGHAR collection.*



The quest to find The White Bird is TIGHAR's oldest, and in some ways dearest, project. So when someone claims to have found important new evidence, we take a close look. On May 8, 1927 – eight-five years ago – two French World War One aces, Charles Nungesser and François Coli, lifted their giant white biplane l'Oiseau Blanc (the White Bird) from Le Bourget Field outside Paris and headed westward across the Atlantic only to vanish, as

Lindbergh later wrote, “like midnight ghosts.” If they had landed in New York, winning the \$25,000 Orteig Prize – as everyone, including Lindbergh, expected – the Lone Eagle would not have flown to Paris a few days later and the tremendous boost to American aviation interest and innovation that resulted from his solo triumph would not have happened. The consequences, in the light of later events, can only be imagined.

## GETTING IT WRONG

Today this hinge-pin of history, when it is remembered at all, is commonly misunderstood and misrepresented. As recently as September 6 of this year, the front page of the *Wall Street Journal* carried an article headlined “Charles Lindbergh Won the Prize, but Did His Rival Get There First?” The answer, of course, is no. The prize was for the first nonstop flight, in either direction, between Paris and New York. Wherever Nungesser and Coli ended up, it wasn't New York. Lindbergh made it all the way to Paris. N'est ce pas?

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There is a great deal of solid documentary evidence to suggest that l'Oiseau Blanc did get as far as Newfoundland but M. Decré's hypothesis that it crashed into the sea near the French-owned islands of St. Pierre and Miquelon is based on a sketchy story about fishermen hearing something crash into the sea in the fog. He considers his best supporting evidence to be a document he discovered in the U.S. National

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On his blog (<http://whitebird.over-blog.net/7-index.html>) M. Decré says:

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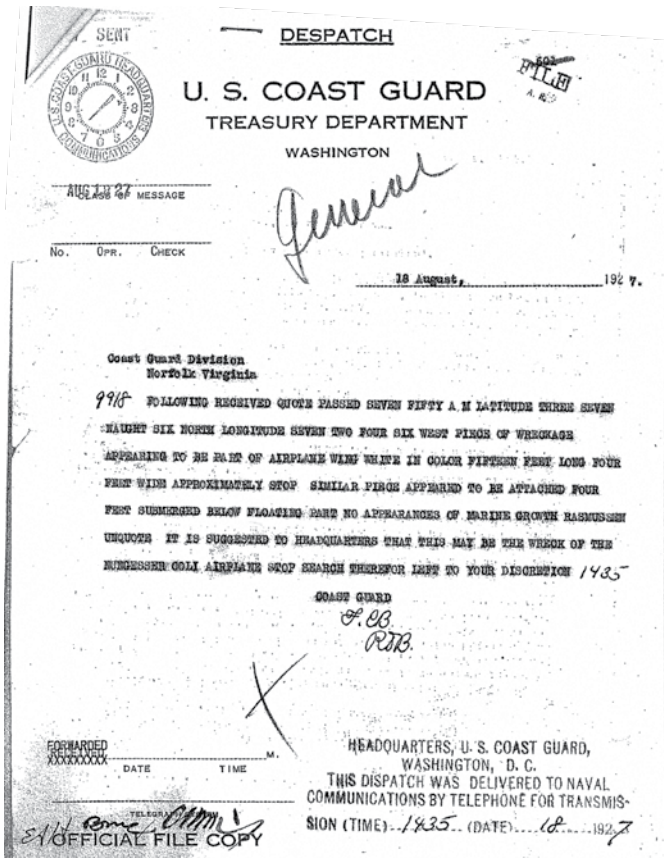
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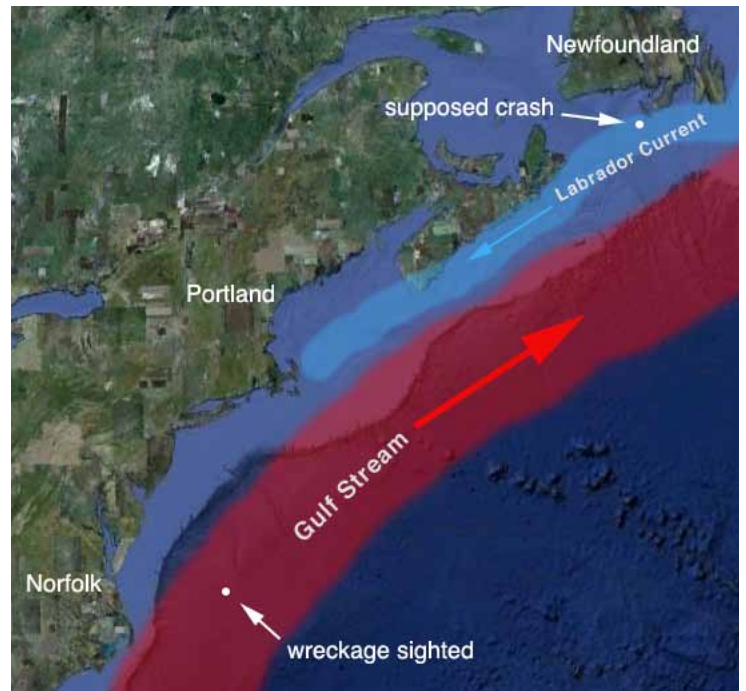
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A closer reading of the telegram might have stilled his pounding heart. Translating from telegramsese, it says:

