



EAA Sport Aviation

MARCH 2009

P-38 RUFF STUFF



Jim Koeppnick

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One man caught my attention as he stood in the background, wiping tears from his eyes. He had chosen to watch from a distance, soaking it all in, as a lifelong dream of owning a P-38 and bringing it to AirVenture became a reality.

The Owner: Ron Fagen

"I can remember my father telling me of his encounter with a P-38 Lightning during World War II," said Ron Fagen, EAA 116414. His dad, Ray, was with the 4th Infantry Division and was one of only three survivors after his squad was pinned down by enemy machine gun fire. "All three of them thought they weren't going to make it out alive," Ron recalled. "My dad said he looked up and saw the most beautiful sight of the war: a P-38 diving down from above, laying down covering fire as he and his buddies high-tailed it out of harm's way and scrambled to safety." Because of his dad's experience, Ron dreamed of owning a P-38.

Ron's history in flying, especially the warbird types, begins in the mid 1970s when he read that some South American countries were getting rid of their piston-engine World War II-era fighters and replacing them with jets. Acting on impulse and a burning desire to own a warbird, Ron hopped into a Mooney and flew to South America to see what he could bring back. He admits he got lucky on that trip. "I came home empty-handed, and I now believe that if I had found one I probably would have killed myself!"

President and CEO of Fagen Inc., a design-build contractor specializing in heavy industrial engineering and construction, Ron turned his attention during his free time toward a milder form of flying: competition aerobatics in a Pitts. He flew competitively from 1976 until 1985 and then quit so that he could devote more time to his company. But warbirds still interested him, and in 1994 he purchased a P-51 Mustang he named *Sweet Revenge*. One warbird wasn't enough, however, so he bought a Fairchild PT-19 project and had it professionally restored. Next he sank his teeth into the Curtiss P-40 Warhawk arena.

"One day I just happened to glance at a *Trade-A-Plane*," Ron said, "and found a P-40 for sale in Canada." Before the day was over he was in Canada, the proud owner of the aircraft. He later discovered he didn't know much about P-40s, and what he bought wasn't as advertised. He had it restored anyway and began to purchase other P-40 parts from all over the world. "I now have a total of six P-40 projects in my hangar, with the intent to make them all flyable."

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"One day this elderly man of 87 years showed up at our hangar, acting like he was 23 years old when he saw the P-38," said Ron. "His name was Norbert Ruff, and he was full of energy. He must have made three separate trips to the hangar to watch the restoration. He could recall every mission he flew in the Pacific theater." The more the team got to know him, the more *they* wanted to paint the airplane with Norb's colors—olive drab with gray undersides—and with his personal nose art of *Ruff Stuff*.

"When I told Norb of my decision, we both cried," said Ron. "As far as I was concerned, I was just the custodian of the airplane, and I wanted to honor all the veterans who sacrificed for our country."



Phil High

ABOVE: The owner of Ruff Stuff, Ron Fagen on the EAA AirVenture grounds in 2007. **LOWER LEFT:** World War II combat veteran and former P-38 pilot Norb Ruff relates his experiences.

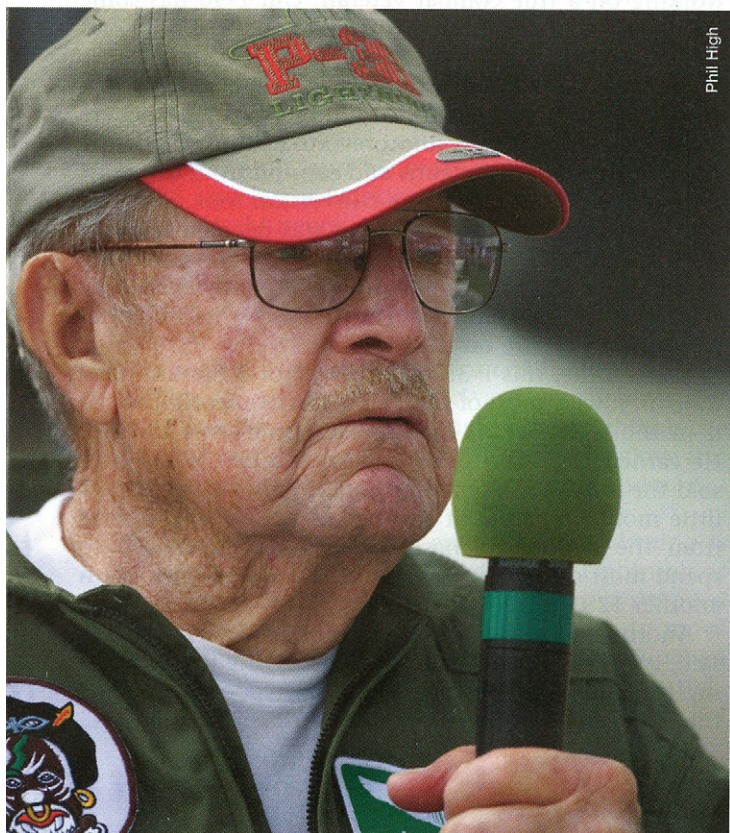
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The Veteran: Retired U.S. Air Force Maj. Norbert C. Ruff

