



# IN THE SHOP

BY BRUCE LOCKWOOD

# WARBIRD MAYDAY!

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THE ENGINE GOES AWAY AND THE PILOT IS FACED WITH A LIMITED CHOICE OF OPTIONS  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL O'LEARY EXCEPT WHERE NOTED

Owing to the difficulty of distinguishing the letter "S" by telephone, the international distress signal "SOS" will give place to the words "Mayday," the phonetic equivalent of M'aidez, the French for "Help Me."  
—"New Air Distress Signal," *The Times* [London], 2 February 1923

It was a typical fall afternoon in the coastal community of Santa Monica, California. A refreshing westerly breeze was gently blowing cool ocean air into the open hangar when the afternoon calm was interrupted by "Mayday! Mayday!" The resolve in the pilot's voice reverberated throughout the hangar. The shop radio, tuned to the airport tower frequency, announced the urgency over the loud speaker onto the ramp and across the airwaves for all to hear. The Mayday call was again repeated. The tone of the voice much higher and strained... as if waiting for someone to respond. "Roger, Santa Monica tower here,

you're cleared to land at your discretion, Runway 8 or 26. Winds are 240-deg at 12-kts. What is the nature of your emergency and type airplane?" "P-51 Mustang," came a somewhat out of breath reply. "My engine is missing badly and losing power." From the west came the distant sound of an ailing engine. I realized the unfolding drama was taking place a scant distance away. Stepping quickly from the hangar, I recognized the distinctive sound of a Rolls-Royce Merlin, but this one didn't sound healthy. The back-firing, faltering, asthmatic engine was struggling to keep the P-51D airborne. Blocking the sun with my hand, I peered in the general direction of the sound and

caught the sunlit glimmer of an airplane. The Santa Monica-based P-51 had just departed Runway 26 and was less than 30 seconds into its flight. I hadn't noticed the departure as I'd been engrossed in welding. By the time I walked out of the hangar, the Mustang had just initiated what appeared to be 180° left turn near the shoreline adjacent to the Santa Monica Pier at approximately 800-ft AGL. Apparently, the pilot felt that returning to the airport before the engine completely expired was a safer option than a beach belly-landing or ditching in the ocean. As the Mustang, now nose high, slowly made its way back towards the safety of home base, it appeared that the ordeal might soon be over. In the eyes of all that were now



The author with the Spitfire in the middle of nowhere. The narrow and short strip made the successful forced landing possible.

The demolished Mustang on a Santa Monica street. After several more accidents, the pilot incinerated himself when the engine of his fuel-laden Hawker Hunter jet fighter failed shortly after takeoff.