As the winter gives up its last patches of melting snow and the trees display their buds, a spring migration begins. While the ducks and geese find their way back north, school groups begin their field trip excursions to a place in the heart of the northern plains: a showplace for the region’s aviation history.

Field trips usually provide children and teachers a temporary escape and welcome relief from the more tedious routine of study and classes. The Dakota Territory Air Museum in Minot, North Dakota is one such place where that escape can be combined with a vivid educational interest.

That interest is made vivid not only by the number and variety of aircraft on display, but also by the exhibits that tie the region’s aviation history into the bigger picture of North American aviation. The region’s aviation history is represented by such North Dakota names as Carl Ben Eielson, Clarence Nyre and “Lucky Dick” Grace. People are often surprised to learn how strong aviation played a role in this northern plains state so early in aviation history.

Standing before a replica of the Wright Flyer built by volunteers of the museum, the school children listen as the tour guide tells the story of the Wright Brothers’ first flight. Sometimes the children are asked questions to give them a chance to get in on the discourse and spice up their interest. The tour guide asks, “When it came time for the Wright Brothers to make their first flight, how did the Wright brothers decide which of the two would be the first to fly the Wright Flyer?” Hands go up in an attempt to provide an answer. The answers will make you smile. One little boy said, “Rock, paper, scissors”. A little girl says “the oldest one got to decide”. Another said, “They arm-wrestled”. Finally someone says, “They tossed a coin”, and that of course, was how the matter was settled.

So what is it that makes this museum a showcase for the region’s and the nation’s aviation history? Two things: its location and its collection. It has a great location because of its’ proximity to places nearby that demonstrate active military and civilian aviation first hand. For instance, standing inside the museum, on a mezzanine, looking out large glass windows, there is a panoramic view of the Minot International Airport (With “International” as a part of the Airport’s name, don’t think that this is a big place. Usually there are three flights in and out in a day.) Visitors sometimes get to watch one of the DC-9’s taking off. Just ten miles north, there is the Minot Air Force Base with its B-52’s that often do their practice flights right over the museum. While live demonstrations of aviation are nearby, often times they are beyond reach. There is a solution to that. The museum’s excellent collection of desktop commercial models, airline mementoes, military and general aviation models and memorabilia are nearby; available for scrutiny. You can perhaps hear one visitor saying to another, “now I see the difference between a DC-6 and a DC-7”.

The close rapport between the city of Minot and the air base, the dependence of local agriculture on the spray planes that do their work in the surrounding area, and the fact that the museum is built on the northern border of the airport makes for a perfect location to bring pilots, mechan-
ics, aviation enthusiasts and the general public into a place where museum artifacts serve to stimulate interchange. That sort of interaction may be the beginnings of someone choosing a lifetime career in aviation. When that happens, the museum lives up to its purpose.

The location of the museum comes in handy in other ways too. Every other year, an air show is held at the Minot Air Force Base called Northern Neighbors Day (to be held July 18th this year.) Warbirds on their way to or from the air show often land at Minot and spend the night on the ramp near the museum. The museum gets the best of both worlds when the crews come into the museum for something to drink while their planes attract public attention. Moments like this make the museum’s purpose come alive. Aviation history becomes more vivid when the museum’s ability to tell the story is combined with events that demonstrate that story.

The museum hosts a special event each year called the Military Vehicle Collectors Association (MVCA) Summer Display and Meeting. This event brings together a large collection of restored military vehicles, from the little Willy’s jeeps to the larger two and one-half ton vehicles. Along with the vehicles are tents and a large array of exhibits. A concession stand is nearby to provide food and beverage. This event will be held on June 27th and 28th this year. The museum will not charge admission during the event. Donations are certainly welcome. At the MVCA Summer Display, an entertainment group will provide a mini USO type of performance with period dress and music from the Big Band era. This performance will be an appetizer for a larger USO show planned later for this year. Details will be forthcoming on the museum’s website as plans progress.

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Minot Air Force Base personnel, who want to get in volunteer time, find the museum one of their strongest attractions. As it comes time to open in the spring, volunteers can be found cleaning and polishing up airplanes. They also find the museum a great partner in hosting some of their events, such as CAP awards ceremonies and dinners. Besides this, there are the volunteers who get in on the museum’s restoration projects. There are two major restorations going on right now, one civilian and the other military: a 1929 Arrow Sport and a P-40 Warhawk. There are some partial restorations going on also: a C-47 that sets outside and the nose of a DC-3 that sets inside. Needless to say, the guys from the base get in on the Warbird restorations. With projects such as these, the museum benefits from those military personnel who have special areas of expertise.

There is another side benefit that occurs as a result of the air base. Eventually the young service men and women are going to have family come to visit. As a re-
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It is central to a region where lots of Norwegian, Swedish and other Scandinavian immigrants came to settle. The German immigrant background is also in the region. The Scandinavian connection between the Old and the New World is the reason for the annual Norsk Hostfest that is celebrated in Minot. This brings in visitors from Norway, Sweden and elsewhere. They take pride in such aviation heroes as Carl Ben Eielsen and others with a Scandinavian background. Scandinavian names are reflected in the names that had the major role in starting and building up the Dakota Territory Air Museum.

