



# Warbird **Love** Affair

**John Paul's journey comes full circle**

BY PHILLIP A. JANQUARTA



**It started** as a barely audible grumble somewhere in the distant California desert.

By the time it reached the elementary school in Palm Springs, it had risen to a deafening roar that nearly shook the building to its foundation. It was enough to cause John Paul, 8, to bolt from his chair to see what had just passed over.

JIM RAEDER



JIM RAEDER PHOTOS



“There were two flights that flew down Palm Canyon Drive and made a horrendous noise. I was like, ‘Oh my God, what was that?’” said John, who, along with wife and Executive Director Sue Paul, co-founded the Warhawk Air Museum in Nampa, Idaho.

The Warhawk Air Museum is a rich cross section of a time when the fate of the world hung in the balance. It is a labor of love that grew out of John’s love for aircraft. But not many people know the story behind this small community resource—a product of time, effort, and diligence. What was originally a tiny collection of memorabilia placed in the corner of a hangar is quickly becoming John’s legacy.

It all began on that spring day in 1950 as the vibration of unbridled horsepower caused John to leave his classroom behind.

“This fella jumped up, ran out the door to look at them, and I ran out the door right behind him. By that time the second two came over, and, I mean, I was just blown away.”

What they had witnessed were two planes, both with Navy blue paint schemes layered on bold fuselages that were complemented by a defining inverted gull-wing design. John and his friend were caught in wide-eyed fascination as the Navy blue underbellies of the planes passed over them in thunderous harmony.

“This fellow that I was with was one of those brainy kids. You know, the nerd you went through school with,” John recalled. “But he knew everything about anything. By that time the teacher came out, took us inside, and sent us to the corner. I asked him, ‘What were those?’ and he said, ‘Those were World War II F4U Navy Corsair fighter planes.’”

## Building a Legacy

And so began what John modestly describes as an “interest” in World War II aircraft. But if actions truly speak louder than words, John’s affinity for vintage aircraft is spoken through a life’s work that includes collecting, searching, scavenging, and piecing together parts found in the most inconspicuous places, much of it left forgotten after the last



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Army pilots Class 43-K found these parrot-headed P-40Ns on the line at Napier Field in Alabama when they showed up for gunnery training. Few could equal the color and originality of these "birds."

COURTESY JIM WIER

days of the war.

His first find was a P-51B Mustang that sat on the ramp at Banning airport in California, a town located about 28 miles northwest of Palm Springs. John spotted the plane on a car trip while still a youth.

"Once in a while my mother would drive up to Banning and Beaumont," he said. "I spotted that P-51 from the highway and thought, 'Oh, man! Look at that!' It had flat tires, and it was sitting there with ragged fabric on it."

John later learned that the Mustang was owned by Jack Hardwick, who was known in restoration circles for his World War II aircraft parts inventory, as well as his collection of vintage aircraft.

When John first caught sight of it, the plane had been sitting outside, exposed to wind and the sun's searing heat. It was purchased in the late 1950s and put into airworthy condition. During a local flight the canopy blew off, and the pilot landed at the Palm Springs airport. It sat at the airport for several months, parked off to the side on a revetment next to a J2F Grumman Duck, which later belonged to movie pilot Frank Tallman. John liked to ride his horse over to the airport and sit in the P-51B, but on one of his visits he was disappointed to find that the plane was gone. John later learned it had belly landed at Hayward, California, and was scrapped out.

John eventually acquired one similar to it, a C model that now sits in the hangar at Nampa airport, ever so close to completion. He and his son, John-Curtiss Paul, are working to put the last pieces of the puzzle together. The aircraft, which took about seven years to restore, is painted in its original olive drab and sports the Boise Bee nose art, which was used by World War II ace Lt. Duane W. Beeson, a native of Boise, Idaho, who chalked up 22 victories during the war, five of them in his P-51B.

The Boise Bee currently rests among other restoration projects that include a UH-1M Huey helicopter, a veteran craft of the Vietnam War. The Huey arrived a few months ago, along with dozens of crates, which hold parts that are crucial to the project's eventual completion.

