

The 1946-1949 Bendix Trophy Races



Jet racing division

BY A. KEVIN GRANTHAM

Editor's Note: This concludes our two-part history of the post-war Bendix races. Part one ran in the February 2006 issue.

Vincent Bendix, president of the Bendix Corp., established a civilian trophy in 1931 to help stimulate aviation development in the United States. Over the next nine years the Bendix Trophy, along with its top prize of \$10,000, was awarded to the

person who could fly a designated cross-country course in the fastest time. Today the names of the people who captured this prize during the golden age of air racing (1931-1939) read like a hall of fame roster of aviation royalty. Names like Jimmy Doolittle, Jackie Cochran, and Roscoe Turner were considered the fastest humans on the planet during the 1930s. In 1939, the National Air Races, including the Bendix Trophy Race, was sidelined while the world prepared for war. Vincent Bendix passed away two



Loofbourrow later discovered the source of his radio interference had originated from another P-80. Reportedly, one of his fellow competitors purposely opened his transmitter to garble the transmission from the ground navigation crews.

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VF-51 Furys 1948-01: Six brand new North American FJ-1 Fury aircraft line up at the Long Beach Airport prior to the start of the Bendix. Each of these fighters was equipped with extended tip tanks that held twice as much fuel as the conventional FJ-1 wing tank.

of Bendix, and his public relations expert Bill Mara didn't let the formalities get in the way of progress. They collectively created two separate divisions for the Bendix: the R-Division for civilian aircraft powered by reciprocating engines, and the J-Division for the military jets. Service pilots, by military law, were forbidden to accept any cash award, so the \$15,000 prize money would be divided among the R-Division finishers. Bendix officials chose to recognize the military pilots by giving them a plaque. The official starting point of the Bendix Trophy Race was then moved from the Burbank Airport, its prewar location, to the longer runways of the Metropolitan Airport in Van Nuys, California.

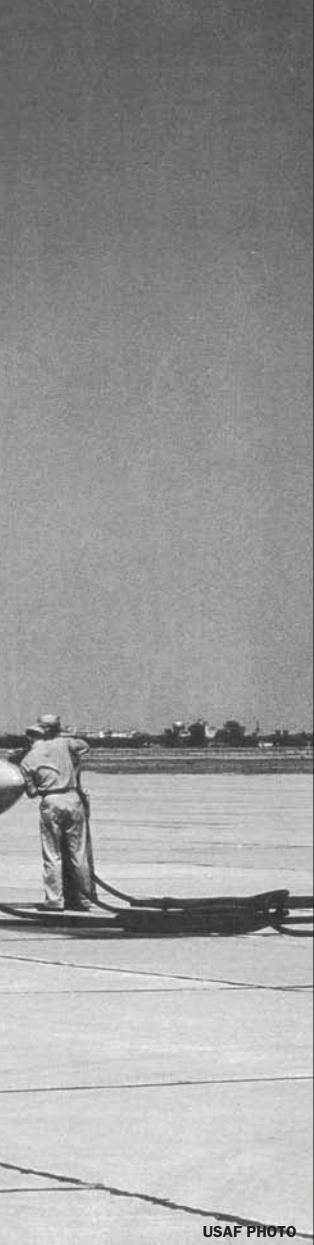
The Air Force welcomed the opportunity to demonstrate its new Lockheed P-80 Shooting Star jet fighter. The only unit west of the Mississippi River that had a substantial number of the aircraft was the 1st Fighter Group at March Field near Riverside, California. Four March Field pilots were selected to represent the U.S. Army Air Forces in the 1946 Bendix, and the group was led by Col. Leon Gray, who commanded the 25th Bombardment Group during World War II. Also included was Maj. Rex Barber, who, in 1943, was given partial credit for shooting down the Japanese Betty bomber carrying Japanese Adm. Isoroku Yamamoto.

On August 30, 1946, a flight of four Shooting Stars was staged to fly across the country. The Lock-

years later, but before he died, he handed down the Bendix Trophy because he knew that someday a new breed of pilot would want to compete for it.

