

THUNDERBIRD

THE INCREDIBLE SAGA OF THE WORLD'S FASTEST MUSTANG
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Logo for the 1949 Cleveland National Air Races.



Magnificently prepared Thunderbird parked on the grass at Cleveland. (Burke Studios)

INTRODUCTION

A bright white and black North American P-51C Mustang entered the traffic pattern at Idewild Airport in New York in the afternoon of 30 March 1954. The sleek aircraft had departed Los Angeles International Airport earlier that day in pursuit of setting a new transcontinental speed record for propeller-driven aircraft. Upon landing, the official elapsed time for the journey was recorded as 4 hours, 24 minutes, and 17 seconds to cover a distance of 2474 miles. The calculated speed was to be a new world's record — a stunning 560-mph! On the Mustang's cowl was name *Mr. Alex* and it was 1949 Bendix Trophy race winner Joe DeBona that emerged from the cockpit. *Mr. Alex* was the same Mustang in which Joe had won the 1949 event. The name *Mr. Alex* had been chosen by the plane's owner, actor Jimmy Stewart, in honor of his father. The flight was the culmination of the effort that began in 1948 by Stewart and DeBona in pursuit of a Bendix victory and to set a transcontinental speed record that remains in place in 2023. Sixteen months later, the story would be completely over but, for the moment, DeBona and Stewart could savor the



Before and after the war, Stewart was an active private pilot and he is seen with his Stinson and actress Margaret Sullavan.

record-setting performance that had been concluded that afternoon at Idewild Airport.

THE BENDIX TROPHY YEARS

Joseph Clairborne DeBona Jr. was born on 16 August 1912 at Eagle Pass, Texas, and would develop an interest in aviation at a young age. By 1947, Joe DeBona was a Beverly Hills realtor and President of the Lions Club when he began his pursuit for Bendix victory. He had been an Air Transport Command pilot in World War Two, achieving the rank of major, and had built

up extensive flying time ferrying aircraft across the Atlantic and the Pacific. Joe had missed the first post-war Bendix in 1946 but had no intention of being absent for the 1947 event. He had noted the success of Hollywood stunt pilot Paul Mantz in 1946 — beating all-comers in his bright red P-51C Mustang Race 46. Paul's success was achieved by turning the wing of his Mustang into a flying fuel tank. Mantz had sealed all the openings in the wing and coated the interior with a zinc chromate paste that when dry would enable the laminar flow wing to