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and Review

High Desert Hangar Stories



The Best of Bob 2022

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X-15: Hollywood strikes out with a fast lady!

by Bob Alvis
special to Aerotech News

Some years back I entered an auction for some movie memorabilia and when I won, I was given the opportunity to choose one item from a large collection. When I saw this theater lobby card, I just about fainted and quickly snatched it up before I woke up from my dream! What a score!

Hanging it in my office and looking at it this week got me to thinking about the movie *X-15*, wondering how such a great subject turned into a less than glamorous production, ending up as an afterthought in the world of aerospace movies.

When the movie idea was being floated around the Bob Hope production company, it was thought that the Bell X-2 would be a great focus for a movie. Hollywood went to the Pentagon to get some backing and found out that the brass really didn't like the idea of that older technology being the movie's glamour girl. Instead, they offered up the idea that the sleek black beauty, the X-15, should land that starring role! The production folks were thrilled that such a new and cutting-edge program could be a film subject, and that the Pentagon would help to secure the necessary footage from NASA and the Air Force!

With the project getting the green light, it was all-hands-on deck to make it the epic that it had the ability to become, and to get it the gloss it would need to be successful. The project was handed over to Frank Sinatra's Essex Productions, which had more contacts to staff it with the people that could really make it fly!

The first person to be brought on board was an unknown director named Richard Donner. People today will recognize him from the "Lethal Weapon" movie franchise, but in the early 1960s, he was just another hopeful looking to make his mark. The first really big "get" was when Jimmy Stewart, who turned down an acting role in the movie, was willing to narrate it



Photograph by Bob Alvis

The movie poster that got me thinking about this story.

as if it were a documentary. As a U.S. Air Force officer, he loved to showcase the "boys in blue" whenever he could. David McLean and Charles Bronson were cast in leading roles, as was James Gregory.

As with so many Hollywood movies, this film showcased a love story and the stresses of the test pilot's wives and girlfriends. Not wanting to sign a big-name female lead and possibly overshadow the subject matter, the producers went for a first-time, unknown actress named Mary Tyler Moore to play the part in her film debut. Another bit actor who played the part of an engineer was a Hollywood regular who had been in many films before, playing bit parts through the

1950s and 1960s and we would know him later as "B-1 Bob" or U.S. Rep. Bob Dornan from Orange County, Calif.

With the Pentagon working the film footage and access for location shooting, it came to the point with the script and filming that a "man in the know" was needed — someone with real inside knowledge of the world of flight test. A list of Air Force/NASA types was floated around, and when it was finally decided who that guy would be, NASA research pilot Milt Thompson was the last man standing. His inside knowledge would be key to the movie's authenticity. (Incidentally, Thompson later went on to pilot the X-15 himself.)

With everything in place, it was felt that because the movie featured so much actual X-15 footage, the film's budget could be reduced. Sadly, this resulted in what ended up being labeled a low-budget production, removing many key elements that would have given the movie the gloss it should have been afforded.

With production dates set and Edwards ready to open up the base and facilities, movie crews invaded the rows of motels in Lancaster and set up home for a couple of weeks, as they prepared to become one with the Edwards flight line!

If you've had the opportunity to view the movie (it came out for a limited release in the 2000s on DVD), there are many notable scenes. One early on was Mary Richards — oh, I mean Mary Tyler Moore — in a convertible smoking a cigarette, mentioning her trip into Lancaster. It had those of us who know Edwards hoping for more of that local flavor, a-la Captain Marvel, but that was not to be. One interesting sequence that still has me scratching my head was that of the officers' housing. That was supposed to be somewhere around the base, but the only match I could come up with location-wise was a new housing development near California City.

Many other locations around the base will be familiar to those who worked there over the years and will bring back some memories of what was at Edwards once.

So, with all this great subject matter, actors, and location, why did the movie fall flat with the public and critics, ending up in a vault locked away for decades? Pretty much relying on stock footage and a low budget to carry the film, it was a recipe for disaster. The standard Panavision filming process, mixed with the Air Force/NASA film footage at a totally different aspect ratio, did not work well on the big screen. When the prospects of cost overruns threatened to shut down production, too many corners were cut. The end result was what many thought looked like an Air Force training film that strangely had a love story attached.

Many thought that with the voice of Jimmy Stewart connecting the dots, it would help cure the ills of a film that struggled to connect with those pre-screener. But even with Jimmy's golden voice, the cartoonish aspect of the X-15 in space flight never really made "X-15" anything more than an "also-ran" in the library of aviation

See X-15, Page 3



Courtesy photograph

The flight line production team with the two biggest stars, the X-15 and B-52.

In this special issue of *Aerotech News*, we take a look back at some of our favorite High Desert Hangar Stories with Bob Alvis. For more High Desert Hangar Stories, visit <https://www.aerotechnews.com/blog/category/high-desert-hangar/>. **On the cover:** Bob Alvis, surrounded by his wingmen, in formation. Sadly, Bob lost Ziggy — the German Sheppard mix behind his chair earlier this year. For many years, Ziggy brought joy and happiness to Bob's life. Other photos are from the "Best of Bob" stories in this issue.

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Brig. Gen. Jimmy Stewart impresses on final mission

by Bob Alvis
special to Aerotech News

The other night surfing the channels I came across the movie “Strategic Air Command” and immediately settled in to watch one of my favorite actors, Jimmy Stewart, in a role that he was more than qualified for.

After it was over, I started to think about the articles that had been written about how Stewart’s World War II experiences had affected him. Stewart suffered from psychological battle scars — “shellshock,” as they called it in that war — like every other soldier who faced the demons of combat. One Hollywood reporter even wrote a piece that painted a grim view of the man who came back from war, saying that he was never the same and how it affected his acting ability.

Jimmy Stewart was a hell of an actor and it kind of makes me scratch my head when somebody would say “It affected his acting ability.” Did it affect it for the good or the bad? Pretty sure most people who are fans of his work would think his body of work after World War II was pretty strong!

So, thinking about an article for this week and with that movie as my inspiration, I started to think about Mr. Stewart and how he approached life after his war-time experiences. Shell shock, or PTSD as they call it nowadays, can be a very fickle demon in the human psyche but for some reason when it came to Mr. Stewart, his actions showed another avenue that I think would leave many wondering what was driving this amazing man. With the war over, Stewart did not leave the military. He stayed on as a reservist and continued to train and advance in the Air Force for many years — and continued to seek the cockpit of America’s premier bombers.

Jimmy Stewart will always be associated with the glory days of Hollywood and the 1930s/1940s era of great movies, but what is really impressive is his commitment to this country and the military that lasted for 30 years, and how he pursued that service with dignity and honor.

Thirty years you say? Well, here is



Air Force photograph

Brig. Gen. Jimmy Stewart

a story about his very last mission that will leave some folks in disbelief and show us his ability to live with the horrors of war, and yet put those experiences in a box and get right back in the saddle.

In February 1966, the war in Vietnam was in full swing and the dangers in that region of the world were horrific. Operation Arc Light missions over North Vietnam were hot and heavy, as both sides were doing all they could to gain an advantage.

For one young B-52 bomber crew at Anderson Air Force Base in Guam, the grind of flying those 13-hour missions was going to be a bit different, when a call came in that a high-ranking pilot would be joining them for the days’ scheduled mission, called “Green Two.” The crew was informed that a Gen. Stewart would be joining them to observe the operation, so he could report back on any aspect that he felt could be improved. The young B-52 crew kind of cringed to think a Pentagon-type would be looking over their shoulders for one of these long missions. But attitudes changed quickly when, on the crew manifest the name Gen. Jimmy Stewart was listed and questions were asked by the pilots about this very unique name! Yep, it’s “that” Jimmy Stewart, and you better not screw up and kill a national treasure! With that news, the pilot and

copilot rushed out to the plane to inform the rest of the crew that a legend would be joining them for the day’s mission!

When the mule arrived (Air Force slang for truck) and General Stewart stepped out, he looked like a grandfather surrounded by grandkids. With pleasantries out of the way, the serious business at hand started to get into full swing and as the pilots took up their positions in the cockpit, a very calm and cool General Stewart watched over them from a backup pilot’s seat. Before long, they were in the air with 30 other Buff’s on their way to their missions’ target.

Jimmy Stewart, at this time in his life, had flown every bomber design the Air Force had. When it came time for an

he replied! With that, and fueling done, the boom operator said, “It’s been a pleasure, General, and just for you, today we’re giving double stamps!” Jimmy laughed as did the rest of the crew and they pressed on to their target.

