

# Farewell to gathering of Mustangs and Legends

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The last week of September was celebrated as Air Force Heritage Week in Columbus, Ohio, but it was also the second and final “Gathering of Mustangs and Legends.”

The 2007 GML was held 27-30 September at Rickenbacker International Airport outside of Columbus. The original gathering was in April 1999 in Kissimmee, Fla.

It was said to be more like a reunion with 65 Mustangs and 12 Legends which was the largest gathering of P-51 Mustangs since Korea. This year, there were more than double the Mustangs and as many legends. In fact, there was close to 200 aircraft on display but the vast majority of the aircraft were warbirds.

If it wasn't for Britain's desperate need for fighters, the Mustang might never have been built. In fact, the U.S. Army Air Corps almost did everything to avoid looking at the bird.

In response to the British request, North American Aviation designed the prototype NA-73 in 1940.

The British ordered a total of 720 NA-73 aircraft with the 1,150 h.p., V-12 Allison engine.

In December 1940, the British gave the NA-73 the official designation of “Mustang.”

The great transformation of the Mustang came at the hands of England's Rolls-Royce Limited. Four Royal Air Force Mustangs were given to Rolls-Royce for a trial installation of the Merlin 61 engine and a four-bladed propeller.

Flight tests with the Merlin engine showed the aircraft was capable of 441 m.p.h. at 30,000 feet and was able to climb to 20,000 feet three minutes faster than the Allison-engined version.

North American redesigned the Mustang to handle a 1,520 h.p. Packard engine which was a license-built Merlin with a two-stage supercharger and an after-cooler. By the summer of 1943, the Packard-engined Mustang was in full production at plants in Inglewood, Calif., and Dallas.

But the Mustangs and other warbirds weren't the only stars of the show. The Legends included Lee Archer, one of 38 Tuskegee Airmen attending GML and the only ace of those famed airmen.

Another Legend was David “Tex” Hill. He was one of the

first members of the American Volunteer Group, the legendary Flying Tigers. Hill was among the first Americans to see combat in World War II. He became a triple ace with 18 enemy aircraft destroyed including the first Japanese Zero shot down by a Mustang. Hill is a member of the National Aviation Hall of Fame.

Also at the GML was a man known as the “pilot's pilot” - Robert A. “Bob” Hoover. He flew 58 combat missions during WWII but was shot down on his 59th and spent 16 months on Stalag Luft #1. After the war, he spent time in the Flight Test Division at Wright Field. During his flying career, he's flown more than 300 types of aircraft and flight tested about every type of fighter aircraft in the inventory.

Two hundred eighty one men became aces in some of the 15,686 Mustangs produced. The Mustang served in Korea and the Air National Guard retired its last propeller-driven Mustang in 1957. Today, only a few more than 165 survive.

In 1945, \$50,985 would buy a brand new Mustang. Now, warbird enthusiasts can't touch one for less than \$1 million dollars. It just goes to prove that you can't keep a good aircraft down.