

FLYING HISTORY

By Stephen Jones
Featured Writer
Montezuma

For the 20 old war birds in the Collings Foundation's collection, the mission has changed. They no longer fly to preserve freedom. Now they fly to preserve history, especially the role they played in making it.

"It's taking history to the people and preserving it," says Jack Fedor, who currently is co-piloting the educational foundation's B-17. Based out of Stow, Massachusetts, the Collings Foundation sends its historically significant airplanes on tour throughout the nation 10 months out of the year. At a different city in America every three or four days, time is rolled back 60 years to the era of World War II. On March 23-25, the tour stopped in nearby Americus.

While the people at the foundation, which is entirely staffed by volunteers, are happy to bring America's history to everyone, veterans clearly have a very honored place in their hearts. Sadly,

Fedor says the number of vets they get to meet at each tour spot is rapidly dwindling. Five years ago, he says, nearly half of those who came out to see the planes on tour were WWII vets. Now, that percentage is perhaps as low as 10%. The numbers will only continue to shrink as an estimated 1,500 WWII vets die every day.

"We want people to understand what the previous generation did," said Fedor, standing behind South Georgia Technical College's Aerospace Technology Center and collecting the small donation visitors are asked to make to take a tour of the majestic Boeing B-17G Flying Fortress and Consolidated B-24J Liberator that have landed at Souther Field on this leg of the Wings of Freedom tour. "Without thinking about it, they joined up and did what they had to do," he said of what has been called "The Greatest Generation." Fedor, who is part owner of a B-25 Mitchell, volunteers his skill and expertise to the founda-

tion because, "I want my kids and grandkids to understand what we have today because of that."

Fedor's love for his cause is clear as he talks about the men who risked their lives battling the Axis powers. "The World War II vets have almost had me crying on occasion," he said, repeating tales of a tail gunner shot down halfway through his first mission and another vet who was shot down on his thirteenth mission and hadn't been near a B-17 since that day back in 1943. "His wife needed to see where he was in the plane when it went down," said Fedor, who isn't embarrassed to admit the moment "reduced me to tears."

"It's all about the vets," said Fedor.

Unfortunately, the men who once flew these proud aircraft are not disappearing alone. The planes they piloted and crewed during those dark hours in the history of the world are now even more rare. This B-17, now christened Nine-O-Nine, is one of only about a half of a dozen still flying today. That's a positively minuscule number compared to the 12,731 that were built for the war effort. The B-24 has fared even worse. Of the 18,500 built, the Collings Foundation's is the only one still flying.

Given how scarce these planes are and the fact that it costs \$3,000 per aircraft for every hour they spend in the air, the chance to take a ride on one is a priceless opportunity. One well worth the \$400 the foundation charges for a 30-minute ride. The price seems even more reasonable considering that the foundation is totally dependent on donations, which are tax deductible, to keep its birds flying.

Perhaps one of the best things about the tour is that the planes can be seen not just

by the generation that used them to win the war, but also by the newest generation. Second only to the veterans, children also hold a special spot in Fedor's heart. He says he loves to introduce the aircraft to children, who have an astounding level of enthusiasm for them. It's not unusual for 300-400 children to visit during a stop on the tour. "They'll ask questions all afternoon and very intelligent ones," he said.

As Fedor talked about the foundation's mission, an old veteran rolled up in a

"I wanna fly that thing yonder"

wheelchair. "I wanna fly that thing yonder," he exclaimed as he came within view of the Nine-O-Nine. Lewis Phillips, 84, of Ellaville was a B-17 pilot during WWII. He was reluctant to speak in any detail of the combat experience he accumulated during his six bombing missions and "a lot of mercy missions after that." One mission in particular "left too vivid a memory" for Phillips to discuss even 60 years later. However, he did talk about flying over the English Channel on D-Day, or as he put it "the day they went across with all those boats." He also talked about the mission when he and his comrades "dropped all those eggs" on a field full of German jets that were grounded because they had no fuel to fly.

Nine-O-Nine and its B-24 partner, currently dubbed Witchcraft, have fascinating stories of their own, however. The original Nine-O-Nine flew 140 missions without an abort loss of a crewman during WWII as a member of the 91st Bomb Group, 323rd Bomb Squadron. Bearing the serial number 42-31909, the B-17 was assigned to combat duty on Feb. 25, 1944. By the war's end, Nine-O-Nine had

dropped 562,000 pounds of bombs, flown 1,129 hours, changed 21 engines and had multiple wing panels, gas tanks and other parts replaced. Flak damage punched some 600 holes in her skin during her service. Despite her heroic service, Nine-O-Nine eventually ended up as scrap once her work was completed.

The B-17G that is now called Nine-O-Nine is serial number 44-83575. It was built in Long Beach, California by Douglas Aircraft Company and accepted for service on April 7, 1945. While entering service too late for combat, 44-83575 did see service in rescue and transport missions before being outfitted in April 1952 to test the effects of three nuclear explosions. Following a 13-year "cool down" period, 44-83575 was sold as part of an 800-ton scrap pile.

It was extensively repaired and refitted and served 20 reliable years as a fire bomber, dousing forest fires. The B-17 was sold again in January 1986 and restored to its wartime configuration. Not long after, in August 1987, 44-83575 was taking part in a western Pennsylvania air show when a severe cross-wind caused the plane to roll off the runway and down a 100-foot ravine.

For a second time, the old aircraft was resurrected. Following thousands of volunteer hours and donations, 44-83575 was airworthy yet again and renamed Nine-O-Nine in honor of the original bomber by that name. Since then, Nine-O-Nine has made

over 1,200 stops on the Wings of Freedom tour.

