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World War I fighter plane debuts at airport open house

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Sunday, 18 July 2010 00:00

Images

AUBURN — A replica of a World War I German fighter plane debuted Saturday at the DeKalb County Airport's second annual open house.

Buck Toenges of Fort Wayne started to build the plane in 1993, after a lifelong fascination with early aircraft.

The plane isn't airworthy yet, but as soon as it's up to code, Toenges plans to sell the piece of replicated history to help pay his children's college tuition.

"I'm not a pilot," he said. "I just like airplanes."

Toenges said he became enamored with planes during a World War I fly-in at a wealthy man's home in Guntersville, Ala. The man owned several planes and would often open his collection to the public.

In the late 1960s, Toenges watched "The Blue Max," a movie about a German World War I fighter pilot. He was hooked, and his love of planes stayed with him into adulthood.

Toenges saw a picture of the plane he would later replicate in World War I Arrow, a niche magazine for World War I history fanatics.

"It was one of the gaudiest planes I ever saw," Toenges said.

The plane's body is checkered with blocks of black and white. The wings are four-color lozenge fabric, an old-style German camouflage, with blots of green, blue, grey and gold styled on heavy fabric. A man in Kentucky specializes in making fabric for wings of older aircraft, Toenges said.



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Toenges started collecting pieces and building a German Fokker D VII fighter plane designed like a plane flown by William Hippert.

After a short time, he realized he was in over his head and started asking for help.

He asked a man from South Africa to create replica machine guns to sit just in front of the plane's open cockpit.

"I was talking to a guy in California — a Fed Ex pilot. He had a replica World War I machine gun built by this guy," Toenges said.

Mercedes of BMW would've built the plane's original engine, but machinery in good condition is hard to come by, Toenges said. He found a similar engine — a DeHavland — which came out of a plane belonging to the Sri Lankan Air Force.

"You meet some pretty eccentric people from all over the world," Toenges said.

The plane's painted, wooden propeller came from Oklahoma.

Originally, the name "Mimi" was scripted across the center of the plane's wings, but Toenges felt he should put the name of his wife, Julie, across his plane.

Toenges said it was quite a chore to transport the plane to Auburn. The aircraft's wings had to be disassembled and everything loaded into a semi trailer. After about a day's work, the plane was ready for public viewing.

Toenges' plane will be on display at the Hoosier Air Museum until it's airworthy, he said. He currently is working with Tony Gaerte of Century Aviation (DeKalb County Airport's fixed-based operator) to get the plane airborne, and Gaerte will be the first person to fly it.

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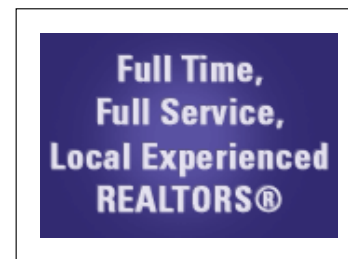
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