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Thomas J. Duffy prepares for takeoff in his P-51 Mustang at Millville Airport in South Jersey.

Wild About WARBIRDS

BY JEFF LYONS

Some people collect stamps. Others have baseball card collections. Thomas J. Duffy has a lot of watches. “I don’t know at what point you become a collector as opposed to a guy with a lot of watches,” said Duffy, founding member of Duffy + Partners. “But my real passion is aircraft.” Specifically, World War II planes, or warbirds, as they are known to enthusiasts. By most accounts Duffy would be considered a warbird collector.

Duffy owns eight planes from the World War II era, including a P-47 Thunderbolt, a P-51 Mustang, an FG1D Corsair, a Mark IX Spitfire, an L-4 Cub, a T-6 Texan, a B-25 Mitchell bomber and a Grumman Widgeon. He keeps most of his aircraft in Millville, N.J. and has another hangar at Red Lion Airport in Burlington County, N.J. The B-25 is based in Ocean County, N.J. “I also have a little Cessna 170 and a Beechcraft Baron,” the veteran trial lawyer added.

Duffy caught the flying bug from his father, who learned to fly after World War II. “He used to take me flying when I was a kid. He would rent a seaplane from the base down in Essington,” Duffy recalled. “I always had an affinity for airplanes. I read magazines, made models and read books on airplanes.”

“I got out of college and worked for a couple of

years and took two or three hours of flying lessons. I got admitted to law school at night at Temple. Between going to law school at night, getting married and starting a family, I had little time to fly. I kept reading books and magazines and everything I could about flying. The bug was always there. Finally, after over 10 years I started flying again.”

Duffy now has commercial, multi-engine, instrument and seaplane ratings as well as “type” ratings. Each of his airplanes requires an individual type rating. He has type ratings in: TBM Avenger, Spitfire, P-47, Corsair and the B-25. The P-51 is a standard category aircraft and does not require a type rating. The B-25 is a multi-engine 26,000-pound aircraft and requires a co-pilot. He has logged more than 3,000 hours in the air.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY Jeff Lyons



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To receive a type rating, an FAA examiner conducts a check ride to make sure a pilot can properly fly the aircraft. For the B-25, the examiner served as the co-pilot. Duffy said he purchased most of his airplanes before he had been type rated to fly them.

“Part of the idea for my collection was to have a plane representing every mission from the Second World War. There are fighters, bombers, bomber escorts, trainers, patrol and liaison class aircraft. No matter what the mission was, there’s an airplane for it. The fighters were mostly used to support the bombers,” Duffy explained.

The L-4 was the first in his warbird collection. He knew someone at an airport who had a T-6 and Duffy asked if he would ever consider giving him a few lessons in it. “(The owner) said that I would never be able to fly it because I was too old. I was in my early 30s. He said you had to learn to fly them when you were a kid. I found out later he didn’t know what he was talking about,” Duffy said. He did a lot of reading on how pilots were trained for World War II and decided to set up his own training program. He got a tailwheel endorsement for the L-4 Cub and flew that for several hundred hours. “After the Cub I bought a BT-13 (a basic trainer) that was a little more complex and a little bigger, but the landing gear is fixed. From there, it was on to the T-6. After that, I thought I was ready to move on to

the heavier iron. I purchased a TBM Avenger then I moved on to the Corsair and the P-47 and then the Spitfire and then the P-51. I always wanted a bomber so I got the B-25 and checked out on that,” he said.

“The first fighter I flew was the Corsair. I went out to Chino, Calif., to get checked out in it and then to go for the check ride with an FAA examiner. He had me fly the T6 Texan from the back seat because it simulates having a lot of airplane in front of you. That allowed me to demonstrate to him that I wasn’t going to [crash] the Corsair and injure anyone or the airplane,” Duffy said.

“And then you get in the Corsair, you start it up and you taxi out and the controller asks ‘what are your intentions.’ All of a sudden you realize you’re going to be flying a Corsair, alone, because there’s no way for anybody else to be in there with you. The thing that hit me as I moved down the runway was ‘I’m a 50-year-old guy in a 60-year-old airplane with 1900 horsepower that’s way more valuable than anything I thought I’d ever own. I better get this right,’” he said.