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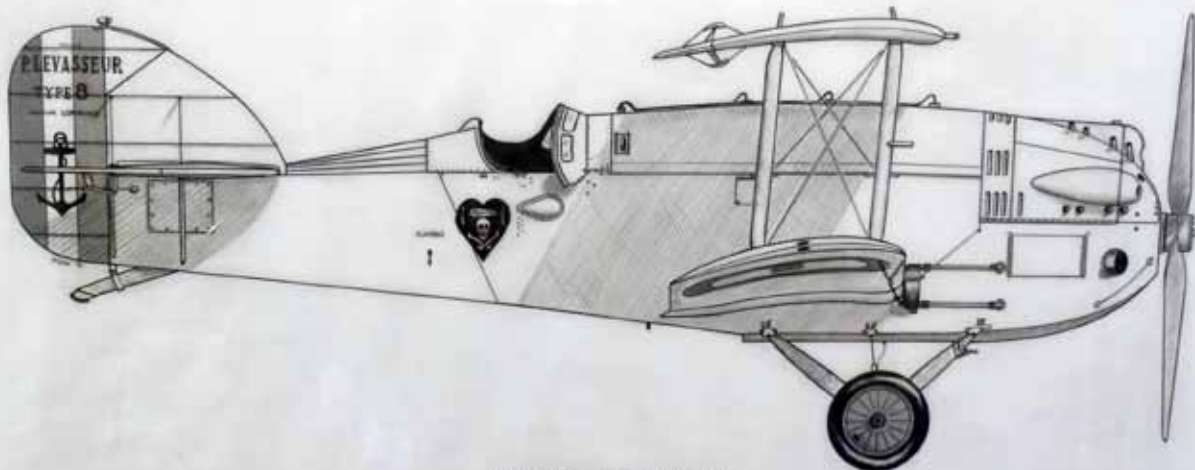


*L'Oiseau Blanc was powered by a 450 hp 12-cylinder Lorraine Dietrich engine like this one on display at the Musée de l'Air. TIGHAR collection.*

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NUNGESSER & COLI'S  
LEVASSEUR PL-B  
L'OISEAU BLANC



## À Coeur Valliant

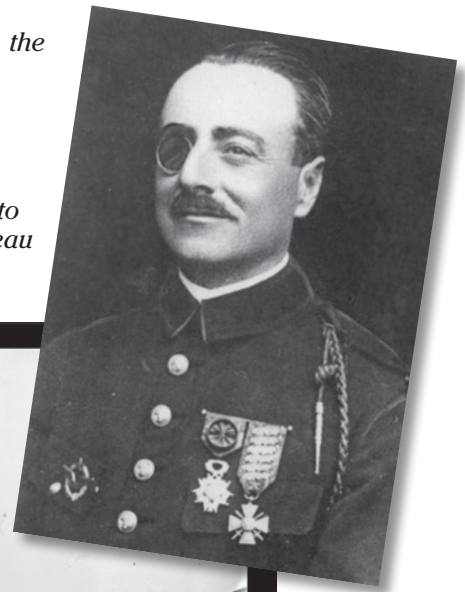


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*Charles Nungesser, left, and François Coli, right, the crew of l'Oiseau Blanc.*



*Navigator François Coli stands in the cockpit to guide pilot Charles Nungesser as he taxis l'Oiseau Blanc across a field. TIGHAR collection.*



