

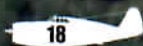
THE BENT WING beauty with the ol' JT on its tail is back in the air where she belongs. The rumors are true about F4U-4 Corsair BuNo 97143, owned by the Tobul family and named *Korean War Hero*. For its poignant family connection and its powerful wartime history it is one of the most significant resurrections in recent years. Completed in relative ambiguity it has been newly restored and is better than ever thanks to Jim Tobul of Bamberg, South Carolina and the professionals at WestPac Restorations in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

F4U-4 Rememberance and Resurrection:
Joe Tobul and the F4U-4 Corsair

Korean War Hero

Story by **Grady A Lisk Jr.**

Photo: Grady Lisk



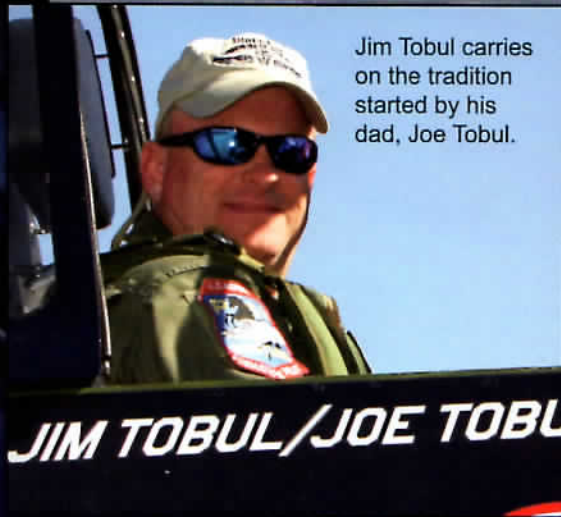
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For the many warbird enthusiasts lucky enough to know one of the Tobuls, they are undoubtedly better off today for it. The Tobul family warbird connection started with Joe Tobul, who served in the Marines during the 1950s with the famous attack squadron VMF-231 "Ace of Spades" based out of MCAS Cherry Point. Sadly, on November 10, 2002, the birthday of the United States Marine Corps, the warbird community lost Joe while he was piloting *Korean War Hero*. Joe was "all Marine" and lived life to high standards and ideals, including duty, honor, country. He was a model father, husband, grandfather, and friend. He always

took time to share conversations with strangers, who quickly became new friends, talking about the Corsair or aviation in general. He was a great guy with a passion for the Corsair, who was willing and able to share it with one and all: strangers, close friends, and family. All who knew Joe loved him dearly and miss him each and every day.

Jim Tobul (Joe's son) recalled that fateful day: "Dad started a tradition of flying over the VA hospital to give the Veterans something to look forward to because they could not travel to the airport for the air show. Dad called the VA that

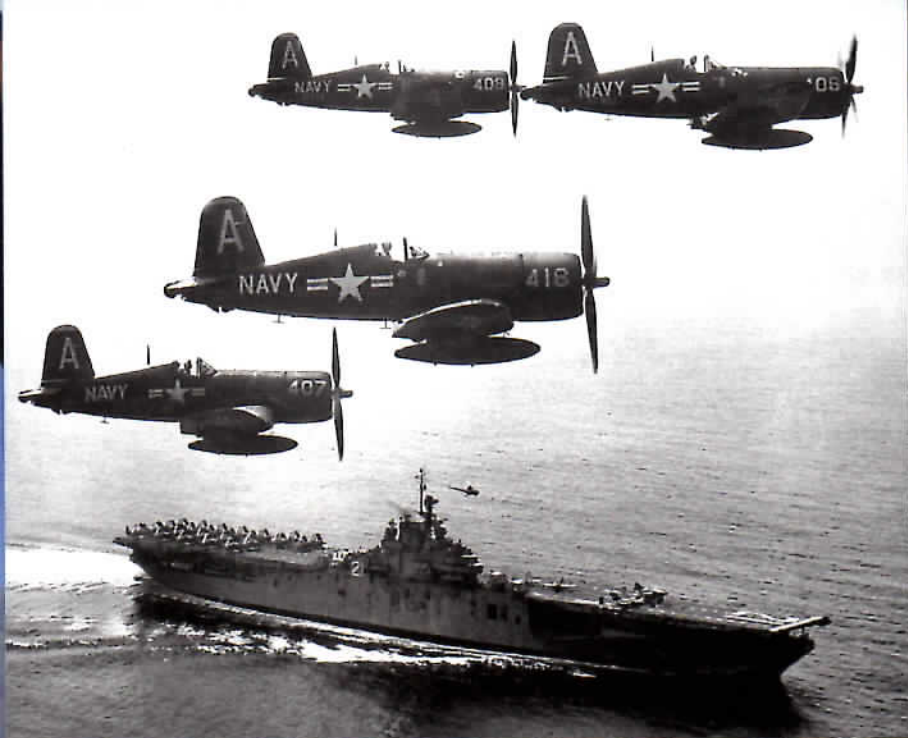
(main photo) Jim Tobul at the controls of F4U-4 Corsair BuNo 97143, the resurrected *Korean War Hero*. The Corsair was rebuilt after a 2002 mechanical failure resulted in the death of Joe Tobul. With its return to the air the Tobul family and all those who knew Joe Tobul celebrate his life.



