

Whistling Dixie



BY JIM BUSHA

L

et's be honest, once in a while we all have the tendency to judge a book by its cover. A recent case in point occurred on the warbird ramp at the 2010 Sun 'n Fun Fly-in at Lakeland, Florida, when a spit- and highly polished P-51 Mustang wandered in looking for a parking spot.

I listened to those around me surmise the pilot must be some "rich Hollywood type." But when the canopy slowly rolled back and the pilot/owner, decked out in faded blue jeans and a well-worn T-shirt, climbed out on the wing, the looks of amazement on the faces in the crowd were priceless. What stunned them the most, however, was that the owner, Selby Burch, was already 16 years old when his P-51 Mus-

A team effort in the resurrection of a P-51



tang *Dixie Boy* was built back in 1945.

It's no secret that Selby's been around Mustangs for a long time. He's owned four and half of them in his 81 years, and every wrinkle, crevice, and furrow on his dark, tanned face tells a story about his experiences—the deeper the valley, the better the story.

Some people look at these blemishes as a sign of growing old, but Selby considers each of them more like a “souvenir” from a lifetime of flying and working with people who share the same passion when it comes to preserving history. Flying them is one thing, but getting them back into the air takes a team effort. That's why Selby surrounded himself with some of the best talent in the business; without the help of others, there would be no way he could make the following statement: “Flying a Mustang is the most fun you can have with your clothes on. It's a fantastic airplane—straight up or straight down. You can roll it, loop it, and do most anything you want with it. Everyone likes the P-51; ask any kid in third grade and they can tell you what a P-51 Mustang is.”

Too young to enter the military during World War II, Selby took advantage of the thousands of military-trained pilots returning from duty who re-entered civilian life as flight instructors. Selby learned to fly J-3 Cubs and Aeronca Chiefs off a cow pasture near his hometown of Winter Garden, Florida, in the late 1940s.

With war clouds looming again, this time in Korea, Selby wound up completing a hitch with the U.S. Army before settling back home in Florida. Selby started a land-clearing business that grew as large as the orange groves he was tilling up with his bulldozer. Eventually Selby saw the need for airpower and used a series of airplanes to get him from one job to another. Until that time all of his airplanes were newer, off-the-shelf factory-built models, like his 1957 Beechcraft Bonanza. That all changed with a little “horse trading.” He recalls:

“There was a guy not too far from me that wanted to trade his P-51 Mustang for my Bonanza. I was trying to get \$9,000 for my airplane. We worked out a deal where I got the Mustang plus \$1,500 bucks and the promise of a brand new VOR. After that I flew that Mustang all over the country. I liked the Mustang so much, I traded up and down on a couple more throughout my life, including half-ownership in the CAF's Red Nose, and I thought I finally had my fill of them when I sold my last one back in 1997. Everything would have been fine had I not gone out looking at a Cub in Texas. I guess you could say I just can't leave well enough alone!”

Looking for Cubs in All the Wrong Places

Sometime in 2005, Selby talked his wife, Dana, into letting him buy a J-3 Cub so he could “teach the grandkids to fly.” As he flipped through the yellow pages of *Trade-A-Plane*, he found a cream puff of a Cub located just south of Houston, Texas, at a little out-of-the-way grass strip. He



PHOTOS COURTESY GARY NORVILLE



convinced his wife to drive along with him so he could look at the Cub face to face, never dreaming of the buried treasure he was about to discover.

“As I waited for the owner of the Cub to show up, I started talking to some of the locals at the airport,” says Selby. “We traded ‘flying fibs’ back and forth, and one thing led to another when one

of us mentioned the word ‘Mustang.’ I nearly fell over backwards when they said they had one on the field.”

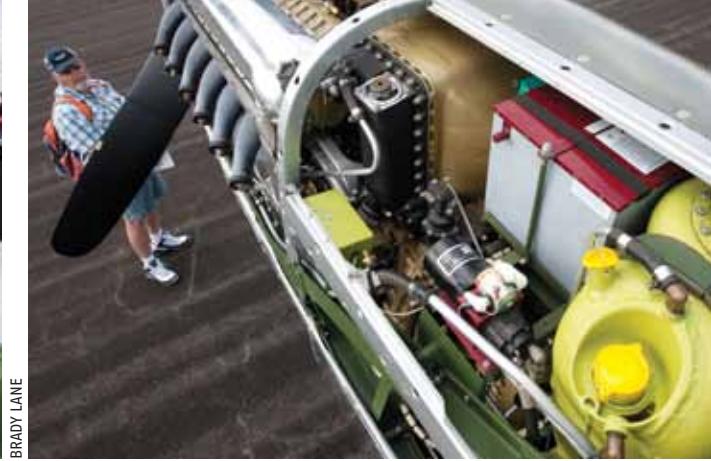
When the hangar door slid back and the dust had settled, Selby spied an almost complete P-51 Mustang, minus the fuselage that was being worked on at another field. Selby admits he “fell off the wagon” at the site of another Mus-

tang, and he worried his wife wouldn’t tolerate another P-51 in his life.

