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## THE MEN WITH THE HANDS OF

# GOLD

**ABOVE:** Award winning P-51s, *Daddy's Girl* (N20MS) and Ken Wagnon of *Cripes A Mighty IV* (44-74813), which received the 2002 Grand Champion WWII Warbird award. [James P Church]

**M**ike Vadeboncoeur was hooked after his first plane ride when he was five. Another influence was the TV show *Baa Baa Black Sheep*, his favourite program growing up. He would go to Oshkosh with the Young family, David Young sharing the love of aircraft. Now David is the Shop Foreman.

Vadeboncoeur attended the Spartan School of Aeronautics in Tulsa Oklahoma, and helped work on several warbirds during that time. He returned to Danville to work at the Fixed Base Operator and helped Henry 'Butch' Schroeder work on his aircraft in his spare time. Later he worked for the University of Illinois Aircraft Maintenance Facility where he became the Master Sheet Metal Mechanic of the shop. Butch offered Mike the opportunity to work for him full time doing a major restoration of his T-6, which was the first aircraft that

In middle America lies the small town of Danville Illinois, known in aviation circles for Midwest Aero Restorations. Midwest has won enough EAA Gold Wrenches to make up a toolbox. Mike Vadeboncoeur laughs and says: 'someone said it's too bad they don't come in different sizes so you can use them.' They are acknowledged as doing among the most authentic restorations in the business and John Freedman brings us this exclusive insight into their success.

won him a Gold Wrench, and the 1990 Reserve Grand Champion Award.

Next was the restoration of Butch Schroeder's photo-reconnaissance F-6D *Lil Margaret*, his first Mustang, which also brought a Gold Wrench, and Grand Champion Award. Vadeboncoeur started to accept work of his own, first of which was Bob Wilson's Vultee BT-13. He helped Schroeder on his P-47 Thunderbolt and Corsair.



**ABOVE:** Midwest Aero's most authentic restoration to date is the award winning P-51D, *Happy Jack's Go Buggy*. Owned by Bruce Winter it sports replicated armour and paper-maché drop tanks. [James P Church]

**BELOW:** Midwest Aero Restorations' Mike Vadeboncoeur, his facility is acknowledged as doing among the most authentic restorations in the business. [John Freedman]

Midwest's first ground up restoration was for Ken Wagnon of *Cripes A Mighty IV* (44-74813), which received the 2002 Grand Champion WWII Warbird award. In 2004 Midwest turned out their 3rd Mustang *Daddy's Girl* (N20MS) after a three-year restoration. *Daddy's Girl* won the Reserve Grand Champion WWII at Oshkosh. Two years later Midwest rolled out *Red Dog* (44-74469) for Dan Baun, featuring modern radios and avionics and was restored as a 'sport Mustang' rather than an authentic one. It won the 2006 Reserve Grand Champion WWII award.

Today Midwest usually have at least two projects in at any one time. They have the necessary equipment to fabricate any part, but out-source some work, the wings go to Odegaard Wings in Kindred North Dakota, flight controls to Aerospace Specialties, and the engines go to Roush Aviation in Livonia Michigan.

"There are other shops that probably have more capability than we do as far as forming major structural components and so forth. But the beauty of the Mustang is there are plenty of parts. What sets us apart is our attention to detail and authenticity, and of course with no compromise in quality."



### Happy Jack's Go Buggy

P51D 122-40992 from NAA Inglewood was given serial 44-74452 and delivered to the RCAF as 9225. Struck off in April 1958, with many others it was bought by Intercontinental Airways and sold to Guatemala as FAG 366. When it arrived at Danville it was still in the original FAG camouflage scheme, had not flown since the 1970s, and had never been converted for civilian use.

Owner Bruce Winter says; "I was no different than any other kid who loves flying and military fighter aircraft and thus the allure of the Mustang was overwhelming. I began looking for a project in earnest in 1993 when I was flying Hornets for the U.S.N. My preference was to restore it to exact war-time status – without compromise. This helped lead to Mike's shop."

2008 saw the completion of Midwest's finest work to date, *Happy Jack's Go Buggy*. The finish on the aircraft is wonderful, the paint and metal has a flat satin finish, and the panels are smooth and unblemished. But when you look closer you see why people are talking about this restoration. The detailing is amazing.