Jim Tobul carries on the tradition started by his dad, Joe Tobul.



◀ (inset-right) Mint Moore, Corsair historian, took the last (and possibly the best) photo of Joe doing what he loved most—fly the Corsair. Mint recalled, "The photo was taken just before start up. I was helping him put on his belts and was chatting and talking with him. I climbed down, got my camera and said, 'Wait a minute—let me get a Smiley Face...!'"
Photo: Mint Moore III



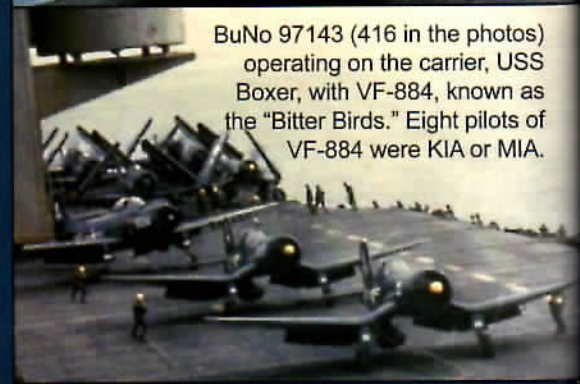
Five Corsairs in the process of forming up. The late Joe Tobul flew the lead airplane, BuNo 97143, during the 2002 Gathering of Corsairs in Mt. Comfort, Indiana. From foreground: Joe Tobul, Gerry Beck, John Muszala (owner: Max Chapman), Jim Read, Steve Bakke (owner: Ray Thompson).
Photo: Paul Bowen



▲ (top-left) A flight of four F4U-4 Corsairs in formation on the starboard side of the USS Boxer, CV-21, as they wait for additional aircraft launching for a combat strike. BuNo 97143 is the center aircraft with "416" painted on the cowling. September 4, 1951.
(US Navy photo)

▲ (middle-left) Pilots of VF-653 "Dragons" pose with their Corsairs on the deck of the USS Valley Forge. The squadron commander was the famous air race pilot, Cook Cleland, who twice won the Cleveland Air Races flying Corsairs. Six pilots of VF-653 were KIA or MIA. (US Navy photo)

morning and said, "I will be flying over the hospital at 1400 so please have everyone out on the front lawn at that time." Dad and I did this the first year. The next year we were planning the same routine but other pilots came up and asked "We heard about what you are doing and would like to go with you for the flyover." Our response was the same every year... "You bet you can fly with us!!" On Nov 10, 2002, we had many aircraft in the skies heading for the VA, such as a B-25, several T-6s, CJs, a Yak-9, and others. I'm not sure exactly how many but I would guess about 10 to 15 planes. When Dad encountered a problem I broke from my 4-ship T-6 flight and headed for his wing. I had my oldest son in my back seat and my other son was with Larry Kelley in the B-25. I was on my dad's left wing and Sean Carroll in the Yak-9 was on Dad's right wing doing whatever we could to help after he lost engine power. It was apparent that Dad's selection of landing site on the street in a housing development was not going to work out so at the last minute he turned left and landed the Corsair smoothly and gently on the tops of the trees. It was a very nice and controlled landing."



