

MUSTANG NAMED BUNNY

THIS POPULAR PALM SPRINGS AIR MUSEUM
WARBIRD IS A REGULAR FLYER

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Currently, one of the most flown Mustangs in southern California is the red-tailed beauty belonging to the Palm Springs Air Museum, a dynamic and diverse aviation collection located in one of America's most popular vacation resorts. The aircraft is P-51D-30-NA USAAF 44-74908 and, like most surviving Mustangs; it has a long and interesting history.

This Inglewood-built fighter was one of 130 P-51Ds that would eventually be transferred to the Royal Canadian Air Force. In 1947, Canada received its first group of 30 reconditioned P-51Ds and the US government charged \$10,000 per aircraft (note that the Swiss aircraft featured elsewhere in this issue went for \$4000 each, but they were not overhauled). The initial contract included 30 spare Merlins along with a one-year (projected) supply of parts and tools. The original intent was to equip and operate No. 417 (FR) Squadron, which was then based at Rivers, Manitoba, for a period of five-years. This would mean that the squadron could field eight operational Mustangs with two others being used for training and 20 held in storage as replacements and spares sources. This was, obviously not a practical plan. To make a more workable force, the RCAF purchased a further 100 Mustangs so that more active squadrons could be fielded.

Our subject Mustang was stored for a period of time at various locations before being included in the second purchase of 100 aircraft. The Mustang became Royal Canadian Air Force 9273 and was made operational on 11 January 1951, nearly six-years after it had been built.

The Mustangs found many uses in Canada, but were particularly welcome in the nation's reserve squadron — somewhat akin to our Air National Guard units. Our subject machine found a home with No. 402 "City of Winnipeg" Squadron. During World War Two, the squadron deployed to Britain, redesignated No. 2 Squadron RCAF, and began flying Hurricanes against the *Luftwaffe*. By 1941, it once again became No. 402 Squadron RCAF and started flying Spitfires.

With the end of the war in Europe, the Squadron stood down but reformed as No. 402 (Fighter-Bomber) Squadron on 15 April 1946 with North American Harvard Mk. IIs — not exactly the most warlike of aircraft! On 18 September 1950, the Squadron was once again given the title of "City of Winnipeg" to add to their name. For two-years, parading two nights each week and on weekends, 402 carried out aerial training with their Harvards while members were given a variety of aviation classes. It was obvious that a new aircraft was needed and some consideration was given to the de Havilland Mosquito.

However, the RCAF decided that the squadron would be equipped with fighters and on 1 March 1947, they began receiving their first de Havilland Vampire F.3s. Training was conducted in the form of summer encampments (much like our ANG) and the pilots really took to the small and fast Vampires.

However, a big change took place in 1951 when No. 402 was ordered to switch to Mustang Mk. IVs (as the P-51D was designated in Canada). This was probably greeted with little enthusiasm. City of Winnipeg Squadron would operate the Mustang until the type's retirement in 1957.

Royal Canadian Air Force Mustang Mk. IV 9273 led a fairly typical life with the Squadron, keeping pilots current until newer

Matt checking over the instruments prior to launching from Chino.



equipment became available. On 17 June 1956 while up on a local training flight, the pilot (who now lives in southern California and has visited "his" aircraft) had problems with his Merlin. His only choice was to put the Mustang down in an open field — which he did, with typical Mustang belly-landing damage and no injuries to him.

Since the Mustang was nearing the end of its operational RCAF life, it does not appear that the aircraft was repaired (damage listed as Category B) to operational status. The airplane was simply moved to another

part of the Winnipeg airport and parked with a couple other out of service Mustangs.

Readers of this publication know that many RCAF surplus Mustangs were purchased by Intercontinental Airways of Canastota, New York, and that is exactly what happened to 9273, with a date of sale being listed as 27 February 1959. For whatever reason, the plane did not fall into the usual N63**T sequence of registrations, but received the registration of N1070Z.

Mustangs in flying condition were worth precious little in 1959 and N1070Z was simply left parked, minus engine and propeller, since the owner probably figured it was not worth repairing — especially since Intercontinental had so many fliers to sell.

"I was a captain for Northwest at the time," recalled Chuck

Doyle while sitting in his spacious hangar at Fleming Field, South Saint Paul, Minnesota. "I always had a fascination for what would become known as Warbirds and I was able to acquire quite a few interesting aircraft for not much money — including a Seversky P-35 and North American A-36A."

We were visiting Chuck back in 1995 and he was tinkering with his "Super" Stearman in his hangar. "I want to show you something," said Chuck as he went over to the hangar wall and grabbed a couple of framed photographs. "This is what I mean," he said as he showed me the first framed item. It was a cancelled check for \$50 — the price he paid for a surplus RCAF P-40. The second shot was of the same P-40, landed gear up in a farm field. "Let me tell you," Chuck said with some firmness, "I was so damned cheap that I figured I could make it back to home field after my last refueling stop. I knew I would be flying on fumes, but I did not want to put in the cost of a few more gallons. Well, guess what? That old Allison gave a couple coughs, a splutter or two, and then quit. Of course, I was cursing the engine but I should have been cursing myself."

Chuck safely belly-landed the plane but his inherent cheapness meant that repairs would cost many times more

than the original price or, for that matter, the price of an extra tank of fuel. Chuck moved ahead and got the P-40 back flying. But he was always looking for more bargains — especially if they were cheap.

"The job would take me to Winnipeg a few times and that is when I noticed the Mustang. I got somebody to drive me over from the airline terminal so I could look at the old bird. She was sitting there looking pretty neglected, but I knew that most of

Matt Nightingale flying *Bunny* near Chino Airport.

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