“It seems like every time I try to walk away from a P-51, I turn around and come back for more,” he says. “I couldn’t sleep that night in the motel room as I tossed and turned thinking about that Mustang. Dana realized how bad I wanted it and in the morn-



PHOTOS COURTESY GARY NORVILLE



BRADY LANE

ing gave me her blessing to ‘Just get it, and be done with it!’ I eventually left Texas with a J-3 Cub and a P-51 project. I should have known from my past projects what a long, drawn-out financial procedure these restorations can become. But I was bound and determined to get back into the saddle of another Mustang.”

P-51D Mustang 44-73751

Built by the North American Aviation Corporation for the Army Air Force in 1945, this particular P-51D was returned to the United States in July of 1945. It served with a variety of state-side units, including both the North Dakota and Illinois Air National Guard. Eventually sold on the civilian market in January of 1958, this P-51D acquired its civilian registration of N5444V and was operated by a handful of different owners. Painted chalk white with a red spinner and a blue/orange stripe running down the fuselage, this airplane spent most of its life in California.

What’s most unusual about this Mustang, however, is the fact that when other P-51s around the world were being restored back to wartime markings, this poor example languished outside for more than 30 years in a faded civilian paint scheme as outdated as the eight-track player.

Eventually the Mustang’s owner shipped it to Texas to begin a restoration process that did more harm than good. Abandoned once again, the Mustang was put up for sale when Selby stumbled across it. Selby was well-versed in Mustangs and knew from experience that if he wanted this P-51 to look factory fresh and to get airborne as soon as possible, he needed a group

of people who could work on it non-stop. Enter Gary Norville and American Aero Services of New Smyrna Beach, Florida.

... ask any kid in third grade and they can tell you what a P-51 Mustang is.

The Restoration

Gary Norville has been involved in the warbird scene at American Aero since 1985. In fact, he liked working on them so much that he bought the company in 1998 and has been restoring and maintaining a variety of warbirds, military vehicles, and rockets for numerous customers. So when he received the call from Selby about restoring his Mustang, Gary was more than a little apprehensive, especially since this Mustang was rumored to be a “corrosion bucket.”

“This P-51 is well-known in the warbird community,” says Gary. “For a long time it sat outside on the ramp in San Jose, resting on its flat tires. Nobody seemed to want to touch it for fear of heavy corrosion. I was pleasantly surprised when I saw it for the first time, because this was not only a time capsule in very good condition, but a very complete project as well.”

Because Gary and his team had already restored a few Mustangs, includ-

ing Jack Roush’s *Gentleman Jim*, they had all the necessary jigs, fixtures, knowledge, and experience to tackle a project of this magnitude. The first item on their list was to “blow the wing apart” by removing the outer skins, interior ribs, and spars.

“We were able to use about 90 percent of the original ribs,” Gary says. “Unfortunately, everything else had that nasty airplane cancer called corrosion eating away at the rest of the metal parts.”

With the wings taking shape in the jigs, all new spars, both new and old ribs, and new outer skins were applied in better-than-factory, like-new fashion. Before any part was put back on the airplane, each was thoroughly examined and inspected for cracks and corrosion. With the wings just about complete, attention turned to the fuselage, which unfortunately was in much worse shape than the wings were.

“That part of the project needed the most attention,” Gary explains. “We ended up replacing all the long-erons and formers along with all of the fuselage skins.”

To complement all the new hardware, the entire cowling was reworked. This amounted to reshaping the top cowling with new stainless and aluminum, and also forming an entirely new bottom cowling out of the same material. Gary pointed out the area that he is most proud of on the entire airplane.

“The ‘elephant ears’ are my pride and joy,” he says with a grin. “Those are the fairings that attach at the wing root and fuselage. All credit goes to Steve Marquis and Linda Tam, who bloodied their knuckles pounding those pieces out. I think the end result speaks for itself.”

Other tedious parts of the project



JIM KOEPNICK

do was send it off to Glenn Wegman of Fighter Enterprises to take a look at it and do a top overhaul for us.”

To give the Mustang its “combat ready” appearance, the instruments have a radium look to them, which entails rescreening of the instrument faces without the glowing aftereffects. New-looking but fake .50-caliber machine guns with ammo belts and trays were placed in the wing gun bays, while reproduced military-specification cotton braid wiring was installed throughout the aircraft to give it that vintage-fighter look. With almost four years spent on this project and more than 23,000 man-hours, it was time to set the Mustang free. But first, it needed a paint job.

