

“FIFI” FLIES

Classics That Won the War Still Thrill

By midafternoon on 9 July 1993, the torrid heat of a 100-degree Virginia summer had turned the Manassas Airport tarmac into a steam iron. I went randomly from plane to plane, heavy camera case over my shoulder, joining a few hardy buffs inspecting the collection of Confederate Air Force (CAF) classics of World War II (WWII) in their occasional fly-in.

I had come mainly to see “Fifi,” the only B-29 Superfortress still flying.* “Fifi” is a model similar to the famous “Enola Gay,” which delivered the first atomic bomb to Hiroshima on 6 August 1945, and her sister ship, “Bockscar,” which hit Nagasaki three days later with the second. The bombs knocked out Japan and ended the war. The long-range Superfortress was sleeker, more powerful, and carried a larger bomb load than any other plane built.

“Fifi” flew during WWII, but only saw action in the Korean War before being retired to the California desert. There, the CAF resurrected her from the U.S. Air Force, and by 3 August 1971, she was ready to fly to her new home, Harlingen, Texas. After three years of fund-raising and hard work, the new addition to the CAF was fully restored to WWII specifications and began participating in air shows around the country.

*World War II plane crews often nicknamed their machines; these names were painted on the nose section: female names were very popular.

I paid the requisite fee and clambered aboard “Fifi” the way her 1945 crew would have — up the aluminum ladder leading to the cockpit area. The heat and humidity were stifling inside the cramped quarters. The pilot and guide said the temperature was 115-120 degrees. Nevertheless, I was spellbound. I sat in

the Mariana Islands. I was 10 and 11 then, and have vivid recollections of this and many other war-



the pilot’s seat for at least 15 minutes, imagining what might have been, as my historian instincts have conditioned me to do. Taking in the navigator’s table, the radioman’s niche, and the long access tunnel over the bomb bays to the mid- and after-sections, my mind swirled with thoughts of those brave men flying in abominable conditions in hours upon hours of flight time to targets in Japan from faraway bases in



time events of 50 years ago that turned my boyhood upside down and helped

shape my life, like many others of my generation.

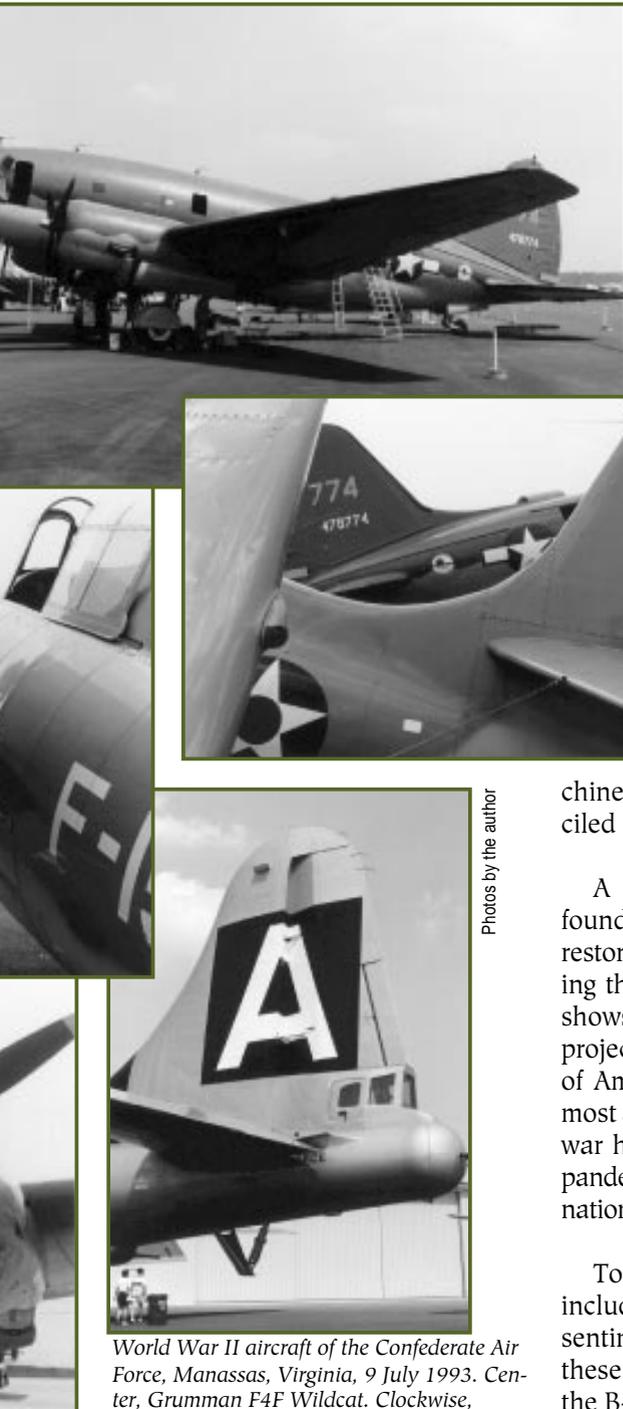
Though the Boeing B-29 stimulated most of my imagination, enough remained as I investigated the interior of "Diamond Lil," the last B-24 Liberator still around. As Cadet Jeremy

