

Programmer recounts ride in P51 Mustang

"I'm up for anything"

By Donald A. Hill, Jr.

So there I was, sitting in the back seat of a P51 Mustang. It is a dream come true, the culmination of a project begun 3 years before, and a life long desire to fly in an actual P51 Mustang. The 3 year project resulted in P51 Mustang Flight Simulator, a computer program for the Apple Macintosh.

I had several times hinted at or asked for a ride in a P51 from acquaintances during research for my program, but it didn't happen until this beautiful July afternoon.

The man in front of me, and at the controls, is quiet, calm, Bill Hane. A man deeply infected with a love for his WWII fighter aircraft. Bill, retired, has an airshow routine he performs at events. I had met Bill 18 months earlier when I asked him to comment on the realism of my program. What could an actual Mustang pilot say about a computer simulation? Not much it turned out. It was a case of two different eras failing to connect.

So there I was, sitting in the back seat strapping myself into a 50 year old fighter legend. I wonder briefly what I've gotten myself into, but the thought passes quickly as I absorb myself in the event.

It's been just minutes since I arrived at Truckee, California airport and walked the short distance to hangar E40. The hangar door was closed and lonely. A flash of disappointment invades my thoughts, "is this not going to happen?" But as I turn away I see Bill and his wife Marci drive up in their Subaru. Disappointment changes to a jolt of fear, "this is going to happen."

I am slightly angered at having any fear. This is something I've always wanted to do.

Bill opens the hangar door, and after brief politeness, hooks up the taxi rig to the main gear of the Mustang and the front of the Subaru. Truly, an odd sight. Marci, at the controls of the Subaru, carefully pulls "Ho! Hun", Bill's Mustang, out of the hangar and into the bright sunlight. I am again reminded of the size of these wonderful machines. Beautiful, in a rugged, menacing sort of way.

This time the aircraft is inviting unlike other Mustangs I've seen. Usually, they are surrounded with crowd control ropes keeping me back, but this is no static display. This machine will soon fly with me inside.

Bill begins his preflight walk around with me silently in tow. He pokes into the undercarriage cavities looking for hydraulic leaks. His hands are slow, methodical, confident. He pushes on the gear covers to see if they are loose. He checks the leading edge of that

double tapered, double angled wing. He checks the surfaces, the tail wheel, the sides of the fuselage.

As we walk around the tail of the aircraft I ask Bill about his first solo. Had he trained in a duel stick Mustang, there were a few made, or did he get in and go it alone? Bill's comment, "I got in and flew it alone... As I started down the runway that first time, I just knew I was going to die. I sat there with three miles of runway in front of me and..." He stops cold. I sense a reluctance from him to discuss with me any chance of danger before the flight. He sees a bit of rag sticking out of the ammunition bay on top of the left wing and falls silent, busy stuffing the rag inside. This is a story that will not be told today.

As we come around the front of the airplane I marvel at the mighty 4 bladed prop towering above my head.

Walk around complete, Bill says with some wry joviality, "Well, I guess she'll fly." Marci comes over, cautions Bill about gliders in the area, gives him a brief kiss, and we're ready to board.

Bill gracefully walks up the left tire onto the wing and I clumsily follow. I have once before sat in a Mustang, but that was different, that Mustang was not going to fly with me in it. My heart beat increases a little.

Getting into the back seat of a Mustang is awkward. Of course the designers never intended there to be a back seat. Original Mustangs had a 90 gallon fuel tank behind the pilot. This can cause center of gravity problems when carrying fuel and was deemed dangerous so current Mustangs have the tanks removed and seats installed. Or more accurately, one sits on the floor with a stiff, metal back rest.

Okay, here goes, left foot on the front seat, right foot on the back seat, now I try to get my left foot in back; I twist, turn and squirm my way down into the seat. I'm in. Bill leans down and asks, "I don't really know what you want to do?" Without hesitation the following words pop out of my mouth, "I'm up for anything." I'm up for anything, I repeat these words to myself. I hadn't thought about what we would do in the air. What would "I'm up for anything" mean to Bill. It didn't seem to have any effect on him, although the next thing he did was make sure the 4 straps of the seat belt were properly fastened. Oh well, I'm up for anything.

Bill leans out and almost quietly says, "Clear". Marci looks around and repeats, "Clear." Geez, it's really going to happen, I'm going to fly in WWII's most famous fighter.

The prop turns over and cylinders begin their music. Some blue/

black smoke is pushed out the exhaust and then that marvelous V12 thunders to life. I smell that smell. The smell of I don't know what. No, I do know, it's the smell of raw, untamed power.

