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 Visitors roam among the P-51 Mustangs lined up on the tarmac Friday, Sept 28, at the Gathering of Mustang and Legends airshow at Rickenbacker International Airport. SNP photo by Jeffrey Konczal

Huge crowd, pilots enjoy 'Final Roundup'

World War II-era and more modern military planes took center stage the airshow.

By MARC HASKINS
 Suburban News Publications

A commanding sun battled clouds for prominence and the feud only served to amplify the backdrop as a team of F-16 Thunderbirds barrel-rolled and maneuvered over Rickenbacker International Airport Friday, Sept. 28. The five-fighter team's performance was a fraction of eight hours of air shows scheduled for the opening day of the Gathering of Mustangs and Legends. With between 200,000 and 300,000 people expected to have attended, the air show might have been the second largest in the world. The

Airventure in Oshkosh, Wisc., reportedly draws about 500,000 spectators annually. At the base of the control tower on the sprawling tarmac several guests of honor spoke wistfully – more amongst themselves perhaps than the large audience they were to be addressing – of the hundreds of missions they flew in the plane at the center of the aviation event: the P-51 Mustang. One of the "legends," 51 veterans affiliated with the Mustang during World War II, was a woman, 86-year-old Vivian Eddy. The former Women in the Airforce Service Pilot told of a time when while flying point she botched a landing only to have the planes behind her follow suit. When she emerged the vexed pilots exclaimed, "It's a girl!" Later, they bought her drinks. People snapped pictures of and admired the more than 100 Mustangs on display.

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It may have been the last time for a gathering of this magnitude. More than ever, World War II veterans are disappearing into their history. The event was dubbed "The Final Roundup." One of the Rolls Royce engine-powered fighters – *Big Beautiful Doll* the side of the nose read – was red, black and white checkered. Thirty-one swastika and six Japanese rising sun icons adorned the side, indicating enemy engagements. At peak production one Mustang was built every 66 minutes. Another, with the moniker *Hell'er Bust*, told the story of its captain, E.L. Heller, with 20 Nazi crosses emblazoned above the wing. Thousands of people traveled from tent to tent, speaking with Tuskegee Airmen, absorbing

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 –Kelly Clayton Gross
 World War II pilot

memorabilia or touring World War II-era bombers. The site belied a disturbing observation from one legend during a media panel. Kelly Clayton Gross, of Walla Walla, Wash., was part of the first class to enter flight training after Pearl Harbor. He flew more than 100 missions in Europe in a Mustang and started a den-

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tistry practice after the war.

Gross, 86, told of an instance with a patient when he remarked that he had received a letter from Eddie Rickenbacker, the famed World War I ace. Who is he? the patient asked.

At a luncheon later an incredulous Gross asked a woman if she knew who Rickenbacker was. "Did he play for the 49ers?" was her reply.

"At that point I knew that despite the fact that I won a war and shot down Germans, nobody's going to remember me," Gross said.

Near the grandstand seating Shaun Holmes, 28, pulled his 3-year-old Megan in a wagon while his other children, Ashley, Cody and Tristan, all younger than 10, followed.

Holmes, who works for a heating and cooling business in Westerville, brought his

children to continue a tradition begun by his parents.

He said he couldn't believe a veteran would have such a dim outlook.

His son, 9-year-old Tristan, said he liked the event, he thought it was "kind of neat."

"It's good to see all this stuff around you, you can learn a lot from it," Tristan Holmes said.

"It's a pretty great experience and that's about all I have to say."