



A P-51 Mustang comes in for a landing near a P-38 Lightning on the ramp at the Chino Air Show in California.

Warbirders and the Re-enactors

By Frederick A. Johnsen



Generations mingle at warbird air shows around the country. One weekend every May, at the annual Chino Air Show in California—put on by the Planes of Fame Museum—the tarmac is filled with parents pushing tots in strollers, Baby Boomers eyeing the warplanes made famous by their parents' generation, and an honored and inexorably dwindling number of World War II veterans telling their stories.

World War II is now 70 years in the past, so its memory and legacy must become the charge of those who weren't even born when it unfolded. Chino has a big role to play in that passing of the torch.

In the 1960s, the nascent warbird movement was populated by enthusiastic—but not very deep-pocketed—owners of surplus warplanes. Southern California was ripe for the picking back then, when 20-year-old stashes of bargain-basement aircraft parts were one legacy of the region's booming aviation factories. Chino at the time was a quiet airfield where the occasional P-51 or P-40 could be groomed for flight by a weekend warbirder.

A TEMPTING SIZZLE

The cachet of Chino as a center for the restoration and operation of World War II aircraft was enhanced in the late 1960s when restaurateur David C. Tallichet Jr. located his warbird collection there. By 1973, pioneer air museum developer Edward T. Maloney settled his hitherto migratory collection at Chino. Restoration shops began to spring up there.

That there were restoration shops at all heralded the next shift in the warbird movement. No longer was it up to owner-operators to fix and fly their warplanes. The sizzle of being a P-51 pilot attracted younger wealth, as people bought their way into the club by having warbirds restored to

Photo by Frederick A. Johnsen

At the Chino Air Show, World War II enthusiasts help cultivate the next generation of aviation advocates.



Photos by Frederick A. Johnson

A replica of a Japanese Aichi D3A Val dive bomber that appeared in the movie "Tora! Tora! Tora!" arrives at the Chino Air Show, passing a pair of P-47 Thunderbolts.

perfection. There was competition to have the best one.

Where once a warplane would be expected to fly in civilian paint, next came the application of vintage military colors. Photos from the 1970s show a fairly rudimentary level of acceptability for such markings, but the rebuilding shops honed their skills and the results showed.

At Aero Trader on Chino Airport, owners Carl Scholl and Tony Ritzman know how to execute accurate metalwork capped with precise paint and markings. For these restorers, it's not merely a job but a passion for preservation. The

elegance of their results comes from more than being workers on the clock; Scholl, Ritzman, and their employees are infused with enthusiasm and pride of workmanship that bespeaks of a desire to keep the World War II message breathing and vibrant.

Scholl can be blunt in his clipped, fast-paced way of speaking, ascribing significance to the warbird movement as an important way to keep the wartime ethos alive.

"The schools aren't teaching it," he observed. What better way to keep the memory of veterans alive than by displaying their authentic warplanes

in flight, restored right down to all the hardware civilian owners once discarded before the aircraft were considered valuable historical icons.

Across the Chino apron, Maloney's Planes of Fame Museum delivers on his prescient postwar notion that these aircraft needed to be preserved. Maloney recalls watching warplanes being scrapped at Chino after the war and aircraft technical manuals mounded high for burning. At the invitation of the scrappers, Maloney carted home as many of the now-precious manuals as he could. He had to lug them to his car "about a mile away," he said. "I just wish I'd had money to buy airplanes, but I was just in high school."

From that wishful beginning came the notion that examples of the aircraft themselves needed to be saved from the furnace, and Maloney was on a mission that keeps him going to this day.

But how will all this be remembered? How will the legacy of the World War II generation and their equipment be cared for and publicly shared when the veterans and the first generation preservationists are all gone? Scholl says his company recruits new blood, rejuvenating the



gene pool of aircraft mechanics who know how—and why—to rebuild World War II aircraft.

Planes of Fame—while honoring founder Maloney at every turn—has evolved to a museum with a business model and a staffing system intended to keep it fail-safe into the future. “We don’t like to borrow money to buy anything,” Maloney explained. That conservative approach may delay some projects and programs, but it ultimately makes it easy for him to sleep at night, knowing the museum’s assets are not endangered as collateral.

DUE DILIGENCE

The stream of visitors to Planes of Fame is growing, he said, and that fact augurs well for the continued ability of the museum to preserve and present World War II history. Maloney is squarely in the camp of those who believe in flying the vintage aircraft so that visitors can load their senses on the spectacle before them, and he believes this operational aspect to Planes of Fame is a crowd attractor to Chino.

