



# FLYING A PIECE OF HISTORY

## B-25 checkout

BY BRIAN DEMAY

**T**he quiet, cool fall morning awakens with a cough and the roar of the Wright R-2600 radial engines. The smell of smoke and oil fills the air and burns my eyes as it enters the open cockpit window. The big 1,700-hp engines make quite a roar as they simultaneously come to life. The aircraft shakes and shudders while we let the oil in the engines warm up. This will be my second ride taking the controls of the World War II medium bomber B-25 *Tondelayo*.

The Collings Foundation Wings of Freedom Tour has stopped once again in Westminster, Maryland, a short drive from home. I follow the tour on the Internet, waiting for the chance to spend a few hours with the B-17 *Nine-O-Nine*, B-24 *Witchcraft*, and B-25 *Tondelayo*. The best way to follow the tour and find out where the big bombers will be is by checking the Collings Foundation website at [www.CollingsFoundation.org](http://www.CollingsFoundation.org).

The tour starts out in January along the Gulf Coast, moving west, then up the coast, and across the nation in the summer months before turning south in the fall and heading back to Florida for winter maintenance in November and December.

The name *Tondelayo* was given to her by her crew. An intriguing lady graces the side of this aircraft. *Tondelayo* was a character from the movie *White Cargo*, and the actress who played her was Hedy Lamarr. The plane also sports the name of her crew and 10 Japanese flags, representing aircraft shot down. The aircraft is painted like the original, which fought all odds to fly a long-range mission to sink a ship and then flew home badly damaged while shooting down 10 Japanese planes.

When I arrive, the first thing we do is pull the props through. We do this to break the oil seal in the radial engines. Without turning the props, the engine could be damaged when we

start it. After preflight, which includes walking around the aircraft and verifying its condition and airworthiness, Rob Collings, my certificated flight instructor (CFI) and the foundation's chief pilot, and I discuss the engines, oil, hydraulic, fuel systems, and landing-gear systems.

We climb up the crew ladder into the cockpit. Finding my seat on the right side of the cockpit, I get strapped in. I familiarize myself with the cockpit layout. I find the instruments—throttles, mixture, prop controls, flap, and landing-gear handles. This is much different than what I am used to. The cockpit layout is 60 years old and is not designed to today's specifications. Secondly, the pilot seats are about 15 feet off the ground, not 4 feet or so as they are in the Seminole I am used to.

I look down on the taxiway. After the engines are warmed, we taxi out to the Runway 34 run-up area and perform our engine run-up. The en-



gines are in good shape and sound good. We're ready to fly!

I taxi onto the runway and push the throttles forward. The plane runs down the runway shaking and is ready to fly. As I pass the 2,000-foot marker, I pull the yoke back and lift off the runway, bringing up the gear and flying to 2,000 feet in no time. Due to the high  $V_{MC}$  for the B-25, we allow the airspeed to build to 135 before lifting off.

When I was kid, I read everything I could on World War II. I started with the overview and then concentrated on specific battles and units. Then I started reading about the air war and the heroes that I would come to admire, such as Doolittle, Boyington, Yeager, and Morgan. I learned about their flights and fights and became awed by their adventures.

My father had taken me to the local airport on Saturday mornings when I was a kid to watch the airplanes take off and land, leaving me to wonder where they were going. The more I watched the aircraft and read the stories of my heroes, the more I wanted to take

to the sky and fly the same aircraft they flew.

Several years later at an air show, the first warbirds I saw fly were a B-25 with P-51s in formation. Again I was awed by the sights and sounds of the great planes of World War II. As I got older, I started taking flying lessons and dreamed that maybe one day I would be able to fly one. As I quickly learned, the cost to fly these magnificent aircraft was far out of my reach. I was left to dream some more.

The company I work for had a sales contest and one of the prizes was a flight in *Aluminum Overcast*, EAA's B-17. My dream began to spark, and I worked very hard to make that dream come true. Eventually, several co-workers and I were chosen for the flight.