When they arrived at the target, the general was very intent on seeing the bombing patterns of the planes that had already delivered their payload and sat quietly writing down notes as he observed. As they turned to head home, a nervous atmosphere prevailed in the cockpit, as this was considered the most dangerous part of the mission. They had lost many aircraft after bombing runs.

After a bit, a call came up from a crew member down below, who stated to the general that something they never

With the end of the mission approaching, a good Hollywood-style plot twist showed up when, lowering flaps, the big bomber started to flounder and a “flaps malfunction” warning alarm went off. The crew jumped into action, recovering the ship, and climbing for altitude. With the plane steady, the crew was briefed on bailing out. The general was sent down to the navigator’s position to follow him out if the plane faltered when the flaps were re-deployed. Come that moment, the flaps were dropped, and the plane responded favorably and everybody’s heart rates dropped back to normal. Luckily a flaps-up landing — or a bail-out — would not need to be attempted.

After the big BUFF (Big Ugly Fat Fellow) landed and taxied up to its hard stand, there was more than just the usual ground crew waiting and departing the aircraft. Leaving was not on people’s minds, as everybody wanted a chance to meet and see the big movie star who had just completed his last combat mission. The next day the crew got a call to meet out at the plane and there was Jimmy to thank and compliment them for their expertise and dedication to their mission. Crew pictures were taken, and each photo was autographed and given to each crew member. The perfect Hollywood ending, but also the perfect ending to a legend’s flying career and service to our country in the air.

Jimmy Stewart continued on in the Air Force Reserves with the rank of brigadier general and was an activist for a strong American military. Here in the Antelope Valley, we were blessed with his presence for two major events — when they rolled out the XB-70 and B-1A in Palmdale. Seeing him sitting in the front row with all that brass, it’s amazing to think of how much this man crammed into his life and what a real treasure he was — a soft-spoken, witty man who in the end just loved to fly, act, and feared very little.

Until next time, peace my friends and Bob out ...

Editor’s note: This story first appeared in the March 19, 2021, issue of Aerotech News.



Courtesy photograph

Jimmy Stewart and aircrew, the day after at Anderson Air Force Base, Guam.

inflight refueling, the crew asked if he would want to get his hands dirty — he jumped right in. The boom operator was a bit perplexed as to this voice coming over the radio, as he had heard it somewhere before (he thought).

With a bit more back and forth it was revealed that he was talking to Jimmy Stewart, the actor! “Wow! This is a story they will never believe back home,”

had in those B-24s in Europe in World War II, was now available if he would come down. Jimmy was surprised to see this enterprising crew had rigged up a hot plate and had cooked up some eggs, bacon, and grilled cheese sandwiches! Jimmy gladly accepted the offer and enjoyed the meal, as it had now been seven hours in the air, with many more to be flown on the way home.

X-15, from 2

films.

Looking back, we can wonder what Milt Thompson and the boys at the Pentagon thought when the final product hit the theaters to less



Courtesy photograph

First time actress Mary Tyler Moore gets her shot at stardom in the movie.

than stellar reviews. The subject of the amazing X-15, which should have hit a homer and been a classic for all time, ended up as just a footnote in Edwards/Hollywood history.

Looking at the movie poster on my wall, it just looks like a hit, and yes, it does have some moments of great old flight test footage to tease the eye and please the memory. I hope that someday the X-15 program and all that amazing history and achievement may find its way to a movie producer that gives the subject a real budget and a storyline that doesn’t need the distraction of underlying subplots to sell it. Focus on the real heroics and edge-of-the-seat drama that this aircraft and those who flew it experienced, every time they heard the word “Release!” come over the radio.

Until next time, Bob out ...

Editors’ note: This story first appeared in the Feb. 19, 2021, issue of Aerotech News



Repatriating the Fallen: American heroes come home

by Bob Alvis
special to Aerotech News

Many times, when I look for a story to share I tend to shy away if it looks like it could be a bit too depressing, but there does come a time when those stories pull at my heartstrings.

As we approach Memorial Day, it seems like an appropriate time to put in perspective the feelings of our nation at the end of World War II, and how far our government went to make sure every soldier had the right to come home to family, even if they were dead.

Walking around Lancaster Cemetery, I'm very aware of two soldiers at rest there who were killed in combat in the Pacific. Many times, I have stood at those graves to pay my respects but never realized the massive effort it took to repatriate those who had died on foreign shores and what it took just to bring these two heroes home.

Public Law 383, enacted May 16, 1946, authorized the U.S. Army to spend \$200 million to repatriate GI's, Sailors and Marines as well as civilian federal employees who died abroad between Sept. 3, 1939, and June 30, 1946. Most nations buried their casualties where they died. The United States offered next of kin the option of bringing their dead home.

The American dead in World War II numbered around 405,000. When it was all said and done, the families of 171,539 American Soldiers took the government up on their offer and had their loved ones brought home. Those left behind were moved from temporary graves into private cemeteries or national cemeteries overseas, maintained by the American Battle Monuments Commission.

At the beginning of the program, it was stated



that the Army would not label the remains "cargo," but as passengers. They were on the passenger list, followed by the word "deceased," aboard Army Transportation Corps ships that brought the dead from overseas. This status also applied aboard mortuary rail cars. The Army paid the railroads a special reduced fare for each repatriated casualty, and the regular fare for guards and military escorts, as with any troop movement.

Congress gave the Army until Dec. 31, 1951, to finish repatriation, including search, recovery, identification, transport, and burial. This global project to return the dead from 86 countries occupied more than 18,000 personnel at its peak and was accomplished on time and under budget.

When all is said and done, it was only two groups that made this all possible when it came to the logistics of this bold project: the United States Army and the American Railroads.

As the remains were loaded aboard ships 8,000 at a time overseas, they would sail to America and arrive at two ports: one in Oakland, Calif., the other in Brooklyn, N.Y. Each casket was inspected, and identity was checked as they were unloaded from the ships. From there, military personnel would send the remains to 15 distribution centers across the country. Local trains would then transport the deceased to local stations, to be handed off to the local mortuary. The deceased were loaded aboard special mortuary rail cars and checked off again against the special passenger lists. At each step in the journey an armed guard accompanied the remains, which were never left outside.

In May 1947, the Army Transportation Corps took delivery of 118 specially modified mortuary cars from the American Car and Foundry shops at Wilmington, Del. Equipped with special roller systems and small doors to accommodate the large number of returning caskets, they performed their task perfectly. The escorts that would accompany the remains all the way to the hometown were different from the guards that would ride the train. Together, they were a special lot of individuals who were called upon to help with this massive undertaking. The military required escorts of equal rank and service for each deceased for the journey from the distribution centers to home. For entire trains of mortuary cars, a commissioned officer would be designated a train commander with three to four additional guards assigned.

The Escorts accompanying remains on the final leg of a soldier's journey had a special role, as the only government representative to have face-to-face contact with the next of kin. Each was picked from a pool of volunteers — many

of them combat veterans asked to reenlist specifically for this mission, to assure that someone of the same service branch, race, sex and equal or higher rank accompanied each deceased. Escorts underwent five weeks of training, including advice from psychiatrists on what to expect and how to respond to reactions and questions. A training film produced called "Your Proudest Duty," says it all. While traveling with remains, personnel were assigned coach or sleeper space (depending on a trip's duration) and were forbidden to consume alcohol. The Army initially feared that the escorts' presence would disturb families but, in the end, the escorts were found to be one of the program's greatest assets.

One aspect of this journey was that the remains would always be covered with an American flag whenever the casket could be seen by the public. The escorts would remove the flag while the casket was in the baggage car and re-drape the casket upon arrival at the final destination. Each escort also carried a new flag for the funeral; blank rounds for the graveside firing party, and reimbursement forms for the family and funeral director.

There is so much more to the details of this program that I would like to share that would make us all proud at the way America dealt with this overwhelming task, and how it was done with dignity and respect by all those along the journey of an American soldier coming home for the last time. Mortuary trains were just a part of the effort to repatriate World War II dead, but they were the element most visible to Americans. In an era when passenger train travel was widespread and train stations prominent, these

See REPATRIATION, Page 5



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REPATRIATION, from 4

conspicuous funeral cars served as a sobering reminder of the real cost of World War II.

