

*Fagen Fighters' P-51D "Sweet Revenge" and P-40E "Desert Shark" in formation over the Minnesota countryside (photo by Sam Larson).*



*Preserving History... One Aircraft at a Time*

# Fagen Fighters

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*By Sam Larson*

Warbirds, those aircraft that answered the call to defend our freedoms long ago, inspire both young and old at airshows all across America. For a select group of patriotic Americans, this inspiration is so great that it drives them to devote time, resources, and effort to preserving and restoring these incredible aircraft. Some will restore their precious aircraft to airworthy condition so that the sights, sounds, and honor they represent may transcend from generation to generation of proud Americans.

On a quiet, cornfield-surrounded airport in the Western Minnesota countryside, Ron and Diane Fagen have done just that. They, along with a dedicated family and team, have restored a multitude of classic aircraft including P-40s, P-51s, and a P-38, as well as established a world class World War II museum that pays tribute to heroes of days past.

## *The Journey*

Ron Fagen's lifelong infatuation with warbirds led him on a journey in 1976 to South America where governments were phasing out military aircraft like the P-51 Mustang as surplus. Ron came away empty handed, but he is now thankful that he did, due to the high

number of fatal crashes that occurred when inexperienced warbird pilots attempted to fly aircraft of questionable airworthiness from South America to the United States.

Then, in the early 1990s, Ron successfully acquired a P-51 from the Sandberg family estate and was one of the first to graduate from Lee Lauderback's Mustang training program at Stallion 51 in Kissimmee, Florida.

"I thought being a professional in aerobatic flying meant that training would be a waste of time," Ron says, reflecting back on his training at Stallion 51. "But had I not done so, I surely would have killed myself."

Following the Mustang, Ron would go on to restore a P-40 Warhawk which took Grand Champion honors at Oshkosh. With the knowledge gained from that first restoration, Ron, along with his family and team, opened a restoration shop in Granite Falls, Minnesota that began cranking out world-class warbird restorations.

Since those days, Fagen Fighters has grown into one of the finest warbird collections in the entire United States. The restoration shop now employs eight full time maintainers and several aircraft restored in the shop have gone on to win Grand Champion at the Oshkosh airshow, a testament to the dedication of the Fagen Fighter team.

For the Fagens, warbirds and airshow flying have become a family





One of only a handful of P-38 Lightnings left flying, the Fagens' P-38 is restored in the scheme of a P-38 flown in World War II by Major Norbert Ruff (photo by Jim Froneberger).



Ron and Diane Fagen's P-40E "Desert Shark" was the Warbird Grand Champion-World War II at EAA AirVenture in 2009 (photo by Sam Larson).

affair. Ron has over 15,000 hours of flight time, including aerobatics in Pitts aircraft. He also holds a low level aerobatic waiver in the P-51 and P-40 for airshow flying. Ron and his wife Diane, who is also a licensed pilot, have flown around much of the United States in their P-51 Mustang *Sweet Revenge*.

The Fagens' son, Evan, is the museum's chief pilot with 3,500 flying hours in 55 different types of aircraft. He holds a low level waiver in the P-51, P-40, and Extra 300 aircraft. Son Aaron runs the acquisition of vintage vehicles for the museum, all of which still drive just like the aircraft still fly.

### Airshows

The entire Fagen collection participates in airshows, both flying and in static displays. The Fagens' P-38 *Ruff Stuff* participates in the U.S. Air Force Heritage Flight program and is most often flown in Heritage formations by warbird legend Kevin Eldridge. When not flown in the Heritage Flight, pilot Rob Ator is the primary pilot at the helm of *Ruff Stuff*.

The Fagens also play host to a biennial airshow at the Granite Falls airport. Titled the "Ray Fagen Memorial Airshow" as a tribute to Ron's father who served in World War II, the show is comprised entirely of vintage and World War II aircraft and has featured the

## Fagen Fighters World War II Museum Aircraft

### Fighters

North American P-51D Mustang *Twilight Tear*  
North American P-51D Mustang *Sweet Revenge*  
Lockheed P-38J Lightning *Ruff Stuff*  
Curtiss P-40E Warhawk *Desert Shark*  
Curtiss P-40K Warhawk

### Trainers

Fairchild PT-19  
Ryan PT-22  
Fairchild PT-26  
Vultee BT-13 Vultee Valiant  
Erco Ercoupe