When I go to the airport for my ride in the B-25, I think I will just be taking a ride, but there are not enough passengers to make the flight. Then the foundation offers a dual flight in the right seat. I'm ecstatic. Never did I imagine I would be able to fly such an aircraft. I have ridden in three B-17s and a B-24 as a passenger, but now I will get to handle the controls of real World War II bomber.

As we take off, I can barely contain myself through the excitement of holding the yoke and pulling back as

we get the Mitchell off the ground. It was just like my first flight in a Cessna when I was getting my private certificate. I'm awed as the ground slips slowly away, and I watch the houses and roads get smaller and smaller. But now it is all business as I fly the aircraft. I enjoy each and every minute; I know this flight will be over all too soon.

We turn to the downwind and then to Hampstead and then south to the Westminster VOR. We fly over downtown Westminster, looking at the Farm Museum, the hospital where both my kids were born, Carroll Community College, and a friend's farm.

The air is smooth and the plane is trimmed just right. This big B-25 is easier to handle than the small four-place Seminole I usually fly. The flight controls are responsive and take little effort. The B-25 weighs about 25,000 pounds in its current configuration, which is much heavier and faster than anything I have ever flown.

A normal crew configuration during World War II was pilot, copilot, bombardier/navigator/gunner, turret gunner/engineer, radio operator/waist gunner, and tail gunner. The war weight for the B-25 is 33,000 pounds, with several thousand pounds of bombs and fuel.

As I fly *Tondelayo*, I am reminded of the book *The First Heroes* by Craig Nelson about the Doolittle Raid over Tokyo in the spring of 1942. The raid itself caused very little physical damage but was a tremendous blow to the Japanese homeland and a big boost to American morale. Never in Japanese history had an enemy attacked the homeland. This psychological blow was more important than the actual damage that was inflicted. The Japanese were now forced to pull troops and aircraft back for homeland defense, possibly contributing to an earlier end to the war.

I think about these young men flying a suicide mission to Japan, loaded down and flying for hours over open ocean with no hope of rescue, flying just above the wave tops to surprise the enemy. After dropping the bombs on Japan, they were supposed



to fly for another several hours to airfields in mainland China, where the friendly Chinese would have welcomed them as heroes. Unfortunately, they never made those airfields. All the airplanes

crashed except for one that diverted to Russia, where the crew was interned. Most of the aircrews survived their crashes and made it to China, a few died during forced landings or parachute jumps, and a few were taken prisoner. A few of the prisoners were executed by their Japanese captors.

I think of other aircrews flying in the Aleutians, the South Pacific, and Africa, cruising in the high, thin air,

wearing bulky flight suits and breathing from oxygen masks. I think of them flying many hours only to be attacked by fighters and anti-aircraft guns. Some of them would be injured and would fly another several hours back to base in badly damaged aircraft to be rescued and sent to the hospital to recover. Many more would become POWs or never return from their missions.

Flying this piece of history provides an amazing moment of reflection for me. Feeling the plane fly, smelling the exhaust and oil.

It is time to go home. I turn over the cement plant in Union Bridge heading back to Westminster, enter the pattern on a left 45, and fly the downwind to an overhead break over the runway. Rob, drops the gear and sets the flaps. I fly the airplane through the pattern and hold off the landing as we approach the end of the runway and touch down smoothly, holding the nose wheel off until we slow down. We stop, and I taxi off the runway and back to our parking spot.

The Seminole I usually fly runs about \$180—a drop in the bucket compared to the \$2,000 per hour it costs to fly the B-25. The big radial engines consume a great deal of fuel—around 60 gallons an hour for each engine.

We shut down the engines and my amazing flight is over. I have great memories and pictures, which the crew took while I was flying. I am very thankful to the Collings Foundation for allowing me to fly their piece of history.



*Brian DeMay is a private pilot with around 300 hours of flight time in 14 different aircraft. He holds single-engine land and sea ratings as well as a multi-engine land rating. When he was young he spent many hours at Maryland's historic College Park Airport, the world's oldest continuously operating airport, watching the airplanes take off and land. He took his first flight at an airport open house when he was 7 years old. He is an aviation underwriter for Avemco Insurance Co.*

