

# Chatham took to flight despite tragedy

## CHATHAM'S HISTORICAL HERITAGE

by Fred J. Vatter



It was a cold winter day in late December 1946 when the sound of low flying aircraft could be heard in the dusky sky over Pittsboro. It came from six Navy "Hellcat" aircraft flying extremely low.

The late Robert Murdock, who operated a gas station near the intersection of Routes 64 and 87, noticed that one of the planes seemed to be lining up right over the highway, where the pilot apparently wanted to land. Murdock and some bystanders began holding up traffic, but the pilot couldn't find enough space and climbed back into the air.

Eventually one plane did land on US 64 and four others crash-landed in the western area of the town. The sixth plane found its way to the Raleigh-Durham Airport.

One of the aircraft came down in the back yard of Mrs. W. G. Fields where it reportedly hit an apple tree, downed a power pole, shattered a well house, ripped down the telephone and electrical lines, and came to a stop by almost splitting an automobile in two.

Another plane slammed its nose into an embankment on NC87, and two others landed in a nearby field. Needless to say, all five planes experienced

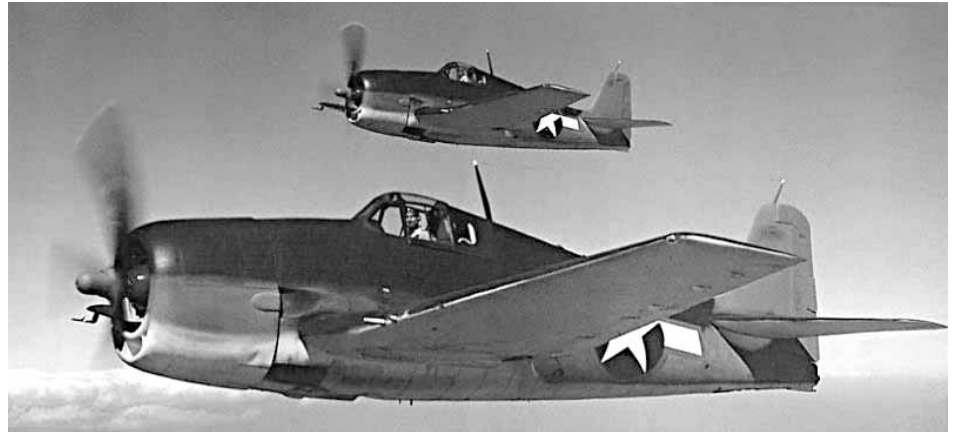
damage to various degrees.

According to an article in The Chatham Record's Pittsboro Bicentennial Edition of February 26, 1987, the six planes had been traveling from Philadelphia to Greensboro and experienced a blinding snowstorm over Blacksburg, Virginia. Driven off course, they found themselves over Pittsboro and were either hopelessly lost or low on fuel. A subsequent investigation was made by the Navy but no information was released. Marines were sent to Pittsboro to guard the planes, which were eventually disassembled and trucked away. In the spirit of the season, local residents cooked Christmas meals for the Marines.

Over 26 years later, in March 1973, a more tragic aviation accident occurred in Chatham, this time over a muddy corn field near Silk Hope.

An EC-47 military transport left Fort Bragg carrying 14 members of the Army Golden Knights parachute team to a performance at Kansas City. About seven to 12 miles north of Fort Bragg communication with the plane was lost. The plane traveled another forty miles to the Silk Hope area, still without further communication.

A local woman, Mrs. A. Newlin, reportedly heard what sounded like an explosion. Looking up, she saw one wing drop off the fuselage and the plane spiraled downward and crashed in a field on the Basil Perry farm, two miles north of Silk Hope. The debris was widely scattered and one engine



In December 1946, six Navy "Hellcat" fighter aircraft tried to make emergency landings in and around Pittsboro. Marines were dispatched to guard the aircraft and, in the spirit of the season, locals served the servicemen Christmas meals.

landed two hundred yards from the fuselage. There were no survivors. None of the bodies exhibited any burns and the State Medical Examiner doubted that an explosion had occurred. Perhaps the sound heard by Mrs. Newlin was caused by the wing breaking off the plane.

This tragic event is memorialized by a stone tablet at the base of Silk Hope Fire Department's flag pole.

Currently good things are happening regarding aviation in Chatham County. The Siler City Municipal Airport, formerly known as Blair Field, has experienced an expansion and renovation starting in 1988. What had been the longest earthen runway in the state was paved and extended by 700 feet to 5,000 feet, enabling the airport to accommodate corporate jets. The project was a joint effort, financed by the state (80 percent, the town (10 percent) and the county (10 percent). At that time the cost was \$1,700,000.

Ben Marion of Cardinal Air, which operates the airport, says that the runway is 75 feet wide and can support aircraft weighing 26,000 pounds. It serves general aviation, private aircraft, and fuels planes for the US Army National Guard. There are now three approach systems: a non-directional radio beam, GPS, and VOR. The airport is extending its parking and plans to install an auto weather service.

Also located at Siler City Municipal Airport is Guardian Aviation Services which performs maintenance and

restores aircraft. Tom Malechuk informed me that they are restoring a historic plane flown by racer Rosco Turner who barnstormed, raced against Jimmy Doolittle, and flew for Howard Hughes in "Hell's Angels."

About 12 years ago Pat Hayes developed the community of Eagles Landing expressly for folks who love to fly. The community has 12 homes, each with its own hanger and garage, and a 3,800-foot runway. Pilots rely on a visual approach system. At least one plane is twin engine, but the rest are various single engine types. One resident, Dick Parr, flies hot air balloons over the Chatham countryside, but I understand that you must often be an early riser to see him pass overhead.

Small private airstrips with names like "Dead Dog" and "Brook Field" also exist on the map, and Ron Schultz even flies ultra-light aircraft from a field near Chicken Bridge Road.

Today Chatham's flying enthusiasts carry on the spirit evidenced by the Wright Brothers at Kitty Hawk as they join Bald Eagles in soaring above our county's beautiful countryside and occasional rush hour traffic.

A special thank you to Ben and Karen at Cardinal Air, Tom Malechuk at Guardian Aviation Service and Pat Hayes at Eagle's Landing, who provided information for this article.

Fred J. Vatter is Past President of Chatham County Historical Association and a Board Member.

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If you are between 25 and 60 years old and are interested in participating, please call Linda at (919) 966-5770 or e-mail her at [LKJUHL@med.unc.edu](mailto:LKJUHL@med.unc.edu)

