

Historical plane an added perk for festival

By JOEY WRIGHT

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DANVILLE — While hot air balloons naturally draw top billing at Balloons Over Vermilion, the event has something for aviation enthusiasts of all kinds.

Beyond the crowds of festival attendees and food vendors at Vermilion Regional Airport is a connection to aircraft new and old.

"This is a really great opportunity for the community to see a vast array of aviation out here because we're still an active airport during this event," airport manager Alex Gale said. "We have three runways, and we close two of them and we keep our main one open."

Onlookers may notice the arrival of a Short 360 cargo plane. They'll also have the chance to fly themselves in a B-25 Mitchell heavy bomber that was used as a training



Provided

'Champaign Gal,' a B-25 Mitchell heavy bomber used in World War II, will be providing ground and flight tours at Balloons Over Vermilion on Saturday.

aircraft during World War II.

The bomber is tied to the area by coincidence alone — nicknamed "Champaign Gal," it's owned by the Champaign Aviation Museum in Urbana, Ohio.

When pilot Terry Singer arrived at the airport in February after leading a

charter flight, he noticed a poster advertising the balloon festival while walking around.

He contacted event organizers and arrangements were made for the plane to become a centerpiece. The 80-year-old plane will join tethered balloon rides as an interactive exhibit available at

the airport.

"When you get down to the end of the runway, and you put those engines up to high power for takeoff, there's a lot of rumbling and shaking and noise and it's really exciting," Singer said. "Once you climb out and you get to altitude and you tell them they can unbuckle and walk around

the airplane, it's really cool."

One modification the plane has that makes it ideal for tours is a bench seat that was added just behind the cockpit for students to sit in while training. It affords a nice view of the pilots as they tend the controls.

The plane was due to arrive in Danville on Friday but inclement weather forced the crew to postpone their departure to this morning.

"We're a good weather operation," Singer said. "We just have to be that way with the historical aircraft."

It is expected to arrive at 8:30 a.m. today and will offer rides at 10:30 a.m., noon and 1:30 p.m. if weather conditions allow.

Depending on conditions, flights and ground tours may be available for purchase at the Champaign Aviation Museum's booth at the airport.