



TORA! TORA! TORA!

BY HARRY AND LINDA HAYE PEREZ

In the early morning hours of December 7, 1941, the Japanese Empire launched a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, with the war cry Tora! Tora! Tora! The United States responded with fearless courage; men lined up at recruitment stations for the honor of serving their country. Women did their part also, supporting the war effort by working in factories and performing jobs traditionally done by men. Icons like *Rosie the Riveter* and *War Bonds* became a permanent part of our history.

The Tora! Tora! Tora! Team was formed in 1972, when six replicas of Japanese Zeros used in the movie, *Tora, Tora, Tora* were donated to the Commemorative Air Force (CAF) (formerly known as the Confederate Air Force). Their first air demonstration show occurred in Galveston, Texas, on June 25th that same year, and have performed this reenactment time and time again, always to the joy of the crowds.

We had the privilege of shadowing the Tora Team for two days in August during the EAA AirVenture in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, seeing and experiencing what they do and how they do it

to put on this spectacular show. Watching the interaction between the Tora Team and visitors to AirVenture was amazing.

The narration of the Tora air power demonstration is moving. With a hushed crowd, the narrator, Roger Gauert, starts off by painting a vivid picture of a quiet and peaceful Sunday morning on the Island of Oahu. The sun barely visible; American ships line the harbor and sailors still in their bunks. And then you hear it - the roar of eight warbirds, five Zeros, one dive bomber and two torpedo bombers, coming in low from north to south, just as they did that early morning. They strafe the runway from one end to the other, bombs explode, multiple fireballs and smoke rise into the sky as the Zeros make high-pitched 360o overhead turns and come down the runway again and again, simulating the dropping of high explosive ordnance.

A Curtis P-40, representing the American response during the bombing of Pearl Harbor, engages one of the Zeros in a dogfight. A B-17 Flying Fortress makes a low-level pass over the runway. It is fifteen minutes of breathtaking,





heart-pounding flying depicting a world gone mad, and then an eerie silence. The smoke dissipates and the armada regroups outside of the view of the crowd. The narrator continues his story, and at the end, all planes fly down the runway one last time in formation as the “wall of fire” explodes beneath them, making for a spectacular ending and leaving the crowd in awe.

The CAF delivers this presentation not to glorify war, but rather to remind us what the horror of war was like, and more importantly to commemorate the men and women whose sacrifices have assured our freedoms today. We are forever indebted to them and to those who dedicate themselves, like the Tora Team, to preserve the memory of that “Day of Infamy.”

They Who Fly

The Tora Team consists of extremely dedicated and experienced pilots, and is supported by dozens more with maintenance, logistics and a pyrotechnics team, that makes the attack look all too real. They do this in order to accurately portray the message of what happened at Pearl Harbor. They come from all walks of life. Dan Reedy, who works in the petrochemical industry and Patrick Hutchins, in sales, are both sons of two of the original pilots that first started Tora, Tora, Tora. Mark Allen, Tora Lead, is a Certified Public Accountant; Michael Burke is a Warbird Instructor Pilot; and Jim Ryan, a Mosquito Control District Director; Doug Derr, a Well-Control Engineer; Craig Hutain, an airline pilot; Ron Wright, an Aviation QA Inspector and Bob Watts, a retired USMC Pilot. Today, these pilots would be the same guys who would go to war without hesitation and for the same reasons, just as those who did in the 1940s.

Their day at an air show starts at the crack of dawn, beside their converted AT-6s or SNJs to resemble Japanese Zeros. In reality there is only one flyable Zero left in the world. During the air shows their

planes are accessible to visitors to look at and photograph; they take time to answer every question asked. The Tora pilots love what they do and that attitude shows through as they talk to onlookers and especially the younger generation. But once it is their time to perform, they are all business.

Safety Is Number One

Safety is of paramount importance to the Tora Team. The precision necessary to deliver a top-notch performance requires a carefully staged and a perfectly executed script. Every pilot comes to the team with a wealth of experience in the type aircraft being used by Tora before he was considered to become a team member. And once selected has to go through a rigorous training program to satisfy not only the FAA, but the team requirements as well, in order to establish trust and to develop the teamwork required to achieve excellence. Each new pilot must also fulfill a minimum of 10 back-seat flights in actual air show performances before allowed to fly solo in subsequent shows.

The majority of the current roster of pilots has been performing with the team for over 10 years and has hundreds of performances to their credit. Each one takes pride in their respective roles and appreciates the privilege that has been bestowed on them to represent a place in history that should always be remembered.

Another important safety consideration is the proper maintenance of their aircraft. Several of the pilots are licensed A&P mechanics and perform many of the routine maintenance requirements themselves.

To ensure an absolutely safe performance, the Air Boss, the overall coordinator of the event, will conduct several briefings with all show demonstration teams that covers safety, timing and any special features affecting the air show. Each team, including Tora, conducts their own individual team briefings to clarify all aspects of the demonstration





parameters and assure that each pilot understands their respective role in the performance.

The Bomb Squad

Gordon (Gordy) Webb, a Senior Account Manager for a communication equipment company, is the Bomb Squad's pyro lead. He is licensed by the Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives and has been creating explosions for over 21 years. His materials are simple: dynamite, gasoline, cardboard and detonation cord. It usually takes an average of four hours for him and his crew of 12 to set up the pyrotechnics for each and every show.

What if you found yourself in the middle of the air raid at Hickam Field near Pearl Harbor in 1941, explosions all around, bullets flying every which way? We tagged along with Gordy

and the Tora Bomb Squad out on the runway where we were shown exactly how they go about placing all the charges for the dramatic explosions that the viewing public see from a safe distance. These professionals know the precise safe methods to use to recreate the horrific and destructive explosions without the risk of any possible damage to the airport property or injury to the public.

A Final Word

This elite group of pilots and their support team give their time, enthusiasm, energy and their money to thrill, inspire and hopefully educate visitors to air shows across the country as to the why, when and how the United States entered World War II. They do it with the reenactment of the attack on Pearl Harbor known as TORA! TORA! TORA!



Tora! Tora! Tora! has two up-coming demonstrations in Texas:
CAF AIRSHO, Midland, TX Wings Over Houston Airshow
October 12 & 13th Ellington Airport, Houston, TX
www.airsho.org October 26th & 27th
www.wingsoverhouston.com