Mike explains: "If you look at photos from WWII, all the stencil markings on the exterior of the airplane were put on with rubber ink stamps and clear coated with lacquer from the factory. You don't 'see' the lacquer at the factory because it is clear, fresh, new, but when you get out in the field, the sun gets to it and the lacquer goes a yellowy-brownish colour. So to replicate an airplane that looked like it had been out in the field, we tinted urethane to make it look like aged lacquer."

He adds; "if you look at factory photos you will see where that metal was etched with acid because when you do aluminum spot welding, the metal has to be perfectly clean and one way they did that was with an acid etch cleaner. So, for instance on the front scoop, and some of the areas on the aft door back, you can see how much lighter it is. they just brushed acid on and spot welded. That's why you have the two-toned look. People look at that and scratch their heads!"

Underneath the panels is no less amazing. Midwest found grease pencil marks on the panels created on the North American production line. They replaced any manufacturing marks and labels, dyed nuts and bolts as per the factory signifying the batch had been inspected.

The cockpit is extremely authentic, with an operational K-14 gunsight, and an original SCR-522 radio assembly, which hides the modern avionics. There's an ANAPS-13 tail warning radar. Flip the switch, and an alarm bell rings and the light goes on! They have an

original ANN-6 gun camera in the left wing and it works. “We were able to get Kodak to load colour film on an original cartridge and we actually shot gun camera footage from the airplane.” says Vadeboncoeur.

On *Go Buggy* they used original guns; built up 50s out of real parts. But as a weight saving, Midwest have used a lot of aluminium replica guns.

The drop tanks are the 108 gallon paper tanks. “That was another big hit with a lot of people. There are only three or four maybe that are known to exist. A good friend, Bob Baker from Oklahoma City, has one in his possession and he was gracious enough to lend that to us to replicate. We took it to a composites company and they made a mould off the original – so our tanks have every imperfection that the originals would have had. However these are made out of a fiberglass, carbon fiber, and Kevlar combination for support. We understand the paper tanks lasted maybe five or six hours with fuel in before they began to deteriorate. So they would put fuel in them and go, fly the mission, drop them never to be seen again.”

### From The Man

Mike answered some other questions for Flightpath:

*How many owners will want to tear down a flying aircraft?*

“If some-one has one that they are flying, they are not going to tear it down unless they just feel that want to continue to keep it in the family. Usually when the airplane trades hands or if there is a customer who is looking for a project and our first suggestion is ‘lets go find a what I call a ‘low end flier’”, an airplane that’s airworthy but has never been restored. And usually the price should reflect that in the purchase price – versus when it comes out the door.

“You know what we were doing back in the eighties for restorations really isn’t what we do today. And a lot of them certainly were not authentic in their rebuilds – those airplanes could be made more authentic. And that is good for us.”

*Did you sit around drinking beer and coming up with bigger and bigger ideas?*

“There a lot of truth there! He has a great interest in WWII history and we opened the airplane up, saw what we had, how authentic it was. He jumped on the wagon right away, and said ‘well lets do it the way we find it’. If a part was yellow, we’d repaint it yellow, if it was green paint it green.

*How hard is it to get parts?*

“The stuff is out there, more and more of it turns up. In fact the Tail Warning Radar I bought on ebay two months before we finished the airplane. I already had one but this one that came up was a little better, and had a manual with it, which we hadn’t seen before. I was tickled pink and it was brand spanking new, never been in an airplane. We put it in, plugged it in and the thing worked, so that was a real good find.”



Vadeboncoeur states, “You know the internet has been great, you type in ‘gun camera’ for instance, and you just start searching and you spend hours looking for somebody who might help, or something that come back with a hit that might lead you to somebody that knows about the things. And that is exactly what happened with that, I found a guy in California who’s experienced with the old cameras and could get the film loaded, and that is exactly what we did. Yeah that helps a lot.”

Owner Winter adds: “She is as much or more fun to fly than even to look at – which is hard to believe. I am thrilled every chance I get to fly her and will try to do so every week. I am also impressed and appreciative of what our young men did over 65 years ago at 28,000 ft, very cold, unpressurised cockpits, for hour after hour over enemy territory, day after day - truly an example of what our best can do.”

*Is there anything that you think, should have, would have, could have?*

“Yeah, there are a few things here that we probably would change if we did the next one, but I am not going to tell you what they are!” Vadeboncoeur smiles.

