

The Tri-State Warbird Museum...a historic aviation museum dedicated to remembering those who fought for our freedom, and honoring those who made the ultimate sacrifice.

August 2012 Volume 6 Number 2

The Tri-State Warbird Museum

Tri-State Warbird Museum

4021 Borman Drive

Batavia, Ohio 45103

513.735.4500

513.735.4333 fax

www.tri-statewarbirdmuseum.org

tristatewarbirdmuseum@fuse.net

Hours:

Wednesday 4pm-7pm

Saturday 10am-3pm

Admission \$12

Discounts available for veterans and students

Annual and lifetime individual and family memberships are available

Donations are needed and are most appreciated - Thank you!

Walk of Veterans Bricks

...Russ Witte, Jr. Page 2
continued...

...Russ Witte, Jr. Page 3
continued...Gala...
Education

...Gala June 8, Page 4
2013

Photography and article reproduction restricted without permission.

Russell B. Witte, Jr.

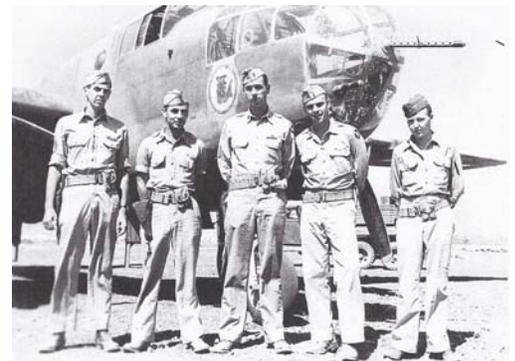
"Most of all I have vivid memories of the dust; the noise; the thrill, pride, ecstasy, and excitement of good tight formation flying; the fear and terror associated with near misses by attacking fighters and bursting flack; and the overwhelming grief you feel when you see a friend, flying near you, shot down." Russell B. Witte, Jr.



Born in 1916 in Cincinnati, Russ Witte was destined to become a part of his father's construction business since the age of one when his dad RB included him in his newly named construction business: "R.B. Witte & Son". He spent his early years in Cincinnati growing up with his 2 younger sisters and swimming in the Ohio River. In 1939 he graduated from the University of Cincinnati with a Civil Engineering degree. In the ROTC program he was commissioned a 2nd



Lieutenant in the Army Reserves. Ordered into active duty in early 1941 Russ was assigned a stressful job as a Personnel Officer managing 3,000 new recruits. Frustrated with that position he became very interested in a flyer posted on the hallway bulletin board about the severe need for pilots. Russ liked that he could keep his rank and payscale while going through pilot training. He was a little worried that he had never been near an airplane but decided it had to be easier than handling all those young recruits and paperwork. So he flew with a friend who was already a pilot, still wasn't sure he liked it but kept going with the decision. He was qualified and accepted into the SE Air Corp Training Center. His primary training was in the PT17 Stearman at the Hawthorn Flying School in Orangeburg, South Carolina. Luckily he got a super civilian instructor who understood that some days a new young pilot could handle the rigors of intense Army Air Corps pilot training and some days should be spent concentrating on taxi-training. With this kind of understanding Russ gained his tolerance and love of flying and steadily increased his skills, learning to fly the way the Stearman teaches, "by the seat of your pants". Advanced pilot training included the Vultee BT-13, North American AT-6 and Cessna At-17. Pilot wings were received early September 1942. By November Russ had been training in the Mitchell B-25 medium bomber at Greenville, SC Army Air Base except most of the training was on the ground with the actual flying time given to the squadron ahead of his.



