

Warbirds

The Collings Foundation keeps the sights and sounds of military aviation alive with an extraordinary collection of flying vintage aircraft.

Photos by Jim Dunn, courtesy of The Collings Foundation





Two stars of a "living history" collection pass San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge. At left is a B-17G painted as the World War II bomber Nine O Nine, and at right is the only flying B-24J Liberator, painted as Witchcraft.

Created in 1979, the Collings Foundation was set up to help Americans learn about their aviation heritage by seeing and hearing for themselves the machines that fought in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. The foundation's 24-airplane collection—many of them the sole privately held flying examples of their type—tours the air show circuit and provides static displays at aviation events. **1** At a 2010 Oshkosh, Wis., air show, an F-4D Phantom, flanked by an A-4 and TA-4J Skyhawk, performs a Vietnam-era flyby. **2** This two-seat Me 262 replica is one of the newest elements of the Collings collection. **3** B-17G Nine O Nine flies past Mount Shasta in California. **4** The Korean War-era collection includes this AT-6F, based at Collings' Stow, Mass., facility. **5** The Fiesler Fi-156 Storch was used for observation and even as an air ambulance.



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11 Tondelayo, a B-25J Mitchell, awaits its next mission at Fox Field in Lancaster, Calif. It honors a B-25D that sank a 6,000-ton freighter in sea action, while its turret gunner shot down five defending Japanese aircraft. Heavily damaged, the original Tondelayo was repaired and returned to action. **12** The newly restored Me 262 Schwalbe (Sparrow). The Me 262 was the first operational jet fighter. **13** Beside a Collins B-17, World War II B-17 crewman Harold Woloz holds a photo of his bomber crew. Fans can take tours of the Collins aircraft, see them in action, and sometimes get firsthand accounts from veterans. **14** At an annual re-enactment in Stockton, Calif., Witchcraft drops two dummy bombs. Although more than 18,000 B-24s were built, only about a dozen intact models survive.

11 The star of the Vietnam-era collection is the F-4D, here lifting off at an Oshkosh air show in 2010. The aircraft depicts that flown by Vietnam War ace Robin Olds during the famous Operation Bolo campaign. Congress had to give special permission to own and operate a civilian Phantom, because the type is still a front-line fighter in some parts of the world. **12** Nine O Nine honors an Eighth Air Force B-17 that survived 140 missions in World War II Europe, believed to be the unit record. The Collings version is complete with its Norden bombsight. **13** The two-seat TP-51C, Betty Jane, escorts Witchcraft over a California bombing range. **14** Many pilots earned their wings in an open-cockpit Boeing PT-17 biplane such as this colorful model. **15** Witchcraft and Nine O Nine fly in formation.





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111 Witchcraft makes a run during a 2009 Collings Foundation "Wings of Freedom" tour. The aircraft served both the US and Britain in the Pacific theater; at war's end, it was abandoned in a boneyard in India, but was resurrected and used by that nation's air force. Again retired, it was bought by a collector in 1981 and acquired by the foundation's namesake, Robert Collings, in 1984. It took five years to restore the bomber to fly-able World War II configuration. *121* A TBM Avenger carrier-based torpedo bomber is one of the foundation's Navy aircraft. *131* The B-24J was originally painted as All American, shown here in 1992. *141* The cockpit of Witchcraft is manned by Jim Rolison (l), a Collings Foundation B-24 volunteer pilot.

11 *Nine O Nine passing the Golden Gate. This B-17 was built too late for the war and served as a test subject in nuclear blast experiments. After a 13-year "cooling down" period, a massive rebuild, and service as a firefighting water bomber, it was acquired by Collings in 1986 and restored.* **12** *Ralph Nash, a B-24 veteran, stands in front of Witchcraft. Names of donors who funded restoration or operation of the bomber are written on its nose.* **13** *A Cessna UC-78 Bobcat, used for liaison, training, and other missions, in Navy colors.* **14** *Betty Jane has two fully operational sets of controls, replicating the five or so Mustangs field-modified as VIP transports and observation.* **15** *The earliest type aircraft in the collection is a pre-World War I-vintage Bleriot Type XI.*





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111 After flying as All American, the foundation's B-24 wore this paint scheme, shown in 2003. The Dragon and His Tail honored Liberator pilots in the Pacific theater. The aircraft had one of the most extensive examples of "nose art" in the war and was reported to be of great interest to Japanese pilots. The actual Dragon was the last B-24 scrapped, despite an energetic campaign to save her. 121 Tondelayo flies over the mothball fleet at Suisun Bay in northern California. 131 Witchcraft is silhouetted by the sunset after a day in Stockton.



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11 Nine O Nine over San Francisco. Though it wears mostly olive drab, most late-war G model Flying Forts dispensed with camouflage and flew in bare metal. *12* Witchcraft powers up for another flight. Despite its authentic look, all of the Collings aircraft weaponry consist of nonfunctional replicas. The aircraft also have some modern navigational aids, as required by the FAA. *13* The TP-51 helps the foundation raise money by offering pilots a flight experience hard to come by nowadays: time logged in an authentic World War II Mustang. *14* A real B-17, B-24, and B-25 flying in formation is a sight once thought lost forever, but thanks to the Collings Foundation, will continue to awe and inspire future generations. ■