

FLIGHTWATCH

VOLUME 234

By: Alan Armstrong, Esq.

OCTOBER 2011

HISTORIC FLIGHT MUSEUM

I.

Immaculate Aircraft With Unique Histories

The Historic Flight Museum on Paine Field in Everett Washington features a collection of immaculately restored aircraft with rich and varied histories. While museums with larger collections exist, one will be hard pressed to find such a rare collection of aircraft in such pristine condition as those in the collection of Historic Flight Foundation (“HFF”). John Sessions directs the operations of the museum and flies aircraft in its inventory. He was kind enough to give me a quick tour of the museum, and this article will discuss the unique aircraft housed in the museum.

II.

P-51B Mustang -- Impatient Virgin

One of the most striking P-51 Mustangs you will ever see is the P-51B Mustang -- Impatient Virgin. A combat veteran, this aircraft flew four missions on D-Day and shot down three enemy aircraft on September 27, 1944.

By June of 1945, the war in Europe was over. However, Officer Wade Ross flew the aircraft on a low-level training flight, got into trouble, and bailed out. The aircraft crashed in a farm field in Little Walden.

Because the mishap took place in the United Kingdom, an accident investigation was conducted by the Royal Air Force (RAF). The pilot testified that while steam in the cockpit in the aircraft’s engine was overheating, he converted airspeed into altitude and departed the aircraft. A farmhand on the ground gave a different account. Apparently, Flight Officer Ross was flying so low

that he ingested hay into the radiator of the aircraft, causing an abrupt rise in the coolant temperature. Apparently, Ross only gave the RAF half of the story. Whatever the case, the remains of this aircraft lay undiscovered in a sugar beet field for 57 years. Discovered in 2002, three years were required to excavate the aircraft between the sugar beet seasons. The license to recover the aircraft stipulated that excavation work would stop during the sugar beet season so as not to jeopardize the farmer’s crop. British regulations forbid that sustainable fields lay fallow. The restoration of the aircraft required 33 months, and in 2008 the aircraft received the Hap Arnold Award for the best warbird restoration at the Reno Air Races. Impatient Virgin features a Malcolm Hood conversion, which was a modification made to Mustangs to improve the visibility by replacing the bird cage canopy with a one piece “blown” canopy. Apparently, the B model Mustang is 14 miles per hour faster than the D model. This can be attributed to the fact that the former has four guns while the latter had six. The former has a contoured fuselage, which is more aerodynamic than the bubble canopy featured on the D Model.

III.

Spitfire Mark 9E -- Czech Mate

The Spitfire Mark 9E in historic flights across this collection is another extraordinary aircraft. Produced by the Castle Bromwich Factory of Vickers Supermarine, it served with RAS Squadron 312 and was one of 54 machines given to the Czechoslovak Air Force at the conclusion of the Second World War. Assigned to the renowned Czech pilot Karel Posta, it was employed by Posta to perform solo aerobatic demonstrations before hundreds of thousands of people at significant holidays, such as National Day, October 28, 1945, to raise the self-esteem of a vanquished nation. The “K” on the nose of the airplane is a unique identifier of the aircraft when flown by Posta.

During the summer of 1948, Czechoslovakia made this aircraft and other Spitfires available to the new Jewish state in Palestine. Interestingly, the aircraft was fitted with long range field tanks by Avia Kunovice Aviation Repair Shop in Moravia, the fuel tanks being of German manufacture. Sold to Burma in 1954, the aircraft sustained a “wheels up” landing and ended up being displayed in a museum in Mandalay with a T-6 tail and a cellophane windscreen. Eventually, the aircraft was acquired by historic flight, and restored in Duxford, United Kingdom. Today, this aircraft with a remarkable history of having served in the RAF during World War II, and having flown under the flag of four different nations, is in immaculate condition in the hangar of historic flight.

IV.

North American B-25D Mitchell -- Grumpy

Historic Flight’s B-25D Mitchell was delivered to United States Army Air Force on October 27, 1943. After 1,551 hours of flying time, the aircraft was overhauled at Kelly Field Depot in Texas and then provided to the Royal Canadian under a lend-lease transaction in 1944. The aircraft, nicknamed “Grumpy”, flew in the Royal Canadian Air Force as part of the Northwest Air Command responsible for the defense of Western Canada. It was truck off charge in 1962, but was a popular aircraft in European airshows for 17 years. Eventually, the aircraft was purchased by Historic Flight Foundation and restored to airworthy condition by Aircraft Restoration Company in Duxford, England. Today, the aircraft is fitted with a bomb bay ferry fuel tank allowing the aircraft to remain airborne for over 11 hours.

