

Nov. 4, 2018 - Hilton Head Island and the WWII B-24

I began flying down to Hilton Head, with my 1964 Cessna Skyhawk, from New Jersey in the late 1960's. We liked the Island so much that we purchased a small condo by the beach in the mid '70's and then a permanent home there in the late '70's, just about the same time that I started my Infra-red Testing and consulting business. I still own the condo and even though we now have a retirement home at Tradition, in South Florida, it is still a place that we visit often. I spent this weekend at the condo while driving en-route from New Jersey to Florida and while there discovered that there was a classic and antique car and aircraft show being held at the Island's Airport. I decided to see what it was all about and was delighted to find that one of the featured WWII warbirds was the Consolidated B-24 Liberator "Witchcraft" which was open for tours and even available for a late afternoon flight. As a last minute whim I decided to sign up for 4 PM trip on Sunday and grabbed the next to last passenger "seat". About 8 years ago I had a similar experience on a flight aboard the EAA's B-17 Flying Fortress "Aluminum Overcast" when returning from a summer spent in the Black Hills of South Dakota, (See 10/12/10 posting "30 Seconds over Greenville") and found it to be an amazing adventure.

CONSOLIDATED B-24J LIBERATOR #44-44052

Built in 1944 by Consolidated Aircraft Company

Wingspan: 110 feet
Length: 67 feet, 7.625 inches

Powerplants: 4 x 1200 hp Pratt & Whitney R-1830-65 engines

Max Speed: 290 mph
Range: 3,000 miles
Service Ceiling: 28,000 feet
Empty Weight: 36,500 lbs.
Max. Weight: 65,000 lbs.
Number Built: 18,482
Armament: 10 x M2 .50 cal. Browning machine guns
Crew: 10

The last B-24J Liberator bomber flying in the world.

Background

The world's only fully restored and flying Consolidated B-24J Liberator is flying over America on its new mission: living history. The B-24 flew missions over Europe and the Pacific as a strategic bomber during the Second World War.

The Collings Foundation's Liberator was built in 1944 at the Consolidated Aircraft Company's Fort Worth, Texas plant. The aircraft was delivered to the US Army Air Force, and in October of 1944 was transferred to the Royal Air Force. The B-24 saw combat in the Pacific Theater as K8191 in operations ranging from anti-shipping to bombing and re-supply of resistance force operations.

At war's end, the aircraft was abandoned by the RAF in a bomber graveyard in Kharpur, India, with the assumption that it would not fly again. However, in 1948, the Indian Air Force succeeded in restoring 36 B-24's, including 44-44052 to operational status. These aircraft were utilized until 1968.

For the next 13 years, the aircraft again sat abandoned in India until British aircraft collector, Doug Arnold, obtained it in 1981. Once in England, the aircraft was advertised for sale in "as is" condition and in 1984, Dr. Robert F. Collings purchased it. After a sea voyage of three weeks, the B-24 arrived in Boston and was brought to Stow, MA in four truckloads.

Collings Foundation intended to restore the plane for static display only, but was persuaded to restore it to flying status by local B-24 crewmen. Preliminary restoration work started in 1985, led by Massachusetts volunteers. When Collings decided to make the plane a flying restoration, the aircraft was moved to Tom Reilly Vintage Aircraft in Kissimmee, FL to complete work on the airframe and power plant.

The restoration involved complete disassembly of the plane and work on about 80% of the B-24's 1.2 million parts. On September 10, 1989, after more than five years of hard work and 97,000+ hours of labor, the B-24 flew for the first time after restoration.

Starting a new life in 1989, our B-24 was painted in honor of the original "All American," a 15th Air Force aircraft that flew in Italy with the 461st Bomb Group. In 1998, she was repainted to represent the "Dragon and His Group," a 5th Air Force B-24 flying in the Pacific Theater with the 43rd Bomb Group. In 2005, she was repainted as "Witchcraft" in honor of the veterans history of the original "Witchcraft" - a story that legends are made from. "Witchcraft" flew an incredible 130 combat missions and never turned back while on a mission, and never had any crewmen injured or killed.

The B-24 flies as part of the Wings of Freedom Tour, visiting over 110 cities nationwide annually with the B-17 Flying Fortress and P-51 Mustang. To accomplish this, the Collings Foundation relies solely on contributions and donations to cover the operating cost of over four thousand dollars per flying hour. These contributions ensure the future of the aircraft and keep it flying as a symbol of American patriotism and as a tool for our future generations to learn more about World War II and aviation history.

COLLINGS FOUNDATION OF KEEPING HISTORY ALIVE WWW.CFDN.ORG



Upon arriving at the Hilton Head airport, whose runway had been recently extended to the 5,000 feet required to entice pure jet air carrier operations, I joined the 10 other passengers who were destined to take the 30 minute flight around the Island at an altitude of 1,000 feet and at a slow cruise speed of about 150 MPH. Although some clouds had moved in the winds were light and the ambient air temperature a pleasant 70 degrees. Although we were required to be safety belted in for take-off and landing, there were really no seats and we simply sat our butts on the floor. Immediately upon take-off were allowed to unbuckle and walk around the entire aircraft.



Two of the 4 Pratt and Whitney 1,200 HP engines



The front gun turret was accessed thru the nose landing gear door

This, for the 1940's, was a moderately large airplane with an overall length of 67 feet and with a wingspan of 110 feet. Its normal cruise speed was about 250 MPH and it had a 3,000 mile range, more than ample to reach Germany and return to its Great Britain bases. Operations in the Pacific theatre were much more challenging due to the distance needed to reach and return from their Japanese Island targets.



Above left, I am at one of the waist gun placements manning the 50 cal. machine gun, but without its long belt of bullets.



Above right is a view of the flight deck, and yes, there are pilots aboard flying the aircraft.

Although those 4 big 1200 HP Pratt and Whitney reciprocal engines made plenty of noise on our take-off, once at the reduced power setting of our economy cruise, it was surprisingly quiet inside the aircraft. We had the opportunity to walk all about the inside of the machine but were careful not to misstep as there was a very narrow "catwalk" from the front to the rear along the bomb-bay and little more than a rope hand line to prevent one from falling out of the airplane, much like a bomb, 1000 feet to the ground below.



Our flight lasted a bit over the advertised 30 minutes and pretty well traversed the entire outer perimeter of Hilton Head, which is about the same size as the Isl. of Manhattan. I believe that our altitude was only about 800 feet which gave marvelous views of the south end, including Harbor Town, with its candy striped lighthouse, the famous Heritage golf course and the South Beach community. (upper photo)

Marshlands make up a large part of the Island and offers respite from the many plantations with their thousands of homes, well disguised beneath dense tree lines and forests.

The Atlantic side beach runs for 13 miles and is open to Hotel guests, the general public and day visitors equally. There are no restricted beach areas and all are welcome. During summer the beaches are totally crowded and around the major hotels there is barely room to lay down one's blankets, shelter huts or even umbrella chairs. However in early November there was hardly a person visible from above. This is the time of the year that I most love coming to my Hilton Head Island.