

▼ (inset-left) James Goodwin, Lt. Col Donald Schoen USAF (Ret), and Lee Lauderback during Don's reunion with *The Little Witch* .




▲ (inset-right) Don Schoen strapped into the rear cockpit of *The LITTLE Witch* for his last "mission."

The **LITTLE Witch**

Story by **Brad Lauderback**
Photography by **Paul Bowen**

(main-photo) Lee Lauderback at the controls of *The LITTLE Witch* over the western side of the Teton mountains with James Hoff in the back seat. (Photo pilot: Bob Hoff)



ON A GLOOMY October afternoon in 1944, after five days at sea, Lt. Donald Schoen and his squadron mates, Leroy Pletz and Jack Davenport, disembarked their transport ship at the port of Liverpool, England. Lt. Schoen recalled, “Our stay in Liverpool was short and by the next day we were headed to Great Grimbsy for our introduction to the P-51 Mustang.” Upon arrival at Great Grimbsy, Don and his fellow replacement pilots immediately had their first glance at the P-51 Mustang and began their check out. With little bookwork and a quick cockpit introduction, the newly trained fighter pilot set out on his first flight in a Mustang. “On one of my training flights in the 51, when I was up more or less boring holes in the sky, I decided to detour across the channel and take a quick look at France. As I was approaching the French coast I spotted a town or a small city up ahead on the coast and considered dropping down and giving the place a buzz job. But before executing any such steps toward that end, I got to thinking that maybe the town was Dunkirk, which was still occupied by the Germans and probably well defended with anti-aircraft guns. As it turned out the town was indeed Dunkirk, and justified my passing it by.”



The Little Witch prepped for another mission during the winter of 1944.



Lt. Schoen and his Crew Chief, Bob Ferris.

▲ (top-left) Lt. Don Schoen (second from right) and Lt Leroy Pletz (Center) with fellow 353rd pilots in the Operations quonset hut at Raydon.

Upon completion of his quick introduction to his new mount, Don and fellow pilots were shipped out to their assigned bases. In his case he reported to Raydon Air Base in East Anglia on the eastern coast of England. "It really didn't concern me at the time, but now that I think of it we were probably replacements for either losses or for those who were rotating back to the States, bringing the group back up to full strength again."

▲ (top-right) Don hiding the witch logo with his hand - something he would regret 60 years later while helping Stallion 51 replicate the original nose art.

Raydon Air Base was the home of the 353rd Fighter Group, consisting of the 352nd and the 354th Fighter Squadrons. Replacing the 9th AF 358th Fighter Group, the 353rd Fighter Group moved to Raydon from RAF Metfeld in April 1944. The group was assigned to the 8th Air Force, headquartered at Sawston Hall, Cambridge. During the Invasion of Normandy, the 353rd Fighter Group provided aerial support to the battle at Saint-Lô, France in July. The squadron received the Distinguished Unit Citation for supporting an airborne attack on Holland when the group contributed to the operation by protecting bombers and troop carriers and by strafing and dive-bombing ground targets during September 1944. About this time Raydon was also known as "Bomb Alley" due to the number of German V-1 "Doodlebug" flying bombs that flew directly overhead on their way to London. The 353rd Fighter Group also participated in the Battle of the Bulge and

► (right-middle) The "Three Amigos," including Lieutenants Leroy Pletz (pilot of *Donna-mite*), Jack Davenport (pilot of *Lucky Leaky*), and Don Schoen. They were together from commencement of primary training until the end of the war.



► (right-bottom) Lt. Schoen and his baby, *The Little Witch*, prior to another mission.





aerial attacks on Germany across the Rhine River. The group continued to fly combat missions until the end of April 1945. After the end of hostilities in Europe, the group trained and prepared for transfer to the Pacific Theater. When Japan surrendered, the group left Raydon and transferred back to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, where it was finally deactivated on October 18, 1945.

Between October 1944 and the end of the war in September 1945, Lt. Schoen flew 63 escort missions accompanying allied bombers into Nazi Germany. During this time he was credited with one aerial and two ground kills, awarded eight Air Medals and a Distinguished Flying Cross, the highest honor bestowed to an aviator. In his Air Force career after the war, Don flew the C-47, the Lockheed T-33 and the North American F-86D all weather interceptor. Don is also credited with being a key player in the development of the Air Force Office of Special Investigation. He spent many years working in Air Force "internal affairs." Donald Schoen retired from the United States Air Force on Sept. 1, 1969, at the rank of Lt. Colonel.

