



The author leading an F-16 and an F-35 during the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the Colorado Air National Guard.

I received the text at 5:15 am on 29 May 2026 stating that Michael W. Bertz had passed after a three-decades-long battle with Parkinson's disease. He was two weeks from his 90th birthday. Mike was one of the original players in the Warbird Movement and he had owned P-51D Mustang USAAF 45-11636 for some 45 years, one of the longest private ownerships of any Warbird (the

first longest individual owner of a P-51 was veteran pilot Clay Lacy). He sold 45-11636 to me during December 2013, but it took ten long years of courtship before he would agree to release his stewardship to me as "Keeper of the Flame."

Mike was born on 11 June 1936 (yes, 11636 — and that is the first unusual association with this particular aircraft)



Mike Bertz fell in love with aviation at an early age and began to attend a variety of airshows. One of the acts that impressed him was "Johnny Skyrocket" in his all-gold surplus de Havilland Vampire.

ROUTE OF FLIGHT		REMARKS AND		AIRCRAFT CATEGORY	
TO	NR	NR	NR	Single engine land	Multi engine land
<h1>KEEPER OF THE FLAME</h1> <p>REMEMBERING AN AVIATOR AND THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF OWNING AN HISTORIC AIRCRAFT</p>					

in Cadiz, Ohio, and thus began a strange set of circumstances surrounding the ownership of 45-11636. What were the chances of that date and that serial number being the same? Zero? Less than zero? It is just one of the many bits of serendipity that has kept this aircraft as a companion throughout the decades.

Cadiz was in a small coal mining region in western Ohio. Although small, a number of famous people were from Cadiz including Clark Gable, Gen. George Armstrong Custer, Edwin M. Stanton (Secretary of War during the Abraham Lincoln administration), and John Bingham, the prosecuting attorney against John Wilkes Booth for the assassination of President Lincoln. All Bingham in the United States are related and derive from a Thomas Bingham, who immigrated in the 1650s from England to Connecticut. Just another bit of serendipity?

During WWII, military aircraft regularly flew over Cadiz. Most were trainers and a Fairchild PT-26 and a North American T-6 were forced to land near Cadiz. Mike rode his bike out to both forced landing sites. It was at



The Mustang shortly after being sold at auction at McClellan AFB. (Doug Fisher Collection)

this point that Mike realized there was another type of airplane known as the P-51 Mustang that regularly flew over his house — coming from Lockbourne Army Airfield (later Rickenbacker AFB) near Columbus and flying towards Pittsburgh. He thought the Mustang was the most beautiful airplane he had ever seen, both in the air and on the ground. From that moment, Mike was hooked on aviation and he decided then and there that someday he would fly a P-51 Mustang.

Mike's parents were a hardworking coal-mining family and they instilled the following tenets early in his life:

- Never smoke
- Always clean your room
- You must have an education
- If you want something, go earn your own money to purchase it. This will make it mean more to you, and you will take better care of it.
- Any job worth doing is worth doing right
- Never spend principal
- Save your money because you might need it
- Pay cash. If you borrow money, you are throwing the interest away
- Your money should work for you while you sleep
- Take care of your possessions
- Be frugal and don't waste things

Mike started earning money early in life by doing odd jobs like plowing gardens, raising rabbits, cutting hay, delivering newspapers, driving a feed truck at age 14, and pumping gas. At the ripe old age of 14, Mike started a life-long passion of collecting cars when he purchased a 1918 Ford Model



Mike Bertz (left) with the author and the Mustang.

T Touring car, which he continued to own until his death. More Model Ts, Porsches, Ferraris, Thunderbirds. Exotics like Panteras would later follow. In the summer of 1951, Mike and a friend rode their Whizzer motorbikes 20 miles from Cadiz to the St. Clairsville Airport to watch his first airshow, where Johnny Skyrocket flew his gold-painted jet-powered de Havilland Vampire (while also wearing a gold-painted deep-sea diving suit!). Upon landing, Johnny

Skyrocket gave the crowd another show with the flick of his dramatic cape and his overall *panache*. Mike knew he just had to be a pilot.

Mike started taking lessons in a Piper J-3 Cub for \$3 per hop but he really had a burning desire to be a fighter pilot. After high school, Mike enlisted in the US Air Force during July 1954. After Basic Training, he was transferred in 1956 to Bunker Hill AFB in the remote farming town of Peru, Indiana. At that



Frank Tallman's first base was at Flabob Airport near Riverside, California. The Mustang can be seen in front of Tallman's hangar directly behind this "Wichita Fokker." (Doug Fisher Collection)