

Oct. 12, 2010 - 30 Seconds over ~~Tokyo~~ Greenville
or How I Got to Fly in a B-17 Bomber

Sometimes things just happen. I received a e-mail from the EAA (Experimental Aircraft Association) informing me that their B-17 *The Aluminum Overcast* was going to be at the Greenville, South Carolina, Downtown Airport (GMU) on Tuesday, Oct. 12th and that flight reservations were being accepted. Knowing that I would be passing thru the area around that time, I immediately booked on line. The B-17 Flying Fortress was the real work-horse of the Army's Air Corps during WW II, and I have always been intrigued by this large fighting aircraft. There are only about a dozen still airworthy in the World, and having an opportunity to fly in one was something not to be missed.

I arrived at the airport about 9:00 AM as we were scheduled for the first flight of the 2 day event. Our "crew" was made up of 10 souls willing enough to fork over the \$350-400 (depending on when and how you made your booking) for the 10 minute ground briefing and 30 minute flight experience. Prior to engine start volunteers were asked to help push through each one of the 4 Wright Cyclone engines to help eliminate hydrostatic lock. It took 2 men and a lot of force to move the 8 foot prop blades through each of their 9 revolutions.

Once inside the aircraft and buckled into the canvas crew seats, one by one, those 1,200 HP engines were started up and run to operating temperature. Given the lack of soundproofing and size of those engines, the noise inside of the aircraft is more an angry "growl" than a deafening "roar". There is actually more noise coming from my little Highlander's 120 HP Jabiru.

This plane takes off at about 80 MPH and cruises around 160. These are about the same performance numbers as with my single engine Piper Comanche of years gone by. Immediately after lift-off we were free to unbuckle and invited to walk around the airplane, for the full length of its 55 foot interior. And wander I did, taking about a hundred photos from each and every angle imaginable. We never did get much above 800 feet over the surrounding terrain, which made for some enjoyable flying on a dead calm morning with unlimited visibility. However, my own airplane allows me this degree of viewing, so I was more interested in getting to experience the noise, vibration, feel and smell of this infamous warbird. I spent most of my time traversing around the airframe, seeing what manning the 50 caliber guns felt like, tweaking dials on the radio room transceivers, crawling up front into the nose and sitting beside the bomb sighting device. We were also welcome into the pilot's cockpit (so long as we did not lean against their seat backs), and were free to take photos there as well. All too soon it was time to strap ourselves back into the canvas seat backs and ready ourselves for the slow and gentle decent back to runway 17 at GMU, and a perfect 3 point landing.

And, at the completion of this flight, it was time for me to take my own airplane back over to the factory from whence it came. No, I am NOT returning my ship, but merely loaning it back to its originator for some minor redesign of the front cowl in order to see if we can finally eliminate that pesky overheating with my #5 and #6 cylinders.



EAA's B-17-G, Aluminum Overcast on GMU Ramp



Me, standing by for our "boarding call"



Working end, bombardier and nose gunner seats



View inside fuselage looking toward the front



You had to be very small to access the ball turret (from outside only) The ball turret from inside the aircraft



The Bomb rack for a total of 20, 500 pound bombs



Me, manning one of the 50 cal. waist guns



Nose end, including the cheek and front guns



Preparing to start the engines (four total)



The #2 and #4 engines turning in flight



This is my view from the the front bombardier's seat