HISTORY of 44-74497

Rolling off the North American Aviation production line in 1944, 44-74497 had a rather uneventful career in the U.S. Army Air Force while being operated by

various state side training squadrons. The aircraft was transferred to the Royal Canadian Air force in 1950. The Mustang served operationally with No. 420 Auxiliary Squadron at RCAF Station Crumlin, Ontario. 44-74497 was withdrawn from Canadian service in 1958 and sold as surplus along with a large number of other P-51s to James Defuria of Intercontinental Airways in Canastota, NY. At this point, the aircraft was registered N6320T. In 1960 the plane was sold to Aero Enterprises in Elkhart, Indiana. In 1962 the Mustang was transferred to Ralph Ressink and then on to Kenneth Neal in 1966. While under the ownership of Neal, N6320T was heavily damaged in a landing accident in Bedford, Oregon. Glen Cook purchased and transported the wreckage to Seattle, Washington in January of 1970. The incomplete airframe was once again sold to Mike Smith of Johnson, Kansas. Smith completed the rebuild and the Mustang once again took to the skies in March of 1971. Smith sold 6320T to the famed I.N. Junior Burchinal in 1972. Burchinal operated the aircraft at his Flying Tigers Museum in Paris, Texas. Kent Jones of Dallas, Texas was the next owner during the period from 1973 to 1975. In 1975, famed racecar driver Johnny Rutherford took ownership and flew N6320T until 1979. At this time, Veteran World War Two Mustang pilot Hess Bomberger and his partner Jimmy Hunt bought N6320T. In 1980 the aircraft

▲ Lee Lauderback flies *The LITTLE Witch* with passenger James Hoff down the Snake River in Eastern Idaho.



▲ (top) Lee Lauderback shows off the distinctive black and yellow checkerboard nose of the 353rd Fighter Group.

▲ (middle-left) Pre-flight trim settings: six degrees right rudder trim, zero degrees aileron trim, and zero degrees elevator trim.

was restored to the wartime colors of Hess' 361st FS Mustang *Vergeltungswaffe*, translation: "revenge weapon." Hess continued to actively fly the Mustang in airshows until the late 1990s. The aircraft changed ownership again in 1998, when Bob Jepson purchased the airframe and it was flown to Kissimmee to begin complete restoration and transformation into a dual cockpit, dual control TF-51 Mustang. Finally, in 2008 James Goodwin purchased N6320T and re-registered the plane as N51LW.

RESTORATION

Enter Bob Jepson, a loyal Cessna Citation customer. During the late 1990s Cessna would offer its top clients a "Day of Golf" with Arnold Palmer as a thank you for purchasing a Citation product. With Mr. Jepson being such an avid aviator, Cessna suggested an alternative and offered Bob a chance to visit Stallion 51 in Kissimmee, FL to fly the dual control TF-51 Mustang Crazy Horse. This was the catalyst that started his love affair with the Mustang. Upon completion of his flight in their famous dual control TF-51 Mustang, Bob made it clear to Stallion 51's owner, Lee Lauderback that he would like to own and fly a P-51. Lee discovered that Hess Bomberger had quietly put N6320T on the market. At this point in time Hess, after 20 plus years, had decided to hang up his parachute and let go of *Vergeltungswaffe*. Bob commissioned Lee and Richard Lauderback to travel

to Atlanta, GA to perform a pre-purchase inspection on the aircraft. After digging through the logbooks and performing a detailed physical inspection, Lee reported that the plane would make an excellent candidate for a Mustang restoration. This fit perfectly with Bob's objective and timeline of building his pilot skills so that he would one day be able to fly his own Mustang. In July of 1998 Lee Lauderback fired up N6320T in the colors of *Vergeltungswaffe* for one last time and ferried the aircraft back to Kissimmee, FL to begin the next chapter in the life of this fantastic fighter.

Once tucked away in the hangar at Stallion 51, a restoration plan was formulated. Peter and Richard Lauderback, the masters of the inner workings of the Mustang, began the disassembly process. Upon reaching deep into the internal organs of this aircraft, the brothers came to the conclusion that the plane would need more than just a basic restoration; it would need to be taken down to its most intimate components. At this point the decision was also made to convert 6320T into a dual cockpit, dual control TF-51 Mustang. A detailed inventory of every component was completed. The fuselage was stripped down to a shell of its former self and sent to Square One Aviation in Chino, CA for conversion to TF cockpit standards. The wing was sent to Bob Odegaard in Kindred, ND for a total rebuild. All the systems were kept in-house along with the tail



section, all the cowlings, and fairings. The Merlin engine was sent to Mike Nixon of Vintage V-12s for overhaul. What originally was intended to be an approximate year long restoration was now evolving into a multi-year project.

While the main components of 6320T were out being restored, all the systems for the plane were disassembled, cleaned, inspected, overhauled, painted, and put back together. Once the fuselage and wings were back in-house, Peter and Richard Lauderback began the painstaking task of putting the Mustang back together, bit by bit. Look in the wheel wells or engine bay and you can see the thousands of man-hours of talented labor that were put into this Mustang. By early 2002 the airframe was once again mounted to the wing and the powerful historic Merlin engine was attached to all its corresponding linkages, lines, and hoses. The cockpit in the plane is a work of art in its own right. The panel retained the feel of a "stock" Mustang while having the functionality of a modern aircraft. The complete Garmin avionics suite with a GNS 530 containing TCAS and real time XM weather capability makes the plane a fully functional cross-country platform in the modern day airspace system. Final assembly took place in late 2002 and in October, N6320T was ready for its first post-restoration flight. Lee Lauderback did the honors. The results of Peter and Richard's hard work and attention to detail

▲ (top-left) The attention to detail provided by Peter and Richard Lauderback during the restoration is evident in the cockpit of *The Little Witch*.