The first time he flew the Spitfire was down in Galveston, Texas under circumstances similar to the Corsair. “This Spitfire actually flew over the beaches of Normandy during the D-Day invasion and when I took off from the airport and the controller asked me for my intentions, I said I was just going to fly up and down the beach a little

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bit. As I was flying, I looked down at the beach and thought somebody looked down from this same airplane at the beaches of Normandy and I have this wonderful privilege of being able to fly this airplane.”

Even though the planes are titled to him, Duffy says he doesn't really “own” the aircraft. “Hopefully, I'm preserving them and taking care of them and letting people see them and enjoy them when I fly them. But someday I'll be gone and just like a Renoir or a Van Gogh these works of art still will be around and someone else will have to take care of them.”

Duffy was more interested in the Spitfire than any of the other fighters. “People always said the Mark IX was the epitome for Spitfires. Once you become a serious collector, the people who have these aircraft seek you out. The man I bought this from, an attorney, spent 10 years restoring it after he retired. He told me ‘I know you'll give it the TLC it deserves. I'm thinking of selling it. Are you interested?’ ” Duffy jumped on the opportunity and has flown it ever since.

“Most of the planes I've owned have pedigrees where the people I've bought them from have done a wonderful job restoring them and taking care of them,” he said.

Duffy often takes his planes to airshows around the country so people can get a chance to get a closer look. At the Atlantic City Airshow in the summer of 2010, he loaded up the B-25 with watermelons and dropped them to simulate a bombing run. Judge Gary DiVito and trial attorney Stacey Schwartz were part of the crew. “The B-25 is a lot of fun at airshows because it's more of a community kind of plane. You are not



Duffy says he doesn't have a favorite aircraft from his collection. “It all depends which one I'm flying the most.”

alone like in the fighter.”

What is it about World War II aircraft that Duffy finds so fascinating? “It sounds kind of corny, but when the world was faced with darkness and what would have happened if the Nazis had prevailed, the people of the United States just stepped up and put together this tremendous engineering capability that allowed them, in a relatively short period of time for what is now a relatively small amount of money, to create these aircraft that young men flew to defend the country and fight for freedom. That always intrigued me and World



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“As I fly them, I realized how privileged I am to be able to do this. All of my planes fly, and I think that’s important. Because you can go to the Smithsonian and you can look at them because they’re all there and beautiful to see. But that’s like going to a museum where all the animals are stuffed rather than seeing them in a zoo or on safari. When you hear them start up and smell the oil and gas burning and you see them fly, it’s a different experience. It’s important that people get the full 360-degree feel of what these airplanes are all about,” he said.

