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## Preserved B-17 gives flying history lessons

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Sunday, 11 July 2010 00:06

AUBURN — It wasn't at typical Saturday morning. No breakfast. No run. No shower. No HGTV design shows. I was late.

After rolling out of bed, my family sped to the DeKalb County Airport, where I soon climbed on board a B-17 aircraft. My son was reluctant to let me go, because he thought I was going to Haiti again. That was the only other time he'd heard "mommy" and "plane" in the same sentence.

The Arizona Wing of the Commemorative Air Force flew the World War II bomber "Sentimental Journey" to Auburn as part of its summer-long educational series. The organization takes pride in its endeavor to honor veterans and allow people to experience history through its "flying museum."

Thanks to the generosity of the CAF, my father-in-law, Don, got to fly on the plane, too. For him, it was a lifelong dream come true.

We signed the necessary paperwork and climbed the ladder leading to the belly of the steaming-hot Flying Fortress with camera bags in hand. I crawled to the plane's nose, and Don made his way to a jump seat in the aircraft's mid-section.

I ventured to an Army-green-colored seat behind a large machine gun in the nose — a cylindrical, tight area at the front of the aircraft where navigators and bombardiers once sat. The plane's concave walls and low ceilings made me feel like I was inside a bullet, but on the exterior, I probably looked like a fish in a bowl.

Outside, I saw two massive propellers on each side of the silver plane. I appeared to be the only woman on this mission, except for Betty Grable sporting a swimsuit on the plane's shiny exterior.

The plane's Plexiglas nose is nearly entirely exposed to the sun with little ventilation. For about a half-hour, I sat in the nose and sweated, eying the equipment and waiting for the plane to depart.

The gadgets at my fingertips — once used to deploy bombs and fire ammunition — reminded me of faded images in my history books. Each button and trigger controlled destruction, but none controlled movement.

It felt strange to sit in the front of an aircraft, but have no access to a throttle or a radio. The men who worked at this station during World War II were at the mercy of the pilot and were the first target of enemy aircraft. After interviewing World War II Army Air Corps veterans and history buffs, most agree the nose and the ball turret (on the underbelly of the plane) were the two most dangerous positions in battle.

I couldn't imagine earning \$21 per month just after graduating from high school to shoot machine guns thousands of feet in the air at enemies I could never look in the eye coming straight at me.

As I was lost in my thoughts, the aircraft's engine revved, and we taxied to the runway. I quickly put my earplugs in and, after a

### Images



LINDSAY WINSLOW BROWN This is the view from my seat in the nose of a B-17 World War II bomber I rode in Saturday morning at the DeKalb County Airport. I'm looking down on local fields through a Plexiglas windshield next to a machine gun.

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brief pause, we were up and away.

The B-17 sailed through the perfect blue skies around DeKalb County and up to Steuben County. If I stared forward, I felt like I was riding on air. If I looked back, I was reminded that I was in a 60- to 70-year-old aircraft.

The pilots decided to have a little fun when we got near the Angola airport, though. At first, I thought we were crashing. The plane went so low and so fast that the plane nearly hit the runway, but just in the nick of time, the plane headed upward. A low pass.

The pilots showed off the plane's abilities to twist and turn through the air. I felt like an acrobat without the flexibility.

I took picture after picture, trying to capture what I saw and how I felt so readers might have a better understanding of B-17 crew members. My camera and words cannot do them justice.

I was hot when I rode in the plane. They were nearly always cold because they flew at such high altitudes.

I was shooting pictures. They were shooting enemies.

I knew I would return to my husband and son after a 30-minute ride. They didn't know if they'd survive 25 missions to return to their lives.

I'm 26. Most of them were 18 or 19.

I'm a woman. They were men.

I can, however, recommend that you talk to a World War II veteran before it's too late. Veterans appreciate it when people take the time to learn about their experiences. Just remember to say thank you.

Another option is to tour this "flying museum." The musty smells and cramped quarters will give you a good understanding of where some men spent their last moments so that you could freely live. It's better than any History Channel special or book.

Ground tours of the plane will cost \$5 for ages 13 to adult and \$3 for children ages 5-12. Children under 5 will be admitted free.

The plane will be on display today from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. and will depart Monday.

Flights of 45 minutes cost \$425 per person for the waist section and \$500 per person in the nose section.

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