



Lessons Learned

Happy Jack's Go Buggy: The making of a Grand Champion

BY JIM BUSHA

PHOTOS COURTESY MIKE VADEBONCOEUR

Ever since a young P-51 Mustang restorer named Mike VadeBonCoeur from Danville, Illinois, showed up at EAA Oshkosh 1993 with Butch Schroeder's immaculate F-6D Mustang, *Lil Margaret*, the world of restoring warbirds, especially P-51 Mustangs, was forever changed by the detailed craftsmanship that went into that airplane. By the time all of the tally marks were counted as the last warbird judge laid down his pencil, *Lil Margaret* was awarded Grand Champion, and a lifelong journey of restoration perfection began to

emerge . . . a journey and passion that would consume Mike's future. Although many would have been content with the stellar accomplishment of winning all the marbles at such a prestigious event like EAA Oshkosh, you will soon learn that Mike is not like most people.

Mike says that growing up in and around Danville, Illinois, afforded him the opportunity to meet some wonderful people who created an aviation path for him. He credits Bob and Sandy Young for introducing him to EAA Chapter 622, as well as to their son, David, who is now Mike's right-hand man when it comes to restoring

warbirds. "I blame both Ken Sternberg and Butch Schroeder for my warbird addiction," he says with a laugh, "and I thank both of them for taking a chance and allowing me to get my hands dirty while turning wrenches on some of their magnificent warbirds."

Mike started his own company, Midwest Aero Restorations Ltd., in 1993. By this time he had earned his airframe and powerplant rating at the Spartan School of Aeronautics and had been heavily involved with both of Butch's Grand Champion warbirds: the T-6G in 1990 and the F-6D Mustang *Lil Margaret* in 1993. Mike says it's the rec-



ognition from those two projects that inspired him to branch out and start his own restoration business.

Shortly after *Lil Margaret* won Grand Champion honors, Mike's good friend Paul Coggan, who has since passed away, asked Mike how he was ever going to top such a fantastic restoration.

"That question has bugged me for over 15 years," Mike says, "and I continue to ask myself the same question after each restoration."

The suggestion that he couldn't do any better on his next P-51 restoration did not sit very well with Mike, so he set out to make his next Mustang project even more authentic than the last one. With that mind-set as his driving force and focus, the very first project to be rolled out of Midwest Aero's hangar door was EAA AirVenture Oshkosh 2002 Grand Champion *Cripes A'Mighty*. Ken Wagnon commissioned Midwest Aero to restore his P-51 blue-nosed beauty. Mike's team spent more than 11,000 man-hours tearing it apart and putting it all back together in better than new condi-

tion. Mike was extremely pleased with the results, but there was still that nagging question in the back of his mind, *Could I still do it better?*

In 2004 Midwest Aero showed up at EAA AirVenture with a green-nosed Mustang called *Daddy's Girl* and walked away with Reserve Grand Champion honors. Two years later it did it again, this time with a red-nosed beauty named *Red Dog* that was christened Reserve Grand Champion at EAA AirVenture 2006. Although Mike was proud of himself and his dedicated employees for their hard work and detailed craftsmanship, he still wondered if he had reached a peak in his career or if he could push himself harder . . . and possibly restore a Mustang back to wartime stock condition. Here begins the journey of *Happy Jack's Go Buggy*.

Although this Mustang would go on to win Grand Champion honors at EAA AirVenture 2008, it started its life as just another USAAC (United States Army Air Corps) P-51 Mustang. After World War II, as the jet age was ushered in, the P-51 became obsolete in the States. The plane was sent south and served with Fuerza Aérea Guatemalteca (Guatemalan air force) until 1972, when it found its way back to the

