

November 17, 2007

REMEMBRANCES
David Tallichet (1922 – 2007)

Pioneer of Theme Restaurants Pulled His Ideas Out of the Sky

 By **STEPHEN MILLER**
November 17, 2007; Page A8

Years before the Hard Rock Cafe put guitars on its walls, David Tallichet's company dressed up its restaurants as Polynesian isles, New England fishing villages and French farmhouses barricaded with sandbags to protect against German bombardment. At his Proud Bird restaurant in Los Angeles International Airport, he installed headphones at each table so diners could listen to control-tower chatter.




John Tallichet

A pioneer of the theme-restaurant concept, Mr. Tallichet was also sometimes called the Indiana Jones of historical aviation for his journeys to remote deserts and swamps in pursuit of warplanes. He eventually built a collection of 120 vintage planes.

Mr. Tallichet, who died Oct. 29 at age 84 at his home in Orange, Calif., liked to put his eateries at harbors and airports and on hillsides. More than offering sustenance, they were destinations. "He brought fantasy to restaurants the way Disney invented the fully themed amusement park," says Mark Gottdiener, author of "The Theming of America."

DOW JONES REPRINTS

 This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers, use the Order Reprints tool at the bottom of any article or visit: www.djreprints.com.

- [See a sample reprint in PDF format.](#)
- [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

Mr. Tallichet opened his first South Seas-inspired venue in 1958. It was called The Reef and placed on the edge of the harbor in Long Beach, Calif. Mr. Tallichet's son, John, says his father took inspiration from Disneyland in Anaheim.

By 1968, when Mr. Tallichet's Specialty Restaurants Corp. first sold shares on the American Stock Exchange, it had grown to 40 outlets, nearly all of them in Southern California.

Mr. Tallichet had an acute eye for real estate and a talent for getting governments to lease him places with wide vistas. "We have plate glass in most of our restaurants where you look out on something -- shimmering water, ships or valleys," he told the Los Angeles Times in 1974. As for cuisine, the restaurants relied on solid middlebrow fare -- steaks, seafood and pasta and, when they became fashionable, salad bars that stretched to 50 feet.

Mr. Tallichet grew up in Texas. His father, a traveling food salesman, became unemployed during the Depression. Mr. Tallichet sold the Saturday Evening Post door to door, making three cents on each copy. He said later this taught him the value of a penny.

He often told the story of cheating on the eye exam to qualify for flight school; it was the first moment, he said, when he took destiny by the horns. He piloted more than 20 B-17 Flying Fortress missions out of England during World War II.

After the war, he stayed on active duty in the Air National Guard for a decade. Later, a visit to the National Air and Space Museum in Washington inspired him to begin collecting warplanes. Among Mr. Tallichet's first purchases was a P-51 Mustang bought as surplus from the Royal Canadian Air Force.

"These aircraft were literally rotting in the weeds around the country," says Gary Lewi of the American Airpower Museum in Farmingdale, N.Y.

Among Mr. Tallichet's trophies were Soviet MiGs, a P-40 Tomahawk fighter and a British Hawker Hurricane. In the late 1970s, he began going on expeditions to salvage wrecked or abandoned planes. He purchased a fleet of British World War II-era Hawker Sea Fury fighter-bombers sitting idle in Iraq and brought them to the West, where collectors snapped them up.

He found a number of Martin B-26 Marauders in western Canada, where they had crashed en route to Alaska and Russia. He pieced together an airworthy version at a time when no flying B-26s existed, according to Michael O'Leary, editor of Air Classics Magazine.

According to Mr. O'Leary, he recovered warplanes in the jungles of New Guinea, haggled with Anastasio Somoza to buy several Douglas A-26 Invaders from the Nicaraguan Air Force and purchased a fleet of PBY-5A flying boats from Brazil. He flew one of them back the U.S. himself, at the front of a mass formation.

In all, he purchased or salvaged about 120 planes, say Mr. O'Leary and John Tallichet. At the time of his death, Mr. Tallichet still had dozens of planes in hangars at the Chino Airport in California and at airports around the country. A number of his planes are on long-term loan to museums, including the Pima Air and Space Museum in Tucson, Ariz.

In the early 1970s, Mr. Tallichet's hobby and his business began to intersect with a series of aviation-themed restaurants, 94th Aero Squadron, with a World War I-era setting. Eventually, there were 14 of them.

Later, he opened World War II-themed restaurants, named for flying units, including one at Cleveland Hopkins Airport called "the Bloody Hundredth," after his own 100th Fighter Group.

Revenues at Specialty Restaurants peaked at \$185 million in 1980, when Mr. Tallichet took the company private again. It continued to expand until declaring bankruptcy in 1993 after a business slowdown left it overextended. It emerged somewhat leaner, including having sold some vintage planes. Today the company operates 25 restaurants in nine states.

Taciturn and averse to interviews, Mr. Tallichet was still closing real-estate deals in recent years. In July, he flew to an air show at the Willow Run, Mich., Airport in his favorite plane, a B-17 Flying Fortress, the same model he piloted in World War II and flew in 1990 for the airborne scenes of the film "Memphis Belle." He was the last World War II pilot still certified to fly a B-17, says Mr. O'Leary.

• **Contact us** at remembrances@wsj.com¹

URL for this article:

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB119526576911396643.html>

Hyperlinks in this Article:

(1) <mailto:remembrances@wsj.com>

Copyright 2007 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our [Subscriber Agreement](#) and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit www.djreprints.com.

RELATED ARTICLES AND BLOGS

Related Articles from the Online Journal

- [Zoellick Charts Inclusive Course At World Bank](#)
- [Hsu Seizure Uncovers More Items](#)
- [Expenses Make It Tough For Cosi to Make Bread](#)
- [Airbus, Amid Turmoil, Revives Troubled Plane](#)

Blog Posts About This Topic

- [Measures of Sacrifice](#) formerspook.blogspot.com
- [World War II Collectibles Skyrocket"](#) by subsowespac.org

More related content Powered by [Sphere](#) 