

Fairchild 24

Sean Neal pays tribute to history

BY JAN TEGLER | PHOTOS BY ???



captions 1, 2, 3

“AT THE END OF THE WAR, there was an interview with a senior German U-boat commander asking why they pulled their submarines from the Atlantic coast in 1943,” American Airlines Boeing 737 captain Sean Neal recalls. “His reply was, ‘It was because of those damn little red and yellow airplanes!’”

The little red and yellow airplanes the U-boat skipper was referring to were the general aviation aircraft pressed into service by the newly formed Civil Air Patrol (CAP) in 1942 to report, deter, and disrupt the operations of German submarines, which had begun to devastate merchant vessels along the East Coast that January.

Civilian-liveried types, including the Stinson 10, Grumman Widgeon, Stinson Reliant, Sikorsky S-39, and Fairchild 24 had CAP markings applied, were armed and went to war for 18 months until August 1943, patrolling Atlantic and Gulf Coast waters at 21 coastal patrol bases extending from Maine to the Mexican border. They effectively drove U-boats from American waters and led President Franklin Roosevelt to transfer CAP from the

Office of Civilian Defense to the Department of War.

Built in 1940, Neal's Fairchild 24 pays tribute to the brave CAP pilots who volunteered to go aloft in the type in all kinds of weather to search for submarines, a dangerous mission that cost many their lives.

That history is near and dear to Neal, who joined the CAP at the age of 15 and now commands CAP's Mid-Eastern Group from its New York Wing as a Lieutenant Colonel.



Seated in a CAP tent during the Mid-Atlantic Air Museum's popular World War II Weekend airshow in June, Neal wearing a WW II vintage CAP uniform, related how he and his wife Susan formed the idea to buy a Fairchild 24.

Honoring CAP Veterans

Sean and Susan Neal have enjoyed being a part of the World War II weekend at Reading Regional Airport just



over the hill from Reading, Pennsylvania for many years. In the mid-2000s they met Mike Strieter there.

Neal says his wife loved Strieter's Stinson SR5A, and the two were interested in the airplane. But they learned that the well-known Maryland-based antique aircraft fly-in organizer sold his Reliant to Harry Ballance Jr.—an aircraft featured in the July/August issue of Flight Journal—the week before the 2006 airshow at Reading.

"When she heard the price, she said, 'We could afford that,'" Neal says. "That started the ball rolling. I knew we couldn't find an airplane like his for the same price, but I knew the Fairchild 24 was similar and I also knew it had a lot of Civil Air Patrol background. So the idea was that we could find a Fairchild 24 and fly it around in honor of the World War II Civil Air Patrol members

and kind of tell their story."

Peace and War in the 24

Fairchild's Model 24 was developed from the Model 22, a two-place, open-cockpit, parasol-winged monoplane. The enclosed-cabin, four-place Model 24 was a high-wing airplane available with either a Warner "Super Scarab" seven-cylinder air-cooled radial or an air-cooled, six-



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cylinder, inverted inline engine from Fairchild's Ranger Aircraft Engine Division.

Produced between 1932 and 1948 in the company's Hagerstown, Maryland plant as well as in Dallas where Texas Engineering & Manufacturing Company (TEMCO) cranked out license-built versions, more than 2,200 Model 24s were manufactured.

Reliable, rugged, and comparatively easy to fly, the 24 found favor with owners who used it for business and with private fliers, including Hollywood stars. Famous ventriloquist Edgar Bergen used the plane to tour the country with his "dummies," Charlie McCarthy and Mortimer Snerd. The aircraft sported a silhouette of McCarthy on its side.

The military wanted them, too. The U.S. Army Air Force ordered hundreds of Fairchild 24s with the designation UC-61. The U.S. Navy and U.S. Coast Guard flew them as GK-1s and J2K-1s, respectively. UC-61s also served with the Royal Air Force.

The main cabin and wing are of wood construction with the aft fuselage made from square and round steel tube. Fabric covers the wings and most of the fuselage, although the ailerons are aluminum. The 24's wide-track landing gear are equipped with spring-oil shock

absorbers and are integral with the wing struts, the wing's front spar, and the cabin's forward door posts. It's an extremely strong structure that soaks up landings on grass fields and inflight loads.

Sean had flown both Ranger and Warner-engined 24s previously and already knew they were "a delight to fly."