Stories began to surface in early 1946 that a group of businessmen in Cleveland, Ohio, intended to re-establish the National Air Races. The Bendix Corp. was eager to once again affiliate its corporate name with the fastest pilots in the business; however, the post-war era presented the company with a few problems. First, the race, by its 1931 charter, restricted military aircraft from competing for the trophy. In 1946 the fastest airplanes were military jets, and these same aircraft needed a longer runway to operate. Malcolm P. Ferguson, the new president





USAF PHOTO

Refueling 1947: Col. Gray taking on fuel at Garden City, Kansas. To save time the P-80 landed downwind and then pulled up next to the fueling station. Then the aircraft's fuel tanks were filled using eight dedicated fuel pumps. The entire process from wheels-touchdown to wheels-up took less than two minutes.

heed P-80 lacked the range to fly nonstop, so refueling arrangements were made at Albuquerque, New Mexico; Topeka, Kansas; and Garden City, Kansas, to accommodate the primary and secondary routes. The Air Force also staged six VHF direction-finding crews along the course to aid the pilots in navigating across the country in bad weather.

Lt. Col. Loofbourrow's P-80 was the first to depart Van Nuys for Cleveland. He climbed out to 37,000 feet. The P-80 had a tendency to pitch nose-down as it approached Mach 0.81, so some back-pressure had to be applied to the stick to keep the aircraft level. He radioed the ground over Pueblo, Colorado, and learned he was about 15 minutes ahead of schedule. He then started to descend toward his refueling stop at Garden City. For some unknown reason he experienced radio interference when he requested a direction fix. After several attempts Gray radioed, "Phil, I think they've loused you up." Shortly thereafter, Loofbourrow's aircraft broke out of the clouds, and he realized he was approximately 100 miles east of Garden City and didn't have enough fuel to backtrack. He therefore set course for Dodge City, Kansas, and ran out of fuel just as the runway came into sight. He also lost hydraulic pressure as he approached the airport, but managed a difficult dead-stick landing. Unfortu-



DAVE LUCABAUGH

Gray arriving 1947: Col. Gray had radio trouble, so he missed the warning about massive thunderstorms in the Cleveland area and avoided the order issued by the Air Force to land at Wright Field near Dayton, Ohio.

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De Haven departing 1948: Maj. De Haven departing Long Beach Airport in a quest to post the fastest time in the 1948 Bendix Trophy Race.



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nately, Dodge City did not have any jet fuel, and that fact put him out of the competition. Loofborough later discovered the source of his radio interference had originated from another P-80. Reportedly, one of his fellow competitors purposely opened his transmitter to garble the transmission from the ground navigation crews.

Barber didn't fare much better. The landing gear on his P-80 failed to retract properly upon takeoff from Van Nuys. He finally got the gear retracted, but the problem resurfaced shortly after his Garden City refueling stop. This time the gear retraction popped a circuit breaker, and Barber's aircraft lost its instruments and hydraulic system. He wisely returned to Garden City.

Gray and Maj. George Rudell didn't experience any problems at

De Haven and Love 1948: Air Guard pilots Bob De Haven (left) and Bob Love getting ready for the 1948 Bendix.



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Brown FJ-1 1948-01: Ensign F. Taylor Brown flew FJ-1 116 to Cleveland and captured the 1948 J-Division Bendix Trophy. Brown was the most junior pilot in the group, and winning the Bendix was a wonderful way to start off his 37-year career in the Navy.

all. Gray arrived first in Cleveland, capturing the inaugural J-Division Bendix Trophy with a record time of four hours, eight minutes, 25.2 seconds (494.779 mph). Rudell followed at four hours, 18 minutes, 51.2 seconds.

1947: Air Force Widens Bendix Participation

The Bendix J-Division competition for 1947 was almost an exact repeat of the 1946 affair. The exception being the Air Force decided to broaden race participation to include pilots from different commands. Gray was the natural choice to represent the 12th Air Force. He was joined by Maj. Clay Albright from the 5th Air Force, Capt. W.S. Patterson from the 15th Air Force, and finally Lt. Eldon A. Klupal from the 9th Air Force. Albright was the first to depart Van Nuys on August 30, 1947, and Klupal, Patterson, and Gray followed him. The weather across most of the route was fine; however, severe thunderstorms were punishing the Cleveland area. All of the P-80s were in the air when Air Force officials ordered the pilots to avoid Cleveland and land at Patterson Field near Dayton, Ohio. Klupal was refueling in Garden City, so he decided to sit out the bad weather there while Albright and Patterson landed at Patterson Field as ordered. Gray had radio trouble and didn't hear the order to land. He continued on to Cleveland and captured his second Bendix Trophy with an average speed of 507 mph. According to Don Dwiggins' book *They Flew the Bendix Race*, Gray's crew chief wrote "Radio don't hear so good" in the aircraft's Form 1 to validate Gray's story.