V.

Grumman F7F-3 Tigercat -- Bad Kitty

Like the other aircraft in the Historic Flight Collection, the Grumman F7F-3 Tigercat nicknamed “Bad Kitty” is an immaculate machine which has been restored to the highest standards. Design work having begun in 1941 for this twin-engine fighter to be operated from the larger Midway-class aircraft carriers. The first prototype flew in

December 1943 as the XF7F-1 Tigercat. Featuring shoulder-mounted wings, and twin under-wing-mounted engines, all-metal construction and tricycle landing gear, the Tigercat is a very fast and formidable machine being powered by two Pratt & Whitney R-2800 engines, each generating an excess of 2,000 horsepower. The aircraft could launch from an aircraft carrier with full fuel, 3,000 pounds of ordnance, and was equipped with four 20mm cannons and four 50-caliber machine guns. Only 364 Tigercats were built, of which six survived today.

Decommissioned after only 46 hours of flight time with the United States Navy, this aircraft and five other Tigercats survived, having been employed as firefighters by Sis-Q Air Service in Oregon. The average acquisition cost was \$1,200 each. The Museum’s F7F-3 logged over 1,300 hours flying time as a fire-fighting aircraft. Acquired by Historic Flight in 2004, this Tigercat has undergone a comprehensive restoration by Victoria Air Maintenance and Pacific Fighters. In 2008, it was featured at the Reno Air Races in a rare three-ship formation of the surviving Tigercats.

VI.

Grumman F8F-2A -- Bearcat

Sitting beside the Tigercat in Historic Flight’s Museum was the Grumman Bearcat, another aircraft in immaculate condition. Designed to beat the Japanese Zero and defend Navy fleets from Kamikaze attacks, the Bearcat was the last piston-engine fighter built for WWII combat. Its Pratt & Whitney R2800 engine generates over 2,100 horsepower, the aircraft will go from brake release at sea level to 10,000 feet in 91 seconds.

From 1946 through 1949, Bearcats were flown by the Navy’s “Blue Angels” flight demonstration team.

Historic Flight’s Bearcat was first flown in 1948 and saw a Navy squadron service through 1957. By 1964, this Bearcat won 4th place in the first Gold Unlimited Race at Reno and was piloted by Walt Ohrich, a former World War II pilot. Flying in the Los Angeles Air Races of 1966 this aircraft

clocked the fastest two laps in the history of the race. It placed third in Harold's Club Trophy Race in 1967 and won the Homestead Air Races in 1979. The aircraft was flown in airshows throughout Europe until Apollo VIII astronaut, Bill Anders, brought the aircraft home to the Historic Flight Museum which ensured that the aircraft was restored to its stock Navy, combat-ready specification.

VII.

Other Aircraft in the Historic Flight Collection

Without exception, every aircraft in Historic Flight's collection is in immaculate and pristine condition. These aircraft are not just fully restored, they are flying pieces of art. Such is certainly the case for the other aircraft in Historic Flight's collection including an SN-J Texan, a Waco UPF-7 bi-plane and a Beechcraft Staggerwing. The quality of restoration of these aircrafts is extraordinary.

VIII. Conclusion

If viewing aircraft restored to an extraordinary level is of interest, then a tour of the facility of Historic Flight will be time well-spent if your travels ever take you near Seattle, Washington. John Sessions was generous with his time discussing the aircraft in the Museum's collection on the day I toured the museum. Everyone in the museum was warm and friendly. The staff members are knowledgeable of the aircraft on display and will make you feel right at home. The Museum also features top-flight apparel and mementoes as a souvenir of your visit to the museum.

B-25D Mitchell -- Grumpy



P-51B Mustang -- Impatient Virgin



Spitfire Mark 9E -- Czech Mate



Grumman F8F-2A -- Bearcat



Copyright 2011. Alan Armstrong.
All Rights Reserved