



Lefty and Ladd Gardner with the P-38. (Phillip Makanna)

THUNDERBIRD'S RETURN

IT WAS A LONG ROAD, BUT LADD GARDNER FINALLY GOT HIS WISH
WHEN HE ACQUIRED HIS FATHER'S MUSTANG

BY MICHAEL O'LEARY

Garren Swager displaying the sleek lines of the Mustang over Chino on 23 September.

My favorite time at an airshow is late in the day — the sun is sliding down on the western horizon, the flying is over, the aircraft are parked, and the engines are ticking away as they cool. I was sitting on a bench with Lefty Gardner and, as usual, we were talking about airplanes. I had known Lefty for quite a few years and we had many friends in the aviation world that we could discuss.

Lefty said, "You know, we went for a couple flights in my *Thunderbird* Mustang at Reno last year." I certainly recalled those — I was strapped into the

rear seat as we roared around the Reno course during a practice session.

"Well," continued Lefty, "I think it is about time you got some Lightning experience under your belt."

Who was I to disagree?

The gleaming white Lightning registered N25Y was parked on the ramp as we did a walk-around on the twin-boom fighter. "I think you are going to find this a bit different than the P-51," commented Lefty as he scrambled up the retractable boarding ladder located to the rear of the fuselage pod. I always found this ladder an interesting way to board a

Warbird and I immediately followed Lefty up onto the right wing.

"This is going to be the hard part," said Lefty. The P-38 does not have a second seat as does a Mustang. There is shelf behind the pilot and I had to wedge myself behind the seat, lay on my left side in sort of a fetal position, while Lefty strapped in. Not exactly a comfortable position. Once I was wedged in, Lefty handed me a camera and then proceeded to start the Allison.

Soon we were climbing into a sky that was rapidly turning a deep blue. Lefty was correct — this was completely different