



THANK GOD *for Wings*

WOA member profile: Keith Wood

BY JIM BUSHA

A very proud Keith Wood taxis in after his first Mustang solo.



KEVIN TANNER



It was an almost impossible task to interview Keith Wood, EAA Warbirds of America 551171, while at the 2008 Sun 'n Fun Fly-In at Lakeland, Florida. It wasn't that he is an unapproachable guy. On the contrary, Keith, who hails from Georgia, was more like a southern gentleman. The problem was that every time I thought I had him cornered or corralled near one of the three warbirds he regularly flies as a member of the Commemorative Air Force's Dixie Wing—the Red Nose P-51 Mustang, the LT-6D Mosquito (AT-6), or the SBD Dauntless—he was in the cockpit of the one I wasn't standing by, taxiing by me and grinning from ear to ear. Most of us would consider it an honor to fly just one warbird. Keith feels not only honored to fly these treasures, but also very blessed to share them with as many people as possible.

"My unofficial title is wing leader for the Dixie Wing squadron of the Commemorative Air Force," said Keith. "Officially, I am an attorney and part-time judge in Jonesboro, Georgia, and that's what I do for a living. But the title I like best is warbird pilot; it's the best title in life anybody could have in my opinion."

While Keith was growing up in



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the 1960s, he listened to flying stories from his uncle, who was an airline pilot for Eastern, and his father, Keith Wood Sr., who was a mechanic in the U.S. Air Force. Keith remembers the fond memories his father related to him about watching young pilots taking to the skies in Alabama Air National Guard P-51 Mustangs. Keith also remembers his father telling him how powerful the Mustang was on take-off and how some young "hotshot" pilots would run them off the runway when they didn't use enough right rudder.

"My dad loved the P-51 Mustang," said Keith. "He spoke of how beautiful it was on the ground and how fast it was in the air. I grew up building models of it along with any other warbirds I could get my hands on. I knew I wanted to fly someday, especially a fighter, but that didn't happen until I graduated from high school. Actually I

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Keiths flies the SBD Dauntless.



Keith at the controls of the LA-6 Mosquito painted in Korean War colors.

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took my first flying lesson on the bicentennial of the United States, July 4, 1976. While everyone else was out celebrating and shooting off fireworks, I was puttering around the sky in a Cessna 150. Eleven days later I soloed and never looked back. By the time I turned 20-1/2 I decided I was going to join the Air Guard as a pilot. I passed my flight test and everything else except one last exam—the eye

exam. Although my eyesight was fine, the doctor said that my measurements were a little below Air Force requirements. That was the worst day of my life—a 20-1/2-year-old, frustrated, rejected, wannabe Air Force pilot crying in the car all the way back home.”

In 1983 Keith soon found himself employed at Eastern Airlines—running the lavatory truck—and hoped that better days lay ahead

for him. Keith moved from one job to the next: a stint with the Federal Aviation Administration as a student flight controller and then as a manager with Air Atlanta. Unfortunately, when Keith was only three weeks away from beginning his training as a flight engineer on 727s, the airline he was working for went bankrupt. Keith admitted he got fed up with aviation, so he took a different path in life and



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Keith also flies Doug Matthew's P-51D Rebel.



“I thank God every day for giving me the persistence to follow my dream, for giving my soul wings, and for allowing me to fly a P-51 Mustang.”

—Keith Wood, 2008

went into law enforcement. Eventually Keith found himself working as an investigator at the Clayton County district attorney's office in Georgia for 11 years. The problem for Keith, though, was that to make ends meet he had to work three other jobs, and he still didn't have enough extra money to go flying!

