Transatlantic LIGHTNING

RESTORED OVER TWO-DECADES AGO, A LOCKHEED P-38 HAS BEEN DELIVERED FOR A NEW OWNER

BY MICHAEL O'LEARY

"Meet you over the lake." Steve Hinton brings N505MH in tight with the Baron photo ship on 24 March after the flight from McMinnville, Oregon.

A soft wind was blowing across the ramp at the former US Marine Corps training base at Santa Barbara, California. The year was 1966 and I was in high school and had just gotten my driver's license. A school pal that knew of my interest in World War Two aircraft said that there were "some old WWII airplanes sitting at the field." Well, that of course got my interest and on a Saturday morning I got an early start and headed up Pacific Coast Highway to the airfield. Back then, there were still quite a few of the WWII hangars and other buildings still standing and I began to drive around the perimeter road — disappointment growing as I did not spot anything that looked like a fighter plane. Then I took a turn on the southeast corner and there they were — a group of P-38s scattered on the ramp in no particular order.

Grabbing my primitive 35mm camera, I quickly exited the car and walked onto the ramp to examine the veteran Lightnings (this was, of course, back in the time when people actually welcomed you to walk around and look at aircraft). They were not the first Lightnings I had seen, but close to it and I guess that — even to my unexperienced eye — I was a bit disappointed by what I saw. It was evident that some of the P-38s had been parked longer than others and a few of the five aircraft were missing vital components — an engine here, an aileron there, a removed radiator, paint really faded, etc. However, and this was the most important part, they were genuine Lockheed P-38 Lightnings and more than I had ever seen.

So, how did these P-38s come to be parked at Santa Barbara Airport — an area known more as an international resort town rather than a gathering point for run-down WWII fighters? The building by which the aircraft was parked had the name "Mark Hurd" on the door and, looking through a window, I could see piles of Lightning parts along with a couple of Allison V-1710 engines. Mark Hurd was an aerial survey company that employed the Lightnings as well as numerous other types of aircraft. By the time of my visit, the Lightnings were pretty much out of service — but not completely since over the next couple years several flyable Lightnings would be parked on the ramp as their unique capabilities would be required by Hurd. However, with a Learjet parked nearby in Mark Hurd colors and configured for photo mapping, it was clear that the days of the twin-boomed classics were coming to a close.

One aircraft immediately became of more interest since a group of mechanics was busily at work on the plane, which was up on jacks with just about every access panel removed. I asked one of the mechanics what they were doing and was told that the plane was being readied for a ferry flight to Reno, Nevada. The Reno National Championship Air Races had just started so I thought perhaps the aircraft was being fixed up to race. The mechanic pointed out a fellow standing by the tail and said, "That's the pilot. Go talk to him."

I did just that and that was how I met Mira Slovak and developed a friendship that would last until his death.

The plane was not going racing. Rather, Mira said it was being flown to Bill Harrah's museum, which was mainly automotive in content but was being expanded to include classic aircraft. Mira also said the aircraft had not flown in some time and that he hoped it would make it to Reno in one piece! Let's examine the aircraft that is the subject of our article.

Lockheed P-38L-5-LO USAAF 44-53186 was one aircraft from a contract that included 2520 Lightnings being built at Burbank during 1945. Completed in gleaming aluminum finish, the fighter was flown to the Lockheed modification center in Texas where it was converted to an F-5G photo reconnaissance aircraft. The fighter nose was removed (and shipped back to Burbank for reuse) and then the extended and rather bulbous F-5G nose added with its associated cameras and other systems that were hooked into the cockpit.

When completed, it was initially flown to Kelly Field and put into storage since there was little need for the F-5G by this point. In February 1946, the F-5G was made airworthy and flown to Kingman, Arizona, where it became part of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation's inventory of surplus military aircraft being offered for sale. The RFC had fixed the price for surplus Lightnings at $1250 and at the time there were 498 P-38/F-5s in storage and available for purchase.

Unfortunately, few people wanted a Lightning and those that did fell into two categories — those that wanted