

The History of P-51 Mustang “Red Nose”
From an article published in the Dispatch
By Keegan Chetwynd

The North American P-51 Mustang is perhaps history’s most celebrated fighter aircraft. Certainly, for ex-service pilots of the World War II generation, it retained its reputation as “the Cadillac of the sky.” There was just something about the airplane, its look, its sound – that captivated people, both then and now. It therefore comes as no surprise that the CAF’s first airplane would be a P-51 Mustang.

In a farm field in South Texas, a crop-duster named Lloyd Nolen longed to own his own World War II fighter aircraft. In 1951 Lloyd Nolen purchased a P-40 Warhawk. While he enjoyed flying the Warhawk, he often contemplated tracking down and purchasing a Mustang. Upon hearing rumors that Mustangs were being offered for sale for prices as low as \$1,000, Nolen sold his P-40 hoping to scrape together enough cash to go and purchase a Mustang.



It was about this time the Pentagon issued an order recalling P-51s for service in the Korean War (which had been raging since 1950). By the time Nolen began his search, he found that the well had all but dried up. About five years elapsed before Mustangs would be available for sale to civilians again in the United States, but by that time prices had more than doubled.

These newly-released-from-service Mustangs were commanding prices in the \$2,500 range and, in 1957, this was simply beyond Nolen's means. If he couldn't own his own Mustang, he could do the next best thing: he could share one. He eagerly engaged a group of his peers, who were also crop-duster pilots and farmers in the Rio Grande Valley, and convinced them that together, they could purchase the airplane – and share it.

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Nolen's circle of friends – many of whom had previously enjoyed flying Nolen's P-40 – included Bill Turbull, Billy Drawe, Royce Norman and C.W. Butler. They found a suitable aircraft that was being offered for sale in El Paso, Texas. Off they went on a quick inspection trip, which showed that the airplane was in good condition, except for the tail, which had been clipped off just days before their visit by an errant aircraft. After spending a few days repairing the damaged tail, Nolen flew the P-51D back to Mercedes, Texas.



The men used a borrowed AT-6 to conduct conversion training in preparation to pilot their new Mustang. Each of the five men who made up “Mustang and Company” would eventually get checked out in the aircraft, and could be seen flying the airplane regularly around the Rio Grande Valley on Sunday mornings.

One morning, the co-owners went to fly their Mustang. As Nolen remembered, it was a Sunday morning in the Fall of 1957. The men approached the airplane and noticed a curious piece of graffiti on the fuselage – someone had marked the airplane “Confederate Air Force” under its stabilizer. The men all looked at one another, wondering how it had gotten there. Years later Nolen explained, “we never found out who that gagster was, but the words seemed to fit. My buddies and I stared at the words, began to laugh out loud, gave each other a playful salute.” Nolen went on to describe the role the airplane played in the establishment of the CAF saying “That was the day we count as the unofficial beginning of the CAF, even though at the time we had one plane.”

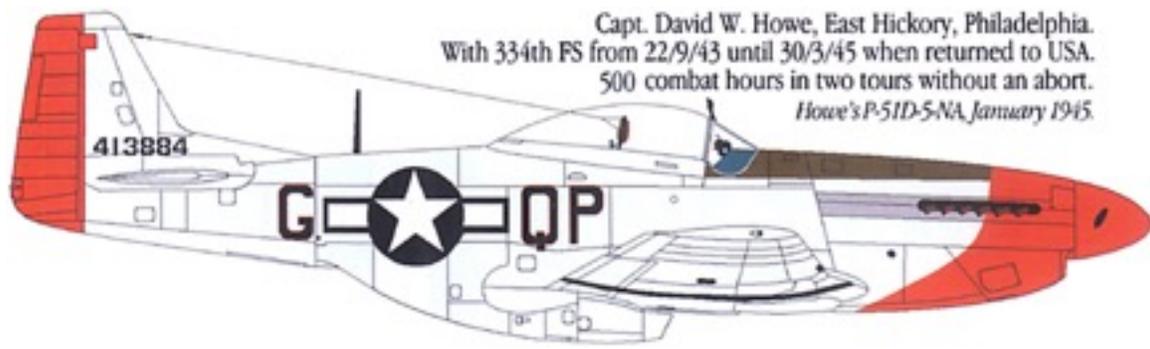


As time went on and the military needs changed, newer aircraft were developed replacing the models developed during World War II. In January 1951, this particular P-51 was declared surplus by the U.S. military and was transferred to the Royal Canadian Air Force as part of the Mutual Defense Assistance Program. During its time in Canada, the Mustang would fly with No. 416 "Lynx" Squadron based in Uplands, Ontario. In 1952, the airplane spent a short time with the No. 10 Technical Services Wing before being assigned to No. 420 "Snowy Owl" Squadron in London, Ontario. It would serve with the "Snowy Owls" until the summer of 1956 when the Canadians listed the aircraft for disposal.



The airplane found itself back in the United States having been purchased by Stinson Field Aircraft based in San Antonio, Texas. Far from past its flying days, the aircraft would soon play an integral role in aviation history. This new chapter in the life of this aircraft came on October 17, 1957 when Nolen and his friends finalized the purchase and began working on the airplane.

The airplane, originally bare metal with a red prop spinner, became known as Red Nose. As time went on, the aircraft would wear a variety of schemes, but has always retained her iconic red nose. First, in the CAF Red White and Blue Scheme, and in later years, wearing a paint scheme reminiscent of the 4th Fighter Group.



A familiar sight in the Rio Grande Valley, the airplane was regularly flown all around South Texas. The group owned the airplane until it was officially donated to the CAF in 1991. In November 2002 the CAF's General Staff voted to assign Red Nose to the CAF Dixie Wing, based in Peachtree City, Georgia outside of Atlanta. The volunteers there have done an excellent job maintaining and touring with Red Nose who continues to fly on the airshow circuit. The CAF has added many Mustangs to its fighter collection, including P-51D Gunfighter, P-51C Tuskegee Airmen and P-51D Man O' War.



