

DOWN AT DUXFORD

The ever-popular Flying Legends airshow at the Imperial War Museum's historic Duxford airshow attracted the usual tens of thousands of spectators this July. They enjoyed non-stop Warbird flying by a huge variety of rare aircraft along with set routines like the Spitfire tail chase, aerobatics by the Mustangs and rarities such as seeing five Hawker Hurricanes in the sky at the same time.

However, and this applies to any sort of motoring event, there is always the possibility of an accident. The British press, oddly perhaps the biggest proponent of "yellow journalism," is always on hand to present aviation accidents in the most negative and sensationalist manner. After an aviation accident, the British public is treated to headlines such as "horror from the sky" or "vintage aircraft takes plunge of death" — headlines that do nothing for the credibility of the newspapers nor, unfortunately, for the vintage and veteran aircraft movement.

Readers of these daily publications were treated to such lurid headlines on 9 July following an accident that befell a Mustang known as *Miss Velma*.

First, let's take a look at the history of this machine.

Today, dual-control two-seat TF-51D Mustangs are extremely popular — and expensive — collector's items.

At Chino, veteran P-51 pilot Elmer



A COMBINATION OF SKILL AND LUCK SAVES A PILOT AND THIS TF-51D DURING THE FLYING LEGENDS AIRSHOW

BY DOUG FISHER

For the benefit of the hundreds of photographers that visit Duxford, Mark Levey brings the TF-51D past spectators in a curving pass that shows off the lines of the Mustang to advantage.

Ward started a new enterprise called Square One Aviation with the purpose of rebuilding P-51 Mustangs back to mint condition. Elmer also owned Pioneer Aviation — perhaps the nation's leading supplier of Mustang components (and run by Elmer's son Bret Ward — see advertisement in this issue) so the creation of Square One was a logical step. The idea behind the name was taking Mustangs "back to square one" and then rebuilding them into the finest restorations possible.

Elmer soon realized that many pilots wanted the TF-51D — not only could other pilots fly the aircraft but it was soon proven that TF-51Ds were money makers — big money makers — for those that wanted to utilize the variant for giving rides and/or instruction. Accordingly, Elmer began gathering tooling, jigs, and other items needed to build the TF variant.

Some of the tooling came from TEMCO, who built a small batch of

The beginnings of *Miss Velma* at Fighter Rebuilders.



Frank Birtciel brings the original *Miss Velma* in for a close-up portrait.



Joel Swager watches as Steve Hinton performs the first engine runs on the TF.

TFs after the war, while other tooling came from Cavalier Aircraft, who built a number of TFs for civil and military use.

Soon, Square One was turning out absolutely beautiful TFs — while also doing other stunning restorations such as the P-63 Kingcobra and F-86 Sabre for former astronaut Frank Borman.

In increasingly poor health, Elmer decided to retire and sold Square One in 2003 (he passed on 20 September 2007) and by then, Square One TF-51D restora-

tions had become very hot items.

The new owner was Ross Anderson who had known Elmer for a long time. Ross brought a new enthusiasm to the company and the employees were soon revitalized on their mission to turn out the finest Mustang restorations possible. Ross had big plans for the company and he immediately began to move forward. However, Ross was killed in the crash of his homebuilt Harmon Rocket and the company was thrown into disarray.

As is usual when the main sparkplug is

removed from an endeavor such as Square One, the company decided to shut its hangar doors in October 2004.

All the assets were disposed of — tooling, parts, and airframes. In Britain, Stephen Grey, founder of The Fighter Collection (TFC), had his eye on one particular project — a TF-51D that was in the initial stages of restoration.

A deal was struck and all the various bits and pieces were moved across the field to Steve Hinton's Fighter Rebuilders. Several former Square One employees were retained to help complete the project.

The project carried the serial USAAF 44-84847 but whether this serial had any actual relation to the parts accumulated for the rebuild is

With the gear just starting to come up, *Miss Velma* is a moment away from touchdown in the wheat field.

