

“GO or Blow!”

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JIM LARSEN
EXCEPT WHERE NOTED

CHUCK LYFORD AND THE P-51D BARDAHL SPECIAL

BY TIM WEINSCHENKER

INTRODUCTION

I began this article with the intention of completing it before May 2017. Chuck Lyford had invited me to spend several days with him at his home in Seattle. I first met Chuck in 2013 and he became a close friend and enthusiastic supporter of my efforts to record the history of air racing. I wanted to give him a copy of this story for his review during our visit. I was not able to complete the story prior to my visit but was able to spend three wonderful days getting a personal tour of the Northwest with Chuck and getting to know him much better and understand and appreciate his career in air racing. I returned home with renewed enthusiasm to complete this story for him to enjoy and appreciate as I knew he would. I had the answers to most questions I felt I needed and could always call to confirm various facts.

I was shocked when two-weeks after my visit I received an e-mail that Chuck had perished while racing his beloved Elva Mk. VII in a vintage sports car race in Spokane. Chuck died doing what he loved but this did not make his passing any easier. I cannot begin to say what a great individual Chuck Lyford was. I can only hope now that these pages will serve as a tribute to just what he has contributed to air racing but also to all those he touched in his life.

On a Sunday afternoon during September 1967 at the former Stead Air Force Base in Reno, Nevada, thousands of eyes were scanning the sky to catch a glimpse of the gleaming field of brightly colored Unlimited racers forming up on the wing of the yellow P-51D Mustang being flown by pace plane pilot R.A. “Bob” Hoover.

Classic view of Chuck and the Mustang banking over a cloud deck above Seattle. The simple gloss white paint scheme helped accentuate the Mustang’s lines. “We were using Ben Hall’s P-51D,” recalled Jim Larsen. “During this time period, I was using Hasselblad and Speed Graphic cameras — both were big, especially the 4X5 Speed Graphic. With that camera, I would have to hold it over my shoulder while Chuck formed up on the lens giving me orders like ‘move it up a bit’ or ‘move it to the left slightly.’ Once it looked right, Chuck would give the order and I would depress the shutter.”

At this point in time, September in Nevada was starting to mean air racing and there was nothing better than watching the Unlimited final dash for the Gold on Sunday afternoon.



Chuck Lyford poses with the Bardahl Special.

Air racing had resumed in Reno in 1964 at a dusty desert field named the Sky Ranch. Nevada rancher and Unlimited hydroplane racer Bill Stead wanted to see a big-time air race and found out the only way for this to happen was to do it himself! Stead would tragically die in the crash of a 190-cu-in class racer in Florida before he would see the future of the event secured by the move to the deactivated Stead AFB in 1966.

As Bob Hoover glanced to the right wing of his Mustang he could see two gleaming white racers dominate his view. In pole position was a highly modified white Bearcat with metallic blue trim. Large black letters on fuselage spelled out *Smirnoff* on the Bearcat flown by Lockheed test pilot Darryl Greenamyer who had won this race the last two-years. Having qualified at a speed of 409-mph, Darryl was the

favorite to gain the Gold victory for a third time.

The blazing white Mustang forming up next to Darryl was emblazoned with large black letters stating *Bardahl Special*.

The P-51D was being flown by Darryl’s chief nemesis Chuck Lyford — a fierce competitor who did not like losing. In 1965, Chuck had flown this Mustang to victory in three of the four Unlimited races held that year.

At Reno, Chuck qualified in second at 400-mph and was determined to give Darryl a run for the money in the Gold race.

There were four other airplanes in this race but all attention was on the two closest to Bob Hoover as he brought the racers down the front straight-

away. Coming down for the start, Darryl and Chuck were exchanging glances at each other as Hoover spoke those famous words, “Gentlemen, you have a race” and pulled up

as the race began.

Greenamyer glanced to his right and saw a friendly wave goodbye from Chuck Lyford in the *Bardahl Special*. With that, Chuck punched the “Go” but-

ton and, with a tremendous surge of power, the Mustang began to pull away from the Bearcat. Darryl and

the others could only watch. Watch that is for a few glorious seconds!

Darryl Greenamyer picks up the story: “Chuck Lyford was beside me for the start of the Gold race. He was a tough competitor who did not like to lose! When Bob Hoover pulled up to start the race, Chuck decided to turn on the nitrous oxide — he waved goodbye and surged ahead. A few seconds later, the Mustang’s cowlings lifted and all sorts of parts and pieces came flying out the engine exhaust stacks! I was soon passing him and probably wanted to wave back but there really

wasn’t room to do that from inside the cut-down canopy!”

The condition of the *Bardahl Special* was not lost on others participating in that race. They also saw the parts and pieces flying from the Mustang and listened intently on their radios for

inevitable Mayday call from Chuck to Hoover to indicate his emergency.

They listened and they listened.

No call was forthcoming.

Finally, Chuck’s good friend and fellow competitor Clay Lacy, thinking something might be wrong with Chuck, called, “Chuck are you declaring a Mayday?” Clay questioned.

After a few moments of silence, Chuck came back, “Yeah... Mayday.”

Chuck Lyford grew up in the state of Washington. Timber was the family business and Chuck would spend time

with his father trekking through the great forests of the Northwest looking for timber to be bought and sold for a profit. In doing so he developed a deep appreciation for nature’s beauty. He came to love both the land and the vast bodies of water that were a part of the great Northwest. His father owned a small Cessna taildragger and soon Chuck was going along for the ride and seeing the sights by air as well as on the ground. At very young age though Chuck was drawn to a true love — Speed!

Seattle was, at that time, a town with none of the stick and ball sports to occupy the masses. The sport that did get the town excited was boat racing — all kinds of boat racing. The excitement and roar of the big Thunder Boats captivated Chuck and soon he was saving his “paper route” money to buy his own racing boat. He purchased his first outboard racing boat at around age seven and never looked back.

From the very beginning, winning was the only option and

Chuck would do everything — and sometimes beyond everything — to make sure he was the winner! Chuck loved to win but he also found that he liked

working on the boats as much as he loved driving them. Very early on in his motorsports career he realized the best way to learn about the equipment he was racing was to build and work on it. He had a strong work ethic to go along with his competitive spirit. Soon this would carry over into his next competitive venture — the sport of air racing.

In the 1950s/1960s, many of the competitive Thunder Boat drivers were pilots. It was almost a natural fit as Seattle was becoming the west coast mecca of boat racing. Bill Boeing had his own Thunder Boat — *Miss Wahoo* — and among its drivers was a refugee from Czechoslovakia named Mira Slovak. Mira was also employed as the personal pilot of Bill Boeing and he was soon taking Chuck aloft in Bill’s twin-engine Aero Commander.



Chuck and Bardahl Special on the way to Reno 1965.

