



The Last Hurrah: Crash Williams Retires

BY JACK MORRISSEY

If you are old enough, you may remember a movie starring Spencer Tracy called *The Last Hurrah*. It was about going out in style. After 50 some years of flying, Robert “Crash”

Williams has gone out in a style befitting the man. A favorite quote of mine says, “Life is not a journey to the grave, with the intention of arriving safely in a pretty and well-preserved body, but rather,

to skid in broadside, thoroughly used up, totally worn out, and loudly proclaiming, “Wow . . . What a ride!” Crash is pretty well used up. Skids in broadside on occasions. Probably totally worn



PAUL BOWEN

“Our flight of 12 launched, and we did three passes. Then the other 11 broke off, and I did the last pass alone. I did a goodbye wave with my wings, turned, and headed for Rockford . . .”

—Crash Williams

Crash Williams banks the Avenger out over Lake Winnebago. Only 24 Avengers of the more than 9,800 built are still flying today.

out. Thoroughly used up. And, at some point he will throw his head back, square up his shoulders, and yell out at the top of his lungs, “Wow . . . What a ride!”

I first got to know Crash when

he, his son Dan, and four other pilot friends accompanied me to New Zealand, where I was to cover Wings Over Wanaka, the premier air show held every two years on the South Island, for *EAA Warbirds*

magazine. He was good company, fit right in, and kept us spellbound with a few stories about his years in the cockpit.

I believe that most of us have an inner clock that tells us it is

Blue Lady, Crash Williams' Avenger, was awarded Judges' Choice for TBMs at this year's EAA AirVenture.



PAUL KOSKELA



PAUL BOWEN PHOTOS



When asked if he was “ready for his close-up,” Crash raised his head, tipped his cap, and said shoot away. The result is Crash in his element: relaxed under the wing of Blue Lady.

time to start curtailing some of these flight activities. That extra g that someone pulls while you are half asleep in the back seat of his aircraft is a reminder to your aging body that “going that extra g” is not the fun it used to be.

I don't think we ever doubt our flying ability, and on some occasions think we are just a little bit better than the rest of the crowd, but that's just ego. The bottom line is that little inner clock that says: “Whoa! Let's not do that again!”

Crash has been around the block, and that nickname came with a penalty. One day, Crash was trying to clear a 10,000-foot ridge in the vicinity of Santa Fe, and trying it in a Tri-Pacer. There were four souls on board along with luggage, and the weight factor was just a tad too much. He didn't clear the ridge.

Unfortunately he and his wife both sustained broken hips; the other two passengers walked away. His squadron mates at the time, who were flying F-100s with him, decided Crash would be his call sign.

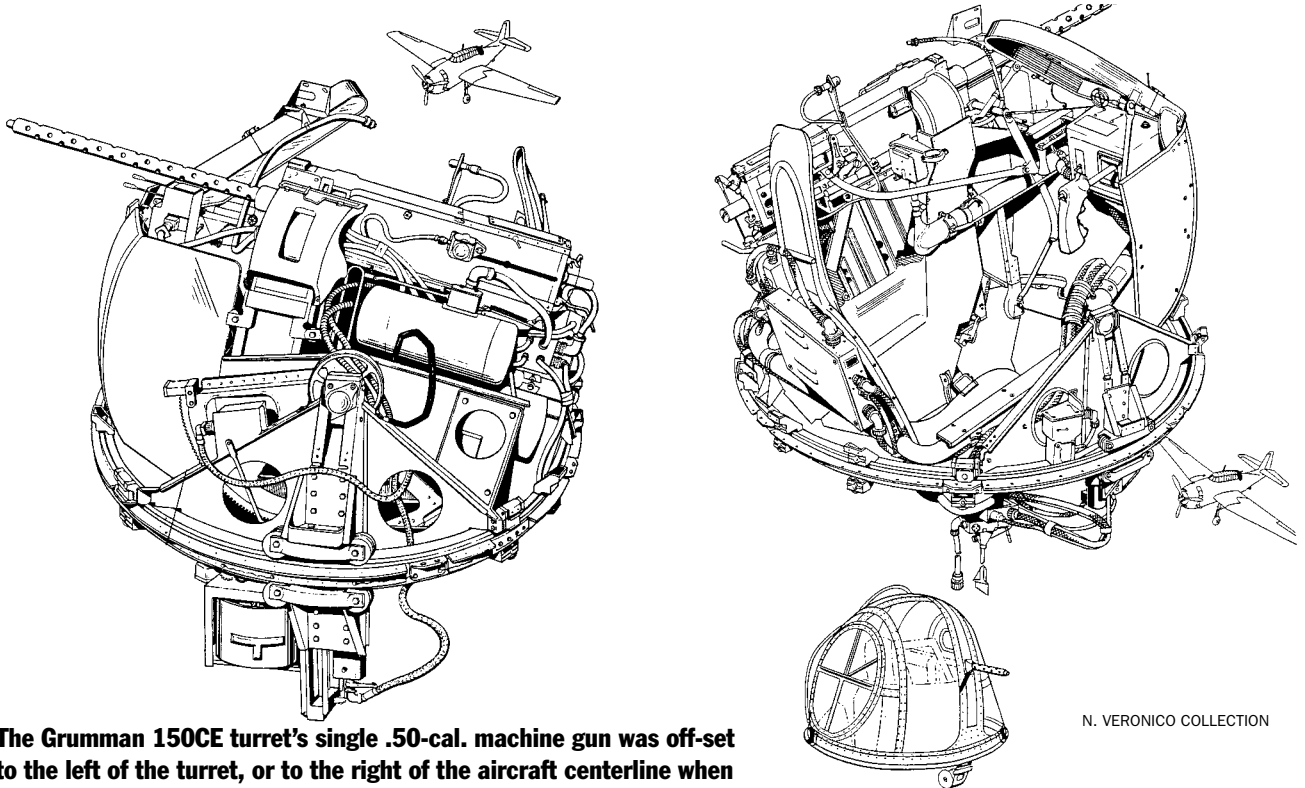
A Minnesota native, and a University of Minnesota graduate, Crash received his wings from the Air Force. He graduated from Air Force primary training (T-6s) at Malden, Missouri, and from there went on to advanced training (P-51s) at Craig Field, Selma, Alabama. Crash entered flight training under an Air National Guard quota system. Interestingly, Crash went through advanced flight training as the only U.S. citizen—the remainder of his advanced class were French citizens. After training, Crash returned to the Minnesota National Guard, which was flying P-51s at that time.



