



The Uvalde Leader-News

Aviation history focus of Mustang roundup

by Margaret Palermo - Staff writer
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Four Uvaldeans and one Knippa man returned this week from the Gathering of Mustangs & Legends at Rickenbacker International airport in Columbus, Ohio.

The Gathering was held in conjunction with Air Force Heritage Week, which marked the 60th anniversary of the U.S. Air Force.

Mark Huffstutler flew his P-51 Mustang to the Gathering alone and flew back with Chip King riding shotgun. Joe and Wanda Kosler drove the entire distance. Larry Montgomery of Knippa also attended.



GATHERING MEMORIES - Mark Huffstutler was among area residents who attended the Gathering of Mustangs & Legends at Rickenbacker International airport in Columbus, Ohio.

Joe Kosler, who works on the planes and keeps them all air show ready, said Montgomery is crew chief for Huffstutler's collection of War Birds, which includes the P-51.

"Since we were driving so far, we took supplies for the airplane, but it performed beautifully," said Wanda Kosler, in an interview Thursday.

She said Huffstutler's P-51 is painted in Chuck Yeager's colors from his war flying days. "He gave permission for this one to be done like that." Yeager was the first pilot to break the sound barrier, a feat he accomplished in 1947.

Joe Kosler said there are between 125 and 127 P-51s still flying today and of those, 90 to 97 flew in for the gathering. "They came from all over the United States, and Canada and one or two came from overseas," he said.

Wanda Kosler said about 50 of the original pilots who flew the planes in World War II were at the Gathering. She said her husband and Montgomery took the panels off the engines so the former aviators could look at the engines. "They'd come up and put their hands on the airplanes with tears in their eyes and start talking about the missions they flew," she said. "It was very touching."

"There were many, many tears shed at this thing," said Joe Kosler. "There were people coming in walkers and in wheelchairs, pushed by their grandkids. They would push them up to an airplane and you would see a tear.

"We talked to many of these people. We asked one of them, "Did you fly the Mustang? How many missions?" he said. Some of the veterans talked of flying as many as 90 to 105 missions.

"They all had tremendous stories to tell," said Kosler. It's a shame we're not there documenting these stories, putting them into book form so we don't lose them. It was so neat to see these people on the flight line.

"It amazed me to see how many of the World War II vets were there," he said. "It's mind-boggling and very touching."

He said Stallion 51, an organization in Florida, put the show together. "They're a big P-51 restoration company. They restore them, check people out in them and give people rides in them," he said. "They're one of the largest P-51 support groups."

"Another thing that happened was they held a special service for the Tuskegee airmen who had flown them," she said, referring to the all-African American 332nd Fighter Group of the U.S. Army Air Corps.

"There were probably 100,000 people there. They had people in golf carts and trams. As they came around, people started getting up and clapping and waving," she said.

She said the Tuskegee airmen appeared to feel very honored by the display of gratitude. "They could have passed and people not even noticed, but people came out and cheered them," said Kosler.

She said the Uvalde group was at the conference for a week and a half.

"At the show itself, the Columbus people were spectacular," said Joe. "They treated us great." He said the U.S. Air Force Thunderbirds were there, as well as the Red Baron Pizza flying team of four Steermans. "They're like the Thunderbirds, only slower," Joe Kosler said.

The local participants may have been privy to a historical event. Due to the age of the planes and the age of the veterans, Joe Kosler said this could be the last Gathering.