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SPOTLIGHT

Maid in the Shade: B-25 bomber visits Bozeman

JODI HAUSEN, Chronicle Staff Writer Aug 1, 2012





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Al Wagner, 80, checks out the front gunner position in a North American B-25 Bomber nicknamed “Maid in the Shade” during a Tuesday morning flight out of the Yellowstone Jet Center.

Ed Cook looked down at the hatch beneath his feet inside a World War II B-25 bomber before soaring into the skies above the Gallatin Valley on Tuesday morning.

“I’m 65 years old and I’m walking where they walked in 1944,” he said. “I’m touching where they touched.”

Cook is a member of the Commemorative Air Force Arizona Wing — the group that brought the restored bomber dubbed Maid in the Shade to Bozeman Yellowstone International Airport this week.

It took the Arizona group 28 years to restore the historic craft after acquiring it in 1981. With a mission of keeping history alive, members also restore and fly several other combat aircraft and maintain a museum in Mesa.

Cook served as guide for Tuesday’s trip into the skies.

Carrying up to 4,000 pounds of ammunition and six crew members, the aircraft flew 15 combat missions in 1944, mostly bombing railroad bridges in Italy to stop invading Germans.

The bomber flew at less than 1,000 feet “off the deck” to avoid detection, Cook told four visitors seated behind the bomb bay.

It also was equipped with a dozen .50-caliber machine guns and carried up to 640 rounds or nine yards of bullets.

That’s where the expression “Give ’em the whole nine yards” originated, Cook said.

Some of the traveling crew members have personal connections to the plane, though none are old enough to be World War II veterans.

Chuck Marquis of Florida is a retired Coast Guard captain. His father flew 35 missions in a B-17 as a navigator and was shot down and taken prisoner during the war.

He was also proud to call his mother a Rosie the Riveter, having helped build B-25s. Though his mother worked in a Kansas factory, he can’t be sure she had a hand in the Maid in the Shade.

During a 25-minute flight, the aircraft shook and groaned loudly.

Al Wagner, 80, retired from the Air Force and National Guard as a lieutenant colonel after 21 years. He served a year in Korea and trained on the “magnificent old bird,” as he called it.

“It brought back a lot of memories,” he said after the flight. “A lot of wonderful memories. Hearing that engine kick off, it brought tears to my eyes.”

World War II veteran Jim Hays of Bozeman needs a walker to get around.

No longer able to climb the ladders to board the B-25, the former navigator came to see the bomber on the ground.

After serving 22 years with the Air Force and the reserves, Hays retired as a major.

He just shrugged his shoulders when asked about the memories seeing the plane elicited.

“I was never shot at until Vietnam,” he said. The B-25 “is the loudest and noisiest aircraft I ever flew in, but you feel a part of the airplane” when flying it.

“I enjoyed flying in this because you’re usually down pretty low, close to Mother Earth,” he said, tapping the plane’s belly.

CAF will have the plane available for flights and on display at the Yellowstone Jet Center’s east building until Sunday.

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B-25 Bomber Flight over Bozeman

Jul 31, 2012

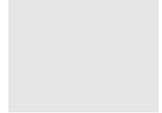
If You Go

Flights on Maid in the Shade are by appointment and cost \$395 for a seat behind the bomb bay or \$650 to ride in front behind the cockpit. There's a \$5 charge to check it out on the ground. For more information, visit azcaf.org or call 480-322-5503.

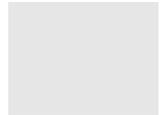
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