“It seems that most Mustangs are painted in the World War II European combat theater schemes,” says Selby. “I have never been one to follow the herd, so I choose a Pacific color scheme belonging to the 5th Air Force, 15th Fighter Group, 47th Fighter Squadron. These guys were based on Iwo Jima late in the war escorting B-29s to Japan. It took a lot of guts to fly a single-engine airplane more than eight hours over open ocean. It’s my way of paying tribute to these brave men. The *Dixie Boy* nose art? Well, I consider myself just

included rebuilding and reskinning the “dog-house”—the section that houses the radiator, which connects to the signature Mustang belly scope. All new ailerons, elevators, flaps, tubing, fittings, and hoses rounded out that part of the project as the Mustang began to take

shape. With the wings mated to the fuselage, the team concentrated on the interior plumbing and wiring while the engine was sent out for an overhaul.

“The engine was a Rolls-Royce Merlin Dash-7 that Jack Hovey had built,” Gary says. “So in essence all we had to



JIM KOEPNICK



Selby Burch



COURTESY SELBY BURCH

Selby's restoration crew.

a good ol' southern boy, so the name kind of fit me!"

After Gary and his team applied the paint, *Dixie Boy* was ready to fly. Gary believes that there was a great team effort among the shop rebuilding it; Glenn going over it with a second set of virgin eyes, looking for any squawks; and then having someone who is well-versed in test flying like Elliot Cross come in and make sure everything is working properly.

"Safety is our number one goal," Gary states. "It has to be if we want to keep these airplanes flying."

The Test Flight

Elliot Cross of St. Augustine, Florida, has no problem admitting that he hasn't done anything workwise in his life that wasn't airplane related. From turning wrenches, to performing air show aerobatics in old biplanes, to instructing in P-51s for more than seven years, you might say that Elliot has been around the block a few times.

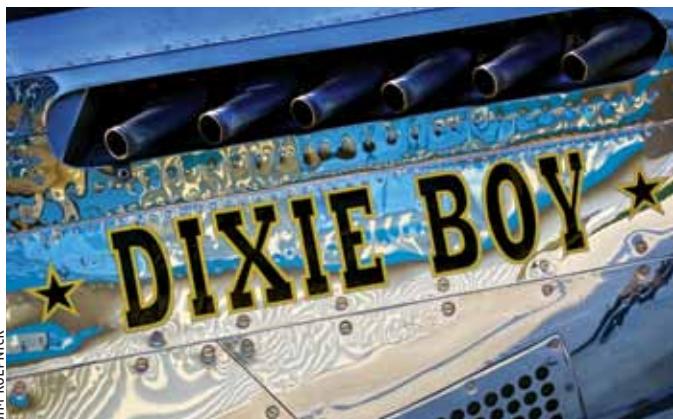
Although Elliot prefers warbird flying, especially in Spitfires, he was also heavily involved in the test-flying of the hot rod of a homebuilt called the Stewart Mustang. Elliot certainly knows his way around the cockpits of different airplanes, but he doesn't just show up to test-fly a particular model—he likes to be involved with the projects early on.

"I like to see these airplanes being rebuilt from the start," he says. "I had known Selby early on when he owned

a couple of different Mustangs, and of course I knew Gary for some time, having test-flown some of his previous rebuilds. Test-flying a Mustang is not experimental work; this is more of a production test flight."

Elliot likes to praise his mentor, Bill Kelly, a former test pilot for the U.S. Navy and then with Piper, who had an enormous influence on him. So much so that each time Elliot takes a new airplane up to wring it out, he always asks himself the same question: *What would Kelly do in this situation?*

"As far as the first hop, I just try to do a normal flight in the airplane, stalling it before I land it," Elliot says. "I favor a piece of cardboard rather than a knee board as I log all the critical numbers, such as temperatures and pressures, to make sure everything is working well. And in the case of *Dixie Boy*, all I found was that the flaps needed to be tweaked and some re-rigging of the clamshell doors. Other than that this was a heck of a nice 'out of the box' airplane to fly. The only other comment I can make is that whoever has to keep this beauty polished will have a full-time job on their hands—personally I am a believer in paint, but then again I am a lazy guy!"



JIM KOEPNICK

Like Riding a Bicycle

With more than 1,100 hours in Mustangs, and a love affair with them that has spanned decades, Selby is far from walking away from his latest P-51. To him the Mustang represents nostalgia and memories of a kid growing up, wishing he were old enough to fly one. Although Selby has entered his golden years of life, he won't admit that this is the last Mustang he will own.

"It's definitely my last project, I can tell you that for sure!" he exclaims. "It's funny, when I jumped back into the saddle of this one and cranked it up for the first time, it was like riding a bicycle—you just don't forget, as everything comes right back to you. None of this would have been possible, though, without the help from so many others. It takes a group of dedicated people to keep these historic treasures flying and a good ol' southern boy smiling!"





