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Gathering of Mustangs & Legends – If Not Now, Never!

Photos & Story by Geoff Sobering



U.S. Air Force “Heritage Flight.”

COLUMBUS, OHIO – The P-51 Mustang is perhaps one of the iconic machines of the 20th century. For many people, the P-51 is the quintessential “World War Two Fighter.” So it’s not surprising that an event centering on the Mustang would generate

intense interest. In 1999, Lee Lauderback and Angela West organized the first “Gathering of Mustangs and Legends” at their “Stallion 51” home-base airport in Kissimmee, Florida. It was a great success with 65 P-51s and 12 legendary pilots



Dr. Roscoe C. Brown’s post-war achievements are as impressive as his flying with the Tuskegee Army Airmen, downing an Me-262, among other victories.

attending – the largest assembly since the Korean War. Eight years later, they decided to repeat the event on a larger scale: the target was 100 Mustangs – the largest assembly of P-51s in one place since WWII. Timing of the 2007 “Gathering” also coincided with the Air Force’s 60th anniversary, and was made a part of the USAF’s year-long anniversary celebration.

The 2007 “Gathering” was held September 27-30 at Rickenbacker International Airport (LCK), Columbus, Ohio. The selection of Rickenbacker as the site brought additional history to the event. During WWII, Lockbourne Army Air Force Base (renamed after Ohio’s Eddie Rickenbacker in 1974) was used for training B-17 crews, including many of the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs), and after WWII, the famous Tuskegee Airmen of the 99th Fighter Squadron were stationed there. Since the Tuskegee Airmen are most closely associated with the P-51 and many WASPs ferried Mustangs across the country, this added another aspect to the “Legends” present at the event.

After nearly a year of anticipation, the first day of the “Gathering” was something of a wash-out (almost literally). A strong cold front moved through the lower Ohio Valley Thursday morning bringing torrential rains to Rickenbacker. I managed to arrive at the airport during the height of the downpour and ended up sitting in my car reading the outstanding program book until the rain moderated. Just before the sky opened up, and the airport closed, both the Raptor and F-15 demo teams managed to land. The Raptors taxied to the ramp just in time for the main deluge, and the lightning forced their support crew under cover. The aircraft sat with their canopies down and engines running for a while until it was safe for the ground crew to venture out and recover their aircraft. Luckily, behind the cold front was a large high-pressure system that built in over Thursday

afternoon and evening, bringing absolutely beautiful weather for the rest of the week!

The storm Thursday morning also kept many of the en route P-51s and other warbirds grounded at their last stop-over point, but planes arrived steadily over the course of the afternoon and evening. This made for quite a show as a wide spectrum of military aircraft landed on the 12,000 ft. main runway at Rickenbacker. Among the arrivals were the Thunderbirds’ F-16s, a C-5, C-17, B-17, P-51s (of course!), and some rare birds: a P-63 and the P-38 “Ruff Stuff.”

On Friday, the show really kicked into high gear. Thursday was nominally reserved for media, and the rain kept away all but the most hardened attendees, but Friday dawned sunny and warm and the crowds started arriving early – many people lining up at the gate more than an hour before the 8:00 AM opening. Unlike many air shows that feature a few hours of flying in the afternoon, things kicked off at 9:30 AM with a parachute landing of the American flag and “Star Spangled Banner,” followed by John Mohr’s amazing stock-Steerman aerobatic routine. From there on until the gates closed at 6:00 PM, there was almost always something flying in front of the crowd. In addition to high-powered aerobatic acts like Patty Wagstaff, John Klatt, Ed Hammill, and Michael Goulian, there were a number of P-51 performances, including Lee Lauderback’s solo routine, and “The Horsemen” formation aerobatics. For the “loud props and lots-of-smoke” fans, both the AeroShell Aerobatic Team and Red Baron Pizza Squadron performed.

Perhaps the highlight of the day was the three “Heritage Flights.” At a typical air show, there is usually one Heritage Flight flown right after the Air Combat Command (ACC) demonstration team’s performance. At “The Gathering,” there were three of the ACC teams present: the “Viper

East” F-16 Demo Team, the West Coast F-15 Demo Team, and the F-22 Raptor Demo Team. So, it was only natural to fly a Heritage Flight with each team. Of course, the “heritage” plane was always a P-51!

To make things even more interesting, the number of P-51s in each formation was increased for each flight. Viper East went first, and was joined by Vlado Lenoch in “Moonbeam McSwine.” Next came the West Coast F-15 team, followed by a formation with Humberto Lobo’s “Shangri-La” and Jack Croul’s “44-73420.” The final demo team performance was the F-22 Raptor; truly an amazing aircraft and an amazing performance by Major Paul “Max” Moga. You can probably guess the number of P-51s that formed up with Max and the Raptor: Stephen Grey’s “Twilight Tear,” Lee Lauderback’s “Crazy Horse,” and Jim Beasley’s “Princess Elizabeth.”