John Paul's story, however, comes full



Jim Wier, Army pilot Class 43-K, climbs up on his parrot-headed P-40N at Nappier Field, Alabama, November or December 1943.



Another of the 43-K pilots with his parrot-headed P-40N at Napier Field, Alabama, in 1943. The line chiefs must have had some dedicated nose artists.

circle with the completion of the P-51C. And, like any worthwhile journey, it's not so much the beginning or the end that holds the most significance; rather, it's all the stuff in the middle. And, John has come a long way, on a road less traveled.

"I don't own these airplanes because I have a lot of money," he said. "I own these airplanes because I got them when nobody wanted them."

Sitting proudly at the Warhawk Air Museum are two operational model P-40s. The E is painted in the original Royal Air Force color scheme and insignias, and the N is a Parrot Head, painted in honor of the class of 1943K training squadron, which was based at Napier Field near Dothan, Alabama.

Both planes are in pristine condition and have been seen in movies such as the 1973 made-for-television movie *Death Race*, which starred Lloyd Bridges. Parts of the E model were used for two P-40s that were seen in the Hollywood re-creation of the December 7 bombing of Pearl Harbor, *Tora! Tora! Tora!* More recently, the planes were used in the 2001 hit *Pearl Harbor*, starring Ben Affleck and Josh Hartnett. And in 2008 just the E model appeared in the movie *Valkyrie*, starring Tom Cruise.

Looking at the aircraft now, it's hard to imagine that the worth of these powerful testaments of a bygone era could be anything less than priceless. But there was a time, immediately after the war, that they were considered good for nothing more than scrap metal.

With the war over and jets quickly making cylinder-powered fighters obsolete, manufacturing of classic World War II aircraft slowed to a crawl until production came to a complete halt altogether. What was left were boxes of aircraft parts, neatly packaged in crates, boxes, bins, and barrels that were left to sit in warehouses and various storage facilities around the country, some of them for decades, before value was once again attached to them. John saw the writing on the wall and began scooping up parts when and where he could, focusing his efforts on planes that were in much less demand. Part-by-part, piece-by-piece, he began building his aircraft legacies.

At one time, John owned five differ-



Bosie Bee running engine test.

JIM RAEDER PHOTOS



Another P-40 at the Paul ranch, this one in desert camo.



Parrot Head front office.

ent P-40s in pieces. Over time collectors looking for parts to restore their own planes looked to him for help. He was gracious enough to assist many of them by relinquishing the parts he had so meticulously gathered over the years.

“One of the big places to get parts back in the 1950s and ’60s was Pally’s,” John said. “They had hydraulics for all of these planes, all the innards, brand-new components. To put things in perspective, a brand-new Allison engine was 285 bucks in the box. A brand-new P-38 or P-40 propeller and the whole assembly was about \$250.”

Today those same items can run as high as \$50,000. But decades ago, what were considered the “oddball” planes were not in demand. Parts were relatively cheap, and John took advantage.

“A main gear retract cylinder on a P-40 was, like, \$17,” he said. “But, hey, I mean, I paid 166 bucks a month for my house, so I guess it’s all relative. Even then, in 1965 and ’70, we were still moaning and groaning that we had missed everything. But there would be stacks of P-63 radiators, P-38, P-40 propellers, all the components and everything, and we’d sit there and go, ‘Man,

it must have been something back in the ’40s when they got rid of all of this stuff.’ We didn’t know it, but we were looking at the last of it.”

John acquired his first full plane at the age of 20, a Fairchild PT-19A open-cockpit, tandem monoplane. The first fighter he ever owned was the P-40E he resurrected from what amounted to a heap of parts.

“I ended up looking at this P-40 in Schellville [north of San Francisco], and the guy wanted 3,000 bucks for it,” said John, who, by then, was working for his father’s manufacturing company in Oakland. “There was another one up in Portland, Oregon, and that guy wanted 3,000 bucks. A guy in Half Moon Bay had one that was disassembled and wanted \$4,000. I never could chase the guy down in Schellville, and because of location, I ended up buying a \$4,000 pile of junk.”

