

CENTENNIAL COUNTDOWN

DECEMBER 17, 2003, MARKS THE 100TH ANNIVERSARY OF POWERED FLIGHT. EACH MONTH OF THIS YEAR, *PLANE & PILOT* WILL FEATURE A REMARKABLE MOMENT IN THE HISTORY OF AVIATION.

In Their Own Words

Lost And Found Aviation Sounds dedicates itself to preserving aviation's aural legacy

By Melissa Brandzel

In the 100 years since the Wright brothers took their first flight at Kitty Hawk, many efforts have been made to restore and display our rich aviation heritage. Museums all over the world, from the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C., to the American Air Museum in Cambridgeshire, England, contain numerous records of our flight achievements as well as our missions in space and war. Photographs, film clips and written transcripts abound. Little has been done to support our audio records of aviation history, however.

Enter Chris Butterfield, curator of Lost And Found Aviation Sounds (LAFAS). A radio producer and aviation enthusiast, Butterfield established LAFAS to "rescue and preserve any audio recordings related to aviation and space flight."

The project began not long ago when Butterfield received a copy of some old wire recordings from his friend Ken McDaniel, a former sound engineer. Uncovered in a Washington, D.C., basement, the four hours of recordings contained interviews with the team that broke the sound barrier in 1947. For Butterfield, it was an incredible find. "What makes these recordings special is that they include not only Chuck Yeager, but other people intimately involved with the X-1 test program. These tapes allow their voices to describe the events while they're still 'raw' in their own minds."

78 PLANE & PILOT



Captain (later Major General) Charles "Chuck" Yeager, the first pilot to break the sound barrier.

Now, Butterfield, McDaniel and a third partner, Liz Fawden, donate their labor to preserve such recordings. The process is arduous: One hour of tape can involve a minimum of four to five hours to restore and often more. The material is checked for nicks, slices and other defects, then carefully wound onto a reel-to-reel player. Next, the recording is played into a com-

puter, where more glitches are removed, and then it gets decrackedled and dehummed. Some tapes require even more TLC, such as a special 16-hour heat-treatment process. In addition, the team must play detective at times, solving the puzzles of when and where some of these unlabeled tapes were recorded, and by whom, so they can be properly identified.

Photo courtesy of USAF

And it's not just the issue of saving this "dead media"—it's also the difficulty of locating the nearly obsolete machines on which the recordings can be played. So, Butterfield buys old reel-to-reels, wire recorders and 78 players whenever he can find them; in at least one case, McDaniel had to build a special box in order to hear a recording.

About a year ago, Butterfield went to look at an old wire recorder in a garage in Lincolnshire, England. The owner also had a tape machine—which was unsalvageable—but a tape hidden inside turned out to be one of three known existing copies of a recording of the Battle of Britain. Taped in 1940, BBC veteran reporter Charles Gardner stands at the cliffs of Dover at the height of the battle, describ-



Images supplied by USAF/Sony Corp., Japan

ing German dive-bombers attacking an Allied convoy in the English Channel, while high above, RAF Spitfires are battling German Messerschmitts. It provides a unique historical perspective, according to Butterfield. "It's him, in his own words, telling it how it was then, not somebody's interpretation in a book." (To hear an excerpt from the Battle of Britain, log on to www.planeandpilotmag.com.)

"It's important to preserve these tapes because of the instilled knowledge these people had," he continues. "We're not just talking about the famous people like Chuck Yeager or Neil Armstrong, but the ordinary flight engineer or flight steward, and their knowledge—they probably knew things that we've forgotten or will forget in 50 or 100 years. It's important to preserve them now, otherwise we're going to lose this knowledge of how things were done."

These little pieces of history are quietly slipping away. Many audiotapes are simply sitting on shelves or in boxes in private homes, collecting dust—recollections from war veterans, interviews with air race participants. Although there are a number of museums with audio-



Photo courtesy of USAF

Colonel (later Major General) Al Boyd, record-setting pilot and chief of the Flight Test Division at Wright Field, 1945-1949.

tape archives, such as the San Diego Aerospace Museum in Southern California, they usually don't have the equipment, knowledge, time or money to restore the material. Some have transcriptions of audio recordings, such as the National Museum of Naval Aviation in Pensacola, Fla., but Butterfield feels it's important to take it a step further. "It's great to read it, but it's so much better to hear it. You can hear the emotion, the inflections, how the person felt about the event. You actually feel like you're there."

Butterfield would like to make audio-tape restorations accessible not only to museums, but also to the general public by releasing the recordings on CD. He also wants to establish history programs with colleges and universities to make the media available to students. "They can hear history for themselves," he says.

"They'll understand it better in first person.

"We've been told we're crazy to be doing this," says Butterfield. "But the whole object is to take a long-term view and build something that will be the biggest archive of audio material related to aviation and space flight. If it takes the rest of my life, that's fine."

As is usually the case with such projects, there are barely enough resources to fund the restorations; Butterfield and his team are covering the costs out of their own pockets. LAFAS would like to see corporate sponsorship of the project and welcomes volunteer assistance and/or donations from pilots everywhere.

For more information, contact: Lost And Found Aviation Sounds, 011-44-152-639-8012 (from the U.S.), e-mail: lafas@one-voice.co.uk, www.one-voice.co.uk/lafas. P&P