

Thunderbolt veterans return to Millville

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MILLVILLE -- More than 60 years have passed since the 412th Fighter Squadron fought the Nazis across Europe.

Some members of the P-47 Thunderbolt squadron trained at the Millville Airport, which was Millville Army Airfield during World War II.

So the airport was an ideal location for the squadron's annual reunion.

Twenty-three squadron members, now in their 80s, attended the reunion that began Monday and ends today. Some came with wives, children and grandchildren.

On Tuesday, the veterans visited and toured the Millville Army Air Field Museum.

"This is probably the most special reunion we've had here in a number of years," said Robert Trivellini, a museum board member. "The P-47 is as important to them as it is to us."

The P-47 Thunderbolt is considered the most effective fighter bomber of World War II. Millville Army Airfield became the nation's first air defense base in August 1941, and the city high school nickname became the Thunderbolts because of Millville's association with the fighter plane.

The reunion highlight Tuesday was the arrival of "Jacky's Revenge," a P-47 belonging to the American Air Power Museum in Farmingdale, N.Y.

It is one of only eight P-47 Thunderbolts that still fly, said Joe Ritz, 84, of Baltimore.

Ritz was a crew chief who saw combat across Europe. "England, France, Holland, Belgium and Germany," he said, recalling where he was deployed during the war.

Ritz said the veterans hadn't seen a P-47 at a reunion in years. He said he contacted Vineland resident Bill Rich to help organize this year's reunion.

Rich was a P-47 pilot for another fighter squadron and is chairman emeritus of the museum here.

"He was here with me in 1943," Ritz said, standing next to Rich, 84.



Staff photo/Charles J. Olson

World War II veterans Bill Rich of Vineland (right) and Joe Ritz, of Baltimore share memories of their experiences at the Millville Army Airfield during the 1940s while standing next to a Thunderbolt P-47 fighter plane Tuesday.

#### BY THE NUMBERS

P-47 Thunderbolt combat statistics:

- 546,000 combat sorties with a combat loss rate of only 0.7 percent.
- 132,000 tons of bombs dropped.
- 135 million 50-caliber rounds fired.
- 1.5 million hours of combat.
- 20 million gallons of fuel consumed.
- 11,878 enemy planes destroyed; half in the air and half on the ground.
- 160,000 military vehicles destroyed.
- More victories than any other American aircraft in World War II.

Source: Millville Army Air Field Museum

Between 1942 and 1945, more than 10,000 men and women served at Millville Army Airfield, and 1,500 pilots received advanced fighter instruction.

Trivellini said he heard some great stories while talking with veterans at the reunion.

"A couple of the guys were staying in Belgium, and they befriended some orphans," he said. "Some were Jews that were being hidden. It's a pretty amazing story."

Norbert Polanski, 84, traveled the longest distance to attend the reunion. He came from Kenosha, Wis. "It took two days to drive," he said.

Lloyd Robert Jones, who lives in a Baltimore suburb, attended the reunion with his 89-year-old father, Lloyd Jones of Westchester County, N.Y. "All the guys here are proud of what they have done," said Lloyd Robert Jones.

Many of the veterans watched "Jacky's Revenge" leave the airport Tuesday afternoon.

The plane circled around the airport and descended once, giving the veterans a chance to wave goodbye.

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A P-47 Thunderbolt prepares to land at Millville Airport on Tuesday for a reunion of World War II veterans this week.