



April 22, 2006

EXECUTIVE PURSUITS

# Gaining Altitude, Doubts in Tow

By HARRY HURT III

I HUNKERED in the rear cockpit of a World War II vintage airplane named Crazy Horse, my heart throbbing with awe and anxiety. I had a blue Kevlar crash helmet on my head, a boom mike in front of my lips and a parachute strapped to my back. As I stared out at the sun-drenched tarmac of Kissimmee Gateway Airport, a soft central Florida breeze bussed my cheeks. I wondered if it was the kiss of death.

"Harry, you ready to do this?"

The voice of Lee Lauderback, a square-jawed 55-year-old veteran pilot, crackled over the intercom from the forward cockpit.

"Ready, captain," I replied in a baritone full of feigned bravado. "Let's go."

Lee and I were in a TF-51 Mustang, the dual-control flight trainer version of the single-seat P-51 Mustang, one of the most illustrious propeller-driven American fighter planes. With its sleek silver fuselage, blue conical nose and 1,700-horsepower Merlin engine designed by [Rolls-Royce](#), our Mustang could fly almost 500 miles an hour and climb to an altitude over 41,000 feet.

I glanced at the antique instrument panel, tightening my four-point safety harness. The Mustang's jetlike abilities were all the more remarkable given that this particular plane was built in 1944. Several of its interior rivets were ringed with what I surmised to be mid-20th-century dust.

"All right," Lee announced. "If you're clear of the canopy rails, I'm gonna roll it forward — don't want to mess up your hair — and we'll go ahead and wake up the Merlin."

The Mustang's engine erupted with a pop, a cackle and a plume of white smoke. The propeller spun so fast I could see right through the blades and all the way up into the wild blue yonder. We were still on the ground, and I still had time to call it quits. But I prayed for the guts to hang in like my dearly departed daddy would have done.

I reckoned this might very well be the ultimate executive pursuit. There are scores of fantasy sports camps where you can test your mettle against professionals. There are driving schools where you can learn to race a car like a bat out of hell. But

with the possible exceptions of skydiving or jumping off the Brooklyn Bridge without a bungee cord, I could think of nothing that even came close to the gravity-defying exhilaration of flying a TF-51 Mustang — or offered such unbeatable bragging rights — especially if you'd had absolutely no previous piloting experience.

My preflight briefing had begun at 0900 hours when I arrived at Stallion 51, the private flight operations company Lee runs from a cluster of hangars a few miles from Walt Disney World. Lee led me into a conference room equipped with a white board, a video screen and two model airplanes. I mentioned that my father had been a so-called 90-day wonder, one of the soldiers who learned to fly World War II fighters at the Naval Air Station in Pensacola in only three months.

Lee promised to make me a less-than-90-minute wonder. After barely more than an hour of ground training, we were going on a sortie in the TF-51 Mustang. But this wasn't going to be just a joy ride. According to Lee, I was going to do about 95 percent of the flying. "We're going to let you drink the Kool-Aid," he said. "You're going to have the total immersion experience."

I gulped bottled water as Lee recounted his background and the genesis of Stallion 51. Raised in Orlando, he started flying gliders at age 14, and soloed in a motorized plane at 16, but failed to get an Air Force commission because he had 20-30 vision instead of the required 20-20. For 17 years, he was the chief jet pilot for the golf legend [Arnold Palmer](#). Lee's dream of flying fighter planes finally came true in 1987 when he and a partner founded Stallion 51 and won a contract to train Navy test pilots to fly TF-51's and P-51's.

A renowned instructor and air show ace, Lee now boasts over 6,000 hours flying Mustangs, more than any other pilot on record. On any given day, Stallion 51's hangars hold a dozen or more vintage war birds, including Spitfires, T-6 Texans, P-51's and TF-51's. The company provides services ranging from flying lessons to aircraft maintenance, restoration and sales. There is even a full-time flight surgeon on staff.

Lee noted that only about 150 single-seat P-51 Mustangs remained from the more than 15,000 manufactured during World War II. They command prices of up to \$2 million, and require annual operating expenses of roughly \$100,000, including a whopping \$30,000 for insurance. Not surprisingly, most current Mustang owners are wealthy doctors or investment bankers.

But thanks to Stallion 51, experiencing the thrill of flying a war bird is relatively cheap. A one-hour orientation flight in a two-seat TF-51 Mustang with Lee or one of his instructor pilots costs \$2,950. A one-hour flight in a T-6 Texan, which requires less maintenance and burns less fuel, is only \$600.

Lee demonstrated some of the maneuvers we would perform in the TF-51 with model airplanes. They included an aileron roll, in which the plane turned over 360 degrees; and a barrel roll, in which the plane circumscribed a pattern similar to the inside rim of a barrel. I confessed that the mere thought of such aerobatics made my stomach churn.

"Your resistance to queasiness and G forces is enhanced if you're flying the plane yourself," Lee assured.

My queasiness meter soared a few minutes later when Lee strapped me into the rear cockpit of the Crazy Horse and pointed out the principal controls. The big black handle on my left was the throttle. The silvery trim wheel beside my seat adjusted the ailerons. The left and right foot pedals moved the rudder. The stick between my legs turned the plane and elevated or lowered the nose. The trigger on the stick, which once fired wing-mounted machine guns, engaged the intercom.

If we had to bail out, Lee said I should exit from the right side of the cockpit, and count to three to give myself time to fall clear of the wings before pulling the rip cord. I told him I'd never jumped out of an airplane.

"I haven't jumped either, and I don't want to ruin my record," Lee replied. "If we lose power, that doesn't necessarily mean I'll want to leave the airplane. I may be able to land it like a glider."

The next thing I knew, we were rolling, and I was alternately pressing the left and right rudder pedals. As Lee explained, the Mustang's nose was so high, we had to zigzag down the taxiway and peek out the sides to see where we were going. Enthralled by the rudder's responsiveness, I momentarily forgot my fears — only to realize I was veering the 9,200-lb. plane perilously close to the edge of the pavement.

"I keep over-steering," I rasped into my boom mike.

"It's quite common," Lee returned. "But you're doing great, so no issues at all."

When we reached the end of Runway 33, Lee reassumed control of the rudder pedals, and turned the Mustang's blue conical nose into the wind. He revved the Merlin engine to 2,300 revolutions per minute and released the wheel brakes. We raced down the centerline until suddenly — miraculously, it seemed to me — we were airborne.

The earth fell away, and I saw white puffs of cumulus clouds billowing above the bubble canopy. Lee banked the Mustang sharply to the left. Then he leveled off, and advised that we were going about 180 m.p.h. at an altitude of 1,400 feet.

"Harry, I'm going to put you back to work flying the airplane," he declared.

All I could think was, "God help us!"

To be continued.

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