
Rendezvous with Destiny

The Dawn Patrol takes on the U.S. Air Force in Dayton.

BY DICK STARKS



“Oh, yes. One more thing,” the FAA briefer said. “In the interest of safety, let’s not have any more of these maximum rate-of-climb takeoffs.” I kept on looking straight ahead, but I could feel a hundred sets of eyes lock onto me. Now I have to give him credit. The FAA guy didn’t look directly at me. He didn’t point at me either. But he really didn’t need to. Everyone knew who he was talking about. I alone occupied the throne of shame. Usually, the rest of The Dawn Patrol was up there with me,

but not this time. Yep, my record at the biannual Dawn Patrol Rendezvous at the National Museum of the U.S. Air Force was intact. Once again, I’d gotten my tail in a crack at this prestigious gathering of WW-I aircraft. It’s a gift.

Every time The Dawn Patrol of Kansas City had come here we’d done something to raise the ire of the safety officer, general in charge or the FAA. The first time we’d attended the Rendezvous, Mark Pierce and I had made a beautiful smoke pass down the line in a nice tight

This banner greeted everyone driving into the museum. Look closely. It’s Tom Glaeser in his Nieuport 11. We had to forcibly restrain him from cutting it down in the dark of night and taking it home to put it on our hangar wall.

formation. When we landed, the safety officer, “Safety Steve,” was there with his glistening fangs bared ready to tear a strip off of our quivering pink rear ends. That was just one of the many things we’d done wrong.

Then there was Mark Pierce’s infa-



Eric Williams with his modified Airdrome Aeroplanes Fokker E-III. Power is supplied by a Geo engine with cog-belt reduction. Note the foggy conditions. The windsock is limp, and you can't see the museum's hangars in the background.

mous flour-bombing of the bombing judge, Herman Leffew, at the next gathering. I'm really jealous of Mark for that. He's the only pilot that's had part of the flight pattern around the museum named in his honor. When pilots are told to "Turn final at "Point Magoo," they know where to turn. Add flying too close to the crowd and other minor infractions, and you've pretty much covered almost everything we've done wrong at these events. We are kinda' proud of the gray hairs we've given these people over the years. But this time I was all alone, hoisted onto the pedestal of infamy.

I have to admit that I'm really proud of the Valley Engineering 2010cc engine on my Nieuport. I've got the meanest direct-drive, VW-powered Nieuport journeying into The Valley of Death. With this engine and my custom-carved Culver propeller, I can climb my Nieuport at a 30° angle at 50 mph till I run out of gas, and I like doing it. Unfortunately, I'd chosen the wrong venue at which to show off the capabilities of this kick-butt engine/prop combo. Fortunately, this chewing was nothing compared to what's been said to me at other airshows, gatherings and fly-ins. The briefing finally ended. I wasn't grounded or even written up. We were cleared to fly. *Yee-haw!* Let the games begin!

Joe Cook flies by the crowd in his Graham Lee Nieuport 12. Power is a VW with PSRU.



Sharon Starks lifts off her Morane Saulnier "L" Parasol from the 2100x100-foot grass strip behind the museum.



Eric Williams waits for the word to start up and head out in his Fokker E-III replica. Check out the highly detailed machine gun with belt feed.



Tom Kozura gets the 1909 50-hp Gnome engine ready for a demonstration run.



Just after the prop was swung, the engine starts with a cloud of smoke. Mike Day was propping it.



Herman Leffew, Mark Pierce's target in the flour bomb drop competition in 2003, stands with Sharon Starks and Brenda Pierce in front of Sharon's DH-2 replica.



Wait a Minute

But now we need to back up a bit. The biennial Rendezvous is a unique happening. I mean, how many pilots get invited to fly their planes off the grounds of the National Museum of the U.S. Air Force? It's an honor and a privilege. Only if you have a WW-I aircraft are you invited to this event. They even have a beautiful 2100x100-foot runway marked out on the grass of the lawn behind the museum. It's a dream fly-in



Craig Garrett, of Grand Rapids, Michigan, flies over the field in his father's SE5a replica.



