

BREITLING DIALS UP A UNIQUE FORMATION

A Mustang, Mosquito, Corsair and Warhawk bring the Super AVI collection to life BY JAN TEGLER



ON A SWELTERING DAY LAST AUGUST, liquid-cooled Merlin and Allison V-12s and an air-cooled Pratt & Whitney R-2800 radial engine idled impatiently at the east end of the Military Aviation Museum's (MAM's) beautifully maintained, 5,000-foot grass runway.

Sweating through his tan flight suit in the hot cockpit of the Cavanaugh Flight Museum's P-40N, Taylor Stevenson was less concerned than usual about getting the Warhawk airborne while waiting for the other fighters lined up to take the runway.

"The P-40 heats up on the ground pretty quickly, faster than a Mustang and definitely faster than a Corsair," he notes. "If we're doing a formation flight, I'm used to being the guy that's always saying, 'Hey guys, we need to go!'"

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"The good news is the Mosquito heats up way faster," Stevenson quips. "So I wasn't the guy yelling, 'Let's go!'"

Just then, Mike Spalding throttled up the two Merlin V-12s on the wings of the MAM's gorgeous DeHavilland Mosquito. One of just four airworthy examples, the British fighter-bomber sped down the turf and lifted off, its twin Merlins gratefully inhaling cool air as it climbed to orbit, awaiting the other fighters.

Ray Fowler, flying "Double Trouble Two," MAM's well-known P-51D, John Fuentes in MAM's classic FG-1D Corsair, and Stevenson followed the Mosquito into the air for a special flight.

Breitling's Super AVI Collection

Rarely have a P-51, Corsair, P-40, and a Mosquito come together in one formation. And though it may seem odd, the impetus for the sortie didn't come from a warbird meet or a gathering at an aviation museum. It came from Swiss watch brand Breitling.

Long known as a maker of timepieces closely associated with aviation—think Chronomat, Navitimer and Emergency among others—the Grenchen-based company has also supported aviation events like the Reno National Championship Air Races, sponsored aircraft and pilots in the now defunct Red Bull Air Races, and even funded its own jet aerobatic team, the L-39 equipped Breitling Jet Team.

The formation's four aircraft represent the chronographs in Breitling's new Super AVI collection. Inspired by the brand's "Co-Pilot" model, originally offered in 1953, the five versions in the collection take their cues from the colors of the fighters in the formation.

For instance, the Super AVI P-51 incorporates the black and gold of "Double Trouble Two's" 353rd Fighter Group checkerboard nose livery in its black dial and gold indexes. The Super AVI Tribute to Vought F4U Corsair takes its cue from the Navy blue two-tone and VF-17 markings on the MAM's FG-1D, while the Super AVI Mosquito combines the black, red and orange elements of MAM's 487 Squadron RNZAF color scheme. The Super AVI Curtiss Warhawk sports a green camouflage dial with red and white accents from the P-40's shark mouth. There's also a silhouette of each fighter on the caseback of the watch dedicated to it.

The Join Up

The four-ship flight took off for what was to be one of two photo missions to provide images and video in support of Breitling's advertising campaign around the Super AVI collection. The watches debuted at a gala event at the Commemorative Air Force's National Aviation Education Center in Dallas, Texas last November.

The group flew south toward the Virginia coast to escape the busy airspace all around the Military Aviation Museum—from NAS Oceana's Super Hornets and airliners flying into Norfolk International Airport to the north to the helicopters, E-2s, C-2s, and CMV-22Bs coming out of Naval Station Norfolk to the northwest and the F/A-18s practicing carrier landings at Naval Auxiliary Landing Field Fentress to the west.

Joined by a specially modified Beech G-58 Baron photo-ship flown by well-known aviation photographer Scott Slocum, the assemblage was in uncontrolled airspace over the Back Bay Wildlife Refuge within minutes.

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TAYLOR STEVENSON, P-40N WARHAWK PILOT

The special combination of aircraft made an immediate impact on Taylor Stevenson. At 32 years old, he's part of a new generation of pilots rising in the warbird world, a much-needed injection of fresh blood to carry on the tradition of displaying American history in flight.

As number three in the four-ship, Stevenson was last to launch. Once off the ground, he took a bead on Ray Fowler, the flight lead, as the group's diamond formation began to come together. Climbing and turning, within about 180 degrees he was "on the perfect bearing line, a little acute just coming right into the position" on the Mustang's right wing, he recalls.

"You look up as you're passing under a beautiful Mustang and a Corsair and slide into position. By the time you get settled you look over your left shoulder and there's a Mosquito in the slot!"

A pilot since his sixteenth birthday, Stevenson "grew up in the back" of a T-6 owned by his father and long-time CAF pilot Ray Kinney. He built time in several tail-draggers, including a Stinson L-5 he bought and restored himself while in high school. Thereafter, he logged several hundred hours in his family's T-6 before flying his first warbird: the Collings Foundation's TF-51D.

