

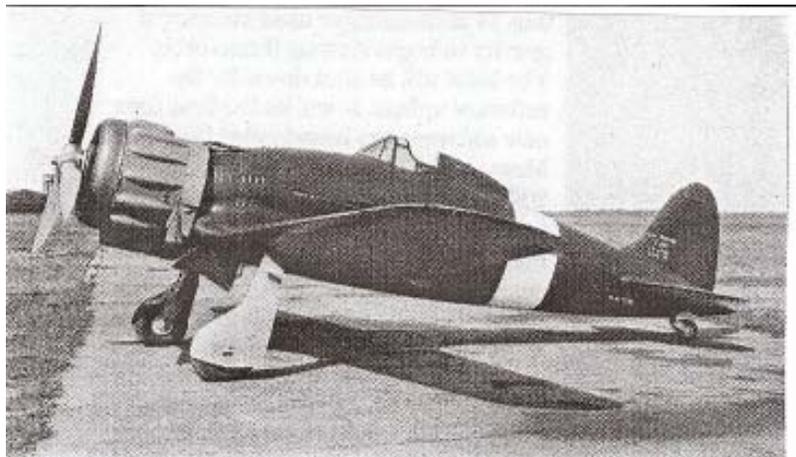


## WHEN WORLD WAR II CAME TO RICHMOND

BY MARK STERNHEIMER, VAHS BOARD MEMBER

The summer of 1943 was a busy time for the Allies in North Africa. German General Rommel had been defeated and a great many captured German and Italian airplanes and tanks were sent back from North Africa to be salvaged for basic metal. Along with the planes and tanks came many German and Italian prisoners. Richmond, Virginia was a staging area for both the material as well as the prisoners. Most of the German and Italian prisoners were shipped off to Ft. Lee for the balance of the war and the same ships that unloaded the prisoners also had many captured tanks and planes.

At that time my Dad's office was located a few blocks from the intermediate terminal down at Lester Street (now East Main Street). We could see planes being taken off the ships and then shortly after that taken to the scrap yards.



MACCHI C-200

VAHS member, Judge Bill Spain who was a Commonwealth Attorney at the time, told me that a squabble arose between Smith's Iron and Metal Company, located at 17<sup>th</sup> and Cary, and Lewis Schaefer's Scrap Yard, located on the south side off of Brander Street

near Hull Street Station, as to who would get the tanks and who would get the planes. Judge Spain ruled that Smith would get the planes and Schaefer the tanks. Both scrap yards wanted the tanks because of their metal value.

When I first saw the German and Italian planes, I could hardly believe my eyes. Although I had just turned 13 at the time, you can imagine how I felt being able to sit in the cockpits of these fabulous World War II fighter planes. There were approximately 50 planes in the yard, some stacked one on top of the other. On one pile stood the most magnificent MC200 fighter. This had a radial engine with those beautiful cowl bumps that were so popular in the late 1930's and early 1940's. Other planes in the yard were ME110's, Macchi MC202's, ME109's, JU87's, and a few Fiat CR67's. If ever there was an aviation lover's paradise, this was it.

My Dad drove past the yard every day to and from work and kept me advised as to what was going on. After school was out in June 1943, I would ride down to the yard on my bike with a big knapsack on my back. I made friends with the Yard Superintendent and he would let me crawl through the airplanes and remove instruments and accessories which I would then bring back to the scale for weighing. Most things were anywhere from five to ten cents a pound so by the end of the day I would have more than I could carry for



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magneto, and fuel injection systems which were very advanced for their day. I had hoped to be able to convince my Dad to buy a fuselage of an MC202 and let me store it in his garage. It proved, however, to be several feet too long, and even though I offered to cut the tail off, it was just something I couldn't talk him into. There is only one MC202 in the world today that I know of and that is at the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum.

Most of the airplanes had rudimentary instruments with virtually no radio navigation equipment except for a simple radio transmitter and receiver.

Early that Fall a number of the airplanes were partially assembled and taken up to the Thalhimer parking lot at 7<sup>th</sup> and Franklin for a display and war bond rally. A picture of the MC202 was published in *The Richmond News Leader* October 12. Many Richmonders had a chance to look at the airplanes while they were on display. Unfortunately none of the airplanes survived too much longer after the parking lot exhibit.



One day in November, my Dad told me they were loading the airplanes into railroad cars and taking them to the smelter. When I paid my last visit to the scrap yard I saw a big electro-magnetic crane try to grab the airplane by the fuselage and lift them into the waiting gondola cars. Because there was so little iron and steel they could not easily load them. Finally someone realized that here was enough steel in the propeller shaft to allow the electro-magnetic crane to grab it. The last recollection I have of these airplanes is them being loaded one at a time hanging by their nose like a fish out of water by the magnetic crane. The yard was soon emptied of all traces of this incredible collection and it is truly unfortunate that no one had the foresight to save not even one for posterity. My Dad helped me take the contour formed armored steel pilot's seat from an MC202 and we made a chair out of it using an adjustable base from an office chair. We assembled some of the instruments, control stick and accessories together, and when we sat in the chair it was very easy to pretend we were again fighting those exciting air battles over North Africa. I kept the pilot's seat for many years but it was so heavy that my wife thought one of the kids would get hurt if it fell over, so we finally gave it away. Fortunately, however, I did save most of the other mementos including a section of the tail which had the Italian squadron insignia.

If any of these airplanes had survived today, its value would have been inestimable as practically all were destroyed after World War II was over.

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## Acronomions Is Back!

ADS-BEE

As before, there are no right answers and all replies will be published.

Send entries to: [ncrabill@vigyan.com](mailto:ncrabill@vigyan.com)

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