JEFF SKILES
COMMENTARY / CONTRAILS

Spring Training

A new season begins

BY JEFF SKILES

IT'S SPRING TRAINING AT the Dallas squadron of the Commemorative Air Force. The hangar housing the gigantic B-29 Superfortress at Fort Worth Meacham is a hub of activity as a dozen crew members wearing tan flight suits ready themselves to train for all six positions in the flight crew. Another crew of eight or 10 swarms over the airplane, preparing *FIFI* for its training flights today under the watchful eye of the squadron's three professional mechanics/crew chiefs. Other than these three crew chiefs, all are volunteers who are here to do their part to keep this magnificent airplane in the air.

The Commemorative Air Force flies well more than a hundred aircraft including a number of multiengine bombers: two B-17 Flying Fortresses, five B-25 Mitchells, three A-26 Invaders, and *FIFI*'s hangar mate in the Dallas squadron, the B-24 *Diamond Lil*. *FIFI*, however, is the queen of the fleet and since the 1960s has been the sole flying example remaining of almost 4,000 Boeing Superfortresses produced.

AIR TOUR

As an air tour operator, the Dallas Squadron takes the B-29 to cities around the country offering the opportunity for the public to see, touch, and actually fly in this rare aircraft. Last year *FIFI* flew more than 150 hours and was seen and touched by 100,000 people. Like most air tour operators, the squadron lies dormant over the cool winter months, but those days are put to good use. The short days of the winter season are an opportunity to perform heavy maintenance in preparation for the busy upcoming flying season. Several more maintenance breaks are scheduled throughout the year. The CAF takes maintenance very seriously on its fleet of historic aircraft.

FIFI will be sporting a fresh Wright 3350 engine for this year's tour as well as two new, improved exhaust systems that noticeably change the tone of the 18-cylinder radial engine's rumble. Spring training is a time to test the results of last winter's labors and ensure that *FIFI* is ready for its ambitious schedule.

Likewise, flight crews must be trained and ready for the spring tour that will begin in just five days with the first flight to Mobile, Alabama. As with any air tour operator, there are FAA requirements that have to be met for crew training. These began in January when more than a hundred people

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assembled for the squadron's annual aircraft ground school.

GROUND SCHOOL

The first morning of ground school consists of squadron information, the presentation of the upcoming tour schedule, and general aircraft training. After lunch the crews break up into their respective positions for specific training.

As you might imagine the pilots all receive ground school on the Superfortress, but then stay on individually for C-45, T-6, T-34, or PT-13 training, as appropriate. Any or all of these aircraft commonly accompany *FIFI* on tour. I maintain qualification on the B-29 and the PT-13 Stearman.

On *FIFI* a flight crew is far more than just two pilots in the cockpit. *FIFI* travels with a support crew of 10 or 12 people who all have a role in keeping it in the air.

The Superfortress is certified as experimental exhibition, and its operations specifications require a flight crew of six on board for every flight. The aircraft commander and copilot positions are of no surprise, and anyone familiar with the large transports and bombers of this era knows that a flight engineer is a required commodity, but the other three positions are less well-known.

WHAT IS A SCANNER?

FIFI flies with three scanners in the aft compartment. They are integral members of the crew who factor heavily into the conduct of the procedures and checklists. The scanners have a large role in crew coordination because they sit in the side bubbles along the fuselage and beside the APU in the tail and act as the aircraft commander's eyes and ears aft of the cockpit. The scanners verify the position of gear and flaps, report on the condition of the engines, and ensure that chocks, external gear down locks, and ladders are stowed as appropriate. In the air on ride flights they monitor and assist the passengers in the rear of the B-29 as well.

The Boeing B-29 was one of the very first pressurized aircraft, and its internal structure resembles two oxygen bottles laid lengthwise connected by an approximately 35-foot-long tunnel. Only rarely does a crew member move between the compartments, however. The tunnel's diameter may have been perfectly proportioned for the 18-year-old, 5-foot-6, 140-pound airmen of its time, but it is decidedly lacking in proportion for the 6-footers of today. The aircraft commander, copilot, and flight engineer work in the forward control cabin, while the scanners are lodged in the larger rear gunner's compartment. All crew members wear headsets and are connected by interphone communications throughout a flight. Today, however, *FIFI* doesn't reach the rarified altitudes flown on missions over Japan and pressurization is not necessary.

TRAINING THE CREW

Due to the fact that it takes six people to crew a B-29, training flights can often be quite busy. The aircraft hasn't flown for four months, so every pilot needs a yearly check or at the very least three takeoffs and landings for currency; flight engineers need to be trained; and scanners must be introduced to their craft. None of which can happen on a ride flight with passengers on board.

A scanner must log five training flights before he or she can be certified to act as a crew member on ride flights. Since the only option to accomplish these flights is on training flights such as this one, or repositioning flights between cities, a prospective scanner must take advantage of every opportunity.

Most scanners are not pilots at all; therefore, new scanners generally have little familiarity with aircraft operations or the concept of acting as part of a crew. Required callouts of ladders "stowed" or flaps "verified 15" are often delivered haltingly as the trainees learn how to conduct a challenge and response checklist.

On this flight we have eight scanners, two flight engineers, and three pilots all either instructing or being instructed. For me, today will be a yearly check requiring air work and three takeoffs and landings for currency. The B-29 is only certified for day VFR operations under the CAF's ops specs, so a yearly check is really nothing more than a grandiose VFR aircraft checkout.

FLIGHT PREP

The maintenance crew has been swarming over the airplane all morning repairing various squawks from yesterday's training flights, cleaning the windows, and wiping oil off the engine cowlings. At the appointed hour the tug is hooked up, and the crew chief pulls the glistening ship out into the sun.

As we approach the aircraft, the scanners and flight engineers are already deep into their extensive preflight duties. One advantage to having such a large crew is that duties that would normally fall to the pilot in command are split amongst many. After preflight duties are complete the entire crew meets at the nose wheel for a briefing from the aircraft commander on today's mission.

"We're going to head out northwest from Meacham for a little air work and then takeoffs and landings at Fort Worth Alliance Airport. The runways are long at Alliance so depending on how the landings go we may make them touch-and-goes. It is windy today"—not a surprise to anyone standing on the ramp—"so it may be a little bumpy. This is a training mission so there are no dumb questions. Everybody be alert and put safety first."

With the briefing complete the scanners all walk to the tail and climb the ladder into the rear compartment. The pilots and flight engineers climb up through the nose wheel well to the control cabin, and we take our seats for start.

With the fire guard posted with his extinguisher to the side of the No. 3 engine and our flight engineer instructor Ben Powers outside with headset and interphone on the long line, we are ready for start.

Next month—training flight. EAA

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