This coming month, we will once again gather at our cemeteries to honor our fallen dead from all wars. We here in the Antelope Valley have always made it a priority to take a few minutes to pay our respects to those who were lost in defense of our sacred ideals that make up our country. In a small way, we are just another part of a soldier's long journey home. This Memorial Day, I will visit those two graves at Lancaster Cemetery. I will remember what our nation did to bring these two young men back to rest among the citizens of the town they called home.

Respect ...

Editor's note: This article first appeared in the April 30, 2021, issue of Aerotech News.



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and a wonderful
Christmas season!

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What do Betty Grable and Halloween have in common? An unlikely World War II hero

by Bob Alvis
special to Aerotech News

As Jackie Coogan sat in the pilot's seat in a WACO Glider half-way around the world in Burma, he was pretty much in the worst combat conditions a soldier would ever want to find himself in.

Whether it be the North Atlantic, a Russian steppe in winter or in the year-round stench of Papua New Guinea, let alone the beaches of Guadalcanal, his battlefield was about the most despicable location on the planet in World War II.

Soldiers in the region near Myanmar dealt with the year-round conditions that never really varied — from monsoon rains that would average up to 200 inches a year, heat exhaustion, infection and diseases that were as likely to kill or disable a soldier as a Japanese bullet.

To compound his problems on this night, he was flying in darkness being towed by another plane — he'd be helpless if things were to go wrong over inhospitable jungles, with no location to safely land. With a plane full of British commandos called the Chindits, Jackie was tasked with finding a needle in a haystack (code named "Broadway") and safely delivering the Chindits 100 miles behind enemy lines, where they could carry out harassment missions to interrupt the communication lines of Japanese units in the area.

On this night, Jackie would become the first pilot to land Allied troops behind enemy lines as a member of the American Air Com-



Courtesy photograph

World War II 'bombshell' Betty Grable when she was married to Jackie Coogan.

mandos. He skillfully managed to land his craft in an unsecured area where only local natives were present. In an interview sometime later, Jackie stated that when they landed, the locals feared them as gods — especially when they opened up the front of the glider and drove a Jeep out. Two of the natives followed Jackie around and made his bed every night out of banana leaves. For four days, dirty and tired, he helped to build a bigger landing strip so the main force of commandos could land — but as the "god" from the sky he put up with the nasty conditions, as his treatment by the natives was on the plus side!



Courtesy photograph

Jackie Coogan with Charlie Chaplin in his breakout role as a child actor in the movie *The Kid*.



Courtesy photograph

Second Lt. Jackie Coogan, Army Corps Pilot in China, Burma and India.

Jackie also said that the arrival of the main force took place at night. He would help set out the flare pots to guide in the commandos, who were basically British and Gurkha knife artists. Fifty-seven gliders in total were sent in to carry the force but only 37 of the gliders made it, which only left a fighting force of about 350 men. The cost of the landings was high, but in the end, it was considered a successful mission.

Always being the guy who loves to string the reader along; do you wonder why our pilot has been on a first-name basis so far? Do you wonder how the exploits of this pilot tie into our region here in the Antelope Valley? And while we look forward to October and the events famous for this month, could there even be a Halloween/Hollywood connection to this story? Well, when it comes to our glider pilot, his life would not only be defined by his heroic service in World War II, or even the fact that before the war he was married to the World War II pin-up icon Betty Grable, AND that he was one of the biggest child actors of the silent screen. No, to our generation, he'll always be remembered as the quirky Uncle Fester in the 1960s television classic, *The Addams Family*.

When a young Jackie Coogan's Hollywood career peaked when he was six years old, little did he know the trials and tribulations that would have him seeking a new direction in life when he found, upon reaching adulthood, that his mother and stepfather had squandered the millions of dollars he'd earned in his youth. Struggling to re-establish his acting career, and in the aftermath of his failed marriage to Grable, Coogan only had one option open that he felt was right for him, that of a soldier. Enlisting in the Army, he became just another flat foot in search of a mission, feeling he was destined to be in the infantry. However, he did have one advantage over the other foxhole mates he was serving with: he had a pilot's license! However, Jackie did not have a college degree, so it limited his possibilities as a military aviator — but one of those possibilities was being a glider pilot.

So off he went to the Southeast to begin training for the opportunity to fly those unpowered aircraft into combat at night, with no defense whatsoever! Determined to succeed, Jackie progressed from school to school, eventually ending up at Victorville Army Airfield just east of us, where they would practice for all combat scenarios landing at El Mirage dry lakebed. After many hours of dead-stick flying, Jackie Coogan became "Flight Officer" Jackie Coogan, and he was immediately



Courtesy photograph

Jackie Coogan on a War Bond tour in 1945.

shipped off to the battlefields of Burma, where not long after he was promoted to second lieutenant.

Coogan served with honor. After his tour of duty was over, he came back to the United States — where he was suddenly a big deal again as the child actor/nov war celebrity and he did well on the War Bonds circuit. Many folks asked about that Betty Grable connection before the war, and he did say it was pretty strange seeing his ex-wife with the million-dollar legs plastered all over the barracks of GIs around the world! Another funny thing he mentioned was how the wings of a glider pilot on a uniform still managed to entice the lady folks. When asked about the letter "G" in the middle of those wings, the reply was always, The "Greatest" pilot, of course.

Jackie Coogan lived to be 69 years old and died in 1984. Looking back at this brief chapter of his life, I'm only bringing up his military career, but his story is much larger and, in many ways, even more tragic in many aspects than what will fit on to a history page here in *Aerotech News*. Looking at Uncle Fester, the short bald man with the funny look and large waist, it's amazing to think how one person's life can take so many twists and turns and just how much living a guy can cram into 69 years: famous/not famous/ famous again; *The Addams Family* cast member and pop culture icon; World War II hero. This month we will remember his service to our country and his contribution to the spirit of Halloween!

Until next time, Bob out ...

Editor's note: This story first appeared in the Oct. 1, 2021, issue of Aerotech News.



Courtesy photograph

Jackie Coogan as Uncle Fester in the 1960s TV sitcom, *The Addams Family*.

Yorkie Doodle Dandy: The tale of Smoky, a small but mighty War Dog

by Bob Alvis
special to Aerotech News

This past Veterans Day, a special memorial was unveiled in our nation's capital: for the first time, a memorial including a Military Working Dog is now part of the Washington, D.C. landscape. A United States Navy Memorial statue depicts the soldier and



Courtesy photograph

Four pounds of American Hero; Smoky.

its handler, Navy sailor John Douangdara and his Belgian Malinois Bart., who were lost in Afghanistan with other members of the Navy SEALs, when the helicopter they were traveling on was destroyed by enemy fire. A well-earned tribute to those who sacrificed their lives in service to our country — the war dogs — I feel, are just as deserving of honor as any soldier that has been lost to enemy action.

Looking online, it's not hard to find many such tributes around our country. American society has a soft spot for our K-9 friends, no matter if they are just guarding our homes, giving us love as a valued companion, or serving with the military in far-off lands. Looking at all the statues, I started to do a bit of soul-searching and one thing stood out that I feel needs to be corrected. The majority of all these statues depict breeds like the German Shepherd, or dogs of similar stature, that shows the strength of a powerful dog that we would associate with an American soldier in combat.

However, as the saying goes, sometimes good things come in small packages! Throughout our history, there



Courtesy photograph

Smoky and her biggest fan Corporal Wynn.

have been many small dog breeds that have performed heroic deeds and have earned the right to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with their larger counterparts. Case in point: a story that goes to show that in the heat of combat, a little four-legged soldier can be a two-legged soldier's best friend and a lifesaver when the chips are down.

Yorkie Doodle Dandy: World War II Dog Hero

This adorable dog, given the nickname Yorkie Doodle Dandy, became famous in history as a World War II dog hero for her brave acts and charming qualities. She weighed only four pounds. Looking up some information on War Dogs that did not fit the physical description of the powerful breeds we have become accustomed to in the media and history, I found a bit of a story about a long-forgotten Terrier that was just as valuable to its bunk mates as any dog that ever served in a combat zone.

The little Yorkshire terrier was found in an abandoned foxhole, dirty and hungry, in the New Guinea jungle. Ed Downey, who did not have a liking for dogs, discovered her and passed her on to a sergeant named Dare. Dare, who needed money for a poker game, sold the dog to Cpl. William Wynne in March 1944 for two Australian pounds (\$6.44 American) — a lot of money during that time. Wynne, a 22-year-old Ohio native, named her Smoky, and the two spent the next 18 months together in combat.

