

TONDELAYO!!!!

by Ralph J. Ferrusi



Seems like we Americans may have been the only aerial combatants to embellish our airplanes with names and images.

“Tondelayo”??? Am I going to write this whole article in Espanol??? Nope: “Tondelayo” is the name of the Collings Foundation World War II North American B-25 Mitchell. Let’s talk about World War II airplane names for a bit. I don’t recall ever seeing, or hearing of a Spitfire or Hurricane with a name on its fuselage. Same with ME-109’s and FW-190’s: every once in a while I’ve seen a picture of one with some kind of dragon or something else scary and/or “fierce” on the tail, but “names” up front are to me, rare if not totally absent. Japanese planes also. Seems like we Americans may have been the only aerial combatants to embellish our airplanes with names (and, drawings): from my experience it was unusual for an aircraft NOT to be named. Good for the U.S.A.!!!

The names were wildly imaginative, and, outrageously original. I have a whole bunch of Mustang books, and one has drawings of Mustangs and info about their pilots and squadrons, so let’s use these as examples. We’ll start off with Major George “Ratsy” Preddy’s P-51’s—a P-51B and two P-51D’s—all named “CRIPES A’ MIGHTY”: he had a liking for “English colloquial phrases”. My recollection is the “B” had a much-less-colorful name at first... Preddy was the top-scoring Mustang pilot of World War II, with 25.83 confirmed “kills”. He was THE stereotypical WWII fighter pilot—a hard-drinking swashbuckling gambler, with a dapper mustache—and flew with the 352nd Fighter Group out of Bodney, England: the “Blue Nosed Bastards of Bodney”. He was killed by “friendly fire”—an American kid manning quad-50-caliber antiaircraft guns—while low-level chasing an FW-190 on Christmas Day 1944, near Leige, Belgium. “The fortunes of war”: What a rotten, rotten shame. Another well-known Mustang ace was Captain Don Gentile, and his P-51B “Shangri-La”. He never did fly “D’s”. Let’s take a quick tour through some other unique Mustang names: “Big Beautiful Doll”, “Moonbeam McSWINE”, “ALABAMA RAMMER JAMMER”, “JERSEY JERK”, “Nooky Booky IV”, “Ferocious Franky”: Point made???

Back to “Tondelayo”: The real B-25 that is now the Collings “Tondelayo” was built at the Kansas City, Kansas North American Aviation factory as serial number 44-28932 and

was accepted into the Army Air Corps on August 3, 1944, and served in the AAF Training Command for the rest of the war, and continued in a training capacity until 1959. 44-28932 was purchased by Earl Dodge, of Anchorage, Alaska and flew as a forest-fire fighter in the Pacific Northwest for the next 25 years (Check out the movie Always).

44-28932 was acquired by Collings in 1984: the first World War II bomber in the Collings’ collection. After two years restoration, it became the “Hoosier Honey”, a 12th Air Force aircraft that served in Italy and North Africa in 1944. In 2001 it became the “Tondelayo”, that flew in the 5th Air Force, 345th Bomb Group, 500th Bomb Squadron “Air Apaches” in the Pacific against targets in New Guinea, attacking shipping and beating off (name-less???) Japanese fighters. The name “Tondelayo” was inspired by Hedy Lamarr’s character in the 1942 movie “White Cargo”!



Fast Forward to Wednesday, October 4, 2017: in the last several years, right about this time, a Collings Foundation light bulb goes off in my head. Dutchess County Airport did not appear in an on-line check of the Collings Wings of Freedom Tour dates for 2017. But,

a small ad in the previous Sunday’s Poughkeepsie Journal said they were a’coming October 4th-6th. I called the airport and was informed the planes would be arriving “between Noon and 2:00 PM”. I hustled over to the “unofficial” parking area on Route 376 at the east end of the main east/“NINE 0 NINE” flight (“Boating on the Hudson and Beyond 2016 Holiday Issue”). So we waited, and waited, straining our eyes for tell-tale specks in the broad blue sky. A few other people eventually showed up, and we all waited, and waited. Close to two o’clock, an “official” Dutchess County vehicle pulled in, and I thought we were going to be told we couldn’t park where we were, but the driver asked if we were “waiting for some airplanes”, and said he just heard on a scanner that they were “in the landing pattern”!

