

## SO YOU THINK YOU'RE A TOUGH GUY . . .

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(Memorial Day 2008)

As I sat down, holding the little 10 inch wooden propeller, signed by Sylvia Miller “Sunny” Burrill, a World War II Woman Airforce Service Pilot (WASP), class of 44W-7, I’ve tried to figure out the why I am still numb from head-to-toe.



At first I thought it was because I had the opportunity to be part of a truly historic event that took place at the end of winter in the small town of Keystone Heights, surrounded by pristine lakes hidden between the forests of Oak and Pine trees, located midway between Jacksonville and Gainesville, in the “Heart of Florida.” But that wasn’t it.

Was it because this amazing 85-year old woman test pilot, “Sunny”, who flew our new shiny American bombers from factories during WWII to deliver them to our forward airbases, then return those damaged planes from enemy fire, had the courage to tow practice targets in the air so our new fighter pilots and ground anti-aircraft gunners could practice their shooting skills (what guts!), actually presented me with that tiny propeller, shook my hand and thanked me. Me! What did I ever do to earn the thanks from such a brave women? No, that wasn’t it, as much of an honor as it was.

Was it because I might have been delirious from spending four straight 12 hour days on a black asphalt tarmac parking dozens of arriving military and private aircraft in the hot Florida Sun? Or was it the vapors from the 100 Octane aviation fuel spewing out from the powerful cyclone piston engines of all the aircraft surrounding me?

Maybe it was the dizzying site of watching the incredible maneuvers of four World Champion aerobatic performers above my head; the reunion of several of the WASP’s; the first time ever in Florida, symposium of the American Fighter Aces Association featuring four WWII Ace Pilots sharing their heroic combat experiences; the countless WWII veterans and their teary-eyed war stories? Or was it the dozens of historical displays, the late Saturday night dancing at a 1940's USO-style Big-Band hanger dance, with a 22-piece brass swing-band while men and women vets in their US Army Air Force (AAF) uniforms were “swinging” under the wings of a B-17 “Flying Fortress” Bomber across from the biggest American flag I have ever stood next to?

No, that still wasn’t it. But I knew it would come to me ....

It must have been for the fact that I had the absolute privilege of pilot training and flying co-pilot in a WWII B-25J “Mitchell” bomber with one of America’s best pilots, Capt. Bob Oehl, a former US Air Force jet fighter pilot, who worked on the U-2 project, was a commercial airline captain, and is a flight instructor for the B-25. This was only possible because of the extraordinary efforts of the Collings Foundation (Stow, MA) and their amazing pilots and crew that maintain the B-25, along with the B-17 “Flying Fortress”, and the only flying B-24 “Liberator” in the world - all that were at this very special event.

Amazing as that all these experiences were, ... that was still not it! I could not figure it out. “Why am I still so numb? ...” I have seen all these planes before, studied all the history of them, been to dozens of airshows, flown in countless aircraft. What was about this that was making me so numb?

And the day after everything was over, and all the planes left, after all our debriefings, as I was washing my flight-suit for the 4<sup>th</sup> time in so many days, ... it finally hit me. It literally brought me to my knees.

It was the “Eyes” !

Yes, the eyes! ... The eyes of the old, the eyes of the young. The eyes of the thousands of people that passed right before me standing watch over these amazing WWII “Warbirds”. Men, women, children, babies, black, white, ... everyone. They came from Everytown, USA to see and touch these flying pieces of American history, their swollen eyes fixated upon these amazing Warbirds. Full of excitement to see them for the very first time and imagine what it would be like to fly inside them, or the emotion of seeing them for the last time, reliving their earlier years in the 1940's and the very real experiences of rolling left and right to avoid enemy anti-aircraft (AA) fire. Watching their plane and fellow air crewmen bleed hydraulic oil and blood from the AA rounds that cut through the paper thin aluminum and human skin like a hot knife through butter.



The people lined up in single-file to board these planes for four straight days, like the “bullets” in the belted links of the 50 caliber machine guns sticking out from all these aircraft. As I was standing watch around these planes, I was hit by every fourth or fifth person in line with a question or story - just like the “tracer” rounds put in-between the regular bullets in the ammunition belts to trace their line-of-fire. “What is this?... why are they painted with those markings?... how fast?... how many bombs?... etc...”