Unlike official war dogs, Smoky did not receive a balanced diet formulated for dogs or veterinary services. She shared Wynne's C-rations and an occasional can of Spam, and amazingly she was never ill despite the harsh conditions. Both Wynne and Smoky survived 12 combat missions, 150 air raids and a typhoon.

Smoky was awarded eight battle stars. One nota-

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YORKIE, from 7

ble feat she performed helped save the lives of some 250 men and 40 planes, thanks to her small size. In January 1945, a communications cable was urgently needed to run through a 70-foot pipe under the runway at an airbase in Luzon. The pipe was only eight inches in diameter and was half-filled with dirt and mold. Not having the proper equipment, the men pinned their hopes on Smoky to solve the problem. They tied kite string to her collar, which was used to thread the wires through the pipe. Wynne coaxed her forward by calling her to come to the other side. Smoky was hesitant at first but made it through and the communication network was established. If it wasn't for the brave dog, dozens of men would have had to dig a trench to get the wire underground, put-

ting their lives at risk from constant enemy attacks. What took Smoky only minutes to accomplish would have taken the men three days to complete.

Heroic acts of war dogs are often portrayed as attacking an assailant, discovering hidden dangers or performing intel operations, but little Smoky did the best she could with her little four-pound body.

Corporal Wynne, who had been around dogs all his life, credited Smoky with saving his life. While on a tank landing ship near the Philippines, under attack from enemy planes, Smoky guided Wynne to duck the fire that hit eight men next to him. He called her an angel from a foxhole.

Many times, as we all know, it is the connection to a beloved family dog that can help us overcome

life's challenges both physically and mentally. For many soldiers suffering from wounds of the flesh and the mind, Smoky was just what the doctor ordered. Naturally affectionate and smart, she became the first therapy dog on record.

Not only was Smoky a hero, saving lives from the enemy, she helped make life a little easier for those going through a difficult time. Wynne had noticed what a strong and uplifting effect she had on the troops with her presence and personality and antics, like chasing after butterflies almost bigger than her. Shortly after Wynne got Smoky, he was hospitalized for dengue fever. Friends would bring Smoky to see him, and the nurse — charmed by her and her story — asked if Smoky could visit other patients. During his five-day stay at the hospital, Smoky would sleep with Wynne at night and make rounds during the day, cheering up other patients. Wynne began teaching her tricks like walking a tightrope, riding a handmade scooter, and spelling her own name by picking up letters as Wynne called them out to her. In the down time, Smoky performed her tricks to entertain troops with Special Services and in hospitals from Australia to Korea.

Over time these stories can get lost to history, but every once and a while a light again shines on them, and we are reminded of the great importance that all the War Dogs, big or small, need to be recognized for their contributions and deservedly so. The reality is that little trooper has six statues that honor her service and as recently as 2017, a book was written about her patriotic service to our country and our freedoms.

Reading the story about the well-deserved commemoration of John Douangdara and Bart that took place this past Veterans Day, it also pulled a bit at my heartstrings. I just wanted to give this four-pound hero a little bit of love from a guy that has a special place in his heart for the little dogs that give



Courtesy photograph

Smoky, the first therapy dog on record, and truly a champion for all time.

us so much love.

At the end of the war, Wynne and Yorkie Doodle Dandy continued to visit hospitals to help recuperating soldiers back home. Smoky retired in 1955 and passed away two years later in her sleep at the age of 14. This famous and incredible little war dog has earned her place in the history books of the American military and from this old veteran, I respectfully salute this champion of the American spirit.

Until next time, Bob out ...

Editor's note: This story first appeared in the Nov. 19, 2021, issue of Aerotech News.



Courtesy photograph

The U.S. U.S Navy Memorial, dedicated Nov. 11, 2021.

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The YB-49 flying wing on “a corner in Winslow, Arizona”

by Bob Alvis
special to Aerotech News

As I was checking into the La Posada hotel in Winslow, Ariz., little did I know that history of flight test in aviation was already there waiting for me. I now uncover the part it played at a small airfield, a steppingstone for many greats from the early years of aviation.

As my wife and I carried our bags to the room, I paused to see photos of all those who had stayed here many years ago and I commented on how many of them had connections to our Antelope Valley. As we settled in, we realized we were in the presence of the spirits that we constantly talk about while retelling Antelope Valley history.

But one story that these walls were keeping secret would soon come to life when a chance sighting of an old photo had me thinking about an old friend, the late Bob Cardenas, and the stories he shared about the early days of the YB-49 flying wing test program and his historic speed run to Washington, D.C., and a famous picture of him flying the wing down Pennsylvania Avenue.

There on the wall, in hotel hall was a picture at the Lindenberg/Winslow Airport and a YB-49 sitting on the ramp with some people milling about. My mind started to reboot a bit and I remembered an aspect of that famous trip to Washington D.C. and back to Muroc that had some drama to it, and here I was visiting the location where flyover country became center stage to the occurrences that took place on Feb. 9, 1949. As luck would

The very first YB-49 flew from Muroc Air Force Base in California to Andrews Air Force Base near Washington, D.C., in four hours, 25 minutes to establish a coast-to-coast speed record after which President Truman ordered a flyby over Pennsylvania Avenue at rooftop level to send a message showing the taxpayers what the government was thinking of spending its money on.

The return flight from Andrews was not to be without controversy when four of the eight engines had to be shut down due to oil starvation. It appeared that at its stop at Wright field on the return trip, the oil was never checked, or there was a more sinister act in play. Inspection after a successful emergency landing at Winslow Airport, Ariz., revealed no oil had been replaced in these engines at Wright after the Muroc-to-Andrew's leg, raising a suspicion of industrial sabotage.

On its way home with a faltering aircraft, when they reached Durango, Colo., it was decided that the best location for an emergency landing would be at the Winslow Airport, as it had the longest and flattest approaches with a more than adequate runway for roll out. The small Winslow community that was used to the traffic generated by their presence on the famous Route 66 was about to get a visit from a Cold War warrior that would have the highway playing second fiddle to all the people in the region.

With a successful landing, the crowds began to appear and with little or no military presence at the field it fell to the small local Civil Air detachment to deal with the security until the feds showed up! The wing drew crowds from all over the region and as the plane waited for replacement engines to arrive from California, it became a must-see event much to the dislike of the Department of Defense.

Funny that even the local newspaper, the Winslow Mail, detailed the arrival and installation of the new engines in detail and promoted the spectacle as a public attraction. After hundreds of people came to see the unique plane, the day came on March 2 when hundreds came to the airport and watched the amazing site, which in 1949 was not a very common sight for residents in a remote Northern Arizona town as the

futuristic flying wing took to the air on its way home.

During our stay, of course, we had to make



Courtesy photograph

A rare photo showing the YB-49 flying wing being towed at Winslow/Linberg airport.

a trip out to the famous old airstrip. After all, I'm Bob and that's just what I do when in search of a cool story and a history walk in vanished footsteps from years ago.

Out at the field, as the wind whistled around that old 1930s hanger, I was thinking of the activity in this one lone structure, that for about a month was home for a bunch of

ordered up to drink as Bob Cardenas and his band of misplaced airmen wondered how long they would be singing the blues at an airport in a town that years later would become famous for the line in an Eagles song as they stood on a corner in Winslow, Ariz., waiting for four Allison J35-A-15 turbojet engines to



Courtesy photograph

The YB-49 Flying Wing flies over the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C.

Northrop folks and all the equipment that had to be flown in to change out four engines on a YB-49.

Sitting in the old La Posada hotel bar, I thought back and wondered what that crew

show up that may very well have been delivered on a flatbed Ford.

Until next time, Bob out ...

Editor's note: This story first appeared in the July 8, 2022, issue of Aerotech News.



Courtesy photograph

The Northrop YB-49 Flying Wing flies a test mission.



Courtesy photograph

The crew for the record breaking YB-49 flight and the ill-fated return trip plagued with mechanical issues. Celebrating a record-breaking flight in February 1949, the gang poses for the photographer at Andrews AFB outside Washington, D.C. On the far right is Sgt. William Cunningham, the YB-49's flight engineer, whom a Northrop executive would defame as a saboteur. Beside him is Northrop test pilot Max Stanley, copilot on the flight from Muroc to Andrews. Third from right is Maj. Robert Cardenas, the aircraft commander.

have it, the crew of that flight and Bob would end up spending some nights at this hotel until the plane was fixed and departed.



