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Return of the KOREAN WAR HERO

BY MICHAEL O'LEARY

JIM TOBUL AND WESTPAC RESTORATIONS RETURN AN AMERICAN WARRIOR TO THE SKY

On 25 June 1950, overwhelming military forces of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea poured south into the Republic of Korea. This devastating action took the Western world completely by surprise. The American military had become a shell of its mighty WWII force and reaction to this wanton aggression was initially confused. Consulting with NATO Allies, America struck back almost immediately. On 3 July 1950, F4U-4B Corsairs operating from the USS *Valley Forge* began aggressive attacks against the communist forces. All across the United States, USAF, USN, and USMC squadrons were activated for combat. The old reliables of WWII — the Mustang and Corsair — were found ideal for the type of combat taking place over the harsh Korean landscape.

Corsairs were pulled out of USN storage depots, IRANed, and shipped aboard carriers to the combat front. Two Marine Corsair squadrons arrived in August to provide close air support while F4U-5N night fighters began to prowl the night skies in search of prey. As the Corsairs roared in low over the heads of beleaguered Allied troops, the bent-wing bird quickly became known as the "Korean War Hero."

Now, we have to fast forward a bit to September 2002 and the Gathering of Corsairs at Mt. Comfort, Indiana. Mint Moore III was one of the organizers of the show and he had introduced me to a Corsair owner that was proudly showing me around his gleaming F4U-4. The owner was Joe Tobul and to say that he was enthusiastic about his aircraft would be an understatement. "I wanted to paint the aircraft in Korean War markings to honor the incredible sacrifices made by the American forces. Today, that war is pretty much forgotten. It is not taught in schools and the veterans are fast fading away so I wanted to do my part in keeping their memories alive while using the Corsair as a reaching aid about a regional war that nearly turned into World War III."

To Joe, his Corsair was a labor of love. "I purchased the aircraft as a project from an American Airlines pilot back in 1981 and it took ten-years to get the plane back into the air," said Joe. "My son Jim is also a real enthusiast and he was a big help on the project." The more that Joe and Jim got into the airplane, the more they discovered about the aircraft's history. The plane had last been operated by the Honduran Air Force, but before that F4U-4 BuNo 97143 had flown with VF-884 aboard the USS *Boxer* (CV-21) from June through October 1951 (as aircraft 416).

The squadron's nickname was the "Bitter Birds" and pilots used the Kansas Jayhawk as their squadron patch. In Korean War operations, Joe was able to determine that Lts. Duane Edge, R. Fritz Schierenberg, and Robert Warner had flown the plane. Flying in the Korean War, the Bitter Birds undertook some 1519 combat missions while dropping 750,000-lbs of bombs and firing 3800 5-in rockets. The pilots also expended some 1,400,000 rounds of .50-cal ammunition. The squadron had a normal compliment of 22 to 24 pilots and the terrible action over Korea claimed the lives of eight pilots KIA or MIA, including squadron commander L/Cmdr. G.F. Carmichael.

As with most Corsairs during the Korean War, BuNo 97143 was sent off to another squadron — VF-653 (it should be noted that both squadrons were Reserve units, and the sacrifices made by the Reserve pilots and crews have never received the publicity these brave men deserved). Operating from USS *Valley Forge* (CV-45), the squadron had come from Akron, Ohio, and their patch consisted of a dragon holding a shield consisting of a golden triangle with a checkerboard stripe. As a point of interest, the golden triangle signified that a large percentage of the squadron's pilots were from the Pittsburgh area. With VF-653, the Corsair carried the number 308. Even at that point, Joe's Corsair had a Warbird tie-in. The checkerboard stripe signified that squadron commander L/Cmdr. Cook Cleland had twice won the post-war Cleveland Air Races while flying Corsairs. Joe's research showed that the plane was flown by at least five pilots from VF-653: Cleland, Lts. Henry Sulkowski, J.R. Rohleder, Robert Jeffel, and David Robertson. Many of the pilots were WWII veterans. The squadron lost six pilots as KIA/MIA.

The combat veteran was retired to NAF Litchfield Park on 5 July 1956 and was eventually purchased (along with a number of others) by Bob Bean, who reconditioned the aircraft for Honduras. During the rebuild, Joe found three *flak* repair patches. Once the Corsair was

The Tobul Corsair when flying with VF-884 during the Korean War.

Jim Tobul off the tail of B-25J *In The Mood*. The Corsair is available for airshow/display work and further details can be found at *www.koreanwarhero.com*.

Joe Tobul leading the pack during the Gathering of Corsairs and Legends.

completed, Joe gave the plane the name *Korean War Hero* and began hitting the airshow circuit.

Then, on 10 November 2002, the unthinkable happened. Joe was leading a flight of six aircraft in F4U-4 N713JT at Columbia, South Carolina. The purpose of the flight was to have the Warbirds participate in a fly-over for the local veterans hospital. Taking off from Columbia Owens Downtown Airport, the Corsair had just passed the approach end of Runway 13 when smoke was noticed coming from the R-2800-52W radial. The tower operator heard an unidentified transmission, "Corsair needs to land." The fighter made a right turn for what appeared to be a left downwind to Runway 31. The controller issued current information and cleared to Corsair for immediate landing.

