

A Working Man's



JIM KOEPNICK

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Warbird



For those of us living in the real world, owning, flying, and maintaining a warbird can be a real challenge. This is especially true if you aren't fortunate enough to have a crew of dedicated volunteers that can give countless hours of their time and expertise. In my case, my warbird would be no more than a "hangar queen" collecting dust in a dark metal shed. Without the assistance of these volunteers, I would not have a complete and original cockpit, ball turret, radio, radar, rockets, or replica torpedo stuffed inside my Avenger. All of them at some point have bloodied their knuckles more than they care to remember. They wiped away the blood, sweat, and tears, and continued on.

Although their scars became well-earned souvenirs, they will never lose their love affair for these historic treasures that keep them coming back for more. Words cannot express my heartfelt thanks and gratitude to all of them for all they do to "Keep 'em Flying!"
—Brad Deckert



Jane—the beauty and brains behind the TBM— gives Brad some flying tips.

EAA WOA Member Profile

Brad Deckert and his TBM Avenger

BY JIM BUSHA



JIM KOEPNICK

TBM-3E Avenger

The TBF/TBM had the distinction of being the heaviest single-engine airplane of World War II and earned the nickname “Turkey” from its Navy crews because of its massive size and the way it looked when it came in to land. Designed and built by the Grumman Aircraft Engineering Company, the Avenger went on to become one of the most successful torpedo bombers of the war. When Grumman found itself overloaded with requests to build the F6F Hellcat, General Motors Corporation stepped in and began building both the TBM Avenger and FM-2 Wildcats under its flagship Eastern Aircraft Division.

With its unique wing-folding mechanism of full cantilever construction, an outer panel folding arrangement of the stand-on-edge fold straight-back type allowed for more TBM aircraft to be stored below the carrier’s deck.

The TBM carried a crew of three: pilot, rear turret gunner, and a radio-man/bombardier. A Wright Cyclone R-2600 14-cylinder radial engine drove a three-bladed Hamilton-Standard propeller, giving the TBM a max speed of 267 mph—pretty respectful for a “turkey” of this size.

Primarily designed as a carrier-launched torpedo bomber, the TBM carried a single 13-foot-by-5-inch torpedo in its belly. The torpedo of choice was the 2,200-pound Mark 13 model, which carried a 600-pound warhead of high-explosive Torpex in its nose.

Built by the Eastern Aircraft Division of General Motors in early 1945, this TBM-3 was given bureau number 85632 and U.S. Navy construction number 2451. Received by the U.S. Navy on March 17, 1945, it later joined Marine Torpedo Bombing Squadron 234 (VMTB-234) and eventually served aboard the CVE-111 carrier USS Vella Gulf during the Okinawa campaign.

“In our research of this TBM we learned that it had dropped bombs on Okinawa and was also involved in the sinking of a Japanese destroyer. There are a number of patches that are in very odd places,” says Brad. “We

Warbird Custodian

Brad Deckert of Eureka, Illinois, never grew up thinking he would own a warbird. As a matter of fact, Brad didn’t give much thought to seriously learning how to fly until he was on the sunny side of 30 years old.

“About 12 years ago I was driving around the Peoria airport and decided to play hooky from the electrical contract company I own. I stopped at the FBO and inquired about flying lessons. Eight months later I was a brand new private pilot.”

The flying bug bit Brad hard as he acquired rating after rating, including a helicopter endorsement. Brad thought he was all set with his flying life, especially since his wife, Jane, referred to the family Bonanza as a “necessary travel expense.” Yep, Brad was all smiles with his airplane and helicopter and really never noticed the warbird scene. But Brad’s outlook on flying warbirds took a hairpin turn after the loss of a close friend.

“I had been good friends with Gerry Beck and had been at his hangar in Wahpeton, North Dakota, many times. I never really paid much attention to all the really cool airplanes that he had parked inside the Tri-State Aviation hangars. It wasn’t until after his tragic death at Oshkosh in 2007 that I noticed the Eastern-built TBM Avenger

shoved in the corner of the hangar. At the time it was owned by the Fargo Air Museum, and they thought that I should be the next custodian of it. I really wasn’t mentally or financially prepared for a warbird in my life, especially one this huge.

