



Staff photo by City Aceto

A dedicated group, the Confederate Air Force brings aviation history to life.

History on the Wing

Photographs by Paul Kennedy and Guy Aceto, Art Director



Piloted by Stan Musick (foreground right) and Jeffrey Ethell (background right), two P-51 Mustangs make a tight pass in the skies near Midland, Tex., practicing for the annual Confederate Air Force airshow.



Whether from a Pratt & Whitney radial or a Rolls-Royce Merlin, the sound of a piston-driven aircraft engine producing nearly 1,500 horsepower is unmistakable and unforgettable. It is a sound retired AAF flight instructor Lloyd P. Nolen had in mind when, about six years after World War II, he bought a surplus P-40 Warhawk. He and his friends then began buying and restoring war surplus aircraft, including the P-51 Old Red Nose (left) that still flies today. This handful of pilots, who wanted to continue flying the aircraft they had flown in the war, called themselves the Confederate Air Force, using "confederate" in the sense of a group joined in a common cause and making a jocular reference to their southern origins.



Photos by Paul Kennedy



From that beginning, the CAF and its American Airpower Heritage Museum in Midland have amassed the world's largest collection of flyable US combat aircraft from World War II. Some of them are among the last of their types in existence. Along with responsibility for more than 130 restored Allied and Axis aircraft in various locations, the CAF headquarters and museum have a research library and archives—a treasure trove of World War II artifacts, memorabilia, and firsthand accounts. Whether on display (above) or behind the scenes (left), the museum's inventory receives top-notch care from a highly professional staff and about 200 volunteers.



In 1963, the CAF organized its first airshow in Mercedes, Tex. Tight formation flying required for performances called on many of the skills CAF members had learned as combat pilots. Originally, almost all CAF aviators had military experience; today, only about half have had military training, and few have experience in the kind of flying that shows visitors what these aircraft did in combat.

The Confederate Air Force has developed a demanding set of standards at a school called TRARON (Training Squadron One). Pilots who want to fly the vintage aircraft during CAF airshows are given rigorous instruction. Safety is paramount. After hours of classroom time, students walk through maneuvers before they fly. Some of the best aircraft to train in are the same ones used fifty years ago. Above, the T-6 Texan and the Navy SNJ version of it are still around, so when CAF pilots get together, they jump at the chance to get into one and practice their skills. The CAF also uses the Vultee BT-13 for training. "Check rides" come at the end of class, and only those who pass will be allowed to fly the tight formation sequences in the airshow. At middle right, CAF instructor Ray Kinney (in the rear seat) will monitor moves during practice for a weekend airshow.





In 1966, the CAF began looking for a B-29 Superfortress to add to its collection. The search led to the Naval Weapons Center at China Lake, Calif., where a number of the bombers had been deteriorating out in the desert near a target range since the mid-1950s. After looking them over, the CAF settled on one that they felt could be restored to flying condition. They then began weeks of paperwork to acquire it. A CAF maintenance crew arrived at China Lake in March 1971, and only nine weeks later the B-29 was ready to fly. Navy regulations precluded a test flight. Once the aircraft took off from the China Lake runway, it was not allowed to return. In a tribute to the expertise of the maintenance and flight crew, the aircraft took off from China Lake and completed its first flight in seventeen years—a nonstop, 1,250-mile journey to Harlingen, Tex.—without a hitch. Complete restoration of the aircraft took another three years.

Today, Fifi, the only B-29 Superfortress still flying, is a crown jewel of the Confederate Air Force.





The CAF's annual headquarters airshow is the perfect opportunity for old friends to get together and not only reminisce but also learn new ways to keep the old airplanes in top form.

One of the CAF's better-known P-40 pilots is former AFA President and Board Chairman O. R. Crawford (above), who has been flying the P-40 since World War II. Above (right) is CAF pilot Dan Secker at the controls of Fifi during a flight over Midland. At right, P-51 owner Ike Enns (on the right) trades stories with Wallace Sanders about the Mustangs they fly and maintain so well.



Staff photo by Guy Aceto



Keeping vintage aircraft flying is a major undertaking. Maintenance is crucial. Parts must be scrounged from a variety of sources. Expertise must be handed down to keep the planes flying. The CAF constantly searches out prospective members, seeking those who know these aircraft well and those willing to learn. Some of the CAF volunteers used to work on such engines as the Pratt & Whitney R2800s that power the A-26 Invader at left. This aircraft flew to the CAF's 1996 airshow in Midland from the organization's Nevada Wing, based in Las Vegas.



The CAF collection of about sixty types of World War II aircraft includes the B-17G at left. It is among the many aircraft owned by the CAF but based with the organization's more than eighty chapters—called wings, squadrons, or detachments—located in twenty-nine states and in Australia, France, New Zealand, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. This outlying CAF fleet takes turns on display at the headquarters and at CAF events, and all that are in flying condition participate in airshows across the country. More than eighty aircraft in the collection fly regularly. Some long-term restoration projects include a rare Douglas B-23 Dragon and a P-82 Twin Mustang night fighter.



Most of the aircraft have fascinating stories behind their journeys back into the skies. Among the rarest is the Mitsubishi A6M2 Zero. One of only two Zeros in the world still regularly flying, it was rebuilt from remains found on an island in the South Pacific in 1968. It took seventeen years to bring the Japanese carrier fighter back to flying status. Left, at the CAF's 1996 airshow, pilot Randy Wilson (standing) gives Orville Long a close-up look at an adversary Mr. Long saw frequently as a World War II B-24 pilot. Above, Mr. Wilson taxis out during that event's re-creation of the attack on Pearl Harbor. Re-created air battles and displays of pyrotechnics enhance the realism that the Confederate Air Force shows are famous for.



Even as the annual airshow at Midland draws to a close, plans get under way for the next one. Maintenance and restoration are year-round tasks, and volunteers in hangars and museums across the country must continue to train for the next airshow. The success that the Confederate Air Force has achieved in finding and preserving these planes has inspired others to help keep aviation history alive and flying. When the results roar into the skies, onlookers get an amazing eyeful of the past.

The CAF's members are determined to pass on to a new generation the legacy of such warplanes as the P-51 (above) and the P-38 (below right). Through unforgettable airshows, the American Airpower Heritage Museum's educational programs, and the efforts of hundreds of volunteers, they put people in touch with history through those who made it. For the Confederate Air Force, these are not just a collection of flyable warbirds but national treasures that embody the spirit of the men and women who built, maintained, and flew them. ■

