

The new American Air Museum in Britain is a working monument to a common aviation heritage.



A Heritage Shared

Photography by Guy Aceto, Art Director, and Paul Kennedy

Artifacts from more than 80 years of Anglo-American aviation history and camaraderie can be found within the American Air Museum in Britain—an important new addition to the famous Imperial War Museum complex at Duxford, United Kingdom.





Less than 50 miles north of London stands the American Air Museum in Britain, at Duxford. Once an important base for the Royal Air Force, the airfield at Duxford has been part of the Imperial War Museum since 1977. The scene around this old airfield is just as much an attraction as its aircraft. Many of the vintage buildings have remained just as they were during World War II when the base was a hub of military activity. Today, Duxford still operates as an active airfield and is home to the world's largest restoration facility. It also enjoys an international reputation as the leading center of aviation history in Europe. At left, the sight of this British Spitfire taxiing down the runway is not uncommon here and adds to the museum's charm.

In 1986, as part of a plan to centralize its collection of American aircraft, the Imperial War Museum began making plans for what would later become known as the American Air Museum in Britain. Designed by renowned architect Sir Norman Foster and funded almost entirely by the Heritage Lottery Fund, as well as donations from British patrons and the museum's 60,000 American founding members, the museum's doors officially opened to the public Aug. 1, 1997. Queen Elizabeth II attended the dedication ceremony. Within the colossal complex resides 21 restored aircraft along with a host of other equipment and memorabilia. The 70,000 square-foot space is home to the largest collection of historic American combat aircraft outside the US.



Lining the walkway at the museum's entrance is this beautiful glass sculpture entitled "Counting the Cost." Etched on 52 glass panels is an outline of each aircraft missing in action from Eighth and Ninth Air Forces and US Navy operations out of Britain during World War II. Above, local schoolchildren move in for a closer look.



Inside the complex, from floor to ceiling, the aircraft are divided into four theme zones: World War II in Europe, World War II in the Pacific, the Cold War, and the Persian Gulf War. They are arrayed to depict the history of the American aviation experience in Britain in a chronological and accurate fashion. Above, this T-33, part of the Cold War zone, appears to be going in for a landing from its position just above an F-86 Sabre. At right, a Soviet SA-2 Surface-to-Air Missile peacefully coexists near a B-52, while a U-2, just above it, appears as if in flight.

Each aircraft is symbolic of its particular period and may also have an individual story. For instance, the museum's B-52 represents the BUFFs stationed in Britain during the Cold War. At the same time it is a 200-mission veteran of the Vietnam War.

Below right, this PT-17 Stearman trained hundreds of pilots during World War II.



Staff photo by Guy Aceto

Inside Hangar 5, Duxford's team of restoration experts mesh the past with the present. The conservation and restoration of large exhibits and aircraft are its primary and most important functions. At any given time, there are a number of "works in progress," usually in full view of visitors, many of whom return to follow the progress of their favorite project. At right, two technicians work on a rare Avro Anson twin-engine RAF utility aircraft using the small model in the lower right to capture every detail and create as authentic a look as possible.



Photo by Paul Kennedy

Staff photo by Guy Aceto



Due to the large number of projects under way, the museum relies heavily on volunteers to help complete many of its works. This rare Junkers Ju-52 is currently undergoing long-term restoration and isn't expected to be finished until sometime in 1999. At left, in the chair underneath the aircraft's fuselage, full-time employee Eric Perrott painstakingly fashions a part for this delicate aircraft. Next to him and also in the photo below right, volunteer Veronica Mitton, an aerospace engineering student at the University of Bath in Britain, cleans grease from the control rods in one of the tighter spots on the aircraft.

Photo by Paul Kennedy



Above, technician Terry Gilroy takes his time over every detail to bring into pristine condition this British Hurricane, which was rescued from a crash site in Russia.



Staff photo by Guy Aceto



The Duxford complex is also home to privately owned vintage aircraft collections. The Old Flying Machine Company, one of the museum's tenants, helps maintain Duxford's collection and, in turn, receives assistance in keeping its aircraft in top flying condition. Above, technician Robert Vernon works on the company's T-33. Many of these aircraft have appeared in movies and are favorites at air shows around the world. On most days, visitors can see these classics in the sky or revving up on the ground.

Another Duxford tenant, Classic Wings, offers visitors the opportunity to fly around the airfield in this 1934 De Havilland Dragon Rapide, a biplane airliner, at right and below.

The Duxford countryside may seem familiar since it was the setting for the 1969 movie "The Battle of Britain" and the 1990 version of the movie "Memphis Belle."



Staff photos by Guy Aceto



What American aircraft collection would be complete without the B-17 Flying Fortress? Perfect right down to the name on its nose, this B-17 is presented with the markings of Mary Alice, an aircraft flown by the 401st Bomb Group out of Deenethorpe.



Inside this beautifully restored B-17, the waist gunner positions look ready for actual combat. Perhaps the best known American bomber of World War II, the B-17 made a name for itself as the Eighth Air Force's main aircraft during the daylight bombing raids over Germany.



Also among the museum's collection is its growing exhibition of US military uniforms and memorabilia donated by charter members and collectors. At left, a curator puts the finishing touches on a brigadier general's uniform. It belonged to the late Hollywood film star Jimmy Stewart, a B-24 pilot during World War II.



Staff photo by Guy Aceto

A veteran of the Normandy Invasion, this C-47 transport (above) arrived at the museum in top condition and stands today as it did just over 50 years ago. Above it, the AT-6 Texan trainer was another staple of World War II.

The museum's large collection houses some rare pieces, including a B-29 (its tail shown in the bottom photo) displayed in Korean War markings. The largest restoration project the museum has ever undertaken involved a B-52, much of which had to be moved into and assembled within the building before construction crews completed the walls.

More than 30,000 American airmen serving in Britain lost their lives during World War II. The American Air Museum in Britain helps preserve testimony to their courage and sacrifice that will live on for generations to come. ■



Photo by Paul Kennedy



Staff photo by Guy Aceto