

P-51s gather for perhaps final tribute

WW II pilots, aviation fans get chance to mingle at Rickenbacker air show

BY BRIAN R. BALL | BUSINESS FIRST

When 100 or more vintage P-51 Mustangs begin to fly into Rickenbacker International Airport next week, Scotts Miracle-Gro Co. boss James Hagedorn will have more than a casual interest in the airplanes that escorted American bombers on missions over World War II Germany.

"It's not just about the airplanes," said Hagedorn, chief executive of the Marysville-based lawn and garden products maker. "It's about the guys who flew them."

Hagedorn has an affinity for the single-seat aircraft. He piloted F-16 fighter jets for the Air Force before joining his family's Miracle-Gro business in 1987, eight years before it merged with Scotts Co. He remains a pilot, including flying a P-51 he has owned for the past two years.

"I've always been a single-seat guy," he said, "so I consider the F-16 and P-51s as the

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most beautiful fighters ever."

GETTING IT DONE

The Gathering of Mustangs & Legends at Rickenbacker will headline an air show set for Sept. 27-30 that will include other World War II aircraft, the Air Force's Thunderbirds demonstration squadron and a celebration of the Air Force's 60th anniversary.

The event is expected to draw 200,000 visitors over four days.

Hagedorn said Rickenbacker's 65 years as a military installation and Ohio's role in aviation prompted him to lobby the air show operator, Gathering Foundation Inc., to consider the former Lockbourne Army Air Base over Denver as the site for the Mustang show.

His efforts included flying in air show organizers on a Scotts aircraft to give area of-

ficials an opportunity to show off the airport and Columbus.

The Gathering Foundation's Angela West said the group needed an airport for several days, an easy place for P-51 enthusiasts to reach and plenty of hotel rooms.

"Rickenbacker had it all," West said.

The air show operator has billed the Rickenbacker event as the "final roundup" of P-51 pilots, support crew and aircraft owners given that the original pilots and crews are now in their 80s.

"But when you talk to them about the Mustangs, they light up like they're in their 20s again," West said.

Only about 165 of the 15,868 P-51s produced remain operational, she said, with 85 or so other Mustangs as museum pieces.

West said among 51 Mustang "legends" to be honored at the show will be pilots and crew of P-51 squadrons and members of the Women Airforce Service Pilots who ferried the planes during the war.

Those lauded also will include four members of the Tuskegee Airmen, a squadron of black aviators based at Lockbourne after World War II. The squadron flew as bomber escorts during World War II and began flying Mustangs in mid-1944.

West said the plane's legacy as critical escort support for American bombers on daylight raids into Germany made it popular among latter-day aviation enthusiasts.

"We have everyone from doctors to lawyers and executives like Jim Hagedorn and others who love aviation," she said of the aircraft owners scheduled to visit the show.

PAYING TRIBUTE

Hagedorn's passion for flying is rooted in his dreams as a kid of becoming an airline pilot.

"That's what I wanted to be, so that's what I set out to do," he said.

When he left the Air Force 20 years ago, however, he equated flying a commercial jet to driving a bus rather than the excitement he experienced flying an F-16 Fighting Falcon.

He remained an avid pilot, but he went into the family business instead.



"I discovered a job I thought was going to be boring was like going to war every day," he said.

Hagedorn regularly flies a corporate jet painted like a combat F-16 and, more recently, a single-engine Cessna aircraft. Still, he has an affinity for the P-51, which he flies a few times a month.

He takes flight training twice a year with the Stallion 51 Corp. of Florida, which helped organize the Gathering Foundation.

He said the Mustang has a powerful engine, but conceded it's "definitely more than a handful" to operate.

"Once you're in the airplane," he said, "it flies easy and I'm relaxed."

He admires those who flew the P-51 in wartime with only a few hundred hours of training.

When he talks to the combat pilots and crews of those airplanes, he is reminded they flew and maintained the P-51s at the age of his son.

"They were green pilots in green airplanes flying in the European theater," he said. "They got experience quickly."

Hagedorn looks forward to hearing their combat memories during the air show as the World War II generation fades.

"This gathering is a big deal," he said. "It's never going to happen again."

