



TF = Too Much Fun

Dick Thurman's *Kentucky Babe*

Budd Davisson
WB #6562

It was hard to miss it sitting on the end of the row of Mustangs at Sun 'n Fun 2001. Looking like a fresh piece of Revere silverware, spectators had to be careful where they stood to look at it, or the reflections would have fried them. Dick Thurman's *Kentucky Babe*, a brand new TF-51D restoration/conversion, was a masterpiece in polished aluminum and still is.

Dick Thurman calls Louisville, Kentucky, home, and he calls warbirds his passion. He started flying more than 30 years ago and then drifted away from it for a few years, while he got his development busi-

ness going. Then, as his business grew, his need to travel grew as well, so he began to work cross-country airplanes into the business. That's when he really got back into flying. The airplanes included a Cessna 310 and 421 and a Turbo Commander, and he now holds a type rating for a Citation I-SP, which he pilots often.

"About 1990, a friend bought a P-51, and it really got me thinking," Dick says. "I'd always wanted to fly a P-51, and I knew the best way to do that was to start with a T-6. I bought a T-6G and then went looking for someone to teach me to fly it."

There aren't a whole lot of places you can go in the country to learn to fly a T-6, especially since Dick's entire tailwheel career consisted of 10 hours in a Piper Cub.

"I contacted Pete Van der Sleuce, who is the pre-eminent T-6 instructor, as far as I'm concerned. He really knows how to take low-time tailwheel pilots and make them comfortable in the airplane. I don't know how he does it, since I came to him with only minimum tailwheel experience, although I had been flying for many years.

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Stallion 51 and got some time with Lee Lauderback in his TF.

“I was pretty nervous on the first flight and went over the checklist at least twice,” Dick remembers, “After the T-6, the Mustang was really fairly easy, and it was a real thrill. I loved that Mustang, and the more I flew it, the more I liked it. But there was something missing. So many of my friends are pilots, and riding just isn’t the same as flying. So, I started getting interested in finding a TF.”

There aren’t many TF’s for sale, and Dick looked for a couple years before deciding on a project that needed restoring and could be converted into a TF.

“The airplane I finally settled on didn’t need restoration so much as it needed lots of repair and un-modifying, as the racers had made so many modifications to it,” Dick said. “Since it had been modified so much, I didn’t feel guilty making it into a TF.”

The airplane he purchased had been a regular on the Unlimited racing scene at Reno. Wearing the race number 6, it had been highly modified for its racing role, with little thought given to returning it to standard Mustang configuration. In fact, undoing a large number of modifications turned out to be very time consuming. Then, to make matters even worse, it had suffered an emergency landing that folded the gear. It wasn’t pretty. Everything on the bottom of the airplane including the cowling, doghouse, radiator, and flaps had been badly damaged in the landing accident

“We had a lot of things to undo, not counting the damage,” Thurman says. “For one thing, they had cut a quarter of an inch off the trailing edge of the ailerons and sealed them tightly to the wings. So many parts of the ailerons

landings from the back seat. He also worked with me a lot in formation flying and aerobatics. We just kept flying until I was totally comfortable in the airplane.”

“I flew the T-6G for two years and 350 hours before I decided to buy my first Mustang. That one was painted in the colors of Col. William Halton of the 352nd Fighter Group, 428th Fighter Squadron.”

“Wild Bill” Halton was officially credited with 10.5 kills in World War II, all but one of which were in the Mustang and 3.5 were on a single mission two days after

Christmas in 1944. He was killed in action, May 21, 1952, while flying a Mustang with the 18th Fighter Bomber Group, 67th Fighter Bomber Squadron in Korea. All of his airplanes, except his first P-47 (*Bugs*), were named *Slender, Tender, and Tall*, which is the way Thurman’s first Mustang was painted.

“Before I flew the Mustang, Vander Sleuce worked me hard in the back seat of the -6, which is far blinder than the Mustang. Also, the T-6 is much harder to control directionally. It’s a great trainer for that reason. Then I went down to



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needed replacing or rebuilding that by the time we were done, we had essentially new ailerons. The gun bays had ADI (Alcohol Direct Injection) tanks in them, and the wings had Bondo everywhere in an attempt to smooth them out for speed. Getting all that Bondo out turned out to be a real job.”

Dick took the airplane to Square One Aviation, an expert in installing the Temco TF kit into stock P-51Ds, for the two-place conversion. Then it was moved to Kissimmee, Florida, where Lee Lauderback and his boys took over the rest of the restoration/rebuild.

“The conversion required doing some re-skinning but, between the damage and the modifications we had to remove, we eventually wound up re-skinning about half of the fuselage,” he says. “Because of the accident, the gear trunnions and all the attach fitting in the wings were suspect; so was just about everything they attached to. So everything had to come out to be inspected or repaired. In fact, every nut and bolt in the entire airplane came out.”

Good Mustang wing and tail fairings are next to impossible to find, so the guys in Kissimmee had new ones made and then tweaked them even more to make them fit perfectly. You don’t have to look at them very carefully to know a lot of work went into making them essentially flawless.

Getting a cowling that fit well was another problem. Again it required fabricating the lower cowl halves to get good enough metal to polish that didn’t have repairs



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in them. When making the fairings, cowlings, and panels, they paid special attention to fit and finish. The result is that they all flow together much better than they did even when new. North American workers would salivate at seeing how well the airplane went together.

When it came time to do the engine, Dick wanted a powerplant that avoided many of the pitfalls normally associated with Merlins. So, rather than overhauling a stock dash seven or dash nine, Thurman commissioned Jack Hovey of Reno racing fame to build him an engine, and he went all the way up to the 700 series transport engine. At least that way he’d know it incorporated all of the modifications ever applied to the Merlin to make it easier to maintain and operate. The only thing that’s not 700 series on his engine is the dash-nine blower case that was used so modifications wouldn’t have to be made to existing intercooler plumbing in the airframe.

It’s no secret that good Mustang props are hard to come by, which

is why U.S. Propeller began having them made in the Czech Republic to factory blueprints. They still aren’t cheap, but they are at least new and available, which is better than not having them at all.

The cockpit incorporates the entire Temco TF modification, which includes not only dual controls, but also the ability to start the airplane from either end.

“Lee did the test flight and put the first two or three hours on it, then it was my turn,” Dick said. “We had put so much work into it that I felt almost as nervous as I had on my first Mustang flight. But it was flawless. Absolutely flawless and smoother than my other airplane. In fact, Lee says it’s better than most Mustangs he’s flown, which is saying a lot.”

Kentucky Babe is a little hard to miss at nearly any air show since it’s an inspired example of the restorer’s art. The big question, however, is whether Dick’s friends realize all the work he went through just so they’d have their own set of controls. All of us should have a friend like Dick Thurman. ✈