

OLD 590

BRIEF TALE OF A PHOTO-RECON MUSTANG IN A FORGOTTEN WAR

BY JACK CANARY AND ROBERT BOURLIER

During World War Two, North American Aviation field representatives were encouraged to write up short and “chatty” bits of news that could be easily read by the “folks back at the factory.” This would give them an inside look on how the planes they were building were being used to defeat the enemy.

During 1945, in his job as field rep, Jack Canary became involved with an F-6C Mustang that was known as *Old 590* by its crew chief. The tac-recon fighter was assigned to the 118th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron, 23rd Fighter Group, and was going out on daily hazardous missions against an enemy that knew they had lost the war but were fighting for every last inch.

Old 590 was heading back to its Chinese base after an engagement with Zeros that attacked the Mustang while it was taking photos. Jack recounted, “With rudder

control and brakes damaged by a 20mm shell while on a raid on Canton, a 14th AAF pilot flew his F-6C back to base and made a three-point landing — only to have the Mustang ground-loop and then come to a stop on its belly with its landing gear legs at the bottom of a 20-foot-wide ditch.”

The pilot got of the cockpit, fortunately uninjured, but then wrote *Old 590* off as a “complete washout.” Readers of our new “Cost of War” feature can certainly relate to the number of USAAF aircraft that were being written off — via combat and accidents — each and every day of the war. However, the pilot had forgotten one thing — Yankee Ingenuity. Crew chief Sgt. Vernon Hill looked at “his baby” with dismay. Canary said, “The prop was bent almost double, the belly and wing tips were wrinkled and torn, and both landing gear struts lay alongside the fuselage.”

However, Sgt. Hill was not

going to have his Mustang sent to the scrap heap. “He obtained permission to attempt repairs in a specified length of time,” wrote Canary. Engineers built a bridge across the ditch strong enough to support both the plane when ready to move along with a wrecking truck. The ship was hoisted on jacks. We installed two new pivot shafts, the left tank door, fairing doors, air scoop, left wing tip, and a new propeller.

“Flight tests revealed no bad flight characteristics. And Sgt. Hill was a pretty tickled crew chief when he announced that *Old 590* was on flying status and ready to fight again after being out of action only six days. Since then, the Mustang has flown an additional 200 hours of combat against the Japs.” **AC**



Crew chief Sgt. Vernon Hill prepares to bore sight the four Browning .50-caliber machine guns after the six-days of repair work. The Mustang's name came from the squadron coding on the vertical tail. (Jack Canary)



F-6C 42-103623 presents a sad sight after coming to a stop in the ditch. The pilot had shut down the Merlin at the last moment so only the bottom two prop blades were bent back. (Jack Canary)

EDITOR'S NOTE: I first met Jack Canary at Long Beach Airport. I had gotten my driver's license and a friend said there were “lots of old airplanes” at the field. That was an understatement. Surplus ex-military aircraft and a variety of other rare flying machines seemed to pack every corner. What caught my eye was the vast assemblage of Texans, Harvards, and Valiants on the ramp at Steward-Davis Aviation. I asked my usual dumb questions to a small group of men that were going over a BT-13 and was told the planes were being modified for a new movie about the Japanese sneak attack on Pearl Harbor called *Tora! Tora! Tora!* I was invited to take my camera and walk around — imagine that happening today. One of the fellows was Jack Canary. He had been a North

American Aviation field representative during WWII and had traveled to some exotic locations. He had gotten a job finding the ex-WWII trainers that would be converted into the film's Japanese aircraft. He had an incredible knowledge and was also completely consumed with aviation history. We spent about an hour talking and promised to stay in touch. He said he was leaving to get a BT-13 in Pennsylvania. Little did I know that he would be dead in less than a week. Robert Bourlier is also an aviation historian and has gathered extensive material on photo-recon Mustangs. In an old issue of NAA's *Skyline* magazine, he found an article by Jack. He added some photos to create a very interesting look at what life was like “in the field.”