

Flying High

Jack Roush always liked Mustangs, but he loves "Old Crow"

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from Richard Petty's Stock Car, December 1998

I'm convinced the only reason Jack Roush hesitated to acknowledge my presence in the garage area at the Charlotte Motor Speedway was because I blurted out the words "P51 Mustang."

Richard Petty's Stock Car had asked me to find out about Roush's unique avocation that involves the restoration and flying of his own P51. As Roush is unique in his own way, the Mustang is also unique, having played an essential role in bringing the worst conflict in this century (WWII) to an end.

Trying first to work through the PR people who were not as concerned about the assignment as I was, I opted to lurk outside the #6 Valvoline transporter and wait for a slight man, wearing a straw hat, to appear. It paid off, and after being told three times to come back, Roush finally beckoned me inside the transporter to talk. I was not quite prepared for the passion this motorsports giant and Winston Cup guru has for his P51 Mustang that he named "Old Crow." After about a half hour, he said, "Be at the Concord airport tomorrow morning at 8 a.m. and I'll show you the aircraft." He had flown it down from Michigan for the Coca-Cola 600 and was flying it home the next morning following the race. The other thing about this interview is that not once did we ever touch the subject of motorsports or racing. Aviation and Old Crow are Roush's respite from the harried world of NASCAR. We talked only "P51 talk." It was generous of him to take the time, and I thank him.

Jack Roush has had an interest in "war birds" all of his life. About 10 years ago he began to think seriously about the fun that would go along with owning a P51. He wanted to know how they were maintained, what the engines were like, everything about them. About five years ago his network of pilot friends began looking for Mustangs for him. He told me that the effort became almost a frenzy. Every time a P51 came on the market anywhere in the world, somebody would call him to say, "Hey, this airplane's for sale." Roush had to make up his mind whether he was going to be a player or simply someone who sat on the sidelines. He looked at a couple of Mustangs, deciding on one in Michigan that had been in the U.S. Training Command from 1944 through 1947, after which it had been sold to the Canadian military. It was returned to the civilian registry in the United States in 1952.

The aircraft had no corrosion on it, and when he disassembled it, Roush found that the original piece of Plexiglas that was installed at the factory in 1944 was in good shape. The modifications that had been made to the by the various previous owners had degraded the airplane, Roush said, so he totally disassembled it and put back together a stock Mustang. It is now organized with instrumentation that makes it safe as an instrumentation flight rules (IFR) airplane. It also has a fresh engine. He flew it the first four and a half years with the engine that was in it when he purchased it. The engine is a Merlin Rolls Royce, 60-degree V-12, with a 1,650ci displacement that produces about 1,600 hp. It has a two-

speed supercharger, and with this configuration, the P51 is capable of flying up to a ceiling of 41,000 feet.

Jack Roush typically flies Old Crow in the 20,000-foot range, and he wears an oxygen mask when he flies it. The aircraft has a glide ratio of three miles per 1,000 feet, which Roush says would give him considerable margin to find an airport where he could safely land, should he ever experience engine failure.

At 20,000 feet, he explained, he can glide just under 60 miles. Roush has now flown Old Crow about 350 hours.

The aircraft is painted up like the P51 Colonel Bud Anderson flew in WWII, which was also called "Old Crow." Colonel Anderson distinguished himself for his effectiveness as a fighter pilot over Europe. He also flew with Chuck Yeager in Europe, the same Chuck Yeager who later gained fame as being the first person to break the sound barrier and attain a number of other firsts in altitude records during his test-pilot years. Colonel Anderson is an important facet of this airplane. He's still a pilot, and is in his mid-70s. Gary Honbarrier, a friend of Roush's has a plane painted up like Chuck Yeager's famous "Glamorous Glenn." Roush and Honbarrier have sponsored Anderson and Yeager at a couple of dozen airshows in the last four years. Yeager and Anderson fly Glamorous Glenn and Old Crow (respectively) at WWII memorabilia events in which they have an interest.

Roush flies "old Crow" down to Daytona and to Charlotte, North Carolina, in the winter. The remainder of the time, "It's real sporadic," said Roush. Other flights are based on the weather, which Roush evaluates before making the decision to fly Old Crow. He said, "Old Crow is a good IFR aircraft; that is, if there isn't fog and the ceiling is low." He doesn't like to fly at night, and if the ceiling is low, he won't subject himself or the aircraft to the risks associated with the loss of an engine in poor visibility. Old Crow is hangered in Michigan at Willow Run, the same airfield Henry Ford built for the B254 bomber plant during WWII. At one time, Old Crow was hangered in the same building where Packard built and tested the engines used in P51s. In the United States, Packard was licensed by Rolls Royce to build these engines during the war. Between 1943 and the end of the war, Packard built 100,000 of them.