BuNo 97143 (416 in the photos) operating on the carrier, USS Boxer, with VF-884, known as the "Bitter Birds." Eight pilots of VF-884 were KIA or MIA.



Six years later as he thought about Korean War Hero, Jim Tobul was ready to channel his love and memories into something special—a physical transformation of his Dad's Corsair. It was accompanied by a personal transformation. The loss of a loved one results in sadness over their loss, and is overcome through celebration of their life. As the sadness of a mangled wreck was replaced with the exhilaration of the Corsair's rebirth, *Korean War Hero* became the ultimate means of celebrating Joe's life. As Jim pondered his desire to rebuild the Corsair he thought about what would be necessary to rebuild her to airworthiness, and assessed what he had to work with. He started with the center section of 97143 and used as many other parts from the original plane as possible. Additionally, he had acquired a large array of F4U-4 Corsair parts and pieces to get BuNo 97143 completed. For a while he worked on the project himself and estimated how long it would take for him to complete the project—roughly eight to ten years. That is when family friend Bill Klaers stepped in and told Jim that he had better ship everything to him in Colorado Springs where he would put enough workers on the

Corsair to finish the restoration in two years. Like any restoration of a classic warbird there are time delays, and at just over two years she was back in the air, flying over the Rocky Mountains.

REFLECTIONS AND RECOLLECTIONS

JIM TOBUL, SON: "When I think about the Corsair, many thoughts cross my mind. The first is my dad. He was the one that introduced me to warbirds, back in the late '70s. If it were not for him, I'm not sure if warbirds would be such a large part of my life today. I started flying the SNJ back in 1980 with the instruction of Dad. After owning two Bearcats (F8F-1 & F8F-2) we settled on a Corsair, F4U-4 BuNo 97143. The restoration started in 1981 and the first flight was 10 years later, on December 8, 1991. Dad taught me to fly the Corsair in the early '90s and that was so awesome at the time. Then there was the accident Nov. 10, 2002, and I lost Dad and the plane. I took six years to finally decide it was time to rebuild the Corsair. It took three more years to complete the rebuild and bring her to the skies once again.

▲ (top) Joe Tobul flying BuNo 97143 in September 2002 over Mt. Comfort, Indiana.
Photo: Paul Bowen

▲ (bottom-left) Jim Tobul performs a pass at the TICO warbird show, March 2011, in the newly restored Corsair, BuNo 97143, its first public appearance since 2002.
Photo: Parr Yonemoto

▲ (bottom-right) Joe Tobul leads a four-ship fingertip formation during the 2002 Gathering of Corsairs in Mt. Comfort, Indiana.
Photo: Greg Morehead



▲ (top) Jim Tobul at the controls of BuNo 97143, known as *Korean War Hero*, over Punta Gorda/Port Charlotte, Florida, March 25, 2011.
Photo: Grady Lisk

▶ (bottom-right) Jim Tobul fires up the Pratt & Whitney R2800 with a characteristic belch of smoke.
Photo: Jane P. Handley

“The second item that crosses my mind is remembering all those who have placed their feet on the rudder pedals before me. I am simply a caretaker of the plane with a mission to preserve her for future generations. There are so many lives that have been touched by this plane. We located a number of pilots that actually flew our plane in combat in Korea. I remember talking with Hank Sulkowski about what it was like to fly the Corsair in combat and he would simply say, “She was a great and very forgiving plane to fly.”

