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undreds of volunteers and spectators gathered at McConnell Air Force Base in Wichita, Kansas, in July to watch the historic first flight of the world's second airworthy B-29 Superfortress, N69972 *Doc.*

It was a long journey that took 16 years of restoration and nearly three decades of persistence on the part of Tony Mazzolini, the man who first found the bomber in 1987.

(The other airworthy Superfortress is the Commemorative Air Force's B-29A 44-62070 – N529B *FiFi* – based at Fort Worth, Texas.) Over the years, it took a great deal of effort to keep the project alive but, with *Doc* being the only restorable B-29 not on display in a museum, it was a once in a lifetime opportunity. All this paid off on July 17, 2016.

As a former B-29 crewman, Mazzolini always had a fondness for the aircraft. When in 1987 his chapter of the Commemorative Air Force suggested trying to return a B-29 to flight, he began a search at China Lake in California, which at one time had been home to 250 B-29s, in use as targets on the US Navy weapons range. Although the navy insisted there were no B-29s left, Mazzolini was sceptical and kept poking around until he heard a rumour that there was indeed one intact out in the desert.

Far left Back in the air, 'Doc' rides again.

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Left An exhaust for one of the mighty Wright RR-3350 hybrid engines.





Right The 'office' of Doc. The

high standard of the restoration is apparent, as are the concessions to modern day technology.

"In April the B-29 was sent to Barksdale, Louisiana, but the records to November of 1945 remain classified to this day, leading to much speculation about the nature of *Doc*'s service during this time"

He found *Doc* resting among the weeds, a majestic silhouette in the sunset. The aircraft was an incredible find, nearly complete with all four original, rare, low-time 2,200hp (1,641kW) 18-cylinder Wright R-3350-57 Cyclone radials. But it would not be so easy for Mazzolini to acquire *Doc* as the navy insisted the B-29 was to be a museum piece.

Refusing to give up, he was finally offered a deal – deliver a fully restored North American B-25 Mitchell, and the B-29 was his.

Mazzolini formed the United States Aviation Museum in Willowick, Ohio, to help with his mission and then tracked down restorable TB-25N 44-29035 (N61821), which had once served with the Venezuelan Air Force. After six years' work, he was finally able to deliver it in 1998 to the National Museum of Naval Aviation at Pensacola, Florida, where it's displayed in the colours of a PBJ-1D.

Owing to concerns about the desert's tortoise population being harmed during the process of transporting *Doc* to its new home, Mazzolini *still* could not move the B-29. It took six months to plan a 38 mile (61km) path to a town only ten miles away.

In four days, *Doc* was hauled across the desert, with observers at each of her three sets of wheels to make sure no tortoises were caught under the tyres. The aircraft was pulled over roads, dry riverbeds and runways before finally finding home outside a hangar in Inyokern, California.

COMING HOME

Now that *Doc* was out of the desert, work could begin at last. There were no hangars at Inyokern large enough to house the B-29's massive 141ft (42.9m) wingspan, so it had to remain outside, enduring severe desert



winds and heat. To progress with the project, as well as maintain the volunteers' morale, *Doc* needed to be put in a hangar.

Essential resources were limited, and after two years a lack of money and volunteers left Mazzolini searching for alternatives. He took a chance and made what he describes as a 'cold call' to then Vice President of Boeing, Jeff Turner, asking for help. Later that same day, Turner returned the call. There was a hangar at Boeing in Wichita with volunteers to help.

All Mazzolini had to do was figure out how to get *Doc* there. He remembered a wealthy Maryland man who had previously offered to donate to the project, so he reached out – and the effort paid off with \$100,000 to cover the move. *Doc* was disassembled and strapped to six flatbed trailers to begin the journey.

In June 2000, the B-29 arrived at the Boeing plant in Wichita. The bomber had come home: it had been built here, rolling out in March 1945, one of 1,644 made at the giant factory.

CLASSIFIED ROLE

Doc began life as B-29-70-BW Superfortress 44-69972 and was delivered to the USAAF on March 23, 1945, going to Birmingham, Alabama, for modifications to the gun turrets. In April it went to Barksdale, Louisiana, but the records to November of 1945 remain classified to this day, leading to much speculation about the nature of its service during this time.

Issued in November 1945 to the Air Technical Service Command at Pyote Field, Texas, *Doc* transferred three months later to the resident 4141st Base Unit and presumably entered storage. In October 1950, it was on the move again, this time to the 2753rd Aircraft Storage Squadron, where it would be prepared for a longterm stay. By November 1950, the Korean War had been raging for five months and the political situation had changed radically. That month, B-29 44-69972 was dispatched to the San Antonio Air Materiel Area at Kelly Field, Texas, to be reconditioned for active duty.

Redesignated as a TB-29 in May 1951, three months later it was sent to Griffiss Air Force Base (AFB) in New York, where it was assigned to the 7th Radar Calibration Squadron (RCS) within Air Defense Command. During this time, *Doc* acted as a 'faker', simulating Soviet Tupolev Tu-4 *Bulls* – B-29 copies – for ground radars and fighter interception training.

