

FLIGHT-WATCH

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By: Alan Armstrong, Esq.

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THE MUSEUM OF FLIGHT IN SEATTLE

I. Overview

The Museum of Flight can be described in one word – fantastic. No matter your interest in aviation, whether it be engineering, space exploration or history, the Museum of Flight near Seattle, Washington will satisfy your interests. Due to the shortage of time, I was unable to view all of the exhibits. However, some of the features and exhibits are discussed below.

II. The T.A. Wilson Great Gallery

Walking to the main museum entrance, the aircraft displayed and visible from the parking area included an F-14 Tomcat, an AV-8 Harrier II and an EA-6B Intruder. Rounding the corner of the building a pristine B-17 Flying Fortress and B-47 Stratojet and an early Douglas DC-3 series aircraft in the colors of the Lindbergh Line were on display. All the aircraft appeared to be in pristine condition.

Upon walking to the main entrance, your attention is immediately drawn to a Rumpler Taube suspended from the ceiling. The Taube (or Dove) has wings and tail surfaces that are birdlike in appearance.

The aircraft on display in the Great Gallery are too numerous to recount. However, among them were several early mail and passenger planes as well as a replica of the Wright Flyer and a Ryan monoplane that served as the basis for Charles Lindbergh's Spirit of St. Louis. A DC-3 in Alaska Airlines livery hung from the ceiling along with a T-38 Talon, Gee Bee Model Z racer and an aircraft designed by Bill Lear that never entered production.

The origins of the air mail system and air navigation system with the beacons that identified links in the chain of the airway system were depicted. Also, the early teletype system employed to transmit weather reports was on display.

A Boeing P-12E biplane fighter, which was flown by the Claire Chennault and the Three Men on the Flying Trapeze when they won the Group Aerobatic Flying Competition at the 1935 Great American Air Races in Miami, was on display. The P-12E was located near an FG-1 Super Corsair powered by a Pratt & Whitney R-4360 Wasp Major, a Canadair Sabre, and F-9 Panther and an A-4 Skyhawk in Blue Angels colors.

A walk through the Great Gallery of the museum presents a series of lessons on how man solved the problems of propulsion, aerodynamics, navigation and weather reporting, as he conquered and overcame the challenges presented in making flight a safe mode of transportation.

III. William E. Boeing Red Barn

The Red Barn display offers a unique perspective with respect to the construction and manufacturing techniques of Boeing Airplane Company from the early years through the jet age. Initially, wood was the chosen medium for aircraft construction. The displays graphically demonstrate these wood working techniques. In time, however, wood gave way to steel tubing and aluminum monocoque structures that came to be expressed in aircraft built by a number of manufacturers including the Boeing 247, the DC-3, the P-26, P-36, P-40, B-17 and B-29 aircraft. Drawings of the B-17 and wind a tunnel model of the B-17 illustrate how Boeing overcame the challenges of developing aircraft capable of traveling at high altitudes and long distances.

IV. The J. Elroy McCaw Personal Courage Wing

Homage to the personal courage and self-sacrifice of airmen who fought in the First and Second World Wars is paid in the Personal Courage Wing. The second floor is filed with aircraft from the Great War. These aircraft appear in rich colors and paint schemes employed during that epic conflict. Among them are a Spad XIII, a Nieuport 28, Nieuport 17, Sopwith Camel, Sopwith Snipe, Sopwith Triplane, S.E. 5A, Fokker Dr.I, Fokker D.VII, Fokker D.VIII, Albatros D.V, Pfalz D.III, and an Aviatik single seat fighter.

Adjacent to the aircraft were kiosks with film and motion picture images of the aircraft in their element. The motion picture *The Dawn Patrol* could be viewed, and the flying jacket Errol Flynn wore during filming of that picture was on display. The second floor also included the French Farmhouse Theatre and a flight simulator with computer animation illustrating the simulated flight of a First World War aircraft.

The first floor of the Personal Courage Wing brings to life the struggle between the forces of evil and the forces who fought for freedom during World War II. Initially, we see juxtaposed a Bf 109E Messerschmitt and a Supermarine Spitfire. Behind the Spitfire is diorama illustrating aircraft engaged in air combat.

Our second stop is a display that juxtaposes a P-40 in American Volunteer Group (“AVG”) colors and a Japanese Army Type 1 fighter, the Nakajima Ki-43 Hayabusa (Peregrine Falcon). Besides these two remarkable aircraft, the museum has on display what appears to be the largest collection of AVG / Flying Tiger artifacts available for viewing anywhere.

The AVG display includes the diary of Sandy Sandell, Squadron Leader of the First Squadron (Adam & Eves), a combat tactics manual written by Claire Lee Chennault, a tunic worn by Dick Rossi and a host of AVG insignia and artifacts. Behind the P-40 was a diorama that complement the display. A signpost showing the direction to Madalay (Burma) completed the setting.

The first floor display does not ignore the contributions of the U.S. Navy as a Grumman F-4F Wildcat in early war makings and an F4U Corsair are also on display. A silver P-38 Lockheed Lightning hangs from the ceiling while a colorful P-47 Thunderbolt, P-51D Mustang and Soviet Yak-3 fighter are positioned on the floor below.

V. Conclusion

Having visited a number of aviation museums in the United States and in Great Britain, the Museum of Flight rates as one of the premier aviation museums. The facilities are spotless. The aircraft are meticulously and authentically reproduced and/or restored. The displays are informative to varied levels of patrons, from the young person with aspirations of a career in flying to the seasoned aviator or aviation historian. If your travels take you to or near Seattle, time at the Museum of Flight will be enjoyable, informative and well spent.

