

Lloyd's Motor Club

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Founded 1951



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Cadillac of The Skies

Ever wondered what it's like to train as a WW2 fighter pilot? Well, with a little imagination it is still possible...

Photograph: Paul Bowen

It became clear at the recent Nigel Rose lunch that amongst LMC members there is a great interest in military history. In WW2, fighter pilots were the equivalent of Formula One drivers today, albeit with a far greater level of bravery, skill and threat of death or injury. Today we are fortunate that many Warbirds are still flying, which takes an enormous amount of commitment, both in time and money, by their owners. What is extraordinary is that whereas you have virtually no chance whatsoever of driving, or even riding in say, a Ferrari 250 GTO, you can fly a P-51 Mustang.

During WW2 the typical progression on aircraft in the RAF was De Havilland Tiger Moth (basic trainer), North American Harvard (advanced trainer), to Supermarine Spitfire/Hawker Hurricane. In the UK there are opportunities to fly the Moth and Harvard but not the Spitfire.

In the US, that progression was frequently from their 'primary' trainer, the Boeing Stearman, through the North American Texan (same as the Harvard in all but name), then finally graduating onto another Rolls-Royce Merlin-powered aircraft, the North American Mustang.

I have flown Moths and Harvards here in England but so far, the Spitfire has proved elusive. However, in the States, thanks to the US Navy and the dedication and enthusiasm with two enterprising pilots, Lee Lauderback and Doug Schultz, anyone can actually fly

arguably the best of all WW2 fighters, the P-51 Mustang. Lee and Doug set-up Stallion 51 back in 1987, to satisfy the US Navy's request to provide trainee test pilots with the opportunity to experience high-performance piston engine aircraft. Stallion 51 offers everything from orientation flights to a week long conversion course for Warbird owners and display pilots. The set-up currently includes three North American products, a Texan and two Mustangs, the only full dual control TF-51Ds in the world which you can pay to fly.

Before moving on to the Mustang though, for the true fighter pilot experience first of all you have to fly the primary trainer, the Boeing Stearman. The PT-17 is a large, robust biplane powered by a Continental radial engine built to withstand the abuse of trainee pilots. Reliable and forgiving, this aircraft earned just about every US pilot his wings. I flew 'mine' at Kermit Weeks's superb Fantasy of Flight museum in Polk City, Florida, (which is the largest private collection of aircraft in the world), where it is operated by Waldo Wright's Flying Service. Flying out of a grass strip on a sunset evening is always the best way to experience a biplane, yet back in the war the Florida skies would have been full of hundreds of 'yellow perils' (as the Army Air Corps called their bright yellow Stearmans).

After an hour or so of lazy eights and other gentle manoeuvres in this benign biplane, it was time to land.

Compared with the six instrument simplicity of the Stearman, the cockpit of the Texan is quite a contrast. With variable rate propeller and retractable gear for starters, the Texan is a much more complex aircraft and although powered by another (Pratt & Whitney) radial, typically it has three times the horsepower.

At Stallion 51 you have a detailed briefing during which you discuss exactly what you want to do, depending upon your experience.

To make the most of your Mustang flight, it is certainly wise to practice your aerobatic routine in the Texan first. Chief Flying Instructor (CFI) Steve Lorimore set out a list of classic manoeuvres including rolls, loops, chandelles etc and my favourite, the Immelmann turn.

In England, on a trial flight you always fly the T6 from the rear seat but at Stallion 51, they put you in the front. This means that you are in charge of starting the aircraft, retracting the gear and the radio calls – all are welcome responsibility. The radial engine makes that distinctive, wonderful sound you have heard in a hundred films. It is a heavy machine to taxi and once the CFI has the T6 airborne, you take over.

Although the Texan is considerably larger than the Spitfire, it is underpowered, with about the same power-to-weight ratio as a Tiger Moth. This means that your prime objective is to maintain energy, keeping the routine as smooth as possible and ending each manoeuvre with a zoom climb to

maximise momentum. It was the most exhausting and intense hour I have ever experienced in a machine, at times pulling over 4g with my vision turning grey as we were on the edge of



Photograph: Paul Bowen

blacking out – all an essential part of the fighter pilot experience.

Although a training aircraft, the Texan has a dangerous tendency to drop a wing and has taken the life of many an experienced pilot. It also takes a rotation or two more than expected to recover from a spin, so it is wise to keep plenty of height. The Texan was tricky to land compared to the Stearman, remembering to watch out for that wing drop at the flare.

After a day or two to assimilate the Texan flight, it was back to Stallion 51 again for the Mustang. When we arrived there were not two but four Mustangs present – the two Crazy Horse TF-51s and a couple of single seater P-51s. It is a huge leap again from the Texan to the Mustang with nearly four times the horsepower. When the Merlin starts it makes your spine tingle – such a wonderful sound. As with any tail dragger, you have to weave along the runway as the forward vision is poor and it is hard work as the rudder pedals are heavy – it must be like treading in treacle.

Once the Ts and Ps are correct the tower clears you for take-off, the CFI rolls down the runway and at 100 knots, you are airborne. The gear is barely up and you hear those familiar words: "You have control", except that this is no 'Air experience' Chipmunk.

Height is restricted to 6,000ft around the airfield and you have to concentrate as this



machine is dying to go faster. Immediately you are freed from the restricted zone, you can open the throttle and in what seems like the blink of an eye, you are close to the imposed 12,000ft ceiling.

It all takes a moment to sink in – there you are, flying a Mustang

at 12,000ft, with the throttle in one hand and the pistol grip control column in the other, watching the sun sparkling off the polished silver wings. Surrounded by puffs of cumulus in that bright blue sky, for a moment you imagine that you are surrounded by the ghosts of pilots past.

Trimming the TF-51 is essential – out of trim I could barely move the stick with both hands - yet in trim, it was the most responsive machine I have ever controlled, simply beautiful. The Merlin has so much power that we used 2-3,000ft for the aerobatics, making large, graceful manoeuvres – rolling around the clouds, Immelmann turns, wingovers, loops and rolls etc. We ended the flight with a low pass over Fantasy of Flight, waggling the wings and waving to Waldo Wright. Speed is relative and believe me, 350mph in a Mustang at low level is fast.

Back up to just under 12,000ft and it was time to return to reality. By now Steve was trusting and talked me through the landing – it was a lot easier than the Texan and the Mustang floated down like a leaf to a three pointer right on the centre line.

Flying this aerial hot rod is a very special experience which should not be missed – in these days of over-officious Health & Safety bureaucracy, it is a wonder of the modern world that is hopefully not on borrowed time.