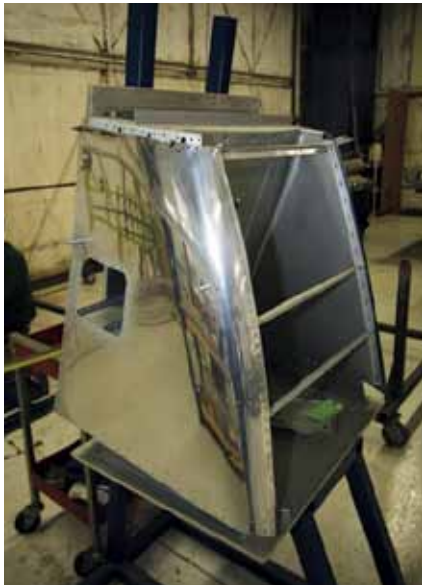
United States. It changed owners a few times and even almost ended up in a shipping container destined for Czechoslovakia. Thankfully it never made it into the container, as destiny would not only bring this once-proud warrior back to flying status, but also would inspire a U.S. Navy pilot to turn his daydream into reality.

Bruce "Doc" Winter signed up for the Navy in 1988. "After earning my wings of gold at Beeville, Texas, I flew F/A-18 Hornets for the rest of my service," Bruce says. "Ever since I can remember I have enjoyed history, especially World War II aviation." Around 1993 Bruce became so interested in the P-51 Mustang that he began to flip through the pages of *Trade-A-Plane* magazine looking for one to buy. "I knew I couldn't afford a flier," Bruce continues. "I was mainly looking for a project to have restored much later in my life after I left the Navy and had established a good medical practice." Although he admits he experienced "sticker shock" at the prices of the planes, he also knew that Mustangs increase in value every year. He tucked the idea of restoring a plane in the back of his mind and continued in his naval career.

In 2003 Bruce was a civilian ophthalmologist with a private



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practice. "I stopped at Nelson Ezell's shop in Texas on a fuel stop and noticed this P-51 sitting on some pallets outside. The shop was closed for the weekend, so I called the following week to get the scoop on this Mustang." When Nelson told Bruce that the plane

might be for sale he thought, *Oh, this is it!* "I also knew that if I were to have the privilege of owning such an aircraft, I would honor this by returning her to the original fighting form." Bruce had read the book *Mustang Restored* about *Lil Margaret*, written by the Paul Cog-

gan, now deceased, and knew Mike could help him with his project. Mike agreed to come to Texas and take a look at it. "Needless to say," recalls Bruce, "I initially wanted it to be restored as a nice clean airplane...Nothing fancy, just something to fly around the patch with. But after dealing with Mike and his team at Midwest Aero Restorations, that idea changed quickly!"

Destiny sure has a strange way



JIM BUSHA PHOTOS



when it comes to bringing two people and an airplane together. While Bruce was turning the pages of *Trade-A-Plane* back in 1993, Mike was turning wrenches on another award-winning Mustang. Although the closure rate of these two men was initially at an L-4 Cub's pace, by the time they met in Texas and gazed at the historic time capsule before them, their ideas and thoughts on how to preserve history collided at hyperspeed!

Mike remembers, "After finish-

ing up with *Red Dog* I was looking forward to going back into doing something stock. When Bruce called us about his find, I really don't think he knew what he had stumbled onto." While Dave and Mike completed the pre-purchase inspection, Mike says that their eyes almost popped out of our heads because of the authenticity the P-51 still had buried deep inside. "Although there were some modifications done firewall-forward and there were some repaints of the cockpit area and wheel wells, this airplane looked pretty much how it did when it left the factory," Mike says. Although Mike and Dave had their own vision of how they could make the Mustang look factory-fresh, Bruce's initial ideas were somewhat different. But Mike recalls that once Bruce recognized the excitement of the Midwest Aero team, he jumped aboard and began to contribute ideas of his own. Of the collaboration, Mike says, "I cannot say enough about how fantastic a customer and pilot Bruce is . . . just a real first-class guy."

Mike and team got the green light from Bruce to restore his airplane to look like it was serving with a fighter group in England. Bruce had the plane shipped up to Midwest Aero shortly after the purchase, but hard restoration didn't truly begin until 2006. Mike admits that the project was a real learning experience for the entire Midwest Aero team. "Essentially we stepped back in time and became North American Aviation employees as we re-created what this airplane looked like as it left the factory," Mike explains. "For example, many of the items we concentrated on will never be seen by the general public or warbird connoisseur." He's referring to items buried deep inside the interior fuselage and wing panels, things such as grease pencil markings made by inspectors to replace bad rivets or de-bur a piece of metal. Some of the most difficult items to re-create include the water transfer decals—Mike's team took great care to get the font, size, and shape correct. They also re-created parts, including certain

clamps and nut-plates that are no longer manufactured. “This airplane created a lot more challenges than we had been used to, but the guys in the shop stepped up to all of the challenges, and I think the finished product speaks for itself,” Mike says with pride. Another hurdle was deciding on the paint scheme, an important decision that Mike left up to the owner.