Marsh reports in his splendid article, more B-24s were built than any other U.S. airplane, 5,500 more than the better-known Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress and nearly 8,000 more than the rugged Douglas C-47 Skytrain, the workhorse DC-3 of commercial aviation. "Diamond Lil" was the 25th off the Consolidated-Vultee assembly line, and was modified to fly high-priority cargoes and top civilian and military leaders, including President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

The CAF display included "Tinker Belle," the Curtiss C-46 Commando, the C-47 Skytrain's companion but larger transport renowned for flying "The Hump" over the Himalayas between India and China; "Lady Lode Star," the Lockheed C-56 Lodestar transport; and the Navy's early war carrier fighter, the Grumman F4F Wildcat. This machine had five Japanese kills stenciled on the fuselage.

A group of ex-military pilots founded the CAF in 1957 with two restored WWII American fighters. Flying them in military and civilian air shows, they generated interest in a project to build a complete collection of American WWII planes. But, almost all of those produced during the war had vanished. Their mission expanded to include aircraft from other nations and became a worldwide effort.

Today, the CAF Flying Museum includes more than 140 aircraft representing 61 different types. Many of these are the only known survivors: the B-24, the Martin B-26 Marauder, the Curtiss SB2C Helldiver, and the Mitsubishi A6M Reisen (Zero) (one of two flyables left). The CAF has more



Photos by the author

World War II aircraft of the Confederate Air Force, Manassas, Virginia, 9 July 1993. Center, Grumman F4F Wildcat. Clockwise, beginning with "Fifi," Boeing B-29; "Tinker Belle," Curtiss C-46 Commando; C-46 and F4F tail sections; B-29 tail section; and "Lady Lodestar," Lockheed C-56 Lodestar.

B-29 COMBAT MILESTONES

First Combat Mission

June 5, 1944, against railyards, Bangkok, Thailand. Mission originated in India.

First Combat Mission against Japan

June 15, 1944, against steelworks, Yawata. Mission originated in China.

Longest Single-Stage Combat Mission

August 10, 1944, from China Bay, Ceylon, to Palenbang, Sumatra (3,900 miles).

First Combat Mission from the Marianas

October 28, 1944, against submarine pens at Dublon Island.

First Combat Mission against Japan from the Marianas

November 24, 1944, against Tokyo.

Largest Number of B-29s Launched on a Single Day

August 1, 1945, 836 launched, 684 reached their targets.

Last B-29 Combat Mission of WWII

August 14, 1944 (741 launched).



