



"READY ROOM"

NEWSLETTER

SPECIAL UPDATE

June, 2013

Submitted by Lt. Col (ret) Peyton Dehart

Following a string of "firsts" for Hixson Flight Museum... on Monday 10 June, our Maintenance Officer, Gary Franks, ably assisted by Frank Davey and Dan Payne, set out from Hixson, bound for Naval Air Station Oceana, Virginia Beach, VA. The trip through scenic mountains, rolling hills and tidewater landscape was made more memorable by torrential rains throughout the ten-plus-hour drive. All to pick up a T-34C Turbo Mentor.

The T-34C turboprop is a Navy primary trainer aircraft. It is still being flown by Navy training squadrons in Corpus Christi, TX but is on its' way out; currently being replaced by the T-6 Texan II.

At 8am on the 11th of June, Mike Settlege of Engility Corporation drove to the Oceana main gate to escort the crew on base. Peyton DeHart joined up at the building that houses Engility; where a process known by the acronym "SARDIP" takes place. The Stricken Aircraft Reclamation and Disposal Program scavenges and recovers usable parts from aircraft that are obsolete, or excess, or somehow damaged beyond repair.

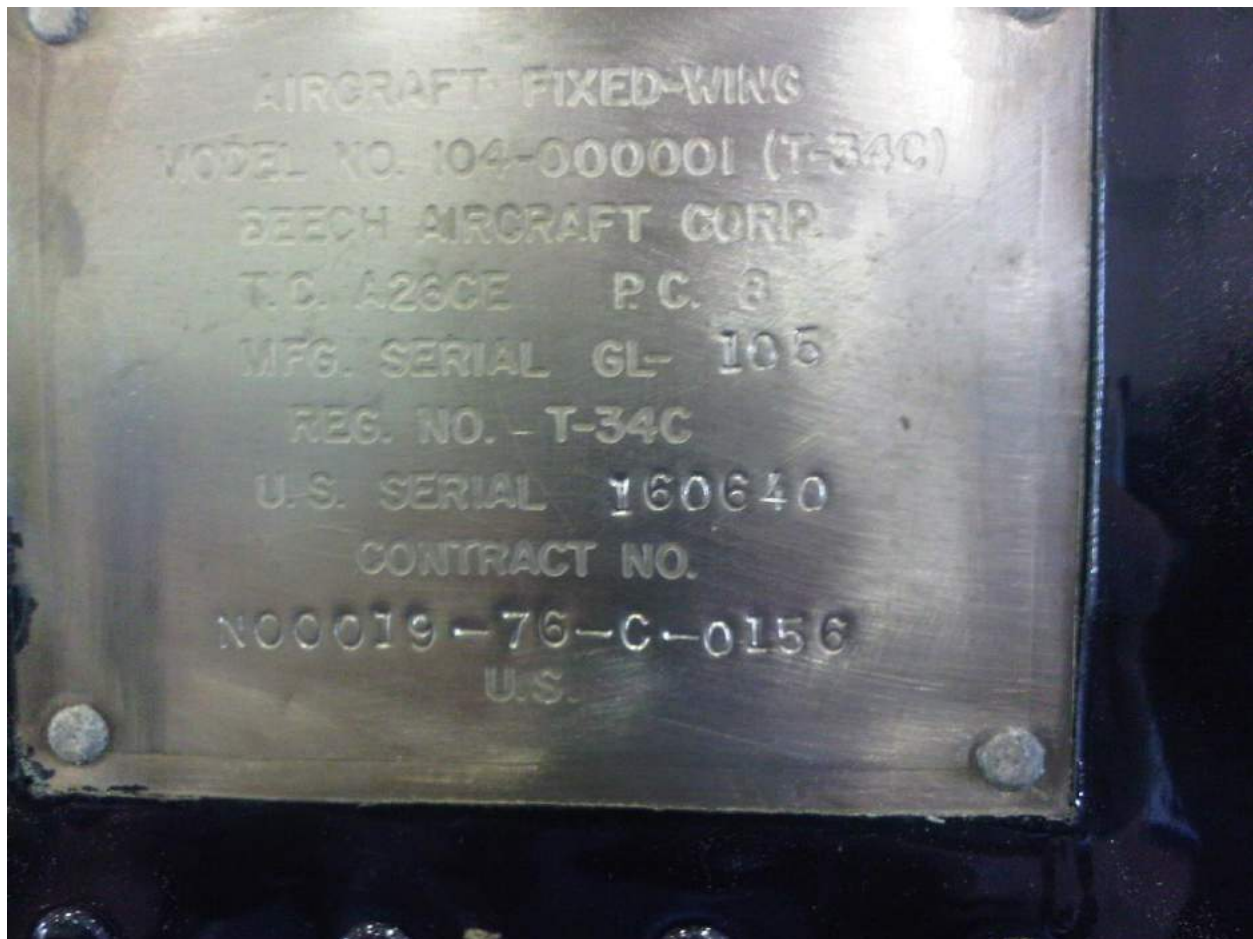
When Settlege and his fellow technicians get an aircraft that is going to be "struck" from the Navy's inventory, they tow it to their space, defuel it, drain every other fluid and compressed gas, recover salvageable parts that can still be used by Active Duty units and then demilitarize it (read: render it unflyable, usually by cutting some of the main wing spar), according to a standardized set of procedures. They also prepare it for shipment; which in this case meant removing the wings and horizontal tail surfaces.



Providing backdrop soundtrack to the loading effort, F/A-18 Hornets blasted off a nearby runway, as flights of two took to the blue morning sky. They'd return some time thereafter, coming in for the "break" and making vapor on the top of their wings as they pulled G's and bled off speed prior to landing.

Gary has moved all manner of airplanes on trailers over the decades and his preparation and expertise paid off with swift situating and tie-down of the T-34C. Arriving with preconstructed wooden bracing forms, his custom trailer proved perfectly suited to accepting the fuselage in one lift from the forklift. Each wing was strapped alongside, the tail and some bit parts were stowed, and it was ready to roll.

Though a thorough inspection of the aircraft's log books will reveal where, and with whom, our bird served, the thumbnail sketch indicates that it was built in 1978. It ended its' flying life about a year ago and sat outside, with five other sister ships, on an out-of-the-way piece of flight line at Oceana.



So if it was a trainer aircraft, what was it doing at a front-line fighter base like Oceana? Three missions have been mentioned by those in the know. It was used for low-cost instrument check rides for Hornet pilots; at units that would have been hard pressed to accomplish that mission in their own single-seat F/A-18's (with no place for the check pilot to sit). It was also used by pilots to refresh spin recovery techniques; again, tough, expensive and dangerous to perform in a Hornet but benign in a trainer plane. Lastly, they were used as safety observer aircraft on the bombing ranges Oceana squadrons use. As the jets would practice dive bombing a bulls-eye target, the T-34C would orbit the area at 10,000'. Any Hornet that descended below the T-34C's altitude would be commanded by radio to "knock it off," discontinue the run and begin the recovery climb to their initial "perch" (the high altitude from which they dove).

Once cinched up on the trailer and the paperwork signed, the Turbo Mentor was officially on permanent loan to us from the Navy.



F/A-18's thundered overhead, seemingly in aerial salute, as our T-34C made its way slowly to the Air Station's main gate and the road ahead... leading to a new home.