The restoration crew goes into high gear to help Sharon get her DH-2 off the trailer. The Wild Snorting Piglet has to be the first to go. In the background the fuselage of the only surviving B-17D, the Swoose.



The Swoose fuselage under restoration. This aircraft is the oldest surviving B-17 Flying Fortress and the only D model in existence. Originally named *Ole Betsy*, this B-17D participated in several bombing missions in the desperate weeks after Pearl Harbor. Later renamed, it also served as a transport for the commander of Allied Air Forces in the Southwest Pacific, Lt. Gen. George Brett.

for WW-I-replica pilots and builders.

When it started in 1996, only three planes showed up. This year, the seventh time it's been held, there were 38 registrants with 19 of them flying. There were also re-enactors, RC WW-I aircraft, antique cars and WW-I memorabilia. Most of the planes were trailered in. Some tried to fly in, but the weather gods were against them. Four pilots that I know of just put down where they were, rented a car and drove to the event, but a few "Iron Men" flew in, and over a long distance, too.

The undisputed stars of the show were three full-scale Fokkers (a D-VII, DR-1 and D-VIII) from Colorado's Vintage Aero Flying Museum, which were flown 1100 miles to attend the event. The rest of the gathering was mostly composed of a good-sized gaggle of Graham Lee Nieuports. Other planes and types were there, but Robert Baslee's Airdrome Aeroplanes creations are coming on strong with more and more aircraft being completed and starting to show up at fly-ins and airshows. Another star of the show was a real operating Gnome Omega rotary engine brought to the event by Tom Kozura. That was really something to see and hear.

There was one big difference at this event. Stephen Skinner, of Sopwith Motorsports, was the announcer. Stephen really knows his WW-I aircraft, engines and history. While listening to him, we all learned stuff about our aircraft. He was able to walk by each one and give a detailed account of its history, flight characteristics and how well



Bill Brucken flies by in his Nieuport 27 replica.



With the Wild Snorting Piglet removed, the tricky part of the operation is getting the DH down the ramps onto the floor.

it flew during the war. By the time he was halfway down the flight line, he had a large crowd walking along with him listening to his analysis. Steve also wrote the book, *The Stand*. This is a highly researched account of WW-I flying ace Frank Luke's last flight. It is well worth the read.

My wife, Sharon, and I were going to try to trailer two planes to the event: her Airdrome Aeroplanes Morane-Saulnier



Sharon directs Duane Jones, one of the artists at the restoration facility, where to clean the mud from the 600-mile trip off the tail of her DH-2. Duane's everyday job at the facility is restoring a Minuteman missile.



Geno Toms of the restoration facility shows us some of the hundreds of signatures from the *Memphis Belle's* war bonds tour over the United States. The signatures in pencil went through the paint and stayed on the metal fuselage. It was a living history lesson.



With friends like this, who needs enemies? The result of the raid by Rick Bennett and Rob Waring on the author's poor, defenseless Nieuport 11.

"L" Parasol and her new beautiful Air-drome Aeroplanes DH-2 replica. I was not looking forward to the 600-mile drive by myself. I get bored and sleepy on long drives. But fate stepped in and saved us big time. Mark Pierce was going to take his Nieuport until his chainsaw

starter chose just two days before we left to disassemble itself while Mark was trying to start his engine. So he kindly offered to trailer my Nieuport to Dayton. Then Robert Baslee called and offered to take the Morane off our hands and trailer it for us. That left us towing the DH-2. Perfect.

Pre-Show Prep

The Rendezvous normally runs Friday through Sunday the last weekend of September. But if you're bringing a flyable aircraft to the event, you need to be there by Thursday so the FAA can ramp-check the plane. The pilots' paperwork and logs are inspected, too. You are also required, prior to arrival, to fill out several government documents allowing you to fly off an Air Force facility.

Sweetie and I decided to make the 11-hour drive from Kansas City to Dayton on Wednesday. We arrived in time to be greeted by Teresa Montgomery, the special events HMIC (Head Momma in Charge). She was there with Dave Thomas, the HMIC (Head Man in Charge) of this event. These two smoothed the way for us to get the DH-2 stored safely in the restoration facility's hangars on the grounds of the museum.