B-29 MILITARY SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum Speed	----- 310 mph
	(at 25,000 ft.)
Cruising Speed	----- 220 mph
Service Ceiling	----- 33,000 ft.
Gross Weight (military load)	147,000 lbs.
Wing Span	----- 141 ft.
Fuselage Length	----- 99 ft.
Range	----- 3,700-4,500 miles
	(depending on fuel and bomb load)
Standard Armament	----- 12.50 caliber
	machine guns
Bomb Load	----- 20,000 lbs.
Fuel Capacity	
Wing Tanks	----- 5,828 gals.
Center Tank	----- 1,120 gals.
Oil Capacity (each engine)	- 85 gals.
Engines	----- 4 Wright Cyclone
	18-cylinder R-3350
	2,200 HP each

WINGS OF FREEDOM

at the Confederate Air Force World War II Airpower Demonstration

Frederick, Md., 27 August 1994 — The roars of “Diamond Lil,” “Fifi,” “Memphis Belle,” “Gunfighter,” the Zeroes, Kates, the Helldiver, the Heinkel and the immaculate Navy blue Corsair—the fighter the Japanese called the “Whistling Death”—shook the brilliant sunsplashed sky here this afternoon.

To the World War II enthusiast, nostalgia lived and little else mattered, as the chronicle of the war by air was reenacted to the pleasure and reverence of thousands of onlookers by the exceptional professional performances by aviators of the Confederate Air Force (CAF). I would not have missed the show for any reason, and wanted to share some photos and observations.

For this demonstration, the CAF flew in “Memphis Belle,” a Boeing B-17; “Chapter XI,” a North American B-25 Mitchell; “Gunfighter” and “Donald Duck,” two North American P-51 Mustangs; a Curtiss P-40 Warhawk; four North American AT-6/SNJ Texans; a Chance Vought F4U Corsair; a Curtiss SB2C Helldiver; a Douglas C-47 Skytrain; a Beechcraft AT-7 Kansan; and an Interstate L-6 Grasshopper. “Diamond Lil” and “Fifi” flew over from Martinsburg, W.Va., and remained airborne. Relics of our former enemies were there, including the sole flying Zero and three replica Zeroes, several Nakajima B5N Kate replicas, and a Heinkel He-111 (which ferried Generalissimo Franco around during the Spanish Civil War).

If you have the opportunity to see this marvelously scripted flying demonstration of American history, don’t miss it.

WDJ, Jr.



Curtiss SB2C Helldiver



“Donald Duck,” North American P-51D Mustang



“Memphis Belle” and Douglas C-47 Skytrain (airborne)



“Chapter XI,” North American B-25J Mitchell



“Memphis Belle,” Boeing B-17F Flying Fortress

than 93 chapters around the world. For more information, contact the Confederate Air Force, Inc., 313 Hanmore, Harlingen, Texas 78550. The telephone number is (210) 428-5081.

Classics of WWII also are sure to fly at two annual U.S. air shows of note, at Dayton, Ohio, and Oshkosh, Wis., both held in late July. These are well worth a trip to anyone interested in flyable aviation classics of all ages. The U.S. Air and Trade Show (Dayton Air Show) telephone is (513) 898-5901. While in Dayton, the visitor must browse the U.S. Air Force Museum (telephone (513) 255-3284) at Wright-Patterson AFB, which boasts more than 200 aircraft and is home to “Bockscar.” The Oshkosh Fly-In Show is associated with the convention of the Experimental Aircraft Association (museum telephone (414) 426-4800).

The “Enola Gay” soon will be displayed at the National Air and Space Museum as the centerpiece in the exhibit, “The Last Act: The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II.” Scripting for the exhibit has been controversial and criticized by veterans’ groups. At this writing, the Smithsonian reports its attempts to refocus and balance the exhibit.

No, nothing could stop the Army Air Corps, just like the fight song said. As the wartime propaganda poster blared to us — do your part for the war effort and “Keep ‘em Flying!” And we have, over all these years.

—Wilbur D. Jones, Jr.

Mr. Jones is Associate Dean of Information, DSMC.