“I knew I didn't want to work three jobs my whole life,” said Keith. “Besides, I missed flying, and I wanted to get back into the air. I decided to go to law school and become an attorney. Once I graduated

and established myself, I found that not only did I have extra time on my hands, but I also had a little extra change in my pocket to use for flying. I ended up joining the Dixie Wing of the CAF and began flying the PT-26 Cornell, a wood and fabric tandem two-place primary trainer. The PT-26 was a lot of fun to fly as I took it to air shows and shared it with the spectators in attendance. As I built up my time I realized that I wanted to fly something a little bigger and with a lot more horsepower. About that same

time our Wing was sponsoring the SBD Dauntless, so I looked forward to flying that. The problem was that the only way you could fly the SBD or any other fighter was that you had to have a minimum of 200 hours in the AT-6. Although I didn't have any T-6 time in my logbook, I could get some for the lofty price of \$500 dollars per hour—expensive even for an attorney! Fortunately for me, though, I went into a partnership with two other guys, and we bought a Tora Kate, a replica of a Japanese torpedo bomber. That big



KEVIN TANNER PHOTOS



Santa Claus, aka Keith Wood, takes the Kate up for a Christmas sortie.

brute was fun to fly, especially in the Tora Tora routine when we used pyro! Eventually I built enough time in the Kate and began flying the Dauntless."

Keith was enamored with the Dauntless, and as one of its sponsors, he began flying it to air shows around the country. When Keith had around 30 hours in the SBD, an opportunity presented itself that Keith could not pass up: an opening to become a sponsor on

a P-51 Mustang. This was not just any Mustang either; this was the famous *Red Nose* P-51 that had been part of the CAF stable of airplanes since it was purchased by Lloyd Nolen back in 1957. Although it had been owned and flown by the CAF for more than 50 years, it had been sitting down in Texas for the last five years in the museum. With the assistance of nine other sponsors along with Keith, *Red Nose* was put back into flying status and began its

renewed life with the Dixie Wing.

"Flying the Mustang is about the most awesome thing I have ever done," said Keith. "My first solo flight in *Red Nose* was probably my most spiritual. As I took off I looked out the big bubble canopy, and I could see the Mustang's long graceful shadow on the ground below. At that exact moment I felt as if all the souls of the people who had flown this wonderful aircraft before me were with me on this flight. Never



have I felt so privileged than when I am at the controls of the Mustang. The P-51 has so much power, you can do just about anything you want with it as long as you respect it and stay ahead of it. Flying it is pure joy, and the hardest part for me learning to fly the Mustang is landing it. But like life itself, practice makes perfect.

“About the only thing better than flying the Mustang is sharing it with people from all walks of life, both young and old, who have a deep admiration for this classic beauty, especially the veterans that have flown it in combat. One day I was displaying *Red Nose* at an air show in Florida when an older gentleman walking

with the aid of a cane came up to me and asked if he could look at the airplane. When I told him to go ahead, this fellow dropped his cane, and with arms outstretched he hugged the Mustang like it was an old friend. With a little assistance he climbed up on the wing and peered into the cockpit as his eyes welled up with tears. He told me he had flown them in Japan right after World War II and hadn’t touched one in over 60 years. I was informed that when I was flying a routine with the Mustang later that day, this same gentleman was in the crowd filming me. When an acquaintance of mine asked him,

‘Can you feel it?’ he said, with tears streaming down his cheeks, ‘Feel it? Are you kidding me, I’m in there with him!’

“That’s what flying warbirds is all about for me, sharing the love I have for these airplanes with as many people as possible.”

Besides flying the *Red Nose* Mustang, Keith occasionally flies Doug Matthews’ P-51 Mustang, *The Rebel*. Doug owns and operates Classic Fighters of America, and besides the Mustang, he also owns and flies an F4U Corsair. With so many different warbirds to pick from, it’s a tough choice some days for Keith on what airplane to fly. Almost makes you want to shed a tear for the poor guy, doesn’t it?

“No matter what patch I am wearing on my flight suit, CAF or EAA Warbirds of America, I feel very honored and privileged to be at the controls of these wonderful, historic machines,” said Keith. “When I fly these warbirds I feel as though I have touched the face of God. I am especially taken by a poem written by Maj. George Preddy, the 352nd Fighter Group ace who was killed on Christmas Day 1944. I know this poem by heart because I feel the same way every time I fly the Mustang:

*“I must go back,
Back to do my part,
But I am not afraid, because I have wings.
Not wings of wood or steel or stuff,
But wings God gave my soul.
Thank God for wings.”*



Keith, along with his wife, Carol, and son Ryan, are all smiles between Mustang flights.