



Don Keller's B-17 Cockpit Instrument Panel Mockup

[Photo courtesy of and taken by Bert Campbell]

8th Air Force Historical Society, Oregon Chapter

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Interviewee: Don Keller

Interviewer: Bert Campbell

Article from the Original Interview, Edited by Joan E. Hamilton

Recently, Bert Campbell interviewed Don Keller in reference to Don's B-17 cockpit instrument panel mockup. Don's interest in B-17s began in 1967 with a sound like nothing he'd heard before, two firefighting B-17s flying "low and slow" over the top of the Seminary school he was attending. Don said, "When the engines are in sync there's no sound like it. It's a symphony. I started my research of this airplane by reading Caidin's book about B-17s and by meeting crewmen."

In the 1970s, Don started dragging airplane parts home. He turned this collection into the business Air Depot, a "source for B-17 parts and warbird collectibles". According to Don, "We worked with film companies on supplying much of their flight gear along with aircraft parts and props including 'Mae West' life preservers for the films *Memphis Belle*, *The Taken*, *Tuskegee Airmen*, and the P-38 series with Jeff Ethell."

When asked how and why he got into this business, Don emphasized, "I came because of the aircraft, but I stayed because of the people many of whom have been

incredible. One of my absolute all-time favorite people is Bob Sturges, founder of Columbia Airmotive, whose enthusiasm for aviation was undeniable and his knowledge unmatched. Bob took me under his wing and I learned about the business of aircraft parts and negotiation.”

“After Memphis Belle was filmed, they contacted me with a list of parts from the movie and I purchased three panel blanks to do the main instrument panel of the B-17 and proceeded to fill the panels. In some cases, we took parts that we had that were good cores and traded them for run-out cores which were red tagged instruments that couldn’t be rebuilt. This is how we gained many parts that came out of actual B-17s. We can basically track down most of the parts. For example, the quadrant came out of a Coast Guard B-17 out of Lake Washington. Of course, it came to the point where some parts just aren’t available and we actually had to manufacture those. Veterans also made suggestions and we added items to our display such as a throttle quadrant. During WWII, many airfields had cockpit panels like ours that they used as training tools for the WASPs, for the flight engineers, for pilot and co-pilot trainees and all without tying up a complete aircraft.

Around 1991 or 1992, we started displaying our B-17 cockpit instrument panel. We do this for our Veterans. It’s just part of the debt that we owe them for their service. We’ve taken it to reunions where the Veterans have a ball sitting at the controls and reminiscing. The instrument panel is also educational for the younger generations and provides family members of Veterans with a connection to their relatives. We mounted it on a trailer for easier mobility and have displayed the instrument panel at the Pearson Air Museum, during ‘open cockpit days’, and at the Oregon International Air Show next to the 8th Air Force Historical Society of Oregon tent several times. Our future plans include enclosing the cockpit so that it actually does look like a B-17 fuselage and including bucket seats with the display.”

In 1993, the formative year of the Oregon Chapter of the 8th AFHS, Don became a member and has continued his position as event and speaker coordinator to the present day. He continues to promote the B-17, an airplane which was designed to last six years. Those that are still airworthy and flying are over sixty years old and according to Don that is “Due to the quality that went into the aircraft, the tremendous designs, and the changes and constant developments that this airplane went through.

Air Depot
<http://www.b-17airdepot.com>



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Don Keller's B-17 Throttle Quadrant
[Photos courtesy of and taken by Bert Campbell]