"Flew about 20 combat missions with this crew. S/Sgt. Kinny-radio gunner, 2nd Lt. Jim Steinberg-navigator-bombardier, 1st Lt. Russ Witte-pilot, 2nd Lt. Dick Sawyer-co-pilot, Sgt. Creed-top turret gunner"

increased his skills, learning to fly the way the Stearman teaches, "by the seat of your pants". Advanced pilot training included the Vultee BT-13, North American AT-6 and Cessna At-17. Pilot wings were received early September 1942. By November Russ had been training in the Mitchell B-25 medium bomber at Greenville, SC Army Air Base except most of the training was on the ground with the actual flying time given to the squadron ahead of his. Russ was given a week of leave to see his family in Cincinnati. The travelling took a day and a half and no sooner had he arrived home he received a telegram with orders to return immediately to his base as he had been picked to replace a pilot from the squadron ahead of his. The mother of one of the pilots in that squadron getting all the flying time had contacted her Congressman complaining that her son was being sent overseas into combat with less than adequate flight training. The War Department removed her son from his squadron and sent him to the West Coast to report for immediate overseas combat duty in the Pacific Theater. Russ was ordered to replace that pilot and sent into combat duty with only 3 hours actual B-25 flying time. So on December 20, 1942 Russ departed with 17 other new B-25s from West Palm Beach, Florida on a flight to Cairo, Egypt to become a member of General

...continued on page 2

As a 501(c)3 organization the Tri-State Warbird Museum is supported primarily through membership dues and the contributions of individuals and businesses that share in the desire to preserve our country's rich aviation legacy.

...continued from page 1

Russ B. Witte, Jr.

Brereton's 9th Air Force. Along the way they had stops in Puerto Rico, Trinidad, Brazil, Assencion Island, the African Gold Coast, Nigeria, British West Africa and Sudan, landing in Ismalia, Egypt on January 3, 1943. There the planes were modified for desert warfare including larger carburetor air filters. They were initially based at Landing Ground (LG)142 at Gambut, 30 miles south of Tobruk, Libya.

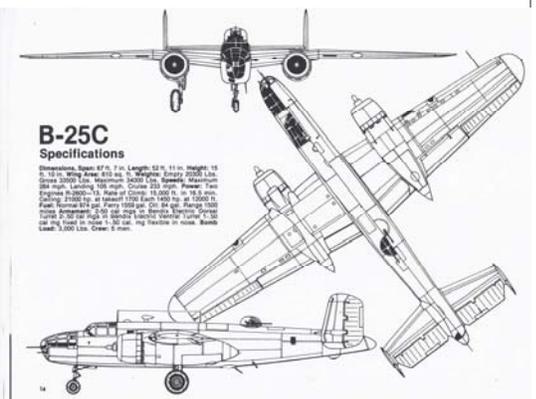
"As a member of the British 8th Army, we wore British uniforms with American insignia, lived in British 12'X12' EPIP (Egypt, Palestine, India Personnel) tents, ate British rations and dropped British bombs. Around the landing fields we used we dispersed our tents 50 yards apart and our planes 150 to 200 yards apart. A 5 man crew lived in each tent (pilot, co-pilot, navigator-bombardier, radio gunner and top turret gunner). We slept on 6' canvas folding cots and were each issued 5 blankets and a pillow. When we moved we loaded our tent and all our gear into the back of the plane. This made the tail of the plane so heavy we had to prop a pole under the tail to hold it up until we got the engines running and the prop wash would keep the tail up. Being so tail heavy made the airplane very difficult to fly. Because it was so dusty on the desert we took off on our missions 6 planes abreast, crosswind, so the dust would blow to the side and the next 6 planes could take off. We landed 3 planes abreast for the same reason. We flew our missions in 6 plane "boxes", 1 to 6 or more boxes per mission depending on the target. We flew mostly at altitudes between 7 and 10,000 ft, in tight formation, continually varying our altitude and direction for our entire mission except on our bombing runs, because at those altitudes flack could be very accurate. But flying any higher required oxygen and we didn't have it." The pilots also desynchronized the two engines to confuse the German sound ranging devices that would be searching for the normal harmonious engine sound.



Through most of 1943 Russ flew missions attached to the Western Desert Air Force that was commanded by British Air Vice-Marshal Sir Coningham, and along with South African, Australian and British Groups, flew tactical missions in direct support of General Montgomery's 8th Army on the ground. "Coningham and Montgomery maintained a joint headquarters in which aviation and ground elements had equal voices. This was a new way for Airmen to work with ground troops, and was very successful." The British 8th Air Force was successfully pushing Rommel's Africa Corps west across the Libyan Desert.



