

CorsairFest

There's a lot more to the F4U than its past association with black sheep.

Air & Space Magazine

Larry Lowe

WALK OUT ON THE RAMP, PAST THE STATIC DISPLAYS, the remote-controlled-model tent, the Marine recruiting stand, and the car show, on across the drying grass to where the flying exhibits were parked, then around the corner at the tail of a B-25. There they are, all gleaming deep blue and jutting propeller blades. It's the Corsairs.

Few airplanes--the triple tail Connie, the Staggerwing Beech among them--are as instantly recognizable as the inverted gull winged F4U Corsair.

Inspired by an event for P-51s in Florida in 1999 (see "Mustang Mania", June/July 1999), last September the Indianapolis Air Show assembled as many flyable examples as possible of the Chance Vought F4U Corsair, a hog-nose, bent-wing, big-ass Mack truck of a fighter that raged across the South Pacific during World War II and later in Korea. Between 1941 and 1952, some 12,500 F4Us rolled off the assembly line. Today there are fewer than 30 Corsairs left, and only 10 to 15 are flyable in the United States. There were only seven of those at the Gathering of Corsairs and Legends reunion at Indianapolis.

Across from the visitor area, in a large red-and-white-striped tent, were some old men wearing baseball caps adorned with unit identifiers like "VMF-223." These were the Legends, the men who flew the F4U in combat.

Also prowling the grounds was Robert Ginty, who came all the way from Dublin, Ireland. Ginty played T.J. Wylie in the 1976-'77 television series "Black Sheep Squadron," which was based loosely on the memoirs of Major Gregory Boyington, the commander of the legendary Marine VMF-214 Black Sheep squadron. T.J. was the young, somewhat naive flier, always peeling off into a swarm of Zeros while calling out an enthusiastic "I've got 'em, Pappy!" over the radio. Ginty made no attempt to vindicate the television series; "I think everybody knew that the show was kind of unrealistic," he said. (Boyington was never called "Pappy" by his squadron, for example; that was an invention that came well after the war.) "It was really meant as a kids' show. It was not meant to show anything about war." The show lasted only two seasons, its demise due to a combination of economics and, Ginty suspects, influence on the network from those who may have felt the scripts did not do the original heroes justice. However naive the character of T.J. was, Ginty is no dilettante. He holds a deep regard for the original Black Sheep, perhaps because he has attended many events like this where he has heard the tales the Black Sheep tell.

At the Gathering of Corsairs and Legends dinner and symposium on Friday night, the eve of the airshow, the tables were filled mostly with those who hadn't been there during the reign of the Corsair. Those who had-the veteran pilots-were dispersed throughout the hall, one to a table, to share their stories. Each Legend took a few minutes at the microphone to reflect on his experiences from the distance of a half-century. The stories tended more toward the humorous than the heroic, and, unlike their film counterparts, these men express modesty mixed with an appreciation for how lucky they are to be here to talk about it all.

Glen Bower, who spent part of his second World War II tour with the Black Sheep, remembered the time he came out of a cloud one day: "I'm flying formation. With a Zero. I looked across...and he smiled back at me. There was no way I'm going to get on his tail. So I pulled back up into the cloud and left him for someone else."

Tom Emrich was flying wing for Boyington during the latter days of a second tour with the Black Sheep. During a fighter sweep, Emrich spotted "a Zero on the most perfect beam shot you'd ever want to see. The machine guns were twinkling on the cowling and a stream of fire was going between me and Boyington." Emrich had to drive his Corsair through the machine gun fire in order to cut off the attack on Boyington. "They used the 7.7 [machine guns] to train their cannons, and when they had you in their sights, they fired their cannons." A 20-millimeter cannon shell exploded at the juncture of the vertical fin and the fuselage, severing Emrich's rudder cables. He nursed the fighter home and managed to get it on the ground in one piece.

Ed Harper was lucky to be sitting anywhere 55 years later. Harper had likely been hit with a .51-caliber armor-piercing anti-aircraft round, which collapsed one lung and nicked his spine, paralyzing his legs and leaving "a hole in his back where you could put your fist," according to John Bolt, another pilot on the raid. Slumping in and out of consciousness, Harper was guided home by his wingmen and only barely managed to land the stricken Corsair.

William Heier struggled during his two minutes with the microphone to come to grips with something he couldn't quite bring himself to recount-perhaps an aspect of war more heinous than heroic. In closing, Heier found a path to vindication. "We could have done a lot worse," he said.

