

SHAKING OFF THE RUST

Flight Training

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When Tom Faath was a boy, he stood witness as a P-51 Mustang flew overhead, traced a graceful arc across the sky, and landed at the general aviation airport he was visiting. It was the early 1960s and the military-surplus fighter was as sleek and beautiful as it was on the day it rolled out of the factory. He asked the pilot if he could touch the powerful beast now that it had safely alighted on the ground. “It was like an electric shock,” he recalls.

A dream was born. Today, at age 65, Faath’s dream is as strong as ever.

Like many young men of his era, Faath dreamed of being a fighter pilot. To climb into the cockpit of an airplane designed to go fast; to twist and turn in the air with almost unimaginable agility; and to possess enough power to point the nose straight upward to the heavens and climb into the cold, thin air.

Aviation brought the possibility of becoming Buck Rogers—at least to a degree.

It was a dream unrealized when, as a teenage flight student, Faath learned that he couldn’t decipher the color vision test his medical examiner placed in front of him. Military aviation was not going to welcome him with open arms.



General aviation, however—that was a different story.

Faath overcame this challenge by taking tests to obtain a waiver permitting him to fly. At 16, he walked onto the ramp and started his journey.

Like a lot of high school kids, he had a part-time job. “My weekly take-home pay was \$22,” Faath recalls. “It cost \$21 to fly one hour in a J-3 Cub, so that’s what I did.”

Opening a logbook that’s nearly half a century old, Faath finds the reference he’s looking for. “My first flight was on July 24, 1966.” He chuckles at the memory. “I was too young to drive a car.” Getting to the airport involved getting a ride from his father—or from his flight instructor, who lived nearby. Eventually, Faath earned his private pilot certificate. But by the summer of 1969 he experienced a condition tens of thousands of general aviation pilots are all too familiar with: Life got in the way of his flying. He logged his final flight that June, with about 104 hours.

For the next 45 years, Faath attended to his career, raised his family, lived a good life, and found success. Yet he never forgot about flying, or of his childhood dream of piloting a P-51 Mustang. Neither did his wife, Maria. One day, while reminiscing about his fascination with the airplane, she surprised him. “You should do it,” she said, encouraging him to book a flight. Permission granted!

Roughly a thousand miles south of Faath’s suburban Connecticut home lies Stallion 51. The one-of-a-kind Kissimmee, Florida, facility offers orientation flights and type-specific training in perhaps the most legendary of all World War II fighter airplanes: the North American P-51 Mustang.

Booking the flight was only half the battle for Faath. Actually being able to fly the machine—that was another challenge entirely. After 45 years, climbing back into the cockpit wasn’t something he expected to be entirely intuitive and natural. Yet, Faath didn’t want to be a mere passenger on the flight of his dreams—he wanted to fly the airplane. He just wasn’t sure he wanted to undergo a major educational and training regimen in order to make that happen.

Fortunately, he bumped into Paul Merola, the president of the Silver City Flying Club in Southington, Connecticut. “He encouraged me,” Faath says. “All I really wanted to do was



sharpen my skills. I didn't think I wanted to be [pilot in command] again," Faath says in retrospect.

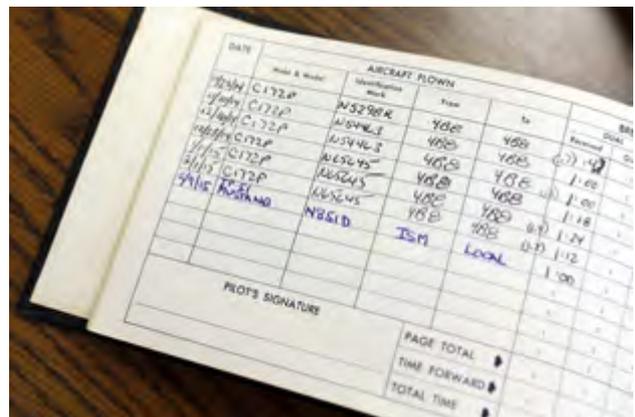
After some investigation of where he might find the flight instruction he was looking for, he settled on a Cessna 172 operated out of Robertson Field Airport in Plainville, Connecticut. "At no point was I nervous," Faath says, "but there was a certain amount of trepidation." He had always flown Piper aircraft, so had no experience in Cessnas, he says.



