

FLIGHTWATCH

VOLUME 239

By: Alan Armstrong, Esq.

MARCH 2012



PALM SPRINGS AIR MUSEUM

I. Overview

The Palm Springs Air Museum is a first class facility featuring a host of well restored and maintained aircraft. The presentation of the aircraft are complemented by displays outlining the history of American air power in the Second World War. The City of Palm Springs is called “an Oasis in the desert.” With desert plains and mountains surrounding the Palm Springs Airport, the Museum is an oasis of aviation history, art and science in the desert.

II. Initial Impressions

The presence of the Museum is announced by the display of four aircraft on concrete hardstands among palm trees: an F-14 Tomcat, an F/A-18 Hornet, an A-6 Intruder and an F-16N Falcon in Soviet bloc colors. The entrance to the Museum is located in an attractive glass semicircular wall. On either side of the entrance are mosaics or renderings that appear to be in stone. The mosaics depict American combat aircraft in flight. These appear along the wall and near the top of the two hangar structures that house the aircraft. To the left is the Pond Hangar Pacific Theater and to the right is the Cravens

Hangar European Theater. Connected to the Cravens Hangar is the Phillips Hangar which houses the Boeing B-17G, the maintenance shop, the Children’s Education Center and the café. Located on the grounds on either side of the entrances are the Wall of Honor and the Distinguished Flying Cross Wall of Honor.

After entering the Museum one sees the Battle of Midway Mural with the gift shop to the left and the stairs to the library to the right. The devotion of the Museum’s staff to preserving aviation heritage and educating the next generation of aviators was evident as I entered the library. Museum volunteers were patiently instructing children in the operation of an array of flight simulator programs. The library houses a collection of seven thousand volumes of aviation materials and publications. The bookcases are adorned models of First and Second World War aircraft.

After surveying the library, I returned downstairs walking through the rear lobby and to my right noted the Buddy Rogers Theater. Throughout the day there were showings of feature films in the theater.

III. The Pond Pacific Theater Hangar

The Pond Pacific Theater Hangar is named in honor of Robert Pond who was a Naval Aviator during World War II. Mr. Pond founded the Museum. His Navy uniforms and pilot certificates are on display. The Pond Hangar houses a number of U.S. Navy aircraft such as an SBD Dauntless, an FM-2 Wildcat, an F-6F Hellcat, an FG-1D Corsair, an F-7F Tigercat, an F-8F Bearcat, TBM Avenger and N2S-3 Stearman. Outside of the Pond Hangar a PV-2 Harpoon, a PBY5A Catalina, a C1A Tracker and an F-4 Phantom were on display.

In addition to the collection of aircraft on display, the Pond Hangar murals and dioramas adorn the hangar complete with a giant map extending up to the hangar ceiling. The map depicts the areas of operation in the Pacific Theater. On either side of the map are black silhouettes of Axis and Allied Powers aircraft as one would commonly see on an aircraft recognition (flash) card.

Displays in the Pond Hangar illustrate the beginning of the World War II with a diorama of Pearl Harbor under attack and the conclusion of the conflict with a diorama and video of the surrender ceremony aboard the U.S.S. Missouri (BB-63). In between these book ends of World War II, there is a diorama of the B-25 Mitchells lined up on the flight deck of the USS Hornet prior to the Doolittle Raid. Numerous models of aircraft and ships are on display, many featuring cut away illustrations exposing the internal structures of the machines. An enormous mural of a Corsair landing aboard an aircraft carrier is positioned behind the FG-1D Corsair. The Pond Hangar is a tribute to the sacrifices of those who served in the Pacific Theater during World War II.



AVG Display



P-47 Thunderbolt/Mural

IV. The Cravens European Theatre Hangar

The Cravens Hangar features an enormous wall map of the European Theater with profiles of Allied and Axis Powers aircraft depicted on either side. In the rear of the hangar are displays that play tribute to airmen of World War II such as the American Volunteer Group (AVG) and their leader Claire Chennault as well as the airman of the Royal Air Force (RAF) whose devotion to duty saved England from conquest by the German Luftwaffe during the Battle of Britain.

An enormous mural on the rear wall of the hangar pays tribute to the Tuskegee Airman and a P-51D is on display in the markings of that fighter group. Besides the Mustang, the Hangar features a Mark XIV Spitfire, a P-47D Thunderbolt, an A-26 Invader, a P-40N Warhawk, a B-25 Mitchell and a T-33 Shooting Star.



Mark XIV Spitfire

V. Intimacy

The collection of aircraft on display at the Museum is impressive. However, more impressive is the fact that visitors are allowed to carefully examine and inspect the aircraft without ropes or barriers that would separate them from the aircraft. To illustrate the point, an FM-2 Wildcat and F6F Hellcat were positioned next to each other in the Pacific Theater Hangar. Because the wings were folded, it was possible to compare the internal wing structures, folding mechanisms and landing gear retraction mechanisms.

While the Wildcat has a landing gear retraction and extension mechanism operated by a bicycle chain and hand crank, the Hellcat has an hydraulically activated landing gear system. The Wildcat's main spar structure pales in comparison to that of the Hellcat evidencing the latter's structural requirements in terms of greater weight and higher speeds in comparison to the Wildcat.

The Wildcat not only features a primitive landing gear system, but the wings were folded by hand and locked and unlocked by means of a hand crank stowed in each wing. The hand crank was used to seat the pin in the main spar structure after the wing was extended. A small access panel on each wing affords access to the hand crank mechanism. In contrast, the Hellcat seated and unseated the main spar pin by way of hydraulic lines. A solenoid switch on the internal leading edge of the Hellcat's wing structure sends a signal to the pilot that the wing is secure and ready flight. Only in a facility such as the Palm Springs Air Museum could the visitor view and appreciate such intimate details of the structures and systems of these historic fighters.

VI. Conclusion

The Palm Springs Air Museum is about more than the aircraft, the murals, the theatre and the artifacts on display. The volunteers and staff ensure the Museum is relevant to the community in which it is located. Several times each month the Museum features exhibitions programs and reunions that make the assets and talents of the Museum and its staff available to the immediate community of the City of Palm Springs and to the aviation community as well.



Hellcat

If your time and travels permit, a day in the Palm Springs Air Museum will be time well spent.



Wildcat



*Copyright 2012. Alan Armstrong.
All Rights Reserved*