

Bridgeton News

Don't say grown men never cry

Wednesday, August 23, 2006

By JEAN JONES

Staff Writer

MILLVILLE -- It was a scene from the past as a P-47 Thunderbolt plane landed at Millville Airport Tuesday, while survivors of the 412th Fighter Squadron, 373rd Fighter Group, 9th U.S. Army Air Force, watched.

It was a three-day reunion for the group and they were thoroughly enjoying the Millville Army Air Field Museum.

But the P-47 was definitely the highlight of the day.

There were loud cheers from the group, which numbers only about 20 survivors, many of whom couldn't attend the reunion, as the plane taxied up and shut down its engine.

It obviously was an emotional experience for the men and their families.

The veterans, all in their 80s, may have been long past their prime, but as the plane came in, they once more were young and strong.

A few saluted.

Some had barely concealed tears.

As the group toured the museum before the landing, reliving their war years through the many displays, word had come that the plane was nearing Millville and the group moved outside to watch from behind the fence.

Bill Rich, a former instructor at the air field, and Joe Ritz, a crew chief, had known each other while here.

They hitched a ride onto the field with airport manager David McCarthy to see the plane close up as it landed.

Ritz apologized for a failing memory, after a stroke and three heart attacks, but his recollections of the war remain sharp.

The ground crews were responsible for keeping the planes flying.

"I lost three men and three planes," he said, naming the men and the exact dates and locations where they went down. "I didn't fly the planes, but I taxied them to where they were going to take off and buckled the men in and wished 'em luck.

"They were the good days," he said.

Ritz said he called Rich several months ago, first to see if he was still alive and then to find out if the group could hold the reunion here.

Norbert Polansky was another man who was stationed here during the war.

Some of the men were P-47 pilots, but didn't train at Millville.

But all had ties to what many pilots said was the best plane you could fly because of its big heavy engine in the front, which protected the pilot from strafing.

Because of that big engine in the front, pilots couldn't see straight ahead, which is why they would taxi in a zig-zag pattern.

"I would lay on the wing and tell the pilot which way to go," Ritz said.

After training at Millville, he was sent to England, France, Belgium, Holland and Germany, before being discharged in 1945.

While it never was publicized during the war, the men flew the planes in combat, but they often were delivered by women, who flew them to Newfoundland, Scotland, England and France, he said.

Rich recalled having trouble learning to fly another plane, a P-40, especially landing. He related how he landed once next to another P-40 which made an absolutely perfect landing.

The pilot got out, waved to him, then removed the helmet, and shook out her long hair.

"She was a beautiful girl," he said.

As the P-47 appeared in the sky, Ritz shouted, "There she is! I'd know that engine anywhere!"

The plane has a top speed of 480 mph.

Rich estimated it was doing about 24 as it made a pass and circled, then landed.

"Isn't that nice!" Rich exclaimed as she passed. Ritz waved.

They rode back to the fence where the others waited as the plane taxied to a stop.

"God, that engine smells good," Rich said.

"The group had come from as far as Wisconsin to experience that smell once more.

Dan Dameo, the pilot, had flown the plane from the American Air Power Museum at Farmingdale, N.Y.

There was a furious round of picture-taking -- those who were pilots, those who trained at Millville -- some with the pilot who brought her in, some with the entire group.

Once finished, they moved off to have lunch.

"Where's the champagne?" one quipped.

It was that kind of an occasion.

The 412th Squadron was part of the 9th Army Air Corps, 373rd Fighter Group serving in Europe.

Several of its pilots completed P-47 training at the Millville Army Air Field here prior to assignment to the squadron.

The squadron provided bomber escort, dive bombing and strafing missions, along with our allies, and participated in battle engagements including air cover for the Normandy beaches during the D-day invasion.