

WWII B-17 bomber returns to Mt. Vernon

By RORYE O'CONNOR

rorye.oconnor@register-news.com

MT. VERNON — As the silver "Sentimental Journey" taxied in toward the Mt. Vernon Outland Airport, manager Chris Collins could be heard over the radio saying, "Welcome back!"

The Commemorative Air Force Arizona Wing Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress landed Thursday morning for its third visit in the King City.

Pilot Russ Gilmore said the "Sentimental Journey" crew chose to return to the Mt. Vernon Outland Airport after 1999 and 2008 visits because of the friendly reception they received in the past.

"The people are wonderful," he said. "It's a nice stop. One year, farmers brought us a basket of the best peaches I've ever tasted. I wanted to thank them."

The "Sentimental Journey," built in 1943, is one of 12 Boeing B-17s left in the world, and one of five still capable of flight, Gilmore said. The "Sentimental Journey" was in service until the 1970s, Gilmore said, until it was donated to the Commemorative Air Force.



Attendees come forward to meet the pilot and crew of the Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress "Sentimental Journey." The flying museum, making its third stop at the Mt. Vernon Outland Airport, is part of the Arizona wing of the Commemorative Air Force and is one of 12 B-17s left in the world. Visit us online at www.register-news.com for a slideshow of the event. RORYE O'CONNOR/REGISTER-NEWS

Those who come to see the plane have many questions, he said, but one stands out.

"They ask, 'How did you get it here?'" he said. "A lot of people think it can't fly, and they think we assemble it here or something."

Most of the B-17's crew are former commercial pilots, said loadmaster Diane Carl, but many still have ties to the military.

"I just lost my husband, he was

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in World War II," she said. "He was an F86 pilot in the First Thunderbird Squadron and a mechanic."

Carl Russell, another crew member for the "Sentimental Journey," is a retired Air Force pilot who spent 22 years in planes.

"You miss airplanes," he said about retiring.

Seeing the shining silver plane with a pinup girl in a blue outfit stirred strong memories for one Mt. Vernon resident, World War II veteran Maurice Davis.

Davis was in the 319th De-

year in Paducah," he said. "Last year, I was the last one."

While the Flying Fortress stirred old memories for some like Davis, for many others it was the first opportunity to see a fire bomber in person.

Blade Taylor, 11, of Mt. Vernon, said he had been on commercial aircraft, but had never seen something like the "Sentimental Journey" in person.

"It's big, it's very big," said Taylor, who is also an Experimental Aircraft Association Young Eagle.

Blade's mother, Stacey Taylor, said she was amazed by the B-17.

"When they did the fly-by

pot Repair Squad and was a mechanic who worked on B-17s and other aircraft, he said. He was deployed for several years in Foggia, Italy, until the end of the war, he said.

"They didn't have silver ones where I was," he said. "They were Army green. If we would work on it, we'd put four hours on it and go up (in the air)."

Davis said he spent hours on B-17s doing "remove-and-replace" maintenance and inspections.

Some of Davis' military memories were bittersweet as he examined a blue leather-bound book featuring his military history at the airport Thursday.

"I go to a reunion every

earlier, they tipped the wing. it was beautiful," she said.

Karen Spieth, a local pilot and member of the EAA, had the opportunity to take a flight in the B-17 warbird Thursday and said it was a wonderful experience.

"The only thing better would be to pilot it," she said.

The plane and crew will remain at the Mt. Vernon airport from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. today, Saturday and Sunday, and will depart Monday morning, said airport manager Chris Collins.

Tours of the flying museum are \$5, and rides are \$500 for adults and \$300 for children. All funds collected go toward upkeep of B-17 and fuel costs.