

Warbird Digest visits with Midwest Aero Restorations of Danville, Illinois, who have completed another award winning North American P-51 Mustang restoration.



Daddy's Girl

A stunning example of the restorer's art, 'Daddy's Girl' is the culmination of just over three year's work by Mike VadeBonCouer, Dave Young, and the rest of Midwest's dedicated crew. VadeBonCouer took time out from a busy day to give us the inside story on the restoration.

Story and Photos by **James Church**

On Monday, July 12th, 2004 Vlado Lench test flew Midwest's latest Mustang rebuild, a former Uruguayan and Bolivian Air Force machine, s/n 44-63807, N20MS. Like many of the Mustangs that have returned from South America this one required an extensive rebuild. Corrosion was evident in much of the structure, requiring replacement of many skins and structural members. Some field repairs that were less than airworthy also required rectification.

Along with the rest of the tired Mustangs still in service with Boliva, it was traded to Canada for some 'modern' Lockheed T-33s in order to upgrade their air arm. The P-51 fleet had remained in front line service with the Fuerza Aerea Boliva until 1978 before finally being retired. Initially registered in Canada as C-GXUD, and then in the United States as N20MS, the aircraft had never had a complete rebuild until it arrived in Danville. VadeBonCouer related the condition when it arrived "...20MS was a tired old girl. Overall it was pretty original and had been painted over many times in the wheel wells. The tail cone was very tough as were the wings. It was a safe airplane but by today's standards it needed the attention it received. I also think it was well taken care of despite the fact it had never really been gone through." Midwest Aero's trademark flawless polished finish was planned, which necessitated the replacement of all fuselage skins. "We replaced all four longerons in this fuselage due to some corrosion. Some of the corrosion was very severe and some was not as bad but it was the time to do the replacement for sure..." said VadeBonCouer. This is no small task, and the workmanship is superb. Looking at the newly applied skins, one would be hard pressed to find any dimples or defects. "This was a fairly straight forward restoration. We basically did exactly the same thing we did to "Cripes a Mighty" except for the back seat and modern panel and only one gun-bay detailed with guns and ammo. There is one major stumbling block that has been with us for about all of our airplanes we've done. POLISHED ALUMINUM!



Midwest sent the wings to Odegaard Aviation, in Kindred, North Dakota for rebuild. "This was the first set of wings that we had to send out due to the damage and corrosion. At some point in 20MS's life it had been down on its left wing. The left main spar had been bent and had a horrific crack with a spliced patch outboard of the ammo bay. Odegaard replaced that outboard main spar and the entire rear spar on the LH wing. On the RH wing they replaced the Inboard main spar due to corrosion and we replaced the outboard rear spar. The wing gun-bay areas had been heavily modified for fuel bladders and much of this structure had been removed or cut so that had to be replaced as well. We do all of the disassembly work, gear casting removal, cleaning, stripping and blasting of the structure to assess the corrosion. If we find major problems with corrosion or damage we'll send the wings north for the structural work and we'll proceed with selected skin riveting, painting and gear casting installation to continue with the theme of the restoration once they return."





ENGINE NO. 1003224
TYPE NO. 4700A
LOW ANG.
HIGH ANG. (53.1)





The Packard-built Merlin engine in N20MS was rebuilt by NASCAR racing engine guru Jack Roush in his Livonia, Michigan workshops. Jack has rebuilt several engines for his own Mustangs and has developed several design improvements for which he has gained FAA approval. This was the first customer engine overhauled by Roush, and VadeBonCouer praised the company. "I have nothing but good to say about the professionalism and capabilities of Roush. I am very pleased so far. The engine currently is doing very well. It is running incredibly dry which keeps our wheel wells looking good! I feel the Mustang community is going to benefit tremendously from Roush's capabilities..." Although Roush has come up with improvements to the V-12s lubrication, cooling and oil systems, the only modification used on this engine was the installation of all new pistons, designed by Roush. One can expect Roush Racing to be a major supplier of rebuilt Merlins in the future.



Warbird Digest was invited to be on hand for the first flight as well as the two subsequent test flights flown in mid-July as the aircraft was prepped for unveiling at Oshkosh. As mentioned earlier, VadeBonCouer selected Lenocho for the test pilot duties "...I have known Vlado for years and always have enjoyed being around him and have admired his piloting skills and his ability to not just fly the airplane but knowing he'd have the ability to read the machine for us. The fact that he's flown so many different mustangs gives him some unique references to draw on. I am not sure Vlado was in the test business before we had him fly "Cripe's a Mighty", but it sure puts my mind a bit at ease when he's at the controls!" During each flight Lenocho expertly positioned the aircraft to allow for the first air-to-air photos, which grace the pages of this issue.