We all jumped out of our cars, and sneaking up behind us was the B-24 “Witchcraft”, soon followed by the “NINE 0 NINE”, and, the “Tondelayo”. We watched all three roar right over our heads and land, but, where was the Mustang???



We waited, and waited. Finally, I gave up, and, while stuck behind a school bus a short way's down 376, a plane that gave a pretty good imitation of a Mustang flew over the road with its landing gear down. I did a quick U-turn and got back to the airport as soon as I could (I was stuck at the infamous 376/New Hackensack Road traffic light forever), and when I got back to the end of the runway was informed "the second you left the Mustang did a fly-by, and then landed". Shit. Double Shit... One of the whole points of all the waiting was to see, and hear, a Mustang in the sky, one more time. Some days you eat the bear, some days the bear eats you.

So, like a moth to a flame, I went back to the airport Friday, hopefully to see the planes (including the Mustang) take off. When I was inside the gate Jamie announced they needed two more people to sign up for the B-25 to fly. Out of nowhere, two guys signed up. I said, "Room for one more???" She nodded. Believe me, 400 Bucks has never been, and never will be, "pocket change" to me, but I, Mr. Non-Impulsive, handed her my DISCOVER card.

It took forever to get the signal to board the B-25, and only then did I find out three people would be in front: ringside seats on the flight deck and in the plexiglass bombardier's compartment in the nose—The Best Seat in

So, like a moth to a flame...

the House—and I and two others would be "in the rear". It got worse: once "in back", there would be no way to get past the bomb bay into the front. In the "NINE 0 NINE" we could roam the entire airplane. Not so with the B-25. Honestly, if I had known this beforehand, I would not have handed over the DISCOVER card.

Aboard, they gave us ear protection. My first thought was "I don't need no stinkin' ear protection: I want to experience the whole nine yards!" The Wright Cyclone R-2600-92's finally fired up, barking and mis-firing for quite a while: loud, but not unbearable. When the pilot revved 'em up at the end of the runway, the sound blast was the absolute LOUDEST thing I had ever experienced: unbearably, painfully LOUD. I slammed on the ear protection, and wore it the entire flight.

Take off was anti-climactic for me—I had The Worst Seat in the House, facing rearward, my back to the bomb bay wall—the two other "rear" guys were seated at the two plexiglass waist gunner's windows. I couldn't see nuthin'... When we reached cruising altitude, as promised we were given the signal we could take off our seat belts and crawl, one at a time, back to the tail gunner's position. I'd be the last, but I moved up to the left waist gunner's window and, Wow!!!, there was the Hudson down there, stretching north, and we were right over Bowdoin Park!



Bear Mountain Bridge.

I finally crawled to the tail, and behind us was the Hudson north of the Bear Mountain Bridge, then the Bridge and the "Bear Mountain Road" looping around Anthony's Nose. Wowser! Soon there was Ansville Creek, Peekskill Bay, Con Ed, Buchanan, and The Point! John later e-mailed me he heard us coming, and ran out and took a picture. We eventually turned back north when I could see the Tappan Zee Bridge in the distance. I didn't want to hog the tail, so I crawled back to my lousy seat.

I went back to the tail one more time and saw hiking-trail-infested Mount Taurus and Breakneck Ridge off our right wing: we were about even with the top of Taurus. After we landed, people asked me how the B-25 flight compared to the B-17 flight. There was no comparison: they were entirely two different animals. Basically, the B-17 was like a commercial airliner compared to the obscenely LOUD, raucous, lurching and swaying, cramped B-25.

All in all, I'm glad I did it: it was a Holy Sh*!!! experience. But, before you hand over your credit card, get it in writing you're going to be In The Front...



Croton River and the MTA's Harmon Train Yard.