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IF YOU GO

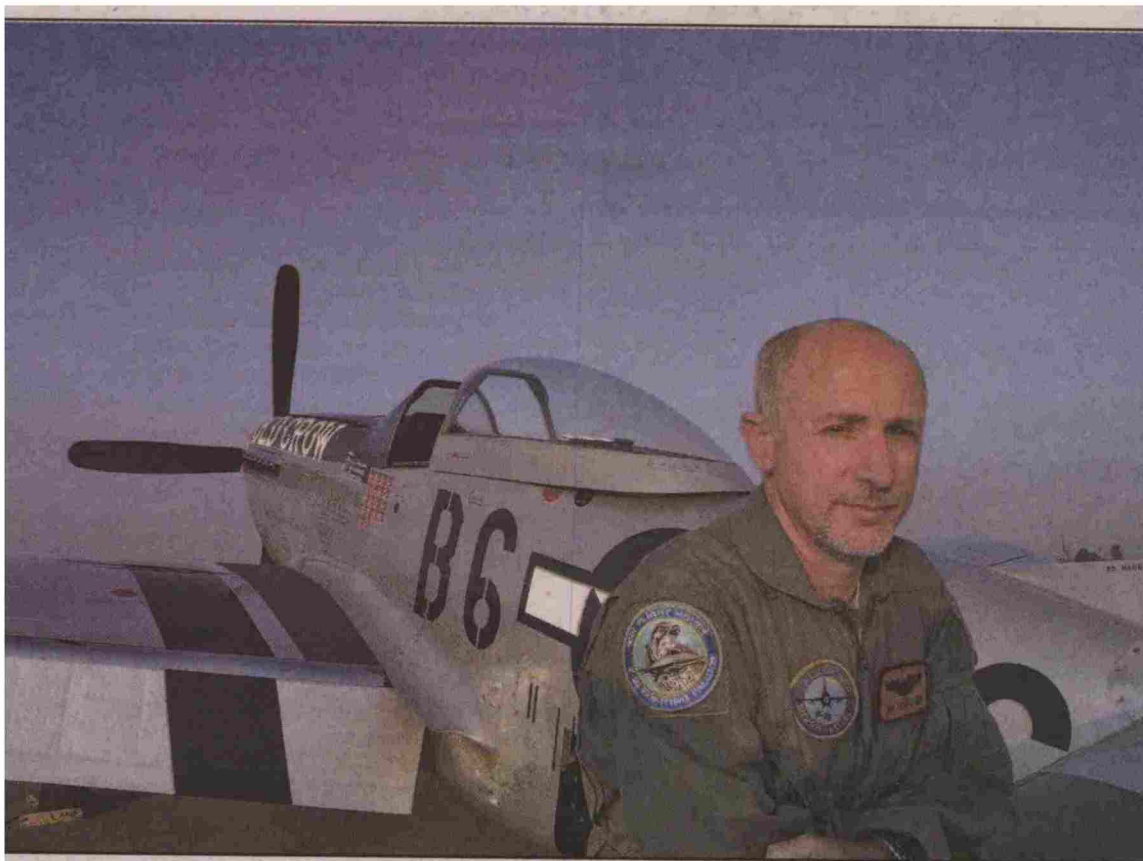
What: Gathering of Mustangs & Legends air show and U.S. Air Force Heritage Week

Where: Rickenbacker International Airport

Headliners: P-51 Mustang formation flights and military demonstrations, including the Air Force's Thunderbirds and civilian performers. Show also commemorates the 60th anniversary of the Air Force and the 65th anniversary of the opening of Rickenbacker as the Lockbourne Army Air Base.

Tickets: \$15 to \$20 general admission in advance, or \$55 for a four-day pass in advance; \$10 to \$25 for general admission purchased at the gate and \$65 for a four-day pass purchased at the gate. Discounts available to students, veterans and military personnel. Advanced sales end Sept. 26.

Information: gml2007.com or 1-888-4FLYSHOW.



JACK KUSTRON | FOR BUSINESS FIRST
Scott's CEO James Hagedorn, with his Mustang, helped land an air show in Columbus for fellow P-51 owners.