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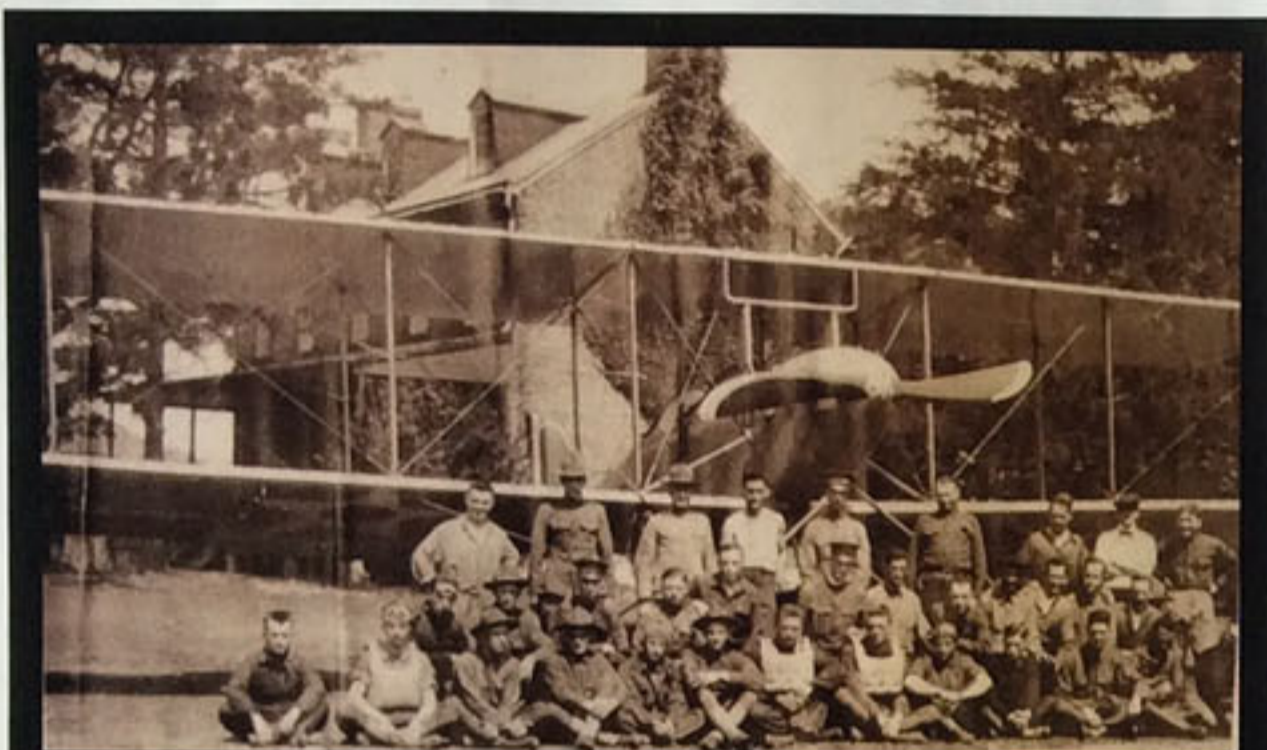
PHILLY SPB
CENTENNIAL

A CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION AT ESSINGTON

By Robert L. Dant

Local seaplane pilots arrived by car and by seaplane last June to celebrate 100 years of seaplane operations at 9N2, the Essington, Philadelphia, Seaplane Base. Essington is the oldest airport of any kind in Pennsylvania, and though seaplanes were flown from other locations before 1915, Essington may be the oldest continuously operated seaplane base in the world. (Operations were suspended during WWII due to its proximity to the Atlantic coastline).

A Searey from Ocean City, New Jersey, was the first to splash down on the Delaware River sealane and try the newly smoothed gravel ramp, becoming the first seaplane to arrive on Essington soil for many years. Over the last decade most operations utilized the floating



Rare 1917 photo of Signal Corps at Essington (above), where they trained National Guard seaplane pilots. (Below) Modern-day seaplane pilots gathered to celebrate the anniversary.



dock because the ramp was in disrepair.

A Lake amphib from nearby Spitfire Airport in New Jersey arrived 30 minutes later and had no issues navigating the ramp and taxiing around the big sycamore tree. Another Lake, this one from Pennsylvania, landed, followed by two more Seareys from Maryland. With their tailwheel configuration, shallow draft, and narrow wingspan, the Seareys were particularly adept at climbing and descending the ramp, even at mid-tide when rutted portions of the ramp are exposed.

Many local seaplane-rated pilots who trained at Essington reminisced about operations there over the decades. Only the sounds of jet aircraft departing nearby Philadelphia International—Runway 27L is just a mile up-river—interrupted the conversations. Activity also took place at the community day and flea market events at the nearby park.

The local township now holds the seaplane base license, as well as the land and the historic 1799 Lazaretto Quarantine Station that dates to the time of Yellow Fever. Plans are being prepared to renovate the Lazaretto for use as township offices and a museum. Those plans also include floating docks

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for boats and seaplanes. A new ramp has not yet been proposed, but a local group of aviators is encouraging the township to include that in the plans.

Another event is scheduled for September 26 in concert with an historical celebration of Essington's military connection. In 1917 the U.S. Army Signal Corps used the seaplane base, which they called Chandler Field, to train National Guard seaplane pilots in preparation for WWI.

Interestingly, the Pope will be in Philadelphia that weekend. Perhaps we can arrange a seaplane flight for the pontiff. A blessing of the site might help secure operations for another 100 years.



Essington SPB lies just to the west of Philadelphia International (left, top). Ramp was recently refurbished (left) and used for the first time in decades. Above, Searey taxis out past dock to Delaware River sealane.

BOB MILLS: 60 YEARS AT 9N2

Frank Mills had already been operating the Philadelphia Seaplane base for five years when, in 1920, his second son, Bobby, was born. If anyone ever grew up in aviation it was Bob Mills. In his early years Bob lived right up the street from the seaplane base. He and his two brothers all worked for their father at the base while they were growing up. All of the brothers eventually earned both pilot and mechanic licenses.

In the almost 60 years that Bob Mills operated the Philadelphia Seaplane Base he became very well known. Much of his business was giving seaplane ratings to airline pilots who came through PHL on layovers. They would find

the seaplane base, come in, look around, decide to fly with Bob, and then go back and tell all their buddies how much fun it was. This created a never-ending supply of customers for seaplane ratings.

Bob passed away from congestive heart failure in March 2008 at Halifax Medical Center in Daytona Beach, Florida. He was 87. His passing marked the end of an era for the aviation community in Philadelphia. Seaplane operations at the Philadelphia Seaplane base have continued under the direction of Bob's successor and good friend, Hank Grenfell. Bob's memory will live on with every seaplane landing on the Delaware River.



From a profile of Bob Mills written by Walt Ellis. For more see <http://www.phillyseaplanebase.com/bob-mills-tribute/>.

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