1948: An All-Navy Affair—In Theory . . .

In 1948, World War II ace Robert De Haven submitted a request to enter the upcoming Bendix Trophy Race. The request eventually landed on the desk of James Forrestal, who happened to be the Secretary of Defense. De Haven received a reply stating that J-Division competition would

be an all-Navy affair in 1948—request denied! The rivalry between the newly established U.S. Air Force and the U.S. Navy was at its peak in 1948 as each service jockeyed for government funds. The Navy wanted a super carrier that could carry a nuclear threat around the globe, while the Air Force was determined to build a fleet of super bombers. The competition between the two armed forces was not ultimately what motivated De Haven. He was more interested in bringing some recognition to his Air Guard unit in Van Nuys. After he received the Pentagon's discouraging reply, he strolled down to base operations and put in a request for a routine training mission from Long Beach, California (the new starting point for the Bendix), to Cleveland, Ohio. The fact that this mission was to be conducted on the same day as the Bendix was mere coincidence. Approval was forthcoming, so De Haven and future Korean War ace Robert Love set out to increase the range of their F-80Cs. The fruits of their labor, along with a little help from Lockheed engineers, produced a new type of tip tank for the F-80 that gave it just enough fuel to make the trip to Cleveland nonstop.

In the meantime the Navy was busy organizing its competitors. Six pilots from VF-51 in San Diego were selected to fly their North American FJ-1 Furys. Leading the group was Cmdr. Evan "Pete" Aurand. Precious few navigational aids were available in 1948, so all of the Navy pilots flew a training mission from Long Beach to Cleveland in Grumman F8F Bearcats to become familiar with the route. A few days later, the FJ-1s from VF-51 landed at the Long Beach Airport to prepare for the competition. Upon their arrival the naval aviators were surprised to see two California Air Guard F-80s on the ramp. A protest was filed with the race officials because the 1948 Bendix was to be all Navy. Nothing much came of the protest because the Air Force jets were present in an unofficial capacity, and both were eventually flagged



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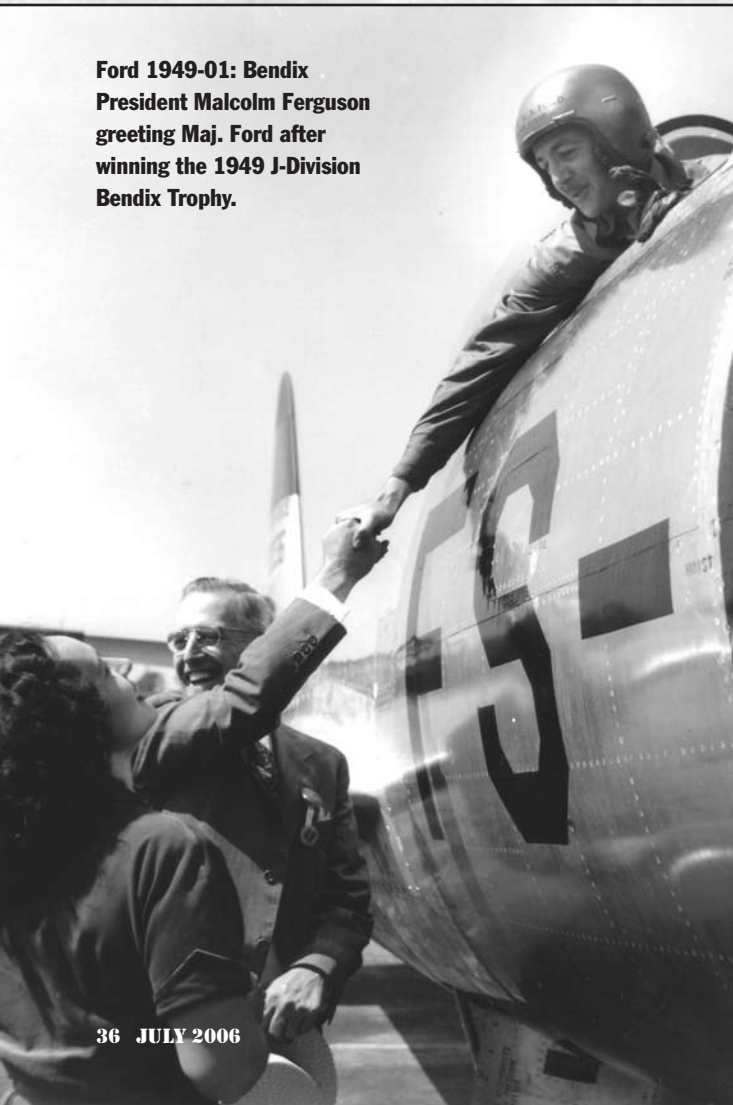
Ford F-84E 1949-01: Maj. Ford's winning F-84E posed on the ramp at Hopkins airport in Cleveland, Ohio.

