



FLIGHTLINE

Newsletter of the American Aviation Historical Society

No. 25-04

1 June 2025

In this issue we close out the story of the ditching of VMF-422 and the rescue of the survivors. That of course was not the end of the squadron. VMF-422, with the addition of replacement pilots and aircraft, moved up to the Marshall Islands as soon as bases there were secured.

The Backwater War

It's often forgotten that not every enemy stronghold was invaded. Many were simply bypassed, left to shrivel and die on the vine as American forces island hopped across the Pacific. Considerable enemy forces remained at Rabaul and Bougainville until war's end, while marooned Japanese garrisons continued to occupy islands and atolls here and there. A substantial chunk of allied air power was employed in keeping these forlorn outposts in check and to hunt down enemy submarines and any surface vessels that might attempt to succor their starving inhabitants.

Aerial opposition was negligible, but these "milk runs" were dull and sometimes dangerous. They were an unglamorous part of the Pacific War that not much is written about. Such was the fate of VMF-422. The Flying Buccaneers would finally get into the real war at Okinawa, but by then the ditching survivors had rotated Stateside. ➔

The Most Influential Aircraft?

In No. 25-02 we asked about the five or ten (pick some number) of the most influential aircraft in history. We decided to start with the first balloon flights in 1783 and work forward. With that in mind, we chose the hydrogen balloon developed by J.A.C. Charles and constructed by the Robert brothers. That aircraft flew only once, and so far as is known nothing of it survives. (Charles himself never flew again, either.)

But that prototype design was so well thought out that it served as the pattern for the world's only usable aircraft for the next 120 years. That works out to 1903. But it might be argued (we would) that the 1903 Wright Flyer, for all its historical significance, was not a truly usable aircraft.

The hydrogen balloon, meanwhile, became the first aircraft to be utilized in warfare. What can truly be called the world's first air force were the two balloon companies organized and fielded for the armies of Revolutionary France. That rather remarkable chapter in aeronautical history has yet to be completely told in English.

Even the much better known exploits of the Union "balloon corps" under T.S.C. Lowe have not been explored much

beyond late 1862. The meager Confederate attempts, and the deployment of a lone U.S. Army balloon in the vicinity of San Juan Hill during the Spanish American War, insignificant and unsuccessful as both were, are virtually unknown to all but hard core history buffs.

With the advent of the internal combustion engine, development of a steerable lighter-than-air craft at least seemed possible. Indeed, from 1899 to about 1908, the early dirigibles reigned supreme. The diminutive Alberto Santos-Dumont was world famous while the Wright Brothers, by their own choice, were little known outside Dayton, Ohio. Glenn Curtiss got his start in aviation by way of one of "Captain Tom" Baldwin's single-seat airships.

Count Zeppelin's tentative first flight of his massive rigid airship in 1900 pioneered a mode of long distance air transport that, through peace and war, endured until the explosion of the Hindenburg in 1937. Airships were interesting, even downright awe inspiring in their most gigantic forms, but they proved to be an aeronautical dead end. For that reason, we don't consider any of the species to be among history's most influential aircraft. ➔

The Future of *FlightLine*

As the email heads up (15 May) announcing the previous issue noted, we've adopted a very ambitious schedule for *FlightLine*. How that plays out remains to be seen. We think it'll work, but if it turns out we don't come across—or can't dream up—enough items of interest, we may have to throttle back to once a month. Which brings up a fundamental question: *Does it matter?* Is producing a separate *FlightLine* worth the time it takes, or would our members be better served by enlarging the these historical tidbits into *Journal* articles? ➔

Elsewhere in AAHS

On page 12 we've reprinted AAHS CEO Jerri Bergen's message that appeared in the Spring AAHS *Journal*. As Jerri points out, AAHS needs your help, but you don't have to come to LA to give us a hand. There are always things to be taken care of at Flabob HQ, but if you have access to a computer and reasonable internet access, you can contribute in other ways.

