

Centralia man rides in World War II fighter

P-51 Mustang takes Tom Walsh for a flight at Mt. Vernon event

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CENTRALIA — A Centralia resident recently fulfilled a lifelong dream of taking to the skies in a classic World War II era aircraft.

During an event earlier this month at Mt. Vernon Outland Airport, Tom Walsh received the opportunity to be a passenger in a P-51 Mustang named "Rednose," part of the Dixie Wing Commemorative Air Force.

"I've been a lifelong aviation enthusiast, especially World War II 'warbirds.' Last week, there was a special Sentinel insert describing the Balloonfest and Fly-In at the Mt. Vernon Outland Airport. Included among the features were 'P-51 Rides.' I immediately took notice and called the airport and talked with Sheila Scrivner, the airport administrative assistant, and made arrangements for a 2 p.m. flight Saturday afternoon," Walsh said.

After years of imagining what pilots experienced in the cockpit of the fighter, Walsh said the reality "greatly exceeded expectations."

"The P-51 is a small, compact, piston engine World War II fighter plane that I describe as a 'flying hot rod' with a single seat for the pilot. The 'Rednose' had been modified to seat a passenger in behind the pilot. As a result, with the help of the pilot, Ray Fowler, and a large 'can opener,' I squeezed into the seat which was covered with a parachute. The pilot strapped me into the 'chute and then the plane. Ray lit up the massive 12 cylinder RR Merlin engine and a heavy rattling developed. We taxied onto the runway, took off, and climbed to about 2,000 feet. Passengers had their own altimeter and air speed indicator," Walsh said. "We then



Submitted Photo

PREPARED FOR TAKE OFF — Tom Walsh of Centralia is strapped in for the ride of his life inside a P-51 Mustang "Rednose" as part of a special flight offered by the Commemorative Air Force at Mt. Vernon Outland Airport.

World War II pilots. As a note, we did 'strafe' a train south of the airport, typical of gun camera footage of World War II."

Walsh's time in a "Rednose" marked the second time he was able to mark a flight in a historic aircraft. In March 2011, his son, Robert, gave him a ticket to fly in a B-29 Superfortress for his birthday.

Nicknamed "FIFI," the Superfortress was brought back to life by the Commemorative Air Force after being discovered in a Navy weapons center in the California desert.

Walsh said his love for World War II era aircraft began as a child.

"It came in part from reading books and building models. I built and painted the Revell model kits and had them all over my room as a kid," Walsh said. "But it came mainly from my dad who was in World War II and told me about seeing these aircraft fly. From there, a desire developed and I began seeing planes at various shows, but there's really no way to understand what it's like until you're in one and flying."

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flew around the airport performing some cool maneuvers, banking quick 90 degree turns. During a quick, very short weightless maneuver coming out of a shallow dive, I saw about 325 mph. It was a thrill to actually ride in and experience G forces that literally smashed me into my seat, the vibrations, and the beautiful whine of the Merlin engine, all the while thinking about the experience of the