

The City of Hastings made good use of the Liberator as a draw to many aviation events as shown by this 23 August 1946, advertisement. (Hastings Daily Tribune)



READY FOR INSPECTION!

AFTER YEARS OF HARD WORK, A B-17G FLYING FORTRESS HAS BEEN RETURNED TO ITS ORIGINAL WWII CONFIGURATION

BY JERRY MCLAUGHLIN

Boeing B-17G USAAF 44-83814 arrived at the National Museum of the Mighty Eighth Air Force (NMMEAF) on 15 January 2009. The bomber had been gifted to the museum, for static restoration, by the Smithsonian Institution in Washington and was immediately named *City of Savannah* (CoS), after a WWII B-17 with that name, as described in the July/August 2009 issue of *Warbirds International*.

Twelve years later, on 16 June 2021, the final major chapter of the *City of Savannah's* restoration took place on the floor of the museum's Combat Gallery when the upper turret of the B-17 was powered up — the last of the aircraft's three power turrets to become operational!

The first year of the restoration of the *City of Savannah* was taken up with literally cleaning the airplane and addressing the main concern of the

restoration team: "We don't know what we don't know."

The interior, aft of the bomb bay, was completely covered with borate residue, left over from the ten years that the airplane had been used as a fire fighter prior to being exchanged in a trade with the Smithsonian in 1984. The exterior of the fuselage was covered in a plastic film that was apparently designed to protect the aluminum, but had totally adhered to it instead, and had to be pulled and scraped off of the metal. The twelve-month cleaning chores did not require skilled technicians, but the challenge attracted a broad range of volunteers who would apply their technical skills after the cleaning was completed. Many of the first volunteers were from the Savannah based 165th Georgia Air National Guard Wing. Others were from nearby Gulfstream Corporation, coordinated by Operations Manager Jim Moriarty. A third group came from

local retirees, many whom had moved to Savannah from other states, and had a wide range of expertise, from carpentry to engineering.

While the interior/exterior cleaning was underway the team received expert initial advice, and acquired several mentors who would be central to their success in the years to come.

The early advice came via a visit to Savannah by the late Bob Mikesh, the retired Smithsonian Institution Curator of Modern Military Aircraft, who was a friend of one of the volunteers and who had approved the trade that brought 44-83814 to the Smithsonian in 1984. Bob met with the restoration leadership team and told them that the format for a successful restoration involved four factors: 1) the airplane had to be indoors, 2) a stable management team had to be established, 3) dependable financial backing was essential, and 4) appropriate technical expertise had to be available



Prior to entry in to the low shop entrance of the museum, the fuselage of the Fortress was mounted on a custom low-level frame, utilizing wheelbarrow tires, to allow the fuselage to pass into the building.

within the local community. These four criteria were all in the program that had been established, and it was with a great sigh of relief that the leadership team realized how well they matched up to criteria set by a leading expert in the field.

The project's first mentor was Dr. Harry Friedman, of *Memphis Belle* fame. "Dr. Harry" was, and is, the leader of an informal group of B-17 owners known as the B-17 Co-Op. One of the first questions that the Savannah team asked Harry was how they could evaluate the large amount of radio parts that had been donated to the museum over the years. Harry advised them to contact the local HAM operators and "then get out of their way." That advice paid off in a big way when members of the Coastal Amateur Radio Society (CARS) arrived at the museum and viewed the many black boxes containing radio parts in the archives. The *City of Savannah* radio room would become the first major restoration success of the project as the CARS team was thrilled at the prospect of taking part in the B-17 restoration.

A second, and hands-on, mentor was brought into the restoration by Harry Friedman. Tommy Garcia, as far as the *City of Savannah* restoration team is concerned, has more technical knowledge of the workings of a B-17 than anyone on the planet. As the team was learning about thousands of small facts regarding the innards of the airplane, Tommy made multiple trips from Houston to the museum to conduct week-long events that came to be known as "Garcia Week." Tommy



The *City of Savannah* arriving at its final location in the Combat Gallery of the museum. Museum CEO Dr. Walter Brown on the right.



Volunteers removing the "protective" plastic covering that had adhered to the fuselage over 25 years.



Volunteers from LMI Corporation mounting fabric on the ailerons and elevators under the supervision of volunteer David Pinegar.