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FEATURED

Airshow provides nonstop entertainment Saturday

Mark Newman Aug 25, 2018



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OTTUMWA — Hang around an airport long enough, you'll discover pilots are a very safety conscious group. Hanging around an airshow might make you think otherwise.

"It makes me not want to get in a plane and fly," said Riley Barker, 15, of Ottumwa.

He might not be too hard to convince, however; he was looking forward to the performance of the twin biplanes that would perform a choreographed arial battle like the one he saw last year at Fly Iowa.

And he thought the former government VIP passenger plane was pretty amazing, as it performed maneuvers usually seen only by stunt planes. One of the announcers said the large plane was doing things in Ottumwa that no one else in the world was attempting using that aircraft.

His mom had brought them to the show as her employer was one of the sponsors.

"You liked the truck," she said.

"The jet truck," he nodded. "We were way over at the entrance when it was starting; it echoed back and forth."

"You could feel the rumble deep in your chest," said Andrea Barker. "It was so loud. And even as we were coming in, you could see the flames."

In fact, no matter when spectators entered, there was something going on; while the jet trucked blasted along the runway, a plane was getting ready to take off. As that plane landed, another would take off.

That's what the board of Fly Ottumwa wanted, they said. More than a hundred volunteers sold passes, checked tickets, stamped hands, parked cars and used golf carts to pick up disabled pedestrians, mostly outdoor jobs that allowed them to see parts of the airshow.

The volunteers who served on the board filled out paperwork at a desk in a windowless airport terminal office. Pam Kaupins, who helped organize Fly Iowa when it came to town last year, was one of the board members who put Fly Ottumwa together this year.

She was writing checks for the performers, but didn't complain about not seeing the action: "This is a premier event for Ottumwa," she said. "And those volunteers, many of them have been working on making it happen for the past year."

She said she's thrilled with the turnout.

"Especially with the weather. We have a lot of families, people of all ages," she said.

That included at least one Vietnam veteran eager to see the A-10 Warthog fly.

"I saw one, one time, in Vietnam," said Greg Moore, now an Ottumwa audiologist known for his dry sense of humor. "We called one in for air support. I don't know that they called them 'Warthogs' at the time. It was rare for us to request air support. We always called in artillery."

Often, those shells came in from sea. When the A-10 came in, it caught the ground troops attention. It wasn't a strafing run, it came in to drop bombs. Moore remembered wondering how the aircraft was avoiding the shells from the US Navy ship guns.

Had the paratroopers called for an A-10 specifically?

"No," he said. "They don't let you pick the plane you want. You get what they send you."

He was seated with his family. To the left of their chairs sat a clean, ready to fly A-10. While Moore waited, he enjoyed the other parts of the show, including what he called "daredevil biplane pilots."

He also liked the demonstration version of paratroopers.

"The jump team was really great," he said.

His airborne unit would have been really great, too, right?

"Not quite the same. We had sergeants shouting at us and sort of — pushing us out of the airplane. It was very different. "

He turned more serious about the last jumper Saturday.

"To watch that, with those accurate parachutes as he came down with the American Flag, it was glorious."

In fact, after the end of the flag dedication ceremony at the Naval Air Station museum of Ottumwa (see separate article), the airshow announcer picked up the story.

Those officers flew in trainers just like the one you see before you now, one of the MCs said from the booth. Thousands of the biplanes were manufactured. So many, in fact, that when the war ended, the military had no use for a large number of them.

Those biplanes generally ended up being sold, and sold cheaply. They either went to a crop duster who would use them to apply agricultural chemicals, or in the hands of a stunt pilot looking to show off for the crowd.

One of the planes performing maneuvers Saturday had done both jobs; it dusted crops, and then, after some modifications, began to perform daredevil stunts at venues like Fly Ottumwa.

Staff writer Mark Newman can be contacted at MNewman@ottumwacourier.com.



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Mark Newman

Born in New England, reporter Mark Newman has lived in Iowa and Nebraska over 20 years, with 12 years as a Courier staff writer. He covered education news, but is now focusing on social issues as well as feature stories of local interest.

