

The NINE 0 NINE Revisited

by Ralph J. Ferrusi

Friday, September 9, 2016 was a Big Day for me. I've flown in a lot of commercial

airliners: Boeing 747's, 737's, 727's—probably even 707's—Airbus A310's, A320's, even Douglas DC-10's, and Aeroflot Tupolev's in the Soviet Union. I've flown in small light planes, and twin-engined "puddle jumpers" in the US, the Caribbean, and Central America.

But on September 9th, I flew in a World War II B-17G: the Collings Foundation NINE 0 NINE, and detailed this once-in-a-lifetime experience in the Boating on the Hudson & Beyond 2016 Holiday Issue, pages 17-22.

I've been a big fan of the Stow, Massachusetts-based Collings Foundation for quite a while. I admire, and respect, what they're doing: in their own words: to "keep the 'Nine-0-Nine' [and their other World War II planes] flying, as a symbol of American patriotism and as a learning tool for our future generations to learn more about World War II and aviation history". Bravo...

I first became aware of the Collings Foundation when their Wings of Freedom Tour visited the Westchester County Airport in September 2009, and I clambered through the NINE 0 NINE and their B-24H Witchcraft. I revisited both planes—and their TP-51C Betty Jane—at the Dutchess County Airport in 2014 and 2015. In 2016, a light bulb went on in my head—my birthday was coming up on September 12th, so why not wake up and treat myself to a flight in the NINE 0 NINE—come on, Ralph, you're not getting any younger; fork over the 450 bucks and Just Do It. I did, and I've very glad I did.



Here I am, psyched about my flight.



Bombardier's view of the Hudson.

After the flight, I received the Collings Foundation 2016-2017 Newsletter, with a great in-flight photo of their newest acquisition, the TF-51D two-seater Mustang Toulouse Nuts. I devoured the glossy, 34-page magazine. On the back cover was Membership Information. We're now Participating Members of the Foundation.

As part of the membership we received a folder that included, among other things, information sheets on each of their World War II aircraft currently on tour. The NINE 0 NINE's information sheet first told the wartime story of the B-17G serial number 44-83575, then how the Foundation acquired it and restored it as the NINE 0 NINE, then the "real" NINE 0 NINE's wartime history.

B-17G #44-83575 and both the actual NINE 0 NINE and the Colling's NINE 0 NINE had very interesting histories. Here's my summary of their stories, from the Collings' information sheet:

B-17G #44-83575 was built at Long Beach, California by the Douglas Aircraft Company and accepted by the Army Air Force on April 7, 1945. Too late for combat, it served in the Air/Sea 1st Rescue Squadron and then in the Military Air Transport Service. Get this: then in 1952 #44-83575 "was instrumented and subjected to the effects of three different nuclear explosions"!!! After a thirteen-year "cool down" period it was sold as part of an 800-ton scrap pile...

The new owner, Aircraft Specialties Company began restoration, that included four thousand feet of new control cable, and the replacement of all electrical wiring and instrumentation. The restored Yucca Lady eventually took to the skies again, serving twenty years as a fire bomber fighting forest fires, and was sold to

the Collings Foundation in January 1986, and "restored back to her original wartime configuration" by Tom Reilly Vintage Aircraft.

In August 1987 things hit the fan: while landing, the now-NINE 0 NINE was caught by a severe crosswind and crashed through a chain link fence into a 100-foot ravine. The landing gear was sheared off, the chin turret and Plexiglass nose were smashed/shattered, and the engines and propellers were torn from their mounts. There were no fatalities.

Thousands of volunteer hours, and support and donations from individuals and corporations finally got her back in the air, and then to 2800 tour stop visits. Remarkable...

The original 91st Bomb Group, 323rd Squadron NINE 0 NINE entered combat on February 25, 1945, eventually making eighteen trips to Berlin and overall dropping 562,000 tons of bombs. Twenty-one engine changes later, and having "suffered from considerable flak damage", she completed 140 combat missions without an abort or the loss of a single crewman. Talk about remarkable...

After the war, she was flown back to the United States, and....scrapped....

Now, thanks to the Collings Foundation—and its supporters—tail number 231909 flies again, visiting over 110 cities annually, nationwide. Makes yah proud: Bravo....

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