

COLORS OF WAR

IN THIS INSTALLMENT, WE DEPART A BIT FROM OUR NORMAL FORMAT TO PRESENT A COLLECTION OF COLOR PHOTOGRAPHS OF B-17 FLYING FORTRESSES FLOWN BY A NUMBER OF USAAF UNITS IN THE ETO

BY MICHAEL O'LEARY

In past installments of "Colors of War," we have run a few shots of Boeing B-17E *Mary Ann* that was the star of the 1943 film *Air Force*. The plot of the film revolves around the crew of *Mary Ann* and how they set out from Hamilton Field near San Francisco only to arrive during the middle of the Japanese sneak attack on Pearl Harbor. The film was rushed to completion and came out on 20 March 1943 so it could serve an audience desperate for any view of American forces winning against the enemy. The film did just that and it was wildly popular. Director Howard Hawks considered the movie as his major contribution to the war effort. *Air Force* would go on to become a masterpiece of WWII movies created while the war was still being fought and completed when the outcome was anything but certain. Hawks knew he had to fictionalize some of the events in the movie but he did a better job than most modern movies about WWII. The film shows just how unprepared this country was for the Pacific War as the enemy swept through the Philippines, Pearl Harbor, and Wake Island. We must remember that many American citizens were living with the real fear of the Japanese attacking and invading the West Coast. Today, most people probably just view this as another war movie but that fear of invasion permeated a major part of America. Of course, *Mary Ann* and her crew are on hand to take part in many of the battles and there is some really good cinematography of the Fort and other aircraft (much of the filming was done at Drew Field in Florida). Going through our files, we found a few more Kodachromes of *Mary Ann* while the bomber was on a War Bond tour. These images were taken by USAAF PR photographers who were responsible for portraying the war in a "patriotic" manner. In this shot, maintenance is being performed on the bomber's Wright R-1820-97 engines to make sure the plane was up and running for its lengthy tour across the country. It is interesting to note the different style of clothing — the fellow on the left is wearing a rather snazzy civilian outfit and he was probably a Boeing field representative sent along with the bomber during its tour. The other guys wear a variety of headgear including tropical-style hats to keep the sun off them while the man in the top middle is wearing a Boeing security guard uniform. Obviously, this was a cast of characters thrown together for the benefit of the photographer. The photo offers great engine detail and it appears the powerplants are new — probably installed for the tour. *Air Force* was, for the time, a very long movie coming in at a bit over two hours. Hawks knew his audience and movie critics wrote how the film was interrupted numerous times when the audience stood and cheered.



Cowls back on, the Wrights are run-up prior to the Fort departing for the next stage of its nation-wide tour. As can be seen, the wording *MARY ANN — STAR OF "AIR FORCE"* was added to the nose in Insignia Yellow paint. At each airfield where the bomber stopped, visitors could make a War Bond donation and tour the aircraft. This view shows the swivel mounts for the machine guns to advantage. It also appears that the Fort was given a new coat of paint. Over the years, there has been some speculation between aviation enthusiasts about the "exact" aircraft that portrayed *Mary Ann*. We went to B-17 expert Scott Thompson to get his thoughts. After watching the film several times, Scott concluded that the Fort known as *Mary Ann* is actually a modified B-17B rather than a B-17C or later B-17 variant as others have claimed. By stopping the film and examining individual frames, Scott (aviation historian Anthony J. Mireles did the same thing) offers a convincing argument stating the bomber is B-17B USAAC 38-584. Over the years, the story that the aircraft was sent into combat and lost has proven to be fiction. The bomber was written off in a crash on 17 October 1943.

Dramatic poster for *Air Force*, which was one of the top movies of 1943. Current reviewers have written that the film is a product of "toxic masculinity" but I am not sure what that really means. As noted in other captions, the threat of invasion was real, the hatred of Japanese was real, and the mounting death toll of young American males was very, very real. Reviewer Bosley Crowther for *The New York Times* wrote, "*Air Force*... is continuously fascinating, frequently thrilling and occasionally exalting."



In *The Nation*, reviewer James Agee gave a rather strange opinion. "The well-paid shamming of forms of violence and death which millions a day are meeting in fact seems of an order more dubious than the shamming of all other forms of human activity; so I cannot be sure how I feel about *Air Force*. It is loud, loose, sincere, violently masculine, and at times quite exciting." I have not watched *Air Force* in years — perhaps decades — but I now intend to do so in order to form my own opinion. I would invite readers to do the same and let me know your thoughts at moleary2challenge@gmail.com. Remember, we must consider the film during the time period in which it was made... and not by today's standards.