Jon Vesely of Inverness, Illinois originally bought the aircraft from Ed Stringfellow of Birmingham, Alabama in the summer of 2001 and contracted Midwest Aero to handle the rebuild. Vesely knew of Midwest's reputation as first class Mustang restorers, and wanted a no holds-bared, full-blown restoration to award winning standards. While desiring a fairly stock airplane, Vesely made some changes in the interest of safety and enjoyment. "The airplane had a Nelson Ezell dual control kit installed when it arrived at our shop for rebuild. We removed that as part of the



restoration and detailed the components and reinstalled that system. Also we kept the interior colors original but added a Garmin 430 and a GTX327 transponder in the panel and replaced the large original gyros with a standard 3 1/8" horizon, and DG and turn coordinator. Not stock but very functional. Everything else is pretty much stock." Vesely nearly saw the project through to its completion but it was sold to Charles Somers, of Sacramento, California several months before the first flight. Charles had Midwest finish the rebuild as originally outlined by Vesely, including the chosen paint scheme.

Considerable research went into the accurately applied 359th Fighter Group paint scheme chosen by Jon. We were looking for some schemes for a long time. We spent a lot of time suggesting this and that and kept coming back to Ray Wetmore's "Daddy's Girl." No one had ever represented a 359th FG airplane and we felt it was time. We just had to convince the owner; and Jon agreed that we should represent the 359th and so we proceeded. There are very few color shots showing the green color used. In fact due to differences in color printing the same photo in two different books will be different shades! We were very cautious to try to pick one of the shades that would look acceptable and not too bold or flat out ugly! We feel we got the color right and I think many people have grown to love the color. We consulted with Jack Smith who authored a book about the 359th. We also had some contact with former 359th pilots like Rene Burtner, Emory Johnson, and Robert Guggemos who incidentally is from our home town of Danville, which adds a bit more nostalgia to the airplane. Two other individual's we consulted with were Peter Randall from England and Tim Gagnon of the 123rd Airlift wing who are direct descendents of the 359th." The end result is a scheme that just looks 'right' and compliments the P-51's lines well, although it is not as colorful as schemes from many

of the other famous groups. "Daddy's Girl" was originally a P-51D-10-NA, s/n 44-14733 flown by the 359th FG's highest scoring ace, Captain Raymond S. Wetmore, of the Group's 370th Fighter Squadron. Based at East Wretham, England, the 359th was assigned to the Eighth Air Force Fighter Command mainly providing bomber escort duties. Wetmore's total score of aircraft downed was 21.25 (all aerial kills), and 9 of these were attained whilst flying 'Daddy's Girl.' That total included a solitary Messerschmitt Me-163 Comet rocket propelled fighter which fell to his guns (while flying a loaner aircraft) on March 15, 1945. Wetmore sadly died in a post war F-86 Sabre accident in February 1951.

For those who want to learn more about the 3359th Fighter Group's exploits during WW II, several very good books have







been written. Most recent is the '359th Fighter Group' by Jack H. Smith which is volume # 10 of Osprey Publishing's outstanding Aviation Elite Series. Previous to this release, Mr. Smith had written 'Mustangs & Unicorns, A History of the 359th FG,' published by Pictorial Histories in 1997. This is more of a unit history, and compiles their daily operations, and follows up with their post war assignment as part of the National Guard. Currently out of print, it should be available with a quick search of the internet used book sellers. Both are filled with interesting stories and contain many photographs of the men and their machines and are a worthy addition to any aviation enthusiast's library. Hopefully the recreation of "Daddy's Girl" will finally bring the brave men of the 359th to the public's attention.

Midwest Aero has won many awards with their restorations in the past, and "Daddy's Girl" continued that trend when it was awarded 'Reserve Grand Champion, WW II' at this year's AirVenture convention in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. Competition in this category was tough this year, with many worthy aircraft vying for the top award. VadeBonCouer and his crew can be justifiably proud of their latest achievement. "We feel very fortunate to win Reserve Grand Champion at this year's Oshkosh. The competition was about as fierce as it gets. We are very happy with the way we finished Daddy's Girl. We know that we lacked some of the more notable original items like a fuselage gas tank and original panel and drop tanks but overall we are very pleased with the way the airplane turned out." Several weeks after Oshkosh, "Daddy's Girl" was delivered to its new owner, and it will be based at the former McClellan Air Force Base, near Sacramento.

Danville, Illinois has become a sort of 'Mustang Central' as of late; with several more projects in the works, and the prospect of several more looming on the horizon. A casual conversation with VadeBonCouer demonstrates his enthusiasm for the Mustang and the warbird movement. "This is our third Mustang and we are always learning... one could do ten of these and still learn new things about the airplane. That is part of the fun! We are currently learning a lot by disassembling a very stock original P51 for a stock rebuild. We are documenting new information all the time". 🇺🇸





Daddy's Girl

visits Arizona

A smile appears on Diane Knuppenburg's face as the unmistakable sound of a Merlin fills the skies of the Arizona high country. The stunning P-51 that bears the name "Daddy's Girl" flashes past the gathering crowd. Tears of joy greet the arrival of the airplane that has been painstakingly restored to represent the wartime mount of Capt. Ray S. Wetmore of the 359th Fighter Group. As the prop stops and the canopy is opened, Randy Bailey and Alan Rockey (both pilots for owner Charles Somers), climb down to meet the family that has gathered at Pulliman Field in Flagstaff. The first to reach them is Diane who proudly claims "I am Daddy's Girl!" Born in the summer of 1944, Diane is the first of four children (daughters Dona Van Dyke and Denise Edwards, and a son Larry) born to Wetmore and the namesake of the Green nosed Mustang.



