



**Main Pic:**  
Lying in Wait. The familiar lines of the bubble canopy look beyond the hangar's confines.

**Below:**  
Mustang Cockpit. The scene of my childhood dogfights.



# Mustangs and Memories

By Owen Zupp

Once in a while you get the opportunity to tear up the sky in something a little out of the ordinary. Ain't it great!

As the four flat blades slowly turned, reality was slowly sinking in. I was strapped in, low and tight, in the rear of a World War II vintage fighter; the Mustang. As the vapour searched for spark, the Merlin engine pushed the blades to an ever-increasing speed. Fuel, air and ignition then found common ground and the whirring blades were replaced by the throaty roar of 12 cylinders leaping in to life. The exhaust stacks punched out a burst of smoke that caught a ride in the slipstream and wove its way into the still-open cockpit. Beyond the back of pilot Guy Bourke's helmet, the propeller now formed a huge disc as the moving parts settled into a

harmony and after start checks were verbalised.

It was thirty years since I'd last sat low in a Mustang's cockpit. At eight years of age there were very few other ways to sit. My father had hoisted me into the cockpit of a now retired steed as it sat in the darkened confines of Syd Marshall's Air Museum at Bankstown Airport in suburban Sydney. Ever since his RAAF days, the P-51D and its Aussie equivalent had been my father's favourite. More than the Meteors he had flown in Korea, or the Connies in which he'd criss-crossed the globe, it was always the Mustang. Leaning in, he explained the numerous dials and switches with military thoroughness. The systems and limitations poured forth from a razor sharp memory that would still forget to pick up milk

on the way home. I grasped what I could, but found my imagination drifting elsewhere. My head revolving as it moved its gaze from the enormous cowling ahead back to 'check my six'...just in case.

Now I again found myself swiveling at the neck. It was an Airshow day at the Temora Aviation Museum in western New South Wales and the atmosphere was charged. Taking in the sights and sounds of this fantastic opportunity, I spotted my wife in the crowd. In conspiracy with display pilot Guy Bourke, who I'd known for years, she had secretly arranged the wedding anniversary gift of a lifetime. I had never seen my wife so keen for me to go to a fly-in and the reasoning was now becoming very apparent. The flight was to

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Old Crow. A beautifully restored example displays the Mustangs profile at Duxford, England.



My Father's Steed. An RAAF Mustang circa 1950 to the backdrop of an Avro Lincoln.

be made up of two sections. The first involved an air-to-air photo shoot in company with another fighter, the Boomerang, and a trainer of yesteryear, the North American Harvard. At the conclusion of this sortie, 'Bourkey' and I would break off and take the Mustang to the

west for airwork on its own. This had been briefed thoroughly pre-flight and the Harvard now led the three ship formation out to the end of Runway 36.

Checks complete, we now sat beneath the closed canopy awaiting our turn for take-off.

Throughout the procedure, Guy had kept me briefed and 'in the loop' through the intercom that linked the world of the rear seat to the fore. The aft seat had a spartan instrument panel of altimeter and A.S.I. to the right. To the left, at about the same height, lies the

throttle quadrant. Ahead, the control column and rudder pedals complete the picture. As the pristine Boomerang cleared the perimeter, Guy announced the departure and smoothly increased the abundant power of the V12. I have been fortunate to fly a number of aircraft over the years, but the sounds, sensations and sinking into the seat of a Mustang take-off takes some beating. As rudder authority increased with airflow, the tail was raised to introduce a new world of enhanced visibility. The ground rush in the peripheral vision began to change in focus as the ground fell away and the gear was selected up. All clear for the turn, Bourkey rolled this fierce piece of North American design to the left in pursuit of the formation. Closing on the two specs at an impressive rate, one couldn't help but imagine how many times this scene had been acted out in skies around the world in a very different time. With the Harvard serving as the camera ship, we slotted in to right echelon on the Boomerang. Sitting tight on the little Aussie fighter, it was easy to see the immaculate quality of the restoration. After weaving across the skies in formation for a period, it was time to break right and head west on our own.

The land surrounding Temora is custom built for committing aviation. Golden fields of crops, uninterrupted by the rising terrain that so often can pose a problem. Should all go quiet 'up front', potential landing fields are numerous, offering a special type of peace to the single-engine pilot. It is little wonder that this site was chosen as an Elementary Flight Training School throughout the war years and was home to a flock of Tiger Moths. Set to this backdrop Guy climbed the Mustang to a safe height and set about demonstrating some rolls and loops. Even tucked into the back seat, the brilliant visibility afforded by the bubble canopy allows tremendous orientation throughout the manoeuvres. As sky passed

earth and back to sky, a sense of balance and power pervaded the aircraft. It was in its realm and roared across the heavens with the freedom of its namesake. I gratefully accepted control on Guy's call of, "Handing Over" and proceeded to experience that freedom first hand. I exercised the controls and the Mustang responded crisply to the inputs. Seemingly unencumbered by adverse yaw to any degree, the rudder is used as a tuning fork rather than a backhoe. Scanning the horizon and the skies, the aircraft holds the attitude as if set in stone and I take in the view and the ambience.

All too soon, the minutes have ticked over and Terra Firma calls. We set Temora in the windscreen and call inbound for an 'initial and pitch' entry, Runway 36. Circuit-side and parallel, we zoom along the bitumen before pulling up and left to enter the circuit. Power steady, the energy is managed and the drag deployed to position the aircraft on left base. Final calls, final checks and the Mustang sets its sights on the touchdown point under Guys hand. Over the fence, powering back and the wide track of the main gear reunites Man and Mustang with Mother Earth. As the speed washes off, the tail slowly lowers and the back of Guys head again dominates my field of view.

The exhilaration as we taxied in was hard to harness. Mindful of wingtip clearance, we navigated through a tarmac littered with a gallery of aircraft that one can only admire. In position and checks complete, power is withdrawn from this great machine and the huge disc dissipates to again form four distinct blades. Becalmed, with 'switches off', the adventure is over. Out of the blue a childhood dream had been realised and it had lived up to all expectations. As I took in the moment, I was that eight year-old once again and looked back to 'check my six' one more time ... just in case. •

Right: Under the Hood. Attending to the Mustang's Merlin engine. Chino, USA.

Below right: Partners in Crime. Guy Bourke and Owen Zupp with indelible smiles after their flight.

Below: On the ramp. Attending to the housekeeping after the exhilarating flight.