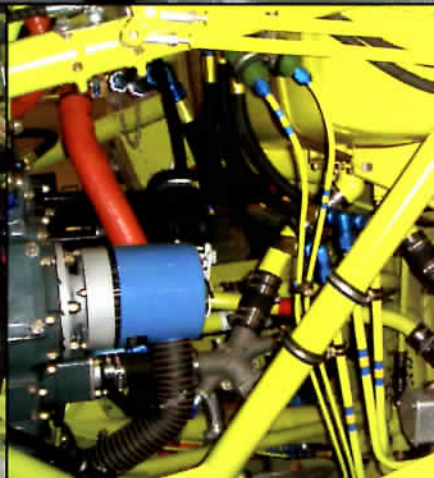
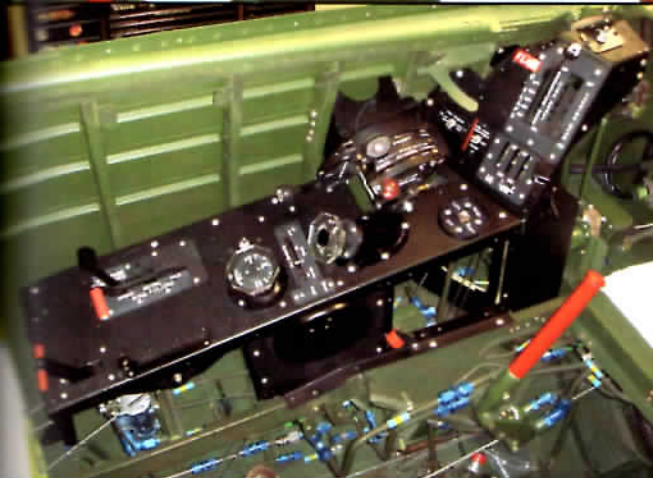
“The third item would be all the people that love aviation, especially the warbirds. They are just so amazed when the Corsair starts up and comes to life. Then to see her fly is the icing on the cake! It’s so rewarding for me to see so many people excited and enthused about seeing these old birds fly.”

EDDIE SUTTON, CREW CHIEF: “I discovered that big beautiful F4U-4 Corsair was based only 20 miles from my home in Bamberg, SC. I began going over frequently and the next thing I knew Joe had



me working on the rocket rails beneath the wing. Believe me, it was an honor. The Corsair is my favorite World War Two aircraft. Joe’s son Jim and I got to know each other pretty well and soon after that, his entire family was treating me like family.

“The big day finally came when Jim brought 416 home again. 416 is what I call her. I guess I’m as



proud of her as Jim is. I'm the one that gets to wipe her nose, pat her fanny, and make her shine. My heart is inside that big beautiful Navy F4U-4 Corsair, and believe me, I take pride in making her shine and look good. Plus, somebody has to take care of Jim as well. I guess the pilot and the plane are one and the same. At least that's the way I feel and the way it should be. Trust me, a big lump fills my chest when I watch that big beautiful F4U-4 *Korean War Hero* take off from Bamberg with my pilot, a man I trust and respect more than anyone I have ever known.

"As for Joe Tobul, if you were starving and walking the flight line at an air show with Joe, he would stop and talk to 500 people. That is not an understatement at all. Joe took the time to talk with everyone. That being said this restoration is not only the resurrection of *Korean War Hero* but also the spirit of Joe Tobul, at least as far as I am concerned."

JIMBO AND SEAN, GRANDSONS: Jimbo said: "Of all the time spent in the hanger, my favorite moments were late at night, standing on the scissor

(all photos this page)
After Jim Tobul began the restoration of BuNo 97143 himself he estimated it would require eight to ten years to complete. He opted instead to send the entire project to Bill Klaers at WestPac Restorations in Colorado Springs, Colorado. These photos show the craftsmanship that won the Grand Champion-Post WWII award at Sun n' Fun 20011.
Photos: Jim Tobul

▲ The WestPac Restorations crew pose for a celebratory photo after completion of their award-winning restoration of the Tobul family Corsair. Included in the photo: Alan Wojciak, Angelica Wilson, Jim Tobul, Bill Klaers, Debi Klaers, Paul Dorety, Dave Gallup, Bill "Dude" Barclay, Rudy Serafin, TJ McFadden, Mike "Lefty" McGuckian, Ingo Moos, Scott Klaers, Larry Goodwin, Chris Baker



▲ (top row, left to right) Details of the newest Corsair restoration include: engine and propeller section, tail gear wheel well, right main landing gear (top), and (bottom) components between sections of the left wing which is the folded configuration, and the tail hook.