John made the purchase in 1966 and, from a pile of parts, brought to life the P-40E, which he flew for the first time in 1971. That was after it was scavenged for parts to restore two other P-40s that were used in the filming of *Tora! Tora! Tora!* Not long afterward, John acquired two more incomplete P-40s, one of which was buried in a Canadian farmer’s field. John found it and, with the help of brother Jerry, dug it up and brought it home to California. With parts he bought from a contact in New Zealand, John was able to build the second P-40E, which was flown by Tom Camp in the movie *1941*.

“I ended up with five of them in pieces,” John said. “At that time we had a few P-40s at Livermore [California] airport. It was just a lot of fun because we all worked together. Keep in mind that during the ’60s and ’70s there was no Internet, fax machines, or cell phones. Everything was done by word of mouth, telephone, or letter writing.”

Eventually the demand for World War II aircraft began to skyrocket and so did the price for planes, parts, and materials. Today, a P-51 can run well more than a million dollars.

“Every year there are more millionaires, and they want to get a fighter,” John said. “Hell, when P-51s got to be



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\$50,000, we thought, ‘My God, wow!’ Before you could find one for \$2,500 and even less than that if they had been sitting around neglected.”

Added John’s son, John-Curtiss, “My dad put the engine in the N (P-40) in 1986, and it cost him \$385. He flew it for about 20 years. We just replaced it. That’s a good return on investment.”

## The Museum

John-Curtiss, 39, who was named after the Curtiss P-40, remembers his family home in Alamo brimming with plane parts and even recalls a wing sitting behind the living room sofa. That was before moving to Idaho. John and his brother, Jerry, moved their wire rope cutter business to Meridian, Idaho, in 1986, where John-Curtiss now acts as the company’s general manager.

“When we moved up here, we built a hangar out at the Caldwell airport,” said John. “We ended up with the P-40s over there, and I had the Allison engine and the Packard Merlin down on display in the corner. Then I put up some pictures,

and people would come in and look at the airplanes, and suddenly more and more stuff would appear. Pretty soon people would start bringing stuff in, and it just got kind of crowded.”

That was in 1986. By 1989 the Pauls formed a full-blown 501(c)3 corporation and founded the Warhawk Air Museum. Over time the museum’s collection outgrew the 7,200-square-foot hangar. In 2000 the museum entered into an agreement with the city of Nampa for property that now acts as the airport’s entry. On it was built a 20,000-square-foot facility the Pauls never thought would be filled. Today the building is brimming with World War II memorabilia, forcing the family to make plans for a future expansion.

For John-Curtiss, the museum is a physical testimony to his parents’ hard work and passion. Perhaps more importantly, however, are the messages found within the countless stories attached to the World War II memorabilia. They speak volumes about a generation that fought to save the world. The real win-

ners, said John-Curtiss, are the thousands of students who filter through the museum each year.

“A lot of history is told in black and white photos in an old textbook,” said John-Curtiss. “But that doesn’t turn kids on and inspire them to learn about this. To come out here and see everything, it brings it all alive, bridging generations. Everything is in color. We fly the airplanes; they can see, hear, and smell it.”

John, along with his wife and son, has managed to bring to life the most significant, perhaps, of American generations for thousands who do not know, remember, or understand that the fate of the entire world once laid in the hands of young men and women—many of them still teenagers. The museum that has grown out of John’s love for vintage aircraft was something of an unexpected bonus, in some ways a reoccurring gift that grew from a few collectibles in the corner of a small hangar into something much greater.

“Hopefully this [the museum] in-



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spires them, because that is the goal, to make kids want to learn more because history is doomed to repeat itself,” John-Curtiss added. “Kids today need to know why they live such cushy lifestyles in this country, the sacrifices that were made in the 1940s during WWII to make this country great.”

Some of the museum’s key attractions are the two P-40 fighter planes. There is also a T-28 Trojan on loan from Bob Nightingale, California; a Navy N3N Trainer biplane, on loan from Dr. Paul Collins, Idaho; and the P-51C that sits in another hangar at the moment, but that will be on display once the museum completes its 15,000-square-foot, \$550,000 expansion, which is planned for the not-so-distant future.

