

Historic plane takes to the skies in Mt. Vernon

Fly On the Ford event arrives this weekend

BY LEAH WILLIAMS
SENTINEL NEWS STAFF

MT. VERNON — Soaring above the clouds inside a genuine 1929 Ford Tri-Motor and getting the chance to see Southern Illinois on a gorgeous fall day does more than just take your breath away.

Fly On the Ford presents the opportunity for participants to experience a flight aboard the world's first mass-produced airliner. Interested travelers can sign up today, Saturday and Sunday for flights of their own from 9 to 5 p.m.

The event marked the first time the Ford Tri-Motor had appeared in Mt. Vernon.

"It's a great weekend for us," said Mt. Vernon Airport Manager Chris Collins. "It's opportunities like this that allow us to go for even more opportunities."

During a media flight held Thursday afternoon, the magnificent aircraft roared to life before taking to the skies. The 20-minute flight offered spectacular aerial views of Mt. Vernon and other areas in Southern Illinois.

According to the EAA website, the Fly the Ford tour allows passengers to recall the kind of "energy, passion and excitement of the Roaring '20s" by hopping aboard the aircraft that was the first luxury airliner and what helped redefine how people traveled the world.

Ticket proceeds go toward the Experimental Aircraft Association, which is a non-profit organization that strives to share "the Spirit of Aviation."

Pilot Tom Leahy said his first flying job was working with a company that had Ford Tri-Motors.

"I enjoy this," Leahy said. "Everything you see here is a volunteer operation."

Leahy said the Ford Tri-Motor tour allows interested participants the chance to experience first-hand an important part of aviation history.

"It was built specifically for the East Coast, and it later became Eastern Airlines," he said. "But it did fund and start the first legitimate airline business in this country."

Nicknamed the "Tin Goose," the Ford Tri-Motor NC8407 was first owned by Pitcairn Aviation, which had opened the airline passenger and mail service on the East Coast.

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Sentinel Photo/LEAH WILLIAMS

TAKE TO THE SKIES — A 1929 Ford Tri-Motor leaves the Mt. Vernon Outland Airport Thursday afternoon during a day for media flights. The Fly On the Ford event will provide rides on the historic aircraft throughout the weekend at the airport.



Sentinel Photo/LEAH WILLIAMS

ABOUT TO TAKE FLIGHT — Tom Leahy, LEFT, addresses passengers aboard a media flight on a 1929 Ford Tri-Motor Thursday afternoon from Mt. Vernon Outland Airport.



Sentinel Photo/LEAH WILLIAMS

ABOVE THE CLOUDS — The media flight of the 1929 Ford Tri-Motor included soaring above the Aquatic Zoo and Lincoln Park.

Ford :

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The service was called Easter Air Transport, and then later, in 1930, the aircraft had been sold to Intercontinent Aviation and leased to a company that inaugurated the first passenger and airmail service in Cuba.

The rest of the Ford Tri-Motor's history includes its operation as a crop sprayer and then it later transitioned into a "borate bomber" to help extinguish forest fires in Idaho. The aircraft also was leased to appear in the Jerry Lewis movie "The Family Jewels."

NC8407 was heavily damaged in a windstorm in June 1973 in Burlington, Wis., where the gusts tore it from its tiedowns. The EAA Air Museum Foundation purchased the aircraft in "as-is" condition, and for 12 years,

it was restored to air quality condition and made ready to fly again.

Except for a short period when it was on display in the EAA AirVenture Museum, the aircraft has been flown consistently as an ambassador of light by the EAA Aviation Foundation.

The aircraft has also appeared in the Johnny Depp movie "Public Enemies," which was released in 2008.

Leahy said the tourists can also build their own adventure with the Ford Tri-Motor.

"You come and see it. You can touch it if you want, climb in it, or take a ride," he said. "We want you to take a ride in it."

In addition to the flights, there will be an antique car show held on the airport grounds this weekend. The cars will be arriving around 4 p.m. today and a drive-in movie is planned to begin at dusk.

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Sentinel Photo/LEAH WILLIAMS

SEE FOR MILES — The countryside stretched for miles from the window of an aerial media flight aboard the Ford Tri-Motor NC8407 Thursday.

Taking flight



Brett Templeton/Register-News

The Fly on the Ford event at Mt. Vernon Airport continues to be offered today and Sunday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Residents can ride in a restored 1929 EAA Ford Tri-Motor Airliner. Advance online pricing is \$70 for adults and \$50 for children under 17, while walk-up pricing is \$75 for everyone.

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