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# **WORLD AIRSHOW NEWS**

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*The  
Gathering!*

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# MUSTANG MAGIC!

## *The Gathering of Mustangs and Legends* 2007

Story by Jim Froneberger

Bombers were being lost at an alarming rate in the skies over Europe in 1943. The bombers were left unprotected when the P-47 Thunderbolts, Spitfires, and P-38 Lightnings being used to escort them into hostile territory were forced to turn back due to the fuel and range limitations of those fighters.

The unprotected bombers became easy prey for the Luftwaffe's FW190s and Me109s which lay in wait just outside of the escorts' range. Losses were mounting, and Allied commanders were beginning to seriously question their strategy of daylight bombing raids over Germany and occupied Europe.

What was needed was a fighter with longer range that could protect the bomber formations deep into Germany. The answer was the P-51 Mustang. Already in development by North American Aviation prior to U.S. involvement in the war, the Mustang had the range, speed, and weaponry to change the course of the air war over Europe.

*Two Mustangs from Kermit Weeks collection – A P-51C "INA the Macon Belle" painted in salute to the Tuskegee Airmen; and "Cripes A'Mighty 3rd" a P-51D painted in tribute to Maj G.E. Preddy, the top-scoring Mustang ace of WW II with 26.83 kills (photo by Scott Slocum)*



By February of 1944, P-51s were enjoying kill rates over three times that of the predecessors and a kill-to-loss ratio of almost five to one. The Mustang allowed the daylight bombing campaign to continue, eventually strangling the Axis supply lines and crippling German weapons production.

Over 15,000 Mustangs were produced, and it is believed that over 165 of the type remain, many kept in active flying condition.

### *The Mustangs*

In late September, over 75 flying examples of the P-51 descended on Rickenbacker International Airport in Columbus, Ohio for the “Gathering of Mustangs and Legends – The Final Roundup.” Conceived by Lee Lauderback and his team at Stallion 51 Corporation as the definitive tribute to the aircraft many consider the greatest piston-engine fighter of all time, the three-day event drew an estimated 150,000 people to Rickenbacker.

While mechanical problems and weather issues around the country in the days preceding the show prevented the attendance goal of 100 Mustangs from being achieved, GML2007 was probably the largest gathering of flyable Mustangs in one place since World War II or the Korean War.

The Mustangs were parked wingtip-to-wingtip in several rows behind the main grandstands and chalet seating areas. On Saturday and Sunday, the throngs of people around the aircraft were so large; it

was difficult for ground crews to reposition the aircraft for participation in the flying displays, forcing announcers Rob Reider, Danny Clisham, and Jon Counsell to ask folks to move forward to the crowd lines to provide the crews the space they needed.

While the first Gathering of Mustangs held in Kissimmee, Florida in 1999 was not primarily a flying event, GML2007 was, first and foremost, about getting these magnificent machines in the air and letting the crowd hear those wonderful Merlin engines.

Lee Lauderback flew his solo Mustang demonstration each day and Patty Wagstaff flew a special solo performance in Jim Beasley’s P-51C *Princess Elizabeth* in honor of the WASPs who flew the Mus-



*“Glamorous Glen III,” “FF-704,” and “February” over the Ohio countryside’s early morning fog (photo by Arnold Greenwell).*



*Lewis Shaw’s P-51D “FF-704” soars over the farms and forests of central Ohio. Shaw’s Mustang is a P-51D painted to recreate the spirit of the last Mustang serving in the USAF in 1958 (photo by David Leininger).*



tangs from the factories to the bases where they would be shipped to the war zone.

One of the crowd favorites during the show was “The Horsemen,” a dual P-51 act flown at GML2007 by Jim Beasley and Ed Shipley. This marvelous act, flown to music from the movie *Stallion of Cimarron*, is an incredible display of formation flying with Shipley locked tight on Beasley’s wing flying either Stephen Grey’s *Twilight Tear* or Lauderback’s *Crazy Horse*.

On Sunday, we were treated to a special three-ship start to the Mustang acts, with Lee Lauderback joining for a splendid three-ship formation loop with Beasley and Shipley before breaking off to fly his solo routine.

Closing the show on both Saturday and Sunday was a mass formation of twenty Mustangs that made two passes over the field. On the second pass each day, they formed into the numerals “51” in salute to the history and legacy of the P-51.



Bob Baker’s “Sweet and Lovely” is painted in the markings of Lt Bill Pattillo’s Mustang of the 487<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron, 352<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Group (photo by Scott Slocum).



Four Mustangs form tight behind the B-25 photo plane used for media flights at the Gathering of Mustangs and Legends (photo by David Leininger).

The formation of 51 Mustangs planned for Sunday did not take place. Bad weather on Thursday limited formation practice time and with a slightly smaller than targeted Mustang contingent, getting 51 formation-qualified pilots up and ready proved to be an unobtainable goal.

### **USAF Heritage Week and Airshow**

The Gathering of Mustangs and Legends was also a key event in the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the USAF – USAF Heritage Week – conceived to pay tribute to the airmen serving our nation around the world and those who pioneered the skies before them. The Air Force committed significant assets to the event in the form of static displays, performances by three tactical jet demo teams, multiple USAF Heritage Flights, and daily performances by the USAF Thunderbirds.

