



Recreating P-51B "Shillelagh"

BY JAN TEGLER

FORTY-FIVE MILES WEST OF PARIS, France near Dreux, 1st Lt. Kenneth Dahlberg and seven other pilots from the 353rd Fighter Squadron bounced a formation of 20 Me-109s on August 16, 1944. Diving from 14,000 feet, they tore into the German fighters just before 5 pm local. Almost immediately, 60 more 109s joined the fray. Dahlberg, flying a P-51B named "Shillelagh" by its regular pilot, 1st Lt. David O'Hara, was too busy to recognize the odds. "You can only see so many at a time," he later recalled.

The nose of "Shillelagh" was pointed at a 109 trailing a group of four other Messerschmitts. Dahlberg opened fire and the German fighter started smoking and spinning. Bending the Mustang's nose left, he found a new target in front of him and

let loose with his .50-calibers. The plane blew up, splashing "Shillelagh" with oil. At about the same moment Dahlberg noticed his own oil pressure dropping. He'd apparently been hit.

As he wheeled around and dropped altitude, hoping to make it back to his own lines, another 109 appeared right in front of him. Dahlberg's gun sight was covered with oil, but he managed to direct his aim by using tracers from his guns. Splash three! But four 109s had gotten behind him. Dahlberg ducked into a cloud. With no oil left, his engine was overheating. He bailed out, landing near where "Shillelagh" had torn into the earth a few minutes earlier. It was the first of three occasions on which the future triple-ace was shot down.

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ABOVE LEFT: Brad and Paul work on fitting longerons. ABOVE RIGHT: Jacob works on the station 248 fuselage bulkhead. Station 248 is at the front of the tailcone assembly. The two brackets near the top of the bulkhead are for elevator cable pulleys.

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RIGHT: This NOS windshield assembly was purchased from John and Sue Paul, owners of P-51B Boise Bee. Their willingness to sell this rare assembly is a good example of how members of the warbird industry support one another.



LEFT: Theo works on the skin section that includes the opening for the tail wheel. Small adjustments to skin sections sometimes require hand filing. ABOVE: Need caption. BELOW: Need caption.



Fortuitously, he came down on the estate of a wealthy French family. Denis Baudoin and his wife were part of the French resistance and though German soldiers occupied the estate, they managed to hide Dahlberg then helped him get back to Allied lines two days later. Within days he was fighting again, supporting the Allies' advance.

After the war, Dahlberg would make a fortune as the developer and founder of the "Miracle Ear" hearing-aid empire.

Re-creating a legend

Erik Hokuf manages the award-winning Bemidji, Minnesota-based warbird restoration and maintenance firm, AirCorps Aviation (ACA), and he and his team were aware of fellow Minnesotan Dahlberg's exploits. In August 2020, 76 years after "Shillelagh" crashed, they excavated the area of the Baudoin estate where the Mustang came down. They found "remnants of the fuselage and lots of different pieces," Hokuf says, enough to have them be part of the story of a new warbird. "We wanted to do that and have that be part of the story," he adds. "We're basically building an airplane to commemorate

'Shillelagh' and that story and maybe there's a few bits that we'll be able to incorporate."

Progress on what will be a new addition to the ranks of Mustang warbirds is well advanced according to Hokuf. The fighter's main fuselage has been assembled/fabricated as well as its tail and lower end structure. Wing sub-components are assembled and ready to start going into major assemblies. Wing areas like the leading edges are in fixtures, and the talented AirCorps team is adapting engine mounts.

"We did source a lot of original North American parts," Hokuf notes. "The horizontal and vertical and all of the control surfaces and bottom-end and engine mounts and some of the bigger bolt-on components of the wings are original."

He says "Shillelagh" should be completed by the end of 2025 with a goal of "making it another 'Lope's Hope the 3rd,'" a reference to ACA's extremely high-quality restoration of a P-51C inspired by WW II ace Lt. Donald Lopez. That Mustang won the 2018 Golden Wrench, Grand Champion Warbird award at EAA AirVenture. ➔