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The Antelope Valley defines this hobby, attracts visitors from all over the world

by Bob Alvis
special to Aerotech News

It was about 100 years ago, or a little more, that a phenomenon started that would continue to grow to epic proportions here in the Antelope Valley.

While pursuing my other hobby of chasing trains and photographing them, I fell in with a group of railroad workers who gave us the nickname “foamers,” whatever the heck that means. I think it was their way of calling us “those crazy guys with cameras and who appear to have no jobs or a life.” LOL!

When it comes to aviation, especially here in the Antelope Valley, we have had generations of shielded eyes looking to the skies to see what hot

rod with wings was punching a hole in our skies.

After World War II when “plane spotting” went from being a wartime assignment to a pastime, the people of the AV started to realize that out at that old dry lakebed some pretty cool stuff was taking wing and that a glimpse of some “Buck Rogers” technology was always worth the effort to see. As many of our families were a part of all that technology, it also added the fun aspect of saying “Hey that’s the plane my mom/dad is working on!” and it was much like a prized baseball card to a kid pointing in the sky at a sleek design that had a family connection.

So here we are today, and things have not changed much, and daily somebody can be seen craning their necks or running outside to see what all the racket is flying over. And for the diehards,

The sun sets over BJs Corner in Palmdale, Calif. BJs Corner is a popular gathering spot for aviation and aircraft enthusiasts as it sits at the end of Runway 25 at Air Force Plant 42. The group boasts its own Facebook group where people post tips and photographs of aircraft flying in and out of Plant 42.



Courtesy photographs

BJs Corner at the intersection of Sierra Highway and Avenue N in Palmdale, Calif., is a popular gathering spot for aviation enthusiasts looking to see aircraft take off and land at Air Force Plant 42.

cameras are clicking, and comments are being shared as the carbon copy of flights day after day is never short of these plane spotters looking for a once in a lifetime catch of something unusual.

Over the years we have had a wide variety of exotic aircraft, thanks to the dozens of contractors taking advantage of the valley’s exceptional flying weather and unique geography, that aided research and development. But it was a challenge to keep up with all the new designs that were showing up during the year. As a plane spotter myself, I believe the 1960s was the best, even though when the black wings took to the skies it was always a must see show that had hundreds fixated on the roar and afterburners crossing Sierra Highway.

Today our skies are a mishmash of commercial traffic way up there and a constant racetrack of military birds in the middle turning heads and civilian aircraft and operations making up the rest of the daily smorgasbord of flight operations in our skies. With all the technology around, we now even have hobbyists tracking air movements and specific aircraft and making daily logs of air traffic.

Here in the AV, we even have groups dedicated to watching the skies who identify themselves from a location or a title that is connected to some aspect of chasing planes and sharing that passion with others. Many times, people from around the world will read up on said groups and travel here, like a young man did last week who came all the way from Warsaw, Poland, to sit at a famous corner at Avenue N and Sierra Highway! In many ways what we have going on daily has no comparison in many parts of the world and people are fascinated with our “daily air shows.”

Now all this talk has brought me to a question in need of an answer when it comes to all of us who need a better nickname than “plane spotters” as that title is more appropriate to those around major airports and standard military bases. That works just great for them, but here in the “Aerospace Valley” I believe we are in need of a better nickname that better reflects our unique region and its dedicated band of wing nuts that just can’t let a sighting, or a sonic boom go without sharing it with the rest of the valley! Pretty sure there is a cartoon character or a fitting mascot that would fill the bill that some of you could come up with and I would look forward to whatever colorful name you folks could come up with that would morph into a title to poke a bit of fun at we bent necks of the Antelope Valley!

I have my own ideas and would like to share, but as an old guy my suggestions are already dated out of the gate. My ideas probably won’t fit what the younger generations would feel was a hipper nickname. So it’s up to others to find that name, so we can form an identity that will let the world know we are all part of a special fraternity of plane spotters that call the Antelope Valley home.

Funny, watching Wayne’s World some time back I was taken in by the scene when Wayne and Garth were on the hood of their car as 747 flies over them on a landing. Nothing new to us here in the Antelope Valley because many of us do the same thing every evening as SOFIA from NASA leaves Plant 42 on its way north! Of course, I don’t know if we scream and yell as it passes over, but it appears people still get pretty excited LOL!

So, there we have it. The masses of those who chase planes are pretty much chase planes themselves, and like the pilots of chase planes we are also preforming in the capacity of sharing information with others about what we are seeing and hearing and letting it be known that it’s a hobby we fully embrace and always will, as long as sleek aircraft and one-of-a-kinds take to the skies over the Antelope Valley.

Until next time, chaser Bob is out ...

Editor’s note: This story first appeared in the June 10, 2022, issue of Aerotech News.



Air Force photograph by Staff Sgt. Clayton Lenhardt

People watch for aircraft during an air show.

Silent warbird reminds us everyone has a story, don't lose them to time!

by Bob Alvis
special to Aerotech News

It was just an old warbird in a hangar. There it sat, still and silent, waiting for wisps of conversation to break up the quiet.

Birds chirped in the background, as we usually hear from the rafters of old hangars. I stood and stared as people strolled on by, at the ladder hanging below this old warbird's belly, transfixed with some memories of a man I knew very well.

How many times did that man make the trip up and down that ladder in the hot days of summer or the cold of winter, performing the tasks that were required to keep this old bird moving forward toward the unknown, during a time when our nation was trying to move ahead from a bitter war in Southeast Asia?

It was during a time when the Cold War was just as cold as ever, and all the talking heads could not agree on what technologies would be the best means to defend ourselves or take the war to our enemies. But to that man, I knew it was a job that brought his love for flying and the skills he had acquired in a lifetime of working in the aerospace industry to the flight line, where he loved to be.

Standing there had me wishing that more stories had been shared about those special days that would have had me sponging in the information



Photograph by Bob Alvis

An old warbird, the B-1A, sits in a museum in Denver, Colo.

well, knowing that in the future I would be kicking myself for not taking the time to take his daily routines to heart, and giving me some answers to my lonely vigil at the base of a ladder in a museum.

That man made many trips in support of this old bird, as he worked on special aspects in the design phase that had him visiting rocket sled tracks in El Centro, Calif., and Alamogordo, N.M., and many places in between. As the plane began to take shape, he moved from one project to another, until the day came that a shiny new aircraft rolled from a hangar in Palmdale before the nation. In December 1974, it would take to the skies for the very first time and end up at Edwards Air Force Base, where, as the budgets and ideals in Washington fell victim to politics, those committed to the program pressed on with development that would someday find its end when the headlines in newspapers used the words "cancelled," "expensive," "dinosaur," and "missiles."

When the end came, it also brought to a close that man's lifelong commitment to the aerospace

industry that had employed him since the 1930s, where he worked with many of the giants in the aircraft industry and was present to see the advancements from propellers to jet engines, and from straight wings to swept wings. It was time to move on to a retirement that he hoped would fulfill his own personal dream of building his own

skills and commitment; he was like so many others who answered the alarm at 4 a.m. and made those trips out to an old lakebed covered with hangars and made the magic happen.

This old bird is that amazing accomplishment of so many who gave their all and felt that a pay-

check was not the reward — it was the opportunity to be a part of history being made in the skies over the High Desert. I never met a man or woman from that time who didn't feel a special pride in what they brought to the projects, no matter how big or small their involvement.

As the time to go came, I found it hard to leave this old bird and I kept glancing back at it, hoping for some kind of sign that it was ok to let go of the memory. It never really came, for the words I never spoke to my dad now haunt me in terms of the closure we all need when a loved one



Photograph by Bob Alvis

Memories and mementos of the B-1 program.

plane and flying it around the country, taking in the heart and soul of America at little airport cafes off the beaten path. That was never to happen as life dealt him some harsh realities when an unforeseen hemorrhage behind his eyes robbed him of his vision and took away his lifelong dream of soaring in the skies and chasing the clouds.

Now here I stand years later, long after that man's passing, looking up the ladder of this B1-A at a museum in Denver, Colo., and wishing that a familiar voice would call down and invite me up for a look around at what he helped to create ... but only silence is heard. He wasn't a big-time test pilot or an industry leader; he was a man who made the planes fly. He was not alone with his

departs. This holiday season, my story here is one of self-reflection but more importantly, a message to all who should not wait until life happens and you're left with more questions and wishes that would bring you peace, when the living years are behind us.

Bill Alvis, my dad, was a man who was dedicated to his family, to his craft and his country a— just another one of the thousands behind the scenes who make this country a special place and inspires us to keep being the best we can be.