Perhaps AAHS's most glaring need is for new *Journal* material. We have no staff of writers, paid or otherwise. We rely one hundred percent on our fellow aviation enthusiasts to share their experiences, their photographs, and the results of their research in aviation history. When we have nothing to print, there is no *Journal*. ➔

The Ditching of VMF-422

More of the Story

In this number, we finish the story of the mass ditching of 23 Marine F4U Corsairs during World War II and the rescue of the survivors. We managed to connect a few more dots along the way. For the first installment, we neglected to check the source we generally go to first: The *AAHS Journal* archives. Sure enough, there's an article from 2010 entitled "[A Lost Squadron, VMF-422's WWII Misadventure](#)."

In 2008, the same author wrote a novel based on the incident, *Sea Eagle Down*. While the AAHS article sketches the basic outline of the story, about half the four pages are devoted to second-guessing, or outright condemnation, of the "decided lack of judgment on the part of the flight commander," Maj. John S. MacLaughlin, Jr.

Even a risky rescue attempt by a PBY is bashed as "another error in a long litany of errors because the PBY was disabled in the landing and had to be towed into Funafuti." That's not exactly the way it happened, as we'll see presently.

One of the sources cited in the 2010 article is "The Foundation, Spring Issue 1991, by Maj. Mark Syrkin, USMCR (Ret.)." We were unable to locate that item, but Syrkin was among the survivors whose experiences were recorded in the squadron history.

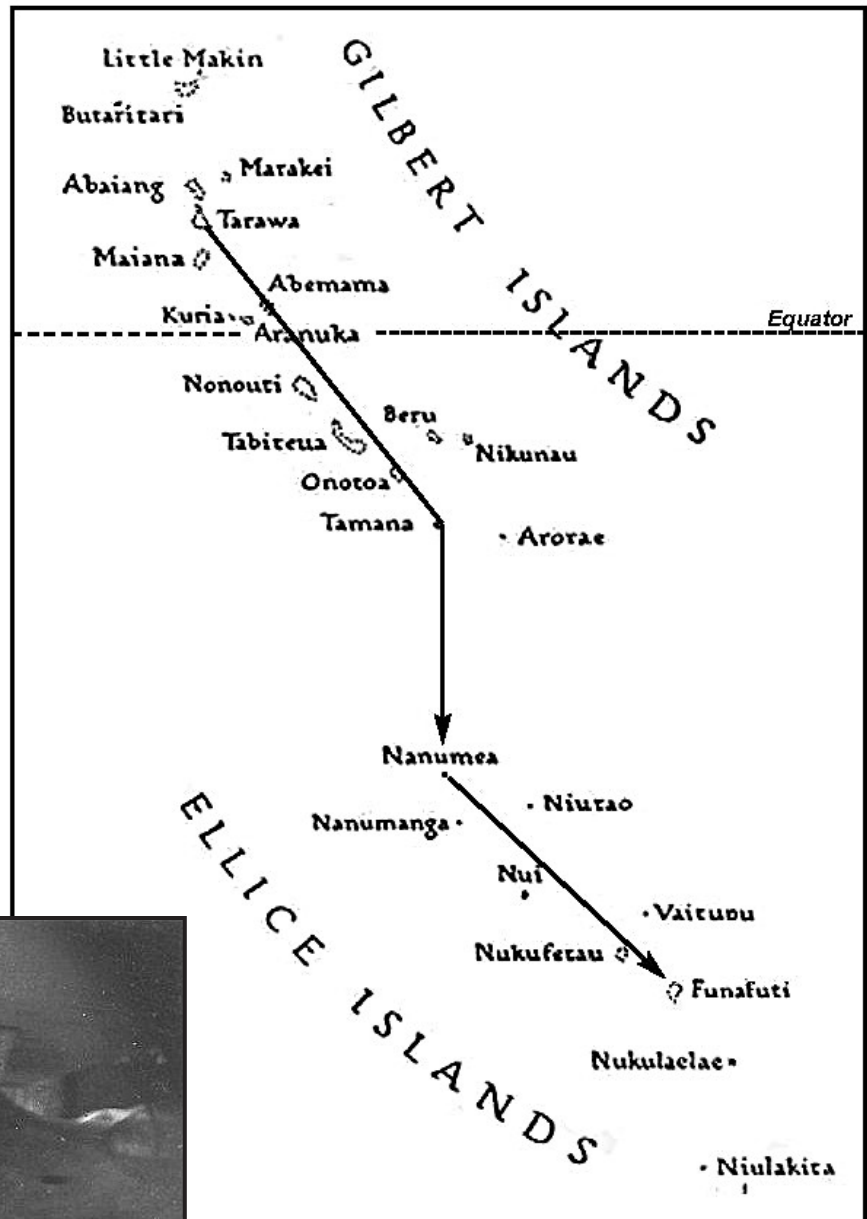
War diaries of the units most involved in the rescue of the survivors were also tracked down in the National Archives website. Relevant portions were extracted and embedded in this article and formed the basis for the description on page 4 of of the retrieval and return of the thirteen survivors to Funafuti.

