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P-51 MUSTANG

LIVE BAIT

WITH CAPTAIN

Clayton Kelly Gross

Harvard

Hour of Power

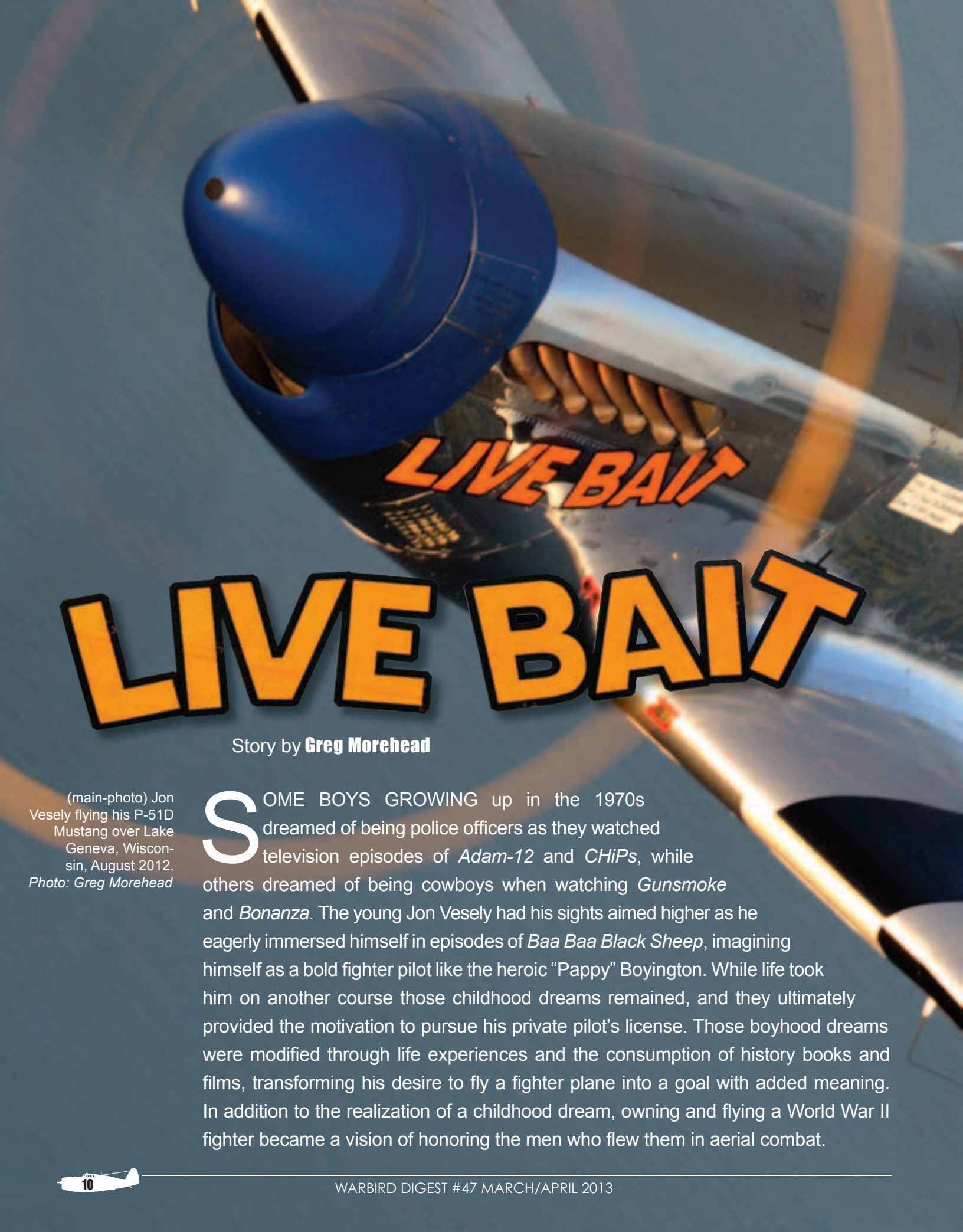
CHUCK HALL

Father of 5

UNSUNG HEROES
L-4 GRASSHOPPER
HISTORY LESSON

NORDIC WARBIRDS





LIVE BAIT

Story by **Greg Morehead**

(main-photo) Jon Vesely flying his P-51D Mustang over Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, August 2012.
Photo: Greg Morehead