The next day dawned cloudy, wet and just plain miserable, but the plane was in a dry hangar ready to be put together. When we arrived at the restoration facility the usual crowd was there to greet us. These were the artists and skilled craftsmen who restore aircraft for the museum. Artist is the correct term. When they finish with a plane, it's usually in better condition than when it left the factory. Anyway, we had about 12 guys on hand to help us put the DH-2 together, and it went quickly. There were several distractions, though. Forty feet away, the fuselage of the "Swoose," the last B-17D, was being



The nose of the *Memphis Belle* will be left as it was until they get ready for the final paint and then it will be duplicated exactly. It is one of the most famous aircraft in history. In May 1943 it became the first U.S. Army Air Forces heavy bomber to complete 25 missions over Europe and return to the United States.



How about this for a splendiferous place to park your Nieuport trailer out of the rain?



Tom Glaeser sits in his cockpit waiting for the signal to "Light 'em up!"

Rendezvous with Destiny *continued*

rebuilt. In the adjacent hangar, the famous B-17F, *Memphis Belle*, was being restored. Aviation history dripped from the ceilings and washed around your ankles. What splendiferous surroundings for working on an airplane!

When everyone who is there helping you put your plane together speaks “airplane,” a lot gets done in a short amount of time. Just as we finished the DH-2, we got a call from Tom Glaeser. He was lost on the museum grounds trying to find the “back way” to the restoration facility without having to pass through base security. I jumped on the Wild Snorting Piglet (our motor scooter that we take on the trailer to events to save our knees) and headed cross-country to rescue him. We were about halfway back with me leading Tom when my cell phone started ringing. It was Sharon and Ted “Thumbs” Beagle (our favorite restoration guy). Thumbs told me to very carefully try to get back to the hangar without attracting the attention of the base security force. It turns out that there are strict regulations about riding



Sharon stands with the team's favorite restoration facility helper bee, Ted “Thumbs” Beagle. In a past Rendezvous, Ted was the only guy strong enough to spin the props on the rotary-engine-powered planes that showed up. A Fokker DR-1 bit back one day and fractured his thumb. That didn't stop him. He got it wrapped up and went back to spinning props. It takes a lot more muscle than you'd think to get one of those engines turning fast enough to get the engine to fire.



The stars of the show on the flight line ready to start up. From left to right: A Fokker D-VII piloted by Dan Murray, a DR-1 flown by Mark Holliday and a D-VIII flown by Andrew King. These full-scale Fokkers were flown more than 1100 miles from Colorado's Vintage Aero Flying Museum in Fort Lupton, Colorado. The web site is www.lafayettefoundation.org.



Sharon Starks and Tom Glaeser are staged, ready to light 'em up and fly for the crowd.



Marvin Story's Graham Lee Siemens Schukert D-1 gets towed over to the flight line from the restoration facility. The D-1 was the German copy of the Nieuport 11 made from a captured Nieuport 11. The 11 was so dominant over the Fokker E-III that the German high command ordered a copy made to fill the gap until the Germans could come up with a better plane.

a scooter or motorcycle on the base, and I was breaking every one of them. Sticking to the edges of the base, I crept back to the hangars without getting arrested. The Piglet was parked, not to run again that whole weekend.

Tom's Nieuport was assembled in record time. Just as we finished, Robert Baslee and Dave Carl showed up with

Sharon's Morane. Robert designed the Morane to be assembled with no tools, using only Clevis pins and safety clips. We had it ready to fly in less than 30 minutes. Mark and Brenda showed up next with my Nieuport and we got it together quickly, too.

It was while all this feverish activity was going on that it was announced that



A long look down the flight line of planes ready to fly.