After all the demo teams and Heritage Flights, the Thunderbirds were almost anti-climatic. They did their usual outstanding job, and really got the crowd excited. Usually, the Thunderbirds are the last act in a show – not so at the “The Gathering;” there was still over an hour of flying left! Right after the Thunderbirds were recovered, a Kallitta Air 747 freighter landed (a treat for transport aircraft aficionados like me). Then planes started taking off: P-51s, P-47s, a P-63, a P-38, a B-17, B-25s, and the Lancaster. They did a number of fly-bys and gave everybody plenty of opportunities to get some great photographs in the late afternoon sun. There was a decent breeze blowing away from the crowd, so the smoke from Rich’s Incredible Pyro’s explosions and strafing runs blew away nicely. A perfect way to end the first day at Rickenbacker!

Saturday dawned warm and clear, just like Friday. Perfect air show weather – again! The only difference were light and variable winds instead of the steady “off-crowd” breeze on

Friday. Sometimes the smoke from the bigger acts would drift over the crowd and static display area pretty dramatically. The flying schedule was almost the same as Friday, so I took the opportunity and spent most of the morning and early afternoon wandering the huge static display area.

Of course, it's easy to concentrate on the spectacular shiny hardware arrayed at a show, but "The Gathering" is of both Mustangs and Legends. The organizers provided plenty of opportunities to see, hear, and visit with the special guests of the event. There were panel discussions, a chalet on the flight-line where (for a price) you could watch the air show and talk one-on-one with the various VIP guests, but my favorite was an unassuming tent in the "Heritage Pavilion" area where various legends would sit down and talk to whoever wandered in to listen; what a treat! All veterans have given to their country, no matter the details of their particular contribution. The presence of the WASPs and Tuskegee Airmen at "The Gathering" drove home the extraordinary resolve and sacrifice that many veterans have made above and beyond the normal sacrifices of service in the military. On Saturday, there was a particular tribute to the Tuskegee Airmen, when all the members of that group who were at Rickenbacker were presented to the crowd between the last Heritage Flight and the Thunderbirds' performance.

In addition to the massive collection of P-51s arrayed in two rows in the main display area, there were examples of all kinds of aircraft spread across the tarmac. I was particularly interested in the Canadian Warplane Heritage Museum's Lancaster bomber, one of only two flying examples in the world. I have a personal tie to the plane, since one of my uncles was very actively involved in its acquisition and restoration. I had a very interesting conversation with the flight engineer about the Lanc's behavior and quirks. For

example, the main landing gear tires rotate backwards as they are lowered, meaning that on touch-down they not only have to spin up, but actually reverse direction. I was also surprised to hear that the tail-wheel is permanently castering freely (no locking or steering capability). That combination makes crosswind landings a bit of a challenge.

Most of the P-51s were the bubble-canopy "D" model, but there were a number of less-common variants present on the flight-line: the P-51A "Polar Bear" (one of three flying), the dual-control TP-51C "Betty Jane" (only one in existence), and Kermit Weeks' P-51C "Ina the Macon Belle" (one of four in existence). In addition to the "stock" Mustangs, there were a number of Mustangs with various modifications: the Reno Unlimited Class racers "Precious Metal" (the only Griffon-powered Mustang), and "VooDoo" were parked on the flight-line, along with the dual-control "Crazy Horse" and "Crazy Horse 2." And while every Mustang has a story, there were a number that are better-known: Bob Hoover's "Ole Yeller" (now owned by John Bagley) stood out no matter where it was parked.

My personal favorite of the "unusual" Mustangs is "NACA 127." To a casual observer it appears to be a mundane P-51D. However, closer examination of the wings shows a unique modification – a raised panel attached to the wing at mid-span with some small funny looking objects sticking out of it. Closer examination reveals that the machine guns have been removed and replaced with a collection of precision scientific instruments. These modifications came about because in 1945, NACA ("National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics," the precursor of NASA) was having difficulty gathering data on the transonic speed regime. Wind tunnels of the day were not able to generate the required air-speed, but enterprising engineers realized that the flow over the top of a

wing is substantially faster than the aircraft's nominal airspeed. By mounting small models on the wing, and having the plane execute a steep dive to around 475 mph, they could gather a few moments of supersonic data. Another external modification of the NACA P-51s is the taller tail fin (like P-51H) to give the plane more stability at high speed.

The static displays weren't only classic WWII aircraft. The U.S. Air Force brought a remarkable collection of contemporary fighters, bombers, and transport planes. On the other end of the display area, FedEx had an Airbus 310 freighter on display, not to mention the various "working" aircraft at the freight terminal. As an aficionado of transport aircraft, and especially those of the jet age, I was fascinated to be able to trace the evolution of turbofan jet engines just by wandering around the static displays. From the early small-diameter fan of the Pratt & Whitney TF-33 (a.k.a. JT3D) on the B-52, through the GE TF-39 (the first high bypass ratio fan-jet) developed for the C-5, and ending up with the thoroughly modern CF-6 used on the C-17.

Summarizing an event like the Gathering of Mustangs and Legends is really tough. There was so much to see and do that the memories blur together into one hazy recollection; without photographs and some notes I made, it would be hard for me to describe it in any detail. It was a tremendous event, and one which will likely not be repeated again. With the diligent effort of Mustang owners, it may be possible to assemble the planes together, but unfortunately, time marches on for the veterans of WWII. The organizers, volunteers, performers, and all the aircraft owners should be congratulated for pulling together such a unique event. Oh, and one last tidbit: the total number of Mustangs missed the goal of 100, but there were 76 flying P-51s and one project plane trailered in. Tremendous! □