The Ditching: A Brief Recap

With Tarawa secured after a brief but bloody struggle, in late December 1943, Marine land-based air began to occupy the former Japanese

field and another quickly constructed by the Seabees. VMF-422 was a late addition to this force, being catapulted from the escort carrier *Kalinin Bay* on 24 January.

The next step up the central Pacific ladder would be the Marshall Islands, with Ellice islands (now known as Tuvalu) bases as staging points, as they had been for the Tarawa invasion. So it was that VMF-422 was directed to proceed from Tarawa to Funafuti. The portion of VMF-422's war history relating to that disastrous ferry flight was related in *FlightLine* [No. 25-03](#).→



(Above) A useful map of the planned route to Funafuti, lifted from the 2010 AAHS article. (Left) A poor but interesting wartime snapshot of a VP-53 PBY-5A. Date and location are uncertain. (Gregory R. Cope via www.vpnavy.org)

VMF-422: Search and Rescue

VP-53 and DesDiv 38

By 3:30 pm or so, 25 January 1944, all but one of the VMF-422 aviators were in the water or had spotted an island and bellied in. Lt. J. E. Hansen found the Funafuti beacon and managed to stay tuned well enough to finally spot the airfield, where he landed at 2:15 pm with 80 gallons still in the tank. Hansen's arrival may have been the first confirmation that something was amiss, but once VMF-422's plight became known, searches got underway at once,

The airborne effort fell to the crews of VP-53 and their PBY Catalinas. The squadron "immediately put all available planes in the air and the search continued for twelve days." VP-53 was a relative newcomer to the Pacific, having been previously based in the Caribbean. At San Diego, the wheel wells of the squadron's replacement PBY-5A amphibians were instead taken up by auxiliary fuel tanks for the flight to Hawaii, where wheels were finally installed. Many of the pilots had never put a flying boat down on dry land! In early November 1943 VP-53 was dispatched to Funafuti, providing search capability for the Marshall Islands invasion fleet assembling there.

Search and Rescue Operations

Takeoff time for the first VP-53 search mission does not appear in any of the related NARA files but it must've been in the early afternoon of 25 January. Around 6:00 pm, Destroyer Division 38, anchored at Funafuti, joined the search as four vessels, led by the USS *Hobby* (DD-610), shoved off and headed towards Nui Island. At 7:58 the next morning, friendly planes were seen, no doubt VP-53's searching Catalinas. At 10:17, one of the Cats reported a downed aircraft on Niutao Island. *Hobby* steered in that direction, and at 1:45 pm an F4U (VMF-422 aircraft #23) was spotted on the beach. By 3:15 pm, Lt. W. A. Wilson was safely aboard, the first of the downed aviators to be rescued.

The following day, a searching Catalina spotted a raft. The VP-53 war diary describes the subsequent pickup.

