

MISS FLYING TIGER

DIANNA BIXBY, HER DE HAVILLAND MOSQUITO, AND THE ATTEMPTS TO SET A GLOBAL FLIGHT RECORD

BY NORMAN MALAYNEY

The end of World War Two witnessed a resurgence of air racing in America. The government offered thousands of surplus military aircraft for disposal at give-away prices and the availability of high-performance fighters such as the P-51, P-39, P-38, P-63, and Corsair piqued interest in returning veterans. One of these men was Robert Swanson. A former USAAF Air Transport Command pilot, Swanson went into partnership with fellow veteran James P. Garvey and operated Skyways International. This Miami-based airline flew Lockheed Lodestars and Curtiss C-46s worldwide hauling freight and passengers and especially doing a lot of business moving Displaced

Persons (DPs) — stateless individuals that had been made homeless by WWII.

The first post-war National Air Races were held at Cleveland beginning on 30 August 1946. Swanson purchased a North American P-51K 44-12140 and quickly registered the former fighter NX66111. Swanson ferried the surplus Mustang to Miami for race preparation where, basically, unneeded military equipment was removed, civil registration was painted in the required areas, and Race 80 was added to the fuselage and wings. During the first qualifying lap at Cleveland, the Merlin failed

spectacularly and engine seized with the prop freezing in place. Spotting an open farm field, Swanson jettisoned the canopy and got the gear partially down before a very hard arrival in the plowed field. The main gear was torn out of the wing while the Harrison radiator was ripped from the belly. Damage was extensive. (EDITOR'S NOTE: This aircraft would go on to have a long and complex history and, for the collector, PlaneTags is offering their extremely well-



This dramatic photograph of Dianna Bixby and the gleaming *Miss Flying Tiger* was taken on FTL's ramp at Burbank. The all-metal nose is pretty obvious and it was thought the drastic modification would be needed for the global record attempt. Note the air-brushing around the tiger's mouth. (Doug Fisher Collection)

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Robert Swanson was typical of the thousands of hard-charging American pilots returning from the war and searching for something to do. Swanson would soon branch out into air racing and international freight hauling. (SARH)

done collectibles made from the craft's original skin. Go to www.planetags.com for further information or see ad within this issue.)

Undaunted, Swanson purchased P-51K 44-12116 (NX79161) that was located in New Mexico. The aircraft arrived the day before the race without the 85-gallon fuselage fuel tank. It would also become Race 80 and carry the name *Second Fiddle*. Quickly, his crew fabricated a smaller 45-gallon tank and installed it behind the pilot. The full-throttle Thompson (the race Swanson was hoping to enter) really ate up fuel. Lacking time to perform drag-reducing

measures, he entered the Thompson in basically stock military configuration. The mechanics proceeded to adjust the Merlin by placing a two-inch broomstick section against the automatic boost-control aneroid, thus eliminating its function! Swanson now controlled fuel consumption manually.

During the qualifying run, the 130-octane fuel appeared to cause detonation as he pushed the throttle to 65 inches of manifold pressure. To overcome this problem, the Shell Petroleum representative at the field donated a "super fuel" containing a triptane additive. The fuel tanks were

drained and filled with the new mixture. Throughout the race, Swanson kept pace with Cook Cleland and Woody Edmundson — 5th and 6th positions — conserving his fuel over the ten lap 300-mile course. He maintained this position until the final lap and then pushed the throttle up. The engine was now drawing 92 inches, which he estimated was only 70% of full power.

Swanson would later recall, "The engine purred like a kitten and held together. In fact, the other P-51s in the race burned their stacks off while mine were in good shape. I later sold the stacks off my Merlin so other pilots could fly their aircraft home."

Swanson placed fifth and recorded the fastest lap speed for an extra reward of \$2500 prize money. Mr. Thompson of Thompson Products approached the pilot to purchase the P-51 for museum display. Swanson sold it for \$4500 and Race 80 was set up as a display at the Crawford Auto Museum, Cleveland, Ohio. For aviation historians this was an important transaction since Race 80 is about as close as one is going to get to a stock WWII Mustang and the interior of the plane has been studied to determine equipment placement along with defining original interior colors.

MOSQUITO PURCHASE

Having experienced the wonderment



Bob Swanson's hard arrival in P-51K-10-NT USAAF 44-12852/NX66111 after the Merlin seized (note that one AeroProducts blade is completely undamaged). Although it looks like a belly landing, it wasn't and the gear was either partially or all the way down as it was ripped from the wing. This aircraft would have an unusual life and enthusiasts can own a piece of the historic Mustang courtesy PlaneTags. (Emil Strasser via Gerald Liang)

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