“I decided I definitely wanted a scheme that represented something from the 8th Air Force,” Bruce says. “As a student of history I thought that the bases in England that the 8thAF occupied had a lot of notoriety associated with them.” Bruce also wanted a combat-military paint scheme that wasn’t shiny or flashy, but rather dull and military-green looking. “The paint scheme really clicked with me, especially with the black and white invasion stripes and the 20th Fighter Group tail code.”

During the restoration, Bruce discovered that the original pilot, Maj. Jack Ilfrey, spent the last 30 years of his life in San Antonio, Texas, the same town where Bruce lived. Unfortunately, Maj. Ilfrey didn’t live long enough to see his namesake fly once again. “When I saw the name *Happy Jack’s Go Buggy*,” Bruce remembers, “I thought that it sounded like a fun name, flown by a fighter pilot who obviously enjoyed his occupation. I knew I had always enjoyed my time at the controls of the F-18 and knew I would feel the same while flying the Mustang.”

With fresh paint applied, making sure that it resembled a workhorse instead of a showpiece, the gang at Midwest Aero began to apply the finishing touches to give the Mustang an authentic look. This included the addition of both Spitfire and P-38 mirrors attached right above the pilot’s head on the canopy bow. They also fabricated faux drop tanks to give the Mustang the look of its original intended purpose—long-range escort fighter.

“The drop tanks were very special and something I wanted to do for a long time,” Mike states. With the help of good friends and fellow EAA Warbirds of America members Bob Baker and Jack Roush,

that dream became a reality. Bob had a rare original drop tank that he lent to Mike’s team. They took it to Jack’s composite shop, where Jack made 108-gallon carbon fiber replicas. “They are rock-solid, and

Right: Clyde East poses with Mike in front of *Lil Margaret*. Clyde’s WWII score of 13 is shown behind him.



Right: *Happy Jack’s Go Buggy*—winner of the 2008 Rolls Royce Aviation Heritage Trophy.



Right: Winner take all! Left to right, Dave Young, Mike and owner Bruce Winter pose with yet another trophy.



it really sets the Mustang off, giving it that 'mission-ready' look," Mike says. The Midwest Aero team also installed a functioning tail warning radar that Mike found on eBay about two weeks before AirVenture.

Mike gushes, "When I received it, it was like new...still in the box. After we installed it and turned the master switch on, it immediately started working!" Mike's team also had real .50-caliber (de-milled) ma-

chine guns manufactured and installed in the six gun bays. They even fabricated a canopy cover out of what Mike calls "smelly, bulky, heavy, duck-cloth canvas," like the originals that helped keep

JACK ILFREY

The son of a World War I fighter pilot, Jack Ilfrey was born in Houston, Texas, almost two years after the conclusion of the "war to end all wars." By early 1941 Jack Ilfrey was an aviation cadet in the U.S. Army Air Corps. After he earned his wings at Luke Airfield, Arizona, in December of 1941, Jack protected the California coastline in a Lockheed P-38 Lightning. Sent to England in the spring of 1942 with the rest of the 1st Fighter Group, Jack and his fellow squadron mates made combat sweeps over occupied France in their P-38s. Later that same year the group was sent to assist in the invasion of North Africa. Due to the loss of a belly tank on the way, Jack was forced to make an emergency landing in Portugal.

Because of their neutrality, the young airman was told that he and his airplane would be interned for the rest of the war. Jack was asked to show a Portuguese pilot the cockpit of the P-38 and how the systems operated. Taking advantage of the engine startup, Jack shoved the throttles forward, knocking the Portuguese student off the wing, and escaped the same way he came in. Jack was eventually able to make it safely to Gibraltar and back into the combat zone. By February of 1943 Jack had five and a half confirmed victories against the Luftwaffe. Jack was sent stateside and became an instructor in both the P-38 and P-47 Thunderbolt.

