

MIDWEST AERO RESTORATIONS



Top: Alan Wojtak on the second P-47 test hop. Right: Alan Sanford's T-6 in front of Midwest Aero's new shop at Vermilion County airport. Below: Completed BT-13 for Bob Wilson. Above: The new shop with Ken Wagnon's Mustang and another D model in the foreground. Right: Mike VadeBonCoeur with Ken Wagnon's Mustang in October 1996 just as the aircraft arrived to be rebuilt. (all photos via Midwest Aero Restorations)

Whilst several of the airworthy Thunderbolts have had their engines fitted to take the 60 spline Hamilton Standard Propeller hub (because they are easier to find than the correct 50 spline version), Mike wanted to see the original on N47DA. He told us "The most difficult part to locate, though we managed it in the end, was the 24-E-50 Prop hub. 47DA had been set up to run the Curtiss Electric, but as we'd been told this time had suffered operational problems in the past we decided it would be best to hunt for the Hamilton Standard Hydromatic prop, especially as brand new blades were relatively inexpensive. Another reason for taking this route was the original Schilling aircraft (named Hairless Joe), was equipped with the Ham Standard unit, and as that was the aircraft we were trying to represent, it made sense".

However, it was a difficult task to locate the hub. Mike says "This part was particular to the Thunderbolt, so any out there were from P-47s. I don't know of any other engine application whereby a 50-spline engine would be using a 4 blade hydraulic propeller hub that could use the D shank blades which are typically found on the 60 series hubs - so it was quite a find". Butch located the parts with the help of Jay Wisler Warbird Parts in Florida.

The engine, an R-2800-59 is believed to be the original unit installed in the aircraft. It is now equipped with a pre-oiling system to allow for the more limited flying hours typical of civilian warbird use, versus the hard combat flying the P-47 is accustomed to. Just with the internal; mechanical supercharger full power - some 52 inches of manifold pressure - is available at sea level.

Though the aircraft is airworthy and was flown to Oshkosh by Butch Schroeder there are more plans to further restore N47DA. Mike again "We've got fake gun barrels installed in the leading edge of our wings, but Butch wants us to get entire machine gun replicas and ammo belts so that we can begin detailing the ammunition and gun bays. Apparently, the Thunderbolt (ex Peruvian Air Force) arrived in the United States without its belly tank shackles, and while the wing pylons were installed they were not plumbed to suck fuel. Mike told us "We've got a set of big P-38 drop tanks which we may mount - they're much bigger than the 110 gallon P-51 type. That will certainly look different and it will slow the aeroplane down. Incidentally, the FAA does not allow the pilot to have access to the drop tank release mechanism from inside the cockpit. N47DA is one of only a few, I understand, that is licensed with no airspace restrictions on it, so we have an unlimited practice area - a real bonus for us."

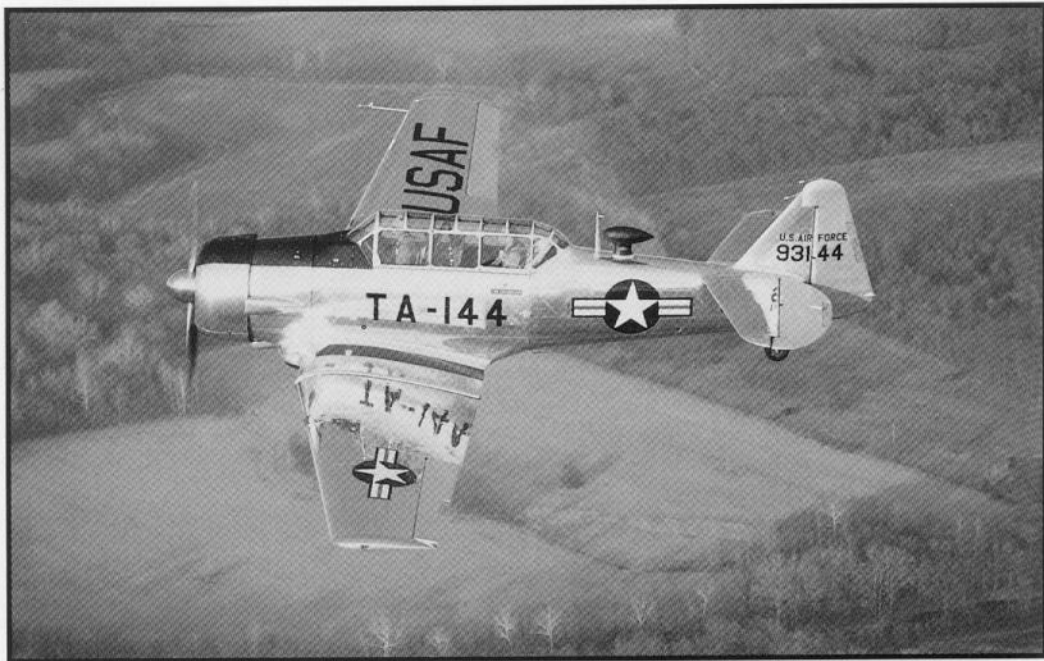
What part of restoring warbirds gives Mike the most pleasure? "Many people don't understand how much basic, hard work goes into a rebuild before the more fun part starts.....the original appearance of these historic airplanes is important to me, and I know Butch feels the same way. That's why we've