Peace my friends!

Editor's note: This story first appeared in the Dec. 3, 2021, issue of Aerotech News.



Courtesy photograph



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Applications will be accepted until the positions are filled.
 For additional information, contact Gary Hatch or Alexis McCadney (BB&E) by e-mailing 412tw.rab@us.af.mil.

Air Force Civil Engineer Center, Installation Support Section, Edwards Air Force Base, California



Paid Public Announcement

George Air Force Base: My first duty station

by Bob Alvis

special to Aerotech News

Once upon a time, an Airman in technical school in Wichita Falls, Texas, got orders to his next duty station, and so started a relationship that would last for decades.

I was that Airman at Sheppard Field when I got those orders, and I was pretty surprised to see “George AFB, Victorville, California” staring up at me from the page. I began to chuckle a bit, thinking that here I had joined the Air Force to “see the world,” and I end up about 50 miles east of the town I have lived in my entire life.

A call to my folks and friends, with the words, “Guess who’s coming back to the High Desert” were met with a few giggles and laughs, but it would be a lot different now. The life of a working Airman would play out a bit differently than the wild man I was before I went into the service.

So, the day came, and travel orders were cut. Before long I pulled up to the main gate of George Air Force Base, home of the 35th Tactical Fighter Wing. I set about getting settled into my new digs as a young Civil Engineer with the 35th Civil Engineering Squadron, finding out all about this base at which I would spend many years.

Even in my younger years, I was always fascinated with history and exploring, as well as finding out about all the things that happened around the places I would visit. After growing up in the shadow of Edwards AFB just to the northwest of George, I was amazed at all the events and operations that took place on this air base, and I never even remember having an interest in its history! Of course, that all changed as I spent time on the base, and old building custodians and civil service-types who had been there

many dry lake beds in the area were perfect landing and takeoff locations for glider operational training. Before long, the base was recognized as a location that pretty much was available with 365 flying days a year, meeting the need for a location with plenty of open area nearby for conducting bombing mission training. The base converted over to bombardier and navigator training and before long, the 24-hour-a-day drone of twin-engine trainers and four-engine bombers were filling the skies over the High Desert.

That mission carried on until the end of the war. With the war won, the base was shut down and it became a graveyard of sorts for all kinds of aircraft returning from the battlefields around the world.

When the Air Force became its own branch of the military, it went shopping for a few old bases to open back up, and Victorville’s ideal flight conditions drew attention once again.

Before long the sounds of aircraft returned, as it became a training base for many Air National Guard units from around the country. In June of 1950, Victorville AFB would be renamed George AFB in honor of World War I flying ace Harold H. George, who had lost his life in Darwin, Australia, in 1942 while serving with General MacArthur. At the time of his death, he was a brigadier general and was highly decorated. Oddly, his death did not come in combat like so many other warriors, but rather during a freak accident on an airstrip. A P-40 lost control on landing and slammed into the general’s transport, killing him and few others on board. General George is at rest today at Arlington National Cemetery.

With the outbreak of the Korean and Vietnam wars, George went into high gear and became the training grounds for pretty much all types of air operations. Aircraft over those years were constantly being changed out to whatever new “hot rod” in the skies was being used; from F-51s, F-86s, F-100s and F-104s, the list was constantly evolving. The birds of my generation were the F-4s and F-105s, which showed up en masse during my time in service.

One thing that really stands out in my mind was that George was the home of an alert squadron under the control of the West Coast Air Defense command, which had been there for many years. Many times during my years there, we would hear that wail of a horn and these slick F-106 beauties would bolt out of those alert hangars and blast down the runway, to be lost in the horizon in just a few minutes. Looking back, it was pretty scary stuff, as those birds were packing some very lethal weapons to confront unwanted “guests,” shall we say, from across the seas.

George was a great assignment if you liked non-stop air action, as every day formations of fighters kept the skies full of departing and returning aircraft. We even had the German air force there, doing training in their F-4s with their olive drab and gray paint jobs. We learned pretty fast that, if you were ever working in their facility, it was a good idea not

to fall prey to the Germans and their foosball table, like so many other warriors, as they made quick work of the unknowing Airmen and scored a few bucks while they were at it!

Again, George was a pretty good assignment. I won’t say it was a perfect place, since in the late 1970s the military was not getting much love and we were keeping things together with safety wire and duct tape. But I did find, many times, when I was out on the flight line GCA or RSU sites, that I enjoyed seeing the business end of Uncle Sam’s Air Force in action.

Working on the base, I was always aware of the history I was walking in and around. Many of those old buildings were hold-overs from World War II and many of those F-4s and F-105s I helped to support had made many trips over North Vietnam. In fact, the F-105G at Joe Davies Air Park in Palmdale is one of those birds I would see lighting up its afterburner on a regular basis. Also note that the tail number on that old bird was seen in many photos as it was chasing SAM sites in North Vietnam.

Looking back and seeing the sad shape but also the resurgence of the base that was once called George AFB, I find myself, on occasion, stopping in to see if I can find anything left from my time there, let alone the World War II years. A few things still remain, but not much. One thing I find sad is all the warbirds that used to surround the headquarters buildings are all gone. I hope they fared better than other aspects of the base.

In a way, I feel a bit sad for the good general for whom the base was named. Now, just like him, his namesake base is just a memory that over time will fade like the last note of “Taps.”

So, there you have my take on those orders I got back in Texas,



Courtesy photograph

Gen. Harold George as a lieutenant in World War I where he shot down five enemy aircraft.

and what an assignment to a Tactical Fighter base in the High Desert meant to me. I came to respect it over time, along with its legacy of what it had done to provide for this nation. My time at George contributed greatly to my understanding of how the business end of the Air Force gets things done and the amazing men and women who make it all happen. Looking back, it was four years of my life that I would not trade for anything. I didn’t do anything heroic during my Air Force days, but I will just say I sure got to see how heroes earn that title.

Until next time, Bob out ...

Editor’s note: This story first appeared in the March 5, 2021, issue of Aerotech News.



Air Force photograph

George Air Force Base, circa 1962.

for many years brought me up to speed on the facility, which had a very distinguished and colorful existence.

George AFB started as Victorville Army Air Field in 1941 during World War II, during which it was focused on pursuit flight training. It was quickly converted over to glider training, as the



Courtesy photograph

Victorville Army Airfield in 1942.



So one day I was passing by late in the evening and the silence was interrupted with a wind gust and the clanging of the clips on an old flag pole at headquarters that is now abandoned. Everyday for decades revile and retreat sounded and the flag was raised and lowered as we came to attention. Those days are long gone and this old flagpole will now just fade away with the memories.

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An unlikely hero in a doghouse

by **Bob Alvis**
special to Aerotech News

There is a generational gap in how military history is understood, and the respect and commemoration for past wars is increasingly difficult to find.

How do we balance reality and fantasy with perceived notions of the evils of war as the world searches for peace? What young people today are taught about past conflicts can easily exceed their capacity to comprehend if those teaching or telling the story fail to realize that the young mind can take a complex subject matter and overfeed it with details.

In 1965, when I was an 11-year-old boy, a comic book series available on newsstands and a CBS Halloween special would ease this young person and thousands of others like me into a very strange relationship between a child's fantasy and the realities of a



we didn't want to get too preachy. After all, this was a fantasy kids' world that needed to be funny and entertaining.

However, the great Charles Schulz was the brain behind the Peanuts

would become the reason that for a couple generations we would not forget the Great War, later known as World War I.

When Snoopy took to the skies on his doghouse and tangled with the infamous Red Baron, Charles Schulz was using his childhood and World War II service to make sure that future generations would not for-

Snoopy opting for the World War I fighter pilot garb of a helmet, goggles, and the scarf, and it's not long before the dream sequence, like many Hollywood movies of the day, had our hero in the skies facing life or death moments with the deadliest enemy of the time, Manfred Von Richthofen — aka the Red Baron.

For a kid's cartoon, the bullets flying and machine guns blaring away seemed a bit out of place especially when our hero Snoopy fell victim and ended up with a smoking, bullet-riddled doghouse crashing into what was called the no-man's land between the American and German lines. Making his way across the battlefields that showed the devastation and the sounds of conflict all around him, our hero managed to make it back to the safety of his own lines.