Early in the afternoon of 27 January, one of the participants in this search, Lieutenant (junior grade) Herbert C. Shively, U.S.N.R. and his crew spotted a single one-man raft and elected to land and rescue its occupant, Lieutenant R.C. Lehnert, USMC. There was an 18 knot wind with 10 to 12 foot swells running with it but Lieutenant Shively successfully managed an up-wind landing and take-off returned to base.

When Funafuti received Shively's radio report, the standby Catalina (BuNo 33982), flown by Ens. George H. Davidson, took off to search the area where Lehnert had been picked up. (According to Pacific Wrecks' VMF-422 page, Lehnert flew F4U-1A BuNo 18116.) With no results forthcoming, Davidson proceeded to another search area where, at about 4:50 pm "a green slick," probably fluorescent dye markers deployed by the fliers, was spotted ten miles to starboard. As the PBY closed on the green patch, "twelve life rafts and thirteen men were observed." VP-53's war history takes up the story:

Ensign Davidson established voice contact with the base and was notified that a destroyer would arrive at his position at 2030. This, however, would be after the fall of darkness and that consideration, together with his knowledge of the exhausted condition of those below, the possibility of their being separated in the rough seas, and the adverse weather which threatened to be come worse, governed Ensign Davidson's decision to make an open sea landing. The plane was safely full-stalled into 12 foot swells and a 16 knot wind at 1715. As the first of the twelve rafts were secured to a line, five broke lose. Under the most difficult of conditions eight survivors and seven rafts were taken aboard the plane by 1800. The remaining five rafts had drifted about a mile astern and were rapidly becoming farther separated from each other. In high seas and increasing darkness, Ensign Davidson taxied from raft to raft. By the time the last five men were aboard (1910), there was not enough light to take-off attempt feasible. Voice radio communication remained good and Ensign Davidson was able to direct the destroyer and two additional planes of the squadron to his position. These planes using flares and landing lights were of great assistance in guiding the destroyer to the floating plane. At 2310 the plane was under tow and all its personnel board the ship; unfortunately, the plane flooded and sank the following morning.

The [war diary](#) of the USS *Hobby* presents a slightly different, and probably more accurate, timeline of events. The PBY was first sighted at 8:48 pm. Around 9:35 pm the thirteen waterlogged flyboys were taken aboard the destroyer, joining Lt. Wilson, who had been picked up the day before. At 11:35 the Catalina was taken in tow, with its nine-man crew also coming aboard a few minutes after midnight. At 3:15 am the tow line parted, setting the now unmanned PBY adrift.

Meanwhile, the USS *Welles* (DD-628) had located the last of the survivors, Lt. T. D. Thurnau, picking him up around 8:15 am. By 8:30, *Hobby* had again corralled the errant Catalina, but fifteen minutes later gave up the attempt and cut her loose to serve as a target for the ship's light anti-aircraft guns. Either the old bird was extremely tough or the gunners were poor marksmen—it took 940 rounds of 20 mm and another 266 Bofors 40 mm “pom-pom” shells to do her in. More likely, the gunners blasted away with everything they had as long as there was something left to shoot at.


At 8:21 am, 29 January 1944, *Hobby*, with her grateful passengers aboard, moored next to an oiler in Funafuti harbor. By quarter past nine, the weary fliers had been transferred to the Marine base on the atoll, survivors of one of the darkest days in the history of Marine Corps aviation. VP-53 continued to fly search missions for another week or so, but no trace of the missing pilots was ever found.