▲ (top-right) The extended bubble canopy of the TF-51 Mustangs allows for extraordinary 360 degree visibility

▲ (middle-right) With Don Schoen's blessing, James Goodwin enlisted his 13 year old son, Gordon, to design the witch and moon logo.

◀ (bottom-left) *The Little Witch* was restored as a Dual Cockpit / Dual Control TF-51 to original Cavalier specifications.



▲ (top left) Lee Lauderback on short final at Idaho Falls at the completion of a photo mission with master aviation photographer Paul Bowen.

▲ (top right) Data plate for 44-74497, which served in both the U.S. Army Air Force and the Canadian Air Force before she began her civilian life.

▲ (middle-left and right) The wheel wells were restored with all stainless steel hydraulic lines and cad plated hardware.

▶ (bottom-right) Rubber meets the ramp at AeroMark FBO in Idaho Falls, Idaho.

were evident in the first flight, with only minor adjustments needed upon return.

The final step in the restoration process was deciding on a color scheme. As a thank you to Peter and Richard for producing a “work of art,” Mr. Jepson gave them the honor of picking the paint job. After paging through various historical references, Peter and Richard came across a small black and white photo of a 353 FG Mustang flown by a Lt. Don Schoen. The name on the plane appeared to be *Little Witch*. This name seemed appropriate because there were many hours of headaches, lost skin and frustration that accompanied producing a plane to this standard of restoration. Armed with a small black and a white photo and an all around vote, it was decided *Little Witch* was catchy and most appropriate. In November, Lee Lauderback headed north to Canada and placed the aircraft in the artistic hands of Sky Harbour Aircraft Refinishing. Three months later *Little Witch* emerged and the final step in the transformation was complete. During April of 2003, *Little Witch* took home the Grand Champion Warbird award at the Sun-n-Fun air show in Lakeland, FL. Peter and Richard Lauderback were also honored with the Golden Wrench Award for their skilled work in producing this masterpiece Mustang.

The LITTLE Witch

After James Goodwin purchased *The LITTLE Witch* in 2008, Bob Jepson forwarded me the contact





information for Don Schoen and I proceeded to make a formal introduction. During the course of our initial correspondence and conversations, Don noted that the name and art on the then *Little Witch* was not historically accurate. He indicated that the real name of the plane was actually *The LITTLE Witch*, which he told me with a chuckle he named after his wife at the time. Don notes: "Shortly after the war, we divorced." He kindly sent photos from his personal collection showing the correct name on the plane. It should also be noted that at the time of the restoration and paint job, it was not known that Don was alive and well, or that additional, clear photographs of the nose art existed. Sky Harbour simply recreated the scheme as best they could at the time. James Goodwin decided that it would be of great importance to correct this inaccuracy, so over the next few months Don helped to determine the exact colors and positioning of the name. He also shared stories about his exploits during and after the war. One of the other big mysteries was the witch and moon artwork forward of the name. The quality of the black and white film of the era did not clearly show the actual painting of the witch riding a broom past the moon. With Don's blessing, James recruited his son Gordon Goodwin, whom at 13 years old has artistic interests. He designed and drew the present day witch and moon that was incorporated with the historically accurate name. Stallion 51 hired an accomplished sign painter to transform *Little Witch* into the historically correct *The LITTLE Witch*.

REUNION

As a tribute to Lt. Col Don Schoen USAF (Ret.) and for his help in making the *The LITTLE Witch* what it is today, Mr. Goodwin decided that it would be a great honor to be able to re-unite Don with the present day reproduction of his wartime mount. After an invitation and a little persuasion, James Goodwin convinced Don and his lovely wife Gerry travel from Arizona to Kissimmee, to once again take to the skies in a Mustang. It had been over 65 years since Don had been at the controls of *The LITTLE Witch*. On May 11, 2009, Don and his wife arrived in Florida for his chance to "saddle up" one more time. The team at Stallion 51 had positioned *The LITTLE Witch* in the center of the hangar surrounded by its immaculate North American brothers and sisters. Don walked in and saw his trusty wartime mount for the first time since leaving Raydon at the conclusion of the war in Europe. That day Don flew his final Mustang mission, together with Lee Lauderback.

The LITTLE Witch is presently maintained by Stallion 51 Flight Operations and is based at their facility in Kissimmee, FL. When James Goodwin is not using the plane, Stallion 51 utilizes N51LW along with their other two TF-51s for orientation flights, checkout training, and air show demonstrations. Lee Lauderback has also flown *The LITTLE Witch* on numerous occasions in the USAF Heritage Flight Program at air shows around the country. 🇺🇸

▲ Both natural and man made beauty complement one another, as captured through the lens of Paul Bowen's camera.