

Vintage aircraft lovingly restored in Lancaster

Woolevers working on the planes again? The same reason: "We're just trying to help out these boys."

The A-26, designed in the early part of World War II, was used primarily as a high speed attack and ground support bomber. Although Ralph and Royce did not personally work on the A-26, they were specialists with the gigantic R-2800 radial engine, also used on the A-26. The R-2800 engine has 18 pistons and develops 2000 horsepower. An A-26 has two of these motors.

"Here you go. That's the fuel line," says Rutherford Branson, the squadron's leader, to new recruit volunteers as he pulls out a three-quarter-inch steel mesh hose from the left engine nacelle. He doesn't say much. The picture of that hose, the size of an average home's water line, opens eyes to the incredible power the motors can deliver.

"Full power will suck 500 gallons per hour from the fuel tanks," says Branson, a slight man with a white crew cut. Retired from the Air Force in 1980, Branson has flown aircraft all over the world. He is a quiet man, capable of sizing up machines and men in a split second. One senses that he is good to have around when all hell breaks loose.

During his tour in Viet Nam, in the mid-60s, Branson helped nurse the A-26 through her third and final war. The A-26 has worked in many civilian and foreign military jobs to this day.

"In the movie *Always*, do you remember that fantastic scene where a plane buzzes two fishermen?" Jim Baldwin, a scholarly soft-spoken gentleman in his late 50s, breaks character and grins from ear to ear like a kid at a Gene Autry movie. He is describing the opening scene in a movie about Forest Service firefighters, starring Richard Dreyfuss and John Goodman. But in Jim's mind, the

main star of the movie is the Douglas A-26 aircraft, featured prominently in the film. You just know he would have died to be the movie stunt pilot. And with more than 3,000 flying hours, he probably could pull it off.

Baldwin explains that the A-26 they are so painstakingly restoring will take about three years to be flightworthy. With volunteers, many working only on weekends, these things will take time.

And what then? "We'll just shop around for another project plane and negotiate with its owner for restoration rights," Baldwin says. That's right, the members of the Fairfield Historic Aircraft Squadron do not own this A-26. Instead, they are part of a cottage industry springing up all over the country of groups dedicated to the restoration of old war birds. The owner of an aircraft probably picked up the plane for salvage costs. With the assistance of groups like this one, the plane is transformed into an historic aircraft that could be worth more than a million dollars. The transformation, though, is very expensive. Overhauling both R-2800 engines costs about \$50,000 each. That job is performed at a certified engine shop. Other farmed-out jobs include propeller repair, avionics/instrument packages and inspection certification. One must wonder if this is an act of a wise investor or just a wealthy man with a personal vision.

From the time of Icarus to the death of Jimmy Doolittle, aviators have been a special breed. An aviator is a poet who understands calculus, a vagabond who believes in commitment, or a shrewd businessman who casually spends his profits to keep fellow aviators in a job. That special brand of commitment is on display every time this band of veteran aviators meets at the Fairfield County Airport, their goal to put another piece of their history back into the sky. □

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The 2002 Wings of Victory Air Show

The Fairfield Historical Aircraft Squadron annually hosts a Wings of Victory air show featuring military and vintage aircraft. This year the show will be held Aug. 17 and 18 at the Fairfield County Airport in Lancaster.

Aircraft scheduled to appear this year include the P-51 Mustang, F4U Corsair, TBM Avenger, YAK 9, T-6, SNI, BT-15, L-39, Russian A-16, DeHaviland Sea Venom, PT-17 Stearman, L-5 Stinson, Blackhawk Helicopter, Cobra, Huey, and a couple commercial helicopters, along with the squadron's own A-26 currently being restored. There also will be an encampment of the Airman's Preservation Society, a WWII Army Air Corps group. Two Blacksheep Squadron pilots will be on hand to meet the public.

Various aerial performances will take place, including a giant fly-by by many WWII aircraft. The show has become a tradition for local and national aviation enthusiasts. The Historical Aircraft Squadron will hold an open house at their hangar and encourages the public to come see their nearly restored Douglas A-26 as well as other aircraft.

Tickets to the show are \$10 for adults and \$5 for children age six to 12. For more information, check the website www.historicalaircraftsquadron.com or send e-mail to info@historicalaircraftsquadron.com.

Planes featured in past Wings of Victory air shows have included the YAK 18A (left) and a B-25 flying above a P-51 at the Fairfield County Airport.