

# IT'S TIME FOR WWII!

MID-ATLANTIC AIR MUSEUM HAS CREATED AN IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCE WITH WORLD WAR II WEEKEND. ISN'T IT TIME FOR YOU TO ATTEND?

BY A. KEVIN GRANTHAM



One of two Sherman tanks that attended WWIIW 2021 rumbles across the ramp. (A. Kevin Grantham)

The Mid-Atlantic Air Museum (MAAM) is perhaps best known for its strenuous efforts to recover and restore one of only four Northrop P-61 Black Widows that exist. Lesser known, perhaps, is the museum's diverse collection of award-winning airplanes and significant artifacts that reflect aviation advancements made by the individuals who once lived or worked in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States — people like William Piper, Sherman Fairchild, Guiseppa Bellanca, and Glenn Martin. There is also a common thread that weaves its way through the museum of how two men with a similar passion for airplanes and history came to form MAAM.

MAAM's origins go back to the 1950s when the late Eugene "Gene" Strine purchased a surplus Goodyear FG-1D (BuNo 88303) Corsair. Gene loved aviation and had a particular fondness for old airplanes — something he passed down to his son Russell "Russ" Strine. "I have been around airplanes from the

time I was eight-years-old," recalled Russ. "We spent weekends working on the Corsair. I also built model planes and read everything I could on aviation. We lived in Washington, DC, during the early 1960s when my dad worked at Andrews AFB. He made friends at the Smithsonian Institution and obtained access to their aircraft storage facility in Silver Hill, Maryland. We spent many hours there, and I think I sat in every cockpit I could, including the *Enola Gay*. Their P-61 was covered with tarps, but I managed to get a good look at that airplane too." Gene Strine also enjoyed being around the relics of aviation history and Russ would occasionally hear his father say, "Boy, I wish we could start a museum someday."

Surrounded by aviation, there was little doubt that Russ Strine would become a pilot. Russ soloed at 16 and in 1974 graduated from Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University with a Bachelor of Science Degree in Aeronautical Science. He also earned his commercial,

instrument, flight instructor, and multi-engine ratings. He did so well that the university asked him to join their flight department. "I loved working at Embry-Riddle," said Russ. "I enjoyed teaching very much, but something was missing. Florida was nice, but it just wasn't home for me. I visited my parents over Thanksgiving when my mother pointed out a corporate flying job ad that appeared in the newspaper. I called the next day and got the job." The initial excitement Russ had about the new job soon turned into disappointment. "The hurry up and wait aspects of corporate flying is not all it's cracked up to be," he recalled. "I did that for a few months and quickly realized how much I missed teaching. My dad was working at a little airport in Hanover, Pennsylvania, and he told me about the Bellanca Viking dealership on the field and that they needed an instructor pilot." Within a week, Russ was back in the air doing what he loved — teaching students to fly. About three

months later, the owner of the Bellanca dealership announced he was closing. Russ and one of his students purchased the company's assets and started Minute Man Airways (MMA). The future looked bright until the Hanover Airport manager decided to triple the cost of their lease, which prompted the Strines to move the company to the Middletown Air Depot near their hometown of Harrisburg. "We obtained a 35,000-square-foot hangar for peanuts, and the company just blossomed," said Russ. "We had the Bellanca dealership plus eleven airplanes on the flight line that supported our teaching and rental business. One day, I received a call from Dowty-Rotol's Central and South American sales representative. He said he needed a large facility to work on Fairchild F-27 and F-227 aircraft. He went on to say that he would find the airplanes and bring them to us. We would then remove the Dowty-Rotol components, send them out for overhaul, and later reverse the process when the parts were returned. The crews of the foreign-registered Fairchilds did not have International Civil Aviation Organization licenses, so I would pick up the airplane and crew in Florida and take over the flying duties to Harrisburg. These ferry trips allowed me to get some big airplane experience that would come in handy in the future." This contract worked out very well for MMA. They overhauled two airplanes for the President of Mexico, one for *Lloyd Aereo Boliviano*, one for the Peruvian Fisheries, and one for the Ecuadorian Air Force; which is a story in itself.

Russ continues: "The EAF crew was an interesting bunch. One of their members declared political asylum. My mother took him to our Congressional representative, and he eventually became an American citizen. We provided these crews with an apartment and a car they used to travel to New York and Washington, DC, where they bought refrigerators, stoves, and air conditioners to haul home. We removed the vertical fin off their F-227 to do an airworthiness directive and then reinstalled it. They waited about a week and then asked us to remove the fin and do something else so it became obvious this crew was in no hurry to go home, so this went

on and on. MMA wanted to keep our customers happy, so we did what they requested." This one job brought in more money than the Strines could imagine, and that influx of extra capital enabled MMA to do a lot of things.

The Mid Atlantic Wing of the Confederate Air Force also had a presence at the Middletown Air Depot (now Harrisburg International Airport). There were several former officers' houses at the airport, and the CAF wing leader rented one to act as a headquarters and meeting place. The Wing also sponsored a very needy Lockheed C-60 Lodestar. The airport manager did not like the CAF members running all over the airport, so in 1978 he approached Russ Strine and asked him to sponsor the group, which he did. Russ, now a member of the CAF, helped the local wing sort out their Lodestar. Later, a group of DC-3s located in Douglas, Arizona, became available. "I flew out there to take a look," recalled Russ. "The one I was interested in was a former FAA flight check aircraft (R4D-6, BuNo 50819) uniquely equipped with modern avionics. It also had a workbench and a three-side console like a disk jockey uses in addition to a couple of seats. The asking price was only \$1500, so I bought the airplane, intending to sponsor it under the auspices of the CAF. However, the CAF wasn't interested. In the meantime, my dad met the CAF's B-29 *FiFi* crew at an airshow. Some of the guys started telling airplane stories at a party they were attending. Al Hoxie, one of the crewmen, shocked everyone by telling the group that he knew the location of a P-61. My dad's ears perked up, and he asked Al some questions about the Black Widow." Hoxie went on to say that he



Gene started out his Warbird collecting when he discovered this Goodyear FG-1D Corsair in need of TLC. This aircraft now forms part of the late Paul Allen's collection at Paine Field. (MAAM)



Another popular WWIIW display is the flamethrower exhibit put on by the Parris Island Historical Foundation. (AKG)

had previously offered the airplane to the CAF, but they turned it down. He, for some reason, felt obligated to offer it to them one more time. He told Gene, "If they don't want it this time, I will give you the information." A few weeks later, a letter arrived with the location of the P-61 along with a photo of the craft resting on a mountain slope near the former Hollandia airfield in New Guinea. Gene Strine asked his son if they should recover the Black Widow and Russ said, "Sure, why not."

The Strines immediately went to the Indonesia Embassy and got nowhere fast. "We had meetings with the Air Attaché with no luck," said Russ. "Remembering that my dad had always wanted to open a museum, I came up with the idea of printing up some official business cards and letterhead. We wrote the Embassy a letter on the Mid-Atlantic Air Museum stationery, and instantly doors began to open. We kept all this P-61 stuff hush-hush. We did not want anyone to know what we were doing. Back now to the R4D. The Wing Leader and I went to the GSA in Harrisburg and informed them that the CAF no longer wanted the R4D. Instead, could they transfer it to our newly-established museum? He said sure, and that right there was the beginning of the Mid-Atlantic Air Museum."