



Grasshopper Gathering

L-Birds invade northern Illinois

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The ragtag army convoy, consisting of GPW jeeps equipped with .50-caliber machine guns, M3 halftracks bristling with an assortment of weapons, Harley WLA motorcycles, and WC-54 ambulance trucks moved slowly toward their objective. Clouds of chocolate-colored dust swirled around the column as the drivers and troops crept forward, watching, worrying, and waiting for any signs of a German ambush. The unit commander knew it was risky moving in the daylight, es-

pecially so close to the ever-changing front lines, but his troops were hungry and needed to be resupplied. There was no other choice but to press on. Suddenly the scene changed as two long, dark shadows flanked either side of the column, seemingly coming out of nowhere as all eyes in the convoy turned skyward.

The dark outline of an olive-drab Piper L-4 with black-and-white invasion stripes under its wings and fuselage appeared first as it flew low over

the column, zigzagging back and forth in defensive sweeps. An Aeronca L-3 followed close behind the L-4 and joined the aerial parade as it pattered above, low and slow, making wide protective circles over the cheering troops. A feeling of relief and salvation overtook the men and women in the vehicles as their “guardian angels” flew overhead. A hearty round of salutes and waves were given to both pilots as the convoy arrived safely at its intended objective: a local fast-food



A Piper L-4 Cub re-creates what it was like to land in dry stream beds and cow pastures during WWII.

drive-in. As the men and women on the ground dined on cheeseburgers, french fries, and hot fudge sundaes, the two L-Birds dipped their wings and flew back to Poplar Grove Airport to participate in the inaugural Army Wings and Wheels fly-in/drive-in.

The event, which took place June 8-10 (Friday to Sunday), was co-sponsored by EAA Chapter 1414 and the Vintage Wings and Wheels Museum, which is located on the beautiful grounds of the Poplar Grove Airport. Lying in the shadow of Chicago's O'Hare International Airport, Poplar Grove Airport is a thriving grassroots community with private residences sharing the airfield with an assort-



One of the many restored military vehicles that were present at the gathering.

ment of aviation treasures. On the field, you can find just about anything that flies, including ultralights, home-builts, antiques, spam cans, and, of course, warbirds. With its two intersecting grass runways and enthusiastic support from the local chapter and museum volunteers, the airport was the clear choice to host the gathering for event organizer Tom Murray, who owns a 1942 Aeronca L-3C.

"My primary motivation was to honor the veterans who were part of the liaison flying corps during World War II," said Tom. "I felt that the contributions made by these brave men in the war effort were greatly overlooked, misunderstood, and generally dismissed by most. This attitude seems to go back as far as 1941, with the beginning of the program itself. That is, if you didn't fly a fighter or a bomber you were somehow less worthy. I feel that most people are somewhat ignorant about the role of these low-and-slow, unarmed, fabric-covered airplanes. Most people are in shock when I tell them that these airplanes operated off of dirt roads and cow pastures with the front lines only a short distance away. Many of these pilots were more than capable of raining down more destructive firepower on Axis troops than a

group of B-17s or B-24s could. All it took was a radio call to the artillery positions on the ground."

Murray says he saw the opportunity to set up a unique experience for visitors after witnessing another group of war re-enactors during one of his flights.

"After flying over the World War II re-enactment at Rockford's Midway Village last fall, it dawned on me that I had the perfect means to help set the L-Bird story straight. The grounds of the Vintage Wings and Wheels Museum at Poplar Grove Airport provides the perfect place to bring together these aircraft and the ground-based equipment and personnel that they were so closely tied to. My goal was to closely integrate the aircraft with re-enactors and military vehicles just as they were during the war."

Tom called on the services of three groups to pull off the magnificent event: EAA, the Military Vehicle Preservation Association (MVPA), and the WWII Historic Re-enactment Society Inc. (HRS). He knew from the beginning he didn't just want a "fly-in," where the aircraft are behind ropes, away from the public. Tom wanted the planes and pilots accessible, and he also wanted period military vehicles



Stinson L-5 belonging to Phil and Sue Hein of Burlington, Wisconsin.



Piper L-4 Cub stands proud in the afternoon sun.



This L-4, belonging to Wayne Smith flew all the way from Georgetown, Texas.

and re-enactors to mingle with one another, setting the scene as if it were the summer of 1944 all over again. Tom's main intent was to achieve a living history for the public with a proper historical perspective so they could experience firsthand what it was like on a forward base. Using the FAA database, Tom sent out more than 135 invitations to as many World War II-era liaison aircraft owners as he could find in states contiguous to Illinois. He also worked in concert with the local MVPA and HRS representatives to gather as many men and women "soldiers" and military vehicle owners as possible. When all was said and done, Tom was somewhat overwhelmed with the turnout.

