CRAZY HORSE

Mustang makes flying fantasies come alive

BY MICHAEL MAYA CHARLES

Wish lists. Many pilots have wish lists, a dream slate of things we'd like to do in this lifetime—if we just had both time and money...at the same time. Perhaps your list includes climbing Mt. Everest or swimming the English Channel, finishing the Ironman triathlon or making the pilgrimage to Mecca. Part of the lure of these adventures is their uniqueness, their unattainability. As far back as I can remember, one that has been at the top of my list is flying the North American P–51 Mustang. ■ I don't remember where or how I first saw one, but I do remember being immediately captured by that long, proud snout; there's something very special about that line—the knowledge that there's a V-12 engine inside makes it even more captivating. The sculpted lines continue aft to a smooth curvaceous empennage, reminding me of some perfect Greek

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE FIZER

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the ramp, bobbing and weaving gently to catch furtive glances ahead; that prominent snout covers up a lot of real estate. In fact, a Cessna 150 in the run-up area is momentarily eclipsed behind the big Rolls-Royce.

Takeoff in the Mustang is done by procedure, like many things in this high-performance taildragger. Line up on the center stripe, making sure that the tailwheel is straight and locked. One last look at the engine at 2,300 rpm, then it's brakes released, and the horse is turned loose.

Power now 40 inches, the airplane tracks straight down the runway; at 50 knots, Lauderback raises the tail and increases the power to 46 inches, then 55; acceleration to 100 knots is brisk. A gentle tug to clear the runway, then accelerate to 150 knots in ground effect and reality falls away with a graceful pull as the Mustang heads for the heavens. Grinning begins in earnest.

"Wow!" I volunteered. Writer lost for words.

"Okay, Michael; it's your airplane." That would be about the last time that Lauderback would fly the airplane for the next hour. I finally had my hands on the reins of a Mustang.

The P–51 feels solid without being ponderous, responsive but not twitchy—no Pitts, but it ain't a bomber, either. This is the way that airplanes flew and performed when handling qualities and performance mattered—often it was a matter of life and death.

I immediately feel comfortable once I get used to the illusion of a very nose-low attitude in cruise, prompted by the downward-sloping canopy rails at my sides. Trim is important in this airplane, and I find myself often fine-tuning the rudder and elevator. Visibility from the rear seat is very good, although I bump my head against the canopy occasionally. The airplane is fairly simple to operate in spite of its complex water-cooled 48-valve supercharged engine. The cockpit is well laid out, although many of the switch locations came recently, not during the war. Even with earplugs and a David Clark headset, the noise level is formidable; this is the way airplanes sounded before noise was unpopular.

We slow the airplane now and explore the low end of the fighter's envelope. The Mustang at slow speeds becomes a little tender in the ailerons, but the rudder remains rock solid. We yaw-turn the airplane first left, then right at minimum airspeed, and it responds with authority. We slow further to just above stall and feel for the burble; there is very little, unlike most GA airplanes—but then, this is a fighter, not your father's Skyhawk. Buffet begins a few knots above stall if you are paying attention, and the break is straight ahead, as long as you keep the rudder coordinated. There is nothing to fear here, although Lauderback had me purposely flat-foot one stall to see what would happen with no right rudder: the break was abrupt, and the airplane immediately rolled off to the left. Unload the wing, though, and the airplane is right back in the ball game—perfect behavior for an airplane of this type, since fighters spend a lot of time in this slow regime. I found the airplane to be very predictable, solid, and stable; a trim airplane, a pilot's airplane if that means that it will do almost everything you ask of it—and do it well. It doesn't match the performance of some of the jets I fly, but for a 10,000-pound airplane designed BC (before computers) it is quite remarkable.

My stomach wasn't up to serious aerobatics—I hadn't done any for years—but we did the usual loop, barrel roll, and a few Immelmanns. Periodically, Lauderback would check in with me on the interphone. "You OK? Havin' fun?" Yup! Lauderback never competes with his guest fighter jock; he only accentuates your experience and is a real pleasure to fly with.

One hundred fifty knots is the magic number in the Mustang. It's best lift-to-drag ratio, gear speed, and best glide at mid weights. Lauderback slowed to this speed in the pattern and added first flaps, which can actually come out at a rather robust 348 knots and produce an enthusiastic pitch down. Then he lowered the gear and trimmed again. Flaps were added in increments on base and final until we reached full flaps and 100 knots. The airplane sets up nicely for an approach at this speed, although the nose tends to get noticeably heavier as power is

Trim is important in the Mustang. Rudder, aileron, and the vertically mounted elevator trim control all are conveniently located below the power quadrant.

reduced.

