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An old warrior flies again

September 29, 1943: pilot J/Lt. I.I. Mikailov anxiously scanned the Russian tundra below for familiar landmarks. He had just survived a battle with four JG5 Bf 109s, but as the fuel gauge edged towards empty, it was obvious he was still going to lose his airplane. Resigned to his fate, he bellied his P-40 into the soft turf, and the war was over for Curtiss Warhawk 42-10256. Mikailov was unscathed, but 10256 would sit for another 50 years before its badly brutalized remains would be rescued.

P-40K

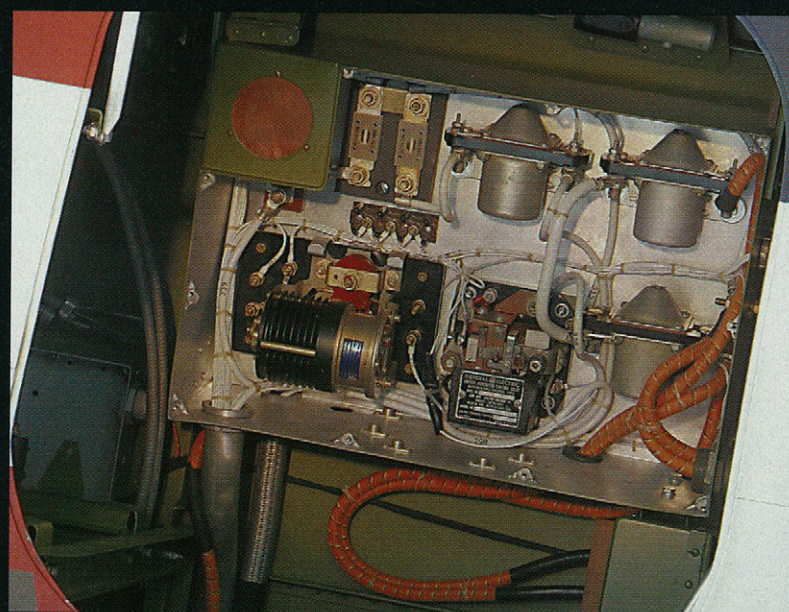
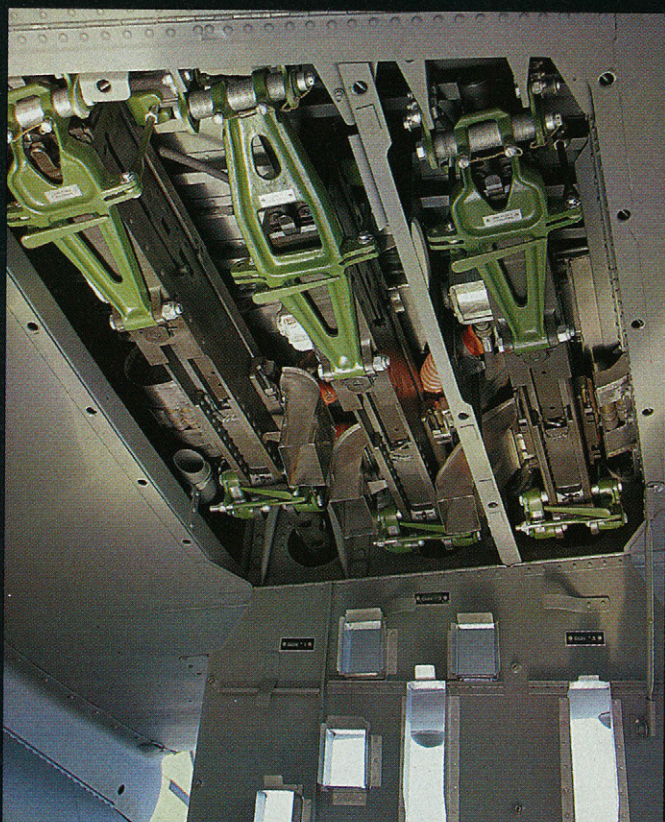
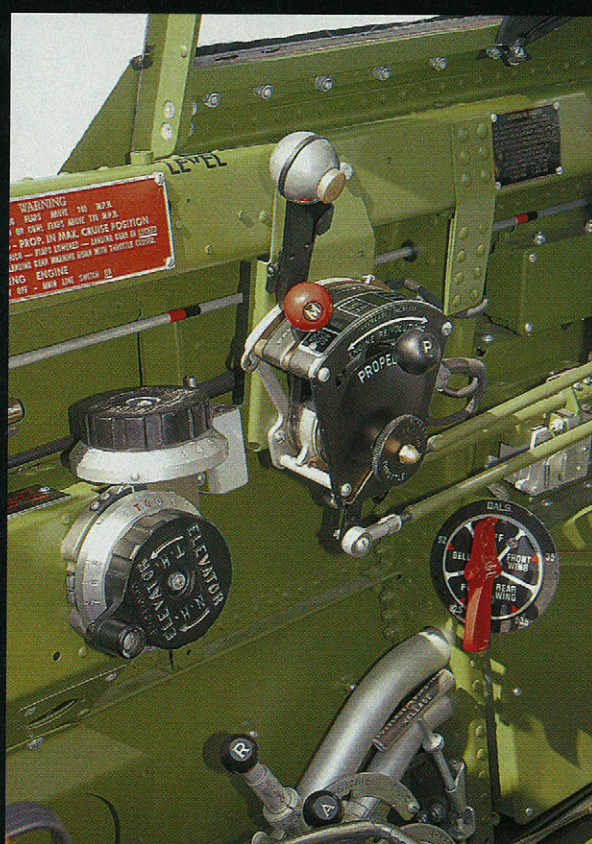
P-40 42-10256 was a K model, which was a continuation of the P-40E line but with the more powerful Allison V-1710-73(F4R) engine installed. The bigger engine required more vertical tail authority, so the initial production batches used the short fuselage of the "E" models with additional vertical tail area in the form of a fin fillet. Later, the horizontal tail was held at the original length, but the rudder and fin were moved back nearly two feet as they were on the "F" models.

