



Childhood dreams

Seeing beyond his limitations

BY MICHAEL MAYA CHARLES

“I’ve been infatuated with airplanes

since I was really, really little.” Super Corsair owner Robert Odegaard says. One of his earliest memories is when he was about two or three years old, running from his mother’s arms to the living room window for a better view of a noisy yellow Stearman, spraying the family’s fields near Fargo, North Dakota. Young Robert had to get real close to that window because his vision was very poor: about 20/800. Legally blind is 20/200.

Years later, with his sights set on growing up to spray wheat and corn, just like that Stearman pilot, he went for his first medical certificate. “I want to be a crop sprayer,” Odegaard announced to the doc as he struggled to make out the big “E” at the top of the eye chart. His doctor laughed out loud. “With those eyes, you’ll never get a commercial license,” the doctor pronounced flatly.

Those words changed Odegaard’s life.

Devastated, Odegaard decided in 1964 to attend airframe and powerplant mechanic school at Northrop Aeronautical Institute, near Los Angeles International Airport. Accepting his fate, he figured fixing airplanes was about as close as he would ever get to the cockpit. While in A&P school

Odegaard learned about medical waivers—and quickly refocused his attention: He would be a pilot, after all!

After graduating from Northrop, he found his first mechanic job in Sioux Falls. But as soon as a line service job opened up in Fargo, he came back home. His pay was \$1.35 an hour—a dime more than his fellow line employees because he had an A&P.

Odegaard didn’t return to Fargo to work the family farm. He just wasn’t interested in row cropping, and really didn’t care much for cows. “Too much work,” he admits with a knowing grin. But because he had grown up on a farm, where one is always repairing equipment, he was quite



Casey (left) and Brady (right) Odegaard flank their proud father Robert in front of the family Corsair. All are pilots and mechanics.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE FIZER

The Japanese called the Corsair "Whistling Death" because of the sound made at high speed as the air passes through those big wingroot air intakes.



adept at fixing things, so fixing airplanes continued to be his livelihood.

He got that vision waiver in 1965 and accepted an invitation to be the first shop instructor at a new A&P school in Fargo. "Life was good," he recalls.

During the late 1960s, while the conflict in Southeast Asia was raging, Odegaard joined the U.S. Army Reserve team and was stationed at Fort Sam

in 1966 at the EAA fly-in at Rockford, Illinois. "I was never the same after that," he sighs.

But buying a Mustang was out of the question. So in the early 1970s, he and partner Jerry Beck, a shop teacher at the local high school, bought two Grumman TBM Avengers, with plans to fix them both up, keep one to fly, and sell the other.

building. But then he traded his careful metal work on the Confederate Air Force's (as it was known at the time) P-51C Mustang for a couple of Mustang wings that the CAF had, and that closed world began to open. He was asked to build a set of scratch-built Mustang wings for a California re-builder, and when those wings were installed and the airplane was flown, the

With its distinctive bent wings, it's one of the most recognizable airplanes of World War II.

Houston. There, he got his flight instructor certificate in the aero club and was soon teaching others to fly.

How to own a Super Corsair

His road to Super Corsair ownership started in 1968 with a wrecked Cessna 150; the little trainer's owner had tried to fly through a set of telephone wires. It was an "easy rebuild," says Odegaard, but he wanted something more exciting to fly.

Odegaard clearly remembers the first time he saw a P-51 Mustang: It was

They kept both. "The TBM was a fun airplane," Odegaard says, "but it wasn't a Mustang."

Odegaard started collecting Mustang parts in 1988, scrounging, trading, wheeling, and dealing, until five-and-a-half years later, when he flew his own P-51—made with parts from 20 different Mustangs.

"I couldn't buy a job back then," Odegaard remembers, because only people from within the tiny, closed warbird community did warbird re-

test pilot was entirely satisfied with Odegaard's workmanship. "Don't touch nuthin,'" he ordered after the flight. That launched Odegaard Aviation into the warbird business. Odegaard got very busy after that, and at one point was three years backlogged, specializing in large component rebuilding instead of whole airplane restorations.

Several rebuild projects followed, including an AirTractor in 1991 that a friend bought for Odegaard sight unseen at a Mississippi auction. He paid

\$18,000 for the quarter-million-dollar agplane, rebuilt it, and sprayed crops with it for five years before trading it for what was left of a derelict Super Corsair. By now, he had become quite an experienced crop sprayer, just like his Stearman hero.

While twisting wrenches, Odegaard continued to build flight time by dropping skydivers, flight instructing, and flying military contracts in Learjets for Flight International.

Rare bird

Odegaard's Goodyear Aircraft Company Super Corsair is a rare bird, the only F2G flying. Its pieces were hauled from Cleveland to Pennsylvania in the '60s, stolen and hidden in the New Hampshire woods for a time, and owned briefly by liver pill magnate Harry Doan. It was trucked to Abilene, Texas, and then to the Lone Star Flight Museum in Galveston. Finally, it was delivered to yet another owner in Kansas, where Odegaard finally bought it. He was the seventh owner who tried to rebuild it.