VMF-422 group portrait, taken at Santa Barbara, 24 Sept. 1943. C.O. Maj. John S. MacLaughlin, Jr., is the tall guy in the khaki uniform, at the 7 o'clock position from the prob hub. He appears to be wearing a shoulder holster. Capt. Rex Jeans, who led the mass ditching, is third on MacLaughlin's left. (VMF-422 War History, NARA)

While the saga of VMF-422's mass ditching remains somewhat obscure, it is by no means unknown, as we immediately discovered once the squadron in question was correctly identified. Having already invested several hours following a false lead, much to our embarrassment we later found that the outline of the story had been on our bookshelf for the past quarter century. (Robert Sherrod's *History of Marine Corps Aviation in World War II*, first published in 1952, pp. 228-230.) Nonetheless, we continued to poke around the National Archives website to see what squadron war diaries might reveal. Extracts of these findings make up the bulk of this and the previous issue of *FlightLine*.

But our archival probing failed to uncover one crucial detail. Even under strict wartime security, the operational loss of a squadron of brand new airplanes and a quarter of its pilots in one bad day could hardly be kept secret for long. Mistakes had obviously been made, and explanations had to be found, with culpability assigned where applicable. A duly assembled naval board of inquiry placed most of the blame on Maj. MacLaughlin for not turning back in the face of the storm, but the flight operations officers at Tarawa were also castigated for their failures. Fourth Marine Air Wing Commander, then-Brig. Gen. Lewie G. Merritt, who had refused to authorize the usual multi-engine navigational pathfinder for the mission, escaped with a letter of censure.

The proceedings and conclusions of the board are thoroughly examined in Mark Carlson's [The Marines' Lost Squadron: The Odyssey of VMF-422](#). Tom Brokaw narrated a 2012 documentary about the incident entitled [The Flintlock Disaster](#), based on research conducted by former VMF-422 ground crewman Sgt. Leon Furgatch. The film includes clips from interviews of several of the survivors. It's certainly worth the time to watch. In closing, we add a few more pages from the squadron's war history; first person accounts of four of the survivors as they were recorded at the time. 

VMF-422: The Survivors' Stories

From the Squadron's War History

The mass water landing, tragic as it was, brought forth some hidden qualities in our airmen. Some rejoined the squadron with a humorous but factual account of their experience, while others returned with strictly facts. Nevertheless, all brought back helpful survival recommendations. The following are first person accounts of the mishap:

Captain C. R. Jeans:

"I was leading the division on the port side of Major MacLaughlin when we hit the first front. Flying at 1500', we were soon forced to take a water level course. Seven minutes out of Nanumea a 90° left turn off course was made. Up to that time we had hit all check points."

"Then we hit the front. You could tell on the approach that it was a long one. With the severity of the storm, trying to maintain formation, concentrating on flying, we became confused. We made a series of violent maneuvers and then suddenly broke out into the clear. I noticed that five planes were missing from the flight."

"I then saw two boats and called Major MacLaughlin's attention to them. I also saw an island at this time and reported it to him. Apparently I had lost radio contact with him so I flew across his bow attracting his attention. We went over the island. It was Nui. Lt. C. F. Lauesen's engine began missing and Lt. J. C. Flood was low on gas. Lt. Lauesen went down shortly after we left Nui. The Major

then asked me to take over the lead in an effort to get back to Nui, since going ahead seemed impossible."

"I shifted course and tried to find it. At that time Lt. R. P. Moran was over Nui and I had just made contact with him. I tried to get our position. Lt. Moran said that he was low on gas and that he was going to bail out. I told him, 'Moran, ride it in', but he chose the alternative."

"I led the flight up to 12,000 feet making square searches and sending MOs but couldn't contact a thing. Then I learned that several of the boys were running low on fuel. Hopelessly lost, I decided that it would be best to stick together. We formed a traffic circle and tried to land as near each other as possible. We jettisoned hoods, dropped full flaps and floated in. We managed to rendezvous and remain a group--13 in twelve rafts. We tried joining up on Lts. Thurnau and Aycrigg but the sea was so rough it was impossible to spot them. We were jostled around so much that it was difficult to remain in the raft. The "U" sure makes a beautiful water landing. So far as I know all fifteen of us got safely out of the plane. Only one man was unable to get his life raft out."

