

History in the Air, on the Ground

Posted on: Thursday, 19 June 2008, 09:00 CDT

By Scott Fontaine, The News Tribune, Tacoma, Wash.

Jun. 19--It's been more than 60 years since Ken Wheeler flew bombing raids over Axis-held Europe, but the memories remain vivid.

"You smell the smells of the airplane," he said Wednesday. "You hear the sounds of those engines. It's just a nostalgic trip."

The 85-year-old Gig Harbor native was dressed like he'd walked straight out of a war movie. He sported an olive-green flight suit and a matching jacket, both adorned with flight wings, silver oak leaf pin and patches from the Military Airlift Command and the 7th Troop Carrier Squadron.

He dusted off his uniform to celebrate the flight of a B-17 Flying Fortress and three other vintage warplanes into Tacoma Narrows Airport near Gig Harbor. It was part of the Collings Foundation's Wings of Freedom Tour that continues today and Friday.

Visitors to the airport can tour the B-17, the B-24 Liberator, the B-25 Mitchell and the P-51 Mustang. Flights aboard the planes, which tour the country to honor the flight crews that helped defeat the Axis powers, also are offered.

World War II-era military memorabilia is on display inside the executive terminal, and veterans will be on hand to share their stories.

"We're really here to help teach history," said Kent's Tommie Lamb, a member of Tuskegee Airmen Inc. who will talk to visitors about the famed black pilots of the 332nd Fighter Group. "Part of our nation's history is slipping away, and World War II was a crucial part of what happened. We're trying to honor that memory."

Wheeler, a retired lieutenant colonel, will be among those sharing war stories. He'll tell crowds how he flew 35 missions during World War II for the 15th Air Force, based in Italy. Or how the crew sometimes had to crawl on a catwalk in the open-air bomb bay and wiggle loose the ordnance that didn't fall. Or how a flight to Poland was cut short when his B-17 was shot down over Croatia. Or how he evaded capture with the help of Yugoslav farmers and was flying again a week later.

His flight instincts never seemed to fade. He still carried a pen and a pencil in pockets on his left arm. He studied an aviation map for almost the entire trip aboard a single-engine plane from Tacoma to Tri-Cities Airport near Pasco. And he good-naturedly grilled the pilot about the plane's speed and altitude.

As Wheeler awaited his next flight in Pasco, dozens of people flocked to the veteran to ask him questions and listen to him tell stories about the old bombers.

"He's literally a living piece of history," said Debi Robinson, one of the tour's local organizers. "He experienced this firsthand."

Wheeler rode aboard the B-24 to return to Tacoma Narrows; although he logged more than 10,000 hours of flight time during his 28 years with the Army Air Corps and the Air Force, he'd never flown aboard the four-engine Liberator.

Still, the vintage aircraft's cramped spaces, open windows and noisy propellers led Wheeler to wax nostalgic as ground below changed from farmland to mountains to forests.

"This really takes me back," he said, holding his cap with his left hand and the .50-caliber machine gun with the right. "It feels like it was just yesterday."