As they headed west the crews would move into landing fields the Germans had recently abandoned. Reaching Tunisia and Algeria the Squadrons joined with the 12th Air Force. Many of these missions were dropping leaflets urging German soldiers to surrender. The crews did not like these paper dropping missions since they would be getting shot at. Early June they moved north to the Mediterranean Sea and resumed bombing



missions over the islands of Pantileria, Lampedusa, Sicily and then Italy in preparation for the ground troops to be able to arrive. As was usual the flying crews were initially told they would fly 25 missions and as that milestone neared the mission count goal would grow to 30, then 35 and finally to 55. Russ's 55th and final mission was a night bombing run on September 11, 1943. "At that time General Cannon at our Tactical AF Headquarters needed a pilot to fly him around in his private B-25. I did this until October 7 when I was ordered to return to the States. Back in the States I was sent as a Test Pilot to Eglin Field, the AAF Proving Ground, a very large base with a main landing field, 9 auxiliary fields, several bombing ranges, etc. located 30 miles east of Pensacola, Florida.

There I was assigned to the Heavy Bomber Squadron. So, for all of 1944 and 1945 I flew tests in B-17's, B-24's and B-29's. The B-29 was the only plane we had with a pressurized cabin. I also had considerable time flying B-25's, B-26's, C-47's, A-20's and others. Couldn't ask for better Stateside duty than that. One fun thing I got to do at Eglin Field was to fly MGM's camera man around while he made the air to air shots that were made while they were filming the movie "30 Seconds Over Tokyo" on our Auxiliary Field #9 where the Doolittle Raiders had trained for their carrier take offs. To do this we removed the tail turret from a B-24 and MGM installed a tripod there in place of the turret, and the cameraman stood back there in that open space with nothing to hold onto but the camera. Scary! MGM gave me one of the Flight suits their actors wore in that movie and I also got to meet all the principal actors. Found out that Van Johnson and I were the same age. After V-J Day came on August 15, 1945 many in the armed forces wanted to get out of the military and back into civilian life as soon as possible, so the War Department established a point system that permitted those with more points to get separated before those with less points. I had a lot of points so I got separated and after serving my terminal leave became a civilian on January 1, 1946." Russ was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and 9 Air Medals as well as the 12th Bomb Group receiving the Presidential Unit Citation. "So, in 10 months out of the States I had flown 55 combat missions, many of them quite harrowing, but never lost a plane. Although sometimes we were shot up so badly that we almost didn't make it back to the base. I never was injured, never lost a crewman. We were extremely lucky since 50% of the men I flew overseas with never made it home." There were two occasions, however, where luck surely did play a role. One day Russ was letting a new co-pilot gain valuable formation flying time in the #2 position so he moved his pilot seat all the way back to allow the right seat co-pilot to see through the left front windshield to the lead B-25. As they were approaching the bombing target over North Africa Russ moved his seat forward and took control of the airplane. Seconds later an 88mm shell burst up through the cockpit floor, missing all the important aircraft lines and not exploding leaving a gaping hole exactly where Russ had been sitting. A second event had Russ flying 2nd element lead, below the element group in front of him, when he watched a German fighter turn to attack his formation with guns blazing. The attacking aircraft incredulously flew through the formation - under the front element and over his

Continued on page 3...

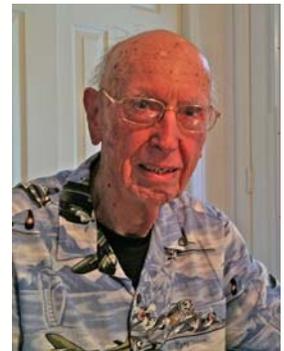
...continued from page 2

Russ B. Witte, Jr.

airplane and element and hitting nothing. Good to be lucky. A third story has Russ flying over Sicily in formation when turning to the target he came under heavy flak attack. A piece of flak came up through the instrument panel landing on the cockpit floor (he kept that piece), but more flack hit the plane cutting through fuel and hydraulic lines and the left engine caught on fire. Over the Mediterranean and shutting down that engine he slowed and dropped back out of formation. Close to the field but needing to fly around Mt. Etna instead of over it and only able to make right turns (never turn into the dead engine), his crew was able to hand crank the gear down and Russ was able to make the runway. With the right engine intermittent Russ made the landing with no flaps and no brakes and just upon touchdown the right engine failed. The plane was on the ground safely and just rolled gently off the runway to a stop. Good to be lucky and good!