off from Long Beach on September 4, 1948.

As with the F-80, the FJ-1s also carried modified tip tanks, which, in theory, gave the North American fighters enough range to fly nonstop to Cleveland. The FJ-1s also didn't have any heat, so the pilots had to wear electric fly-

ing suits, and the oxygen system in the aircraft was a bit antiquated for altitudes in excess of 40,000 feet. In fact, Lt. A.T. Capriotti wandered off course after suffering from lack of oxygen. He eventually crash-landed his Fury near Chicago. Lt. Cmdr. Robert Elder's FJ-1 ran out of fuel about 50 miles short of Cleveland, but he managed to dead-stick his aircraft onto the field without flying past the finish line.

Ford 1949-01: Bendix President Malcolm Ferguson greeting Maj. Ford after winning the 1949 J-Division Bendix Trophy.



PHOTOS BURKE-SMITH STUDIOS

Cmdr. Pete Aurand shown shaking hands with Bendix President Malcolm Ferguson after finishing second in the 1948 cross-country trek from Long Beach, California, to Cleveland, Ohio, in four hours, 13 minutes, 4.9 seconds (484.674 mph).

The lucky winner was Ensign F. Taylor Brown who completed the cross-country trek in 4 hours, 10 minutes, 34.4 seconds (489.526 mph). His aircraft also lost power shortly after he turned off the runway and had to be towed to the parking area. The balance of the Navy flight finished within 10 minutes of the winning time. By the way, De Haven completed his nonstop trip to Cleveland in 4 hours, 9 minutes, 30 seconds, which was about one minute faster than the Navy.

1949: New Departure Point

The starting location for the jet Bendix competition was moved to Edwards Air Force Base, California, in 1949. The Air Force was once again given the honor of competing for the Bendix Trophy. This time the five pilots, Maj. Vernon Ford, Capt. J.E. Newman, Lt. Col. L.E. Moon, Capt. Harry M. Lester, and Capt. Franklin Rizer, were equipped with the new Republic F-84E. On September 3, 1949, all five of the F-84s thundered down the Edwards runway headed for Cleveland. The race was totally uneventful, and four of the five pilots broke the existing speed record. The fifth, Rizer, was forced to leave the race near Peoria, Illinois. Ford posted an average speed of 529.614 mph and covered the distance in three hours, 45 minutes, 51.3 seconds. This was the first time in the long history of the Bendix races that a plane had traveled the distance in less than four hours.

The 1949 Bendix was the swan song for the event at Cleveland. In 1950, the Cleveland National Air Races were canceled due to a terrible crash that took the life of pilot Bill Odom, as well as a young lady and her infant child, during the 1949 Thompson Trophy Race. The start of the Korean War also played an important role in the cancellation of the races. The Bendix Corp. continued to award the trophy to military jet pilots in 1951, 1953-1957, and 1962 and to a B-58 Hustler crew who, in 1962, flew from New York to Los Angeles in two hours, 56.8 seconds (1,214.71 mph). 