Of the countless stories and experiences I encountered over this truly historical weekend, I would like to share just three special ones that represent only a sampling of the many that occurred because of the gathering of these magnificent “Warbirds” in this small Florida town USA:

On the second of four days of the “Wings of Freedom” Airshow held at the Keystone Heights airport (42J), hosted by the “Wings of Dreams” Museum and Warbird Restoration Center (located at this same airport), I had the joy of escorting a very excited group of Tiger Scouts (younger Boy Scouts) from Pack 82 of a local elementary school from Gainesville, FL. One of the scouts in the group whose grandfather, an immigrant from Denmark that served as a US AAF WWII B-25J pilot and flew 57 combat missions over Italy between 1943-1945, Capt. Svend P. Olsen of the 12<sup>th</sup> Army Air Force (AAF) / 57<sup>th</sup> Bomb Wing (BW) / 321<sup>st</sup> Bomb Group (BG) / 447<sup>th</sup> Bomber Squadron (BS), and was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, Air Medal and Purple Heart among others, had his family there so I wanted to be sure the experience was a good one.



As we had finished a long tour inside and out of the of the B-17 “Flying Fortress”, we walked over to the B-25 “Mitchell” Bomber, the plane his grandfather flew. The group spent some time looking over this immaculately maintained aircraft. After a while, I noticed this very tall black man standing by the tail of the aircraft. As I walked over to him, he started shooting off questions to me. He looked “too young” to be a WWII vet, so I tried to answer all his questions (... how much fuel load, fuel consumption, what grade oil?, etc...), after a few minutes I realized he wasn’t asking me - he was quizzing me! It turned out he wasn’t really that “young” after all - he just looked it.



He was one of the original “Tuskegee Airmen” - America’s first African-American Army Air Force (AAF) servicemen during WWII. Airmen SGT. Stephen “Steve” Lawrence, a AAF Squadron Aircraft Mechanic who served with the Tuskegee Airmen in 1943-1945, assigned to the 332<sup>nd</sup> and 99<sup>th</sup> Fighter Groups (“The Tuskegee Airmen”). He was originally trained at Sheppard Air Force Base (AFB), located in Wichita Falls, Texas, with the 320<sup>th</sup> Technical Class as an aircraft and engine mechanic (MOS-747), and and now lives in Gainesville, FL. What an honor!

After that eye-awakening experience, I starting thinking I better “tighten-up” and started reviewing my aircraft manuals to get the facts straight. About that same time, this obvious elderly gentlemen in a wheel chair rolled over to the tail of the aircraft. I first noticed him as I was finishing my tour. After 15 or so minutes, he was still there - hadn’t moved an inch. Just sitting under the tail looking straight up at the aircraft.



I walked over, well knowing (this time) he was a WWII vet, and asked him “ ... Sir, can I help or answer any questions...” (like I would know anything that he already didn’t). He lifted his very tired hand and kept shaking it while pointing at the bomber. “This isn’t right ... “ he kept repeating. I asked again, can I answer any questions? “... This plane, he said, ... it’s not configured right, ... it is a J-series ... where is the nose cannon..., the top turret...” I asked him how do you know this? He answered ...

“ ... I flew 70 combat air missions over the Italian Alps in the B-25J ". He is Capt. Dwain Gull, 12<sup>th</sup> AAF / 57<sup>th</sup> BW / 340<sup>th</sup> BG / 487<sup>th</sup> BS, and he just kept telling me war stories!

My last story, and one of the most moving experiences I had during this historical event, came about at the end of the third full day. On that Sunday, earlier in the afternoon, this one “young” lady (I’d been a terrible guesser of age all day) was walking around the B-25. I didn’t have to be a fighter pilot to notice this one (if you know what I mean). I walked over to her and asked if I could answer any questions. She just stood there staring at the airplane for a few minutes then said: “... it would be great if I could only fly in one of these ...”. I answered, you can - just go over to the Collings Foundation guys up front and sign up, it costs around \$400 for a ride (just a fraction of the \$4,000+ per hour it costs to keep these planes flying).

That was the last I saw of her. It was back to work getting ready to launch the B-17 and B-25 for their end-of-day/last flights.

As I was moving the crowds away in preparation of the bomber take-offs, I was notified that “all the planes are full .... you are flight engineer on the 25 ... get in...”

Not one to miss a chance to fly, I jumped in the back and had the bottom hatch closed right behind me after a 30 second pre-flight. To my surprise, the lady I had met earlier that day was in the back, along with two other men. It was very obvious that she was nervous. The other two passengers onboard also picked-up on this. I started talking about the B-25 to try to take her mind off things, just when the two 1,700 hp 14-cylinder Wright R-2600 Cyclone Engines started coughing and came alive. The sound of these powerful engines as they were “running-up” (increasing RPM’s) became very loud and the back of the plane started shaking and bouncing as we began rolling down the taxiway. This didn’t help the nervousness of our one female passenger. I shouted to her over the roar of the engines, ...