A Gut Feeling

On the way to EAA's 2006 AirVenture show in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, Neal and his wife stopped to see a Fairchild 24 for sale.

"My wife has gut feelings and she said, 'That's not our airplane.'"

But returning from Oshkosh, Susan Neal spied another 24 for sale in Barnstormers' Aviation Classifieds. She had a good feeling about the Ranger-powered example listed for sale in Idaho.

"We basically bought it sight unseen," Sean explains. "We called the owner and told him that if it was as he described we'd pay him what he was asking. It took two months to get out there, but when I did it started right up, which was a good sign. I jumped in it with a friend of mine and started back east over the Rocky Mountains. It took only two days to get from Idaho back to Albany."



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Now based at Freehold Airport in upstate New York, about 30 miles south of Albany, N25327 has lived an active life.

"Its serial number supposedly indicates it was the last of an order of 23 airplanes bought by the CAA [Civil Aeronautics Authority, forerunner of the FAA] as airway inspection airplanes," Neal says.

"It went to the desert-southwest, ironically on floats—the float fittings are still on it. They used it for a short time and then when the war came, it was acquired by the Defense Plant Corporation, which was buying up equipment for all sorts of war industries."

During the War, the 24 served as an instrument trainer, flying from auxiliary airfields around Sky Harbor Airport in Phoenix, Arizona with Southwestern Airways. Afterward, Southwestern sold the airplane. It changed hands among a number of fixed-base operators and flight schools until "about 1950 when it had an engine failure that led to an accident and ended up on its back. A bunch of high school kids bought it to fix and restore," Neal says.

The determined high-schoolers got N25327 back on its feet and replaced the Warner radial the airplane was originally powered by with a 200-horsepower 6-440 series Ranger inline. The conversion became popular in later decades because Rangers also equipped Fairchild's PT-19 and PT-26 military trainers and Grumman's Widgeon seaplane. Thousands of the six-cylinder engines were built and parts are still plentiful today.

Neal confirms that Warner radials are now rare and expensive, but he understands that Fairchild 24 buyers opted "usually two to one in favor of the Warner from the factory."

Reportedly, Ranger-engined 24s were slightly more expensive: \$5,590 for the 150 hp Ranger in 1937 as

opposed to \$5,290 for the 145 hp Warner radial. Ranger-equipped models with 175 hp sold for \$7,230 in 1940 while the 145 hp Warner examples retailed at \$6,290.

From 1950 forward, N25327 passed from one general aviation owner to another, mostly on the West Coast, Neal says.

27,000 Hours & Counting

Sean Neal has accumulated more than 27,000 flight hours. It's an incomprehensible number for most of us, a literal lifetime in the air. But Neal wouldn't have it any other way. His love for aviation dates back to his childhood. "We moved to Westchester [Pennsylvania] when I was nine, two miles from the airport and under the traffic pattern. I was into fishing but I would have to ride my bike past the airport to get to the fishing area."

Fishing was disrupted as Neal found himself constantly looking skyward to watch aircraft pass overhead. "So I ditched the fishing gear and started hanging around the airport when I was 12. It took me two years to get up the nerve to ask for a summer job when I was 14. I was hired immediately and almost went full time there after school and on weekends."

The job helped Neal pay for his own flight training. "I soloed on my 16th birthday, got my private license on my 17th birthday, my commercial license on my 18th birthday then got my driver's license three weeks later. A month after graduating high school, I got my instrument rating and four months after that I got my CFI."

He also studied for an airframe and powerplant rating with the idea of having mechanical knowledge to complement his flying skills. While piling up hours as a flight instructor, Neal decided he'd better get a college degree if he was going to make aviation a career. In 1984,

he enrolled at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, showing up with over 3,300 hours already in his logbook. "That put me mostly ahead of the other students, but I also worked hard as a flight instructor six to seven days a week while going to school full time."

Three years later, he graduated with an Air Science degree and 4,400 hours of flight time. Less than perfect vision ruled out military service or an airline job. "You had to have 20/20 uncorrected vision to get into the airlines at that time and three generations of astronauts in your lineage," Neal jokes.

So he went looking for opportunities to fly corporate aircraft. A chance to fly Cessna Citation bizjets fell through because though Neal had lots of single-engine experience he didn't meet insurance requirements to have 500 hours of multi-engine time.