Photos: Grady Lisk

lift between my father and grandfather working on the Corsair engine. No words were exchanged, just the turning of wrenches and being a part of building something great, together.

“While I learned how to correctly torque a bolt and to understand that bolts are installed down and point towards the back of the plane, I also learned how to be a good person and understand honor. They’re the things that you learn without knowing you learned them, until later down the road, that are important. I counted down the days until it was time to depart for the next air show. The air shows are when I began to understand how to be a better person. At first I wanted to have the cleanest, best looking airplane at the show. But as I went to more shows, I saw why my dad and grandfather spent so much time on those beautiful machines. It was about respecting and honoring those who flew the aircraft and made sacrifices for their country. I first realized this one day while wiping the never ending amounts of oil from

under the Corsair. My grandfather was talking with an elderly man about the plane. The man was telling a story about the aircraft in the Korean War. The man’s face as he told his story was as alive and glowing as a child’s. My grandfather listened intently with the same enthusiasm. My grandfather enjoyed sharing information about the plane as much as he enjoyed flying it. People were drawn to him at shows—not just the visitors, but the pilots as well.”

Sean added, “Every time I was at an air show, I always wondered if grandpa knew everybody. He always seemed to talk to everyone as if they had been a long-time friend. The hangar was rather empty for eight years. The thought of Dad resurrecting the airplane was a mind blower from the start. Many thoughts had me amped for the very first pass of the new Corsair. As I started to hear the noise from the engine in the distance, I started to have chills run down my whole body. All of a sudden he comes smokin’ across Runway 23 and I couldn’t believe my



eyes. One could see the air twisting from the propeller once he went across. After this, my eyes started to water up and so many emotions hit me all at once. Once he landed, that first hand shake with Dad was indescribable. That evening I asked dad if he wanted to have a shot to celebrate the new airplane and his answer was a quick and simple 'Yes.' He chose Wild Turkey Rare Breed and the toast was to 'Legacy.' After swallowing the shot I thought, 'With a burn like that, Legacy will go on forever!'"

COMING HOME TO SOUTH CAROLINA

Jim flew to Colorado Springs one last time, to bring the family Corsair home to South Carolina. On March 7th, 2011, Jim arrived home to a hero's welcome. Jim was greeted by his mother "Miss Nancy," son Sean, crew chief Eddie Sutton, and other home town folks that came out to see the beautiful Corsair back where she belongs. Before his arrival in Bamberg, Jim stopped and

had lunch with son Jimbo at the Oconee Airport near Clemson, South Carolina. After lunch Jimbo watched his dad take to the skies in the Corsair, just like Jim had done so many times before with his dad at the controls. Jimbo said, "Seeing *Korean War Hero* land for the first time in South Carolina brought all those memories back to life. My dad stopped in Clemson to see me and eat lunch before continuing on to Bamberg. I'm pretty sure we never talked about anything other than the plane, which was about two hours. The anticipation was bigger and bigger as the Corsair neared completion. Now that the Corsair is home, my grandfather's memory will live on in the blue skies above."

YESTERDAY AND TODAY

This F4U-4 Corsair is rich with United States Naval Aviation history of the Korean War conflict. She served on the USS *Boxer* (CV-21) with VF-884 (tail code A) from 2 March 1951 through 24 October

▲ (above) Jim Tobul over the Punta Gorda/Port Charlotte, FL countryside.
Photo: Don Hickey

1951, then served from the decks of the USS *Bon Homme Richard* (CV-31) assigned to VF-874 (tail code D) from 10 May 1951 through 17 December 1951, and finally the USS *Valley Forge* (CV-45) assigned to VF-653 (tail code H) from 15 October 1951 through 3 July 1952. While serving with these three squadrons and carriers, *Korean War Hero* was assigned to Task Force 77, completing well over two hundred missions during the Korean conflict. (Note: The cruise dates overlap due to planes staying in the region and being assigned to the new carriers as they would come on station.) 97143 was retired from U.S. Naval service on 5 July 1956. In later years BuNo 97143 served with the Honduran Air Force and flew as FAH-613 from 1960 to 1970. In 1977 an American Airlines pilot purchased her and she returned to the United States where she remained.

