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## Lord Of The Warbirds

Rod Lewis was flying circles around us. Literally. In his L-39 Albatross jet, painted in the blue and yellow colors of the U.S.Navy's famous Blue Angels team, the Texas oil and gas tycoon performed barrel rolls that swooped his jet under and then over the top of the P-51 Mustang I was flying in.



Chris Helman

[Click for full photo gallery: Rod Lewis And His Amazing Warbirds](#)

My pilot, Jim "J.D." Dale, kept our Mustang, named *La Pistolera*, on a steady course that allowed Lewis to bring his jet in so close that our wingtips were scarcely 10 feet apart. To join in the fun, J.D. rolled the Mustang upside down. My head pressed against the Plexiglas; on the other side of the canopy, 6,000 feet below, the rolling hill country outside of San Antonio hurtled past at 300 mph.

"How was that?" crackled Lewis over the radio. So fun I couldn't stop laughing.

Not long ago, flying in a World War II Mustang was every boy's dream. It is a dream Rod Lewis lives every day. The Lewis Energy founder and chief executive has one of the top vintage warbird collections in the country, if not the world. His 26 warbird planes include such fantasy craft as *Glacier Girl*, a P-38 Lightning dug out of a Greenland glacier; one of only two surviving T-6G trainer planes used by the Tuskegee airmen; a B-25 bomber like the ones used in James Doolittle's raid on Tokyo; the only flying F4F Wildcat in existence; a British Spitfire that actually fought dogfights with German Messerschmitts; and a famed racing plane called *Rare Bear* that holds the official world speed record—528 mph—for piston-driven aircraft. (Though Lewis insists that in

test flights *Rare Bear* has beaten that “significantly.”)

As astonishing as the collection itself is how it’s cared for. “Every single one of them is in mint condition,” Lewis says. “I could jump in any plane at any time and take off and go. You got to keep these things flying. If not, it’ll go to hell.”

And fly them Lewis does, logging 600 hours a year in the cockpit. It’s not an accident that his office at the headquarters of Lewis Energy overlooks his hangars at the San Antonio International Airport. Lewis, 55, often starts his day with a call to his flight director, Bob Cardin. “If he wakes up and feels like he wants to fly a plane, we get it ready,” Cardin says. Recently the request has been for *Glacier Girl*, the crown jewel of Lewis’s collection and, through a strange accident, one of the most famous warbirds in the world.

*Glacier Girl* was part of a squadron of six P-38s and two B-17s en route to Iceland in 1942 when bad weather forced them to crash-land on a glacier in Greenland. Amazingly, all the fliers survived the crash and the trek back to civilization. In 1992, a team bankrolled by Tennessee businessman Roy Shoffner and led by Bob Cardin excavated the plane by using hot water to melt a shaft into the ice, hoisting the plane out piece by piece. They gave the plane her name and spent the next decade—and \$3.75 million—restoring her. After Shoffner died,



Lewis paid \$7 million to acquire *Glacier Girl* and hired on Cardin for good measure. They even tracked down the sole surviving pilot of the ill-fated squadron, Brad McManus, and took him up to again fly in formation with *Glacier Girl*.

The P-38 was a legendary fighter, fast and acrobatic, beloved by the top guns of World War II. “I love flying it because I love honoring those aces,” says Lewis. He also flew his B-25 this year at an event honoring the 70th anniversary of Doolittle’s raid. “But I’m just flying around. They were actually fighting and trying to save their ass and fighting for our country.”

Lewis’s love of flying began with his father, an air force pilot. From an early age, he could take an engine apart and put it back together. But back then, planes were just tools to cover the huge expanses between his natural gas wells. Having started Lewis Energy from scratch, he now controls 300,000 acres of oil- and gas fields in south Texas. He bought his first aircraft—an Aeronca Chief with a propeller he had to crank by hand—in 1981 because he

was tired of driving 300 miles a day in a pickup truck.

Lewis dabbled in vintage warbirds in the mid-1990s but soon sold off his first planes and focused on more utilitarian craft like the \$20 million Falcon jets he flies for business trips to Colombia and Mexico.

The collector's impulse only blossomed amid his brush with death. A decade ago, Lewis battled esophageal cancer that required the removal of his salivary glands. (He sips water constantly.) Suffering through chemotherapy got him thinking about all the things in life he didn't want to regret not enjoying. There were a lot of planes on that list.

His first move was to acquire an L-39 Albatross, a high-performance Czechoslovakian trainer, and get it overhauled. Lewis's dream in spring 2004 was to fly the plane, with its Blue Angels paint job, to the annual airshow in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, that July. But "I was eating through a feeding tube," Lewis says, and "I could barely climb into this thing." But dreams motivate, and by Oshkosh, Lewis was ready to fly.

