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Reliving past honor and glory

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By **Emily McFarlan** Staff writer

The Collings Foundation's Wings of Freedom Tour brought three historic World War II aircraft to DuPage Airport this weekend. Gene Sullivan was looking forward to seeing the B-24 Liberator.

"It's just a thrill to me to see that old plane," he said. "I flew halfway around the world in it."

Sullivan, a lifelong Naperville resident, spent almost three years sitting in the tail of a B-24 as a gunner during World War II. On Sunday, he spent several hours sitting in a folding chair alongside the plane as if it were an old friend.

The 85-year-old Air Force veteran was one of about 2,000 people to visit the planes during the tour at DuPage Airport's Community Days, said Bob Collings, co-founder of The Collings Foundation.

The B-24, B-25 Mitchell and B-17 Flying Fortress landed at the airport in West Chicago at about 2 p.m. Friday. The planes remain available for display, walk-through tours and some flights until noon today. The B-24 is the last of its kind still flying.

"Our mission is living history," said Collings. "We support events where people can come out and touch and feel and smell history."

Sullivan came with three of his children who live in Naperville and eight of his 15 grandchildren. Two other children live in Minnesota and Oregon. This was the first time many family members saw the historic plane that held so many memories for Sullivan.

It also was the first time the veteran was asked for his autograph.

"I had my Air Force cap on and I was sitting in my chair waiting for the kids to go through the plane, and pretty soon we had a big crowd," he said.

For about an hour, Sullivan spoke with other veterans and answered questions for visitors about the plane and about his own experiences.

Sullivan said he flew more than 50 missions against the German Luftwaffe, bombing seven European capitals.

Mostly, he said, his plane bombed airfields and factories, and their top priority was to knock out their enemies' oil supplies.

"A lot of times, we wouldn't drop bombs when it was cloudy because we didn't want to hit any houses," Sullivan said. "I prayed every time we dropped a bomb for the people below."

It was tough, he said. Planes flew at 25,000 feet, where the temperature was 40 below. Although the men aboard wore heavy clothing and oxygen masks, Sullivan said they were always freezing. And when one plane was lost, 10 men were lost with it.

"That's the idea - to honor the veterans and have people meet them and hear their stories," Collings said. "We hope they'll take away a better understanding of the period and the sacrifices made by our veterans."

Those veterans, Collings said, are dying at a rate of about 1,000 a day. But a few, like Sullivan, remain to tell their stories. And one B-24 remains to illustrate them.

"It's beautiful to look up and see the plane you were flying in," he said. "It's a great thrill to see the plane that brought me safely home."

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