### Awards

As well as the Oshkosh awards, Midwest won the National Aviation Heritage Invitational.

“The Invitational is different than a lot of other competitions because we’re looking for authenticity”, Ken Perich explains, “They have the aircraft restored like it was early in its career, not like some that look brand new out of the box, and I think that is what the judges like so much about this restoration. It wasn’t polished aluminum and gloss paint. They spent a lot of time and effort restoring the details to it. If you took away the



**BOTTOM LEFT: Gary Day and Doug Marlatt who wears a shop apron is a mechanic at Midwest. His father was a pilot in the war. Gary an A&P was in the US Marine Corp as a Helicopter Crew Chief. [JF]**

**BELOW: The Happy Jack’s Go Buggy team at Reno: Midwest’s Dave Young and Mike Vadeboncoeur with owner Bruce Winter proudly pose with trophy. [JF]**

**LEFT: Shop Foreman David Young making a final touch-up to P-51 Happy Jack’s Go Buggy during an annual at the Midwest shop. [JF]**

surroundings it would look like it was in 1944, and that is what the Invitational is all about. Not the prettiest airplane but the most realistic restoration.”

*Happy Jack* would not be out of place in the Smithsonian. “I would agree with that, I think that is what I like about it because I could see the aircraft sitting in the Smithsonian like it is,” states Perich, “At the Udvar-Hazy Center they are not all pretty and polished to a high gloss – they look like they would have when you walked out of your Quonset hut in 1944 and jumped in.”

Mustang pilot Vlado Lenoč, who did the first post restoration flights, adds: “I do not think any more original work could have incorporated without becoming impractical or non-airworthy. Some modernization in the engine was incorporated; contemporary engine oil filters, the deletion of the oil dilution and the addition of the pre-oiler. These modern Merlin items are necessary for improved engine service life. If one were to remove the military paint scheme, what would be left on *Happy Jack* is basically a factory stock aircraft as would have rolled off the factory assembly line.”

Bruce is ecstatic with the work, “I would do another restoration project with Mike and Dave at Midwest Aero Restorations immediately if I had the funds and a worthwhile project; they are truly the greatest and they deserve most of all the credit for how beautiful she is. The awards speak of their expertise for which we are all so very proud and appreciative.”

### The future

Midwest has two other Mustangs in restoration; the next will feature the high gloss that is familiar with newly restored ‘sport’ or civilian P-51s. The finish on the metal is mirror perfect, and when completed it will have the same attention to structural soundness.

With a restoration flying out about every two years, some may feel that Oshkosh 2009 will be safe from Midwest, but Mike aims to finish the Cessna Birdog by then.

Mike muses on the future; “A Corsair would be interesting. I would like to do a Thunderbolt, it’s Air Force; we’ve kind of been in the Air Force mindset, Air Force mode. Dave and I both think that a Thunderbolt would be fun to do again. Or a P-40. A Hellcat would be another one on my list. But then, as a kid I thought Mustangs were OK, but the Corsair was IT!”

**BELOW:** Midwest’s first ground up restoration was for Ken Wagon of *Cripes A Mighty IV* (44-74813), which received the 2002 Grand Champion WWII Warbird award. [JF]

### Happy Jack Ifrey

The aircraft was restored to replicate the P-51 flown by WWII ace Major Jack Ifrey, the scheme was chosen by owner Bruce Winter.

Ifrey has been described as a real-life cross between Hans Solo and Indiana Jones! Jack Milton Ifrey was born in Houston on the 31st July 1920. He joined the Civilian Pilot Program while attending Texas A&M, before entering the Army Air Corps in April 1941. Graduating on the 12th December 1941 he was assigned to the 94th *Hat-in-the-Ring* Squadron patrolling the Californian Coast in P-38s. He was part of the ‘Operation Bolero’ the mass flight of fighters and bombers to England.

On the 15th November 1942 Ifrey took off from Chivenor Airdrome in Land’s End for a 1500 mile non-stop flight to Oran. Half an hour into the flight he felt a jolt – one of his 150 gallon belly tanks had fallen off. Jack estimated he could just reach Gibraltar with the remaining fuel, but then the flight had to avoid storms, leaving him without enough fuel. He was faced with the choice of ditching into the sea or landing in Spain or Portugal. Jack thought that the Portuguese would offer him a better future and managed to find an airfield near Lisbon. Landing his P-38, he was met by six horsemen, and escorted to the Administration Building. After an hour of interrogation Jack was told that he and his aircraft would be interned.

