

# Airport celebration



Photos by Kurt Ellison

An F8 Bearcat fighter of World War II vintage takes off during airport festivities Saturday.

## Airplanes old and new do their thing

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Aviation enthusiasts celebrated Watsonville Municipal Airport's 50th anniversary on Saturday, enjoying sunny skies and airplanes old and new.

Several vintage planes flew out of history and into Watsonville, including the 2,300-horsepower Grumman Bearcat, developed but never used for intercepting Kamikazes in World War II and the Grumman TBM, two squadrons of which were stationed at Watsonville's airport during WWII.

Members of the Confederate Air Force, a group dedicated to keeping the memories of World War II alive by restoring old warplanes, gave tours of "China Doll," a C-46 transport plane that came off the line just as the war was ending.

Not all of the celebration took place on the ground. The Bearcat put down its wings (they fold up to conserve space on aircraft-carriers) and joined the TBM for a couple of passes over the airport, and two biplanes performed aerobatic stunts, rolling and looping for the entertainment of the couple of hundred people on the ground.

Many people took advantage of the airplane rides offered by two groups at the anniversary for a small charge. Those who

wished to shell out a little more money took a ride in a classic barnstormer, a 1927 biplane.

Karl Swanson, a doctor and private pilot from Scotts Valley, went up in the biplane, taking his 3-year-old son Karl on the boy's first airplane ride, where they flew close by a flock of migrating Canadian geese.

"He was pointing at everything," Swanson said of his son.

The open cockpit provided more of a feeling of flying than a modern plane, Swanson said, giving him and his son a sweeping view of the coastline from the Santa Cruz wharf to Monterey.

Airplanes landed and took off regularly throughout the celebration, but when Aptos resident Ted Grachek's Polish military Super Stol taxied in after landing, a group of people gathered around the odd-looking craft. Long, jointed landing gear in the front and a strangely tapering fuselage gave the camouflage-painted plane the appearance of an insect, perhaps a cross between a dragonfly and a praying mantis.

The long landing gear allows the plane, which is the basic military training craft in Russia and the former Soviet Union, to land and take off in rough terrain, Grachek said. The Super Stols are in current production, and are as common as Cessnas in Eastern Europe and the



Pilot Dick Russell taxis in with the C-46 'China Doll.'

former Soviet Union, he said.

Although it was a local event, the airport anniversary brought people from out of the area as well. Andy Morch came down from Paradise, near Chico, at the invitation of a friend who keeps a plane in Watsonville.

Morch, a former crew chief for the Blue Angels Navy flight team in the 1950s, said he still has strong feelings for planes.

"Airplanes have always fascinated me," he said. "Anything that gets off the ground and flies."