

Those magnificent men and their flying machines

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The sky is overcast, and the ground is puddled up from last night's storm. It is an early September morning at Fairfield County Airport. Far from the neat rows of small planes and the operations office sit two blue hangars. A large plane, parked between the hangars, lies tailless and motorless. From a distance it looks as if it's abandoned, waiting for the scrap man to claim it.

Nearing the ship, one immediately senses that it's too clean to be an abandoned piece of junk. The tires seem new and fully inflated. The bare aluminum skin is being reworked and cleaned. There is no telltale pile of debris usually found around abandoned vehicles. This old plane is delicately being restored back to life.

Activity is buzzing here, and this old-timer is meant to take her place in the sky again, someday. Missing body parts mask any sense of symmetry. But speed and elegance dance off the sculptured aluminum skin like the motion of a beautiful figure skater doing her routine. Her lines are sensual, but her age is elusive.

This aircraft, a Douglas A-26, is fortunate to have found a safe haven at the home of the Fairfield Historical Aircraft Squadron. As morning is replaced by mid-day, volunteers stream in to the squadron's hangar to continue projects from the week before. There is little small talk and very little guidance from squadron leader Rutherford Branson, for every man knows his task and is eager to carry it out.

"When the war was over, we swore we'd never look at another plane," says Ralph Woollever. At

war's end, he and his twin brother, Royce, had had enough. The brothers had been drafted into the U.S. Army Air Corps in 1942 and sent to aircraft mechanic school. After three years of combat in Europe, they were going home. They went back to Fairfield County, bought 18 Holstein cows and never again left the farm.

Ralph's wrinkled face softens for a moment and one can almost picture what this man looked like as a teenager. "The first time we saw an airplane close up, it was in the Army. It was so amazing — we couldn't keep our hands off of it," he said. The Woollever twins served as mechanics with the 366th Fighter Squadron in Belgium during the Battle of the Bulge, fought during one of the worst winters recorded in Europe.

"We slept in tents and serviced our planes outside on makeshift airfields. We considered ourselves lucky because we weren't front-line combat troops. We just tried to help out our boys," Ralph explains.

After all these years, why are the



The Fairfield Historical Aircraft Squadron is working to restore a Douglas A-26 like the one featured at left. You also can see planes such as the PT-17 Stearman's trainer aircraft (above) at their annual air show on Aug. 17 and 18 (see sidebar, following page).