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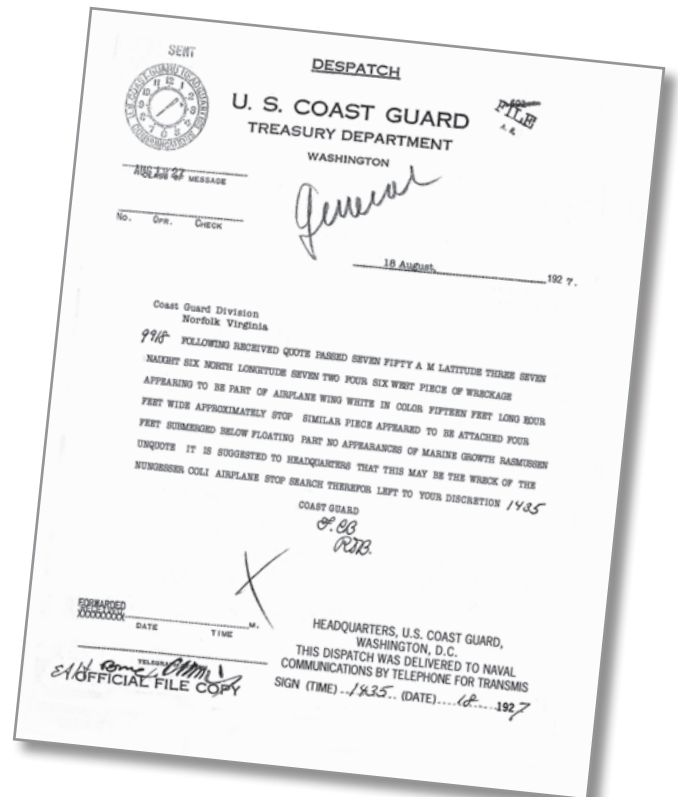
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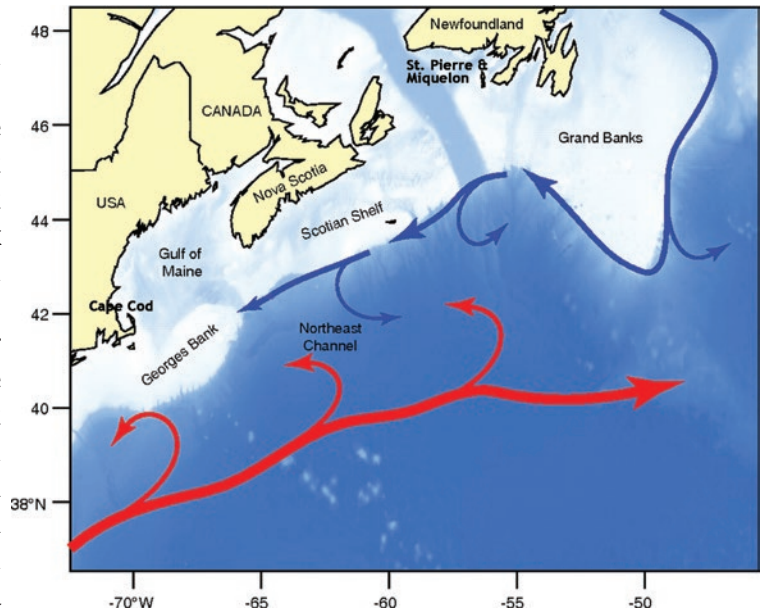
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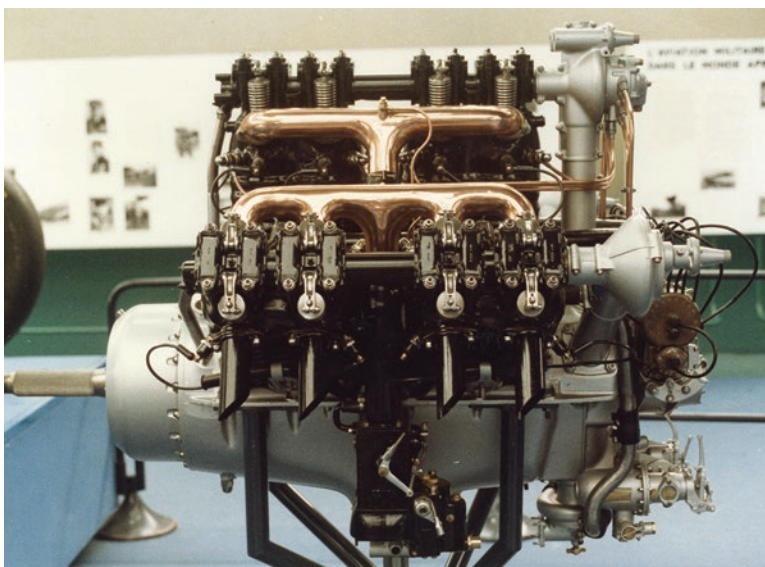