"We had a total of 11 L-Birds that flew in for the day," said Tom. "We even had one fellow, Wayne Smith from Georgetown, Texas, who flew his L-4J in for the event. [Wayne ended up keeping his airplane at Poplar Grove for the next six weeks and eventually flew it to AirVenture 2007.] Other owners flew in from Ohio, Illinois, and Wisconsin in a variety of L-Birds that included two Taylorcraft L-2s, three Aeronca L-3s, four Piper L-4s, and a pair of Stinson L-5s. As far as military vehicles, we had an assortment of jeeps, motorcycles, halftracks, and ambulances along with American and German re-enactors that fought two courageous battles during the day."

As the military re-enactors slugged it out with one another—the American forces bravely wresting control of a bridge away from a very determined German counterattack—the L-Birds took to the skies for an aerial contest of airmanship. Four separate categories were established in the contest, which included message drops, spot landing, short-field takeoff, and short-field landing. After a hard-fought battle and a bellyful of pancakes provided by EAA Chapter 1414, Sam Taber of East Troy, Wisconsin, was crowned Top Liaison Pilot. Sam and his lovely wife, Shari, also received top honors as they were given the Owners' Choice Award for their beautiful white-tailed Guinea Short Lines Stinson L-5. Although Sam's L-5 never saw combat,



Re-creators pose in front of a restored M3 halftrack.



Army field hospital is flanked by a WC-54 ambulance.



A Stinson L-5 delivers a wounded soldier to a waiting ambulance.



it does have its own unique history. It was used in the movie *Catch-22*.

As the crowds immersed themselves in living history by looking at and touching the assembled aircraft, riding in military vehicles, and having their photos taken with “American soldiers” and “German POWs,” they were also given a special treat by a very special guest. Dr. Welton Taylor was the guest of honor at the event and spoke to a packed room about his experiences as the only Tuskegee Airman who became a liaison pilot during World War II. Taylor was stationed in the South Pacific Theater and flew L-4s and L-5s as an army pilot with the 93rd Infantry Division. Taylor saw combat in the Solomon Islands, New Guinea, and the Philippines. The last days of the war found him dropping 81 mm mortar rounds on Japanese positions. When Dr. Taylor was finished with his talk, he sprang from the room like a teenage boy and was treated to flights in the back of an L-5 and L-4. After landing and climbing out of the L-5, Taylor remarked, “These light aircraft flew as beautifully as they did back in 1944 with one exception. I can now fly them straight and level because no one was shooting at me!”

As the afternoon sun drifted high above a crystal-clear blue sky, the public was treated to an afternoon’s worth of living history as a selection of L-Birds took off for a liaison flight demonstration. First out of the gate was an L-5 carrying a wounded American soldier. The short-field characteristics of the big Stinson came into play as the wheels of the L-5 dug into the grass runway and stopped near the back of a waiting WC-54 ambulance. Even before the “wounded soldier” was placed into the back of the ambulance, the L-5 was roaring down the runway, returning to the front to retrieve more wounded. The next demonstration was from an L-4 Cub that trailed a long rope attached to a three-pronged barbed hook. As the L-4 dove below the

Flying in low and slow, a L-4 uses a grappling hook to pick up a message pouch.

tree line, the pilot set his sights on the men ahead of him who were holding two 12-foot poles spread 15 feet apart. A thin black wire was strung between the poles with a small message pouch attached to it. With bomber-pilot-like precision, the L-4 pilot held the Cub rock steady as the observer in the back lowered the hook and snatched the message skyward into the back of the L-4. The last demonstration involved another L-4 showing how the wartime pilots traveled on one wheel through winding roads and dry stream beds as they prepared to land.

As the golden rays of a setting sun signaled the last few remaining hours of a very successful Army Wings and Wheels event, the participants were shown the new documentary *L-Bird the Little Plane That Did*. The producer is hopeful that the film will find an outlet such as the History Channel or the Discovery Channel so it can help educate the public about the exploits of these unsung heroes. After the movie, the rest of the evening was dedicated to a dinner, awards ceremony, and social gathering.

"I think we were very successful at achieving our aim," said Tom. "Army Wings and Wheels had a sense of fly-in, road rally, living history, and county fair all rolled into one. Everyone involved, from participant to spectator, seemed to have a great time. If only one person walked off of this field fully realizing and appreciating what these liaison pilots had to endure, then I am more than happy to call this event a success."

I can say without a doubt, from where I sat under the wing of my L-3 that day, watching and listening to the curious onlookers, that most all walked away—some with a tear in their eye—with a better understanding of the sacrifices made by these brave men in doing their part to protect our freedoms. So next time you see a dirty-looking L-Bird on the field, walk up to it, touch it if the owner lets you, and whisper a big thank-you to all who have served.

For more information on the Army Wings and Wheels event and plans for the 2008 event, please visit www.ArmeyWingsAndWheels.com.



Phil and Sue Hein fly top cover for the author in his Aeronca L-3 as they wing their way to Poplar Grove.



Dr. Welton Taylor relaxes against Sam and Shari Taber's Guinea Short Lines Stinson after his flight in the L-5.



Long legs and a big tail—Stinson L-5 patrols the sky's over Illinois.