

Mukilteo man helps keep aviation history in motion

By Teri Baker

Bill Ashworth strokes the side of a Lockheed Electra 10E, the same make and model airplane Amelia Earhart flew. He describes the aircraft as the equivalent of today's Lear jet. Across the floor is a Ryan NYP, the same model as the Spirit of St. Louis piloted by Charles Lindbergh in the first nonstop, solo flight across the Atlantic from New York to Paris.

He grins at the artwork on the "Impatient Virgin," a P-51B Mustang excavated from a farmer's field in England, and points out a 1941 Waco UPF-7 bi-plane found neatly packed in boxes in an elderly man's garage and fully restored after thousands of man hours.

Bill opens the hangar door to wave at a B-25B Mitchell bomber just like the one Lt. Col. Jimmy Doolittle flew in the raid over Tokyo in 1942. The bomber is warming up for a flight from Paine Field out over Mt. Pilchuck and back.

"I'm getting to work on actual planes I built models of when I was ten years old growing up in Chicago," Bill says happily. "All these planes have been restored by specialists, and they all fly!"

HISTORIC FLIGHT MUSEUM COLLECTION

The planes are at the Historic Flight Museum opened at Paine Field in Mukilteo in March by the Flight Foundation, a nonprofit organization supported by donations and fund-raisers in the community and around the world.

Bill, 61, a gracious, soft spoken younger senior from Mukilteo, is on the foundation board. He retired after 15 years with the Federal Aviation Administration and 25 years in the aviation industry and devotes as much time as he can to help the foundation achieve its goal of honoring aviation from Lindbergh's historic flight to the flight of the Boeing 707.

"We want to link the historical aspect of the role planes – and those who flew them – played in the development of aviation to the community," he explains. His love of history and aircraft is evident as he continues, "In the late thirties, you'd take lessons and fly a personal airplane. Many advances in aviation are the result of entry into World War Two when aircraft was very powerful and fast and mostly flown by teens."

He points out the museum's "Wampus Cat," a Grumman F7F Bearcat, one of only 10 flying in the world today, then walks over to a Texan that is being repaired. The Texan is open so people can see what an airplane looks like inside its skin. Bill is excited that Everett Community College, where he is



CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Bill Ashworth helps keeps aviation history in motion, continued

on the advisory board, includes the museum in its classes for people interested in the history of aviation. Students also work on the aircraft.

Bill has been interested in airplanes from the time he was a little boy listening to his father talk about being in a bomber crew in WWII. While his dad was flying in B-17s and B-29s, Bill's mom worked as a Rosie the Riveter.

After the war, his father, a service engineer, built machines that packaged frozen dinners. Bill, who describes himself as a typical Midwesterner whose Baby Boomer family had a little house in the suburbs, says, "I grew up with aluminum trays for dishes."

Bill left Chicago to go to St. Louis University in Missouri, where he graduated in 1970 with a degree in aeronautical engineering. Ten years later, while working, he would earn a master's degree in technical management at the University of Washington.

A licensed aviation mechanic, his first job was as a safety engineer for the Federal Aviation Administration. His 15 years with the FAA included everything from being a project design engineer responsible for compliance determinations and analysis to having international authority for transport airplane design evaluation, safety certification and initial maintenance programs. As a senior FAA manager he directed all FAA-type certification activity for Boeing, Airbus and other foreign transport planes prior to commercial operation in the U.S.

ACCIDENT INVESTIGATION

"I also investigated accidents and assisted with technical stuff for the National Transportation Safety Board," he says. "I helped develop corrective action and issued orders to fix planes."

Bill doesn't flinch at the exacting demands of the FAA. His work with the NTSB had a profound impact upon him. "Seeing dead people carried away and sifting through the rubble to understand what happened helped me understand the importance of safety regulations," he says soberly. "I don't think you can really appreciate that until you see that people have been killed in a crash because of some simple thing somebody forgot to do."

He says that one of the hardest parts of his job was talking to the press about FAA responses. "It's tough," he says, "when the plane is U.S. built and involved in a foreign crash and you have foreign reporters ask, 'Why did you let all those people die?'"

When Bill left the FAA, he went into private industry where his experience in FAA certification and compliance, modification, maintenance and manufacturing was put to good use by the airlines.

"I worked with everything from seats to radios to engines," he says. "I've been in a position to see technical advances from props to jets to advanced aircraft. Both at the FAA and in the airplane industry, I've seen many significant passenger safety rule changes. Now there are rules about using materials that are fire, flame and smoke resistant. Sharp corners in the cabin have been eliminated. Flying is safer. That's the gratifying part."

Bill has also been through industry ups and downs. He was with Goodrich Aviation Technical Services when the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack happened. He says those were dark days for aviation as government directives grounded flights, companies stopped maintenance and deliveries, and employees were laid off. It was a relief when those in the profession he loves were able to go back to work.

"I've met lots of great people," he says. Among them is Jackie, his wife of 35 years. "I met her in the hallway at work," he recalls fondly. "She was a secretary and I liked that I could always find her."

Bill is currently president of WB Ashworth, LLC Aviation Consulting, a firm that provides technical and advisory support to airlines and major aviation related companies. He advises them regarding FAA certifications, modifications, maintenance, error management and more. Among his clients are Southwest Airlines and Raytheon.

"I keep my consulting business down to what I enjoy," he says. Consequently, he usually works about two and a half days a week, leaving him time to spend with his grandson and to work with the foundation. Many foundation members are pilots rated for the historic aircraft.

Bill, who learned to fly small planes in the '70s and sticks to recreational flying, is not rated for these

Bill Ashworth helps keeps aviation history in motion, continued

aircraft. He addresses technical issues and FAA regulations and is working toward getting FAA approval to allow paid passengers on the historic planes.

The foundation hopes to build two more hangars to accommodate some of its other planes. Meanwhile, local pilots warm up the vintage aircraft and take them for a spin as often as they can. “We fly at least two every weekend,” Bill says. “What flies depends on what pilots are available.”

He scans the sky, spots the Mitchell bomber in the distance and smiles, his toy models a distant memory.

Here, at Paine Field, he can see, touch and fly in the real thing.

To learn more about the Historic Flight Restoration Center, which is open Friday through Sunday from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., or to donate money or memorabilia (log books, maintenance manuals, uniforms, tools, flying attire, etc.) call 425-348-3200 or visit *historicflight.org*.