“The TBM was very intimidating to me; after all I was more or less just a general aviation guy. The Avenger looked as big as a freight train and sounded like one when that massive radial engine came to life. I was also concerned about the maintenance issues and believed there would be nowhere left in the world to find parts for this old dinosaur. This particular Avenger not only served its country during World War II but also switched roles and became a fire bomber up in Canada well into the 1980s. The good news was that the outside restoration was pretty much complete. The inside was another story and was simply a gutted-out shell of its former self.

“The museum made an offer I didn’t think I could pass up. As it turns out the TBM is really a ‘budget’ warbird. They are way undervalued compared to a Mustang or Corsair and are similar in price to a T-6; way cooler in both looks and sound. But one of the big reasons I wrote the check for the Avenger was because I wanted to keep it flying as a tribute to my good friend Gerry.”



PHIL HIGH

Torpedo strapped in and ready to go.



Torpedo under construction.

COURTESY BRAD DECKERT



PHIL HIGH

TBM front office.



COURTESY BRAD DECKERT



PHIL HIGH



COURTESY BRAD DECKERT

TBM back office-ball turret.



JIM KOERNICK

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COURTESY BRAD DECKERT



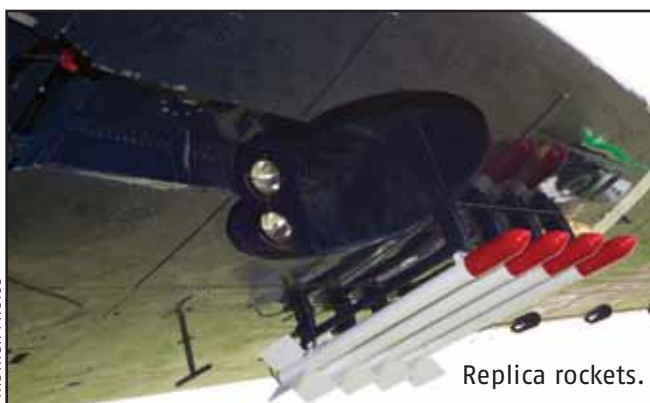
Mk13 Torpedo replica.

PHIL HIGH



Radar pod.

PHIL HIGH PHOTOS



Replica rockets.

assumed they were from flak damage until we found two very distinct bullet holes that came into the cockpit area. Further examination showed that one bullet entered right in front of the pilot and the other right behind the pilot seat. These were some very brave 'kids' that flew on a daily basis."

After the war Brad's TBM served with a variety of squadrons, including VMTB-622, VMTB-623, and Service Squadron 44 and then into several Naval Air Reserve Training Units until it was stricken off from the Navy records in May of 1956. In 1957 it was sold to Plains Aero Service of Amerio, Texas, for \$1,768.

Converted to a crop duster/fire bomber, this TBM slugged it out with bugs and smoke for most of its working life until it was sold to the Fargo Air Museum in 2005. After a fresh coat of paint and a well-deserved engine overhaul/rebuild, this TBM, N81865, was purchased by TBM Avenger Inc. of Eureka, Illinois.

Taming the Beast

Because Brad had no prior tailwheel experience, he hired veteran air show performer and warbird pilot extraordinaire Warren Pietsch to make the ferry flight from North Dakota to Illinois.

"I had been involved in the restoration of two other TBMs between 1993 and 2000," Pietsch says. "I flew them quite a bit, along with the one Gerry Beck owned and the one Brad purchased from the museum. I really enjoyed the TBM, especially the interaction with all the veterans at the various air shows. To me the TBM flew like a truck, but it was a good honest truck!"

With Brad's new pride and joy safely hangared in his home state, it was time for him to "tame the beast" and learn how to fly it. Because there are no dual-controlled TBMs available to train on, Brad had to enlist the help from some more air show performers.

"Lucky for me I got hooked up with the AeroShell T-6 guys, and they took

me under their wing. I started out learning everything I could about flying the T-6 with brothers Alan and Mark Henley and even traveled to their home airport when they couldn't make it up here. Flying safe and learning how to fly a high-performance tailwheel was the number one priority as I built up my time in the T-6 for my first TBM solo."