SOME BOYS GROWING up in the 1970s dreamed of being police officers as they watched television episodes of *Adam-12* and *CHiPs*, while others dreamed of being cowboys when watching *Gunsmoke* and *Bonanza*. The young Jon Vesely had his sights aimed higher as he eagerly immersed himself in episodes of *Baa Baa Black Sheep*, imagining himself as a bold fighter pilot like the heroic “Pappy” Boyington. While life took him on another course those childhood dreams remained, and they ultimately provided the motivation to pursue his private pilot’s license. Those boyhood dreams were modified through life experiences and the consumption of history books and films, transforming his desire to fly a fighter plane into a goal with added meaning. In addition to the realization of a childhood dream, owning and flying a World War II fighter became a vision of honoring the men who flew them in aerial combat.



▲ The official design of the 354th Fighter Group, 355th Fighter Squadron, the "Pugnacious Pups."

▶ (inset-bottom-right) From left: A special reunion at AirVenture 2010 (L-R): Dave Young and Michael Vadeboncoeur of Midwest Aero Restorations; WWII Ace Clayton Kelly Gross; Jon Vesely, owner, with son, Josh Vesely. Midwest Aero restored *LIVE BAIT* for Jon to represent Kelly's wartime P-51D.
Photo: Chris Wawro





▲ (top-left) In 1966 Ben Hall flew the renamed *Esther's Mink* in the Reno Air Races.
Photo: Ron Olson

▲ (top and middle-right) Ben Hall flying *Seattle Miss* at the 1966 Fox Field Air Races in Lancaster, California. Before the Reno Air Races, Ben Hall renamed the racer, *Esther's Mink*.
Photo: Mike Stakocius

▲ (middle-left) 44-73343 on the ramp at Stead Field during the Reno Air Races, September 20, 1968.
Photo: Ron Olson

▶ (lower-right-top) Just before sunset Jon Vesely's P-51D, *LIVE BAIT*, cools down after the completion of an evening flight over Danville, Illinois, October 2011.
Photo: Greg Morehead

Jon earned his pilot's license and instrument rating in 1998 and purchased a new Bonanza from Beechcraft. Never losing sight of his goal of flying warbirds, he immediately went to work on fulfilling the dream. The journey to the cockpit of a World War II fighter is never quick; Jon shares the story of his journey: "In 1999, I met Don Keller, Steve Bolander and Eddie Wachs from Kenosha. Steve was kind enough to let me fly his T-6 with Don Keller that summer. Later that year, I bought a T-6G out of a barn in Ohio that was being restored by its owner. That was a beautiful airplane. Don and I flew it during the spring of 2000, and I eventually soloed the T-6 and began flying it regularly. In the fall of 1999 I took an orientation flight at Stallion 51 in the P-51 Mustang *Crazy Horse*. That's what got me hooked on warbirds and the Mustang. That's also where I went to finish my training years later, with John Posson instructing in *Crazy Horse 2*."

Jon started looking for a Mustang and it didn't take long for him to find one. He continued, "I heard about a Mustang in a Trade-a-Plane advertisement and went to Pell City, Alabama, to look at the airplane and to meet the owner, Ed Stringfellow. Ed was a civilian instructor pilot in the T-6 just after World War II, and had owned his Mustang for 15 years. Ed and I became friends and we visited regularly. He even gave me some advanced instruction in





the T-6. A year later I bought Ed's Mustang from him with the intention of having the airplane restored by Mike Vadeboncoeur at Midwest Aero Restorations. Ed's Mustang (44-63807) was called *Tiger Lily*, his daughter's nickname. He made his last flight in *Tiger Lily*, flying the airplane from Pell City, Alabama, to Danville, Illinois, where Midwest Aero would transform her. I could tell it was a very emotional experience for him. I wanted to restore the airplane in an authentic World War II scheme, but I also wanted to honor Ed's ownership of the Mustang because it was so important to him. I chose the scheme *Daddy's Girl* because it was an authentic and attractive scheme of an honored World War II ace, and also thematically carried the same emotion as Ed had when he named his Mustang after his daughter."