Jim departed in *Korean War Hero* for the Valiant Air Command's annual air show on Wednesday March 9, 2011, trying to beat the weather that was vastly approaching. He arrived in Titusville, Florida, the same place where *Korean War Hero* made her debut in 1992. Media day was a wash due to weather so we ended up cleaning and making her shine like a brand new beauty queen. It was truly unreal to see her finished—such a tribute. Old and new friends would come up and ask questions about her and inquire which airframe it was. Some asserted that it could not be the old one. Those people were really shocked to find out it was truly 97143. It was a once in a lifetime experience to witness how so many people remembered the plane and how it instigated stories from so many about the memories of bygone years watching this Corsair fly. This year, the 100th year of Naval Aviation, to have *Korean War Hero* airworthy and participating in the Centennial Celebrations throughout the country is a great honor.

Three weeks later, at Sun n' Fun in Lakeland, Florida, *Korean War Hero* won the Grand Champion—Post WWII award. It was a fitting tribute to the expert craftsmanship and attention to detail of the restoration team at WestPac Restorations. The honor also holds meaning as a statement from the judges, who represent the entire warbird community, in acknowledging the stunning result of a historic effort.

Special thanks to Larry Kelley for his help and support. By providing his B-25 *Panchito* as a photo platform he made possible the air-to-air photos seen in this article. Thanks also to the Disabled American Veterans, for their continued partnership with Larry Kelley in a shared mission which enables countless citizens the opportunity to see this beautiful B-25 at events nationwide. ★

▲ (top-right) Larry DeFranco has a strong connection with BuNo 97143. During the Korean War he was in charge of the maintainers responsible for this airframe and others in the squadron. He started working on Corsairs in 1948 when he took a job working for Cook Cleland, the aviation legend who won the Cleveland Air Races twice flying Corsairs. Today he continues to function as a crew chief for Jim Tobul and BuNo 97143. Photo: Jane P. Handley



LEGENDS REUNITED

When he was 18 years old Lenny DeFranco started with Cook Cleland in Willoughby, Ohio. It was 1948 and he was working on Cleland's three F2G Super Corsairs known as *Race #57*, *Race #74* and *Race #94*. In 1949 they entered the Cleveland Air Races and won the Thompson Trophy with *Race #94*, which is now being restored by Bob Odegaard. Lenny was the driving force behind the paint scheme of *Race #57*. When the number was assigned to the racer Lenny wanted to differentiate it from the same number Roscoe Turner famously flew with. It came to him while eating some late night hot dogs with Art Barker at Cleland's Air Services. He saw the "57" on the Heinz brand ketchup bottle and used it as the inspiration for the paint job.

In 1950 Lenny decided to join the same Akron, Ohio based Naval Air Reserve unit that Cleland was commanding. The squadron, VF-653 "Dragons," were flying F4U-4 Corsairs when they were activated and flew to Alameda, CA to embark on the USS *Valley Forge*. That is where BuNo 97143 became a small part of Lenny's life. Lenny was in charge of the VF-653 maintainers while serving in the Korean Theater in 1951 and 1952. After leaving the service Lenny lived life focused on other things.

In 1983 Lenny met Joe Tobul and forged a friendship with the family that remains strong today. The first time Lenny saw *Korean War Hero* he gave her a kiss just like she was an old girlfriend. On March 25, 2011, Lenny was able to meet his ol' girlfriend again, for a third time! He was the crew chief on *Korean War Hero* for Jim Tobul at the 2011 Punta Gorda Air Show, performing just as he had done for Cook Cleland in 1951-52, and the Tobuls from the 1980s through 2002. He will be at select 2011 air shows to help Jim and *Korean War Hero*, creating new memories with the Tobul team. Lenny summed up his thoughts of Joe when he said, "Joe was a great gentleman and one that would always give so much back to the fans, either with answering a question or signing an autograph." Now that *Korean War Hero* is back, when he's wiping the old Navy beauty down you might see a smile on Lenny's face as he recalls all the good times they had playing jokes and sharing life's experiences together with a special Corsair, *Korean War Hero*. ★