“ ... this flight will be as smooth as a commercial airliner ...” By the expression on her face, I don’t think she believed me.

Right before take-off, our “special” female passenger, an elementary school teacher from Lake City, Florida, Laura Pitman Moody, said “ ... I’ve only been on a plane once before ... but I had to do this ... my father was a WWII B-25 pilot and he recently passed away. When I heard about this air show , I had to come.... I’m here for him ....” (His name was Capt. James H. Pitman, 12<sup>th</sup> AAF / 57<sup>th</sup> BW / 340<sup>th</sup> BG).

I signaled our passengers to put on the hearing protection (headsets) just as Capt. Bob was throttling up the engines. Right after rotation (take-off), the aircraft immediately began to smooth out, and a few minutes later we were approaching our cruise altitude of 1,000 ft. with gear up, and our air speed was 170 knots. Heading due West at around 4:30 pm, the Sun shining through the rear gunner’s windows as it was beginning to set on what had turned out to be a beautifully clear day with no clouds (after a massive storm front that just passed through 24 hours prior, threatening the entire airshow). I looked over to see how our one lady passenger was doing when I noticed she had a handkerchief and was wiping the tears from her eyes.

At that point, I think our entire male crew was about to lose it. As flight crew, I was there to make the passengers feel safe and secure. Being this big “tough”, confident guy that I always come across as, I was suddenly finding myself reaching into my flight suit pocket to pull out a hydraulic oil-soaked rag and pretend to wipe the sweat from my brow, when it was actually the tears that were rolling down my cheeks. After taking a few moments to gather my composure, I signaled everyone to remove their seat-belts and then stood up and tapped the young lady on the shoulder.

As she lifted the corner of her hearing protection to listen to my “instructions” over the roar of the powerful Wright engines ... I shouted in my usual loud, commanding voice ...”

“Can you believe, ... you’re flying in a B-25! ... with the best pilot and your father is co-pilot! ”

She unbuckled her seat-belt without hesitation and stood up with no fear, and began walking all over the plane - taking in all the sights and sounds. She had just experienced what her father did over 50 years ago as a young US AAF crewman and pilot, and she was smiling from ear-to-ear.

So if you think you are a real “tough guy” - you’re wrong! All those “skinny” 20 year old men and women who volunteered and stepped up to the challenge to defend America’s honor and her allies in WWII in order to preserve all the freedoms that we enjoy today - they are the true “tough guys” and real American heroes. I Thank you all!

### **Acknowledgments:**

I wish to expressly thank Capt. Bob Oehl and Susan King, the airshow hosts and directors of the “Wings of Dreams” Inc. Museum and Warbird Restoration Center ([www.wingsofdreams.org](http://www.wingsofdreams.org)), Keystone Heights, FL; the Collings Foundation “Wings of Freedom Tour” Organization ([www.collingsfoundation.org](http://www.collingsfoundation.org)), Stow, MA, for keeping all these Warbirds flying, and all of their staff of volunteers for making this event possible.

I also want to thank my German immigrant mother, Mrs. Doris Manukian, who was a WWII refugee and came to America after the war, became a US citizen and English teacher, and would send all my letters from military boarding school back to me with red-ink circling my spelling and grammar mistakes.

And finally, my highest regards and utmost thanks to Col. J.M. Moriarty (USMC), one of the most decorated Marine Corps Vietnam pilots who commanded VMO-2 and was awarded the Legion of Merit with Combat "V", the Distinguished Flying Cross, 16 Air Combat Medals, the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry with Silver Star among many others. Col. Moriarty was my mentor and "second father" during my years at military boarding school and fostered my passion for aviation and also taught me "creative writing" in English class (I'm sorry for all those sleepless nights); but most importantly, he taught me everything I know about duty and honor. His legend lives on in his son John who was in my graduating class at the academy and is now serving America in Iraq. Semper fi Dude!

### **About the Author:**



Ara Manukian, a senior member of the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics (AIAA), who is currently the CEO of Analytical Research Systems (ARS, inc. Gainesville, Florida), previously worked as a systems engineer for the USDA ARS Center for Medical and Veterinary Entomology (CMAVE) and as a research assistant in the NASA/USRA program funded by the Florida TRADA Challenger Astronaut Memorial Foundation. Ara was the Executive Officer from his class at Admiral Farragut Academy, America's first Naval military preparatory school and whose alumni included America's first astronaut and two of 12 Moon walkers: R.ADM. Alan B. Shepard (Freedom 7, Apollo 14) and B.GEN Charles M. Duke (Apollo 16).