

Another airport education

BY BOB FRAKES
IT CAUGHT MY EYE

Almost a year to the day ago, I did a piece on all the Mt. Vernon Outland Airport has to offer. It contained seven paragraphs of activities hosted by the airport, many not directly tied to aviation. The piece concluded with the note, "and the community may see something out of the ordinary." Those words rang true on the 14th as the B-17G "Yankee Lady" made a stop at the airport.

The stop came about as the result of a pilot overnight and several conversations on a cold February day. This gave rise to the plans for a "Yankee Lady" refuel here, complete with public examination and demo flight. Such was the case as "Don" urged people to look low on the horizon to catch the plane coming in.

First out to meet and greet was Everett Atkinson. In service to the 2nd Air Force, 3rd Air Force and Air Force Training Command, he flew and trained others on the B-17 and B-29. When he went out to welcome the plane and crew in, the crowd instinctively knew to hold back and give him his due. It was a special moment.

B-17 — The B-17 is an American bomber that was developed prior to World War II and refined during. It was primarily used in the European Theater and dropped more bombs than any other aircraft during the war. It would also serve many other functions as: 1) transport, 2) antisubmarine, 3) search and rescue and 4) even fire fighting. It was relatively fast, high-flying, long range, with heavy defense and developed the reputation for toughness. Pictures today of planes that "flew home" continue to amaze people. It was heavily used for daytime bombing, with the Royal Air Force bombing at night. This was the so called Allied "control bomber offensive." A staggering over 12,000 planes would be built.

The plane bristled with defensive machine guns which evolved to the 50 caliber variety. A reporter first referred to it as a "15-ton flying fortress," and Boeing was quick to trademark it for use. However, daytime attacks proved to be problematic without fighter escort. The famous Schwienfurt/Regensburg run lost 60 planes total, with minimal damage to the enemy.

The "combat box" strategy was employed to keep planes in formation and create what the German fighter pilots called a "bristling porcupine." But, this created a better target for flack. In addition, during the "bombing run" in order to use the bombsight effectively the direction and speed of the plane needed to be constant — good for the bombardier but bad for defense from flack. In fact, losses became so high, crew who completed 25 missions were eligible for rotation out, but many re-upped anyway.

February 1944, however, produced "Big Week," whereby improved drop tanks allowed Mustang and Thunderbolt fighters to escort B-17s deep into Germany and back, and losses soon dropped to under 7%.

YANKEE LADY B-17G — The B-17 that visited the Mt. Vernon Outland Airport was a plane of the "G" developmental style (built in

July 1945) owned by the Yankee Air Museum in Michigan. It was used for over a decade by the Coast Guard and, as such, had much of the armament removed. After its 10-year duty, and some bouncing around, it would be purchased by the museum and not fly for nine years. During this time efforts were undertaken to restore a safe flying condition and reinstall as much combat equipment as possible.

All four Wright R-1820-97 turbo-charged radial engines were overhauled at \$25,000 each. These were a big attraction at the airport (that engine type or variations would be used in other military, civilian and as a single engine in some fighters). Every hose and electrical wire was replaced. The eye-catching Bendix "chin turret" and other turrets were acquired, renovated and re-installed. The engines and guns and turrets were big eye-catchers at the airport. So was the "nose art."

The aircraft had been painted in the markings of a typical B-17G. The Yankee Lady name and nose art do not replicate that of a known combat veteran B-17, but rather are meant to be a representation of that era. While begun for the purpose of identifying friendly units, the custom evolved to show the individuality often constrained by the military, to recall memories of home and peacetime, and as a kind of psychological protection against the stresses of war and the possibility of death. Research has indicated that the bomber crews, who suffered high casualty rates, developed strong ties with the planes they were flying and believed the nose art brought luck to the plane.

Military post-World War II rules would curtail the representation of women on planes, but the "shark



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mouth" found on the A-10 Thunderbolt harkens back to the earlier "nose art" era.

Local flying (parachute, pilot, ultra-light, gyro, drone) enthusiast Marty Cox got a seat on the Luck Lady courtesy ride and commented:

"I don't know where to begin on the surreal feelings I had during my flight. I had the privilege of sitting directly behind the cockpit ... after the takeoff I was able to stand directly behind the two pilots and watch them fly the iconic aircraft. Being a pilot myself, it was extremely interesting to watch them fly the old four-engine WWII bomber. I felt like I had stepped back in time. The lovely sounds of the radial engines added to the mesmerizing experience. Back in the early 1980's I, along with Crile Doescher, took a flight on the British Concord during the annual Oshkosh fly-in. It didn't hold a candle to what I experienced yesterday. This was, in my opinion, the ride of a lifetime."

I find some today that believe the Mt. Vernon Outland Airport has nothing to offer them. I suggest you not get stuck in a box and make sure and look outside of it at times.

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