

# MOSQUITO MISSION

IT HAD BEEN 37 YEARS SINCE TWO DE HAVILLAND MOSQUITOES HAD FLOWN TOGETHER.  
NOW, IT WAS TIME TO MAKE HISTORY ALL OVER AGAIN

BY MICHAEL O'LEARY

**O**n 21 September, a cool marine layer was pouring over the Santa Ynez Mountains and into California's sprawling Coastal Valley, which is home to the town of Santa Maria. This was a relief from the triple-digit heat wave that had plagued the lower half of the state. "The fog is going to push back the show about an hour," said Steve Hinton who is, of course, president of Planes of Fame Air Museum. The museum was holding its second AirFest at the field, which will be the location of the new Planes of Fame. Construction was just starting on the first of an impressive series of structures that will house POF, Fighter Rebuilders, and a growing collection of vintage and veteran aircraft.

Santa Maria Public Airport (and the "Public" in the name is rather unique)

has an interesting history and the delay in the start of the show gave me a bit of time to drive around the field. Originally built by the Army Air Force for B-25 Mitchell training, the airport soon transitioned to a training base for Lockheed P-38 Lightnings and many of the revetments for those aircraft are still clearly visible. During the war, the skies above Santa Maria were filled with the twin-boom, twin-engine fighters and even today aviation archeologists have discovered various P-38 bits and pieces scattered around the revetments. The signs of war often take a long time to disappear.

The airport is sometimes confused with Hancock Field, which was about two miles south of Santa Maria. Founded in 1927 by Capt. Alan Hancock, the field became the community airport for the

area. In 1928, Hancock, who was a major aviation supporter as well as a massive land owner and oil developer, established the Hancock Foundation College of Aeronautics and as World War Two drew closer, Hancock received contracts from the government to create a major pilot training facility that went into operation on 14 September 1940. Soon, dozens of Stearmans filled the ramp area and young aviators went through an intensive primary pilot program. After the war, the College of Aeronautics resumed its various training courses and received a large variety of surplus military aircraft that would serve as training aids. Included in this group would be a Bell P-59 Airacomet, America's first jet aircraft and, in one of those strange coincidences, the Airacomet would eventually find its way into the collection



Steve Hinton brings NZ2308 in tight on Bradon Kunicki's SNJ flown by Pat Nightingale. This view shows the concentrated firepower of the four .303-caliber machine guns and four 20mm cannon.