

'Thank you for flying Ancient Airlines'

Ed Escallon's Fairchild PT-26 has logged thousands of hours

By MEG GODLEWSKI
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There are some airplanes that you are just meant to own and to share with others. That's how Ed Escallon from Elwood, Ind., feels about his 1940's-era Fairchild PT-26. The airplane is painted classic primary trainer yellow and has a grinning shark mouth.

"A shark mouth on a trainer?" I asked when I caught up with Escallon in the vintage parking area of this summer's AirVenture. Usually you only see that design on aircraft of that era that have some sort of weaponry.

Escallon smiled, saying, "It's more like something you find on a P-40 but, because of the inverted engine, the design fits the lines really well."

Escallon has owned the airplane since 1970. "I found it in Seattle and I just fell in love with it," he said. "I wasn't sure how I was going to pay for it, but I thought, 'gosh, I have to buy that airplane!'"

Escallon doesn't have much history on the airplane. He knows it was built during World War II by Fleet Aircraft in Canada right across from Buffalo, New York. During the war it was used by the Canadians on the west coast in the Vancouver area.

"After the war it came back to the United States because it had been part of the Lend-Lease Act," said Escallon, adding that he has a familial connection to the airplane. "My aunt was one of the first women to fly military airplanes," he said proudly. "She was a WAF (Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron) and she flew PT-26s as well as P-51s, P-40s and the like. Her name was Helen Schmidt McGilvery and she went on to become a WASP (Women Airforce Service Pilots)." To prove it, he opened a scrapbook he'd brought to AirVenture that held a photo of his aunt during her pilot days.

He then told me that I wasn't the only person to raise an eyebrow at the military-inspired paint job.

"The paint job is very inauthentic, not very imaginative," he said. "At the time I bought it we were in the midst of the Vietnam War and most warbirds were not painted up."

Escallon painted his airplane yellow with blue wings and the red meatball insignia inside a white star. "The white star and the red ball were pretty common in military aircraft in World War II. Some purists are offended and turn their nose up at me saying, 'it's supposed to be all yellow' and I say, 'well, if it was their airplane they could paint it however they wanted.'"

The PT-26 is a tandem design. The instruments are basic. Escallon has added some portable avionics, but for the most part the airplane is as it was during the war. Entry into the cockpit means climbing up on the wing, stepping on the seat and lowering yourself into the seat. Pilot trainees often flew sitting on their parachutes. Without a seat cushion you may feel a little like you are sitting in a bathtub. The fuel gauge is located in the wing. The skin is fabric and plywood.

Escallon describes maintenance as "progressive," noting that the fuselage is going to be re-skinned in the fall.

Finding parts for the PT-26 can be a challenge, but with the Fairchild owners group, you can likely find what you need, he said. "I always tell people not to throw anything away!" Escallon laughed, adding that the sentiment is the standard mantra of the antique aviation set because if a part can't be put on another airplane, it can be used as a template to make a replacement part.

The airplane was built in part from non-strategic materials, which means the wings are made of wood. The fuselage is made of chromoly steel. The engine is a 200-hp Ranger.

On the tail are the letters AA. When asked what they stood for, Escallon lowered the flaps, revealing the slogan "Fly Ancient Airlines."

"The airplane has flown for thousands of hours," he said. "It flies 50, 75 to 100 hours a year. After we land we say, 'thank you for flying Ancient Airlines.'"

"The airplane is a great joy to fly," he continued. "It's a good handling airplane and reasonably economical — for a military airplane at least. It is the most economical of the trainers, close to a Ryan and much less expensive than a T-6 or a BT-13. We cruise at about 115 mph, burning about 10 gallons an hour."

Escallon's airplane is a familiar sight at fly-ins. "This is my 30th trip to Oshkosh," he said. "I am also a founding member of Sun 'n Fun."

For more information: FairchildClub.org,
Groups.yahoo.com/group/FairchildClub.



Photos by Meg Godlewski



"A GREAT JOY TO FLY": Take a vintage open-cockpit airplane, add some whimsy and you have Ed Escallon's Fairchild PT-26, the sole airplane of "Ancient Airlines." The sharkmouth on the nose does make some vintage warbird buffs scratch their heads but, according to Escallon, the airplane brings a smile to everyone who flies in it — including the pilot.

