

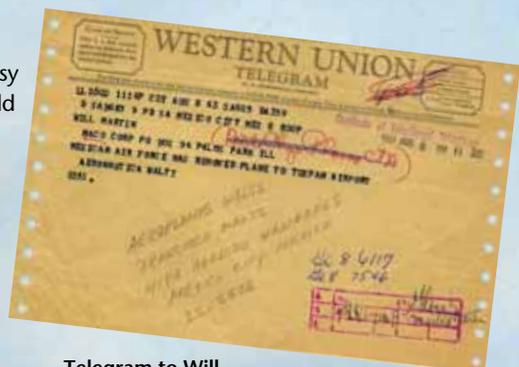
**THE SAGA OF
BUYING A MUSTANG
IN NICARAGUA,
CRASH-LANDING IT
IN MEXICO,
FIGHTING THE
MEXICAN
BUREAUCRACY, RETURNING IT TO THE USA, AND
RESTORING THE P-51D TO FLY AGAIN**

Adventures with **EL GATO RAPIDO**

BY SUZANNE MARTIN



*MEXICAN AIR FORCE
HAS REMOVED PLANE TO
TUXPAN AIRPORT.*



**Telegram to Will
advising that
the Mexican
Air Force
now has his
Mustang.**

NICARAGUAN MUSTANGS FOR SALE

In 1963, my father, Will Martin, flew down to Nicaragua to negotiate the purchase of surplus North American P-51 Mustangs, Republic F-47 Thunderbolts, and Beech C-45 Expeditors from the Nicaraguan Air Force. He and his brother Glenn planned to resell the planes in the US civilian market. My dad promised my mother the whole deal would be wrapped up in two- to three-months. Instead, it turned into a wild two-year adventure that he describes in his book *So I Bought an Air Force* (autographed copies available via an advertisement in this issue).

Although most of the planes made it back up to the States, five Mustangs crashed *en route* due to mechanical failures, pilot error, or a combination of the two. Of those that went down, only one was fully recovered and that aircraft was USAAF 44-26139.

Many of the *Nica* Mustangs that returned to the US went on to lead colorful lives as movie stars, racing planes, and museum attractions in the years after my dad and uncle sold them to American buyers.

This, however, is the story of 44-26139, or *El Gato* as it was known in our family —

the Mustang my father kept for himself.

El Gato had come to Nicaragua in November 1954 as part of a group of 25 Mustangs acquired from the Royal Swedish Air Force. The Mustangs were the backbone of the *Nica* air force, which was known by its Spanish initials of FAN.

Dad arrived in Nicaragua in April 1963 and eventually struck a deal with Gen. Anastasio Somoza Debayle to buy most of the FAN's piston-engine planes. He and my uncle bought a total of 21 *Nica* Mustangs. Although the FAN had represented the planes as in very good condition, all of them turned out to need work.

The pace of repairs was slow and frustrating, but — one by one — the planes finally started to come back up to the land of their birth. USAAF 44-26139 was the sixth plane my dad and Glenn brought back.

THE ODYSSEY

El Gato took off for the United States from Las Mercedes airfield outside Managua, Nicaragua, on Tuesday, 25 July 1963. It still had its Nicaraguan *Guardia* Number of 76 emblazoned on its vertical tail.

Ignoring my dad's explicit instructions, the ferry pilot decided he didn't really need to check in at the southern border

town of Tapachula as was required by Mexican law. He continued on and landed at Veracruz for the night.

He might have gotten away with that had everything gone well.

The next morning shortly after takeoff, the airplane crashed. The pilot hadn't gotten very far — after about a half hour in the air, the Mustang went down on a beach a couple miles south of the Rio Cazonas, about 30-miles from Poza Rica. Fortunately, he was not injured.

When the pilot didn't show up in Brownsville, my dad and uncle reported the plane as missing. The Mexican government was just starting an air/sea rescue operation when word came through that the pilot was alive and well.

The pilot had finally gotten himself to a telephone and made contact with the FAA in the Brownsville tower, who in turn called Bat Corrigan — the customs broker in Texas — who then phoned my father. (Although the FAA also immediately got in touch with the Mexican authorities, the Mexicans would later claim no one notified them.)

My dad contacted the US Embassy in Mexico City and Glenn got the Border

Aircraft Service out of Brownsville to do a survey flight to get the exact location of the plane and assess the damage to the extent possible from the air.

On 30 July, Border located the downed Mustang and reported the damage appeared to be minimal.

My father had started contacting transport firms to figure out who could barge or truck the airplane off the beach when he got a call from Bat Corrigan. Bat said a contact in the Mexican Air Force had told him the plane had been confiscated. One of the Mexican aircraft recovery firms confirmed Bat's news shortly thereafter in a telegram:

Then the fun began. My father called the American Embassy a second time. He was assured they would look into it. A week later he called back and was informed by a Mr. Olson that the embassy had learned the aircraft was under the control of the 19th Military Zone Commander at Tuxpan.

That the pilot hadn't filed the proper paperwork at the port of entry was a big problem. The Mexicans had assumed it was a smuggler's plane.

Days later, the pilot showed up in Chicago. He explained to my father and uncle that he had checked the coolant in Veracruz when he landed and had added water. Mustangs are notorious for coolant leaks. My dad commented sharply that since it is a sealed system, there was no question there had been a leak. The pilot said that since

The accumulation of years of hard work: Will Martin flying *El Gato Rapido*.

Will Martin's effort in returning the Nicaraguan Mustangs to the USA was long and difficult, with five aircraft being lost in transit. This view shows P-51D N6162U after crash-landing on a beach in the Gulf of Fonseca. Obviously, the aircraft was a write-off.