The fantasy then returned to the reality of Halloween night and the joyous activities until at the party, Snoopy found himself with Schroeder at the piano and before long he was joining in with chorus after chorus of songs that became standards

ing time and the numbing effect of subsequent conflicts, the Great War has largely receded from American memory and popular culture — with the improbable exception of an animated beagle dressed as an aviator, in eternal pursuit of the Red Baron.

Charles Schulz, who served in combat, took his own experiences after landing in France in February 1945 and serving in Germany and Austria. The cartoonist later recalled his first glimpse of war-torn Germany: "Everything was bombed out, crushed, every building shot up; bullet holes were every place." Schulz's memories seem to haunt Snoopy's journey through France, made visible by bullet holes and gutted villages, and audible in the ghastly sounds of combat.

Of all Charles Schulz works, his one constant companion in reality and fantasy will always be Snoopy, as far as I can tell. He used Snoopy as his best communicator, for when it

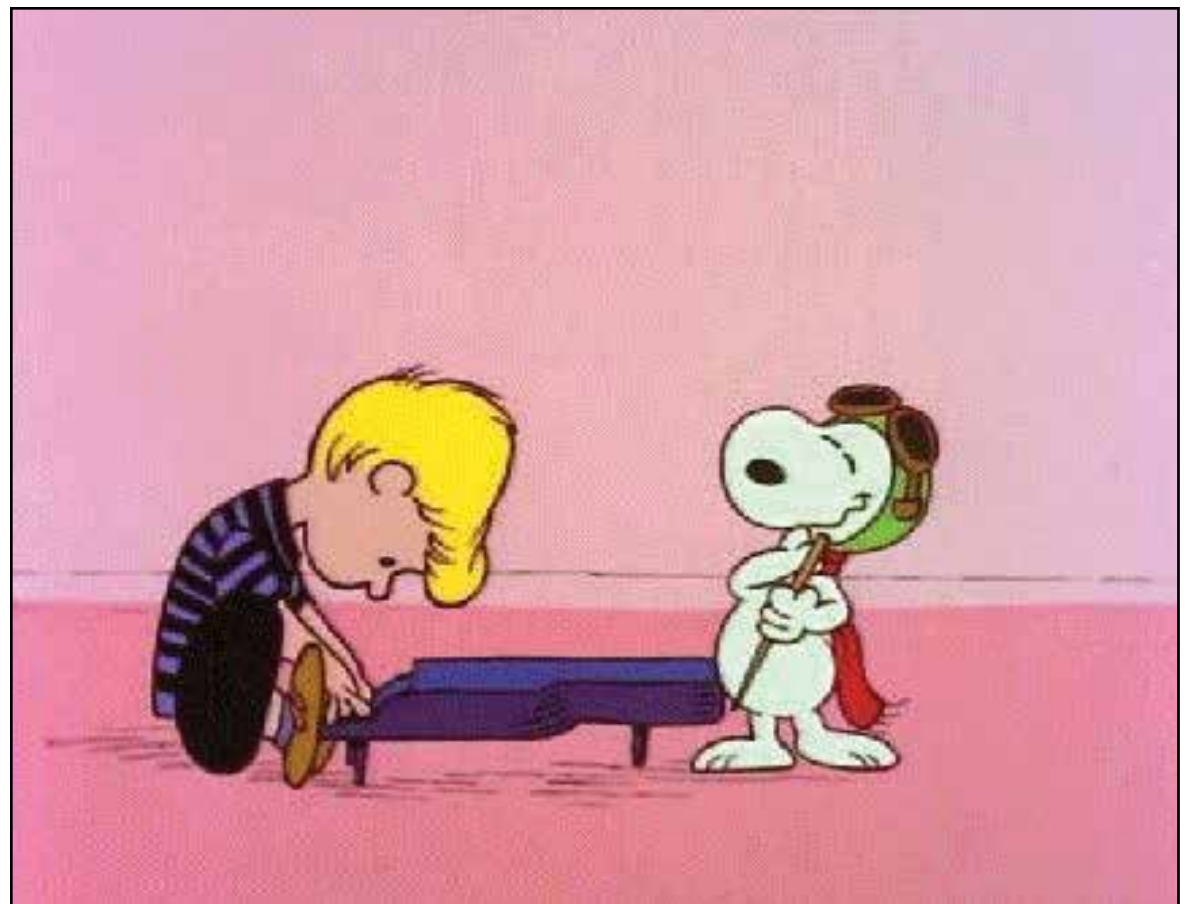


world at war.

We all know and love the Peanuts characters. Charlie Brown and his crew of colorful personalities do a great job paralleling real-life experiences and how to deal with them in a positive way. Much like Lucy and her "doctorly" advice, there was always some bit of wit shared to help one cope with everyday challenges. That was a lot to ask of cartoon characters

gang, and he needed a way to share some history in a fun manner. He wanted to expose the reality of uncomfortable subjects so they could be processed by young minds, creating a lasting impression.

A song from 1966 spoke of a hero, a funny looking dog with a big black nose, and that dog we all came to love was of course Snoopy. Little did we know that our favorite pup



get the world of his youth, and later his Army service. All those like him who grew up in the shadows of World War I and the Great Depression, and unselfishly gave of themselves were also going to be part of the lesson when the world would find itself at war again in the 1940s.

When It's the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown first aired on CBS, most did not realize there were two story lines, one a fantasy, and fun excursion into the joys of the Halloween season, and the second a dramatic understanding of a world at war.

Using the Halloween costume search for the Peanuts gang we find

during World War I for the fighting troops but also for the youth of the next generation that grew up singing and humming those songs.

Snoopy's emotions ran from celebration to camaraderie, to excruciating grief as Schroeder hammered out the songs on his little piano. As this scene played out many wondered what in the world this doing in a Halloween TV special made for kids.

Through the imagery of his comic strips and the haunting sequences of The Great Pumpkin, Charles Schulz made sure that America's Great War would not easily be forgotten.

Obscured by the fog of pass-

came to remembering the importance of the past to the veterans that have served this country, none would serve that role any better, than that funny looking dog with the big black nose that never would speak a word but communicated his creator's messages in a manner that would endear him to generations.

Keep 'em flying Snoopy, and until next time, Bob out ...

Editor's note: This story first appeared in the Aug. 5, 2022, issue of Aerotech News.



Courtesy photograph

Peanuts creator Charles Shultz.

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Fisher P-75 Eagle:

A hodgepodge of parts merged into potential fighter

by Bob Alvis
special to Aerotech News

When you live in the Aerospace Valley, you're aware of the interesting and exotic aircraft routinely taking to our skies over the years. For decades it was always a treat to go to the Edwards Airshows since we used to have so many contractors involved with varied programs that walking the airshow flight line was like a candy store of exotic aircraft.

Now times have changed; only a few manufacturers display their projects for public view since in today's world secrecy is paramount to national security.

Many times, people feel that all flight testing managed to find its way to our lake beds sooner or later, but many aircraft developed over the years never made it out this way except for maybe a curiosity check or some specialized assignments.

That brings me to an aircraft that never hit the big time but became one of the most bizarre projects of all time. My interest was piqued when I saw a photo of the only remaining Fisher P-75 sitting in front of the XB-70 in Dayton, Ohio.

When somebody mentions the Fisher P-75 Eagle most people would think they are referring to something other than an airplane, but an airplane it was, and it grew from the World War II panic that set in when the United States was scrambling to build an air force that could take on the world.

General Motors wanted to get into the aircraft building business, and in 1942 had just come out with the Allison V-3420-19 engine. GM decided to build a new fighter around the engine design. Designer Don Berlin, the driving force behind the P-40 Warhawk, sent a proposal on the new aircraft to the government in September 1942 and in less than a month a contract was signed for two prototypes. GM's Fisher Body division would undertake the construction of the new aircraft.

One of the strangest practices took place to get the aircraft into the air as quickly as possible, when other aircraft components from other companies were used in its construction. From Bell Aircraft the wings from the P-40 Warhawk were used, from Douglas aircraft the tail section from



Courtesy photograph

The Fisher P-75 Eagle sits in front of the XB-70 at the National Museum of the Air Force in Dayton, Ohio.

the SBD dive bombers was used and from the Vought Company the landing gear from the F4U Corsair was utilized. Even its designation drew from a strange source as the XP-75 was a patriotic gesture taken from the famous French 75 cannon of World War I fame.

The idea was to build a fighter in a very short time and even as it was being hatched, pens and paper were flying. Before it had even flown contracts were drawn to produce 2,500 P-75As that would be armed with six fifty-caliber guns in the wings and four 50-caliber guns fitted to fire through the propeller. That feature alone would be a real challenge, as the Eagle was also fitted with counter

rotating propellers.

