

Paint the Sky

Boeing employee provides splash of color for U.S. naval aviation centennial

By Mike Lombardi

On Jan. 18, 1911, Eugene Ely landed his Curtiss Model D Pusher onto a wooden platform built on the after-deck of the armored cruiser USS *Pennsylvania*.

It was the first time an airplane landed on a ship.

That and other key events that year marked the beginning of a century of U.S. naval aviation, and during 2011 the U.S. Navy celebrated its centennial of flight with spectacular air shows that featured modern naval aircraft painted in vintage

Navy colors and markings.

The program to paint modern naval aircraft in vintage finishes was the brain-child of Boeing employee Richard Dann, a captain in the U.S. Navy Reserve who, until his recall to active service, worked in St. Louis as an analysis integrator team lead on the P-8A Poseidon program.

Dann, also an aviation writer, artist and historian, was given the job of planning the Navy's response to this important anniversary.

"I determined a unique way to do this would be to paint current Navy aircraft in vintage or throwback markings, in

much the same way that the National Football League will occasionally sport throwback jerseys for their players," Dan said.

Unlike the finishes of modern naval aircraft that include subdued markings and low-visibility camouflages in shades of gray, the U.S. Navy air fleet in the past was extremely colorful—from the "yellow wings" period of the 1920s and 1930s to highly visible squadron markings of the 1960s through the 1980s.

The "Heritage Paint Project" painted U.S. Navy aircraft in vintage colors and the markings of the U.S. Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard aircraft from the past 100 years.

Dann originally planned for 18 planes to receive vintage livery, but there now are 28 aircraft in the program, with perhaps more to follow. They include Boeing F/A-18s and T-45s, as well as T-34s, EA-6Bs, SH-60s, S-3s and P-3s.

"It was an effort to create living history," Dann said.

Dann directed the painting of the F/A-18s in color schemes that originally decorated U.S. Navy and Marine Corps fighters during World War II, and the painting of training planes with the colorful yellow wing finishes of the 1930s. Even a venerable P-3 Orion was painted in the stately "seaplane gray" and white finish

PHOTOS: (Far left) A T-45C Goshawk carries a heritage paint scheme typical of aircraft operated from the USS *Enterprise* in 1938. U.S. NAVY (Left) Louise McWorter and Capt. Rich Dann. RICH DANN (Below, from left) An E/A-6B Prowler, foreground, and an E/A-18G Growler display a throwback tactical paint scheme honoring U.S. combat aircraft that fought in the Battle of the Coral Sea during World War II. U.S. NAVY A Boeing F4B-4 carrier-based fighter of the early 1930s shows the yellow wings and colorful squadron markings that were typical of U.S. Navy and Marine Corps airplanes from that period. BOEING ARCHIVES This North American Aviation PBJ-1J, a U.S. Navy version of the B-25J Mitchell bomber, shows the three-color camouflage used by the U.S. Navy during the Second World War. BOEING ARCHIVES



the plane originally sported in the 1960s.

To minimize cost, planes selected for the heritage paint schemes were those requiring paint as part of scheduled major maintenance and not planned for deployment.

The wrap-up of the centennial celebration does not mean the Heritage Paint Project planes will immediately be returned to their standard finishes. The airplanes will retain their heritage colors and markings until their next rework cycle, which means some of the planes will continue to be a feature at air shows for the next seven to eight years.

Meanwhile, Rich has returned to Boeing with fond memories of a once-in-a-lifetime

job, including a special memory: the painting of an F/A-18C Hornet in the markings of Lt. Hamilton McWhorter, an F6F Hellcat ace in World War II.

McWhorter recently died, but his widow, Louise, in the San Diego area, and their grown children were invited to see the newly painted Hornet. The event took place on what would have been McWhorter's 90th birthday.

"It was a very touching moment," Dann said, "and a reminder that behind our airplanes there are real people who build, fly and maintain them, and behind those people are real families." ■

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