Start the Engine!

Tommy’s LeRhone rotary engine roars to life after more than 75 years during IAHF’s annual Open House at our new home at the Ithaca Airport.
Dr. Thibault’s Joined Us in May

Again we had the pleasure of hosting Dr. Thibault, his son William and his grandson Trent at the IAHF shop during the Doctor’s trip from San Diego Memorial Day weekend to visit his family. Dr. Thibault donated his Tommy to the Ithaca Aviation Heritage Foundation when he understood we intended to restore the airplane to its original configuration as he had intended to do. We always look forward to the Doctor’s visits. Dr. Thibault again expressed his admiration for the quality of the work done by our volunteers, and he looks forward to Tommy’s completion.

Aviation Trail Explored

Kevin House, a volunteer with the National Warplane Museum in Geneseo, is putting together a proposal for an Aviation Trail in Central New York. He is in the process of meeting with aviation-related facilities in the region and is collecting ideas on the value of such a project and its potential for drawing tourism to the area.

Kevin met at IAHF’s former shop in Dryden with Mike Hall, President and CEO of the Wings of Eagles museum in Elmira and Manager of the Ithaca Tompkins Regional Airport, and IAHF’s Board members Don Funke and Jim Rundle, to explore the matter. Many good ideas were exchanged on how combining aviation with other attractions in our area could attract visitors to the region.

Visit to Old Rhinebeck Aerodrome

We were fortunate to visit the Old Rhinebeck Aerodrome in August, where the only other Thomas-Morse S4-B Scout resides. We were welcomed by Rhinebeck’s wonderfully supportive staff.

Left to right: Ken Cassens, Mich DiGiacomio and his son Everett, and Tom Polapink in front of the Aerodrome’s S4-B.
In the middle of the night, in the summer of 1922, Roy Larson, of Larsen, Wisconsin, got a phone call from the railroad station in nearby Neenah. His Thomas-Morse S-4B Scout had just arrived from the Aviation General Supply Depot in Houston, Texas.

The airplane had been built in Ithaca, NY, in early 1918 in Thomas-Morse's South Hill plant, and shipped off to a training base in a box car. It served with the U.S. Army Signal Corps as an advanced trainer, to prepare American pilots to fly combat planes in France. Now it was surplus, and Roy had bought it on auction.

Under the night sky, Roy hitched a team of horses to a hay wagon and rode 15 miles to the railroad station. In the morning he returned home with his airplane.

Mr. Larson's niece, Theda, still remembers him telling the story of the day he got it. She told her uncle's story to Don Funke, three years ago, when he visited Theda in Larsen where she still lives. Her story is very special for us, because her uncle's Tommy was the very same airplane we are now restoring.

In 1922, not long before he acquired his Tommy, Roy, with his three brothers, cleared a sod strip and started the first airport in Wisconsin. They built a hangar that still exists (now listed on the National Register of Historic Places). They gave rides and trained pilots using a Curtiss "Canuck" and a Standard J-1, also bought as Army surplus. Roy probably bought the Tommy for exhibition flying since it was a single seater. The family still has a photo of Larsen's Tommy sitting on the grass outside their hangar with the Canuck and the Standard, and kindly gave Mr. Funke a copy and allowed it to be published.

Roy Larsen wouldn't have noticed or cared at the time, but underneath two metal panels on the fuselage the plane carried the number 191. We discovered those numbers 90 years later. The plane had passed through many hands to Dr. William Thibault, and from him, as a generous donation, to IAHF. The number told us that our Tommy was the 91st machine to come off the production line at the Thomas-Morse plant on South Hill in Ithaca, NY. It was part of the very first production order from the U.S. Army, for 100 airplanes. Numbering at the plant began with "101". The sequence of those numbers was retained when the U.S. Army gave the planes their own numbers. Our 191 would have been U.S. Army number 4366, which is the number we will eventually paint on Tommy's fuselage.

Our Tommy at the Larson Brothers Airport, Larsen, Wisconsin. They built the hangar on the left in 1924. At that time they also had a Standard and a 'Canuck', both shown in the photo along with IAHF's Tommy (at left). PHOTO: the Larson family
On Friday, December 19, 2014, nearly 120 students from Dryden High School piled into the IAHF’s former workshop on Southworth Road for a field trip to learn about the restoration of a Thomas-Morse Scout, manufactured in Ithaca during World War I. The visit featured stops at each of the primary work stations in the shop, where IAHF’s volunteer staff of restorers spoke to the students about the inner workings of the plane and how the project came together. The students had all spent their fall semester studying World War I, so their trip to see Tommy was a great enhancement to their study material.

IAHF volunteers and Board members were on hand to explain that IAHF’s Tommy was donated by Dr. William Thibault of San Diego in 2010 after IAHF’s multi-year search for a Thomas-Morse Scout.

The students also learned how IAHF’s team of volunteers has been working a few days a week to restore Tommy using as many of the original parts as possible, with any remanufactured parts being nearly exact copies of the originals. The students were interested to find that the only major modern component in the plane’s restoration that differs from its original construction is the glue. The glue originally used was animal glue, but modern glue of course is being used in the restoration.

The project moved to the workshop on Southworth Road in early 2012 after IAHF’s work on the restoration had begun in the factory where Tommy was originally constructed, most recently know as the Emerson Power Transmission plant. Volunteers noted that some restoration work had been performed at Significant Elements in Ithaca, another site where Thomas-Morse planes were developed over 90 years ago.

The students took note that IAHF accepts volunteers of any skill set, including individuals knowledgeable in the areas of woodworking, metal working, painting, sewing, administrative duties, and fund raising, among others.

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