

AirCorps Aviation

An unwavering obsession for accuracy, a talented team of people, and clients whose mission is to resurrect world-class aircraft to honor those who served and sacrificed: You now have the recipe that has fueled the development of AirCorps Aviation. In six-years, northern Minnesota's AirCorps Aviation has developed an enviable reputation for premier P-51 Mustang restorations.

The 35-member team led by founder Erik Hokuf and fellow owners Eric Trueblood, Dan Matejcek, and Mark Tisler, have built an impressive resume of restored P-51s heralded as some of

the finest examples in the world. AirCorps has established itself in the upper echelon of Warbird shops globally, and maintained a constant drive towards accuracy, creativity, and excellence in all facets of restoration.

"We've been blessed to have amazing clients who've believed in our process and capacity to do great work. The clients we worked with on Day One continue to be our clients and mentors today and that has always been a primary goal of ours," said General Manager Erik Hokuf.

AirCorps' home in Bemidji, Minnesota, is not the locale that first comes to mind when thinking of the Warbird restoration industry. The northern Minnesota town is better known for beautiful lakes, fishing, and lumber than WWII aircraft restoration. "A lot of people think we just opened the doors and

TELLING HISTORY'S STORIES THROUGH WARBIRD RESTORATION BY CHUCK CRAVENS

instantly had the shop as you see today, but that's not so. Before we even had a building to keep our tools in, we were on the road nearly every day working for clients all over the USA. Basically we were doing anything that would allow us to build customer relationships and bootstrap starting a shop. Eventually we had saved enough and built a large enough base of long-term work to rent a facility. We simply needed a place to call home, establish and build our roots. Bemidji checked every box and we've grown from there," said Erik Hokuf whose hometown is also Bemidji.

Location hasn't been an issue in attracting customers or employees to Northern Minnesota. "Both the aviation industry and community have been incredible in

supporting us, and we see a great deal of potential here. Northern Minnesota with its base in mining, manufacturing, and lumber has a foundation of people who still work with their hands. Generations have been raised here by parents who made their living as craftsmen and women," related Eric Trueblood, AirCorps' VP of Sales and Marketing.

"We are fortunate to recruit people from throughout the world, most

recently Australia, but also to hire from a talented base of locals who show up on time, are committed to each other, and know what it means to put in an honest day of hard work" related Trueblood.

AIRCORPS AND THE MUSTANG

The variety of Mustangs restored and repaired by AirCorps over the past six-years reads like a P-51 enthusiast's wish list that includes early model variants, rare combat veteran airplanes, and working airplanes that fly a grueling airshow season. They are owned and operated by customers and non-profits whose noble mission is to share their passion and honor our veterans.

The AirCorps restoration floor fixtures are currently filled with major structures for four different P-51 owners. Pounding rivets, spot welding, inspecting structure, and drilling new skins creates a cacophony of sounds on the restoration floor. The largest space within the AirCorps shop is filled with fixtures for various components built for assembly of P-51 and P-47 structures. The team of talented craftsmen is lead by Restoration Shop Manger Ryan Underwood and co-owner Mark Tisler.

Tisler has encyclopedic knowledge of the P-51 that extends well beyond the mechanical, having restored 15 P-51s in his 30-years of restoration work. Tisler and Underwood's skills compliment one another, with Underwood actively working on the shop floor planning and project managing, and Tisler teaching, guiding, inspecting, and sharing his expertise.

The maintenance team has two P-51s currently receiving annual maintenance and specializes in heavy annu-

als and major component overhauls. With an expansive knowledge of the makeup of the P-51 the parts team is supporting nine P-51 restorations and numerous repairs throughout the world. "We maintain so many Mustangs that the backlog of landing gear, hydraulics, and accessories coming in for overhaul never seems to diminish. That experience now guides us, and has helped us predict and develop a knowledge of what works, what doesn't, what we should have in-house and where to find what we need," said Tye Halvas who leads the AirCorps maintenance team and serves as the shop IA.

The AirCorps fabrication team, an experienced group of talented machinists, has built a formidable working knowledge of the Mustang and processes that were commonplace during its design and assembly. The blend of modern and traditional techniques pays homage to the men and women of North American Aviation who proved to the world what America was capable of during WWII. The fab shop uses a unique blend of old and new techniques. WWII drawings are redrawn in modern CAD/CAM software — a nearly impossible to draw component is remodeled by a state of the art 3D scanner to an accuracy of .0012-inch, only to be formed by matched tooling mounted in a 1939 Cecostamp drop hammer, and a sheet metal skin is stretch formed using modern tooling substrates on equipment designed 75+ years ago.

"Whether it is a fixture, a fairlead, or a component we need immediately, the guys in the fab shop make our jobs a lot easier and more fulfilling," states Randy Kraft, AirCorps Restoration Specialist.

"We evaluate almost everything we do related to the P-51, whether we are going to do it again, and what we can do to enhance the

This night view of the completed *Sierra Sue II* illuminated by the photographer's lights gives the aircraft the semblance of being a time traveler. (Matt McLaughlin)