

A MUSTANG'S STORY

THROUGH A HISTORY THAT HAS INCLUDED THE CLEVELAND AIR RACES, THIS LAST COMBAT MUSTANG HAS ENTERED A NEW CHAPTER IN ITS LIFE

THE MADMAN MUNTZ OF THE AIR

BY MICHAEL O'LEARY

With the butt of a saliva-soaked cigar firmly clenched in his jaws, Jack Hardwick had a plan. The setting was the 1946 Cleveland National Air Races and Hardwick's plan was simple — he was going to win as much prize money as possible. He was going to do it by keeping the throttle of this Rolls-Royce/Packard V-1650 Merlin all the way forward — hoping that other competitors would either crash or drop out with mechanical problems. In today's terms, Hardwick would be classified as an "entrepreneur" or, depending what side of the fence you were on, as either a "scam artist" or "crook." In his various business enterprises, Hardwick styled himself as the "Madman Muntz of the Air." For those of you that do not date back that far, Earl "Madman" Muntz was an American businessman and engineer who sold and promoted cars and consumer electronics through a series of outrageous stunts.

We all know what they say about the best laid plans of mice and men... Jack pushed the throttle into war emergency power and the Mustang leapt forward, at least for a couple minutes. Suddenly, there was a god-awful bang announcing the Merlin had destroyed itself. Jack immediately tried to gain some altitude but the propeller jerked to a halt and acted like a dive brake. What to do next?

First, let's discuss the Mustang Jack was flying. As we have noted many times previously, when the war ended the storage lots



Frenesi after its first partial rebuild.

operated by the RFC/WAA were jammed full of ex-military aircraft and all were available for purchase. When it came to Mustangs the choice was a bit slim for the military was still operating the P-51D/K series as a front line fighter but there were Allison-powered variants as well as Bs and Cs available. When it came to the bubble tops, they were a bit hard to find but it does not mean that they were not out there.

From this point in time, it is unclear why *any* P-51D/Ks were released for sale but there were a few scattered around the many surplus lots. We are not sure where Jack found his prize but he was able to purchase P-51 K-10-NT 44-12852 and have it civilianized as NX66111. Some sources note that the plane was a F-6K-15-NT and it could have well been since the plane is the last serial in a batch of F-6Ks that run from 44-12810 to 44-12852, but NX66111 does not seem to show any of the modifications standard to the photo recon model. It could simply be that Jack had these modifications removed and the photo ports skinned over.

He got the plane back to his home base at Rosemead, California, and had all the military equipment removed. He then added a touch of paint, along with Race 80 on the sides of the fuselage and on the wings. It must be mentioned at this time that the new Israeli government was doing anything and everything it could to illegally purchase P-51D/Ks and get them to Israel to fight the Arabs. Hardwick knew of this and he also realized the profit that could be made.

At that time, the airfield at Cleveland was surrounded by many lots and farms so there was a fairly adequate choice of alternative landing sites. Jack picked one open chunk of land and brought the K model in hot. Looking at the photos, it initially appeared that he was making a gear-up landing but closer inspection shows the gear legs ripped out and under the fuselage.

Upon touch-down, Jack kept the wings level but the damage was heavy, the flaps were finished, and the heavy Harrison radiator was ripped from its mounts, caus-



Frenesi on the grass at Duxford during July's Flying Legends airshow. (Doug Fisher)