Ifrey managed to con some fuel out of the Portuguese and when one Air Force officer showed interest in his aircraft he saw his chance. As another P-38 came into land he advanced throttles and the Portuguese officer fell off. He then took off, without maps, parachute or Mae West. He managed to find Gibraltar, where he was in diplomatic hot water. He reasoned the authorities would not send him back to a Lisbon jail, but Col. Willis (the CO of US operations in Gibraltar) told him that Washington had directed just that. Willis cabled Washington to tell them that the officer involved had ‘already left for North Africa’; he then dispatched Ifrey on his way.

Ifrey proved that it was the right decision by quickly racking up kills. In December Ifrey returned from one mission with over 278 bullet holes in his P-38 *Texas Terror*. During another mission he actually collided with one ME-109 during a head-on pass.

“I felt a jolt,” Ifrey explained; “and I ducked. I saw the 109 start to spin and my own plane went over into a dangerous bank and rocked badly. I finally managed to get it under control, but I had several anxious moments and had to fight like fury to keep from spinning. The collision had ripped open my right wing tank and that engine quit temporarily. From where I sat the end of the wing looked like shredded wheat, but I managed to skip out of that hot spot and later got both engines working.”

In April 1943 he returned to the US as an instructor. Promoted to Captain he returned to England commander of the 79th Fighter Squadron, 20th Fighter Group, at Kingscliffe. He shot down two ME-109 in May 1944.

On the 13th June he was shot down by flak while strafing a train near Angers, France. Ifrey managed to evade with the help of a French family, and he made the 200 miles back to the Allied lines, on a bicycle as ‘Jacques Robert’ a deaf-mute. In July the 20th converted to the P-51D, and Ifrey painted it up the same as his P-38 – *Happy Jack’s Go Buggy*. Ifrey was promoted to Major, but during the celebrations of his promotion he wound up being busted back to 2nd Lieutenant for rules infractions. He remained





in charge of his squadron giving him the dubious distinction of being the only 2nd Lt. to be a Commanding Officer of a combat squadron during the war.

Whilst returning from one escort mission his wingman Kelso was hit and made a landing on an emergency strip surrounded by trees. Jack Ilfrey wrote; "Damned, I must have been out of my ever loving mind, however the thought of not going in never occurred to me. He was a good pilot, excellent wingman, would have followed me anywhere. So, impetuously, I threw down wheels and flaps and went in for another hairy landing. He had the presence of mind to get away from his a/c as German ground fire was still trying to hit it. Ran a 100 yards or so towards the end of the strip figuring I'd turn around and take off

## "Ilfrey has been described as a real-life cross between Hans Solo and Indiana Jones!"

from the way I came in, irregardless of wind, which happened to be negligible. (Lucky us.)

"God, what a hairy landing, dodging holes, muddy as hell but the *Go Buggy* made it. Taxied a short distance up to him, set the park brakes, jumped out on the wing and took off my chute and dinghy. He got in, sat in what now was a bucket like seat, lowered all the way. We immediately discovered that four legs were not to fit and allow me full rudder control. So I stood up and he crossed his legs under him and I sat down on them. No time to try other positions or adjust the seat and shoulder harness. Liked to have scalped myself trying to close the canopy, thank God it was a 'D'. So there I was, head and neck bent down, knees almost up to my chin and we started a most hairy take off. Almost castrated myself pulling back on the stick. For a second there I thought we weren't going to make it. Threw down some flaps' reamed out my crotch some more and the *Go Buggy* pulled up over the trees. Thank God she was light, low on ammo and fuel.

Made a short flight to Brussels, which had been taken by the British on Sept. 3rd., for another hairy landing, crotch bit and all."

In his two combat tours Ilfrey flew 142 missions and is credited with shooting down 7.5 aircraft, he was awarded the Silver Star, Distinguished Flying Cross with 5 Oak Leaf Clusters, and the Air Medal with 13 OLC. Jack Ilfrey lived in San Antonio, passing away on the 15th October 2004.

**LEFT: On *Go Buggy* they used original guns, built up .50s out of real parts. [JF]**

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