Located east of the Los Angeles metropolitan area and served by freeways, Chino continues to offer a good venue for warbird displays within an easy drive from a major population.

Maloney acknowledges an inevitable danger when all of the witnesses to World

War II have died: “When you don’t have any veterans to interview, where are you going to get your information?”

While sound research and documentation can be found electronically, he is unequivocal in his description of some online World War II postings as “Internet hokum.” Maloney insists on due diligence in researching World War II history to keep it truthful and accurate.

Another movement that is keeping the World War II message alive is the re-enactor movement. For decades, American Civil War history has boomed to life with the firing of cannons and volleys from muzzle-loading muskets as lines of troops refight skirmishes on hallowed green fields in the south and east. Now, the World War II re-enactor movement is gaining traction.

At warbird air show displays like Chino, airpower advocates and aviation enthusiasts ranging from teenagers to adults in their 50s and 60s don period uniforms and civilian attire to bring the era to life with a passion ranging from thespian-chic to delightfully, almost obsessively, nerdy.

From clean-cut airmen in wool flight suits and leather A-2 jackets to cigar-chomping maintainers in herringbone coveralls and GI ball caps with flipped-up brims, the re-enactors are the animators of the story.



Sally Lockard (l), dressed as a World War II German nurse, and Gail Marinello, dressed as a Soviet doctor, in the re-enactment area at Chino. Re-enactors represent many countries and types of service.

Re-enactors at Chino brought everything from operable World War II radios and hand-crank generators to a replica Fieseler Storch German liaison aircraft. American, British, German and Russian troops set up camps next to each other and invited air show visitors to meander into their time machine.

Maloney recalls that many of the early re-enactors who wanted to get involved with Planes of Fame decades ago were enamored of German uniforms. He had to coach them to branch out and represent Allies as well. Wary of such quirkiness, Maloney nonetheless acknowledges re-enacting. “It has its place,” he said.

Nick Casanova wears a World War II US Army enlisted uniform with the nonchalance needed to make it look natural. At Chino, he is representing a

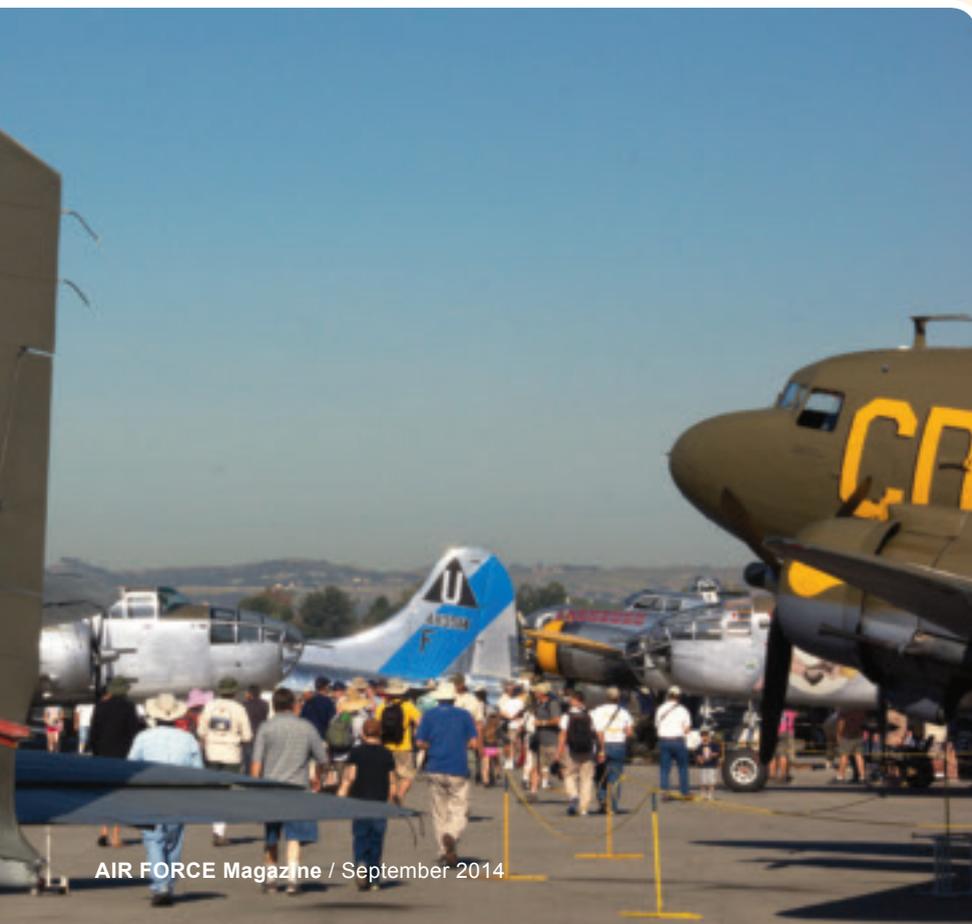


Photo by Frederick A. Johnson

Far left: A World War II-era Northrop N9M sub-scale manned flying wing is a big favorite of the crowds at the Chino Air Show. Left: C-47s, B-25s, and B-17s, plus rows of fighters, gathered at the 2014 air show. Chino and the adjacent Planes of Fame museum are drawing ever-larger crowds as aviation fans, history buffs, and re-enactors discover the significance of the era.