Soon afterward he flew the CAF's P-63A, and for several years he's been the "caretaker" of the



CAF's replica Nakajima B5N2 "Kate 310." Taylor has extensively flown the Kate in the CAF's "Tora, Tora, Tora!" display.

"It was just so cool," Stevenson says of the opportunity Breitling provided to fly with such different aircraft in one formation.

"Having these aircraft and their history encapsulated in a watch is very special. Breitling wants to make sure the history they associate with the watches is accurate and that they get the historic elements right. They actually ask the pilots about what we find most important, what's relevant historically, and what should be incorporated."

"The amount of history that was in that flight was amazing!"



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These aircraft are famous of course, but these days there are lots of people around the world who may not be familiar with them. Breitling can help bring this history to a wider audience.



RAY FOWLER, P-51D MUSTANG PILOT

Ray Fowler describes the opportunity to lead the formation for the Breitling photo shoot as a "treat," praising the watch brand for showcasing the aircraft in a different way with the Super AVI collection.

"Everything went so smoothly and they did such a great job of organizing it," he notes. "These aircraft are famous of course, but these days there are lots of people around the world who may not be familiar with them. Breitling can help bring this history to a wider audience."

Leading the flight, Fowler kept the formation at between 180 and 200 mph to accommodate the differing performance of the fighters as well as the Beech Baron photo-ship. With the exception of the Mosquito, the experienced warbird pilot has time flying all of the formation's fighters (and others) as well as the B-17 and B-24. He's also the only pilot in the world currently rated to fly the XP-82, having piloted restorer Tom Reilly's prototype Twin Mustang since its first flight in 2019.

Chatting with me from the flight deck of a Delta Airlines Airbus A321 between flights, Fowler said his journey to warbird flying started when he was a certified flight instructor during college. He got to know the owner of the CAF's Kate replica and told him, "I'd clean every bug off the airplane any time it flew if I could get a ride in it!"

Later the owner had a medical issue, and Ray jumped at the chance to fly the dive-bomber. He also started rapidly accumulating flight hours in a T-6. By the age of 22, he'd checked out in P-51. All of this took place before he joined the Air National Guard in the 1990s.

When he joined the Guard, he purposely didn't tell them he already had lots of flight time, including in WW II fighters, knowing the USAF would not want to "re-teach" him how to fly. "I kept my mouth shut all the way through flight training," Fowler quips. "No one found out."

By 2000, he was part of the Washington District of Columbia ANG, flying F-16s. Thereafter, he made multiple deployments flying over Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom. He still flies the Viper today with Alabama Air National Guard's 100 Fighter Squadron.

Ask him which warbird is his favorite and he responds quickly: "It's hard to beat the Mustang. It's nimble and it flies so well with a wide performance envelope."

Fowler has been flying with MAM for several years now, racking up time in the "Double Trouble Two." But he also flies for NASCAR team owner and warbird enthusiast Jack Roush, piloting his P-51B and P-51D, which both wear Bud Anderson's "Old Crow" livery. He says it's an honor to pilot both aircraft and that flying Mustangs dedicated to Anderson, including for the recent celebration of the famed WW II ace's 100th birthday, was his "favorite experience."



“You can fly it with two fingers on the stick. It’s also very stable. Put it somewhere and it’s going to stay there.”



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JOHN FUENTES, FG-1D CORSAIR PILOT

“I’m loving it! It’s a beautiful timepiece,” John Fuentes says, referring to the Super AVI Tribute to Vought F4U Corsair strapped around his wrist.

Fuentes has been flying MAM’s Corsair for 11 years now as well as the museum’s Hawker Hurricane and FM-2 Wildcat. He’s also flown the Mosquito.

“I’m fortunate that at the MAM we have a diverse group of aircraft and quite often we do dissimilar formations, so I’ve flown with the Mosquito many times before and I’m rated in the airplane, too.

“The whole preparation for the filming around the Super AVI collection and the photo flights was a first-class operation by Breitling,” Fuentes enthuses. “Everything was done 100 percent.

Currently a Boeing 787 captain with United Airlines, his warbird journey goes back to the 1980s.

Enrolled at Southern Illinois University, he was a classmate of Tom Frasca, one of well-known warbird collector Rudy Frasca’s sons. Fuentes was president of a group of students who organized air shows for the university and got his “first, up close exposure to warbirds by having the Frasca family bring some of their aircraft in for our shows.”

After joining Douglas Aircraft Company in southern

California in 1986, he helped a charter company “maintain some of the old twin and four-engine airliners that were still running around at Chino airport.”