Jack returned to combat in his familiar P-38 during April of 1944 and joined the 20th Fighter Group, 79th Fighter Squadron at Kings Cliffe, Northamptonshire, England. Jack continued to add to his victory credit against the Luftwaffe while at the controls of his trusty Lightning. By July of 1944 the 20th Fighter Group traded in its twin engine "forked-

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tail devils" for the North American P-51 Mustang. By December 1944, with more than 320 hours of combat flying in 70 missions with the Mustang, Jack was sent back home a second time and left the service

with the rank of major in December 1945. Jack's final tally was seven and a half aerial victories in almost 550 hours of combat flying. Jack then spent 30 years in the banking industry in San Antonio, Texas, before he retired. Jack passed away in October 2004, probably never realizing that his P-51 Mustang *Happy Jack's Go Buggy* would grace the Texas skies.





the snow off the canopies during the harsh English winters. But the team says their No. 1 frustration with this restoration was the finish—trying to make it look worn, dirty, and abused like it would have during wartime operations. They eventually came up with a waxing process that not only protects the finish from corrosion and exhaust and oil stains, but also maintains the period finish they worked so hard at to achieve. “I believe that the more the owner operates this airplane the more period-looking it will become,” Mike says, “and I don’t think that bothers the owner one bit.”

Bruce could not be happier with the results of his plane restoration project:

“When I sit in this cockpit and look out through the windscreen over the long slender nose of this machine, I am very humbled to be the custodian of this wonderful piece of history. I have a tremendous amount of respect for the young 20-year-olds that had relatively little time in these airplanes and then flew these fighters on six- to seven-hour missions deep into enemy territory in sub-zero freezing weather, being shot at by enemy fighters and flak. They had to be

resilient and cognizant of not only their surroundings, but also how many gallons of gas they had left, along with how many rounds of ammunition they had at their disposal to protect the bombers and themselves for the long trip home. When I flew the Hornets we had all sorts of air-to-air weapons to choose from, and all these guys had were six .50-caliber machine guns with a limited supply of ammo.

“Aside from the fighting part of the Mustang, it is truly a delight to fly. It responds beautifully and is a predictable fighter to fly. It is very harmonious in its controls, and the visibility is unbelievable. The controls seem to be situated as if placed there by a fighter pilot. Everything is in its proper place and is easily accessible. To me the P-51 Mustang is the



Midwest Aero's past restorations—*Red Dog* and *Cripes A'Mighty*.

greatest fighter from that era because it did so many things well. Words cannot express the gratitude I have for Mike and the rest of his crew at Midwest Aero for the absolute perfection and workmanship that went into this restoration.”

The judges at EAA AirVen-



"Doc" Winter's other airplane—the F-18 Hornet.



Bruce Winter stands in front of his F-18 Hornet.

ture 2008 agreed with Bruce, and awarded *Happy Jack's Go Buggy* Grand Champion honors. Even so, Mike still had some lingering doubts about the finished product and wondered, *Could I still do better?*

"Honestly I still had that same nagging feeling I did after we finished *Lil Margaret*," Mike admits. "I have this vision in my mind of what an original airplane should look like, so I think we could have done some things different." While Mike says he thinks there is always room for improvement, he also realizes that no project is perfect. He continues to see each project as a learning experience and incorporates what he learns into future restorations. "I wouldn't mind tackling something different like a Corsair, Hellcat, or P-40 just to create some more challenges," he says, "which to me is always a good thing."

Mike says that one of his absolute joys is taking a finished product to AirVenture, to show it off and share it with fellow EAA members. "That is a very gratifying moment for me, as I step back and watch the spectators point and comment about this or that on the airplane," he adds. "The smiles on their faces make it all worthwhile for me. And I hope to continue to bring many more examples to AirVenture in the future."

We hope you do, Mike. We hope you do!



WARBIRD TOONS

by Jean Barbaud

<http://jeanbarbaud.blogspot.com>

