

Tri-City Herald

VOICE OF THE MID-COLUMBIA

A piece of history

Converted military plane to perform at Water Follies

By Andrew Sirocchi
staff writer

The massive propellers made the red-and blue-striped metal chassis of the Albatross brate as the big plane heaved up on the Tri-Cities Airport on Thursday, passing over the checkered tents set up along the Columbia river for Water Follies weekend.

Flying low and slow, the old military veteran zig-zagged 400 feet over the Columbia River before sliding onto the green water. The V-tailed keel pushed through choppy waves, sending up a splash of white water.

"It's actually a little rough down here," said pilot and owner John Fetcko through the static of his radio.

The Grumman Aerospace Albatross will be one of the centerpiece of this year's Follies weekend.

For 10 years, the air show and unlimited hydroplane boat races have provided the weekend's entertainment.

Never in the race's 40-year history, though, has the festival featured a plane that could ride the waves alongside the boats.

"I think it's going to be the highlight of the air show," said Malin Bergstrom, of Bergstrom Aircraft. "Everyone likes the jets, but this Albatross is very unique as well."

Fetcko's Albatross is one of about a dozen such machines that remain in service today.



A Grumman Albatross "Flying Boat" flies over the blue bridge on Thursday afternoon. Owned by John and Julie Fetcko of Crescent City, Fla., the plane will be one of the featured aircraft participating in the air show during this weekend's Water Follies.

Each of its two propellers is driven by a 1,425-horsepower engine. The plane has a 100-foot wingspan and stands 25 feet tall.

"It's actually a triphybian," said co-owner John Fetcko. "It has the capacity to land on water, land and on the snow."

The Albatross was built as a war machine by the U.S. government in 1931.

Initially, it was used to rescue stranded American pilots who were shot down in enemy waters off Korea. Its versatility allowed it to land in the ocean, even in medium-high swells.

During the Korean War, Fetcko's Albatross rescued about 1,000 pilots, he said.

The name Albatross was no accident, and refers to the bird's ability to make long flights over the sea. Pontoon below the Albatross' wings stabilize it when it lands on water, but they also can store fuel to extend its range.

"It was a search and rescue plane. It would go out looking for people and it would spend a lot of time out there," said Lawrence Lucas, a former military man who volunteers with Bergstrom Aircraft to set up ground operations for the airplanes taking part in the air show.

From 1964 to 1975, after the U.S. military sold its line of amphibious planes, the Albatross worked in the Chilean Air Force hunting submarines. It carried torpedoes and depth charges.

Today, Fetcko's Albatross shows few signs of its military past. Its utilitarian interior was gutted and replaced with creature comforts, including a couch, a small plasma TV, a stove, a galley and a microwave oven.

Originally able to carry 14 passengers, the Albatross now has room for only six, but it's roomier than ever. A 6-foot tall passenger nearly can walk through without slouching.

"It's converted into a motor home

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History: Albatross 'saved a lot of lives,' says volunteer

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on the inside," said Julie Fetcko.

The plane's current luxury has not been unnoticed.

In 2004, at the Sun 'N Fun air show in Lakeland, Fla., it won the judge's award for best air yacht.

The Fetckos said the judges liked it so much they created a new category for it.

The Fetckos enjoy their Albatross so much that during the summer months the Florida couple live onboard, skipping across the country to various air shows.

They also beach the plane on lakes and take time off to enjoy its amenities.

The Albatross will perform Saturday and

Sunday, in between heats for the hydroplanes.

It's capable of reaching 170 knots in the air (195 mph) and about 80 knots on the water.

It deserves to also be admired, Lucas said.

"This is a piece of history," he said. "It saved a lot of lives."

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Catch the Fever: Rome Renegades prepare to face Tri-Cities in sellout National Indoor Football League championship. **C1**

HEADLINERS

Wild on breakup: TV personality and the former host of E!'s *Wild On* Brooke Burke and her plastic surgeon husband Garth Fisher have called it quits. Burke and Fisher announced their separation in a statement issued to People magazine Wednesday. The couple, who have been married since 2001, have two children. "We are saddened to announce that we have mutually decided to separate after seven years together," the statement read.

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Vol. 103, No. 210



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