

TBM Gathering – 90 Tons of Turkeys Invade Illinois

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As we promised a few months ago, here is our report on the TBM gathering organized by Brad Deckert in Peru, Illinois this past week. The event was widely acclaimed as a roaring success, and we had our own Matthew McDaniel on the ground to report on the proceedings. We are also able to share some images from the event taken by the masterful photographer Greg Morehead and provided to **WarbirdsNews** compliments of the world-class **Warbird Digest** magazine. We greatly appreciate their support, and can't thank chief editor Greg Morehead enough for his generosity. There's also a great video from [AirshowStuff.com](#) as well, and we must offer our thanks to their team for providing us with live coverage of the event on our [Facebook feed](#) as well. We hope you enjoy reading....

90 Tons of Turkeys Invade Illinois

by Matthew McDaniel



A glorious sunset formation shot of three TBMs. TBM-3E Bu.85650 is in the foreground with TBM-3E Bu. 85882 'Ida Red' in the middle and Brad Deckert's TBM-3E Bu.85828 in the background. (photo by Greg Morehead, courtesy Warbird Digest magazine)



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Eight of the ten TBM's that flew from Peru, Illinois during the Avenger Gathering. (photo by Greg Morehead, courtesy of Warbird Digest magazine)

Twenty miles northeast of Illinois Valley Regional Airport, I selected the airport's Common Traffic Advisory Frequency (CTAF) and was immediately bombarded with a non-stop barrage of position reports by the dozens of airplanes descending upon Peru, IL. Several radio calls were between the TBM Avengers that were airborne south of KVYS and assembling into a 9-ship formation. About 10 miles out, the gaggle of TBM's came into view, appearing as a mighty Tour de Force on the horizon. Soon after I'd landed, the Avengers made a series of fly overs before their recoveries onto Illinois Valley's Runway 18. In military parade fashion, each Avenger folded its wings exiting the taxiway and parked as a picturesque row of eight TBM's across the apron. A ninth TBM parked at a staging location for giving rides to lucky passengers, as a tenth Turkey underwent maintenance while 'roosting' in a nearby hangar. Ten airworthy examples of Grumman's giant torpedo bomber haven't assembled in a single location since the type was still a staple of the air tanker fleet in the 1980s. However, the last time that so many flying, military-configured TBM's got together must have been around 1960!

Organized by TBM owner/pilot, Brad Deckert, the First Annual TBM Avenger Gathering was a success by any measure. In fact, it exceeded all expectations. Over the course of the three-day weekend in April, an estimated 10,000 spectators took in the sights and sounds of aviation history at VYS. Approximately 200 aircraft flew in to see or take part in the display as well. While many show planes (warbirds, antiques, classics, homebuilts, etc.) were in attendance, the undisputed stars were the ten massive machines designed by the famed 'Grumman Iron Works'.



Working on the engine of the recalcitrant Avenger. (photo by Greg Morehead, courtesy of Warbird Digest magazine)

“Imposing” is an apt descriptor, even for a single Avenger. However, eight or nine Avengers parked side-by-side only magnifies that impression. Some variants weigh in with a max takeoff weight of nearly 18,000 lbs.... that’s nine tons! Grumman personnel referred to the plane as the Turkey during its development. That nickname and others were used by Avenger flight and ground crews, more to describe the plane’s ungainly appearance than its performance (which was quite good in nearly every respect, in spite of its size and bulky appearance). Nine tons of torpedo-toting Turkey cannot be ignored any more by airport crowds today than it could have been by axis seamen watching it bare down on them to drop a shallow-running Mk XIII torpedo meant to dispatch their vessel to the ocean floor.

Some may wonder why so many Avengers remain considering that there are no preserved examples of its predecessor, the Douglas TBD Devastator, and just a handful of its dive-bombing cousin, the SBD Dauntless, remain airworthy along with a single SB2C Helldiver. Avengers have survived in relatively large numbers because, unlike so many WWII designs, they were useful in post-war life, serving in both military and civilian roles.



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TBM's warming up prior to a formation flight. (photo by Greg Morehead, courtesy of Warbird Digest magazine)

Avengers served US Navy and Marine squadrons throughout WWII, making their combat debut, in June 1942, at the Battle of Midway. Allied nations also operated several variants of the Avenger throughout the war. Post-war, Avengers continued to serve in many military roles, most notably within the Royal Canadian Navy, who retained Avengers until July, 1960. Yet, the capability of the Avenger that helped ensure the survival of so many airframes today was almost exactly the opposite of what it was designed to do. As a torpedo bomber, the Avenger's job was to rain hellfire upon enemy warships. Ironically, in civilian life, they were found to be equally adept at extinguishing fires, as water bombers. Thus, they flew extensively in both firefighting and aerial application missions. Amazingly, the last Avenger wasn't retired from such roughneck civilian duty until 2012 (71 years after the design first flew)!



