

Houston



Above: One of Wings over Houston's unusual combinations was the Lifters Legacy pairing of the Vietnam War Flight Museum's C-47 Skytrain Spooky and a USAF C-17A Globemaster III. The difference in size of the two transports is striking.
Neil Pearson

This photograph: The Douglas Flight staged at Wings over Houston involved the Vietnam War Flight Museum's A-26C Invader and A-1D Skyraider, and the Collings Foundation's TA-4J Skyhawk. Neil Pearson



Event: Wings over Houston Airshow
Venue: Ellington Airport, Houston, Texas, USA
Date: Saturday 31 October-Sunday 1 November 2009
Reviewer: Neil Pearson

Wings over Houston has long been one of the highlights of the US airshow season, and 2009's event, the 25th in this annual series, was no exception. The public clearly agreed, and this year saw record attendance in excess of 90,000, due not least to the participation of the US Navy's Blue Angels for the first time since 1998. Their usual immaculate display was preceded by their support Hercules 'Fat Albert', which performed one of its final JATO displays on Saturday. Dwindling stocks of the solid-fuel rocket bottles, which date from the Vietnam War era, means that 2009 was the last year to witness this spectacle.

The show was proud to boast both static and flying displays from all five branches of the US armed forces. In addition to the Angels, the US Navy displayed an F/A-18F Super Hornet, and the Marine Corps wowed the crowds with the AV-8B Harrier II, while the USAF contributed its solo demos from the A-10A Thunderbolt II, F-15E Strike Eagle and C-17A Globemaster III. The Ellington-based Texas Army

National Guard staged a role demo using a pair of AH-64A Apaches, enhanced by a multitude of bangs and explosions. Also stationed at Ellington is the US Coast Guard, which carried out a SAR demo with an MH-65C Dolphin helicopter.

The Wings over Houston programme is particularly extensive, that excellent modern military content backed up by a wide range of aerobatic performers and especially warbirds. The fleets of Texas' finest, the Commemorative Air Force and the Lone Star Flight Museum, play a major role through typically spectacular scenarios — the 'Tora! Tora! Tora!' Pearl Harbor re-enactment, a Battle of Midway re-creation and a European theatre set-piece. In addition, the Vietnam Firepower demo acted out a very well-organised scenario to rescue a downed A-4 Skyhawk pilot from the Viet Cong. First to launch, to provide reconnaissance and forward air control, were an O-1 Bird Dog and an O-2A Skymaster. While the Vietnam War Flight Museum's A-1D Skyraider and A-26C Invader suppressed enemy units on the ground, a pair of UH-1s skimmed the airfield at low level to rescue the pilot. This segment also featured the Collings Foundation TA-4J Skyhawk. Unfortunately their F-4D remained on static display, and a B-52 flyby failed to materialise.

With so many warbirds and military demo teams in attendance, there were also high expectations for the USAF Heritage Flights at this show, and it did not disappoint. The Lone Star museum's P-47 Thunderbolt flew with the A-10, and the F-15E was joined by a pair of P-51 Mustangs and P-38 Lightning *Glacier Girl*, the latter also joining up with the three Mustangs of the Horsemen team. But the organisers, keen to be different, also put together a couple of mixed formations of their own. Dubbed 'Lifters Legacy', the USAF C-17 made several impressive passes with a C-47 Skytrain, while a Douglas Flight comprised Invader, Skyraider and Skyhawk, all products of the Douglas Aircraft Company of the 1940s and '50s. These combinations marked Wings over Houston out as one of the most imaginative North American events of the year.

The AIRCRAFT verdict

This airshow had something for everyone — perfect weather, a broad spectrum of flying acts and interesting static displays. The only downside is the position of the sun in the morning.