MOVING HEADQUARTERS

CALIFORNIA AEROFAB HAS RELOCATED TO CHINO AIRPORT AND THE COMPANY IS BUSY ON NUMEROUS RESTORATION PROJECTS

Work underway on Sea Fury WG599 and a cowling from the Constellation.

Matt Nightingale with the nearly-completed Spitfire tail section.

BY MICHAEL O'LEARY

Like so many others of the current generation of Warbird restorers, Matt Nightingale got his start at Chino Airport. "I grew up in an aviation family. My father is a Warbird restorer and when I was a small kid he was working for David Tallichet so I have early memories of sitting in David's Warhawk, Mustang, and Lightning while Dad ran the engines and taxied the aircraft. I had the opportunity to grow up around Chino Airport and I started to meet other people including John Hinton and Kevin Eldridge. Then, of course, there was John and Jim Maloney and Steve Hinton. Needless to say, this was a heady atmosphere for someone in love with Warbirds.

"Other memories include sitting in the cockpit of Tallichet's Corsair while I 'shot down' the P-40 parked in front of it." Also, Bob Nightingale took his son to Aero Sport so he could check out the hangar stuffed with Mustangs. "Cliff Cummins let me sit in the cockpit of his *Galloping Ghost* racer so I could play race pilot — it was also my first chance to get in a Mustang cockpit. Chino was just a wonderful place for a kid that loved Warbirds.

"My Dad always urged me to go in the direction I wanted and I knew that if I selected a profession other than aviation, he would give me his full backing. When I was twelve, Steve Hinton put me to work at Fighter Rebuilders and my first job was drilling out a bracket inside the fuselage of an ex-Indonesian Mustang Steve was restoring. Years later, as a pilot and IA, I was inspecting a Mustang and noted a bracket. At first I thought, 'Who did such a bad job drilling out that bracket?' before I realized it was the Indonesian Mustang and that was my bracket!"

The Rolls-Royce Griffon will be shipped out for rebuild.

This is Rudy Frasca's Spitfire that was stored for many years.

Other early projects included working on Bob Pond's belly landed Curtiss TP-40N while helping install a second seat in the POF P-47G Thunderbolt.

Time went by and Matt graduated from high school while he kept working at Fighter Rebuilders. "At this point in my life, I pretty much figured I wanted to be around Warbirds," recalled Matt.

Working his way up the Warbird ladder, Matt remembered one particular day at Chino. "I was 14 and the museum was getting ready for its annual airshow. Stephen Grey, founder of a Warbird collection in Britain, had come over to fly a P-51D in the show. Stephen threw me in the backseat of the P-51D for my first Mustang ride and I was absolutely hooked. I had no idea that the coming years would lead to a very close association with Stephen, The Fighter Collection, and myself."

By the mid-1990s, vast areas of the Soviet Union were opening to collectors searching for rebuildable Warbirds. The country was rich in crash sites and Stephen Grey's The Fighter Collection was able to obtain several Curtiss fighters — including P-40C USAAC 41-13390, the 63rd P-40C built. The airframe was eventually transferred to Fighter Rebuilders for restoration to flying condition.

"I always loved the Curtiss fighters," said Matt, "so it was a real thrill to be put in charge of the P-40C's restoration. By today's standards, the airframe was in remarkable condition — the Soviet markings still clearly visible. I joke that we did an IRAN [Inspection and Repair As Necessary] rather than a full restoration. We had instructions from Stephen to use the RAF repair manual where possible to repair German bullet holes and forced landing damage. Of course, it was a full restoration but the condition of the fighter was such that we did not have to replace any of the skins."

Some restoration on the Spitfire had been carried out in the 1980s before the aircraft was put into storage.

Steve Hinton put Matt in charge of the project and the completed aircraft was really something — it would also form the basis of Matt's career.

In 2003, Matt created California Aerofab — a company devoted to the restoration of historic aircraft. He established headquarters in an industrial building about ten-miles from Chino Airport. His first project was a major one — The Fighter Collection had acquired the remains of an *Armee de l'Air* Curtiss Hawk 75A-1 (export version of the Air Corps' P-36). These aircraft saw very heavy action against the invading Germans and then, in one of the odder twists of history, action against American forces invading North Africa.