"I remember being intrigued by aviation at an early age as I grew up in northern Wisconsin," Norb said. "I earned my military wings on December 6, 1941, and the very next day the whole world changed." Norb was sent to the South Pacific, and he earned his first victory in the P-38 in July 1943. "Our flight had been jumped by a bunch of Japanese Zeros, and I proceeded to shoot one down," Norb recalled. "I saw the pilot bail out, and I was instantly amazed. That was when I realized that there was a man in that airplane; up until then I had always thought of combat as airplane against airplane."

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Norb cherished seeing Ron’s P-38 at AirVenture with his *Ruff Stuff* nose art applied. “I felt as though I was back in the South Pacific, watching one of my line crew applying my markings to the nose of the P-38,” he said.

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The Restorer: Erik Hokuf, Warhawks Inc.

Erik Hokuf remembers seeing A-26 Invaders converted into fire bombers attacking the smoke and flames of distant fires while growing up in northern Minnesota. That’s when he became intrigued with World War II airplanes. He turned wrenches with his dad and brothers at a young age on his parents’ farm. “It was as natural as riding a bike for me as I learned how to do mechanical things and learned how machinery worked,” Erik said. “I think most mechanics who have earned their A&P probably decided to go that route when they were in high school.” Erik was different; he knew he wanted to work on airplanes since he was 8 years old.

By the time he had graduated high school he was overhauling aircraft engines for a local fixed base operation. He was working on everything from J-3 Cubs to Falcon 50 jets by the time he met Ron Fagen. Ron was looking for a mechanic, and when Erik interviewed, Ron hired him on the spot.

“I especially like working on the World War II stuff because, as far as I am concerned, it was the greatest time in aviation history,” Erik said. “I know a lot of