Souther Field was the Collings' B-24 first appearance after having been freshly repainted in honor of Witchcraft, a B-24 assigned to the 467th Bomb Group, 790th Bomb Squadron that completed 130 bombing missions. After its initial restoration, the B-24 was christened All American after a bomber that served in Italy with the 15th Air Force. The original All American shot down 14 enemy fighters in a single mission. All American was later shot down on October 4, 1944 over Yugoslavia. The Collings plane was later repainted to honor the veterans of the war in the Pacific and given the name Dragon and His Tail after a B-24 that flew 85 missions for the 43rd Bomb Group, 64th Bomb Squadron. While the Dragon survived WWII, after it was flown back home, it was eventually scrapped despite efforts to save it.

The Collings' Witchcraft is serial number 44-44052 and was built in 1944 at Consolidated Aircraft Company's Fort Worth, Texas plant. It was transferred into British service for operations in the Pacific theatre. At the end of the war, the B-24 was abandoned by the British in India and never expected to fly again. It was one of 36 B-24s the Indian Air Force managed to restore to service in 1948, however, and saw another 20 years of duty in the Indian Air Force.

A British aircraft collector obtained 44-44052 in 1981 following 13 years of moth-balling. Dr. Robert F. Collings then purchased it in 1984, intending only to restore it is a non-operational museum piece. The disassembled B-24 completed a three-week sea journey and was brought to Stow in four truckloads. Once it arrived, local B-24 crewmen convinced Collings to restore the aircraft to the air and work began in 1985. During the restoration, about 80% of 44-44052's 1.2 million parts were worked upon.

The love and attention to detail that restored these

"We're very privileged and very fortunate to get to do what we do"

aircraft is also used to keep them preserved. Fedor credits the dedication of his fellow volunteers for keeping Nine-O-Nine and Witchcraft looking more like planes kept in a museum instead of ones that see flight time on a daily basis. "It's everybody - no individuals. The purpose is greater than any one person," he said. Still, Fedor and his fellow volunteers gladly put in long hours to keep these old birds in the air. "We're very privileged and very fortunate to get to do what we do," he said.

More information about the Collings Foundation, its historic aircraft and Wings of Freedom tour dates can be found by visiting www.collingsfoundation.org <<http://www.collingsfoundation.org/>>. The Collings Foundation may also be reached at P.O. Box 248, Stow, MA 01775. The foundation's phone numbers are 978-562-9182 or 978-568-8924.



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B-17 co-pilot Jack Fedor loves to introduce the Nine-O-Nine to visitors, especially children.



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Visitors check out the B-17 Nine-O-Nine at Souther Field, when it stopped recently as part of the Wings of Freedom Tour.

Jack's Restaurant of Montezuma

Serving: 6 a.m.-11 a.m. Breakfast Lunch Buffet 11 a.m.-2 p.m.

Friday Night Catfish Buffet
All You Can Eat! \$10.25
5 p.m. - 9 p.m. PLUS TAX
menu items available too

423 Spaulding Road, Montezuma
478-472-7153

Houston Healthcare

Happenings

April 2005

April Calendar



Abnormal Uterine Bleeding

Dr. Paul Harnetty, OB-GYN, will discuss the many causes of abnormal uterine bleeding, signs for concern, and the latest treatments. Call 923-9771 to pre-register.
Tuesday, April 12
7 pm
Houston Health Pavilion EduCare Center

Eating Right On a Budget

Sandy Brenner, RD, PhD, CDE, will discuss how to eat healthy and still stay on your food budget.
Thursday, April 14
7 pm
Houston Health Pavilion EduCare Center
Please call 923-9771 to pre-register.

NEW!!! Living with Congestive Heart Failure

This new monthly class will help you learn how to manage congestive heart failure and live a normal, healthy life.
Thursday, April 14
11 am
Health Connections Cardiac Rehab Center
Houston Mall

Women's HealthWatch: What's Hot, What's Not in Women's Health Issues?

Come and join this informal discussion on how to take better care of yourself with Kay Hartley, Women's Health Nurse Practitioner, who was also one of the researchers with the largest national health study, Women's Health Initiative. Pre-registration required by calling 923-9771.
Thursday, April 21
6 pm
Houston Medical Center's Women's Center Classroom

Managing Stress

Burton Carriker, Program Administrator for Houston Medical Center's Behavioral Health Services and a licensed mental health counselor, will lead this class and help you understand and deal with everyday stress.
Monday, April 25
7 - 8 pm
Houston Health Pavilion EduCare Center
Call 923-9771 to pre-register.

Crock Pot Cooking

By popular request, Sandy Brenner, RD, PhD, CDE, will present "Crock Pot Cooking." Recipes and tasting will be available. Call 923-9771 to pre-register.
Wednesday, April 27
11:30 am - 1 pm
Health Connections Cardiac Rehab Center
Houston Mall
Cost: \$5 per person



Premature babies need hope, love and you!!

Join Houston Healthcare and The March of Dimes to save babies!! Did you know that premature birth is the leading cause of newborn death and many lifelong disabilities? One out of eight babies in the United States is born premature which is about 470,000 each year. Walk for someone you love!!

March of Dimes WalkAmerica

Saturday, April 16
9am - Registration
10am - WalkAmerica begins
Galleria Mall - Centerville
(area beside Goody's)

For more information on WalkAmerica or to sign up, contact the March of Dimes at 743-9165.