When 42-10256 was recovered, it was barely above junk status. A bomb blast had removed any trace of fuselage from behind the canopy, and locals had hacked off everything that could be removed. When the remains hit Ken Hake's facility in Tipton, Kansas, he stripped it down to its primary structure and began to build a new airplane around the bones. Then Warbirds Inc., owned by Ron Fagen in Granite Falls, Minnesota, bought the airframe and continued the process. Erik Hokuf completed the restoration; it was his first attempt at such a monumental undertaking.

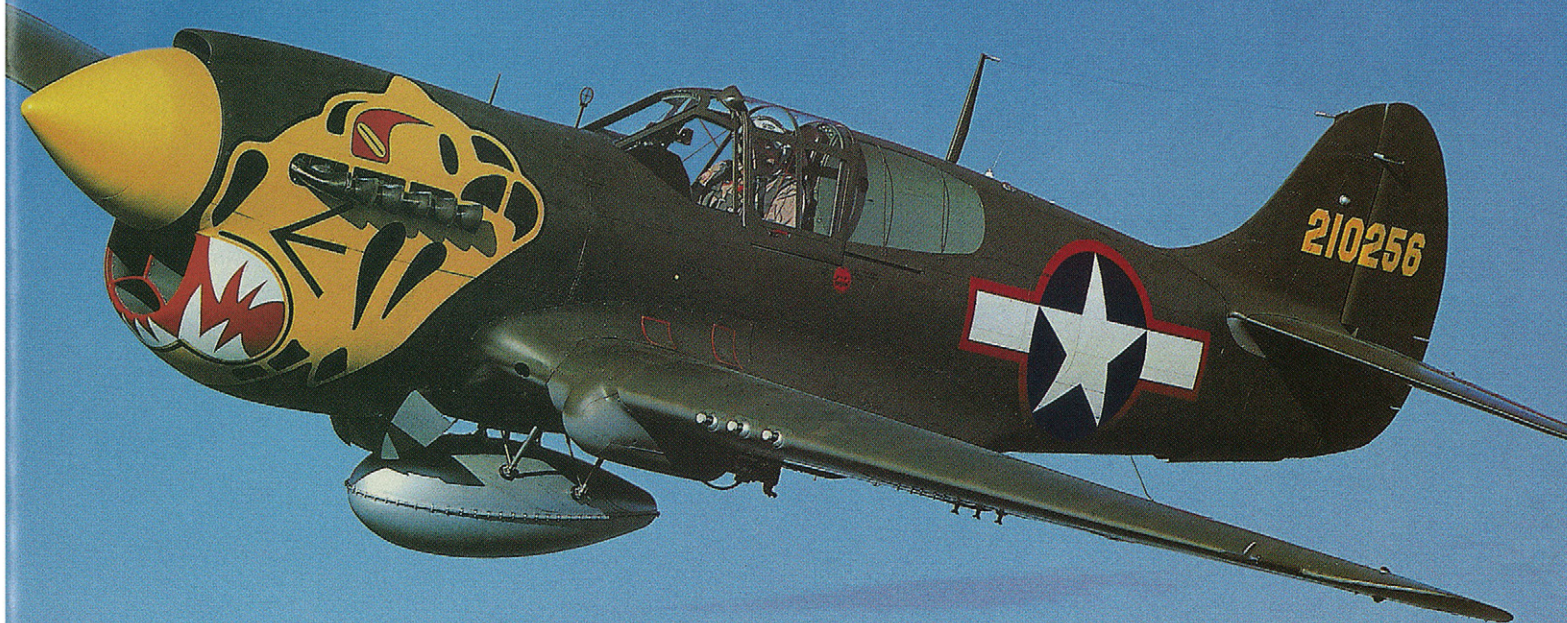
The final product is a monument to the restorers' determination and skill, which earned the airplane the Grand Champion Warbird (WW II) award at Air Venture '06, as well as a Golden Wrench award. At the Rolls-Royce National Aviation Heritage Invitational Western Regional, it won the prestigious Hap Arnold Trophy.