Don Larson, from nearby Sawyer, North Dakota, saw the need for a museum and got others involved who have a strong role in the regions business aviation community. Don, along with Al Pietsch and Al’s son Warren, founded the museum in 1986. One of their purposes in the museum was to tell the story of the regions history in aviation.

With a grant from the Centennial Commission, the first hanger was completed in time for the North Dakota Centennial Air Show of 1989. A second building was completed in 1990. A local WWII hero, Oswin H. “Moose” Elker, provided the means for the third building. A pilot who flew the P-40 Warhawk in the 75th Fighter Squadron of the 14th Air Force, he participated in the Burma and Chinese campaigns. He was shot down twice by enemy ground fire. His escape through enemy territory with the help of local Chinese farm and village peasants makes for some adventurous reading. The book is sold in the museum’s gift shop under the title, Oswin H. Elker, A Flying Tiger.

The crash occurred just north of the airport on December 12, 1944.

Beside the airplanes, there are paintings, photographs, display cases, kiosks, memorabilia, flight suits, uniforms, models, WWII air base dioramas, narratives, a small hallway art gallery and a library with magazines dating back to the 1920’s. Examples of the valuable items to be seen in the display area are those found in the Oswin H. Elker display case. There you can see his leather jacket from WWII – in excellent condition – along with the items he carried while he worked his way through enemy lines. The rewards he received from the citizens of China, including a jade carving given to him by Madam Chiang Kai-shek, are included in this exhibit.

Some of the subjects covered in the display hanger are: The Early Years of Powered Flight; WWII; Korea; Vietnam; The Minot Air Force Base; The Minutemen Missiles; The Air National Guard; From Wheat fields to Air Fields;
Women in Aviation; The Canadian Snowbirds; The U.S. Air Force Thunderbirds; The U.S Navy Blue Angels; Commercial Aviation and Minot’s Early Years. Minot’s Early Years includes such subjects as the initial attempts to fly the mail to Minot and Operation Haylift, in which the National Guard and civilian pilots flew supplies, hay and food, from sunrise to sunset to hundreds of stranded farmers during the terrible winter of 1948-1949.

Setting outside you will see three aircraft on display: a T-33 trainer (one of the first to be assigned to MAFB), it belonged to the ‘Spittin Kitten’ squadron; another is an A-7 Corsair II; the third is an olive drab C-47 “Gooney Bird” painted up in the D-Day invasion stripes. The rest of the airplanes are kept inside. Standing in the midst of the three airplanes outside is a likeness to a B-17 tail section. On that tail section are the letters (SC) and its serial number (337661). That tail section represents a B-17 that crashed during a training mission from out of Sioux City, Iowa. The crash occurred just north of the airport on December 12, 1944. Only four of its crew survived. A bronze plaque that honors the names of the crew accompanies the tail section. This item of interest is a memorial commemorating all those aircrew members who gave their lives in the war.

The military planes are the three on static display outside along with the P-40 under restoration and a T-28 Trojan. All of the others are civilian. The oldest is a 1928 Waco 10. Most are from the early thirty’s and the forties. All of the planes in the Elker Hanger are airworthy. There are other non-airline items that have found their way into the museum, including old fire trucks with dates from 1919, 1927, 1930 and 1939. The museum also has the beacon that was used at the Minot airport from 1949 to 1993.

The museum becomes an active place from time to time when aircraft are taken out and flown during the summer. It catches everyone’s attention when you see a 1932 Monocoupe, a 1931 Waco QCF-2 and a 1943 T-6 taxiing out to the runway. To further stir up the dust, sometimes a special visitor roars in and rests for a few weeks. That would be none other than a North American P-51 known as the Dakota Kid II. This is a P-51 painted up to look like and named after a P-51 that was flown by another North Dakota veteran from WWII, the late Noble Petersen.

What keeps the museum going? The funding of the museum comes from the business community, from donations, memberships, admissions and a gift shop. However, one of the most important functions that fund the museum is the annual sweepstakes. This year is the thirteenth year of the sweepstakes. The grand prize this year (besides two Early Bird drawings of $200.00 for those who get in by June 1st) will be a 1946 Cessna 140. Only 2000 entries at $50.00 each will be sold. The big day comes when there is a fly-in on August 23rd. Starting around 9 am, there will be a breakfast. At 11 am the drawing will take place. There is no requirement to be at the drawing in order to win, however, it is always nice to see the winner on hand to receive the prize.

How to contact us? You can call the museum at (701) 852-8500 or visit the website at www.dakotaterritoryairmuseum.com. You can also email us at airmuseum@minot.com. Our mailing address is: Dakota Territory Air Museum, P.O. Box 195, Minot, North Dakota 58702.

The museum is open from mid-May to mid-October. This year, opening day will be May 16th. The last day will be October 11. Hours are Monday through Saturday, 10 am to 5 pm and Sunday from 1 to 5 pm. Admission fees are $2.00 for children 6-17 and $4.00 for adults. A family will not have to pay more than $10.00. Groups are welcome. To visit during off-hours or during the off-season, call for an appointment at (701) 852-8500.

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