



HELLCAT ROLL-OUT

YANKS AIR MUSEUM COMPLETES ANOTHER MILESTONE

BY MICHAEL O'LEARY

On 28 April, a significant event for the Warbird World took place as the hangar doors at the Yanks Air Museum's restoration shop slid open and a gleaming new aircraft was rolled out into the morning sun for the first time. "Over the years, I have owned three Hellcats along with quite a few Hellcat components," stated Charles Nichols, founder of Yanks. "I have always admired the Grumman F6F and it's only relatively recently that this fighter has gained the importance it has always deserved. During the 1970s, one could still find airframes and lots of F6F parts. Remember, the US Navy operated drone Hellcats into the start of the 1960s and I

recall that in the early 1970s there were two Hellcats in the GSA yard at NAS China Lake for sale. They were a bit battered but the F6F-5Ks were essentially complete airframes and, sadly, they attracted little interest. As I started my collecting, I recall my airplane friends say to me, 'Why don't you just buy a Mustang?' Basically, I knew there was a goodly supply of P-51s, so that acquisition could wait. Available Hellcats were disappearing and I knew I needed to concentrate on hard-to-find airplanes. Back then, a Hellcat was always cheaper than a comparable Mustang. Today, the situation is completely reversed and anything to do with a Hellcat is much more expensive.

"The first Hellcat I came across was in an unlikely location. It was inside a hangar at Compton Airport in south central Los Angeles. It was owned by some guys operating as California Warbirds. They also had a P-51D Mustang but it needed a new engine. I went into the hangar and looked at the F6F-5K. It was all apart and there were boxes full of parts, instruments, etc. There was a fellow working on the aircraft and we struck up a conversation. His name was Stan Hoefler and he was doing part time work on the plane. I told him I was thinking about buying the aircraft but I needed someone to restore it. Stan did not particularly want to work full-time. During WWII, he was a command

The F6F-3 on the Yanks ramp. At this point, detail painting still had some work left and, as can be seen, the national insignia on the left wing was not yet finished.