Fuentes moved back to the Chicago area a couple years later to fly Shorts 360 regional airliners with American Eagle and began volunteering with the CAF. He did maintenance and corrosion control on the B-29 “Fifi” and a B-24 and flew them. When he moved to Manassas, Virginia, working for United Airlines, he continued volunteering, bought a Vultee BT-13, helped the Culpepper CAF unit restore a TBM Avenger, and began flying a Ken Laird’s Aichi D3A Val as well as the unit’s Wildcat. Eventually, he became the MAM’s operations director.

Fuentes loves flying the museum’s FG-1D. “You can fly it with two fingers on the stick. It’s also very stable. Put it somewhere and it’s going to stay there. There are a lot of control and servo tabs that help keep it balanced. It’s not going to turn tight, but for its day it was pretty fast.”

Now in the latter stage of his warbird flying career, the 25,000-hour pilot relishes opportunities to showcase MAM’s aircraft. “Breitling’s support made it possible to bring those four aircraft together. We want as many people to see them as possible.”



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WATCH SPECS

The five Chronograph GMT watches in Breitling's Super AVI collection share the maker's Manufacture Caliber B04 self-winding mechanical movement with 70-hour power reserve. The P-51 version comes in two case materials, stainless-steel or 18-karat red gold. The other models feature stainless-steel cases.

Diameter: 46 mm

Chronograph: Column-wheel, vertical clutch, 1/4th second, 30-minute, and 12-hour totalizers

Display: Hour, minute, second, date window, second time zone

Water resistance: Up to 10 bar (100 meters)

Glass: Cambered sapphire, glare-proofed on both sides

Brown and black pilot-inspired leather straps with folding clasps



Need caption to identify various watches?

MIKE SPALDING, MOSQUITO PILOT

"As long as they're both running, flying the Mosquito is no different than flying a single-engine fighter," Mike Spalding says, referring to the two Merlin V-12s that power the DeHavilland fighter-bomber.

The MAM example is probably the most regularly flown Mosquito. Spalding is the museum's chief pilot and has flown most of the collection's nearly 60 WW I and WW II aircraft.

"It's when one engine quits at a bad time, on takeoff for instance, that makes it the animal that it can be."

Spalding says the "Wooden Wonder"—a nickname derived from the Mosquito's mostly wooden airframe construction—is actually a comparatively heavy aircraft, underlining its role as a bomber.

"From zero to 100 mph it accelerates pretty quickly. Then it seems to take just as long to accelerate to 125 mph, where it lifts off." Thereafter, acceleration is slow he adds. If an engine quits, the Mosquito's flyaway



speed—the point at which it can safely climb and continue flying—is 190 mph, Spalding notes.

Getting to 190 mph could take some time, a feat made more challenging by the need to retract the "Mossie's" gear. "Like most British airplanes, you have to take your

It takes a lot of control input to get it to go where you want. But over 200 mph, it's more like a fighter, very responsive and comfortable going fast."

left hand off the throttle to hold the stick and use your right hand to raise the gear," Spalding explains. "If an engine quits right then, it's a real critical time. You've got to be ready for it."

Below 200 mph, the Mosquito "flies like a heavy airplane," Spalding says. "That's where its bomber characteristics are. It takes a lot of control input to get it to go where you want. But over 200 mph, it's more like a fighter, very responsive and comfortable going fast."

Spalding affirms the need to get the British aircraft airborne quickly on a hot day like the one on which the Breitling photo flights were done.

"The radiators don't have much opening for air movement sitting on the ground and the engines will overheat, particularly when you do your pre-takeoff run-up. I was number four in all of the formations and that's the order in which you'd normally takeoff. But on that hot day it was better for me to line up, run up and go."

Fascinated with Boeing's Stearman growing up, Spalding soloed in the trainer by age 18 and later bought one. While flying as a corporate pilot, he joined the CAF and began to fly a Lockheed Lodestar and a Grumman S-2 Tracker, then acquired a T-6 to build time in the

advanced trainer.

Not long after Jerry Yagen started the Military Aviation Museum, Spalding was invited to fly the collection's AD-4 Skyraider and TBM Avenger. "Eventually the chief pilot retired, and they asked me to take over. I've been with Jerry for almost 20 years now."

One of the prime challenges of flying the Mosquito is seeing below the aircraft, making formation flight tricky, particularly with dissimilar aircraft, Spalding says. Positioning the Mosquito for photos adds to the challenge.

"The wings and nacelles block everything from eye-level down," Spalding explains. "If people are flying stepped-down below or behind you, you can't see them. In most ways, it's easier for me to be last in formation. And it's important to brief the other pilots not to get below me."

Like the other pilots, Spalding is grateful for the opportunity Breitling provided to get the Mosquito and the other fighters in front of a broad audience.

"And they really did a good job of tying the watch to the Mosquito. I was proud to be part of this."➔