From September 1952 the B-29 operated with the 109th RCS and three months later it was serving the 1st RCS, which had a fleet of eight B-29s known as 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs', leading to the first recorded use of the name *Doc* for 44-69972.

Doc remained part of the 'Seven Dwarfs' for several years until being reassigned to the 4713th Radar Left

An imposing view of the B-29 as it warms up its engines prior to take-off.



Above The brakes and landing data for Doc.

Evaluation Squadron, still at Griffiss. In March 1955 the B-29 went to the Arco Manufacturing Corporation in Tennessee for a rework before joining the 17th Tow Target Squadron at Yuma County Airport, Arizona, and shortly afterwards the 4750th Air Defense Wing. In March 1956, *Do*c left the USAF inventory and transferred to the US Navy.

On October 15 that year it was officially issued to China Lake with 50 other B-29s to be used as ballistic targets for air combat training. Over the next three decades it was fired on just four times, each attempt missing the sitting target!

When all the derelict B-29s at China Lake were destroyed, *Doc* remained tucked away far enough out in the desert that she was spared, only to be found by Mazzolini in 1987.

When the B-29 arrived back at its Wichita birthplace in the summer of 2000, enthusiastic volunteers were ready to get her flying again. Many had flown on or worked on B-29s in the past, including one with a very special connection.

CONNIE THE RIVETER

Connie Palacioz graduated from high school in 1943 and, soon after, heard on the radio that Boeing was hiring women. Eager to help with the war effort, she joined the Wichita workforce as a riveter and worked on B-29 nose sections. Her efforts could be found on every B-29 that came out of the plant in 1944.

When Connie heard *Doc* was coming back to Wichita, she wanted to be involved, knowing the aircraft was not only a part of America's heritage but also her own personal history. When she first laid eyes on the pieces spread out and ready to be restored, she could point out exactly which rivets were those she'd done more than 55 years before.

Eager to help as much as she could, Connie, now 92, remembers spending four months meticulously polishing nearly 350 switches pulled from *Doc*, many of them usable again. Her hard work paid off, and she was one of many volunteers to witness *Doc*'s first flight.

DOC'S FRIENDS

From arrival in Wichita to first flight took much longer than anyone anticipated. When *Doc* first arrived, it was assumed it would only take a few years to get the bomber flying, but a few major setbacks made the goal a little more difficult to achieve.

Even something as simple as the nose-art held them back – Disney holds the rights to the cartoon versions of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs and did not initially want to allow the painted cartoon to remain on the side of the B-29. But after some negotiation, the company eventually allowed its use.

But nose-art was far from the biggest setback that *Doc* faced. The magnitude of the project overwhelmed the resources and volunteers, and it



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suffered especially badly during the mid-2000s economic downturn. By 2010, the fuselage and wings had been mostly completed, but the resources had run out. Once again the B-29 was placed in storage to await a time when the space and money could be found to recommence.

Three years later a group of Wichita businessmen got together and formed Doc's Friends, a nonprofit organisation. Headed by Jeff Turner, the members were united by the refusal to let the project die and, taking ownership of the aircraft, began to raise money.

Doc's Friends formed with three primary goals in mind: to finish the restoration, find a permanent home and operate *Doc* as a flying museum for all to see. The B-29 was moved out of storage and taken to a hangar at the Boeing plant – the project was running again.

Although most of the work on the fuselage had already been completed, the wings still needed to be finished. But the engines were the most challenging element.

HYBRID ENGINES

Doc had been found with its four original engines intact, but had been exposed to the desert for several decades – and Wright R-3350-57s were prone to overheating, so modifications needed to be made.

The answer was custom-built hybrids, combining the R-3350-95W with the -26WD engine. This was the best of both worlds, the -95W being readily available while the -26WD was very reliable.

Originally, the -95W would not fit on the B-29, but combining the two engines gave the power needed to get *Doc* in the air while also fitting in the space available. Anderson Aeromotive of Grangeville, Idaho, handled this demanding job.

After three more years of restoration, the efforts of Doc's Friends, Tony Mazzolini and hundreds of volunteers finally paid off.

DREAMS AND DETERMINATION

Followers had been watching for months as videos were livestreamed on the internet – showing *Doc*'s engines starting up and FAA inspections taking place – all eagerly anticipating the eventual first flight.

At last, *Doc* was scheduled to fly at 08:30 on Sunday, July 17, 2016, taking off from McConnell AFB, adjacent to the Boeing plant where most of the restoration took place. The event was again live on the internet and viewers watched with excitement as the world's second flying B-29 made history.

When *Doc's* wheels lifted off the runway for the first time after many decades, it was the culmination of so many dreams and the determination of a community that would not stop until such an incredible piece of America's aviation history was in the air again.