

AirPower History Tour

*By Ken Philippart
Images by Lisa and Ken Philippart.*

The Commemorative Air Force (CAF) AirPower History Tour visited Huntsville Executive Airport (MDQ) from May 24 – 27, 2018. The tour brings World War II-era and later warbirds to locations around the country. Visitors can tour the aircraft on the ground and buy tickets for orientation flights. Aircraft participating in the Huntsville tour were the B-29 Superfortress *Fifi*, one of only two flying B-29s in the world, the P-51 Mustang *Gunfighter*, the C-45 Expeditor *Bucket of Bolts*, a T-6 Texan, a PT-13 Stearman and T-34 Mentor.

The Greater Huntsville Section helped get the word out about the tour. Several AIAA members, including Dr. Arloe Mayne, Nishanth Goli, Michael Dunning and Lisa Philippart ventured to MDQ to see the aircraft. I was also one of those members but then took it a step farther. I purchased a ride on *Fifi*. I reasoned that the chances of a B-29 coming through



Huntsville again any time soon were slim so I had better take advantage of the opportunity while I could. Or at least that's how I rationalized spending that kind of money. And after having been bitten by the warbird bug two years ago when I rode in the B-17 *Aluminum Overcast* (see [GHSV eMag](#)), it didn't take much to convince me that I *must* fly on *Fifi*.



While waiting for my flight, Lisa and I took pictures of all the aircraft and watched excited passengers embark on other flights.

Fifi was clearly the star of the tour though. My initial impression upon seeing the B-29 was how much bigger and more modern the aircraft appeared compared to a B-17. Unlike *Doc*, the other flying B-29, *Fifi* is not polished to a gleaming finish. She is dull silver gray, sleek and slightly sinister in appearance.

At the appointed hour, the CAF rounded up the ten lucky ticket holders for our flight. We were given a safety briefing including discussion of the emergency exits, hand signals, what not to touch, and the whys and wherefores of the aircraft being registered in the experimental category before being led to the aircraft to meet the crew. The pilot introduced the rest of the

crew, outlined the flight profile and reinforced the safety procedures. He then asked how many of the group were veterans. Six of us raised our hands. Four were Air Force veterans with a combined total of 90 years of service.

We then boarded the aircraft. I had purchased a gunner's seat, a weak nod to economizing since the cost was half of the ticket price to sit in the cockpit or nose area.

We five "gunners" were led to the rear hatch where we climbed a short step ladder to enter the



aircraft. We moved forward and took our places on two banks of canvas jump seats arrayed on both sides of the aircraft. The seats were equipped with automotive-style vice military seatbelts which sometimes baffle the uninitiated. We were offered earplugs and the crew reminded us of the hand signals since communication would be difficult when the engines were running.

It was a warm morning and even though the rear door and an upper hatch were open, it was hot in the old bomber and our sweat began to trickle. Looking around took my mind off of the heat. I was surprised that despite the B-29 being a more modern aircraft than the B-17, it too had exposed control cables that we were cautioned not to touch. On each side of the fuselage was a blister window for the port and starboard gunners which allowed a clear view of the wings and flaps. Looking aft, we could see the crawl way to the tail gunner's position but no one was allowed to sit there for takeoff. The scene forward revealed the top gunner's chair with a sighting blister above it and the port and starboard gunners' seats on the flanks. In front of that was the entrance to the tunnel that allowed the crew to crawl above the bomb bays and traverse the full length of the aircraft. We were told that we would not be allowed to go into the tunnel and were restricted to the aft of the aircraft. Given our average age and physical condition, no one was anxious to try that passage anyway.



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Two crewmembers--the scanners--occupied the port and starboard gunner chairs. Their job was to scan for obstructions on the ground, visually confirm flap settings and keep the passengers from getting into trouble.



With passengers buckled up and earplugs in, the Wright R-3350 engines were started with the characteristic billowing of blue smoke, or so I was told since we couldn't see it. The noise level was not intolerable and seemed comparable to that of the B-17. Engines running, some much-welcomed air flowed through the open door and upper hatch. The B-29 is a pressurized aircraft but for rides, is flown unpressurized with the hatches open for ventilation. The pressure bulkhead hatches were nonetheless closed for takeoff.

While taxiing to Runway 36, the flaps were lowered to 25 degrees as evident by the yellow degree markings. The scanners confirmed the settings with each other and the pilots via headset.

The crew maneuvered the venerable warhorse onto the runway, advanced the throttles and we were on our way. Acceleration was brisk, faster than the B-17 with comparable noise levels. We were soon airborne and departed the pattern.

Once at cruising altitude of 2,500 feet, the scanners motioned it was safe to unbuckle and move around. I headed aft and crawled to the rear gunner position as nimbly and gracefully as I could despite the aircraft's and my advanced ages. When I finally arrived and popped my head up inside the Plexiglas canopy, I was rewarded with a spectacular view of the retreating landscape. After snapping several pictures, I inched forward on my hands and knees to let the next person take the seat. I next slid into the top gunner seat and poked my head into the upper blister for additional pictures. The seat rotated, giving me a 360-degree view of the upper half of the aircraft. The scratches on the Plexiglas produced unusual reflections of sunlight.



I looked into the crew tunnel and the thought of climbing in must have shown on my face since a crewmember looked at me and shook his head to remind me that was no entry.

Finally, I settled into the starboard gunner seat for the obligatory in-flight self-portrait and to enjoy the scenery passing below. Despite the heat, the aircraft rode comfortably and easily weathered the occasional turbulence.

All too soon, the crew signaled for us to return to our seats. I watched out the port side blister as the flaps were lowered to 45 degrees for landing, much greater than I expected.

The pilots greased *Fifi* onto the runway and we taxied back. The engines were shut down and the exit ladder positioned. Suddenly quiet, we asked the crew questions we couldn't ask in flight due to the noise. Not wanting to leave, we chatted for about 10 minutes before the ground crew gently prodded us to make way for the next flight. The CAF presented each passenger a gift bag and certificate, fitting mementos of our flight.

I rejoined Lisa who was waiting patiently outside the cordon. She commented that I had the same goofy grin on my face that I had after my B-17 flight. When she saw me eyeing the passengers getting ready to embark on a flight in the C-45 Expeditor, she gently led me out the gate before I could do more damage to our credit card. The warbird bug bites hard and is hard to resist. I just learned that there is an Avro Lancaster in Ontario, Canada that sells rides...