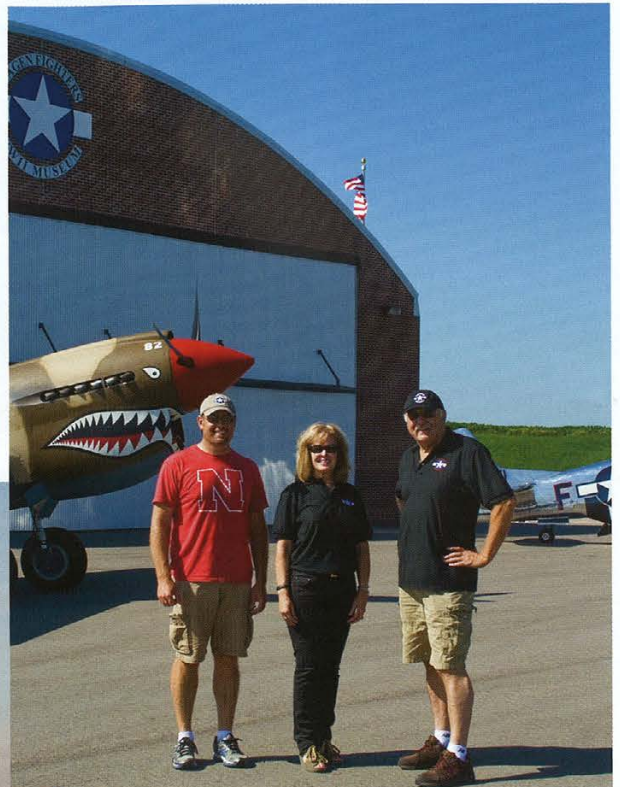
### Glider

Waco CG-4A Combat Glider  
Schweizer TG-2 Glider





Left: Two more Fagen aircraft that have been crowned Oshkosh Warbird Grand Champions-World War II are the P-40K Warhawk(top) in 2013 and the P-51D "Twilight Tear" in 2011 (bottom, photos by Jim Froneberger).



From left to right, Evan Fagen, Diane Fagen, and Ron Fagen at the Fagen Fighters World War II Museum (photo by Sam Larson).

AeroShell Aerobatic Team, a World War II Battle Reenactment, and a concert by Aaron Tippin. The next airshow is set for June 20, 2015 and is a must-see for warbird enthusiast in the Midwest.

### The Museum

To accompany and house their vast collection of fighter and trainer aircraft, the Fagens have added a remarkable museum that takes those who visit the small airfield in the heart of the Midwest on a journey through the greatest generation of aircraft and the battles they flew in. The Fagens have two massive hangars: one dedicated to fighters and one dedicated to trainers. Soon, a third hangar will be erected for bomber aircraft and will house the Fagen's latest restoration taking place in California, a B-25 Mitchell which is scheduled to be airworthy

in April of 2014.

Painted on the museum walls are huge murals that depict famous battles that the restored aircraft participated in. One example of this is the checker tail P-40 that is painted to reflect the Warhawk aircraft that flew low level bombing runs in a battle that defeated German tank commander Erwin Rommel. Behind this historic aircraft is a massive painting on the hanger wall showing the Warhawk in action.

Other highlights include a D-Day tribute in dedication to Ron's father who stormed the beaches of Normandy. The D-Day display features real sand from Utah Beach, authentic World War II machine guns, a Quonset hut dedicated to Bud Anderson, and a World War II patrol tower.

The museum is built to last, with walls that can withstand winds in excess of 160

miles per hour, equal to an F3 tornado. Ron and Diane Fagen hope the museum will hold their beautifully restored aircraft for hundreds of years to come.

### The Future

The latest restoration completed by the Fagen team is a P-40K Warhawk that won Grand Champion-World War II and Golden Wrench awards at EAA AirVenture 2013. The aircraft was salvaged out of Russia and flew for the first time since 1942, when it was forced to make a belly up landing less than 500 feet from another P-40. The Fagen team restored both P-40 aircraft and both fly in the air together once again nearly 70 years later.

With a Curtiss Helldiver and four more P-40 Warhawk projects still yet to complete, the dedicated Fagen shop team has about 25 more years of work bringing warbirds to life. Look for the Fagen's pristine aircraft on the airshow circuit or visit the Fagen's and their dedicated team at their Midwest warbird oasis in Granite Falls as they continue to restore and preserve the most influential fighter aircraft to ever grace the skies. 🌐