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AP Photo
 Jim Hagedorn, CEO of Scotts Miracle-Gro, poses with the P-51 Mustang airplane he owns. Hagedorn has been instrumental in bringing the Gathering of Mustangs & Legends air show to Columbus at the end of September.

Hundreds of P-51 Mustangs Featured at Ohio Air Show

COLUMBUS (AP) — The last time Bill Pattillo saw his P-51 Mustang fighter plane, it was a heap of wrecked metal and he had just been shot down over a farmer's field in Germany.

Held as a POW for a short while before Germany surrendered, the World War II fighter pilot never learned what happened to the plane he referred to as "my baby."

This weekend, he'll pay a visit to more than 100 of the P-51 Mustangs that survived. Now collectors' items that bring an average \$1.5 million price tag, the iconic propeller-driven planes will be flown by war plane enthusiasts from around the country into Rickenbacker International Airport for a three-day Gathering of Mustangs & Legends air show.

Mustang owners and former Mustang fighter pilots agree the air show is a once-in-a-lifetime occasion because of the rarity of the single-seat planes and of the men who flew the planes over the skies of Europe and the Pacific.

"Seeing the other pilots, to me, is the most important thing," said Donald Strait, 89, a retired Air Force general now living in Jackson Springs, N.C., who shot down 13 1/2 German planes during 122 World War II missions.

"It really was like a Cadillac. You just felt like when you got in the plane, that you wrapped it around you. It was a powerful aircraft."

**Bill Pattillo,
 World War II veteran**

"We're scattered all over the country. We're all getting up there in age. It will only be a couple of years, and we'll all be gone."

The P-51 Mustangs that remain — there are only about 160 worldwide — have drawn more attention over the past few decades, in part due to the increased interest in the preservation of military aircraft. Pattillo said he's not surprised.

"It really was like a Cadillac," he said from his Harrisonburg, Va., home. "You just felt like when you got in the plane, that you wrapped it around you. It was a powerful aircraft."

Some owners spend thousands maintaining and restoring P-51 Mustang to historical accuracy, insisting on 1940s-era radios, wiring and hydraulics, as well as external markings that match what pilots painted on their planes during the war, said Jim Thompson, a Birmingham, Ala., lawyer who bought his Mustang a year ago.

"They're like a Picasso or a Mona Lisa," he said. "They're a highly prized piece of artwork, and they are very expensive. Before you know it, you could have \$2 million tied up in one of these."

The Mustangs have come a long way from the end of World War II, when the military turned to jets and quickly forgot about the P-51s. Many now believe that the highly maneuverable aircraft, which flew up to 500 mph as it escorted Allied bombers, turned the tide in Europe.

But most of the 15,500 Mustangs built at a frantic pace by U.S. factories during the war were sent to scrap heaps in England, or were pushed off aircraft carriers.

Others were used in the Korean War and by National Guard units into the 1950s. Some were sold to less developed countries, like Bolivia, Indonesia and El Salvador, which used Mustangs in its air force into the 1980s.