There is one P-51 engine on display in the main hangar, the Rolls-Royce Merlin version, along with an Allison V-12 liquid-cooled engine that is used in the Curtiss P-40s and the twin-boomed P-38 Lightning.

There are also aircraft and memorabilia from World War I, Korea, and Vietnam, including an F-86 Sabre jet, which is set to be painted with the paint

scheme of the Pauls’ personal friend Korean Ace Bob Love, and a Fokker DR-1 Triplane replica. There are examples of the earliest types of internal combustion aircraft engines and jet engines from the late 1940s and ’50s.

### The Parrot Head

One of the museum’s prized displays is the P-40N Parrot Head, which was painted in honor of the class of 1943K based at Napier Field near Dothan, Alabama, during World War II. It is an authentic scheme used by the training class, which accumulated 10 hours of flight time in the colorful P-40s before transitioning to various fighter training squadrons around the country. There is limited information behind the parrot head scheme, but John-Curtiss’ call to former 1943K class member Jim Wier revealed that the planes were N models and the parrot was called *Gruffy*.

“Well, I actually made the decision about three years ago that we were going to put it [the parrot head] on there, but only after a lot of conversations with Dad, going back about 10 or 15 years,” said John-Curtiss, who contacted Jim

and told him of his plans to paint his P-40 in honor of the training squadron. “Most people never knew there was a parrot painted on a P-40. The planes in Jim Wier’s training squadron were N model P-40s, and if you look at the serial numbers, one of the P-40s in the photos is actually only about a hundred or so off the line separated from our N model P-40. They were painted identical to our P-40, with the factory olive drab and gray with the dapple, and with the addition of the buzz number on the side and the parrot head, it had the same paint job. And, it’s a love it or hate it thing. I love it. I think it’s cool.”

The parrot head color scheme stands out clearly among the other planes on display at the Warhawk Air Museum and is the only one like it in the world. The plane’s vibrantly painted fuselage, done in a combination of red, black, yellow, and orange, immediately catches the eye of visitors passing through the museum and becomes the focal point in the center of the large hangar. During World War II, there were about 10 P-40s with the same color scheme, all based at Napier Field, where they were used as

advanced trainers. According to one veteran who trained on the fighter, the Parrot Heads are a bit of a mystery.

“They were in the war someplace,” said World War II veteran flier Jim, who was responsible for painting 27 pieces of nose art on various planes during the war. “They fought someplace, then were brought back here for training. I had never seen a color scheme like that before. They were the only planes I ever saw with that type of decoration.”

“We told him we were going to honor his squadron,” said John-Curtiss. “One of the neat things that happened was that it inspired Jim to get in touch with the other guys who were in that class of 1943 because he hadn’t seen them since they were in training together. They all went off to war and flew various aircraft. They had a reunion last year, and he said

it was one of those joyous things.”

### **Bridging the Gap**

Inspiring people is just what the Pauls seem to do. The museum has become a connection for those who fought during World War II and the youth of today, most of whom don’t realize what hung in the balance so many decades ago.

“Some of the people I’ve talked to don’t even know what happened because they aren’t really told,” said John. “We get a lot of kids that come out here, and we have a program called Bridging the Generations. We may have 20 World War II veterans out here at one time. They bring out their memorabilia, and students come in, sit back and talk to these guys, and they begin to realize what happened.”

To help preserve the stories of the na-

tion’s veterans, the Warhawk Air Museum has partnered with the Library of Congress for the Veterans History Project. The project is dedicated to recording on DVD individual histories acquired through lengthy interviews. Three copies are made; one is sent to the Library of Congress, one is given to the veteran and his family, and another is kept at the Warhawk Air Museum.

“Many people don’t appreciate the price of freedom,” said John-Curtiss. “That’s why it’s such a tremendous honor to be a part of this kind of thing. It makes you feel like, personally, my life is committed to something important, that there is a difference I’m making, something worthwhile. When I’m dead and gone, I will have contributed to something that will get passed on.”



# **WARBIRD**TOONS

by Jean Barbaud

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