

Warbirds On A Budget (Sort Of)

There are warbirds, and then there are warbirds

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There are very few pilots who, when seeing a P-51 or Corsair taxi up, don't experience some sort of adrenaline rush. A not-so-tiny voice in our heads says, "Oh, man, just one flight! That's all I want, just one go at it." Then, of course, the other tiny voice in our head, the one that sometimes sounds suspiciously like our spouse, says, "Yeeow! Can you imagine how much it would cost to own something like that?" Reality is a cruel mistress. But when it comes to warbirds, it doesn't have to be.

Although the term "warbird" automatically conjures up images of massive motors, machine guns and indicated airspeeds that start with "4," the warbird world is actually so huge and diverse that there's even room for those of us who drive to the airport in an ancient Honda rather than a new Ferrari. The true reality of the warbird universe is that you can spend as much as you want (or have).

The single-engine warbird inventory that's available to us civilians is so deep that it's hard to cover it all. However, we'll start at the bottom and work our way to the top, giving thumbnail pireps from our own experiences (where possible) and a best-guess price range.

The "L-Birds:" Shoestring-Budget Warbugs

In talking about "warbugs," we're discussing the tiniest featherweight warbirds, primarily the "L-Birds." Just about anyone wanting to own an airplane that formerly wore olive drab clothes can afford one of the L-Birds: those that were designed or adapted to the observer/liason role. The majority of L-Birds were off-the-shelf civilian types that were already in production when WWII started. The military had a few little twists added at the factory and put them to work.

The liaison type of aircraft continued to be designed and were produced from before WWII until well after Vietnam, so there's a large number of types, ages and price ranges.



Corsair

WWII Warbugs

With the exception of the Stinson L-5, the most commonly available, full production WWII L-Birds all were well-accepted in the civilian market before the war began. The L-5 was purpose-built so is more "military" than the rest. Incidentally, originally, all wore "O" designations (observation), but that was dropped in favor of "L" (liaison) in 1942. When buying these airplanes, remember that they were essentially throwaway airplanes meant to survive a year or two in military service, so some of the construction was never expected to still be in the air 70-75 years later. This is especially true of the mostly wood wings: Inspect them carefully. Because of their size and cost, many have been rebuilt, and most make good garage restoration projects. The price ranges for each vary wildly based on whether it has been restored or not. These prices are, therefore, approximations.

L-2 Taylorcraft, \$23,000. When the two-place, tandem Model D Taylorcraft was drafted, it was a natural for artillery spotting and general short-range reconnaissance. A wonderful flying 65 hp (as most WWII warbugs were), it's the soul of docility. Better yet, all except the L-2M (which is reportedly five pounds too heavy, but has spoilers) are LSA compliant. So, you don't need a medical to fly your very own warbird, and lots were built.

L-4 Piper, \$40,000. This a J-3 Cub with more glass, hence the higher-than-normal price. As with all L-Birds, the L-4 was originally equipped with lots of radio gear and other military goodies that are hard, but not impossible, to find. That's part of the fun of owning a warbug: keeping your eyes open for some of the widgets that gave the cockpit a military feel. LSA compliant.

L-5 Stinson, \$37,000. Being designed specifically for the liaison role, including hauling a litter patient in the later models, the L-5 is much larger and more powerful (six-cylinder, Lycoming O-435, 190 hp) than the rest. The visibility is excellent, and the controls are beautifully smooth and powerful. It's a ton of fun to fly. However, the wings and tail are completely wood, so inspect closely.

Postwar L-Birds

The need for the utility/liaison/recon roles didn't stop with the end of WWII. In fact, newer, more specialized aircraft were designed.

L-16 Aeronca, \$27,000. An L-16 is a big-windowed Aeronca 7-series Champion, painted silver in the typical post-WWII plain-Jane paint scheme. It's too heavy for LSA. Usually seen with an 85 hp Continental. Saw action in Korea.

L-17 North American/Ryan Navion, \$45,000. This is a rarity in that it's actually useful because it easily carries four passengers and cruises at 135 to 145 knots. It's one of the most practical warbirds in existence. (Did we just put "practical" and "warbird" in the same sentence? Our bad!)

L-19/O-1 Cessna, \$80,000. The Bird Dog is possibly the ultimate L-Bird of those available to the normal man. It's also the most expensive, the most usable and the one with the most military history, having been a warrior in both Korea and Vietnam. It's a terrific flying airplane with good STOL performance, great visibility, a huge cockpit and nothing unusual about its mechanical upkeep.

WWII Trainers

Training during the last big one was split into three levels: Primary Training (PT), Basic Training (BT) and Advanced Training (AT). Lots of aircraft from each category have survived to give us ways of playing the warbird game for reasonable investments.

Primary Trainers

Being taildraggers, the primary trainers of the day would be real challenges for any of today's pilots, even advanced ones, without the appropriate training. They were taildraggers because, with only a few notable exceptions, none of the WWII aircraft flight-school students would be flying would be tri-gear. A person trained on a taildragger easily adapts to a nosedragger. The reverse wasn't true then, and it isn't true now.