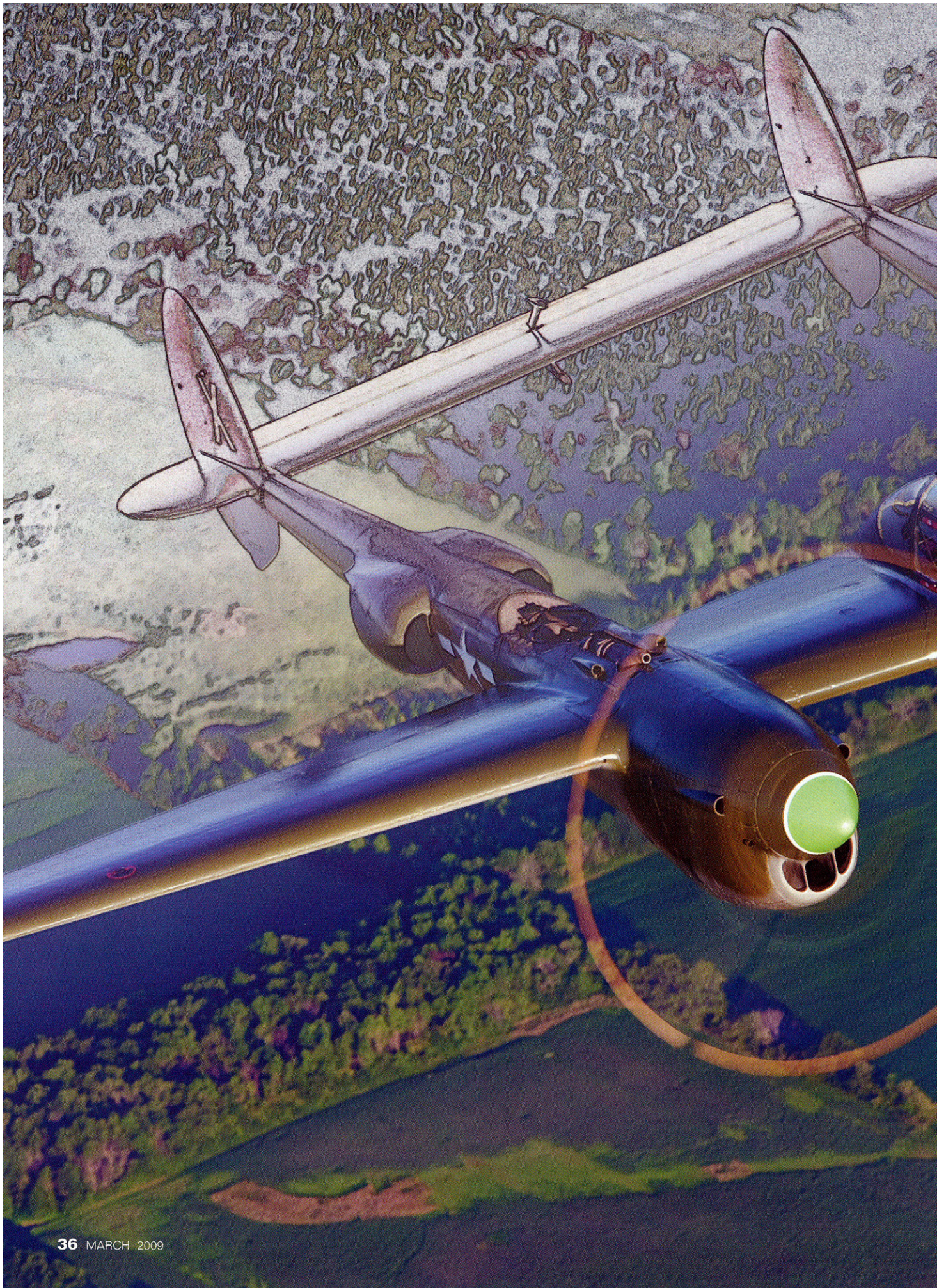
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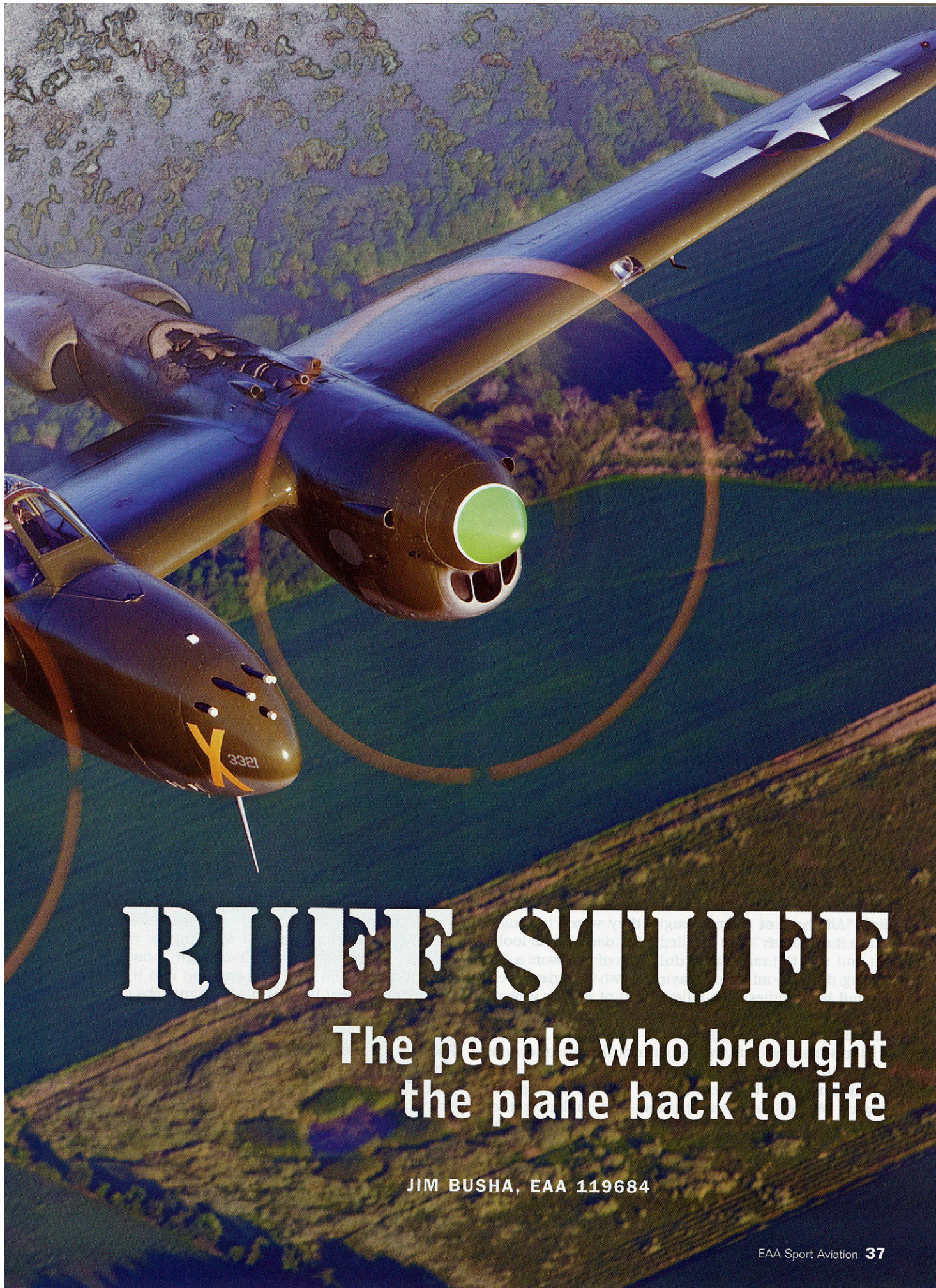
Erik is attracted to the old warbirds because they are big and noisy, have oil leaks, and have a unique smell. He is also excited about the airplanes’ combat history and the places they have been. “I love uncovering that stuff, especially when it comes to finding that you’re working on a true combat veteran. Our P-40 has some awesome history associated with it, as does the P-38, but in a different realm.”