As his first Mustang's restoration neared completion, Jon realized that his busy life was not conducive to learning to fly or building proficiency in a Mustang. He said, "I'm pretty particular about training and safety and I just didn't feel like I could dedicate the time to flying the airplane enough to feel comfortable." So, his dream would go on hold for a while and a new owner, Charles Somers of Sacramento, California, would enjoy the fruits of Midwest Aero Restoration's labors. In 2004 *Daddy's Girl* (44-63807) was awarded Reserve Grand Champion - World War II at EAA's AirVenture in

Oshkosh, Wisconsin. (For the complete story on *Daddy's Girl* see *Warbird Digest* #2, Fall 2004.)

As *Daddy's Girl* was being restored, Jon was also having a T-6G restored by Paul Redlich of Stars and Bars in Huntington, Indiana. Jon knew Ed Stringfellow needed a good warbird to fly after giving up his beloved *Tiger Lily*, so Jon sold him the newly restored Texan. When Ed finally decided to retire from flying warbirds, Jon bought the T-6 back. It was at that time that a phone call from Mike Vadeboncoeur got Jon back on course towards achieving that elusive dream. From their *Daddy's Girl* experience, the two had an excellent working relationship, and Mike knew Jon wanted to fulfill his dream of owning a Mustang. Even though it was bad timing in some respects, when Mike asked Jon if he was interested in another Mustang project, Jon decided to "pull the trigger." Mike was restoring a P-51D Mustang (44-73343) that owner Larry Thompson wanted to sell, and Jon Vesely wasn't about to let the opportunity pass by.

The History of 44-73343

P-51D-25NA 44-73343 was delivered to the U.S. Army Air Force on March 14, 1945. It departed the U.S. for the 8th Air Force, ETO, in April of 1945, and then returned to the U.S. in July 1945. After the war it had several duty stations over the next decade, including:

▲ (top) When Midwest Aero Restorations began restoration of 44-73343, *LIVE BAIT*, they were already working on Bruce Winter's P-51D named *Happy Jack's Go Buggy*. They were restored together and here they are flying together, with Vlado Lenocho in Jon Vesely's *LIVE BAIT* and Bruce "Doc" Winter flying "*HJGB*." Photo: Greg Morehead

◀ (op-bottom-right) Jon Vesely's P-51D 44-73343 was restored to represent 44-63668, Clayton Kelly Gross' wartime aircraft named *LIVE BAIT*, from the 354th Ftr Grp, 355th Ftr Sqdrn, known as the "Pugnacious Pups." Photo: Greg Morehead



▲ (top) Vlado Lenoch flying *LIVE BAIT* in October 2011. His abilities as a Mustang pilot have been tapped by Midwest Aero Restorations on many test flights of its award winning Mustangs.
Photo: Greg Morehead

▶ (op-bottom-left) A look inside the main gear well shows the quality craftsmanship implemented in the restoration of 44-73343.
Photo: Mike Vadeboncoeur

September 1945

To 4108th Base Unit, Newark Field, NJ

April 1946

To 4003rd Base Unit, Air Material Command (AMC), Newark Field, NJ

December 1946

To 4112nd Base Unit AMC, Olmstead, PA, for repairs

January 1947

To 187th Fighter Squadron, Air National Guard, Cheyenne, WY

April 1951

To 140th Fighter Bomber Wing, Tactical Air Command, Cheyenne, WY

December 1951

Wing moved to Colvis Air Force Base, NM

December 1952

To 3203rd Maintenance & Supply Grp, Air Proving Ground Cmnd, Eglin AFB, FL for maintenance

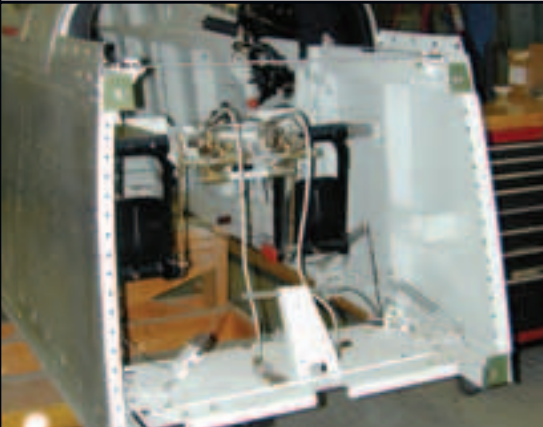
While it didn't find glory in its military career, 44-73343 did become significant in the history of air racing. Just as the dawn of the Reno Air Races approached, Ben Hall of Seattle, Washington, bought the surplus Mustang in 1963 (registered as N5482V), named it *Seattle Miss*, and entered it as Race #2 in

the first annual Reno Air Races held at Sky Ranch in 1964. It was the beginning of a seven-year career in what many people consider aviation's greatest sport.