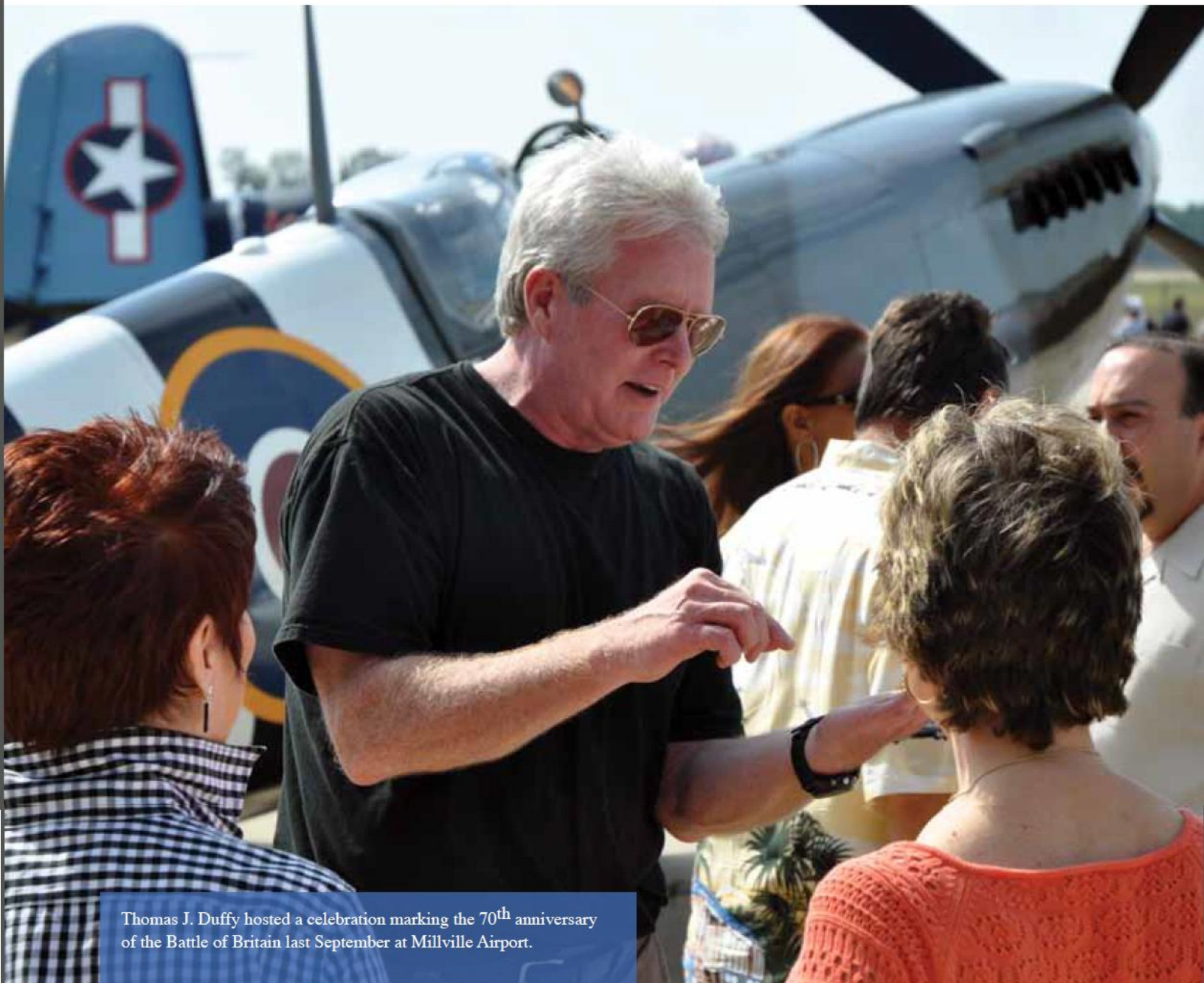
Duffy insists he doesn’t have a favorite aircraft from his collection. “It all depends which one I’m flying the most. I work really hard at being safe. I won’t get in an airplane that I haven’t been in for a while unless I sit in it and make sure I’m reaching for all the controls correctly. I’ll spend a couple of hours with the manual. I hadn’t flown the Spitfire a lot, but because this past September was the 70th anniversary of the Battle of Britain, I started to fly it again. I flew it in an airshow

in Long Island. I got reacquainted with it and remembered it was a really exciting and fun airplane to fly.”

Duffy rarely flies when he’s on trial because it takes focus. “Flying totally consumes you. You have to be thinking about what you’re doing, where you’re going, how the plane is flying, what is the wind like. When you’re totally in that element, you’re able to forget things like ‘did I get those interrogatories out, how’s the judge going to rule on this motion, is this appeal ever going to end?’ ”

“It really gives you an escape from what goes on being a trial lawyer full time. When you’re talking to controllers and preparing for approaches, there’s no room for thinking about what’s going to be happening on Tuesday with that case you’re arguing in Superior Court. It’s a great distraction from what goes on when you’re practicing law. I realize I am very fortunate,” Duffy said. ■

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Thomas J. Duffy hosted a celebration marking the 70th anniversary of the Battle of Britain last September at Millville Airport.