

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A WARBIIRD

What better way to spend a Saturday morning than on the ramp? Here at Falcon Field (FFC, Peachtree City, Georgia), it usually starts with ground fog that slowly lifts as the sun rises, the rhythm of the airport quickening in proportion to the retreat of the fog. But on this particular Saturday, there's a lot of bustle on the ramp even before the fog lifts. A dedicated crew of Commemorative Air Force volunteers is preparing three vintage warbirds for a flight to an air show in central Georgia.

The first ship towed out of the hangar is a Douglas SBD "Dauntless." This WW II dive bomber was made famous in the battle of Midway when it was used to destroy the Japanese carrier fleet. The example sitting on the ramp is one of only three still flying today and is a crowd favorite. This ship was restored by the same people who are now preparing her for flight. They were so meticulous that they even custom matched the paint using the original Navy specs. Pulling the prop through on this airplane is not an easy job, and the ground crew always works up an early morning sweat.

Meanwhile, a "Twin Beech" C-45 is pulled onto the ramp. It is painted in distinctive yellow, green, and brown colors used by the Royal Air Force in WW II, complete with D-Day invasion stripes. The markings are identical to a RAF C-45 flown during the war by one of the CAF volunteers. That same pilot is now helping prep this ship for flight.

Last in the procession is a small PT-26 primary trainer painted silver with Army Air Corps markings. This wood and fabric airplane was also meticulously restored and looks like it came straight from the factory. Although it is not as glamorous as its sister ships, it is a favorite among the volunteers, who like to take rides with the canopy open and proverbial silk scarf flapping. All three airplanes are ready in short order, and one one-by-one, they start their engines. The low rumbling of a big radial engine idling on the ramp is distinctive. A few last ground checks and all three ships taxi to the runway. It takes ten minutes to get the oil temperature into the operating range, and the ground crew has gathered expectantly waiting



to see each ship begin its takeoff roll. At length, each ship lifts off amid a rising cacophony of noise, departing toward the air show where they will rendezvous with a mobile PX truck. Upon arrival, they will set up the PX, prepare the airplanes for static display, and spend the remainder of the day telling visitors about their airplanes and the role of American airpower WW II. By the end of the day, they will have helped educate the public, raised money for continued operations, and had fun doing it.

Meanwhile, things are happening back at the hangar. It takes considerable effort and coordination to keep these 50+ year-old airplanes flying. This includes a maintenance crew that works most of the Winter performing annual inspections on each ship, facilities personnel, finance, marketing and sales people who book these airplanes to airshows, pilots who fly the planes, and so on—almost like a small company. This scene is all the more remarkable in that these people aren't working for a company—they are all volunteers and the only revenue the CAF makes is through donations and air shows.

The inside of the hangar maintenance area is dominated by machine tools and various airplane parts. There are two more vintage airplanes undergoing restoration in this hangar: a rare Bell P-63 "King Cobra" and a North American AT-6 "Texan." Teams of volunteers work to restore these ships so that they will one day become part of the CAF's "flying museum," a living tribute to American airpower. The restoration process requires many years and a great deal of money—the parts are scarce, some parts are no longer available, and there is not always enough money to go around. But the volunteers negotiate each obstacle as it arises, doggedly restoring both ships one piece at a time.

In addition to flight operations and restoration, many CAF volunteers are involved in the air show held every September at Falcon Field. In four years, the "Wings Over Dixie" air show has become one of the biggest airshows in Georgia, and the Dixie Wing of the CAF has been an integral part since its inception. It takes year-around effort to make this happen. Right now, they are preparing for the show on Sept 14-15th.

The volunteers in this organization come from all walks of life and fulfil roles of every type and description. The Dixie Wing is only one of 75 chartered CAF units located throughout the US, all having similar stories. Their purpose: to allow you—no matter where you live—to participate in a hands-on way in the history of American airpower.

The Dixie Wing of the Commemorative Air Force was approved as the 83rd CAF unit on February 28, 1987, and has since displayed its collection of vintage World War II era aircraft at airshows throughout the Southeast. We are based at Falcon Field in Peachtree City, Georgia, with approximately 220 active members from all walks of life. Want to find out more? Go to: www.dixiewing.org or contact Dixie Wing Leader Jake Tryon at jtryon@numail.org

