

Canadian boy's encounter with a P-51

Old Aviators and Old Airplanes....

This is a good little story about a vivid memory of a P-51 and its pilot, by a fellow who was 12 years old in Canada in 1967. It was to take to the air. They said it had flown in during the night from some U.S. Airport, the pilot had been tired.

I marveled at the size of the plane dwarfing the Pipers and Canucks tied down by her. It was much larger than in the movies. She glistened in the sun like a bulwark of security from days gone by.



The pilot arrived by cab, paid the driver, and then stepped into the pilot's lounge. He was an older man; his wavy hair was gray and tossed. It looked like it might have been combed, say, around the turn of the century. His flight jacket was checked, greased and worn - it smelled old and genuine. Old Glory was prominently sewn to its shoulders. He projected a quiet air of proficiency and pride devoid of arrogance. He filed a quick flight plan to Montreal (Expo-67, Air Show) then walked across the tarmac.



After taking several minutes to perform his walk-around check the pilot returned to the flight lounge to ask if anyone would be available to stand by with fire extinguishers while he "flashed the old bird up, just to be safe."

Though only 12 at the time I was allowed to stand by with an extinguisher after brief instruction on its use -- "If you see a fire, point, then pull this lever!" I later became a firefighter, but that's another story. The air around the exhaust manifolds shimmered like a mirror from fuel fumes as the huge prop started to rotate. One manifold, then another, and yet another barked -- I stepped back with the others. In moments the Packard-built Merlin engine came to life with a thunderous roar, blue flames knifed from her manifolds. I looked at the others' faces, there was no concern. I lowered the bell of my extinguisher. One of the guys signaled to walk back to the lounge. We did.



Several minutes later we could hear the pilot doing his pre-flight run-up. He'd taxied to the end of runway 19, out of sight. All went quiet for several seconds; we raced from the lounge to the second story deck to see if we could catch a glimpse of the P-51 as she started down the runway. We could not. There we stood, eyes fixed to a spot half way down 19. Then a roar ripped across the field, much louder than before, like a furious hell spawn set loose---something mighty this way was coming. "Listen to that thing!" said the controller.



In seconds the Mustang burst into our line of sight. Its tail was already off and it was moving faster than anything I'd ever seen by that point on 19. Two-thirds the way down 19 the Mustang was airborne with her gear going up. The prop tips were supersonic; we clasped our ears as the Mustang climbed hellish fast into the circuit to be eaten up by the dog-day haze.



We stood for a few moments in stunned silence trying to digest what we'd just seen. The radio controller rushed by me to the radio.

"Kingston tower calling Mustang?" He looked back to us as he waited for an acknowledgment. The radio crackled, "Go ahead Kingston."



"Roger Mustang. Kingston tower would like to advise the circuit is clear for a low level pass." I stood in shock because the controller had, more or less, just asked the pilot to return for an impromptu air show!

The controller looked at us. "What?" He asked. "I can't let that guy go without asking. I couldn't forgive myself!"



The radio crackled once again, "Kingston, do I have permission for a low level pass, east to west, across the field?" "Roger Mustang, the circuit is clear for an east to west pass."

"Roger, Kingston, I'm coming out of 3000 feet, stand by."

We rushed back onto the second-story deck, eyes fixed toward the eastern haze. The sound was subtle at first, a high-pitched whine, a muffled screech, a distant scream.



Moments later the P-51 burst through the haze. Her airframe straining against positive Gs and gravity, wing tips spilling contrails of condensed air, prop-tips again supersonic as the burnished bird blasted across the eastern margin of the field shredding and tearing the air.



At about 500 mph and 150 yards from where we stood she passed with the old American pilot saluting. Imagine. A salute! I felt like laughing, I felt like crying, she glistened, she screamed, the building shook, my heart pounded



Then the old pilot pulled her up and rolled, and rolled, and rolled out of sight into the broken clouds and indelibly into my memory. I've never wanted to be an American more than on that day. It was a time when many nations in the world looked to America as their big brother, a steady and even-handed beacon of security who navigated difficult political water with grace and style; not unlike the pilot who'd just flown into my memory. He was proud, not arrogant, humble, not a braggart, old and honest, projecting an aura of America at its best. That America will return one day, I know it will. Until that time, I'll just send off this story; call it a reciprocal salute, to the old American pilot who wove a memory for a young Canadian that's lasted a lifetime.



(Forward to your Aviator Friends, and anyone who would enjoy a patriotic story)

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"Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Anyone Who Threatens It"

In God We Trust!

Thanks,

An American