The airshow was designed to not only entertain, but to educate



Jim Beasley, Jr and Ed Shipley flew as one in *The Horsemen* routine (photo by Jim Froneberger).



Mark Huffstutler's Mustang painted to salute Chuck Yeager's "Glamorous Glen III" leads a formation that includes Lewis Shaw's P-51D "FF-704," and Chris Wood's "February," which is painted in the colors of ace Jim Brooks of the 31<sup>st</sup> Fighter group, 307<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron (photo by Arnold Greenwell).

The USAF Thunderbirds flew their demo every day prior to the warbird-oriented finale (photo by Jim Froneberger).



Mustangs come overhead in the "51" formation that closed the show on Sunday (photo by Jim Froneberger).



Paul Ehlen's "Little Horse" came from the last group of 200 Mustangs produced at the North American Texas plant in 1944. Tim McPherson's "Boomer" first flew in July 2006 after an 18-year restoration (photo by Arnold Greenwell).



Triple ace Bud Anderson (left) and Charles Wilson (right) were among the P-51 Legends who captivated audiences with their stories (photos by Arnold Greenwell).

about the history and legacy of the P-51 and the men who flew them. Each day began with performances by John Mohr in his stock Stearman and the Red Baron Squadron in their four Super Stearman biplanes. The Stearman was the primary trainer in which most Mustang pilots began flight training.

After the Stearman, pilots would advance to the next level in the higher-performance T-6 Texan; so next on the schedule came a solo T-6 demo flown by Stallion 51's Erik Frazier, followed by the Aero-Shell Team in their four smoke-belching Texans. These performances provided a great lead-in to the Mustang aerobatics from Lee Lauderback and "The Horsemen."

Just before noon each day, the USAF took the stage with the F-16 East, F-15 West, and F-22 Raptor demos. On Friday and Saturday, three separate USAF Heritage Flights – a two-ship, a three-ship, and a four-ship – were flown, and on Sunday a single four-ship formation was led by a Mustang and featured all three modern fighters.

At most venues, the Thunderbirds close the show, but at GML 2007 the Thunderbirds graciously handed over the center stage to the Mustangs. The Thunderbirds flew their demo mid-show, allow-

ing the P-51 and its brethren from World War II to be the focus of attention for the final afternoon time slots.

The organizers also wanted to showcase many of the aircraft the Mustang served alongside during the war. So each afternoon after the Thunderbirds, Mustangs took to the skies along with many of their partners in battle – the P-47, P-40, P-63, and P-38. And since the mission of the Mustang was bomber escort, each afternoon several Mustangs took their places alongside B-17s, B-25s, and a rare Avro Lancaster for a simulated bombing mission. Rich Gibson's pyro added realism, including a 3,000 foot wall of fire on Sunday.

No airshow would be complete without some great civilian aerobatic performers and GML2007 featured some of the best. Performances from Michael Goulian, Ed Hamill, John Klatt, and Patty Wagstaff were scattered throughout the day and added variety and excitement to the already-packed schedule.

### **The Legends**

In addition to the airplanes, GML2007 was also about the Legends – the men and women who flew the Mustang in trying times and lived to tell some fabulous tales. Each year, fewer and fewer of these brave heroes remain, so how special it was to have guys like triple ace Bud Anderson, Buck and Bill Patillo, Bill Overstreet, Charlie Wilson, and test pilot/airshow pilot Bob Hoover telling the stories of their exploits in the P-51.

Rickenbacker, formerly Lockbourne Army Air Base, was also the post-war home to the Tuskegee Airmen, the famed group of African-American fighter pilots who flew the "Red Tail" P-51C Mustangs during World War II and achieved great success escorting bombers to their targets. Many of the surviving Tuskegee Airmen were on hand for the show and were presented before the crowd during Saturday's airshow.

Without the heroic efforts of all of these Legends, our world would be a different place today. Without the P-51 Mustang, many more heroes would have not made it home to fight another day and



*Moon over Mustang (photo by Jon Houghtaling).*



*GML 2007 featured seven USAF Heritage Flights including the Sunday flight which included Vlado Lench in his P-51 "Moonbeam McSwine" flanked by the F-22, F-15, and F-16 (photo by David Gore).*




*The "Little Witch" (photo by Arnold Greenwell).*



*Mustang Row (photo by Arnold Greenwell).*

make a major impact upon the world in which we live.

The herculean efforts by the event organizers, the Mustang owners, the USAF, and everyone connected with this amazing display made it truly an event for the ages and a fitting tribute to the P-51 and those who flew them. The real significance of this event, however, may have been captured best by Lee Lauderback in his essay, *The Keeper of the Keys...*

*"But I remind myself often that I am but just the 'keeper of the keys.' These treasures must move on to the next generation, not because they are awesome to fly, but because they represent what so many fallen Patriots gave their lives to defend. They represent the ultimate freedom."* 



*The Red Baron Squadron was on hand to represent the Stearman, the aircraft in which Mustang pilots began their flight training (photo by Jim Froneberger).*