In 1964 pilot Ben Hall flew *Seattle Miss* to a fourth place finish in the Unlimited Championship Race at a speed of 344.45 miles per hour. In 1966 Ben Hall raced '343 as the renamed *Esther's Mink*. He took third place in the Unlimited Qualifying Race, fifth place in the Unlimited Heat 1 Race, and second place in the Unlimited Championship Race at 372.701 mph.

Mike Loenig was another Mustang pilot who was bit by the air racing bug, and after buying *Esther's Mink* from Ben Hall in 1966, he renamed it *Traveler* and entered it in the 1967 races. Mike flew 44-73343 to a sixth place finish in the Unlimited Qualifying Race, fifth place in the Unlimited Consolation Race, and fifth place in the Unlimited Championship Race at 359.866 mph. In 1968, the year the races started being held at Stead Field, Mike must have felt excitement and anticipation of glory as he won the Unlimited Heat 2 Race, but then felt the agony of defeat when an engine failure on lap five of the Championship Race ended his bid for ultimate victory.

Loenig and his renamed *Boise Bitch* returned to Stead Field in 1969 and finished in fourth place in the Unlimited Consolation Race and he won the



Unlimited Medallion Race at a speed of 319.48 mph. The following year Loenig returned with the Mustang wearing the name *Miss Salmon River*, and took 4th place in his Qualifying Race, first place in the Unlimited Heat 2 Race, and enjoyed a second place finish in the Unlimited Championship Race.

The 1971 Reno Air Races yielded the best and worst for Mike Loenig. His Unlimited Qualifying Race speed was the airplane's Reno career best at 400.909 mph. Then, in the Unlimited Heat 2 Race he placed third with a speed of 395.89 mph. On September 26, 1971, his fortunes turned when a connecting rod broke during the second lap of the Championship Race, forcing him to crash land *Miss Salmon River*. With significant wing and fuselage damage, it could have been the end of the line for '343. Loenig transported the Mustang home to Boise, Idaho and closed the door on an era.

In 1983 Bruce Morehouse of San Antonio, Texas, bought the project and started restoration work. After 22 years Morehouse had refurbished one wing and had accomplished some work on the fuselage, but there was so much work remaining that he must have realized the need to pass on the project. In 2005 Bruce sold '343 to Larry Thompson of Atlanta, Georgia, who wisely decided to send the project to Michael Vadeboncoeur's shop, Midwest Aero Restorations, in Danville, Illinois.

▲ (top) *LIVE BAIT* just prior to mating the wings to the fuselage.
Photo: Mike Vadeboncoeur

▲ (middle-left) When it arrived at Midwest Aero Restoration, the fuselage had been partially restored in a style typical of the 1970s. One of the tasks in the restoration was to return the airframe to its original, green (zinc chromate) finish.
Photo: Mike Vadeboncoeur

▲ (middle-center) The fuselage in Midwest Aero's fixture being reskinned.
Photo: Mike Vadeboncoeur

▲ (middle-right) While the fuselage was mounted in Midwest Aero's fixture, the skins were removed and the longerons and rear floor structure were repaired.
Photo: Mike Vadeboncoeur



Restoration and Rebirth of 44-73343

Larry Thompson's new Mustang project arrived at Midwest Aero Restorations in two Ryder trucks; one had the fuselage and various parts in it and the other contained the wings. From a layman's viewpoint the airplane was a "basket case." Thankfully, the experts in Danville know the Mustang so intimately that it didn't take long to assess the condition and present the options to Larry, who would ultimately decide how far to go with the restoration.

