



photo courtesy of Steve Flippin

2009

C-17 airlifter was on display at the 2005 Winston-Salem Air Show. This year's show will take place Saturday and Sunday at Smith Reynolds Airport.

by tim clodfelter

After a yearlong absence, the Winston-Salem Air Show at Smith Reynolds Airport will be back in flight this Saturday and Sunday. And it's much more than just a chance for people to look at airplanes.

"We've got a nice car show by the folks that used to do the concours de Graylyn," said Steve Flippin, the organizer of the 2008 air show. "There are in-stables, a rock-climbing wall, power jump, Winston race cars, and a Piedmont Airlines memorabilia area."

There's also an "Art Walk" with tents and booths displaying fine arts and crafts; a stage with music, gymnastics, karate, belly dancing, and a variety show; and such characters as McGruff the Crime Dog, Spider-Man and the Geico Gecko wandering around. The Forsyth County Sheriff's Department will have a K9 demonstration, and the U.S. Army will have a "Virtual Army Experience" tent with activities, simulators and training exercises.

"In a small way, we wanted to move the old Winston-Salem Street Scene to the airport for the weekend," Flippin said. "It's another way to broaden the appeal of the event."

But, he pointed out, the primary focus of the show is still on airplanes, and peoples' fascination with them.

Flippin, a former pilot who taught aviation at the Career Center, has been volunteering with the air show since 2001.

"Personally, I love to fly," he said. "These old planes, I love to see them fly, hear them fly.... It's a multisensory experience."

He enjoys larger air shows such as ones that take place on military bases, but says that there is an advantage to a midsize show such as this one. "There's an appeal to a lot of aviation lovers to come to a show this size," he said. "You get a little closer to the aircraft and the pilots."

The last full-fledged air show at Smith Reynolds was held in 2005.

The 2006 show was handled by an outside company. "It didn't work out," he said. "They didn't do enough advertising. We didn't have our air-show committee, they weren't involved, and '06 hurt us a little bit."

When the Airport Commission approached him about organizing an air show for 2008, he quickly agreed. "I was very happy," he said. "It's more work than I realized in the beginning."

"We're trying to get it going again on an annual basis."

But what if it rains?

"We plan to still open up," he said. "There will be folks doing things on the ground, but flying can be an issue."

Plenty of airplanes will be on display on the ground and in the air during the two-day show, including modern craft and vintage planes, including some from World War II, Korea and Vietnam.

Among the pilots bringing their vintage aircraft to the show is a Walnut Cove resident, Mike Steele, who is bringing his T-6 Texan. Steele, a retired corporate pilot, bought the plane about 10 years ago and takes it to two or three air shows a year. "It had always been a dream of mine to own a war bird like this," said Steele, who was born in 1942, one year before his plane rolled off the assembly line. "I enjoy flying the aircraft and going to air shows. It's like taking it to a classic-car show."

One of the most notable modern planes participating in the show, Flippin said, is the F-22 Raptor, which he described as "the greatest aircraft in the world today."

It's scheduled to do some flybys here on Sunday (at 2 p.m.). On Saturday, as of right now, we've got some F-15E Strike Eagles."

Other performers will include aerobatic teams, stunt pilots, the Red Thunder Air Show team, the Black Daggers Jump Team, the Air Force Reserve Jet Car (which can go from 0 to 375 in eight seconds), and the Geico Skytypers, a team that has an unusual method of skywriting.

Five or six World War II-era planes fly in formation 10,000 feet in the air, releasing puffs of smoke to form letters. Each letter is larger than the Empire

State Building. They can spell out messages up to 36 characters long, said Steve Kapur, a pilot with the team for 12 years.

"Skywriting is a single airplane twisting and turning to spell individual letters," he said. "What we're doing is like the printing head on a giant dot matrix printer."

The team is scheduled to come in before the air show and do some skytyping to promote the show, he said. On Saturday, they will also fly over the Wake Forest/Ole Miss game for some bonus skytyping ("Go Deacs," most likely, according to Kapur) before returning to Smith Reynolds for a show.

Their planes are SNJ training craft, also known as T-6 Texans, built by North American Aviation.

"So few people get to fly these aircraft, and they are from the Greatest Generation," Kapur said. "These are the planes our fathers flew in the war."

One of Kapur's favorite parts of air shows, he said, is the chance to meet seniors who flew those planes in the war. "On a number of occasions — a recent trip to St. Louis comes to mind — we sat with these guys and hour and a half who had flown our aircraft in the Second World War," he said. "Like all pilots, we trade lies and tell stories. It's a great experience."

"We enjoy meeting the kids, but we enjoy, frankly, the seniors as much."