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Pilots who aren't afraid to get their hands dirty – Mark Murphy finishing up some brake work on Charlie Lynch's TBM. The scale of the tire to the man gives some idea of how massive the TBM is! (photo by Greg Morehead, courtesy of Warbird Digest magazine)



Another gorgeous Avenger sunset shot by Greg Morehead. This is TBM-3E Bu.85882 'Ida Red', owned by Mike Kopp. Owner Michael Kopp (back seat) gives Mark Murphy some stick time in his TBM.(photo by Greg Morehead, courtesy of Warbird Digest magazine)

Of the 9,800+ Avengers manufactured between 1941 and 1945, the vast majority were built under contract by General Motors' Eastern Aircraft Division in order to meet critical wartime demand. Those Avengers carry the "TBM" designation (Torpedo Bomber, General Motors), versus the Grumman-built "TBF" designation. All ten Avengers present in Peru were late-production TBM-3s:

NL81865, Bu.85828, TBM-3E: Brad Deckert. Based: Illinois Valley Regional Airport (VYS), Peru, IL. Deckert organized the Avenger Gathering and housed up to five of them at a time in his large hangar on the field. Bristling with external weapons stores, a radar pod, and a replica torpedo in the internal bay, Deckert's TBM shows a real dedication to a militarily accurate restoration.

N85650, Bu.85650, TBM-3E: Heritage Flight Foundation / Mark Simmons. Based: Westerly State Airport (WST), Westerly, RI. This unique TBM was the only one present with the long 'greenhouse' canopy configuration (without the rear turret). The extra long canopy allows seating for 4, in tandem.

NL293E, Bu.53829, TBM-3E: Mark & Allen Yaggie. Based: Hector Int'l Airport (FAR), Fargo, ND.

NL9584Z, Bu.85822, TBM-3E: Michael Kopp. Based: Seattle, WA area. The gray over white paint scheme on this TBM was unique, with all other TBMs sporting some variation of Navy or Marine blue schemes.

NL683G, Bu.53768, TBM-3U: Tom Buck. Based: Joliet Regional Airport (JOT), Joliet, IL. Probably the most recognizable TBM on the airshow circuit due to its vibrant blue and white paint scheme, representing the TBM flown by Lt. J.G. George H.W. Bush in the Pacific Theater.

NL436GM, Bu.91436, TBM-3: Charlie Cartledge. Oshkosh Grand Champion winner. Based: Erie-Ottawa Int'l Airport (PCW), Port Clinton, OH.

NL420GP, Bu.53420, TBM-3S: Tri-State Warbird Museum. Based: Clermont Co. Airport (I69), Batavia, OH.

N3967A, Bu.53835, TBM-3: Charles Lynch. Based: Westchester Co. Airport (HPN), White Plains, NY.

NL325GT, Bu.69325, TBM-3U: Darrell Berry. Based: Benton Co. Regional Airport (0M8), Camden, TN. Unfortunately, this striking TBM spent most of the event inside Deckert's hangar undergoing unscheduled maintenance.

N5264, Bu.53353, TBM-3E: Commemorative Air Force, Missouri Wing. Based: St. Charles Co. Airport, Portages des Sioux, MO. The CAF's Avenger spent the event giving rides and rarely sat still for long, giving nearly every spectator a chance to see an Avenger in flight, regardless of when or for how long they in attended.



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Ida Red bids adieu. (photo by Greg Morehead, courtesy of Warbird Digest magazine)

About The Author: Matthew McDaniel is a Master & Gold Seal CFII, ATP, MEI, AGI, & IGI and Platinum CSIP. In 25 years of flying, he has logged 16,000 hours total, over 5,500 hours of instruction-given. Currently, he flies the Airbus A-320 series for an international airline, holds eight turbine aircraft type ratings, and has flown over 80 aircraft types. Matt is one of 25 instructors in the world to have earned the Master CFI designation for seven consecutive two-year terms. He has been a freelance aviation author since 2003. He can be reached at: matt@progaviation.com or +1-414-339-4990. OR www.progaviation.com/

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