Lt. R. K. Wilson:

"Before I entered the first front I set my gyro. This helped me since all the compasses were fouled up as a result

of magnetic disturbances. I was flying on Captain Jeans' wing and was next to last to land in the water. I guess it was about 1600 when I went in. I landed with thirty degree flaps but now I think it best to use fifty. My plane took about $1\frac{1}{2}$ minutes to sink. Before I went in I rehearsed everything I was to do. My chief concern then was my pay account and log book, which I put in the leg pocket of my flight suit. I knew I could get out alright. I soon joined up with Captain Hughes. It wasn't too bad in the water."

"That sea anchor sure is necessary for a life raft. I found both a .45 and a .38 worked after landing in the water-- but I had to pull the slide on the .45 before it would fire."

"Some sharks followed us for a long time. We finally named them. The persistent one was LeRoy. He often made low side runs on my sea anchor and several times he came in under my raft and scraped his fins against it. Oscar and Boscoe were also along but they didn't bother us much. We lost them all after Captain Hughes fired and hit one of them. I thought I was in pretty good shape after fifty-two hours in the water, but when I entered the P-Boat and tried standing on my feet I fell flat on my face."

Lt. M. W. Syrkin:

"About seven minutes from my ETA (1230), we hit the

storm. My compass needle was stuck on 60 degrees. Before we hit the second front, I heard Major MacLaughlin say that everything was all right and that we would head for Funafuti. I then counted 19 planes. I heard Nanumea say we were 70 miles off an island. Which island, I didn't know. I then heard Captain Jeans say that when the first man ran out of gas, we should all stay together and land with him. I saw Lt. Ayerigg land and get into his boat. This was about 1500 or 1515."

"Meanwhile, I rehearsed everything I was to do. I took off my shoes and tied them around my neck. I threw my chartboard over the side because it was loose and I was afraid it might have injured me when I landed. I then fired my guns as I had previously read that it would lighten the plane considerably. I hit the water and it felt like a carrier landing, only a little harder. I had 50 degree flaps and I hadn't cut my leg straps. When I dove into the water I came up with a sudden jerk. I had to reach into the cockpit to take my life raft out. I should have cut the straps first. I lost my shoes."

"That life boat drill back at Ewa Air Station sure did me a lot of good. I felt nauseated and when I leaned over the side of the boat I lost a good part of my gear. I guess I landed about 1600. I took my clothes off and swam, pushing the boat along in order to join the other men. I did

this until I saw a fin sticking out of the water. I sure got back into my boat fast. I tried my lighter--it didn't work."

"At night we tied the boats together in a circular chain so that if it broke we would still be together. During daylight hours we tied our rafts in a line. That circular formation looked like a seagoing prayer meeting. The first night was so rough we had to string out. The next day it rained (Jan. 26) so we had plenty of water. We tried to do something so as not to get discouraged. The next day a storm hit us and we had one huge prayer meeting. There were no atheists there. We reenforced our chain of boats by using our hands. The storm got so rough that we had to go into a string. The sharks were getting frisky so Captain Hughes shot one and they made off."

"At the height of the storm Lt. D. W. Walker started a songfest. I joined hoping it would make us all feel better."

"Our little raft compasses are good. We took a course for Funafuti. I think we were right on course when we were rescued. Captain Hughes was navigating then. Lts. Smick and Gunderson decided to navigate but not for long. They had us going around in circles so Captain Hughes took over the task again. We saw several blue faced boobies. Whoever said that seeing a blue faced boobie is an indication that

you're 50 miles from land certainly had never been in our position."

"We had all rehearsed what we were going to do when anyone sighted a boat or plane. One was to release three dye markers, another was to fire a Very pistol, someone else was to shoot tracers, one was to wave a canvas--and the rest of us were to pray. As for that survival mirror how can one use it when between the sun and the searching plane? I've yet to find out."

"Well, the P-Boat spotted the dye marker and not the rafts. When he circled us we broke out our rations and consumed them. Early in our argosy we had set up a rationing system."

