



Mark Clark

## Warbirds for Sale Vintage Airplanes Put Local Company On

By Paul Anthony Arco

The windows in Mark Clark's spacious office give him a spectacular view that opens up to the rest of the world. Clark is president of Courtesy Aircraft Sales, a Rockford-based company that is located in a 13,000-square-foot hangar nestled near a long runway at the Northwest Chicagoland International Airport at Rockford (RFD).

Inside, you can see symbols of a man who's dedicated his entire adult life to the aviation business. There are black and white photos of vintage air-

planes, a worn pilot's cap, a model airplane and many more mementos of Clark's career of nearly four decades. He had worked as a corporate pilot, aircraft mechanic and airplane salesman.

But these days Clark, 54, is enjoying a different take on aviation – buying and selling warbirds – ex-military airplanes that have been used by various military branches. The unofficial leader in warbird sales, Courtesy Aircraft sells about 60 to 70 warbirds a year. The remaining portion of its busi-

ness is general aircraft sales such as corporate planes that are used for business purposes.

Clark's father, D.M. Clark, started a Cessna aircraft dealership in 1957. The younger Clark caught the bug as a teenager when he got his hands on a book about aviation. "It was amazing that a few of those airplanes from the 1940s were still around," Clark says. "I was in high school when I started tracking down how many of these airplanes still existed."

His interest in old planes intensified



Photograph by Tom Clabough

## the Map

in 1975 when he started working for his dad washing airplanes. The warbird business took off about a year later. When Clark purchased the business from his father in the early 1980s, he gave his full attention to buying and selling planes such as World War II and Korean-era ex-military trainers, fighters and bombers such as the T-6/SNJ Texans, P-51 Mustangs, and B-25 Mitchells.

“Mark has the premiere warbird business,” says Jim Foskett, M.D., an orthopedic surgeon in Rockford who recently bought a T-6 trainer from Courtesy Aircraft. “I find his professionalism and attention to locating the right aircraft to fit the person to be remarkable.”

Clark knows how to please his customers because he understands this is no ordinary hobby. “It’s more of a passion,” Clark says. “These are collectors who enjoy the sights and sounds of the airplanes, who enjoy the history and performance, and who take them to air shows.”

It’s an expensive passion. According to Clark, the cost to own and maintain a warbird can range from \$35,000 for a J-3 Cub into excess of \$1 million for a military World War II fighter B51 Mustang. So it comes as no surprise that many of Clark’s customers are doctors, lawyers or can be found on the Forbes 400 list. Some are celebrities: Clark once sold a plane to actor Tom Cruise.

“You have to be a romantic to own one of these planes,” says Dr. Foskett, who also owns a French military transport Broussard he bought from an aviation museum in New Jersey in 2003. “They are inefficient, high maintenance and they burn a lot of oil and fuel. But you’re flying a piece of histo-

ry. You’re a steward of these planes until it’s time to pass it along to someone else.”

Deals are complex in nature. It can take anywhere from a couple of days to several months to negotiate a contract. But when a seller lives in California, the broker is based in Illinois and the buyer is in Miami, it takes serious coordination to get all interested parties together.

“Recently, I bought a plane in California and brought it to Rockford,” Clark says. “The buyer ended up being from California who flew out here to buy it. It would have been easier for him to buy it in California, but the logistics didn’t work out.”

Clark has planes for sale virtually all over the world including Chicago, British Columbia, Switzerland and Germany. In the past year, Clark has delivered five airplanes to Europe and he’s brought two back home. Clark once traveled to Honduras and bought nine T-28 trainer airplanes from the Honduras government. Many of Clark’s customers find him on the Internet. His Web site, [courtesyaircraft.com](http://courtesyaircraft.com), averages 150,000 hits per month.

Despite his hectic schedule, Clark, who’s married with two grown children, manages to fly about 100 hours a year, just enough to still enjoy the flying experience. But his greatest pleasure is helping others find their passion through vintage planes. Recently, Clark and his sales manager, John Kraman, took Jim Foskett’s brother up for a ride in a warbird. Dr. Foskett’s older sibling wasn’t in the market for a plane; he’s battling cancer.

“They didn’t have to do that,” Dr. Foskett says. “It shows what kind of character these men have.” ■

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