Preparing for flight...again

story and photos by LISA R. HOOKER

Through the dedicated restoration efforts of the Historical Aircraft Squadron, Inc. (HAS), a piece of military history soon will fly off into the wild blue yonder once again.

The aircraft is a Douglas A-26 medium bomber, also known as "The Invader."

The plane had been in Cleveland, and the parts were transported to Lancaster on three flatbed trucks in 1998. Since its arrival at the Fairfield County Airport, where HAS is based, more than 5,800 volunteer hours have gone into the project.

Leading the way is Branson Rutherford, retired chief master sergeant who served 27 years active duty with the United States Marine Corps and the United States Air Force. During the Vietnam War, Rutherford was a crew member on an A-26 just like the one HAS is restoring.

The Historical Aircraft Squadron is restoring this Douglas A-26.

"We have a dedicated group of volunteers who work on it every Wednesday and Saturday," says Rutherford, who also is a South Central Power customer.

Assisting Rutherford are Jim Baldwin, Jim Belshe, Harold Carpenter, Michael Lorenzi, Roger Marshall, Tom Palmer, Jim Ridgway, Mike Ryan and Ralph Woolever.

The Douglas A-26. About 2,500 A-26 Invaders were built, and the model's first flight was July 20, 1942. On Nov. 19, 1944, it went into combat over Europe and was used for level bombing, ground strafing and rocket attacks. In 1948, it was redesignated the B-26 and later it saw action in Korea and Vietnam.

The A-26 wingspan is 70 feet. It is 51 feet, three inches long and 18 feet, three inches high. Its range is 1,400 miles, with a maximum speed of 373 miles per hour. Fully loaded, it weighs 35,000 pounds. It accommodated various armaments and carried bombs internally and under its wings. Three crew members operate the aircraft.

The HAS restoration. The A-26 being restored by HAS was last flown in 1992 when it landed in Cleveland.

"The private owner of the plane was looking for a group like ours to restore his plane. We raise funds for the restoration and our volunteers do all of the work. Then we can use it at air shows. It's a good partnership," says Bob DeLay, HAS public affairs officer..

"HAS could never afford to buy a plane like this, but we can save it and show it to the public," adds Rutherford. HAS intends to use the plane to teach adults and children about history and about the military.

All of the major parts were disassembled and rebuilt. The hydraulic, instrumentation and electrical systems were checked, repaired or replaced. The A-26 sports new tires, and the propellers now turn.

An especially important day for HAS members came in April, when the engines roared to life for the first time in many years.

"It was a great day. All of our hard work paid off just to hear those engines," says Rutherford. Later that month, a 20-minute systems operation check affirmed what was working correctly and identified components that need further mechanical attention. Rutherford estimates it will be next spring before the A-26 Invader restoration is complete.

About HAS. Founded in December 1994, HAS is an all-volunteer, nonprofit organization dedicated to the restoration, display and operation of former military aircraft and related equipment. In 2000, it completed construction of its hangar. Additional buildings to house restored aircraft, a museum, military vehicles and other memorabilia are planned. HAS possesses a Folland Gnat Jet Fighter, Douglas C-47 transport, Grumman S2F Tracker, Beech C-45 transport and a Vultee BT trainer. Its most recent acquisition is a Stuart M5A1 light tank.

Wings of Victory Air Show. HAS, like other volunteer organizations, relies on contributions and fundraising. Its biggest event is the annual Wings of Victory Air Show. The Aug. 17 and 18 event at the Fairfield County Airport will feature various military and vintage aircraft. Of special interest is a restored Douglas A-26 Invader just like the one HAS is working on. Aerial performances are scheduled throughout the show, including a sizable fly-by of WWII aircraft. The Airman's Preservation Society, a WWII Army Air Corps group, will set up an encampment. The public also can meet two Black-sheep Squadron pilots, tour the HAS hangar and see its nearly restored A-26 Invader.

Contact HAS at www.historicalaircraftsquadron.org or 740-653-4778 for air show or A-26 restoration information.

(Learn more about the HAS project on Page 30.)

Left: Inside the cockpit of the A-26. Right: Rutherford checks one of the engines after its systems check in April.