PT-13/17/N2S Stearman, \$92,000. There are probably more Stearmans flying today than at any time since WWII. The Stearman is the darling of the military trainer set because she's a terrifically good airplane that's relatively easy to maintain (after someone else invests the time and money to restore one...a massive job). You don't measure her efficiency by miles per gallon (which is terrible), but by smiles per flight. She's big, strong, capable of hosting huge pilots and making small ones feel lost. She'll teach them all what being a pilot is all about.

PT-19/23/26 Fairchild, \$45,000. The PT-19 uses a six-cylinder, inline Ranger and is open cockpit. The PT-23 uses a 220 hp Continental radial and is open cockpit. The PT-26 has the Ranger, but sliding enclosed cockpits. All are gracious, easy-to-land aircraft with silky-smooth controls and leisurely performance (they're big and a little heavy). They, however, have all-wood wings and center sections bolted to a steel-tubing frame. So, condition of that wood is what drives the price and safety of the airplane.



PT-22 Ryan

PT-22 Ryan, \$65,000. The little Ryan Recruit is a controversial bird, but the only way it can be a dangerous airplane is if the pilot doesn't get a correct checkout and learn to respect its idiosyncrasies. It has zero tolerance for abrupt or extreme handling at anything approaching slow speeds. Flown by the numbers, it's a fun, charismatic airplane with loads of character, and the old Kinner radial will keep on thumping as long as its own idiosyncrasies are known.

N3N Naval Aircraft Factory, \$95,000. First, the N3N isn't even a distant cousin of a Stearman. Designed by the Naval Aircraft Factory, it's noticeably more rotund than the PT-17 and generally a little slower to respond to a pilot's wishes. It's also, however, a pussycat (more or less) on the runway. Like all of the rest of the Primary Trainers, in 1943, it was progressively replaced when the military branches decided to standardize on the PT-17/13/N2S Stearman.

SNV-1 Vultee BT-13/15, \$98,000. Even though over 11,000 BT-13 variants were produced during the war, it's estimated that there are only about 50 still flying. They were the next step up the training ladder from the PTs, with 450 hp (P&W R-985 in the BT-13 and 420 hp Wright Whirlwind in the BT-15) and a much more complex cockpit capable of full IFR flight. With its wide gear and good handling, the airplane is much easier on the ground than either the PT-17 before it or the AT-6 after it.

AT-6/SNJ Texan, \$150,000. It's quite possible that the AT-6 was the most important U.S. airplane of WWII because of the skills it gave so many pilots so early in their careers. Although there's a "T" in AT, the AT-6 is more than a trainer. It's about as "military" as an airplane gets

and is notably more demanding than something like a P-51 Mustang or F8F Bearcat. That doesn't mean it's hard to fly, because it's not, but by the time a pilot has explored all of the dark corners of an AT-6 Texan's soul and is comfortable with it, he's more than ready for the fighters that come after. The only difference between flying a -6 and a fighter is where the needle stops on the airspeed indicator. Oh, yeah, one other thing: The AT-6 pilot is getting the same thrills and satisfaction as the fighter guys at a fraction of the price.

Postwar Trainers: Ours And Theirs

Right now, we're seeing a surge in interest in our postwar trainers and those from foreign countries, some of which are real bargains (relatively speaking).

Beechcraft T-34 Mentor, \$180,000. Essentially a tandem, two-place Bonanza (not a bad thing), the Mentor has to be the easiest warbird to fly while, at the same time, giving most of the same visceral feelings to the pilot they'd get in bigger, more exotic warbirds. The price on them has stabilized, maybe even coming down a little, putting those that have been modified with bigger motors (original was 225 hp, which isn't quite enough) within reach. They've had a lot of ADs against the wing structure, but most T-34's that are now flying have had all of that taken care of.

North American T-28, Trojan, \$175,000. The T-28 may not be svelte, but it has played nearly every role in wartime an airplane can play. It's a trainer, a forward air controller (FAC) and a down-in-the-dirt ground attack machine complete with guns and rockets. There are three major variations of it: A,B, C (800 hp to 1,425 hp) and a bunch of special spin-offs that all saw combat. It is huge, easy to fly and, if you're willing to burn the gas, the B and C can run with the Mustangs (assuming they don't decide to burn some gas, too).

Yak 52, \$55,000. This modern-built (1970s and up) Russian/Romanian tri-gear trainer is so numerous in the U.S. that support is easy, and prices are competitive. They're "strong like bull," and once you spend some time behind a 360 hp Vedeneyev M-14P, you'll never want to go back to square motors. It's magnificent! The engine has a few unique factors, but kits are available that make them simple to operate. There's also a taildragger version (52TD) that really completes the fighter image.

Chinese CJ-6 Nanchang, \$100,000 (modified). The CJ-6 is a 1958 clean-sheet- of-paper design (not a Yak 52 spin-off) that's being recognized as a great place to start building a hot rod mini-fighter. It flies great with the original 285 hp Hosai 6 radial, but the hot setup is exchanging that for a Russian/ Romanian 360 hp M-14P, a fairly straightforward swap, which turns the air-plane into a climbing fool, but raises the price.