Fagen’s P-38 was built in 1944 by the Lockheed Aircraft Corporation in California, and sent to Texas where it was converted into a photoreconnaissance model by removing the machine guns and cannon from the front nose section. By the time the conversion took place the war had ended, so the Lightning was deemed military surplus and put up for sale. James Harp, a 20-something veteran of World War II, bought the airplane for \$1,250. Erik stopped and laughed. “That is exactly half of what we pay for one tire on the airplane.”

At the time, this P-38 had only 20 or 30 hours’ total time on it with most of that being ferry time. Harp raced it in the 1946 Bendix Trophy Race and came in fifth. He earned \$1,500 in prize money, and two weeks later sold the P-38 for \$1,500. In essence, James Harp made a little money for himself and helped save a rare warbird from the cutting torches. The Lightning went on to spend most of its time in California and was only flown another 120 hours.

Another unique thing about this particular P-38, Erik said, is the fact that it’s the only one flying with operating turbochargers. “When the turbos spool up it gives the P-38 a special sound all of its own,” he said.





RUFF STUFF

The people who brought
the plane back to life

JIM BUSH, EAA 119684

When the P-38 arrived at the shop in Minnesota, Erik was working on the P-40, so the only thing that got touched on the Lightning was the removal of one panel to see what it looked like inside. When no one was around, he would go over and sit in the Lightning's cockpit and dream.

Erik said there is a big difference working on a P-38 compared to a P-40. "The P-40, to me, is 1930s technology with hand-braided control cables and levers, 78-degree rivets, which don't exist anymore. There is nothing automatic on the airplane. Even the cockpit is unfinished so you can see all the structures right at your feet. The P-38 on the other hand is much more advanced, with the use of 100-degree rivets and Phillips head screws. The P-38 systems don't even compare to those on the Warhawk. The hydraulics, wiring, and plumbing on the P-38 is much more complex and, unfortunately, a lot more challenging. One P-38 system is like working on three P-40 systems all at once."

The crew at Warhawks Inc. had a goal to bring the P-38 to AirVenture Oshkosh in July 2007. They were fortunate in that the entire structure was in relatively good shape, with the exception of the control surfaces, which they overhauled. Erik was the only guy in the shop who had worked on a warbird before, but that didn't stop the enthusiasm of his coworkers. Everyone in the shop worked hard on the project, and most worked weekends to get the airplane ready for AirVenture.