Midwest Aero Restorations owner Michael Vadeboncoeur described what they found: "From the Reno crash landing in 1971, the lower longerons had kinks in them. Also, when we tried to put the fuselage in our fixture the bolts wouldn't line up, which was evidence of what we thought — the fuselage had been 'tweaked' in the crash. One wing had not been restored but was fixable, and the other had been partially refurbished but a few things were not quite what we would like to see come out of our shop. The main spar in that wing had been buckled and there was a large patch over it rather than being replaced. We showed Larry our concerns, and the fuselage fixture confirmed it. He had seen the quality of our work before and liked what he saw in *CRIPES A' MIGHTY* and *Daddy's Girl*, and he wanted that same quality for his Mustang."



▲ (top) The wings after being painted at Midwest Aero. Odegaard wings rebuilt the wings and painted unexposed areas before sending them back to Midwest Aero, where they were completed.
Photo: Mike Vadeboncoeur

▲ (middle-left) Right-hand wing disassembly and preparation for restoration.
Photo: Mike Vadeboncoeur

▲ (middle-center) The right-hand wing as received, prior to restoration.
Photo: Mike Vadeboncoeur

▲ (middle-right) The wing being finished and prepped for painting.
Photo: Mike Vadeboncoeur



With a green light to do the job right, Vadeboncoeur put his plans into action. At the time Midwest was already working on another major project; Bruce “Doc” Winter’s P-51 Mustang, *Happy Jack’s Go Buggy*. While Doc’s Mustang was the primary project the team was able to work concurrently on both Mustangs, and in fact it offered a greater efficiency of shop resources. When “*HJGB*” was completed, 44-73343 received all of Midwest Aero’s attention. The amount of work needed to complete the job was massive and Vadeboncoeur wisely decided to send the wings out to Robert Odegaard’s shop, Odegaard Wings, in Kindred, North Dakota. The engine was sent to be rebuilt at Roush Aviation in Livonia, Michigan.

Before the wings were sent to Bob Odegaard, the skins were removed and as much paint as possible was removed. Brent Meester, who worked for Bob, did much of the work, which included rebuilding the wing structure. They fabricated the triangle skin and leading edges but left them uninstalled. They also painted any parts of the wing that were going to be unexposed. The triangle skin was not installed because they needed to be off for Midwest to install the main gear after replacing the gear bushings and other necessary components. That also allowed Midwest to control the final interior wheel well and gun bay paint processes.

At Midwest Aero the fuselage was deskinned and all the longerons were replaced, along with any other components that showed signs of damage or corrosion. When the skins came off, the previous restoration work was revealed. It was a typical ‘70s era presentation, with gray paint used on the interior structure and components. Midwest Aero returned everything to the original green (zinc chromate) finish, and except for the instrument panel and RH switch panel alterations, the cockpit was returned to stock military configuration.

The restoration began in 2005 under the ownership of Larry Thompson; however, before the project was completed, he decided to sell it. It was 2008 when Mike Vadeboncoeur made the fateful call to Jon Vesely of Scottsdale, Arizona. Jon was an easy sell on the project, and when he purchased the Mustang he agreed with virtually everything that Larry had decided for its completion. Jon even agreed with Larry’s decision to make it a polished aluminum airplane with a cockpit layout like another of Midwest Aero’s P-51 restorations, *Red Dog*, minus the autopilot. The philosophy was to mix original gauges with compact, high end, modern avionics.

Every possible task was completed on the fuselage before the wings were mated so it was an exciting milestone when the plane was finally “sitting on its own legs” once more. All of the painting was done in-

▲ (top) Owner Jon Vesely flying *LIVE BAIT* over the early morning fog of Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, August 2012. The heart on the fuselage below the cockpit was painted just as it was on Kelly Gross’ original *LIVE BAIT*, in honor of his wife, Gwendolyn.
Photo: Greg Morehead

◀ (lower-right-top) The wings were not mated to the fuselage until most of the fuselage work was completed, so it was a big day when the wings went on and it was sitting on its own legs.
Photo: Mike Vadeboncoeur

◀ (op-bottom-right) Tail cone repair in Midwest Aero’s fixture.
Photo: Mike Vadeboncoeur



▲ (top) Owner Jon Vesely entering the pattern for a landing at the Southern Wisconsin Regional Airport in Janesville, WI, August, 2012.