There was no looking back. Fortunately his renewed passion for warbirds coincided with the revolution in drilling techniques that unlocked the oil-rich Eagle Ford shale—smack-dab in the south Texas scrub country Lewis had been working for years. His personal fortune now tops \$2.6 billion. "Got to have all that stuff to pay for all this," he smiles, as we walk among his airplanes. He estimates he's spent more than \$50 million so far acquiring and maintaining his collection.

Now he wants only the best planes, overhauled by the best restorers and worked over by the best pilots. It is a rarefied community. Lewis became good friends with legendary test pilot Chuck Yeager, as well as with Steve Hinton and Stewart Dawson, two of the top pilots flying warbirds—Hinton is the only other pilot allowed to fly *Glacier Girl*. Hinton's company, Fighter Rebuilders, is overhauling two planes for Lewis, a Hawker Sea Fury and his newest acquisition, an F-86 Sabre. Lewis says the F-86 work may cost \$700,000 to \$1 million due to Hinton's devotion to authentic parts (roughly doubling the price of a decent plane), but it's worth it. "Probably no one else would know if you had something made," he says. "But I'd know."

The paint job is the finishing touch. Lewis's F8F Bearcat boasts the colors of the Royal Thai Air Force and features a voluptuous, scantily clad lady painted on the nose alongside the plane's name, *Tai Wun On*. Lewis's B-25 bomber is painted in Soviet colors and features a blonde gal decked out in leather riding on a bomb with the name *Russian Ta Get Ya*. These and other flying ladies were painted by acclaimed pinup artist Greg Hildebrandt. Despite her name, *Glacier Girl* doesn't yet feature a painted mascot, but "we're thinking of putting a little less sexy girl on the side." It may appear odd to paint foreign colors on American planes (another plane has a Cuban paint job), but Lewis says it helps keep history alive: Through FDR's Lend-Lease program, the United States sent these planes all over the world.

Not surprisingly, the Lewis cadre of fly guys also work with America's other well-heeled warbird fans. Father and son Dan and Tom Friedkin of Houston operate a network of Toyota dealerships and regularly fly their planes with

Lewis. Then there's Paul Allen, the Microsoft cofounder, who, like Lewis, keeps most of his 18 warbirds in flying condition. But Allen himself is not a pilot, meaning he's never experienced the thrill of driving these one-seaters. In fairness to Allen, you don't have to be a painter to appreciate a Rembrandt. Cory Graff, Allen's curator, says his boss enjoys collecting unique craft (like an early German rocket plane) more for their place among the 20th century's technological marvels.

Says Hinton, "I'm just happy that these guys can afford to do this and want to do this."

That said, Lewis does have one plane that even he doesn't fly. The record-setting *Rare Bear* is a highly modified F8F Bearcat that has been competing in air races since 1969. Its modifications make it far tougher to fly than other warbirds, which, after all, were built for 19-year-olds to handle. Says the *Bear's* pilot, Stewart Dawson, "It's a privilege to fly it, but it's not a pleasure."

Lewis acquired the plane from its longtime owner for \$2 million in 2006. As with *Glacier Girl*, *Rare Bear* came with its own caretakers (and loyal fan base). The plane rarely leaves Reno, Nevada, where it competes each fall in the highest echelon of the Reno Air Races. (Lewis pilots some of his other planes at the Reno races.)

In fact, Dawson was racing *Rare Bear* in Reno last September when tragedy struck. The *Bear* was flying neck and neck with a highly modified P-51 Mustang, *The Galloping Ghost* (owned by another collector), when part of the Ghost's tail broke off, causing the plane to pitch up violently, roll inverted, then pitch down, smashing into the tarmac at the edge of the crowd, killing 11, including pilot James Leeward, 74. Dawson watched the horror unfold over his shoulder. "I've never seen an airplane just disintegrate," he says.

The tragedy led Lewis, already a perfectionist about the flightworthiness of his planes, to reemphasize safety. His mechanics now take each plane apart once a year for heavy maintenance. "The neat thing about Rod—if it's not right, it don't go," Dawson says. "He says, 'If it's broke, fix it.'"

Yet tragedy struck again last April, this time even closer to home. Kyle Richardson, the fiancé of Lewis's daughter, was killed, along with his father and a guide, when his Cessna crashed in the Utah backcountry. Richardson had been set to begin work at Lewis Energy the following week. Lewis and his pilot friends held a ceremony to honor the young man and flew a group of planes in a "missing man" formation over Ozona, Texas.

Reflecting on Richardson, the victims of the Reno crash, and every other pilot who has gone before, Lewis says, "We will continue to fly these planes in honor of their memory."

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