As you would expect, such a mish-mash of aircraft components and a newly designed engine became an albatross in the air. When flight test began on Nov. 17, 1943, it was found that the aircraft had all kinds of aerodynamic problems including poor spin recovery, instability, slow rate of roll, and a top speed 30 mph slower than expected. With all the issues the projected date of at least 600 long-range Eagles being in combat in October of 1944 was instead replaced with a cancellation order on the 27th of that month.

When it came to an end only six examples had been built at a cost of \$50 million dollars and General Motors was now worried that they would be tasked to build B-29's for Boeing when their main objective was to become a fighter plane company. Their only other project was building the TBM Avenger for Grumman, and they wanted their own logo on an aircraft.

In the end it was labeled a monumental failure as the P-75 was passed off as being one of the very first over-priced and underdelivered aircraft of the era. Thankfully, the P-51 Mustang and P-38 Lightning were more than capable of picking up the slack for the over-hyped Fisher Eagle.

After the war the P-75 faded into the sunset quickly since disasters like this needed to be quickly buried from the public eye. The big corporate

names involved do not care much for answering for failed projects as these. It's amazing that after all this time one example of the Fisher Eagle managed to survive — tail number 44-44553. For decades it was in "deep storage," as they say in Dayton, Ohio, and when finally given the nod it was restored back to its original luster by a skilled museum restoration crew, and became a monument to a failed attempt at creating a new type of fighting machine.

Many aircraft over the years never managed to make the grade, and the forgotten Fisher fighter that was known as "The Spare Parts Fighter" was the champion. Like many things

conceived under stress it was the perfect example of "let's just throw stuff at the wall and see what sticks." Luckily we had a lot of other aircraft that did stick, and we overcame the war nerves of building things without really thinking about what we were going to end up with.

Next time you visit Dayton take the time to search out this strange beauty that looks like a million dollars! — Well, in all honesty, \$50 million.

Until next time, Bob out ...

Editor's note: This article first appeared in the July 22, 2022, issue of Aerotech News.



Courtesy photograph

The Fisher P-75 Eagle in flight.



The Allison V-3420-19 that was used in the Fisher P-75 Eagle.

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A miracle and a savior: How a carrier pigeon became both

by Bob Alvis
special to Aerotech News

Come Christmas time, I always look for a story that keeps with the traditions of the season.

The subjects covered in this publication focus on the high-powered world of aerospace and military — our world of knowledge when it comes to things that fly and fight.

Wanting to share some seasonal inspiration, I went looking for the story of a “savior” who, like the Christ Child, came to men trapped in the darkness of the world and delivered them to safety, at great personal sacrifice.

Walking the halls of the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum in Washington D.C. we marvel at all the amazing aircraft on display. We read all the stories of how hurtling pieces of machinery became famous and ended up in this National Museum of American pride. But one of the displays may seem a bit out of place when you first see it and you may just pass right on by it without giving it a second glance. It sure doesn't carry the grandeur of the X-15 or the Wright Brothers plane. Heck, it doesn't even have a motor or a cockpit — but it does deserve its place of honor among all the great history on display. For generations who knew his incredible story, the little lad became a national hero and, for 200 badly beaten and tired American soldiers, he became their savior.

Our tale begins during World War I, when the 77th Infantry Division led by one Major Whittlesey, a New York lawyer, found themselves in an unwinnable situation. The 500-plus Doughboys were given orders to take a German stronghold and were told that they would have additional support from other regiments on their flanks.

On Oct. 2, 1918, American soldiers of the 77th Division pushed too far into the Argonne Forest and became trapped behind German lines on the slopes of a hill. Cut off from reinforcements and supplies, roughly 550 men from the 306th, 307th, and 308th Regiments under Major Whittlesey's command held their ground against a far larger German force for several days. Far beyond radio range, the only way the Americans could communicate with their own lines was via carrier pigeon. However, it did not take long to realize that the skies were as dangerous as the ground. Trapped in a horrible meatgrinder of machine guns and rain, the Lost Battalion held their ground against vicious German attacks.

Little did they know that they were hung out

to dry as, in a cruel twist, the promised reinforcements were pulled back the same day that the 77th moved on the German lines. With limited communications and runners being picked off by German snipers, all the 77th could do was keep fighting in the hopes that help would come.

Pinned down and running out of supplies and hope, a break came when an observation plane spotted the lost battalion and managed to get some coordinates to an American artillery unit. The order was given to open fire on what was thought to be where the German lines were. Tragically, they ended up shelling the fox holes of the 77th, killing 32 of their own soldiers. In the middle of the bombardment, a desperate plan was hatched to save their lives and an unlikely hero arose in the form of a pigeon named Cher Ami, the unit's last surviving carrier pigeon.

In a desperate bid, Major Whittlesey wrote a message telling of the nightmare unfolding under his command, entreating for the shelling to be stopped. With the hopes of the surviving Americans on his wings, Cher Ami was released along with the prayers of the embattled soldiers, hoping he would find his way back to friendly lines.

Upon release, the brave little soldier became the target of German troops and the Americans' hearts sank, as gunshots and feathers were marking the route of the last best hope for the besieged men. For many, it was felt that the little pigeon only lasted for a few moments of flight never to be seen again, as previous birds had fallen quickly to German gunfire.

Sometime later, a pigeon handler in the rear area noticed a badly wounded bird attempting to make its way into the receiving cage. He picked it up and saw that it had been shot in the breast and was missing a leg and an eye, with a message which was just barely hanging on to its severed leg. When the soldier read the communique, he went running to headquarters yelling to stop the shelling in the area of the 77th battalion. In doing so, he saved the lives of many soldiers who had pretty much figured they would not see another sunrise. Upon returning to his birdcages, he suddenly looked at Cher Ami and realized his best effort to save its life would be required, as a hero of this stature was just as important as saving any combat soldier. The bird handler enlisted fellow troops and medical staff to help with the effort and miraculously, the tiny bird pulled through.

The official story said, “The brave bird flew



Courtesy photograph

straight into the German fire, dodging bullets as he went. However, his luck did not last for long. Cher Ami was hit in the chest soon after take-off, as American soldiers watched in horror as their last hope hit the ground. Against all odds though, Cher Ami got up again! Wounded but still alive, the little bird took flight again, charging head-on into wave after wave of gunfire. By the end of the trip, he covered 25 miles in roughly half an hour. He arrived at base heavily wounded, but alive.”

Because of Cher Ami's delivery, the artillery stopped and took up new firing coordinates away from American lines. The next day, shells started to fall on German positions, relieving pressure on the bloodied 77th, and the battle turned in America's favor. On Oct. 8, 194 men of the over 500 that started the battle made it back to the American lines, thanks to Cher Ami's sacrifice.

For his part in saving the 77th Division, Cher Ami was awarded the Croix de Guerre, one of France's highest military honors, for his gallantry in the field. Gen. John Pershing, commander of the American Expeditionary Force, said “There isn't anything the United States can do too much for this bird.”

Cher Ami made it back to the United States in the care of his trainer, Capt. John Carney. On June 13, 1919, Cher Ami died at Fort Monmouth, N.J. However, Cher Ami's one-legged body was preserved and presented to the American government with honor. It is difficult to say how many families owe their lineage to the sheer courage and self-sacrifice of one brave bird. Today, Cher Ami is on display at the Smithsonian Museum of American History to preserve his memory. Since then, his story has lived on in the hearts and minds of Americans across the decades, and his bravery will never be forgotten.

It is truly a miracle that, even today, you can look at Cher Ami and realize that this small bird

in your presence was a part of history on that day, with a sacrifice no less than any man that performed a heroic act during war time. Isn't it funny how we look to things and people we call saviors, not realizing that along with the long line of heroes who have filled those shoes — that the creatures God has blessed us with can at any moment bring hope to those lost and suffering, when it looks like all hope is lost?

I hope the next time you visit all the shiny history at the Smithsonian, you take the time to look for a handful of feathers that we call Cher Ami and give thanks for an unlikely gift that reminds us of how special all God's creatures are. Truly a treasure in the halls of American military history.

Merry Christmas, my friends and I hope you have a blessed New Year. For now, Bob out ...

Editor's note: This story first appeared in the Dec. 17, 2021, issue of Aerotech News.



Courtesy photograph



A young visitor views Cher Ami, the homing pigeon that became a hero and savior during World War I, at a display at the Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C.



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