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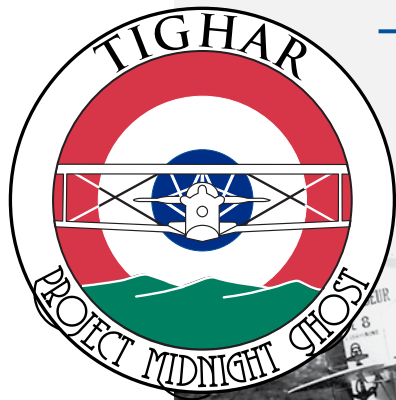


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# To Solve a Mystery



Reviewing our files and doing some new research, we find that there is evidence that the mystery of the White Bird was conclusively solved in 1947 but, due to a bizarre sequence of circumstances, the news never became public.

**D**ozens of TIGHAR members at the TIGHAR researcher level (\$125/yr) and above recently took the opportunity to watch, via the Youtube TIGHAR Channel, an excellent French documentary about l'Oiseau Blanc (The White Bird) and the competing theories to explain its disappearance. TIGHAR believes Nungesser and Coli went down on Newfoundland's Cape Shore peninsula in or near a shallow lake known locally as Gull Pond. French researcher Bernard Decré believes the flight crashed into the sea near the islands of Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon off the southern coast of Newfoundland – shot down by a U.S. Coast Guard gunboat patrolling for rum runners. Which, if either, theory is correct?

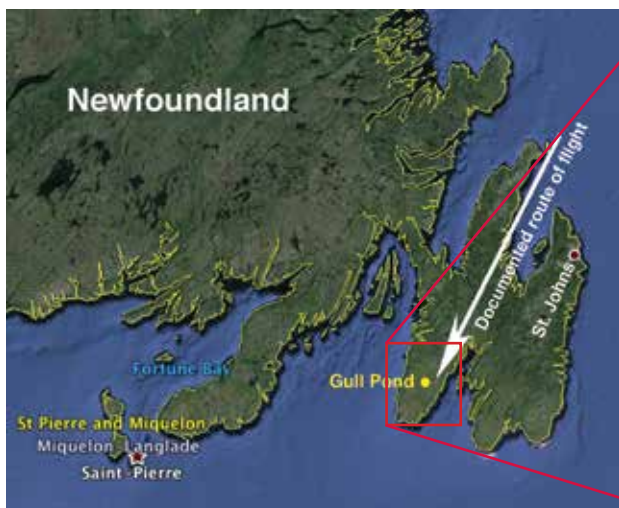
TIGHAR's investigation of the mystery has been largely dormant for the past ten years as our attention has been focused on the Earhart case. That work has sharpened our skills and the French documentary has inspired us to take a fresh look at the evidence we gathered in Newfoundland.

Decré and TIGHAR agree that several documented sightings confirm that the flight passed northeast to

southwest over the Avalon Peninsula on the morning of May 9, 1927. The sightings are sequential and match the 100 mph cruising speed of l'Oiseau Blanc. The last witness in the chain reported seeing an aircraft over the Cape Shore peninsula "on fire, trailing white smoke." A burning aircraft trails black smoke. The White Bird's 450 horsepower Lorraine-Dietrich engine was liquid-cooled with pipes carrying the water/glycol coolant to and from radiators in the wing roots. What the witness probably saw was steam from a burst coolant pipe. In such a circumstance, the engine would soon overheat and seize. The aircraft was designed to land on water – smooth water. The best option for a forced landing was one of the many lakes (locally known as ponds) that dot the barren Cape Shore interior.

Deriving its name from Cape St. Mary's at its southern tip, the Cape Shore is ringed with a necklace of small fishing villages. The interior of the peninsula, known locally as simply "the country," is a high barren plateau, treeless, boulder-strewn, moss-covered, and populated only by herds of caribou. The people of

the Cape Shore are almost exclusively of Irish descent, insular, fiercely independent, and disinclined to share what they know with outsiders. In the years before WWII, education was through the local parish and contact with the world beyond was spotty at best.