The Big Iron: Fighters

From this point on, it has to be realized that there's a segment of the population for which a million bucks borders on being movie money. Still, even there, there are warbird bargains to be found. Since we're talking about bucket-list—for most of us unobtainable—items, we'll include a few birds of which only a small handful exist.



P-51

North American P-51 Mustang, \$1.9 million. It's a given that the Mustang is the single most common and most popular warbird out there. This is to be expected because of its aesthetics and place in history. Plus, there are more than 100 of them still flying, and transition training is available from Stallion 51 in Kissimmee, Fla. This is a major upgrade in the warbird community, where at one time, the new owner just wrote a check and went flying. With proper training, the 1,500 hp Mustang is a surprisingly easy airplane to fly, but it's not without its quirks that can spoil your day in a heartbeat. This is where the training comes in. Plus, in terms of maintenance, like most of its fighter brethren, you don't own the airplane, it owns you.

Curtiss P-40 Warhawk, \$2 million. Only a few remain and they don't often change hands, so it's hard to nail a price down, but they ain't cheap. They're also an older generation than the Mustang, so many of its systems appear to be a little on the crude side, by comparison. The owners, however, claim they're a delight to fly.

Grumman F8F Bearcat, \$3 million. Absolutely the best-performing, easiest-to-fly propeller-driven fighter ever built. Period! It's a 2,100 hp pussycat that goes up like gravity doesn't exist. However, it's super rare, and they don't often change hands. It's an absolute kick in the shorts to fly!

Chance-Vought F4U Corsair, \$2 million. The longest propeller-driven fighter in production, the last one rolled off the line in 1953. Super recognizable, about three dozen still fly, with another two dozen being restored. It offers no more demands to fly it than most 2,000 hp airplanes, which is to say again, it's all about the training.



Spitfire

Supermarine Spitfire, \$3 million. A surprising number of Spits have taken to the air in recent years, so they show up for sale from time to time. The Merlin-powered versions (versus the big Griffon-powered ones) are gracious, nice-handling airplanes. It has been said that the Griffon machines are still nice handling, but their snarl and vicious power overwhelms the airplane's basic gracious nature.

Hawker Sea Fury, \$1 million. A stock Sea Fury is possibly the biggest warbird bargain, but with it comes an engine that's strange for Americans (sleeve-valve Bristol Centaurus). This is often replaced by a good old American Wright R-3350, which raises the price.

Spend What You Want, But Enjoy The History

Warbirds can't talk, which is a shame because it would be interesting to hear of the various young men who sat at its controls and the adventures they had together. To one degree or another, each was a cog in the wheel of American history, and we enjoy the life we now live because of their contributions and sacrifices.

A Cheaper Way?



In the homebuilt community, the concept of replica fighters has long been established, with kits for everything from WWI Nieuports with two-stroke engines, to fire-breathing Mustangs with for-real V-12s. The prices go from reasonable to levels that would easily let a pilot buy a T-6 Texan and have enough left over to feed it gas for the rest of their life. However, a Texan doesn't have "that look." There's something about the outline of a fighter that causes an adrenaline surge that's hard to control. And, of course, some of the replicas have performance that out-strips the originals in many areas. There are a number of different companies offering kits, but these are the most obvious.

Bear 360 (A Certified Part 23 Aircraft)

www.bearaircraft.com

While not truly a replica, the Bear 360 is a "Bearcatish-" appearing, two-place, all-metal bird using the well-respected Russian/Romanian Vedeneyev M-14P radial

(360-420 hp). The airplane was designed more for performance and handling than replica looks and meets FAA Part 23 specifications. It cruises at 210 knots indicated at sea level.

Spitfire

www.supermarineaircraft.com

The Supermarine Aircraft Spitfire looks remarkably like the real thing and at 90% is nearly the same size. The all-metal kits have been in production for nearly two decades, and utilize V-6 and V-8 engines available from the company. Max cruise is listed at 193 knots, while it climbs at 3,500 fpm on the larger engines.

Thunder Mustang

www.thundermustang.com

There are a number of Mustang replica kits available, but the Thunder Mustang is touted as being the fastest piston-driven kit plane ever built. With a rate of climb over 5,000 fpm, it's well ahead of the original Mustang and tops out just under 400 mph (340 knots) while cruising at 340 mph (295 knots). The airframe is state-of-the-art composites, and the engine is the 640 hp Falconer V-12 that has the sound you expect from the Mustang shape (which is very accurate, by the way). This is a serious airplane that requires a serious pilot.

Titan T-51D

www.titanaircraft.com

At the other end of the performance and piloting skill spectrum is the Titan T-51D that uses the 245 hp Honda 3.5L V6 engine and a scale four-blade constant speed prop. This one will still cruise in the 150-180 mph range at a very reasonable fuel burn. Climb is still 2,500 fpm, and it's available as an LSA in a fixed-gear version.