Russ is 95 now, a lovely gentleman who was married to Ruth and then Jinny. Russ has two sons and two daughters. He is a champion competitive swimmer. He learned to swim in the Ohio River in the Cincinnati YMCA program at Camp Mecham, swam on school teams and while getting his Civil Engineering degree at the University of Cincinnati but then didn't swim again until 45 years later after he retired. His sons were swimming in competitions and convinced him to join them. Russ is a Senior Olympian many times over, has won many gold medals and set many world records competing throughout the world. This year alone Russ has set 3 World records and 15 National records in the 95 to 99 age bracket. He swims all the events except the butterfly. Also he discovered golfing at the age of 40 and now plays golf in the local Senior Olympics as well as swimming. He loved flying in the service and received all his civilian ratings upon discharge. He did enter his father's construction business as planned although there were temptations of flying for the airlines or continuing his Air Force flying career. His construction business R.B. Witte & Son was very successful building churches and commercial buildings in Cincinnati. He specialized in building retrofit elevator shafts when the regulations changed and most of Cincinnati's elevators needed to improve or be shut down. Russ retired in 1981 after 35 years and has certainly stayed active. June 2012 at the Taking Flight Gala Russ



Taking Flight Gala June 8, 2012



Hours:

Wednesday
4pm-7pm

Saturday
10am-3pm

Admission \$12

Discounted admission for veterans
and students \$7

Admission for World War II veterans
is complimentary

Group tours are a great way to spend
some time learning about World War
II aviation history

Memberships:

Annual individual and family

Lifetime individual and family

Bricks can be engraved into the Walk
of Veterans—a great way to honor
someone

Donations are needed and are most
appreciated - Thank you!



Tri-State Warbird Museum Education Program

Year 2012 has seen a dramatic increase in the number of school field trips to visit the Tri-State Warbird Museum. We are thrilled to host the school kids and teach important history lessons about the people and airplanes of World War II. The Tri-State Warbird Museum would like to encourage every school in the surrounding tri-state area to come here for an educational field trip, no admission fee and no transportation costs!

Rick Raabe is a retired educator and Director of the Tri-State Warbird Museum Education Program. First stop on the field trip is the media room for an introductory and well-received dvd film introducing America in World War II. The kids get to meet a World War II aviation veteran and hear what it was like to be an American going to war to keep our freedoms. There many heroes of World War II and the opportunity to hear their stories is a privilege. The barracks display lets the students walk through to see how the American aviator lived in an English airfield barracks. There is an instrument flight Link trainer display to see how our pilots were trained. Several Cincinnati World War II aviators have displays about the incredible missions they accomplished. The airplanes are amazing and they highlight our history in World War II. Facts are taught and questions are answered while the feeling of a nation coming together is conveyed. The Fighter Hangar introduces the P-51 Mustang, P-40 Kittyhawk, AT-6 Texan trainer, the PT-17 Stearman primary trainer and the Corsair restoration. The Bomber Hangar houses the TBM torpedo bomber and the B-25 Mitchell medium twin engine bomber as well as the Piper Clipper and the German Fw-190 restoration. The kids are influenced in not only the sacrifices made by our country during these important years but also in history, engineering, mechanics, building, restoring and flying. Who knows how high their minds will soar with this opportunity to see the Tri-State Warbird Museum through the Education Program. *Bring them!*



Tri-State Warbird Museum
4021 Borman Drive
Batavia, OH 45103

513.735.4500
513.735.4333 fax
www.tri-statewarbirdmuseum.org