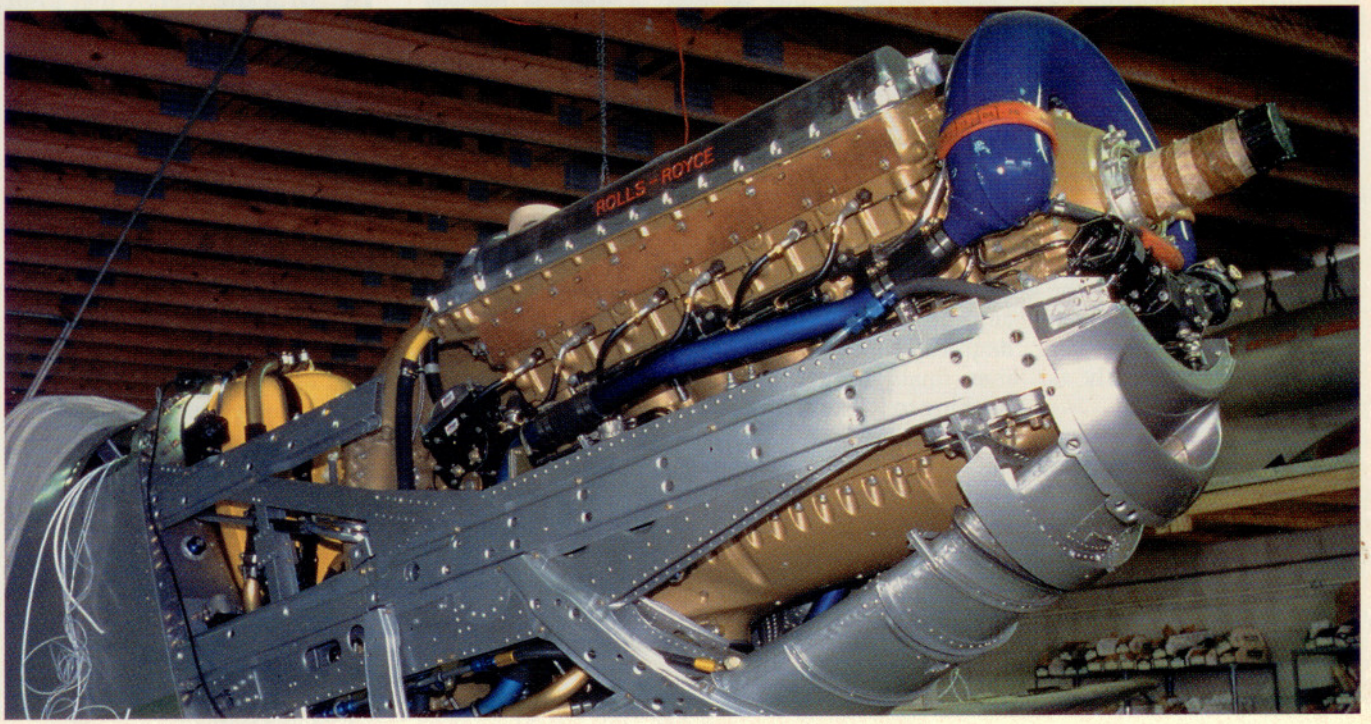
We discovered a closed runway on the first approach, so I never did get to see a landing demonstration. Lauderback gave me the airplane on the go-around, and I performed the second pattern to a different runway.

On final, Lauderback leaned over to one side to allow me more visibility, though I wasn't bothered by the view; my first landing of the day was a greaser, a testament to the airplane's good qualities; the second was a little less sure, and the third was a low skip corrected easily with slight forward pressure. I quit while I was ahead.

The Mustang is a horse with good manners. It asks only to be flown procedurally, because of its performance envelope, weight, and speed.

Pilots who flew the Mustang learned to love her, as pilots do with airplanes that deliver the goods day in and day out. Like many before me, I, too, was growing to love the airplane.

As we taxi in and Lauderback opens the canopy, 12 short stacks rumble with the spent life-force of 1,700 horsepower. I savor the moment again: the aroma; the deep bark of the Merlin at idle; and the huge, slow-turning paddle ahead of the long snout. "It doesn't get any better than this," Lauderback says, sensing my



spent euphoria.