With his TBM type rating now in his pocket, signed off by longtime EAA member Vern Jobst, Brad waited for the perfect day to take the TBM up. After countless hours of "cockpit" flying and blindfold checkouts, the weather in Illinois was picture perfect.

"The day was so perfect I really had no excuses not to fly. The first thing I noticed was how much bigger the TBM was to the T-6—forward visibility was limited. After takeoff I flew around for a while getting used to the feel of the stick and rudders and finally got up the courage to come in and land. For a moment my thoughts wandered



JIM KOEPNICK

off to back in the 1940s when someone half my age flew this very same TBM straight and level at an enemy ship while geysers of water erupted all around him as he made his rock-steady torpedo run in on the ship. These were some very brave men.

“There is no way you can leave the cockpit of this airplane without getting a huge sensory overload of history. The engine is big and loud, and the wings seem to extend outward to infinity. As far as landing goes, it is easier to land than a T-6, mostly because of its wide landing gear track. But you can never let yourself forget how heavy and powerful this beast really is. The engine torque will push you off the side of the runway in a heartbeat if your right foot isn’t doing its job on the rudder. My very first landing was a ‘greaser,’ and from that point on flying the TBM has been nothing but pure fun! Maintaining it, on the other hand, is a whole other story.”

Restoration: A Never-Ending Process

Brad’s first year of warbird ownership was an eye-opening one for him as he realized how much money and time it takes to keep these treasures flying. Brad made a conscious effort to keep maintenance issues as a high priority, but he soon found that the local mechanics were not used to working on something as complex as a TBM.

“The first year of ownership I spent every minute and every extra dime I had

keeping it in the air. It became very apparent very quickly that the only difference between me scratching my head over a problem and a mechanic standing next to me scratching his head was the money—he got paid and I didn’t.

“I remember having a conversation with my wife, Jane, telling her I would have to sell the Avenger. She stood her ground, bless her heart, and told

TBM-3 Specs	
Wingspan	52 feet 2 inches
Length	40 feet
Height	16 feet 5 inches
Empty weight	10,843 pounds
Max weight	18,250 pounds
Engine	Wright R-2600-20 rated at 1,900 hp
Max speed	267 mph
Ceiling	23,400 feet
Range	1,130 miles
Crew	3

Weapons	
Two forward firing .50-caliber machine guns	
One .50-caliber machine gun in a rear Grumman 150SE power turret	
One .30-caliber machine gun in the ventral gun position	
Four 3.5-inch or 5-inch rockets per wing (8 total)	
Up to 2,000 pounds of bombs	
One 2,000-pound Mark 13 torpedo	

me I needed to try it for at least one more year. I am very glad I listened to my wife, because slowly but surely the word got out that there was a TBM in town, and like bugs attracted to light the volunteers began to show up and help. Without these people there would be no way I could keep the TBM flying.”

The cadre of volunteers started out small—but large enough to get Brad and the TBM through the first flying season. As the ranks began to swell, more and more interior restoration projects began on the TBM. A group of volunteers in Iowa tackled the rear turret restoration, while another group moved the batteries back to their original location. Brad also began to develop a parts network and began to swap and barter what he could.

“The radar unit is a prime example of what the warbird community is all about—helping each other. The RT5APF-4 radar unit was kind of important to me because we located a photograph of this airplane during the war flying with a radar unit attached to the wing. The Commemorative Air Force unit in St. Louis had one but didn’t want to put it on their airplane. What they needed was a set of jacks to get their airplane flying again. I had an extra set, so we made a swap. We were having a little bit of trouble getting the wings to lock with the extra weight of the radar unit, so we ended up removing most of the innards from the radar pod.

“I also became good friends with Mike Rawson from St. Louis, who also

owns a TBM under restoration. Mike not only loaned me thousands of dollars worth of parts and equipment, but he also came up and did the annual for me. He had the world's shortest commute to work for the next eight weeks—we parked a motor home in the hangar for Mike to live in."