Allan McCartney, who flew his third combat tour with the Black Sheep, brought the mood of the symposium back full circle. "I've flown a lot of airplanes for the Marine Corps," he said. "I've brought four [Corsairs] back that were so badly shot up that [the maintenance crew] just pushed them off the side of the runway and used them for spare parts. I love the Corsair."

Affection for the airplane was late in coming when it entered the fleet to post a mixed record. Fast and rugged, it was also hard to land aboard carriers, and its accident rate caused the Navy to transfer it to the Marines, who flew the airplane from the beach. Later models fixed problems that had limited forward visibility over the long nose, and carrier landings became less of a challenge. A Navy History Office summary says its aerial combat record was 2,140 aircraft destroyed against 189 losses.

The Black Sheep said this will be their last reunion. In contrast, Jack Holden said his squadron, VMF-312, is a "very closely knit group. I think we will continue to have a reunion until the last man stands."

At the airshow the following day, retired Navy pilot Dale Snodgrass, call sign "Snort," flew the solo Corsair demonstration in the airshow, and his routine was mesmerizing. Snodgrass starts a long turning dive from 3,000 feet and ends up at about 25 feet above the ground, doing an airspeed of 320 knots-about 370 mph. "That airspeed gives the famous Corsair whistle," he says. The distinctive sound comes from air entering the oil cooler intakes mounted in the roots of the F4U's hallmark feature: inverted gull wings. The wings were built that way so the main gear legs could be designed short and stout while providing the huge prop ground clearance.

In low passes back and forth across the airfield, Snodgrass trades airspeed for altitude and back again without inflicting high G loads, respecting the machine while pleasing the crowd. At the finish, there's a long, low, fast swooping pass for the cameras.

During the performance, Snodgrass is way too busy to think about the airplane's history. "But I tell you, when I walk around it...that's when it touches me," he says, his voice lower and softer. "My father flew Corsairs at the end of World War II. I just appreciate the privilege of being in an airplane like that." He also appreciates the generosity of owner Jim Read, who lets him "have the keys to such a precious piece of equipment."

Read flew Skyraiders in the Marines, then retired to civilian life as a banker. Success afforded him the option of returning to flying upon retirement. When he called warbird dealer Mark Clark to inquire about a P-51, he learned that a Corsair was for sale. He bought the airplane from renowned warbird collector Doug Arnold in England. It was shipped to the United States and flown to Indiana, where Read took his first flight in it.

"I assumed that the Corsair...would be more difficult to fly, and I was totally wrong," said Read. He particularly enjoys the Corsair's control authority and response at low airspeeds. "At 90 knots, you can just take the stick and go all around with it," he said, as if twirling an imaginary baseball bat in a big circle, "and it just kinda wallowed. I thought, Wow, I can't believe this! It's so easy!"

Easy to fly or not, owning the Corsair is a responsibility Read takes seriously. "I want to keep it flying and I want to keep it safe and I want to keep it in one piece," he says. When it's not flying, his F4U-5 is on loan to the Indiana Air Museum in Valparaiso.

Read's Corsair sported the paint scheme of Marine squadron VMF-312, perhaps the most distinctive one associated with F4Us: white checks alternating with traditional navy blue. First Lieutenant John J.E. Holden designed the color scheme in June 1943, and it has become the most enduring squadron motif in history. Both the squadron and the checkerboard pattern survive today.

Holden was in attendance, and his comments echoed those of every pilot lucky enough to fly a Corsair. "If anyone were to ask me to name the finest [American] fighter during World

War II-unequivocally-the Corsair. I've never flown a P-51, and I'm sure some of those boys would give you some argument. But the Corsair could be a fierce fighter and a loyal companion at the same time, and the Corsair never, even under difficult circumstances-like flying with an oil pressure gauge that read zero-did it let me down."

Late in the day, as the airshow was winding down, the public was shooed from the row of parked Corsairs, and the pilots gathered for a quick briefing before mounting up. Soon, word came from ground operations director Arlene Samuelson, and one by one the ground crew signalled "Start engine." The massive propeller blades initially struggled to turn but soon spun into a blur, blowing a curl of smoke away from big blue cowlings, and the Corsairs taxied out in staggered order to match the planned takeoff sequence. One by one, they took off from the east end of the airport, tails floating up as they gained speed. They retracted the gear, gathered more speed even as they climbed, and entered their element. Then each one returned to beat up the airfield in a round-robin lazy trail formation.

There were five Corsairs flying together on that day, the most just about anyone could remember seeing at one time since Korea. Four of them finally formed up in a classic finger four, and, from stage left, made a pass over the runway. The announcer was silent, letting everyone appreciate the sight and the sound. Passing by in steady formation, they were soon lost in the sun. There was nothing to do, really, but try to memorize it all.