When he learned that Trenton, Maine-based Bar Harbor Airlines was looking for pilots, he immediately applied. "They interviewed me and a week later I got a job offer and started flying Beech 99s with a whopping 70 hours multi-engine. We would do at least five flights a day, all hub and spoke out of Philadelphia to White Plains, Wilkes-Barre, Allentown, Lancaster, Harrisburg, Washington, and Reading."

Neal was furloughed by Bar Harbor just nine months after being hired but landed on his feet by joining Command Airways, an American Eagle regional airline operator for parent American Airlines. For the next 23 years, he flew the Shorts 360, ATR-42, and Saab 340 turboprop airliners as well as Embraer 145 passenger jets. Promoted to American in 2011, Neal flew MD-80s and Boeing 757s before becoming a captain flying the 737 NG and MAX.

Old Airplanes

Neal had flown an array of aircraft by the time the Fairchild 24 came into his life but "always loved old airplanes."

N25327 had been well-cared for with restoration work done by its Idaho-based owner before Neal acquired it in 2006. Since then, he's mainly performed routine maintenance. But several years ago engine trouble arose when he was leaving the World War II weekend at Reading.

"I'd just given a couple of VIPs rides in the night before," Neal remembers. "It was a hot summer day and as I was climbing out over the city towards the hills, the engine started having a vibration. The performance was not what it should have been, so I did a mayday and returned to the field quickly."

Upon landing it was discovered that Ranger was down one cylinder. The 24 remained at Reading until Neal found another engine in New England rebuilt by Ranger guru

Joe Denest. The replacement was trucked to Reading, installed with the help of mechanics at the field, and flown back to New York. Otherwise, N25327 has been trouble-free, Neal reports.

Now with a little over 3,600 hours total time, the airplane is well-sorted. "It's comfortable to fly. You can roll the windows down like an automobile. It's essentially the [Cessna] 182 of its day."

Fairchild 24s have a control stick in place of the expected wheel or yoke other aircraft of the period feature. "All of the flight controls are on roller bearings so they're very smooth. There's no binding in them due to their cable and pulley system."



Caption 7

Neal says the 24's tail comes up at about 50 mph on takeoff and the airplane breaks ground shortly thereafter. He likes to climb at 75 to 80 mph and 500 to 600 feet per minute.

The airplane cruises at between 105 and 115 mph and "rides out turbulence beautifully," he notes. "It's almost like being in a boat going over waves as opposed to being in a speed boat hitting choppy water. You definitely want to trim it up but the trim works well. Once you've trimmed it, you can literally fly it with your fingertips on the stick."

Landings can be "cushy," Neal says. "It's got very wide landing gear, about nine feet wide. The spring-oil shock struts have almost a nine-inch stroke. Smooth landings are fairly easy to make. You can actually feel for the ground and not get catapulted back into the air like you can with some of the other tail-draggers."

Crosswinds are always challenging in tail-draggers, but Neal says the 24's rudder authority is good. That's ideal given all of the places Sean and his wife have taken N25327.

A Trip Back In Time

Shortly after bringing their Fairchild 24 home to New York, the Neals applied CAP markings to the aircraft and made their most memorable trip so far, flying N25327 down the Hudson River corridor bound for Rehoboth Beach, Delaware. The beach community was home to the second flying station the Civil Air Patrol created in early 1942, known as Coastal Patrol Base-2.

The Neals planned to fly-in for a reunion of Patrol Base-2 veterans. On the way, they learned that Bader Field in Atlantic City, New Jersey, the site of Coastal Patrol Base-1, was closing permanently that day, so they decided to drop in.

"They had a friendly rivalry with Coastal Patrol Base-2, so we decided we'd pay homage to the Base-1 personnel enroute," Sean explains. "We were one of the last airplanes to take off and land at Bader. Lots of Fairchilds

flew out of Base-1."

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"As soon as we were off the ground, he took over the airplane and flew right out over the main street like he did 75 years before," Neal remembers. "He flew us out over the ocean and we did a wreath drop for the four crewmembers that were killed flying from Rehoboth Beach during the 18 months they were doing anti-submarine patrols.

"He rolled the window down and we made the pass, dropping the wreath. As soon as that was done, he was back on the stick and let me land it about 30 minutes later. He loved it! He flew the airplane like he'd been flying it the week before.

"It was amazing. We just love to share the airplane with others." ✈
