

A celebration of flight brings the past and the present together.

Heritage Flight



Photography by Erik Hildebrandt



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Airpower past and present come together in this P-47, P-51, and F-15 formation over Lake Winnebago in Wisconsin. The Air Force Heritage Flight program brings legendary warbirds and their active duty counterparts together to inspire air show audiences around the nation.

“Air Force 50,” the service’s golden anniversary celebration at Nellis AFB, Nev., provided the seeds of Heritage Flight. There, vintage airplanes drawn from aviation heritage organizations around the nation flew wingtip to wingtip with their “descendants” now in the inventory.

The parade of 50 years of flying history wowed the crowd.

The unprecedented sight of A-10s, F-15s, and F-16s flying tight formation with their World War II and Korean War-era counterparts proved so popular that USAF officials decided to make it a staple of the air show season. In cooperation with the International Council of Air Shows Foundation and the FAA, a formal program was developed to bring together the diverse aircraft of USAF history. “Heritage Flight” made its debut in April 1999 and is now an official part of Air Combat Command’s flying demonstration program.



Participants in the program make up a veritable who’s who of aviation. Here, F-15 demonstration pilot Capt. John York is flanked by USAF legends Clarence E. “Bud” Anderson, at left, and Chuck Yeager, at right. New recruits include Apollo 8 veterans William A. Anders and Frank Borman. Above, Regis F.A. “Reg” Urschler shows off his restored P-51 for the camera. Above left, York rolls inverted during a single-ship demo.



One of the best-known air show Mustangs is Big Beautiful Doll, owned and piloted by Ed Shipley, one of Heritage Flight's charter participants. Flying World War II-era aircraft in tight formation with Mach 2+ jets requires tremendous proficiency, and Shipley led the effort to sign up the airplanes and pilots to do the job. In the background is a Korean War-era F-86 wearing a patriotic paint scheme.



Study in contrasts (above): Tom Gregory, flying a gorgeous P-47 owned by the Lone Star Flight Museum of Galveston, Texas, flies lead on York in an F-15. The markings worn by the P-47 warbird represent an actual (and very colorful) World War II fighter from the 366th Fighter Squadron.

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Above, Shipley's highly polished machine is silhouetted against the waters in Wisconsin. (The original Big Beautiful Doll was flown by World War II P-51 ace John D. Landers.) At left, York noses his F-15 up for the camera with Gregory and his P-47 in trail.

York snaps a salute to his two crew chiefs, SSgts. Tracy Ann Tremblay (left) and Heriberto Padilla. An assignment to a demo bird is highly prized, and these two dedicated technicians understand how important it is that their ship be "Code One" (for no discrepancies) and good to go for every air show hop. Thousands will be watching, and many will gain their first impressions of the Air Force from what they see.



Heritage Flight warbirds receive no logistical or financial support from the Air Force, though some of their costs are offset by air show organizers and sponsors. The year 2000 air show season is slated to feature more than a dozen historic aircraft types.

Flying, maintaining, and caring for warbirds is a labor of love. Those who undertake it know that keeping them in the air is the only way to communicate to younger generations the sights, sounds, smells, and romance of these magnificent machines.

Above, York flashes the high sign to an appreciative crowd, while Gregory, at right, poses Tarheel Hal for the camera. Below, it's York's turn.



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Heritage Flight will participate in air shows around the country this season, allowing thousands to experience the thrill of seeing modern fighter aerobatics as well as the grace and beauty of aircraft from a bygone era. Whether it's the roar of Merlin engines or the awesome thunder of turbofans, audiences will thrill to the "sound of freedom." ■