Ray Shuey Wetmore was born in Kerman California, a small farming town just west of Fresno. Joining the Army Air Corp in 1942, Wetmore excelled in training and was posted to the newly formed 359th Fighter Group in the spring of 1943. The group trained in the P-47 throughout the summer and early fall. In October, the group departed the United States for England and entered combat on December 13th. Wetmore opened his account on February 10, 1944 by destroying a Me-109 that was preparing to bounce the formation of B-17's under 359th escort. Commonly called "X-ray" for his ability to see enemy aircraft sometimes minutes before anyone else was able, Wetmore was actually color blind! His tally steadily rose and on one incredible mission in November of 1944, Wetmore added three to his total. After becoming separated from the rest of the group, Wetmore and his wingman Lt. Robert "Rudy" York, spot two gaggles of enemy fighters. One gaggle consists of about 100 Me-109's and the other, a like number of Fw-190's. While the pair of Mustangs shadows the enemy aircraft, Wetmore radios for assistance. Soon the German fighters discover the two US fighters and start sending flights of four after them. With no help coming and out of self preservation, Wetmore and York have no other choice but to engage the fighters even though the odds are 100 to 1 against them. After almost 30 minutes of combat, both Wetmore and York are credited with 3 Me-109's each. Wetmore closes his account in March of 1945 by downing a Me-163, the fourth and final rocket powered fighter downed of the war. With a total of 21.25 aircraft destroyed in the air, Wetmore was the leading ace in the ETO at wars end. He was once asked what it took to be successful in aerial combat; he replied "Average flying ability and a lot of luck." Major Ray Wetmore was tragically killed on February 14, 1951 while flying an F-86 Sabre. Found in the wreckage was a Hopalong Cassidy toy gun set, a gift for his son who had turned two the day before.



The day brought another joy to this extremely close family when Rockey graciously offered Diane and Ray's grandson, Blue Van Dyke, the opportunity to experience, if only briefly, what it was like to fly in the P-51. As Daddy's Girl lifted off into the setting Arizona sun, I am sure that once again, Ray Wetmore was aloft with his beloved Daddy's Girl. 🇺🇸

After World War Two, the government of Uruguay decided to form an air arm, modeled after the air force in the United States. Initially it was named the Cuerpo Aerea, later the Fuerza Aerea Nacional, and finally, in 1951, the Fuerza Aerea Uruguaya.

The initial purchase from U.S. surplus stocks included twenty five P-51Ds, eleven B-25s and two C-47s. The U.S. government initially offered P-47 Thunderbolts, but the Uruguayans insisted on the Mustangs. In late November and early December of 1950, twenty five P-51D-20-NA in the serial block of 44-63xxx, were flown to Uruguay by a core group of FAU pilots trained in the USA. The Mustangs were given FAU serial numbers from 251 to 275.

The FAU later came to regret that decision to demand Mustangs when the availability of spare parts became hard to obtain as the Korean War progressed. Conversely, Thunderbolt spares were still plentiful, as they were not used in the conflict. As a result of this decision, the FAU Mustang force never met the expectations of the Uruguayan government.

After ten years of sporadic use, the FAU sold the eight best mustangs left in their inventory, along with a C-124 Globemaster full of spare parts, to the Bolivian Air Force, for the grand total of \$8.00. (Authors note: that must have been the bargain of the century). A few of the original twenty-five aircraft had been destroyed by accidents, but the remainder of the aircraft was scrapped. One of those that survived FAU use to go to the FAB was FAU 272, 44-63807.

On arrival in Bolivia, it became FAB 506 and remained in service for 17 more years. In December 1977 a group of Canadians arranged the exchange of a number of Canadair built T-33A-Ns for six of the airworthy mustangs. In 1978, six Canadian pilots ferried the Mustangs to Canada. FAU 272

became C-GXUO and the others became C-GXUP, C-GXRG, C-GXUQ, C-GXUR and C-GMUS. At this time, all six aircraft were still in their FAB camouflage paint scheme.

Arny Carnegie of Edmonton, Alberta was the initial owner of all six of the Mustangs. In July 1978, Bill Bailey Aviation Service in Edmonton bought GXUO and kept it until 1984. He sold it to Ed Stringfellow of Mid South Lumber Company of Birmingham, Alabama who registered it with the FAA as N20MS. Stringfellow stripped off the camouflage paint scheme and put it in a military silver/yellow scheme with the name "TIGER LILY". In 2001 it was sold to Jon Vesely of Inverness, Illinois who decided to have it completely rebuilt at Midwest Aero Restorations in Danville, Illinois. As the project neared completion the Mustang was sold to Charles Somers, Sacramento, California. 🇺🇸