The rebuild went slowly; its wings, which are actually from an F4U-4B, "went pretty easy," Odegaard said, "but we had to build the canopy and firewall forward from scratch." Needless to say, even for an experienced warbird builder, it was a formidable task. It took



12,000 hours and three-and-a-half years before he finally finished the project in August 1999.

Small-town North Dakota

Kindred, North Dakota, is a small town with a small-town airport surrounded by vast, flat, fertile fields. When you meet Odegaard in his shop, you immediately notice his fresh-scrubbed hands with hints of grease under the nails. He's a hands-on guy. While there, I watched him get elbow deep in electrical problems on his P-51 Mustang, and coax a recalcitrant tug to start. One gets the impression that he never gets too far from working on machinery.

Odegaard Aviation is a family affair. Wife Donna keeps the office humming

while sons Brady and Casey work in the shop with their father. According to dad, both boys are passionate about warbirds, and that makes them excellent mechanics. Casey also flies the family Mustang, and has 800 hours in his logbook. He hopes to fly the Super Corsair soon.

Walk around

The Super Corsair is a large single-engine airplane—more than 16 feet tall. On preflight, one can easily walk under the nose cowl. The machine weighs nearly 10,000 pounds empty, as much as a Beech 1900, and max gross weight is 17,000 pounds.

With its distinctive bent wings, it's one of the most recognizable airplanes of World War II. The nose is long on the Super Corsair to house the huge Pratt & Whitney R-4360 Wasp Major radial, one of the largest piston engines ever produced. With four rows of seven cylinders each, staggered for cooling, the "corn cob," as it's also known, weighs 3,870 pounds, about 500 pounds more than a Cessna 185 at max gross weight. It develops up to 3,850 horsepower—more than twice the horsepower of the standard F4U Corsair. This huge engine powered several other airplanes of the late 1940s and early '50s, including the Convair B-36 Peacemaker, the Boeing 377 Stratocruiser, Howard Hughes' H-4 Hercules (*The Spruce Goose*), and the Fairchild C-119 Flying Boxcar.

Full rated power for the 4360 is achieved at 63 inches manifold pressure, although Odegaard uses 40 inches

The big Hamilton Standard propeller makes one very careful with tail-high wheel landings because of the minimal prop clearance.



In cruise, the big Pratt sips a dainty 100 gallons of avgas per hour, and indicates about 270 mph.

for most takeoffs. There's good reason for the conservative settings: It costs about a hundred grand to overhaul the engine. In cruise, the big Pratt sips a dainty 100 gallons of avgas per hour, and indicates about 270 mph.

The sole purpose of the Super was burst speed and climb rate. It was first test flown in 1944, about the time the military was looking for a good interceptor to attack Japanese kamikaze airplanes before they reached their targets. But by the time the Super was in production in 1945, the war was winding down, and none of the Supers ever saw combat.

The prop is a 14-foot Hamilton Standard and the Corsair's long, slender legs keep the big four-blade paddle out of harm's way. So, what's with the one white propeller blade on this airplane? The original owner, Cook Cleland, once landed on a wet, 1,800-foot grass strip and stood the big bird on its nose, bending one prop blade. When he sent the prop to Hamilton Standard for repair and inspection, they painted it white.

Cleland didn't want to paint the other blades white, so he left it; Odegaard, in a salute to Cleland, painted

his prop that way when he rebuilt the airplane.

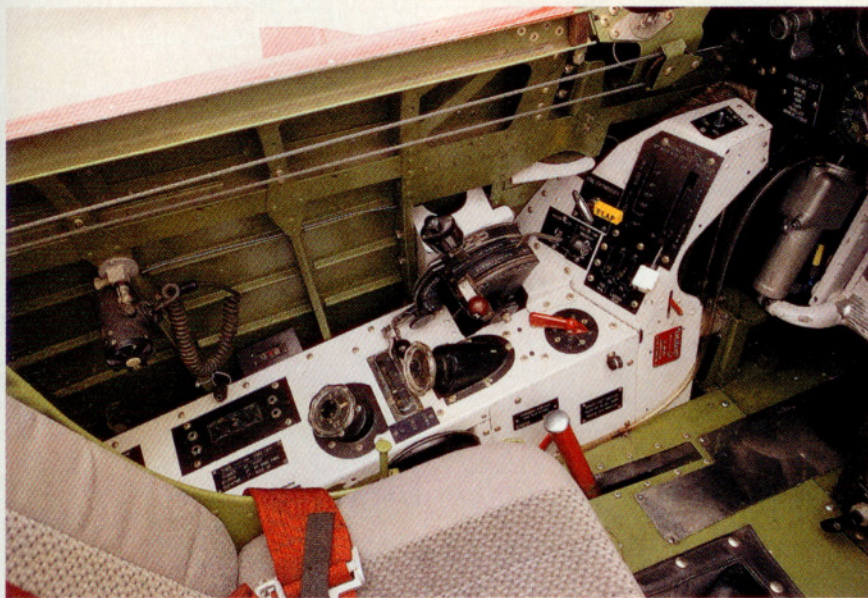
A unique feature of the F2G model is the auxiliary rudder below the main rudder. Added to compensate for the additional power and P-factor of the huge engine, it is connected to flaps, not gear, as many people think. It travels full right when the flaps are lowered to 30 degrees; and is faired with the other rudder when flaps are retracted through 20 degrees.