## THE PLANE IN THE POND

In the late spring of 1927, Nicholas McGrath (pronounced McGraw), 48 years old, of Patrick's Cove, is trapping muskrat along the Branch River several miles south of Gull Pond when he hears three explosions in rapid succession off in the distance. He cannot imagine the cause. (A crash on landing would drive the White Bird's hot engine into the aircraft's three large fuselage fuel tanks.)

The following winter, while hunting caribou, McGrath takes a short cut across the ice of the frozen Gull Pond and notices metal jammed in the rocks of the pond's small rocky island. He decides it must be airplane wreckage and upon his return publicly wonders if it explains the explosions he heard the year before. About this time James Joseph "Jim Joe" Doyle of Gooseberry Cove, age mid-50s, is seen using metal of unknown origin to repair sled runners. Rumor has it that the metal came from "the plane in the pond."

In 1932, Patrick "Patsy" Judge, age 20, of Patrick's Cove and boyfriend (later husband) of Doyle's adopted daughter Bridget, recovers a piece of metal from the island in Gull Pond. Patsy wants to know what plane it came from but has no means of researching it.



October 25, 1992. TIGHAR recovered an artifact from the small rocky island in Gull Pond. TIGHAR photo.

In 1947, Patsy Judge, now 35, gives the piece he recovered in 1932 to Ralph Martin, 42, a visitor from England and the first "foreigner" Patsy has ever met. Martin returns to England and gives the piece to people at the Avro Aircraft company plant in Chadderton, Yorkshire. At some point, Avro wrote back and, according to Patsy's 1974 recollection, asserted that the piece of metal is, without a doubt, part of the undercarriage of ??? – Patsy apparently lost the letter and later could not remember whether it said the piece was part of the Bluebird or the White Bird. (There was no Bluebird.)

In 1948, apparently before receiving the reply from Avro, Patsy Judge returns to the pond and collects more debris. He writes a letter to Mr. C. Noonan, a businessman in St. John's, seeking his help in identifying the plane. He does not mention the piece he gave to Martin.

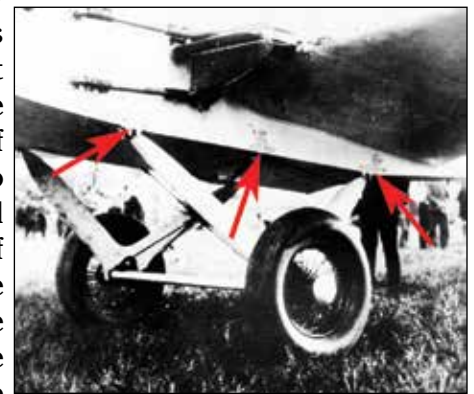
"I was in the country last week ... and came across what appears to be parts of an aeroplane" on "the island of Great Gull Pond." "I was wondering if it might be the plane called the Bluebird, as it has spots of blue paint still on it. ... I am sure it must be fifteen or twenty years since the plane fell as the iron is rusted out." (The steel components of the White Bird were painted blue. The artifact TIGHAR found in the pond that we suspect is from the plane had surviving spots of blue paint.)

Noonan referred Patsy's query to the Commissioner for Public Utilities who forwarded it to the Civil Aviation Division. They replied, "We are inclined to agree with Mr. Patrick Judge that the plane might have been at Great Gull Pond for 15-20 years as we have no knowledge of any civil aircraft being missing in this area in recent years. It will be recalled that there were a number of aircraft left Europe about twenty years ago of which no trace of them has been found. It does appear that we cannot or need not take any action for further investigation."

In 1974 a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation reporter tried to follow up on the story but learned from Avro that a fire had destroyed the company's records.

In 1993 TIGHAR's Ric Gillespie interviewed Ralph Martin, the man who had given the object to Avro in 1947. Martin described it as bent and somewhat crumpled, comparatively light, aluminum or stainless steel, no corrosion, bright and shiny, about 12 or 14 inches long, about 3 inches long at its widest part, with strange numerals stamped on it. He thought it looked like "a support piece."

The description fits the stainless steel attach points – Levasseur part numbers 114 A, B & C (2 each) – for the White Bird's jettisonable landing gear. We have recently confirmed that there was a fire at the Chadderton Avro plant in October 1959 that destroyed many of the company's records, but did it really destroy the company's copy of the letter sent to Patsy Judge? And what became of the artifact? At the very least, is there a former employee who recalls the incident?



A mystery is not solved if the word never gets out. It's time to pick up the thread and see where it leads us.