To live a fantasy almost as good as the dream is rare. This was better than singing on stage with Bobby McFerrin, better than finishing a marathon, better than sharing ideas with Buckminster Fuller late at night; better than...well, maybe not quite that good.

Fantasies are expensive, though. *Crazy Horse* rents for $1,750 an hour with an instructor; that's $29.17 a minute for those who keep track of pennies. But how can you put a price on a fantasy? Especially when it occupies a very special place on your wish list. □

Like riding a wild horse

Learning to separate myth from reality

For 10 years, in addition to orientation flights, Stallion 51 Corporation has offered Mustang flight training and training to lesser degrees. Over time, it has earned the respect of insurance companies, the FAA, and the warbird community by training pilots to fly a high-performance piece of the past the right way. Pilots who come to partners Lee Lauderback and Doug Shultz for checkout and recurrent training will see more of the ornerier sides of the Mustang than I did during my backseat flight; the full spectrum of the Mustang's capabilities and quirks is thoroughly explored.

To sample a bit of Mustang pilot training, we flew another evaluation flight, with Lauderback offering me the honor of the front seat. Our flight plan was tailored toward a pilot who wanted to refine takeoffs and landings, more extensive airwork, and a lot more aerobatics. I also wanted a firsthand look at some of the "truths" that have long been a part of Mustang lore: Do the Mustang's ailerons really get heavy at high speeds? Is the go-around the real killer that people think it is? Is the split-S maneuver as deadly as people say?

For years, we've all heard how "torque" kills pilots in this airplane when power is mashed to the stop on a go-around. To learn about this behavior, we climbed to altitude, extended the gear and added full flaps, then pushed the power to 51 inches, as if in a go-around. Next, Lauderback had me take my hands off the stick and pull the flaps up. The nose pitched up dramatically. I then retracted the gear, and the nose pitched up even more, nearly to vertical. Had I tried that down close to the ground, I would have had a handful of untrimmed rearing horse to contend with.

On a later approach at 100 feet, we did a go-around the right way: add power smoothly to 46 inches, then retrim the airplane; retract the flaps to 20 degrees; stabilize and trim; then, finally, retract the gear. Nothing to it. Configuration changes and hefty trim requirements are the killers here—not torque—a reminder that high-performance airplanes like the Mustang are flown by procedure, not by gosh and by golly.

Here are a few other notes I made during our flight:

- Just as you've probably heard, the Mustang's ailerons do noticeably stiffen at high speeds. No servos and sissy, computer-generated feel here.
- The Mustang maintains energy well when you pull up at high speed—a good characteristic for a fighter; the inertia of a 10,000-pound, clean airframe.
- Acceleration characteristics of the Mustang also reflect the clean airframe: at 5,500 feet and 130 knots we unloaded, rolled inverted, then pulled 3.5 to 4 Gs until the sky was back on top; our altimeter read 1,700 feet, airspeed 300 knots when we leveled, a 3,800 foot loss. (Note: we flew that high-speed portion in the safety of a restricted area that Stallion 51 is permitted to use for training.)
- Figure about a gallon a minute fuel flow in this airplane and you won't be too far off.

As in my backseat flight, the on-board video system with cameras mounted on the glareshield and the vertical fin captures every grimace, grin, and gyration. For the orientation flight, it's a great souvenir to take home, proving to pilots and family that you actually did fly the Mustang. During flight training, the video becomes an invaluable training tool, allowing a complete debriefing for reinforcement after flying.

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Lee Lauderback (right) briefs the author before an evaluation flight.

Crazy Horse flies eight to 10 airshows each year, including Oshkosh this year. Stallion 51 pilots also conduct familiarization flights with the Navy's test pilot school at Naval Air Station Patuxent River, Maryland, allowing future test pilots to sample a very different steed from their usual pointy-nosed fighter jets.

Stallion 51 just built a 12,500-square-foot hangar on the Kissimmee airport, with enough storage room for nine customer Mustangs, offices, classrooms, and a full maintenance shop. A comfortable country-club lounge area, with a commanding view of both airport and the pampered horses in the sparkling hangar below, completes the new ranch's digs. Like all Stallion 51 projects, this is a class act; these guys know how to treat a good horse. —*MMC*