"By the time July rolled around we were down to the wire as the P-38 flew to the paint shop in Michigan nine days before Oshkosh," Erik said. "I have to give the guys at Sturgis Aviation credit because they pulled off a small miracle by getting it painted in seven days." The Lightning arrived on time at AirVenture.

How does he feel to have been a part of the restoration? At 27, he says he had to pinch himself as he stood in front of the P-38 at Oshkosh. "I am having the time of my life working on these wonderful old airplanes."

The Pilot: Kevin Eldridge

"I guess you could say I stumbled into aviation back in the 1970s when I started hanging out with John Maloney, Steve Hinton, and his brother, John, at the Chino Airport," said Kevin Eldridge, chief pilot for the Planes of Fame Air Museum. "I started volunteering at the museum, and eventually they offered me a job to work on these old airplanes."

Kevin had never been in an airplane before. His first ride was in a North American O-47, and after that flight he was hooked. He earned his pilot certificate and began flying the Air Museum's World War II-era fighters and medium bombers. His favorite single-engine fighter is the F8F Bearcat, because the airplane "fits you like a glove and it does everything you want it to—climb, dive, and turn—and it does it very fast."

"By comparison, the twin-engine P-38 Lightning is a big airplane," Kevin continued. "The Lightning is another one of my favorites to fly. When you're strapped inside the cockpit you have a lot more room to move around." He said the hardest thing to get used to when flying the P-38 is the use of a yoke instead of a stick: "Forward and sideward visibility wasn't as good as I



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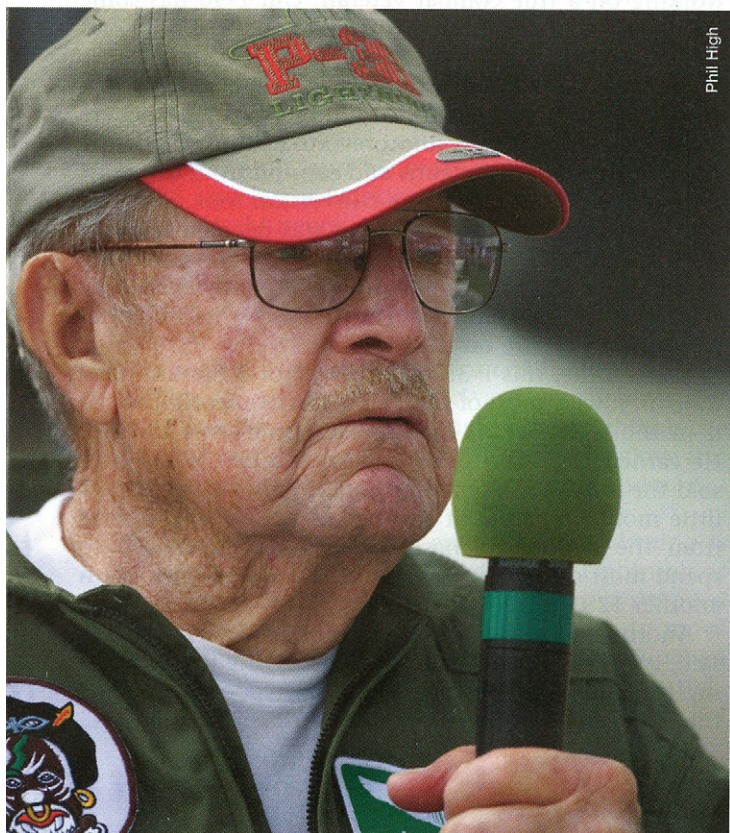
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 watch the video



P38 Nose Art Painting
www.AirVenture.org/videos/AirVenture/2007/P-38NoseArt

can about the airplane and its operating systems. He explores their history and talks to the veterans who flew them in combat. "It means a lot to

me to stand under the wing of one of these old warbirds and listen to an elderly gentleman take me back to when he was just a kid. You can see it in their eyes and hear it in their voice when they talk about flying these airplanes—they were very special to all of them."


The Painter: Stephan Hokuf

If you were lucky, you saw Ron Fagen's P-38 arrive at AirVenture 2007, but an added treat was if you saw a young man clad in World War II-era clothing hunched over the front section of the Lightning hand painting the nose art of *Ruff Stuff*.

Stephan Hokuf works as an architect by trade and dabbles in pin-striping hot rods. His brother, Erik, supplied the opportunity to take his painting to another level by re-creating the nose art on *Ruff Stuff*. "This was such a great opportunity to replicate the feeling of what it was like in World War II for the crowds at Oshkosh. It was better than any T-shirt or book you could bring home from the air show," he said.