In the course of his broadcast career of some 38 years, Crash managed radio and TV stations around the country. While maintaining his broadcast career, he also flew with the Minnesota, Iowa, Oklahoma, and New Mexico National Guard, amassing more than 13,000 hours of pilot-in-command time.

Now for Crash's *Blue Lady*. The aircraft is a Grumman TBM Avenger, known to most ex-Navy personnel as a torpedo bomber. Manufactured in 1945, it came off the assembly line a little too late for World War II. It was sent to Naval Air Station North Island in San Diego, California, for duty and then was transferred first to Marine Corps Air Station El Toro in California and next to various U.S. Navy Reserve squadrons. The TBM became surplus in 1954, and

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The Grumman 150CE turret's single .50-cal. machine gun was off-set to the left of the turret, or to the right of the aircraft centerline when facing aft. The turret used the Mk. IX "mail box" reflector gunsight.



PAUL BOWEN

Paul D. Youman, the TBM's crew chief, always kept Crash in the air. Now that Crash has retired, Youman is looking for a new ride.



DENNIS CHAPMAN

Detail view of the Grumman-designed 150CE electrically driven, single .50-caliber machine gun turret used to defend the Avenger from stern attacks.

was purchased by the Canadian Province of New Brunswick, where it did duty as a fire bomber and sprayer. It then went into private hands in Detroit, Michigan, until Crash Williams purchased it. Crash based the *Blue Lady* in Galvin Flying Service's main hangar at Boeing

Field, Seattle, Washington. There the aircraft was a part of the Cascade Warbird Squadron's inventory and participated in a heavy air show schedule each summer.

From a total of 9,800 Avenger torpedo bombers built by both Grumman and General Motors,

today only 24 are flying, with another 33 on static display in various museums. This is the same type of aircraft that former President George H.W. Bush flew in World War II.

Crash's bride, Sonya, has weathered the trials and tribulations

of marriage and finally reached the big milestone, the 50th anniversary. Together, they've reared four children and seven grandchildren, and when gathered they can shatter the peace and quiet of their home on Mercer Island, Washington.

Crash was recently honored with a major birthday bash when he reached the young age of 75. His hangar at Boeing Field will never be as full as it was during the party. The birthday well-wishers numbered into the hundreds, and from all reports it was a grand party.

It seems that Cal Ripken Jr., world famous baseball player, was the impetus for Crash's retirement. Ripken had indicated to the Baltimore Orioles a year before his planned retirement that it was time to go. So he gave them a year's notice. Crash thought that was a classy way to start looking a little harder at the rocking chair. Crash sat in the Seattle bleachers for Cal's last game, and stood along with 40,000 others to render a standing ovation to Ripken upon his retirement. Crash said, "I thought of Frank Sinatra who kept on singing for five years with a voice past its prime. Joe Montana who kept going until he couldn't find a job, and John Elway who left after his second Super Bowl. I figured out there is a right way and a wrong way to pull the pin, and I thank Cal Ripken for showing me the way.

"My Super Bowl was this year at Oshkosh. This was followed by a week in Detroit at the Thunder Over Michigan air show. I was at the controls of one of 12 TBMs out of the 24 in the country (that fly). The topper came when 20,000 air show fans heard the announcer state that this was my last hurrah! I stood on the wing of my bird, ready to load into the cockpit for the last time, and heard the announcer tell this crowd what this meant to me. To

say I was overwhelmed would be an understatement," Crash said. "The PA system then played Frank Sinatra's recording of *My Way* (I Did It My Way). I lost it right there, and the tears started flowing. If there ever was an emotional high, this was one of them for me. Our flight of 12 launched, and we did three passes. Then the other 11 broke off, and I did the last pass alone. I did a goodbye wave with my wings, turned, and headed for Rockford, Illinois, where the *Blue Lady* will stay with Courtesy Aircraft until it is sold. I can only say, "Thanks Cal, for showing me the way."

So . . . the next air show you attend, just look around and I'm sure you will see Crash along the flightline somewhere. Yes, I know his heart will be back in his favorite cockpit, but he's earned the right to sit back and watch, and the sound of those round engines overhead will tug strongly on his heart.