One of the biggest tasks was restoring the cockpit back to original. Brad had all the panels rebuilt and was also able to locate original instrumentation. Brad also replaced miles and miles of hydraulic lines and wiring that had been butchered up over the years. Another big-ticket item was the gear-up locks that had been removed years ago. Brad claimed that when he made a 3g pass and pull-up at air shows, the gear, held up with hydraulic pressure, would sag down. Again another volunteer came forward and fixed the problem with the installation of new up-locks. As the TBM began its transformation from war weary to combat ready, it was apparent to everyone involved that this Tiger had no teeth. It needed some weapons.

Torpedo and Rockets: Toys for Big Boys

Richard Kosi of Otto, Illinois, is not your typical "airport bum." He's been flying and building airplanes for more than 51 years, everything from a scratchbuilt 1918 Jenny to hauling freight in DC-8s.

In that time Richard has logged more than 15,500 hours of flight time, and like his counterparts who have similar non-curable addictions, even in retirement Richard can't seem to stay away from airplanes or airports.

Richard met Brad the first winter that the TBM came to roost in Eureka, Illinois, and soon found himself deep into the interior restoration.

"I started out making brackets for the batteries, then the radios, and then worked on the control panel itself. I just kept working a variety of items, and one day Brad said, 'Boy, it sure would be nice if we had a torpedo.'

When I told him I could build him one, everyone around began to laugh. But I think the finished product speaks for itself, so I guess I got the last laugh!"

Starting out with three sheets of plywood and three sheets of aluminum, Richard began his task of re-creating a Mark 13 torpedo. To make the torpedo somewhat functional, Brad requested that the interior needed to have some storage capabilities for essentials like oil and adult beverages. Without hesitation Richard was able to craft a small storage locker inside of the torpedo.

"An original torpedo weighed in at over 2,000 pounds, I scaled the weight back quite a bit, and the replica tips the scales at 225 pounds. I was able to locate drawings of an Mk 13 torpedo and enlisted the help of other volunteers, including Al Botenheimer, who helped with the woodworking and cutting. Jack Dally and Jim O'Brien helped with the metal side of things as I used an English wheel to create the nose bowl. I thought I could get it all built in two weeks, but being a perfectionist, it took me three months.

"Although it's not an original torpedo, the people that see it at air shows sure think it looks like the real thing. I am proud to be a volunteer on Brad's crew and really think the torpedo not only adds something to the originality of the TBM, but it also pays respect to all those Navy sailors who had to service them while in combat."

With the torpedo securely slung inside of the TBM's belly, Brad was all set for another air show season. He now had some hardware to show off with and thought he was all set with how his TBM should look. Brad thought wrong.

"I really love how the torpedo came out and like to show it off by opening

the bomb bay doors during passes. I jokingly said one day that some rockets would look nice to go with the torpedo, and before I could finish my sentence I had some of the volunteers raise their hand and say they would do it. Tom Hartman led the charge in building the replica rockets. I can't say this enough, but without the help from all of the volunteers, my TBM would still look like an old fire bomber with a shiny paint job."

What It Means to Be a Warbird Custodian

Although Brad's TBM is sometimes referred to as the "family station wagon," he and Jane enjoy traveling around the Midwest, sharing it with as many people as they can. They are both especially fond of the veterans who sacrificed their futures for our freedoms.

"Any chance we get we like to give those guys a ride. I try to get them into the cockpit or inside the belly to look around. As their eyes begin to mist over and their minds begin to remember long-ago places and lost friends, the stories begin to unfold.

"One old ball-turret guy took me off guard when he said, 'It's amazing how much those wings can flex, isn't it?' I tried to correct him and told him the wings don't flex at all, but I was the one who needed correcting. 'Oh, yeah! Try doing 340 mph in a dive, and watch how that aluminum likes to buckle and bend back!' he said. I told him the TBM was limited to 320 mph in a dive because the wings would tear off, and for a second time I was corrected. 'When someone's shooting at you, you don't follow the speed limits!'

"Every one of these guys has a great story; some of them still can't open up about their experiences. I feel very honored to be the custodian of this aircraft and actively involved in sharing a part of history with the sons, daughters, and grandchildren of the greatest generation. Chances are, I wouldn't be flying this airplane had they not made the sacrifices that they did. It's the least I can do to say thank you." ✈