The young painter thought it would be more authentic and unique to dress the part of a ground crew member while painting the P-38. He did some research and hit a bunch of Army surplus stores before coming up with the right uniform. "It put me in the element and made painting the nose art a living diorama for the onlookers. About the only thing missing was a bunch of palm trees and a nice sandy beach."

Before painting the art work, Hokuf took "a lot of measurements off the cowlings of the airplane" to create a template to replicate the name *Ruff Stuff* as close to the original as he possibly could.

"The comments I heard from the people in the crowd made it all worthwhile for me as I played a part—small as it was—in re-creating some long-lost history. It was humbling to see families with small children watching and asking questions. The enthusiasm from the crowd made me realize that people are hungry to learn about our history, not necessarily just World War II airplanes, but all types of aviation in general. This was a great honor for me to take part in this once-in-a-lifetime event at AirVenture." 

An avid pilot and longtime contributor to EAA publications, Jim Busha is the editor of Warbirds magazine and the owner of a 1943 Aeronca L-3.



Stephan Hokuf applies the nose art to match the original *Ruff Stuff* that saw service against the Japanese in the Pacific.


Steve introduced Kevin to Ron Fagen and his crew at Warhawks Inc., and he says without hesitation that it is a first-class operation. "I was very impressed with their craftsmanship when I went to their shop in mid-July (2007) to test-fly the P-38."

Kevin made some taxi tests and engine run-ups with no problems. On July 12, he took the P-38 up for some air work and found everything working like it should. He noted that this P-38 has a couple of unique features that make it an elite model of the Lightning. "For one, it has hydraulically boosted ailerons, which make the roll rate twice that of an earlier model P-38. The other feature that immediately caught my attention was the constant whining sound of the spinning turbos. It took me a couple of flights to get used to the sound of them spinning up, but after a while I hardly noticed it at all."

He typically operates the Lightning at 55 percent power, which equates to 30 inches of manifold pressure and 2000 rpm. At that setting it indicates 230 mph and burns 100 gallons an hour. "With 400 gallons of fuel on board that gives me pretty good range. Add some 300-gallon drop tanks and it's more flying than I want to do in a day!"

Kevin feels privileged to fly all the different warbirds he has. Before he flies a particular model he reads all he



 watch the video



P38 Nose Art Painting
www.AirVenture.org/videos/AirVenture/2007/P-38NoseArt

can about the airplane and its operating systems. He explores their history and talks to the veterans who flew them in combat. "It means a lot to

me to stand under the wing of one of these old warbirds and listen to an elderly gentleman take me back to when he was just a kid. You can see it in their eyes and hear it in their voice when they talk about flying these airplanes—they were very special to all of them."


The Painter: Stephan Hokuf

If you were lucky, you saw Ron Fagen's P-38 arrive at AirVenture 2007, but an added treat was if you saw a young man clad in World War II-era clothing hunched over the front section of the Lightning hand painting the nose art of *Ruff Stuff*.

Stephan Hokuf works as an architect by trade and dabbles in pin-striping hot rods. His brother, Erik, supplied the opportunity to take his painting to another level by re-creating the nose art on *Ruff Stuff*. "This was such a great opportunity to replicate the feeling of what it was like in World War II for the crowds at Oshkosh. It was better than any T-shirt or book you could bring home from the air show," he said.

The young painter thought it would be more authentic and unique to dress the part of a ground crew member while painting the P-38. He did some research and hit a bunch of Army surplus stores before coming up with the right uniform. "It put me in the element and made painting the nose art a living diorama for the onlookers. About the only thing missing was a bunch of palm trees and a nice sandy beach."

Before painting the art work, Hokuf took "a lot of measurements off the cowlings of the airplane" to create a template to replicate the name *Ruff Stuff* as close to the original as he possibly could.

"The comments I heard from the people in the crowd made it all worthwhile for me as I played a part—small as it was—in re-creating some long-lost history. It was humbling to see families with small children watching and asking questions. The enthusiasm from the crowd made me realize that people are hungry to learn about our history, not necessarily just World War II airplanes, but all types of aviation in general. This was a great honor for me to take part in this once-in-a-lifetime event at AirVenture." 

An avid pilot and longtime contributor to EAA publications, Jim Busha is the editor of Warbirds magazine and the owner of a 1943 Aeronca L-3.



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