A brief shutter tumbles down the fuselage. The entire plane feels alive as we begin to move. This large aircraft now looks compact, perfectly proportioned. As I look left and right I feel I understand the comment I've heard from these P51 pilots. They don't think of sitting inside the airplane, rather, they say the aircraft is strapped on to them. That their thoughts are translated directly into the aircrafts performance. They merely think that they want to move this way, and the aircraft yields. It becomes an extension of their body.

We roll down the tarmac toward the runway. Bill turns the aircraft slightly left, then right, so he can see the ground in front of us. In this tail down attitude, the nose obscures vision directly ahead. We stop just short of the end of the runway and turn into the wind. Bill adds throttle and runs the engine up. It goes from popping and cracking to the very definition of smooth.

A Piper twin taxies nearby, turns into the wind and does his run up. I wonder what is going through his mind as he glances over at us.

The exhaust rushing past the still open canopy is now hot. I feel anxious to go. The Piper turns for the runway, and we follow. Bill cranks the canopy closed. I realize suddenly that I am only a useless appendage in this affair. I can do nothing constructive from my position. The bubble canopy is narrow at my head, only slightly wider at Bill's shoulders. There is no chance of me squeezing past him to the front, or of me releasing the canopy. If Bill should pass out for some unknown reason, I could only sit back and watch those final, deadly, scenes... I'm ready.

The Piper is away and climbing as Bill gingerly pushes the throttle slide forward. The torque on this beast can be dangerous and it demands respect.

We bump along down the runway and after what seems like forever, the tail comes up and we're rolling on the main gear only. I get the sensation that the tail is too high and that we're going to nose over. I think this is partly from my computer simulation. It's perspective is, if anything, a bit nose high.

But everything is fine and before I expect it, we're flying. It's always exciting in any aircraft at that moment when you lunge into the sky. In the Mustang, it's incredibly smooth.

I look right and see our shadow retreating. I imagine the sight I've

(Continued on other side)

seen so many times; I see in my mind's eye the Mustang's gear retracting into the wing. Beautiful from the ground, inside it's hardly noticed.

I lose sight of the Piper as we turn left toward Lake Tahoe. Over Bill's left shoulder I see a compass. Over his right shoulder I see the accelerometer (G meter). The arm jiggles right around "1". It also has a second arm which will remain at the highest point or most G's pulled. Historically, this instrument is for after a mission the flight engineer could look at this gauge and see if the airframe had been over stressed.

Earphones on, the engine is a dull roar. I pull off the right ear piece and am assaulted with the precision and expression of 12 large cylinders, totally unmuffled. Returning my ear piece makes the sound tolerable.

We are now heading directly toward a ridge that separates Truckee airport and the Lake Tahoe basin. I can just barely see the Lake beyond the ridge. We are not flying over the ridge so much as flying "by" it. I look down at Northstar ski resort. It looks dry, shriveled, dead during summer.

We clear the ridge with 200 feet to spare. It's usually bumpy this close to mountains, but the Mustang is solid.

Lake Tahoe fills my vision ahead. It's spectacularly deep blue today and I can see many boats skipping along the surface.

As I think idly of this day's beauty, Bill abruptly, and without warning, performs a complete roll to the right. Great. I think back to my words, "I'm up for anything" and I'm actually delighted by the prospect of doing maneuvers. The roll was completely positive so there wasn't any of that "hanging from the straps" feeling. The G meter is on "2".

We begin some high bank turns and then some climbing maneuvers. The world is rocking and rolling all around me and I'm not quite sure which way to look to take it all in. It's kind of like seeing a film from inside the cockpit of an aerobatic plane, but I get that sense of space, of depth about me. We do a 90° banking turn and my vision goes from inside then down to the water. This is a new experience to my body and it's exciting, although I feel detached from the action. So far, all maneuvers have been positive and only up to 2 G's.

We have the most altitude since we took off now. The nose comes up a little, wings level, airspeed bleeds off, then, quickly, we roll inverted. I look up, which is down, I guess, but it's up from inside the cockpit, and I see tiny boats with wakes surrounded by blue. Then, the nose is pointing straight down.

Straight down.

Our chariot is gaining speed quickly now. I think of the charts I've seen in an original 50's era Mustang manual on how much altitude is needed to pull out of a dive, pulling "x" G's. I'm trying to remember the details of these charts, but all thought is forced out of my mind as the blood is squeezed out of my brain. I'm looking straight

forward now and my head is very heavy on my neck. It's being forced forward and down. I see a checkerboard pattern before me as I "grey out". I think vaguely of trying to do something with my stomach, a technique to get blood back in to my head that I can't quite remember, but then it's too late. We're straight and level at 500 feet over the water, I'm fully conscience and everything is back to normal. I look over Bill's right shoulder and see we've pulled 4 1/2 G's. Excellent, the ride can end right now and I'll be happy.

