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School takes flight with donation of vintage DC-3

By KATIE HOLSCHER, Staff Writer

PLATTSBURGH — The Plattsburgh Aeronautical Institute initiative has a restoration project.

Her name is Elli May.

A World War II Douglas DC-3 passenger plane, fondly known as Elli May, was donated to the institute by Champlain Air Inc., a Plattsburgh flights school.

Larry Trow, an associate of Pratt & Whitney Engine Services Inc. and a certified mechanic, asked Champlain Air Inc. Vice President James Drollette to donate the plane to the fledgling Aeronautical Institute. Drollette had been planning to refurbish the plane.

"I was kind of amazed," Trow said. "It was just a couple of questions, and (he said), 'Yeah, sure, why don't you guys take it?' I think it was good timing."

In addition to donating the aircraft, Champlain Air also gave all of the parts needed to restore it.

Once the Aeronautical Institute is established, high-school students will work on the plane periodically through two years of attendance at CV-TEC, part of Champlain Valley Educational Services, and one year at Clinton Community College.

Adult learners will spend one year and possibly a few summers at CV-TEC, as well as one year at CCC.

At the end of their training and education, the students would have the experience needed to test for Federal Aviation Administration certification as an airframe mechanic, a powerplant mechanic or both. They would also receive an associate's degree from Clinton Community College.

CCC Dean of Continuing Education Dave Lawliss said the plane "is a laboratory for training students ... (It's) a way of getting our aeronautical school off the ground."

Lawliss anticipates the restoration will take three years. Each year, 25 new students from the aeronautical program will have the opportunity to take part in the project.

"The biggest thing will be to acquire two Pratt & Whitney R-1830 engines — radial engines," Trow said.

The interior of the plane needs to be restored, as well as the electrical and avionics systems.

Jim McCartney, a supervisor at CV-TEC for the Workforce Education Program, is working with Lawliss, Trow and other volunteers to remove the plane's wings so it can be moved to the former Air Force Base, where the aeronautical school will be located.

They are also planning to build a hangar for the plane.

"We hope that we will have secured federal or state appropriations (for the hangar)," McCartney said.

He added, "The graduates from a school like this will help to drive the economic development of this area."

As for the plane, Trow, McCartney and Lawliss are hoping to see it fly again someday. Trow hopes it will be used for air shows.

He is researching the history of the plane to find out if it was used in the World War II Lend-Lease Program. President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Lend-Lease Bill, signed into law in 1941, was devised to provide money and equipment to U.S. allies during the war.

For now, the focus is on moving the plane to its new location by July or August.

"When we go to move the airplane, that's going to be kind of an adventure in itself," Trow said.

SITE INDEX

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