The controller heard an unidentified transmission, "Your gear is not coming down." While on left base, the Corsair disappeared beyond a tree line and the controller saw a column of smoke arise from the trees. Jim Tobul was flying his Texan in the formation. "Dad was in just about the worst possible of situations. He was low and slow — the training aircraft were limiting the speed of the formation. He knew the engine had failed and he did everything right for setting up a crash landing. However, he settled into a stand of very large trees and the Corsair went

The Corsair being serviced inside WestPac's climate controlled hangar.

THE DASH FOUR CORSAIR

The F4U-4 was the second production variant of the fighter and it featured numerous improvements over the earlier aircraft. At first, two F4U-1s were modified to F4U-4X configuration starting on 20 May 1943 with the first flying on 19 May 1944. Testing led to five new XF4U-4 prototypes. Fitted with a Pratt & Whitney R-2800-18W radial of 2100-hp, the first example flew on 20 September 1944. All the extra power took the top speed up to an impressive 446-mph and numerous other changes made the aircraft a very superior fighter. Armament consisted of six .50-cal Browning M2 air-cooled machine guns while two 1000-lb bombs or eight 5-in rockets could be carried under the wings. By the end of the Second World War, some 1859 F4U-4s had been delivered but victory over the Japanese led to contracts for 3149 aircraft being reduced to 2056. Production of the F4U-4 continued through April 1946. The basic fighter order was followed by a contract for 287 F4U-4Bs fitted with four 20mm cannon and eleven F4U-4Ps fitted with cameras in the rear fuselage. Production of these two variants was completed by August 1947. Goodyear was scheduled to license build the F4U-4 as the FG-4, but contracts for 2500 aircraft were cancelled.

The completed F4U-4 instrument panel.

inverted. He never stood a chance."

Jim, the Tobul family, and the Warbird community were stunned. "I knew how Dad felt about the *Korean War Hero*," said Jim. "We had acquired quite a few Corsair components and spares over the years and as time went by, I decided to rebuild the Corsair to honor Dad and his commitment to the veterans. I told my Mother about my intentions and she said, 'Go for it.'"

"I first met Joe back when he was rebuilding the Corsair and we were still at Rialto Airport," recalls WestPac Restorations president Bill Klaers. "Joe would stop by and check out whatever we were working on. One day he called up

SPECIFICATIONS
VOUGHT F4U-4

Span	41-ft
Length	34-ft 6-in
Height	14-ft 9-in
Wing Area	314-sq-ft
Empty Weight	9205-lbs
Gross Weight	12,420-lbs
Max Weight	14,670-lbs
Fuel	234- to 534-gal
Max Speed	446-mph @ 26,200-ft
	381-mph @ sl
Cruise Speed	215-mph
Landing Speed	89-mph
Ceiling	41,500-ft
Climb	3870-fpm (initial)
Range	1005-mi normal
	1560-mi max
Powerplant	Pratt & Whitney R-2800-18W
	2100-hp takeoff
	1950-hp @ 23,300-ft

Scott, Bill, and Jim briefing for the photo flight.

Few aircraft are as iconic as the Chance-Vought Corsair.


JT
NAVY
VF653
USS VALLEY FORGE
416
416 JT

and said 'I got this gear door that is all crunched to hell and can't figure out what to do with it.' I told Joe to send it to the shop. I had gotten our first power hammer and we deskinned the door and put it back into airworthy shape. Joe was impressed."

"When I decided to commit to getting the Corsair back in the air, I contracted Bill and went to Colorado Springs to visit WestPac's new facility," said Jim. "As with everyone else that has visited, I was extremely impressed with the new facility — for Warbird restoration, this is truly the way of the future. I also knew

Jim displays the aircraft's classic planform.

Ready to come aboard. Jim displays the F4U-4 with everything down.

SIX BEST/WORST THINGS ABOUT RESTORING A CORSAIR

In the August 2010 issue, we asked WestPac's Bill Klaers and Alan Wojciak to give independent opinions on the six best/worst things about restoring a P-47D. Their answers proved quite popular with our readers so we have done the same thing regarding the Corsair

BILL KLAERS

SIX WORST THINGS ABOUT RESTORING A CORSAIR

1) The gull wing makes everything you have to work on from the cockpit forward a real grind. Slip and slide, twist and grind — it does it all to you. In fact, two-weeks after finishing the Corsair, I had ligaments put into my left knee — something I have lived without for over 35-years!

2) Chance Vought and their weird hardware — what a nightmare to find different degree bolts, alien-looking attaching hardware, and the like. You would have thought that the military would have had some type of standardization by that point. Then there are the spot-welded subassemblies. Basically the whole airframe is spot-welded, anodized, and assembled. This is not like most aircraft where you drill a skin off, make a new one, and then rivet the new skin on. De-skinning a Corsair means the total destruction of the skin or structure — an added dilemma for the restorer.