Roush went on to explain that North America built about 14,000 P51s during the war. At level flight, 31,000 feet, it had a top speed of 440 mph. It was redlined at a true air speed of 505 mph and was recognized by both sides as being the best all-around fighter in the war. IT gets about 5 miles per gallon (about the same as a Winston Cup car), and with the fuel it was designed to carry, a P51 could be airborne between 8 and 10 hours. Old Crow uses only the internal tanks, which allows Roush to take off from Detroit and fly to Miami Beach nonstop. It takes him about four hours.

Old Crow is not the only aircraft Roush owns. He has several, including a corporate jet. He has owned a twin engine and an eight-passenger Cessna for the last 13 years, but it wasn't until he bought the P51 that he became serious about getting a pilot's license. It took Roush about a year to restore the Mustang and another 14 months of flight school and training so that he was insurable. Since starting flight training he has also earned a Multi-Engine Rating, an Instrument Rating, a Commercial Rating, and his Airline Transport Pilot Rating. As I said initially, flying, in particular his Mustang, is Jack Roush's passion.

All total, he's accumulated about 2,500 hours of flight time in four years. Last year he flew 800 hours. To put that into perspective, the normal number of hours a person works in a year is 2,000. So in addition to owning and directing five Winston Cup teams, he spent 40 percent of a normal work year flying his airplanes. His race shops are in North Carolina, and he makes the trip there once a week, and he pilots his planes to each of the Winston Cup events.

Two years ago he flew Old Crow 180 hours. Last year he flew her 150 ours. This season he sees it dropping to 130 hours because of the Winston Cup schedule. However, he has no intention of letting that diminishing trend continue. He said, "I'm going to fight to stay in the 150-hours-per-year range in my Mustang.

Roush talked about what flying Old Crow means to him, and the important role he now plays in the history of the aircraft. He said, "To think that 95 percent of the people who designed this aircraft, who machined the initial parts, who flew it in combat, their time has come and gone. I'm now the custodian, the steward of this technology, and I feel the honor of doing that." In Roush's own words, "The P51 was the fighter that made it possible to protect the bombing raids over Europe; that ultimately stopped Hitler's program to develop atomic weapons."

It is also his passion to find people who have damaged P51s or spare parts, to collect those, and to engage in an effort to restore them to an airworthy condition. Roush has a second P51 that's in the process of being restored. It was severely damaged in an accident in Florida and would have been scrapped, except for the fact that he bought it. He and his new partner, Honbarrier, expect it will take three to four years to finish the restoration project. Then they will have a fully restored TF model, a two-seat trainer with two complete sets of controls that they can fly past the time when they can maintain single-pilot status with the FAA.

I asked Roush how he learned to fly a P51 when there are so few around in which to train. HE explained, "You need to climb the ladder of airplanes that are this type of configuration, that elevate you into increasingly faster and more complex aircraft." His initial trainer was a basic '47 Piper Cub. Like the P51 it is a tail-dragger, with the center of mass located behind the front wheels. He flew the Piper Cub 65 hours, figuring out its ground handling characteristics as opposed to one with tricycle-type landing gear where the center of mass is positioned forward of the front wheels in the aircraft. Next he found a '44 North American SMJ-5, a two-seat trainer that was used to train fighter pilots during WWII. Before he could use it, he first had to get the trainer in shape to fly, and then he trained in it for 100 hours. Following that, Roush enrolled himself in the Crazy Horse Training School in Florida, a flight school that specializes in training pilots to fly P51s. Upon completion of that school, his insurance company blessed him and insured him at the lowest possible rate to fly Old Crow.

Roush explained how he was in the cockpit the first time he took Old Crow up, organizing everything, going through the check list, and then he realized that he still had his straw hat on, the one his is always seen wearing at the Winston Cup events. Roush said, "I told the guy who was assisting me to keep an eye on my hat because I might need it later." When asked what he felt the first time he taxied Old Crow out

to takeoff, he said, "I felt like I was going to the moon. As I picked up speed and the tail wheel lifted, I was just screaming inside. This was the type of emotion that rivaled the birth of my children."

Roush in his own words is "a risk taker," "a managed risk taker." By education he's a mathematician with an advanced degree in mathematics and a minor in physics. "The miracle of flight is a gratifying and satisfying experience for me. I can have the most horrible day at the racetrack or have problems that I can't solve, that are driving me crazy in my engineering operations, and to go up in my airplane and fly to a business meeting or to a racetrack, it's just another world. Nothing is more relaxing or makes me feel more alive than flying." Roush continued his explanation that flying has its associated risks. "A day without a risk that I can manage, a situation that I can assess and make reasonable decision about, that will keep me out of harm's way, is an uninteresting day for me. Life without that would be very boring."