Incidentally, another P-40K that flew with J/Lt. Mikailov that day also crash-landed. Unbelievably, it now sits alongside 42-10256 in Ron Fagen's hangar! How many aircraft lost on the same mission have been reunited?

—Mark Sheppard
Photos by Xavier Méal



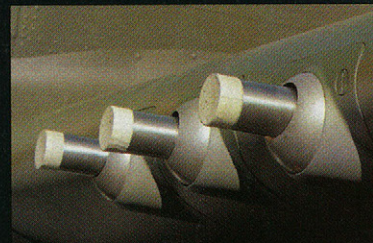
Upper left: the P-40 had one of the most spacious cockpits of any American fighter but featured hydraulic systems that were archaic by Mustang standards. Upper right: the horizontal black knob is the rudder trim, and for takeoff, it had to be cranked far to the right to control the yaw associated with so much power and a huge propeller. Lower left: the gun bays show that when Erik Hokuf details a warbird, everything is done according to 1942 standards. This includes Reed & Prince head screws, the exact shade of cotton electrical insulation, exact shade of Beryloid paint for the zinc chromate and many other details. He even hand-laced the control cable ends—a truly lost art. And this was his first warbird restoration! Lower right: Erik Hokuf and the rest of the Fagen team were constantly restoring something that didn't exist. When recovered, nothing in this photo was on the airplane, including this electrical box, so the ability to research became just as important as mechanical skill.



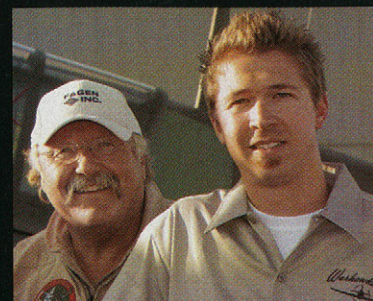
The Aleutian Tigers wore the Bengal Tiger scheme, partially because their commander was Maj. John Chennault, son of legendary Flying Tiger leader, Claire Chennault.



Examine this photo carefully. Note the extensive deterioration and damage at the hands of Russian locals. Also, there isn't any fuselage or empennage to the left of this photo; a blast removed every hint of it. It's hard to believe an airplane in this condition would ever fly again much less win awards.



The guns came out of the wings in "eyeball" fittings so that they could swivel when they were adjusted to converge at a given point in front of the airplane.



Owner Ron Fagen (left) and restoration specialist Erik Hokuf (right). Fagen wanted this historic old combat bird to fly once again, and it did.