It doesn't end.

In a zooming turn we push right down on the water. I think back to a couple of days ago when on the beach I watched Bill do this very same thing. He goes right down on the deck. I think then, and now, this is altogether too low. It seems to me that the prop must be just a few feet above the water. I'm becoming concerned. How does he know how low to go, without going too low and hitting the

I command myself, "I will not get sick"

water? I look left and *up* at a sail boat's mast. Then I realize how he knows and I'm no longer worried. I make a mental note to ask Bill later about this.

We climb a little along side a hill, change direction and return to the deck. We fly past the local beach at perhaps 250 mph and I wonder if any of my friends are watching. When I told people of my opportunity to fly in this historic aircraft they really didn't understand what it would mean to me, or why others like me make such a big deal about it. There are several intellectual reasons, most of them obvious and certainly one is to make my program better. But beyond that, the real motivation is emotional. For me, it goes back to childhood fantasies about airplanes in general, and the Mustang specifically. The desire to fly in this aircraft has been with me so long it has become part of my very being. It's a fulfillment of a longing I can't completely express in words.

Ahead climbs the eastern ridge of the Sierra Nevada Mountain range. We appear to be playing chicken with it. No, I know that's not accurate. I know this is no frivolous endeavor for Bill, rather, his is an unconscious revelry in the exercise. His is the joy of the bond between man and machine.

Finally, we pull up the tree lined hillside, veer left, and as the airspeed falls to maybe 150 mph we crest the ridge. The basin where Carson City lies stretches below us. The ground falls to 4000 feet, the ridge is maybe 7500 feet with the lake altitude at 6200. Interestingly, Lake Tahoe at its deepest point is below the Carson valley. Dramatic vistas indeed.

We fly across a mountain meadow toward the north. Ahead is another ridge. I hear Bill's voice over the intercom, "Still with me?" "This is great", I respond and Bill gives me a left handed "OK" sign.

We reach the ridge and push down the other side. Canyon walls plummet in front of us and we fly between them. I think of us as lone raiders flying inside a canyon to evade radar. I look right and see the familiar Mustang shadow dancing with the trees. The release of flying is undeniable. We bank left, right, then left again. This is exhilarating, and I have no fear.

We bank right 80° and shoot through a gap in the canyon wall... incredible.

Then we zoom up and I see Truckee airport and I-80 spread out beneath us. There is a small lake off to the right and as I wonder if we'll fly toward it, we perform another roll. It feels almost commonplace, how quickly humans adapt.

I'm beginning to feel very hot inside the bubble canopy. There is a small oval hole cut in the bubble canopy and I wonder if I should stick my finger through it. Would the air stream break my finger?

I'm feeling queasy. I feel damp. As much as I've enjoyed this, and as much as I've wanted to do this, I think I would like to land now. I command myself, I will not get sick. Not now, not this close to the end.

We turn right for a 360 and we're on final. I notice a small plane landing in front of us and I hope this doesn't make us go around. I can't believe myself, I actually want the ride to end.

As we reach the threshold, Bill cuts the power. We hit ground effect over the runway and the plane refuses to stop flying. And then, with a squeak, it's over. We've landed. I feel the familiar comfort of solid ground underneath me. Thankfully, the canopy opens and fresh air rushes in. (I am not going to be sick.)

Looking back now, I can hardly remember the rest of the event. I tell Bill what a great experience it is. He agrees, but his demeanor is almost bored. I ask him how he knows how low to fly over the water, does he feel ground effect? He says yes, just a little "bump" and he knows. He asks if everything is okay with me, and I lie and say fine, not wanting to tell him I'm very queasy, he probably knows anyway. I tell him I saw grey during the split-S and he tells me, in a matter-of-fact way, that it happens to him sometimes also. He says when it happens the trick is to hold the stick back and count to ten. Somehow, I'm glad we didn't speak of this before the flight.

What is it like to fly in a P51 Mustang? Exciting, exhilarating, incredible. Is P51 Mustang Flight Simulator just like flying an actual Mustang? Yes, and no. Of course it can't be just like flying an actual aircraft. But it is as close as my mind and heart can make it.

The P51 Mustang is one of those rare examples of men designing to a need and creating something much more. The precision of its performance and the beauty of its form combine to make it a lasting monument to its accomplishments. This is a creation that is truly greater than the sum of its parts.

And if you ever get a chance to ride shot gun in a Mustang, take it. Fly low and fast, and remember to say, "I'm up for anything."