Lt. J. E. Hansen:

"I was flying lead of the second section of Captain J. R. Rogers' division. Very soon after we started circling in the storm, Captain Rogers and his wingman, Lt. W. A. Wilson, and myself became separated from the squadron. We began to climb through the thick overcast and then I lost Lt. Wilson. Captain Rogers and myself climbed to about 10,000 feet and then we lost each other. I continued to climb to 13,000 but was still not over the storm. We had been flying on instruments from the time we left 200 feet. I had 120 gallons of gas left in the main tank and about five to ten in each wing so I immediately decided to continue on to Funafuti. I took a heading of 150 degrees

and began a gradual let down. I came out of the storm about 10,000 and spotted the island which I believed to be Nanumea. I passed the island about 1245 and changed my heading to 115 degrees. At this time I heard Major MacLaughlin and Captain Jeans, the third division leader, talking on the radio. Apparently they were on the Nanumea radio beam and had made two or three passes at the island without seeing it. I heard them talking about getting the Funafuti beam and trying to make it on to that base. I tried to contact them on the radio but was only able to get my wingman, Lt. Walker. I asked him how to get the Funafuti beam and he relayed the message back to Major MacLaughlin, who relayed the reply back to me. I immediately found the beam and attempted to bracket it without too much success, although I did manage to stay fairly close. At what I estimated to be thirty to forty miles from Funafuti my engine began to miss and sputter badly, although my instrument readings were normal. The engine continued to run like that until I spotted Funafuti about four miles off my starboard beam. I landed at 1415 with about eighty gallons of gas."

SECRET

Chief Executive Officer's Message

Late last year AAHS was approached by a local benefactor interested in assisting AAHS in building out more space for our aviation collections and preservation efforts. Since that time we have had ongoing discussions with the leadership at Flabob Airport regarding how we could make this addition to AAHS' "footprint" at Flabob bigger. We can ALWAYS use space; with our increased incoming donations of late, we are devoting more effort (and square footage) towards cataloging and dispositioning the aviation items placed in our care. It also could be the opportunity we need to build the *right* sort of space to effectively preserve the aviation history we've spent nearly 70 years collecting.

The proposed addition to our living space comes with the expectation that AAHS will initiate, lead and manage an ongoing docent program that supports the various history venues built or currently under construction at Flabob Airport.

Flabob Airport, in addition to its several youth education programs, is striving to become a kind of "history village," where visitors can see and touch aviation history from various eras. Flabob has already developed a Wright Flyer history building, along with a hangar devoted to early aviation race planes. They are currently constructing a hangar devoted to the "golden age" of aviation (1920s-1930s), a jet hangar, and a memorial to the aviators of the Vietnam conflict. AAHS would train volunteers to guide visitors through these history venues, and possibly assist Flabob management with larger group tours.

The prospect of a new building for AAHS has been a heady challenge, while developing a docent program has added another dimension to our already full plate of important tasks planned for this year, such as the initiation of a new AAHS digital platform.

We are reaching out to you – could you lend a hand to assist AAHS, at this critical junction in our existence? Creating history materials for the planned docent program, updating our social media with news bits, assisting in helping writers with upcoming journal articles, or identifying aviation photographs, are all things that can be done remotely, and don't require a presence at the AAHS office.

Many other aviation clubs/organizations have since closed down, due to low member interaction, reduced interest, lack of funds, etc. We at AAHS are very blessed in that we are situated at a historic site that shares our future interests. With careful management we can manage our publication costs. What we REALLY need is some time from you, our members, so that as an organization we can complete tasks that are both critical AND time sensitive, AND meet our member needs.

Email me at my work address- and I'll see if we can match an AAHS need to any time you may have to offer. And thank you!

Jerri Bergen
AAHS CEO

jerri@victorygirl.com



Questions ?
Comments ?
Squawks ?

Flightline@aahs-online.org



Joe Martin
AAHS *FlightLine* Editor