

LARKINS IN FLIGHT

CONTINUING OUR SERIES OF WILLIAM T. LARKINS PHOTOS, WE EXAMINE
A FEW OF THE SHOTS BILL TOOK OF AIRBORNE AIRCRAFT

BY MICHAEL O'LEARY



**THE WILLIAM T. LARKINS
COLLECTION**

This is one of the first photographs Bill Larkins sent me when he learned I was trying to photograph civilian P-51 Mustangs. To me, it is one of the best Mustang photographs since it combines an iconic aircraft, perfect lighting, interesting background, and an unusual blend of markings. These P-51Ds had launched out of Hayward Airport on 15 October 1949 and Bill was firmly strapped into the back seat of a USAF Reserve AT-6C Texan with his faithful Kodak 616 Monitor camera (not the ideal camera for aerial photography, but look at the results). The formation orbited out over San Francisco while Bill shot away and in this particular view, Yerba Buena Island with the San Francisco Bridge (with its now demolished eastern span) can be seen at the upper left. The lead Mustang is 44-74607 carrying blue-painted 100-lb practice bombs (as readers know, histories of Mustangs can be confusing and there are two histories for this plane — one stating it hit a tow target on 21 October 1951 over Monterey, California, and the pilot was killed; another source that states it was written off in Korea on 5 September 1951 while with the 18th FBG), followed by 44-74820 (transferred to the 85th FIS), 44-74909 (transferred to the 3600th PTW), and 44-74684 (written off in an accident at the Santa Rosa NG Base, California, on 1 September 1960). The fighters were from the 194th Fighter Squadron, 144th Fighter Group, and display a variety of markings. This was before the "Air National Guard" so they carry the NG designation for National Guard and only the first two planes carry "CAL NG" while the second pair has just "NG" on the vertical tails. It is presumed that pair had just arrived and that the fuselage markings had not yet been added.



The Kodak 616 Monitor of the type used to take many of the photos. One had to be very careful since the bellows could be collapsed by the airstream. Also, the roll film was difficult to load in turbulence. Everything was manual so the photographer had to know exactly what he was doing.

EDITOR'S NOTE: As a young teenager hanging around the local airport, I would take lots of photographs of vintage aircraft (and there were plenty of them back then before the airport was "sanitized") but in the back of my mind I wondered how these aircraft could be photographed in the air. It was certainly beyond my capabilities but I looked in books on WWII aircraft and saw many great aerial photographs. However, I realized these were taken with the full support of the manufacturer and the military — something I certainly did not have. As I got a bit older and started to know a few of the P-51 Mustang owners at the field, one of them suggested that I should get in contact with a fellow by the name of William T. Larkins. I probably wrote the letter on lined schoolbook paper, but I got an answer back along with several examples of aerial photographs that he had taken. I was stunned at the quality. This led to a life-long correspondence. I was eventually able to acquire a 35mm camera and one day a P-51 pilot said

he was going to fly chase on a just-restored Warbird and he wanted me to go along to record the event. Away we went. The results were not superb but they were satisfactory (I could afford only one lens). That led to a lot more photo missions as the years went by and I would usually let Bill know what I was photographing. Eventually, Challenge Publications was able to obtain a portion of the W.T. Larkins collection and in this installment, we are presenting photos of aircraft Bill took in flight. Bill always reasoned that takeoff and landing photographs were an important part of recording an aircraft's history since they showed the plane in different configurations while still in the air and he was certainly correct. Few sights were more imposing than an early jetliner streaming black smoke and with all the flaps, gear, and high-lift devices down. This selection covers all forms of flying machines and will be the first installment of "Larkins In Flight." >>