



A B-24 Liberator taxis into Billings Logan Airport.
Gazette photo by Keith Simonsen

WWII bombers arrive

B-24 Liberator, B-17 Flying Fortress rumble into city

By DENNIS GAUB
Of the Gazette Staff

You can be Walt Metier — pilot of a B-24 Liberator that was shot down in combat 49 years ago — and get a revelation while riding a restored edition of the fabled bomber Sunday.

Or, you can be someone who grew up in the "Top Gun" jet fighter generation — and still appreciate the power and beauty of the twin-tail, prop-driven B-24.

That cross-generational appeal brings out crowds everywhere the

Collings Foundation sends its "living history" display, according to Craig McBurney, pilot-mechanic of the B-24. Besides the Liberator — billed as the only restored flying B-24 in the world — the foundation also sends an equally famed World War II bomber, the B-17 Flying Fortress, to airports around the country.

Both planes landed in Billings Sunday afternoon, starting a three-day stay at Logan International Airport. The bombers, parked in front of the Lynch Flying Service building, will be open to public viewing from 8:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. Monday and

from 8:30 a.m. until 1 p.m. Tuesday. They will leave at 2 p.m. for their next stop, Miles City.

Metier and several media representatives were among six people who rode on the B-24 during a one-hour flight from Bozeman to Billings Sunday.

Metier, who now lives in Bozeman but hails from Wilsall, said he flew 42 missions, starting Feb. 27, 1944, as a first pilot of the B-24. On July 7, 1944 — the 42nd mission — his plane was shot down over Bleick-

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Bombers

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hamer, Czechoslovakia, but not before dropping its bombs.

Meiter was a prisoner of war for almost a year and got home on June 17, 1945.

He hadn't flown in a B-24 until Sunday — and he learned something that he didn't know as a pilot sitting in the cockpit.

"I didn't realize how wicked it was for them," he said, referring to members of the B-24 crew who rode toward the rear of the bomber.

"Those poor devils sitting here, looking for

fighters all the time, going through treadmills (of the plane's changes in altitude) —them guys were pretty special people," Metier said.

"We flew at 20-some thousand feet," so crew members endured cold surroundings in the non-pressurized plane, he said.

McBurney, who's in his third year as a crew member for the foundation, said he has been in aviation for 12 years. He spent nine years in the U.S. Air Force, has a couple of college degrees in aviation and is a licensed airplane mechanic.

That's typical of those who fly the B-24 and the B-17. "Everyone has to wear a couple hats" as a member of the ground crew, the flight crew or handling public relations, McBurney said.

He and his colleagues are proud of the record for dependability they compile.

"We fly at least every 47 hours, sometimes in 24 hours. Last year, we made 129 stops with two 48-year-old planes — and we didn't miss any cities for maintenance or weather," he said.

Asked to describe a typical visitor to the display, he said, "It's hard to say. People who come out are anywhere from 5 years old to 95 years old. They're veterans, children of veterans, relatives of someone lost in combat, people who built the plane. These are airplanes that touched everyone's lives."

The foundation charges adults \$7 and children \$3 to view the planes and help defray the \$2,000-per-hour cost of flying them and the millions of dollars it cost to restore them.

More than 97,000 man-hours went into restoring the B-24. Asked if that represented a labor of love, McBurney replied: "It's a love of labor."

bomber continued

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