

living it



Top & above right: John Baert photos

Shore Life Magazine's Chris LeMatty straps into Kevin Russo's World War II Warbird T-6 and prepares for a fast & furious ...

# JOYride

MY uncle was a crewmember of a B-17 bomber in England during World War II. Decades later, his son gave him the gift of a fantasy flight in a restored "Flying Fortress," the exact duplicate of the craft he flew in from 1943 to 1945. Until the day he died, his face was wreathed in a big smile whenever he spoke of his Warbird Fantasy flight.

You don't have to be a World War II veteran to enjoy a stimulating simulation of combat acrobatics in the real thing. A short drive to Somerset Airport will place you in the cockpit of a Warbird built in the 1930s. Former US Air Force

Lt. Colonel Kevin Russo will take you aboard a lovingly restored, mint edition SNJ6 warbird. The aircraft was used as a trainer, bomber and fighter during World War II. Kevin is a decorated combat pilot, as well as a commercial airline captain.

The aircraft looks as if it belongs in a new car showroom. Every inch of the warbird gleams from the loving care rendered by Kevin. The manner of the rollout of the aircraft from the hanger was amazing. Expecting a tug to tow the plane out on the tarmac, instead Kevin and his young daughter, Spenser, moved behind each wing. They both pushed on the wings and the plane just rolled out almost effortlessly, almost easily as walking a bicycle out of a garage.

The SNJ6 has been restored to look exactly as it looked when it was first acquired by the U.S. Navy. Even the circular red white and blue star on the fuselage and wings are accurate. Early in 1942, the red ball in the center of the star was removed from all U.S. military aircraft. This change was made because the red ball was the official marking on all

Japanese aircraft. This prevented U.S. pilots and gunners from mistaking one of our own planes as an enemy. Japanese aircraft were nicknamed "meatballs," because of the markings.

A long checkup prior to takeoff ensured that Shore Life passenger Chris LeMatty would be ready for any eventuality. The flight suit checked, the pedals and joystick, and yes, opening and closing the plexiglass cowling in case of emergency. Not so comforting was pilot Kevin's query: "Did you eat any breakfast, Chris?" The thunderous roar of the 600 horsepower engine during takeoff had everyone at Somerset airport watching Colonel Russo's gem rise to fight.

Here are some after comments from Chris, the co-pilot ...

"I loved it! Colonel Russo explained everything we were going to do. Not only that, he let me fly the plane after we were up in the air for about two minutes. Obviously he was at the controls during most of the acrobatic stuff, but that also gave me the chance to take some pictures. I especially love the one I took flying upside down during the barrel roll. The toughest one was when we did the loop. I knew about G force, but I never expected how it kept me pinned in my seat. Later he explained that we were going to simulate an air attack on an enemy target. Our "target" was a farmhouse and we went into a dive firing at the house, and pulling up really quick so that the plane behind us could continue the attack.

The trip was really fun! It was a great experience that I will remember the rest of my life!"

For more info or to sign up for your own Warbird Fantasy Tour call 877-868-3926 or log on at [Warbirdtours.com](http://Warbirdtours.com).

— Gordon LeMatty •



Left: Chris manages two quick pics during his wild ride.  
Above: Kevin Russo preps Chris for his joy ride.  
Gordon LeMatty photo.