Photo: Greg Morehead

► (op-top) clockwise from left: Cockpit of 44-73343 shows the restoration to original condition, with the exception of the instrument panel and RH switch panel, which adds modern high-end avionics for increased functionality and safety; the gun bays in the wing are perfectly finished to military specs, minus functioning machine gun receivers; wing mounted bomb rack; gun ports (foreground) and Kelly Gross' personal markings on the fuselage. The kill markings include 6 aerial, 2 ground, and ½ probable aerial.

Photo: Greg Morehead

house, and the decision to make it a polished aluminum presentation was well within the capabilities of Mike Vadeboncoeur, who had first learned the balance of art and science while working for Butch Schroeder on his polished aluminum T-6G project.

While Karl Bausmann of Roush Aviation was at the shop to perform an engine inspection on another Mustang, he picked up three pallets with the engine components for 44-73343 and took them back to Roush in Livonia, Michigan, for a fairly straight forward rebuild and reassembly. Prior to installation in the airplane, the engine mounts were rebuilt and all related components were magnafluxed and inspected. Once it was installed, Jim Igrisan from Roush Aviation came for the engine test runs.

Once the project was complete, Vlado Lench was called to perform the test flights. Lench is known as one of the world's premier Mustang pilots, and his relationship with Midwest Aero has been a great, mutually beneficial friendship. Vlado flew 44-73343 to Wittman Field in Oshkosh, Wisconsin just five days before EAA's annual AirVenture, where it was stored at Basler Flight Service in preparation for judging. For their efforts, Mike Vadeboncoeur and his team earned a Gold Wrench Award, and Jon Vesely won the Reserve Grand Champion — World War II Award. The awards were great, but for Jon Vesely the real prize was something else.

Introducing *LIVE BAIT* and Clayton Kelly Gross

When it was time to choose a paint scheme for 44-73343, Jon and Mike agreed that it should be an airplane that was not represented on any flying warbird, and it needed to have a good history to go with it. When aviation photographer Chris Wawro heard about the project at Midwest Aero, and learned Jon and Mike were looking for a paint scheme, he reached out to them. Jon Vesely recalled, "Mike and I were trying to decide on a paint scheme and we both cared about the pilot's story and the significance of the history. Photographer Chris Wawro contacted us and told us about Clayton Kelly Gross, he told us we needed to read Kelly's autobiography about his wartime experiences, aptly titled *LIVE BAIT*. The book blew us away! We were intrigued to know his plane had never been represented before and were excited to learn Kelly was doing well in Vancouver, Washington. I started exchanging e-mails with him; he shared so many stories that I loved reading. It didn't take long to know that I absolutely wanted to honor him and his Mustang, *LIVE BAIT*. When I asked for his permission to paint the airplane in his markings, I don't know who was more excited; Kelly when I asked, or me when he said yes!"

When *LIVE BAIT* was flown to Oshkosh in 2010, Kelly Gross had flown in to see "his" plane,



Photo: Mark Hoffman



Photo: Barbara Vesely



◀ (middle-left & right) In 2010 Captain Clayton Kelly Gross was honored with the unveiling of a Mustang restored to perfect condition in his honor. His “reunion” took place at AirVenture, where he sat under the wing and told stories to captivated audiences for two days.

◀ (bottom-left) Owner Jon Vesely gives Kelly Gross a close-up tour of “Kelly’s” Mustang. When Jon asked Kelly if he could restore the Mustang with his markings, it was difficult to know who was more excited – Kelly when Jon asked, or Jon when Kelly said yes.
Photo: Mark Hoffman

as represented on Jon’s Mustang, 44-73343. Jon remembered the experience as one of his greatest memories: “Kelly had flown in with a few of his friends. The first morning he was there, my son Josh and I met him at his hotel and took him to AirVenture. It was just the three of us. Mike Vadeboncoeur and Dave Young met us at the airplane. Several photographers from EAA and local newspapers were also looking forward to the reunion and met us there as well. It was incredibly poignant to see this true hero touching the airplane as his memories flooded back. He sat under the wing of the plane for two days and told stories. It was priceless – absolutely priceless.” 🇺🇸