Fred Murrin, the moving force behind the Great War Aeroplanes Association had ordered pizzas, so we all went to the lounge and started chowing down. There was a low buzz of conversation going on while everyone was eating. I stuck my hand up in the air and asked, "How many pilots here have made an off-field landing?" Just about every hand went up. Keeping my hand up, I asked, "How many of you have been upside down in a farm field?" Almost as many hands went up again. About that time, Tom Glaeser wandered in the door, sniffing the air and looking for food. "Raise your hand, Tom," I said. That opened a wide range of personal stories about off-field adventures. The FAA guys showed up just as we were finishing the pizzas and started ramp-checking all the planes and inspecting the pilots' papers and logbooks. That all went well, too.

That night we had a meeting in the museum's auditorium with everyone who was going to participate, followed by a nice buffet inside the museum. Sitting around a table eating finger food under the wing of a B-17 is a unique experience.

Vandals Strike Again

When we arrived at the hangar Friday morning to take the planes over to the flight line, a grinning crowd was standing there looking at my Nieuport. The infamous Toilet Paper Bandits had struck again. At Oshkosh 2008, Butch Witlock and Rick Bennett had decorated Sharon's Morane with a roll or three of toilet paper. This time it was Rob Waring and Rick Bennett's work. They'd outdone themselves. I had my Nieuport towed over to the flight line



Rick Bennett's over-the-top Graham Lee Nieuport 23 flies by. He really raised the bar with the attention to detail he put into building this beautiful VW-powered aircraft.

with the paper still on it, blowing in the breeze, so the people in the crowd could see how much I'm respected and revered by my flying brethren and colleagues.

After the briefing by the FAA and "Air Boss" David Egner, we were cleared to fly. That's when a slip of paper from my personal bucket list got taken care of. When Sharon lifted off in her Morane and made her first circuit of the museum, she became the first woman to fly her WW-I plane around the National Museum of the U.S. Air Force. I was so proud. What a gal!

What ruined it for me was when her landing was a greaser, and mine was a "Don't look, Ethel!" If I had been on short final landing on an aircraft carrier, I'd have been given a wave-off from the LSO. Instead, I forged on to make a horrible arrival. Calling it a landing would have been an insult to landings. It was more of a controlled crash. I must have bounced 10 feet in the air before fluttering to the ground with a thump like a pigeon with a broken wing. The ground crew guys and gals were all laughing and pointing to me as I taxied back to the flight line. But as I always say to my critics, "Hey, nothing fell off the plane, so I'm happy."

Star Power

Saturday dawned with thick fog. When we had the briefing at zero-nine-thirty, we couldn't even see the museum's hangars an eighth of a mile away. We finally got cleared to fly with a thousand-foot ceiling at 1:30 p.m. Between the radio-control guys and us, we kept the sky full the rest of the day. When it cleared up even more, the three Iron Men from Colorado were able to fly in with their

incredible full-scale Fokkers. The *stars* had arrived. What an awesome trio of planes they were.

Sunday arrived with building strong winds that were 90° to the runway. Sweetie and I made one flight of about 10 minutes and then remembered that this is a hobby and landed. We got towed back to the restoration hangars, put the planes back on their trailers, said our good-byes and went to the hotel. Getting up and hitting the road at 2 a.m., we made it back to good old Liberty Landing International Airport in 11 hours. The 2009 Dawn Patrol Rendezvous was over. We're already looking forward to the next one. There are numerous videos of the event on YouTube. Check them out and see what fun we had.

The Circle of Honor, Last Man Standing, Combat Plank Combat is a tradition at the Gardner Gathering of Eagles. It's also a tradition at the Air Force Museum's Dawn Patrol Rendezvous. Even though the weather was challenging, we got it in Friday night on the front lawn of the museum. There's a YouTube video of the carnage. I'm building six more combat planks to be ready for next time. We're trying to get Teresa to include them in the schedule, too. They're a real crowd pleaser.

One last thing. The next Dawn Patrol Rendezvous will be the last weekend of September 2011. If you get right on the stick...just think! You could have a WW-I plane flying there, too. Wink wink, nudge, nudge. Say no more! ✚

For more information on the National Museum of the USAF, visit www.nationalmuseum.af.mil. Find a direct link at www.kitplanes.com.