3) Painting the aircraft Glossy Sea Blue. Paint is always a restorer's biggest nightmare.

4) High-speed taxi tests down the runway after restoration. Now

Departing Colorado Springs, Jim went on to almost immediately participate in the Tico, Florida, airshow as well as US Navy Tailhook Legacy Flight training.

Bill, Alan, and the whole gang and the quality of their work. We spent hours going over the project, how it would be handled, etc. I originally planned to have the aircraft restored over a period of years, but after talking to Bill I realized the importance of completing the plane in a timely manner and getting it out on the airshow circuit where the Corsair could continue Dad's original mission."

Jim transferred the remains of N713JT along with his other Corsair components to WestPac and the project got underway in January 2010. "We knew Jim wanted the airplane complet-

you really get the appreciation of torque and how far the engine sits forward and how far the pilot sits aft. It is much easier just taking off and landing.

5) Rigging the main landing gear with the multiple chambers and all of the monkey motion to get the gear in the wells and back out.

6) Watching the aircraft fly away to its new home. The Corsair has been a part of your life for so long and to see it go leaves a void. But knowing what it means to the owner makes it priceless.

OH... DID I MENTION THE **!!?? GULL WING?

SIX BEST THINGS ABOUT RESTORING A CORSAIR

1) The bottom accessory compartment makes working on the accessory area a mechanic's dream. It is big, roomy and even I can stand up inside.

2) It is a Navy aircraft — nothing is cooler than spreading and folding the wings.

3) The gull wing. More people ask why the wing has that huge bend. The gull wing is a real discussion point.

4) The cockpit of the Dash 4. It is nice to have a floor in the cockpit so that when you drop something, you can actually find it without having to crawl through the belly of the aircraft with a magnet and searchlight.

5) The four-blade Hamilton-Standard 24E60 propeller. Seeing this prop next to the early 23E50 props makes this aircraft look great.

6) Working with Jim Tobul on this project and being able to see his father Joe and Jim come back together again. Joe was a great guy — we miss him.

ALAN WOJCIAK

SIX WORST THINGS ABOUT RESTORING A CORSAIR

1) Climbing into the cockpit. You have to be a mountain climber!

2) The structure of the airframe is very complex — especially the wing center section.

3) The hydraulic system.

4) The main landing gear shock struts: Getting them properly serviced is a challenge.

5) Trying to sort through issues or problems on out-sourced components.

6) Trying to come up with a "Six Best" list.

SIX BEST THINGS ABOUT RESTORING A CORSAIR

1) The Corsair is an historic icon. After completing the restoration, it is great to see the plane come back to life on the ramp.

2) Just being able to compare the engineering between Chance Vought and the aircraft companies of the time like North American, Republic, and Lockheed.

3) Not having too many final assembly problems or flight test issues.

4) In the case of Jim's Corsair, just seeing him get back into an F4U-4 and doing a fabulous job getting up to speed again.

5) Getting the project done in the time the customer wanted.

6) Restoring a Corsair makes a P-47 or P-38 project look easy!

Jim in the cockpit of the Corsair.

ed as soon as possible, so we originally had four of our craftsmen assigned full-time to the project," stated Alan Wojciak. "As the aircraft progressed, we had 6/7 people on the plane during the last few months." In February, the aircraft was ready for engine runs and taxi tests. "I did a lot of T-6 flying to prepare for getting back into the Corsair's cockpit," said Jim. "I also had decals made to put on the plane once the painting was finished so that the Corsair would appear exactly has it had when Dad was flying the plane."

The first test flights went extremely smoothly, with a minimal number of squawks. Jim was making pretty regular trips to Colorado Springs to build up hours and he had put on an impressive 12-hrs by the time of our 5 March photo flight. The weather had been pretty marginal, but Bill had moved B-25J *In The Mood* out of its hangar and run the engines just to make sure everything was ready to go. Bill's son Scott would be handling the copilot duties. Around noon, the skies suddenly cleared and it appeared that the rest of the day would be sun drenched. "This is Colorado," said Bill, "so we better get going right now!"

We had already briefed the photo flight so the two Wrights and the Pratt & Whitney coughed into life and the Mitchell and Corsair headed for the active. After run-ups, we blasted down the 11,000-ft Runway 35 and climbed into an increasingly frigid sky. When it comes to formation flying, Jim is a real pro and we did not need any radio communications — just a couple hand signals for positioning. Bill and Scott established a racetrack pattern north of the field over open land and after 30-min of tight formation work; we headed back to Colorado Springs — just as the weather began to close in once again. Bill was right about the Colorado weather!

Bill and Scott Klaers ready for the photo flight.

With drop tank firmly in place, Jim prepares to head home to South Carolina.

Back on the ground, we had a good debrief and everyone was very pleased with the flight. The Corsair went back into the hangar to be serviced so that Jim could take the plane home the next day. A Mk. 12 drop tank was fitted and the Corsair was fueled and oiled. The next day, after a thorough run-up, Jim headed east for his first airshow at Tico and for practice with the Navy's Tailhook Legacy Flight. The *Korean War Hero* was back where it belonged — in the air! **AC**