



WHAT WARBIRDS MEAN TO ME

A VETERAN PILOT EXPLAINS WHY SOME AIRCRAFT ARE MUCH MORE THAN ALUMINUM AND A COLLECTION OF PARTS

BY MARK CLARK



A young Mark Clark taxis out in his first Texan, registered N666MC.

For over five decades, I have been involved with Warbird aircraft and my appreciation for these historic treasures has only increased as time goes by. When I consider these flying machines that changed the world, three words come to mind: Respect, Sacrifice, and Maturity.

I have come to **respect** the designers, the builders, the pilots, the ground crews, the maintainers, and now the restorers. The designers used slide rules and drawing paper to engineer aircraft that would be mass-produced on a scale unlike anything the world had ever seen. The people who built the factories that made the aircraft, the engines, and the thousands of parts needed for them to fly deserve our respect. Today's supply chain issues are nothing compared to starting with an empty field and in a few short years hundreds of thousands of aircraft were rolling off the production lines in a rapid and efficient manner as the entire country united against a common enemy. The pilots who, in short order, went from perhaps never having been in an aircraft to become highly-trained and disciplined aviators capable of defeating an enemy that initially seemed unstoppable are nothing short of awe-inspiring.

I have great respect for the current and past owners of Warbirds that have been the caretakers for several generations and have been willing to fund the ever-increasing costs of restoration, maintaining, and housing the aircraft. If there is one fact that we can be sure of when dealing with Warbirds, it is that the costs associated with such aircraft will always go up — and that includes everything from fuel to insurance. That

these individuals take on such a financial commitment to preserve history is humbling.

Without the **sacrifices** of hard work and dedication we would not be able to understand the stories and the significance of these pieces of history. The sacrifices came in many forms. Putting life and family on hold to join the military. Sacrifices from the tens of thousands of workers who toiled around the clock at new and unfamiliar jobs to assemble a vast armada of military equipment — an armada that absolutely overwhelmed the capabilities of the Axis powers. Then we have today's sacrifices that include often complex reverse engineering of unavailable parts to keep these aircraft flying in the public eye to serve as living memorials to America's greatness. There are the late-night work sessions to make an aircraft ready for the next airshow. We have had amazing expeditions to literally the ends of the earth to recover long-forgotten wrecks for restoration or recovery of rare parts.

However, the true and ultimate sacrifice was given by huge numbers of men in the skies and on battlefields in faraway places that are completely forgotten by today's general public.

So, how does **maturity** fit in to our equation? Maturity came quickly to those who served and who were mainly in their late teens through their early twenties. Living in a foxhole, flying through *flak*, going on ten-hour missions that could be your last (or your wingman's last) — all these factored into rapidly making an individual mature and capable of

taking care of his life as well as the life of a buddy. Today, maturity often comes slowly to many of us over the course of our lives. The people who served got maturity quickly and many spent the remainder of their time on earth coping with the lessons rapidly and often so painfully learned.

My own aviation maturity has evolved from my private pilot days — learning to fly in many General Aviation aircraft, my first Warbird checkout in an SNJ Texan, and my first flight in a Mustang. How great to be able to fly and help maintain many of these iconic aircraft! I am privileged to be able to look through my logbook and see the variety of famous aircraft that I carefully recorded — trainers, fighters, and bombers are all a part my story. Of course, it is and was a thrill to fly them but, more importantly, they are part of that bigger story of Respect, Sacrifice, and Maturity undertaken by countless individuals before my time and by people that will come after me.

We honor those people, past and present, who "Keep Them Flying." We now can now look back at several generations of individuals who have carried the torch of keeping these great aircraft operational. Fortunately, we have part of the most current generation that is also willing to do the same thing. So, at the next airshow, let's all take a moment to thank the pilots and crews that have brought a Warbird for all of us to see. If there is a veteran standing nearby, then let us for sure pay our respects and thank them for their sacrifices.

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