member of the 82nd Airborne Division. Now 18, he first discovered re-enacting at an earlier Chino Air Show. Not unlike some teenagers during the war years, Casanova donned a uniform before his re-enactor character was old enough to do so. He is quietly earnest about his motivation: “telling the people about what they [the World War II generation] did so it doesn’t die down. That’s the one thing I don’t want to have happen.” For him, life imitates art; his pending graduation from high school leads to an Army enlistment.

HEROIC ENOUGH

Casanova is absorbing the view of World War II from veterans at Chino like B-17 ball turret gunner Wilbur Richardson. A cherished part of the Chino show’s format is a session with veterans such as Richardson who recount their wartime experiences while seated under a shady awning as respectful visitors crowd close to them. Casanova is emphatic: “Wilbur’s great. He still remembers it like it was yesterday.” Not always an 82nd Airborne re-enactor, Casanova sometimes cruises the Chino encampment in a flier’s A-2 jacket, bolstered in his role by the World War II history he reads and what he observes from Richardson and others.

Richardson wears a suntan-colored enlisted 50-mission-crash hat as he

speaks at Chino. He frequently closes his eyes while describing wartime events as if conjuring the memories comes easier that way. He chats about what it was like in a cold B-17 at altitude, what food was available to the crews. Richardson recalls that airmen were free to fly. Their military service was mandatory, but flying was voluntary, and some declined it. Not him: “I was proud to do the missions I did.”

The re-enacting is not only for men. Sally Lockard drove from Oxnard, almost 100 miles from Chino, to bring her recreation of a World War II German Red Cross nurse to life.

“I’m a history nerd,” Lockard explained. On a field trip to Colonial Williamsburg when she was in the eighth grade, she was mesmerized by the re-enactors at that historic site. “I thought that was the coolest thing on the planet,” she said. But the going pay for those re-enactors who do it for a living pales in comparison to what Lockard makes as a quality control expert, so she settled into the pattern of a weekend re-enactor, migrating from 1850s California some years ago to the 20th century now. “I’ve always loved [the era of] World War II,” she said.

For many, re-enacting is an utterly apolitical adventure. Like a versatile member of a repertory theater troupe, Lockard has been known to cross battle lines to become a Soviet medical specialist when she is not in German garb. At Chino, she caught up with re-enactor Gail Marinello, replete in her reproduction Soviet women’s uniform and her mother’s vintage eyeglasses.

Marinello came to the re-enactor group after her home-schooled son chose Russian for his educational language requirements. Now both of them breathe life into a Stalingrad camp setup.

If Civil War re-enacting is still the cornerstone for this passion, Lockard said World War II is more accessible to people. “In some ways it’s getting very romanticized as time goes on.” Some would argue this is a flaw in such activities, if it tends to glorify the war. What deserves glorifying is the people of that time, however, not battle itself.

Photos by Frederick A. Johnsen



Wilbur Richardson, a B-17 ball turret gunner during World War II, is one of several veterans who tell their wartime stories at the Chino show, helping to keep history alive.

Only time will tell if the burgeoning World War II re-enactor movement will eventually lose touch with some of its realism as the years pass. For now, the Chino encampment is doing its best to bring the war years to life.

The fabric of American history constantly gets tugged and restitched, with heroic mythology sometimes supplanting reality until the next round of historians sets the record straight once more. But with World War II, the reality is more than heroic enough. Now, it is up to people who never faced a Focke-Wulf in combat to convey the emotions and grit of those who did. ■

Frederick A. Johnsen retired as director of the Air Force Flight Test Museum at Edwards AFB, Calif., to pursue museum, writing, and video projects. He is completing a major study of the interface between US Air Force and German aerospace technology from the 1930s into the postwar era. His most recent article for Air Force Magazine, “Museums and Money,” appeared in the June issue.



Nick Casanova, an 18-year-old re-enactor, bolts down a GI breakfast from a World War II mess kit at Chino in the early morning before the Chino Air Show.