BACK IN THE EARLY 1960s, MIKE DILLON MADE THE DECISION TO PURCHASE A RATHER BEDRAGGLED CURTISS WARHAWK AND RETURN IT TO FLYING CONDITION. LITTLE DID HE REALIZE THAT HIS ACTIONS WOULD FORM THE BASIS FOR TODAY’S GLOBAL WARBIRD MOVEMENT

PART ONE

BY MIKE DILLON

Old logbooks contain more than just a record of hours flown. They contain memories. As I thumb through my first log, one entry in particular pops out: 11 March 1958. Cross-country flight, Struthers, Texas, to Paris, Texas. That was the day I met 26 November.

I had landed to fuel the new Champion I was ferrying down from the factory. After parking at the gas pumps, I hurried over to examine the World War Two fighter I had spotted from the air. This was the first warplane (EDITOR’S NOTE: It is worth pointing out that these aircraft had yet to achieve the title of Warbird) I ever had a chance to get near. Painted silver, she bore those once-famous teeth of the Tiger Shark.

The airplane models of and in front of me. Her sturdy construction and her beautifully contoured fillets and fairings surprised me. Most of all, I was impressed by her huge spinner. The entire engine cowling of my Champion wasn’t that big!

On the side of the fuselage was the number N1226N. Sure, I wondered what it would be like to fly the P-40, but it never entered my mind that I might one day find out. Now, just to be able to see and touch and look into the cockpit of a real P-40 was enough for the moment.

Five-months later, I saw 26 November again. Only this time she didn’t look so good, dismantled and loaded on a flatbed truck. Earlier, the gear had collapsed on landing — bending the prop and tearing open the belly. A local duster pilot, Glen “Bucket” Parker, had bought the plane and trucked it to Parker’s Airport near Port Arthur, Texas, where I lived. Following the truck to the airport I helped unload the damaged Warhawk. Bucket accepted my volunteer labor and all through the winter of 1958/1959, I worked with him repairing the damage. It was the first plane on which I had ever worked. I sure learned a lot from Bucket.

The Curtiss-Electric prop had to be replaced as did the oil cooler. Since the P-40 had a heavy skid plate under the wings, there was little more than sheet metal damage to the belly. One would almost think that Curtiss expected it to be bellied in. Bucket installed new canopy glass and painted the Warhawk white with red trim.

By this time, I had gotten to know bucket’s dad, Glen Parker, Sr., owner of the airport and a dusting service. When almost half the winter had slipped by, it was time to start preparing the Stearman dusters for their rice season. Thus, work on the P-40 was relegated to weekends only. I worked on the dusters for G.P. Sr. and took most of my pay in flying time.

Working with Bucket, I became convinced that his was the best job a man could ask for. That’s what I wanted to be — a duster pilot. With my new commercial ticket in hand, I approached the senior Parker about dusting for him. He told me I didn’t have enough flying time. So I left Parker’s Airport and returned to college. But I managed to acquire an instructor’s rating and a bridle.

Bucket flew the P-40 only once and I missed the hop. It was short. Loss of oil pressure forced him down after 20-minutes. Investigation of the engine revealed internal damage. Having run out of both enthusiasm and money, Bucket washed his hands of 26 November and sold it to someone for 20-minutes. Investigation of the engine revealed internal damage. Having run out of both enthusiasm and money, Bucket washed his hands of 26 November and sold it to an Arkansas duster operator. With its ailing engine, the Warhawk sat for the next three-years in one spot. The weeds grew and her cables rusted.

My bride and I moved to Arizona since my good friend Red Smith explained that if I wanted to be a duster pilot, I would have to go where no one knew me. When I arrived at Safford, the only Ag experience I had was the two-hours of free dual that Red had given me.

I was so dumb I probably didn’t fool anyone. Fortunately my employer, Walt Davis, taught me enough to get by. I continued my college work in the winters and got a job dusting in the summers. With my wife teaching school, we just did make ends meet (new Ag pilots don’t get rich).

Each summer I returned to Texas to work rice, fertilizing and spraying. A trip to Parker’s airport was always part of the routine. I would check on the condition of the P-40 and ask the senior Parker if it was for sale and for how much.

Three seasons came and went. My dreams of owning the P-40 became stronger, irresistible. I was sure that if someone would only restore the plane, it could be sold for a profit. No one wants a plane that won’t fly and if it sat much longer someone would smelt it (EDITOR’S NOTE: Mike was completely correct for in the early 1960s, numerous historic WWII aircraft were scrapped). If I could buy the P-40, restore it and sell it, it would be my one chance to fly a fighter.

Comes a time in every man’s life when he has to either put up or shut up. Late one winter night I phoned Clarence Muche in England, Arkansas, and asked how much he wanted for the broken-down fighter on Parker’s airport. With a minimum of dickering, we settled on $800. The P-40 would belong to me for $800. Since the P-40 became stronger, irresistible. I was sure that if someone would only restore the plane, it could be sold for a profit. No one wants a plane that won’t fly and if it sat much longer someone would smelt it (EDITOR’S NOTE: Mike was completely correct for in the early 1960s, numerous historic WWII aircraft were scrapped). If I could buy the P-40, restore it and sell it, it would be my one chance to fly a fighter.

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We Dillons had perhaps $50 in the bank and a minimal income. My wife borrowed a maximum $700 from her credit union. Clarence agreed to trust...