Some detail shots of Thunderbolt N47DA - Top -the accessory and wheel well area during restoration in October 1996. Centre: The cockpit as it arrived in Danville, and Lower - during the restoration process. Note incredible attention to detail combined with the ability to restore to a high standard of workmanship plus a 'flight safety is paramount' attitude bode well for the future.



tried to make the P-47 look totally authentic right down to the last detail. We've applied the correct stencilling and original decals. We received a lot of that stuff from Brad Hood (Brad operates P-47 *Tarheel Hal* for WW member Charles Osborn in Kentucky) down in Louisville. I think that trying to detail the Thunderbolt, not only authentically, but from a quality restoration standpoint as well, must go hand in hand. If a restorer covers those two areas he probably has a very nice machine." Bill Klaers and Alan Wojciak carried out the test flying programme, and Butch earned his letter of authorisation so he could fly the Thunderbolt into Oshkosh. Though the aircraft attracted a lot of attention it was not entered for judging at the event. Typically, Mike sings the praises of Bill and Alan "They've been a big help and Butch, David and me would like to thank them for their help in the completion phase. They are definitely true professionals and the future of the Thunderbolt is in good hands with them (*Klaers Aviation* are carving an excellent reputation for themselves as Thunderbolt specialists - Ed).



Above: a late summer T-6 flight out of Danville. This is one of the first warbirds Mike was actively involved with, helping Butch Schroeder restore it.

The Thunderbolt is not the only aircraft currently being worked on by *Midwest Aero*. Again, Mike takes up the story "We had hoped to finish the '47 prior to the BT - but it didn't work out that way. In December '96 we were able to acquire a 4800 sq. foot hangar which allows us to take on more work. Prior to that we worked out of 'T' hangars which was rather limiting. With the new hangar we have been able to install an open face spray booth for parts painting. This has been a big plus for us - we can paint any time we need to. While we were sharing some equipment with Butch in the 'T' hangars we have invested in the vital equipment such as a shear, brake, and band saw. The most exciting piece of equipment to date is a Baking soda blasting outfit for stripping paint from large parts! So far it is very promising."

Many people have told us that WW co-founder Butch Schroeder's North American Mustang N51BS - the *EAA Warbirds of America Grand Champion* in 1995 - set new standards in warbird restoration, and many people have aspired to reach that standard since. If that sounds arrogant then so be it, for if you know Mike or Butch, you already know the only edge is in the standards they achieve. Immediately after the F-6D won the award I had asked Mike if he would ever want to see another Mustang. Surprisingly, to me at least, he replied that he would, not least of all because he had learned from his experiences in building the Mustang with Butch, and that there would be some things he would do differently.

When Mike told me he was looking at another Mustang and asked what I knew about a particular airframe, a little research brought up some interesting news. The aircraft con-

cerned, as far as I could see, had never had an accident, was ex RCAF in origin and seemingly had never been restored. Mike takes up the story - "In October of last year we started work on our newest project. This is a P-51D that was formerly owned by the late Jack Rodgers from the Chicago area. *Warbirds Worldwide* member Ken Wagnon from Wichita, Kansas, purchased 44-74813/N6301T from the Rodgers estate. Ken has the desire to return the Mustang to stock original condition - he's very committed to that end". The Mustang is now N251KW.

After an initial examination of the airframe Mike told WW "I think that we have a fine example to work with - this is a relatively stock old ex Royal Canadian Air Force machine. To the previous owners credit the ammunition trays and rollers were still in the gun bays during our inspection. In my experience, with most P-51s these items have been removed long ago". *Midwest* are currently ready to remove the engine and demate the fuselage after going through a thorough dismantling and inspection process. The horizontal stab, ailerons and elevators have been dismantled and are currently being reskinned. The newly restored Mustang will have a polished fuselage and painted wing similar to Butch Schroeder's *Lil Margaret*.

Other projects that have kept *Midwest Aero Restorations* busy include some T-6 maintenance for Alan Samford. Following their stunning success with the F-6D the company have restored many P-51 cockpit components - such as throttle quadrants, trim consoles and other cockpit items for other people including Bob May of Canada. Bob's Mustang (44-63476) is on rebuild at Gerry Beck's shop in Wahpeton, North Dakota.

Though Mike runs a small company, they are always looking to learn new techniques, and constantly strive to improve their own standards. They also have many contacts and keep in close touch, often 'networking' with other companies. Of his select workforce Mike

says "My number one man is Dave Young who is developing into a very talented restorer. Dave was responsible for a great deal of the Thunderbolt restoration." Though *Midwest* are a commercial company with several customers Mike remembers those that have helped him in the past "We are obviously indebted to Butch Schroeder for his help and support and will continue to help him with the *Midwest Aviation Museum* aircraft."

The warbirds business has always been very competitive in the United States, perhaps more so than any other country. There are many companies, and most would agree the standards vary from acceptable to outstanding. Mike knows he has a young company, and despite the fact they have a lot of awards to their credit Mike has his feet firmly on the ground. He told us "While we are relatively new as a business and also quite small we have a desire to maintain our standards and keep busy doing what we love to do - that is to Keep us Flying!" With their track record to date, and enthusiasm for the future, *Midwest Aero Restorations* are sure to maintain their success.
WW Paul Coggan

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