Only 10 F2G Super Corsairs were built; five for land-based operations, called F2G-1Ds, and another five



You sit right at the trailing edge and well aft, but visibility over the nose is surprisingly good (far left). A slightly taller vertical fin and auxiliary rudder are unique features of the Super Corsair (left). This shows the rudder at its full 12 1/2 degree bias for takeoff and landing. The author climbs flap and fuselage kick-in steps to board for his flight (below).





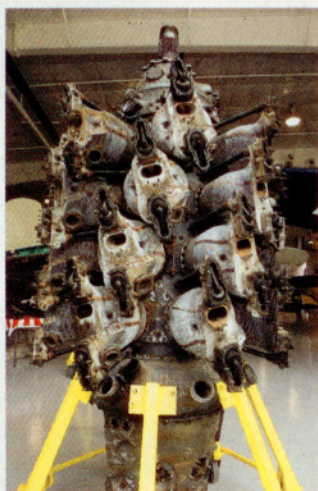
called F2G-2Ds, intended for carrier operations with folding wings and a tail hook. Odegaard's bird is the land-based version. The wings fold, though manually instead of hydraulically, because it wasn't usually necessary to fold the wings on land.

Flying the beast

It's quite a climb from the step in the flaps, up the side of the fuselage, and into the cockpit of a Corsair. Once seated, you are very high and aft, about at the trailing edge of the wing; the nose is very long, and the cockpit is quite roomy for a fighter, much larger than a Mustang and cavernous compared to a Spitfire. Electrics are on the right; mechanicals, flaps, gear, and tailwheel lock are on the left. It looks simple and it is.

There is a "back seat" in Odegaard's airplane, although it didn't have one in 1945. The "seat" is actually a flat piece of aluminum, and an equally primitive metal backrest. A throttle, short stick and rudder pedals were added, and an airspeed indicator—the only instrument—is buried so far forward as to be unusable.

Starting the huge Pratt & Whitney R-4360 is simple. Master and mag switches on, fuel pump on, throttle wide open, hit the starter while intermittently priming. The big paddle turns so slowly you are sure it will



The red mag switch in the right center controls seven magnetos (above). The partial R-4360 engine in the Fargo Air Museum shows the four row-seven cylinders arrangement, which earned the engine's nickname "Corn-cob" (left).

never start. But then the first cylinder chuffs to life, the throttle is quickly pulled to idle and the mixture is pushed out of cutoff position. Smoke erupts from each of those 28 cylinders as they grumble to life, the pungent odor of burnt oil and the guttural, tractor-like vibration, giving you a pleasant taste of the way the world ought to sound, feel, and smell.

With the Corsair's nonsteerable tailwheel, Odegaard briefed me on the two positions for steering: Tailwheel locked, and "grocery cart." Brakes are not the Corsair's strongest feature, and one quickly learns that it often takes power, anticipation, and brakes to finesse your way around on the ground. Taxiing is much more difficult than flying the beast.

Adding power smoothly for takeoff makes the airplane move smartly but requires no heroics to keep it on the centerline. This is largely because of that auxiliary rudder. Visibility over

the long snout is not bad except for straight ahead, but you must remember that the huge prop will not allow you to get too generous with forward pressure lest you wish to shorten that 14-foot Hamilton Standard. We used about 32 inches mp for takeoff in deference to the old girl's advancing age but the military used 63.5 inches with water injection. That must have been some kind of rocket launch....

Airborne and climbing, you quickly fall in love with the Super's handling qualities. It's a sweet airplane to fly, just as Odegaard promised. The ailerons are nicely balanced, though the rudder is a little stiff at speed. And that nose goes forever!

After some slow flight and stalls, and a little gentleman's acro, we returned to the field, using flaps and gear below 200 knots to slow the clean design to pattern speeds. My tail-low wheel landings were both greasers, thanks to the bird's long-travel struts, pleasant manners and good visibility. Again, it didn't take any heroics to keep the old bird straight, even with the slight crosswind. What a sweetheart!

The future

Amazingly, Odegaard has most of the parts for another Super Corsair in the back of his hangar. That aircraft was sold to a very lucky owner from Ohio during my visit, and Odegaard plans to fly the completed airplane in about a year.

Living your dreams

So that young boy who struggled from his mother's arms and was told he would never fly became a mechanic instead, then the crop sprayer that he dreamed about, and eventually flew Lears to FL450. Now, he owns and flies one of the rarest of the rare warbirds. But he didn't just go out and buy it; he built it himself.

For a man whose love affair with flying began nearly 60 years ago, rebuilding and owning a Super Corsair; a P-51; Duggy, the loveable yellow Douglas DC-3; and soon, another F2G Corsair, the lesson is clear: "Never give up on your on childhood dreams." ACPA

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