

PICTURE THIS

PLANE GAMES

AIR SHOWS STRIKE A CHORD IN A STATE WITH A RICH AVIATION HISTORY AND FUTURE.

BY EDWARD MARTIN



North Carolina air shows boast a variety of planes, including World War II models such as the Boeing B-25 Mitchell, above, and the Navy Vought F4U Corsairs.



PHOTO BY RALPH VOLTZ, COURTESY OF WARBIRDS OVER MONROE



PHOTOS BY WINGS OVER WAYNE

▲ Wings Over Wayne Air Show in Goldsboro drew more than 150,000 attendees to Seymour Johnson Air Force Base in April, ranking as one of the nation's largest air shows. The show was awarded "2017 Event of the Year" by the N.C. Association of Festivals & Events.



Some 1,500 feet down, Union County is a patchwork of fields and forests as a small helicopter banks toward Charlotte-Monroe Executive Airport. As it hovers, its two passengers and pilot see a scene below that seems straight out of the 1940s.

Its two big piston engines rumbling, a Douglas C-47 Skytrain taxis to take off, just as hundreds like it did on June 6, 1944, pouring thousands of U.S. paratroopers into France on D-Day, the invasion that reversed the tide of World War II. Nearby, warming up, sit North American Aviation P-51 Mustang fighters that helped sway the aerial Battle of Britain and, as escorts, cleared the way for bombers like the Boeing B-17F "Memphis Belle" to pummel Nazi Germany. It's also waiting below, with hundreds of spectators milling around it.

"These are some of the planes that changed the tide of the war," says Pete Hovanec, who directs the annual Warbirds Over Monroe Air Show that expects to attract 40,000 visitors Nov. 9-10, at a ticket fee of \$5 to \$15. "If not for some of them, we might be speaking a different language today."

Events like Monroe's are popular elsewhere in the First in Flight state, topped by Goldsboro's Wings Over Wayne Air Show. It drew more than 150,000 spectators to Seymour Johnson Air Force Base in April, ranking as one of the nation's largest air shows. Attractions included the Air Force Thunderbirds, Army parachutists and

Tora! Tora! Tora!, a team of vintage U.S. planes painted to resemble Japanese aircraft that recreate the Pearl Harbor attack. The next show will be staged in the spring of 2021, organizers say.

North Carolina is one of the nation's leading states for air shows. Which makes sense, given the state's pivotal role in aviation.

North Carolina has more than 70 public-use airports such as massive Charlotte Douglas International and Raleigh-Durham International airports, but also smaller ones like Monroe's and more than 480 public and private airports, airstrips and helipads, such as those owned by hospitals, says James Pearce, spokesman for the state's Division of Aviation. The industry's annual economic impact tops \$50 billion. Union County makes up an important slice with about 3,500 employed at aerospace-related companies such as ATI Specialty Materials Inc., which makes alloys for jet turbines.

In addition to its 40 mostly World War II-era aircraft, weapons and uniformed re-enactors, Monroe's show includes Greg Koontz, a bib-overalled Georgian who lands his vintage Piper J-3 Cub on the back of a pickup truck, and Concord-based Chuck Aaron, one of the world's few helicopter aerobatics fliers, who does loops and other maneuvers. He flew stunts in the 2015 James Bond movie *Spectre*.

They represent a phenomenon nearly as old as aviation itself. Barnstorming and aerobatics began not too long after the Wright brothers' historic 1903 flight, and daredevil wing-walkers with their biplanes soon followed. Warbirds Over Monroe features a "wall of fire," which simulates a bombing run but maintains safety standards, show officials say. "We have a pyrotechnics team that ignites 20-pound bags of diesel fuel," Hovanec says. "It's safe, but it catches people off guard."

Unlike the perpetually restored P-51 Mustang fighters, gull-winged Navy Vought F4U Corsairs and the "Memphis Belle" bomber that show up in Monroe, World War II veterans are rapidly disappearing. Fewer than 500,000 of the 16 million who served remain. A few pilots are expected, Hovanec says. "We want the spectators to meet and talk to the pilots and get up close, to learn the history and significance of these planes and the pilots and crew who flew them." ■

STATE OF AVIATION

Air shows annually (Monroe, Goldsboro, New Bern)	3
Public-use airports	72
Publicly owned, private use airports (mostly helipads)	17
Total public, private airports, air strips, other	484
Aviation's annual economic impact	\$52 billion

sources: N.C. Division of Aviation, Federal Aviation Administration



▲ The Cherry Point Air Show takes place in May at the Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point, the Marine Corps' largest air base. It features a variety of military and civilian aerobatic demonstrations.

PHOTOS BY RALPH VOLTZ, WARBIRDS OVER MONROE

PHOTOS BY SGT. COLIN BROADSTONE, CPL. MICHA PIERCE

