

World War II vet takes ride over Cape in restored B-24

By JACK FICHTER
Cape May Star and Wave

ERMA - Before they are seen, they are heard. It's a sound from the past, the low roar of 1,200 horsepower, piston-driven aircraft engines coming from some distance away in the sky.

Beachgoers and residents near the county airport looked skyward from Sept. 4 to Sept. 7 as the Wings of Freedom Tour came to Naval Air Station Wildwood as part of its annual Airfest.

A B-17 Flying Fortress ar-

rived Sept. 4 followed a quarter hour later by a B-24 Liberator to applause of the crowd. Many inspected the war birds from the ground inside and out. The media and those who were willing to pay \$450 for a once-in-a-lifetime experience, took a half hour flight in either the B-17 or B-24.

Cape May resident Harvey Williams, a World War II veteran, took his first flight Sept. 4 in a vintage bomber, the B-24. He said he served in the Navy from 1944 to 1946 as a radio operator on a weather ship in the South Pacific.

In a pre-flight briefing, Gary Dunn, the B-24's flight engineer, told passengers they would wear safety belts during taxi, landing and takeoff.

"Once we get up in the air those of you in the back will hear a bell go off," he said. "One bell means you can get up, two bells means sit down."

Dunn said passengers would have 15 to 20 minutes to crawl around the aircraft. In order to get to the front of the B-24, passengers had to crawl along a catwalk and the floor of the aircraft. He warned of bomb doors in the floor that would

open up if any weight was put on them.

The only windows in the B-24 were two large waist gunner doors equipped with machine guns. Both were open to the elements during the flight. The B-24 was not designed for the comfort or safety of the crew. Some crewmen flew strapped to the floor.

The B-24 flew a loop from the county airport to North Wildwood and along the beaches of Wildwood, Cape May, Cape May Point, over the remains of the concrete ship S.S. Atlantus, the Cape May Lewes Ferry and

along the beaches of North Cape May. The noise level in the plane was akin to a rock concert from the B-24's four 1,200 horsepower Pratt and Whitney engines.

The aircraft are owned by the non-profit Collings Foundation. The B-24 is the world's only fully restored and flying aircraft of its type. The bomber flew under the Royal Air Force flag in the Pacific Theater in operations ranging from anti-shipping to bombing and resupplying resistance force operations, according to the foundation.

The B-24 was abandoned at the end of World War II in India but restored by the Indian Air Force in 1948 and us until 1968. After once again suffering abandonment, the B-24 was

purchased by British collector, disassembled and transported to England and put up for sale in "as is" condition. The B-24 was purchased by Dr. Robert Collins, brought by ship to America, where initial restoration was planned only to be a standing display.

Collins said he was convinced to restore the B-24 to flying condition because only 3,000 persons per year would see the plane on static display while 3 million could view the aircraft on a nationwide tour.

After the flight, Harvey compared the interior of the plane to a submarine. He said he would also like to fly in a restored TP-51 Mustang.



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Above, an aerial view of Cape May Point taken this weekend from this restored B-24, left, taking off from the Cape May County Airport.

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World War II Navy veteran Harvey Williams of Cape gives the thumbs off while taking off inside a restored B-24 bomber from the Cape May County Airport.

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Cape May Star & Wave

CAPE MAY STAR AND WAVE (ISSN 519-020)
Volume 161 Number 37

Published weekly by Sample Media, Inc., 801 Asbury Ave., #310,
Ocean City, N.J. 08226

Published Weekly (52 times a year)

SUBSCRIPTION PRICE: By mail for \$39 a year; \$70 for two years; \$20 for six months. Periodical Postage at Cape May Court House, N.J. and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Please send address changes to the Cape May Star and Wave, 600 Park Blvd. #28, West Cape May, N.J. 08204.

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