

History group preserves wartime idealism

by MSgt. Tom Allocco

The guns have been silent for decades, but the idealism and drama unleashed by the war General Eisenhower called the "Great Crusade" still reverberate. The Great New England Airshow was a forum for members of the World War II Living History Association who hope to preserve the spirit that is our inheritance from that generation.

Capt. Don Carlton, 439th Operations Support Squadron intelligence officer, is among members of the association old enough to remember when almost every American family felt deeply the impact of the experience of war. During the airshow, association members donned the khakis, olive drabs and flight suits of the Army Air Corps and laid out a display of memorabilia in the Base Hangar to pass the inheritance to one more generation.

"My father's brother, my Uncle Chet, was a 15th Air Force gunner who was shot down and killed in a B-24 Liberator over Yugoslavia in November, 1944. My mother had a brother killed in the Battle of the Bulge. All my uncles and my father served in World War II," Carlton said.

"Growing up, my uncles and grandparents would tell me about my Uncle Chet who I never met. When my grandparents passed away I got all the memorabilia -- his goggles, training manuals, fleece-lined gloves.

"I was passed on the family heritage. It

was kind of automatic that I would go into the Air Force... Kids of my generation had quite a military example growing up," he said.

From sheet music of forlorn love to sugar and gasoline ration stamps, to war bond posters of square jawed airmen, the association chronicles the unique style produced by the collective national effort of 1941-45. They were the last years before molded plastic replaced iron, leather and canvas equipment and popular culture was commercialized. The cover of the 15-cent "Army Laughs" might poke fun at overweight generals, but there was no doubt that America was united in its crusade. Even Ted Williams and Jimmy Stewart wore military uniforms.

"A blue star indicated a son or daughter serving. Just about every household had a blue star in the window, usually in the front porch window where it was a point of pride," Carlton said.

"A gold star indicated a son who was killed. I have my grandmother's gold star in fringed satin," he said.

"I think the mission of our country and our military was crystal clear...there was an involvement of families on the home front who were aware of the sacrifices of soldiers and airmen overseas," he said.

"I'm fascinated by the Army Air Corps. The Air Force was so new and everything

was being pioneered. It was part of the Army, but everyone had a sense they were aviation pioneers and building a whole new force for their country.

"The reward is talking with vets, hearing their stories and keeping alive our Air Force history," he said.

One of the association's most treasured artifacts is a Norden bombsight, held to be capable of "pickle-barrel" accuracy from great height. It was so highly classified that it included an explosive device to keep it from falling into enemy hands.

Carlton personally owns a numbered copy, signed by General Jimmy Doolittle, of the final report of the 8th Air Force to brief President Truman and the Congress. He obtained it through retired CMSgt. Bob Adams, a nationally-known collector of military antiques.

"We're getting a lot of personal artifacts, now, that veterans donate because their kids and grandchildren are not interested. It's poignant when a 75 or 80 year old vet says 'I want you to have my old dogtags because no one in his family is interested,'" Carlton said.

"We suit up and explain what that generation did. People have no concept of what a crew went through flying at 30,000 feet. The payoff is when you see the realization dawn in their eyes. You've educated somebody and passed a lesson to a new generation," Carlton said.



SECRETS REVEALED — Capt. Don Carlton of the 439th Operations Support Squadron explains the function of the once top-secret Norden bombsight at the World War II Living History Association display in the base hangar during the airshow.