Ironically, a procedural error during that first lesson gave Faath the first indication that getting back into flying shape wasn't unrealistic. "You know, I've got my head in the cockpit and I'm looking at the instruments instead of outside looking out the windshield," he said. That's a common issue among new students. Rather than waiting to be corrected, Faath brought his error to the attention of his CFI, correcting himself and earning praise from the instructor. By the end of that flight Faath took pride in the realization that he had flown the airplane throughout the entire lesson and landed without his instructor needing to take the controls. In an hour and a half he had transitioned from "What am I getting myself into here?" to "I can do this."

A few months later, after some more instruction, Faath finds himself in a hangar only inches away from his dream machine, a two-place P-51 dubbed Crazy Horse.

The chief instructor and demonstration pilot at Stallion 51 is congenial, silver-haired Lee Lauderback. Tall, slender, and armed with an easy smile, Lauderback conducts himself with the confident air of a man who has more than 9,000 hours in the venerable fighter.



"It actually happens quite a bit," Lauderback says of Faath's quest to get back into the cockpit and fly the airplane he admired so much as a young man. "Everybody sort of does their homework. In a sense it's a game changer."

For all the excitement, and perhaps a slight case of nervousness about flying such a powerful machine, Faath is pragmatic about his preparation for the adventure. "I don't want to go down there and be a passenger," he asserts. His goal is to pilot the airplane, to man the stick, place his hand on the throttle, and guide the slippery beast through the air as he's always dreamed he could.

Faath sits across from Lauderback, his instructor for the day, to brief the flight. With the excitement of a young boy on Christmas morning, Faath is motivated. He'd spent time earlier in the morning wandering through the hangars, marveling at the sight of four pristine Mustangs on the sparkling-clean, painted floor. But he is also feeling some nervousness. After all, the P-51 packs roughly 10 times as much horsepower as the 172 he'd been flying.

Lauderback's briefing is casual, even lighthearted. Yet it's also highly specific, filled with the appropriate methods for increasing or decreasing power, a detailed review of local airspace, discussions of control forces and effectiveness at various airspeeds and power settings—even the proper technique for rolling and looping the airplane.

Faath is uncertain about doing aerobatics. He has no experience with being inverted and isn't sure he wants to get that deeply into the abilities of the airplane. Lauderback, the quintessential pro, dispels any perceived sense of reckless abandon. "Keep in mind," he says, "these are things we can do." He pauses and smiles. "We don't have to.

"Whatever we do today in the airplane," Lauderback assures his student, "we're going to go for maximum comfort rather than maximum performance." That attitude is the key to Stallion 51's success. The flight isn't about Lauderback and his fellow instructor pilots showing off, or pushing the airplane to its limit. It's about allowing student to safely explore the P-51 to the degree they're comfortable. "Safety's going to be number one," Lauderback says. "Fun's going to be number two, and education is number three."

After a thorough and thoroughly enjoyable 45-minute briefing, Faath says, "Let's go fly." Half an hour later and far to the south of Stallion's home field, after an impressive climbout during takeoff and a series of turns, stalls, and rolls, Lauderback says over the intercom, "Wanna do a loop?"

The previously hesitant Faath answers, "You know, I've never done one." He pauses for a heartbeat, and then says, "I feel OK. Let's do it." Lauderback talks his student through the maneuver. The result is a beautiful, round loop that covers nearly 4,000 feet of airspace and never exceeds 2.3 Gs.

Back in Kissimmee, the Mustang streaks over the field at 1,500 feet above ground level. It breaks hard to the right and flies the pattern, lining up for final approach on the centerline. Faath is on the controls, as he has been since the airplane first taxied into position for takeoff. With assistance from his instructor pilot, he greases the airplane onto the runway and taxis back to the Stallion 51 hangars. Lauderback cranks the bubble canopy open and pumps his arms in the air to signal another satisfied customer has returned. To say Faath is jubilant would be an understatement. Moments after climbing out of the cockpit he says, "I did everything that a pilot would do, with an expert hand guiding me. I flew it." After more than 45 years away from aviation, Faath has realized his childhood dream and then some.

The flight is over, but Faath's penchant for flying machines is undiminished. When discussing how aviation will fit into his life in the future, he is unequivocal. "I'm going to keep going," he says. "I'm back."

He has plans to fly with his instructor at Robertson Field when he gets home to Connecticut, and to join the Silver City Flying Club, which operates both Cessna and Piper aircraft. This leaves the aviation community short one rusty pilot—replaced by an active, motivated, reinvigorated general aviation aviator with one heck of a story to tell.