

How I got to fly the



Ever fancy flying a warbird?

You need to be dedicated as well as skilful.

Pat Malone meets display pilot **Michael Weber**



As a 23-year-old warbird pilot, Michael Weber had to get used to double-takes when he stepped out of his P51 after an air display. Somehow you expect a Mustang pilot to be a grizzled veteran with a grey hair for every near-death experience, not a fresh-faced youth who looks hardly old enough to drive a car.

But when you think about it, Michael Weber makes the Mustang display even more of an authentic experience because the pilots who flew these machines in the Second World War were 19, maybe 20 years old. Not only did they fly them, they fought and died in them, and you don't have to linger long in a war cemetery to know that a lot of them never reached the ripe old age of 23.

Michael was the youngest Mustang pilot in Europe, and he quickly followed up by becoming the youngest T28 Trojan pilot, then the youngest B25 Mitchell bomber pilot too. Today, as he approaches 30, he finds himself with more than 400 hours on warbirds ranging from the T6 Harvard to the L39 Albatross – hard hours, all hand-flown, many of them in precise displays with lots of take-offs and landings and positioning flights in





Damen Burke



Above: like many wartime pilots, Michael Weber was just 23 when he first flew the Mustang

Left: Michael with Crazy Horse, the Mustang in which he did his conversion in Florida

Top right: Michael's T6 - learning to fly the Harvard was a step towards flying the Mustang
Above right: Michael Weber in his Harvard, which he has recently sold

uncooperative northern European weather. It's the kind of flying that gives you grey hair.

Most of us would feel a little reticent about going up to a Mustang owner and asking if we could please fly his million-dollar baby, but Michael had no such qualms. "Somebody has to fly them," he says. "If you want to fly warbirds, you have to go to them, because they're certainly not going to come to you."

So first, you need the chutzpah to ask. Secondly, you need an extraordinarily high level of piloting skill and an uncommonly level head. It's also helpful to have friends in the right places and a great deal of luck, and then you must work very hard for many years, and most importantly, you have to be absolutely,

totally consumed by the idea of flying warbirds, so much so that there is room for nothing else in your life.

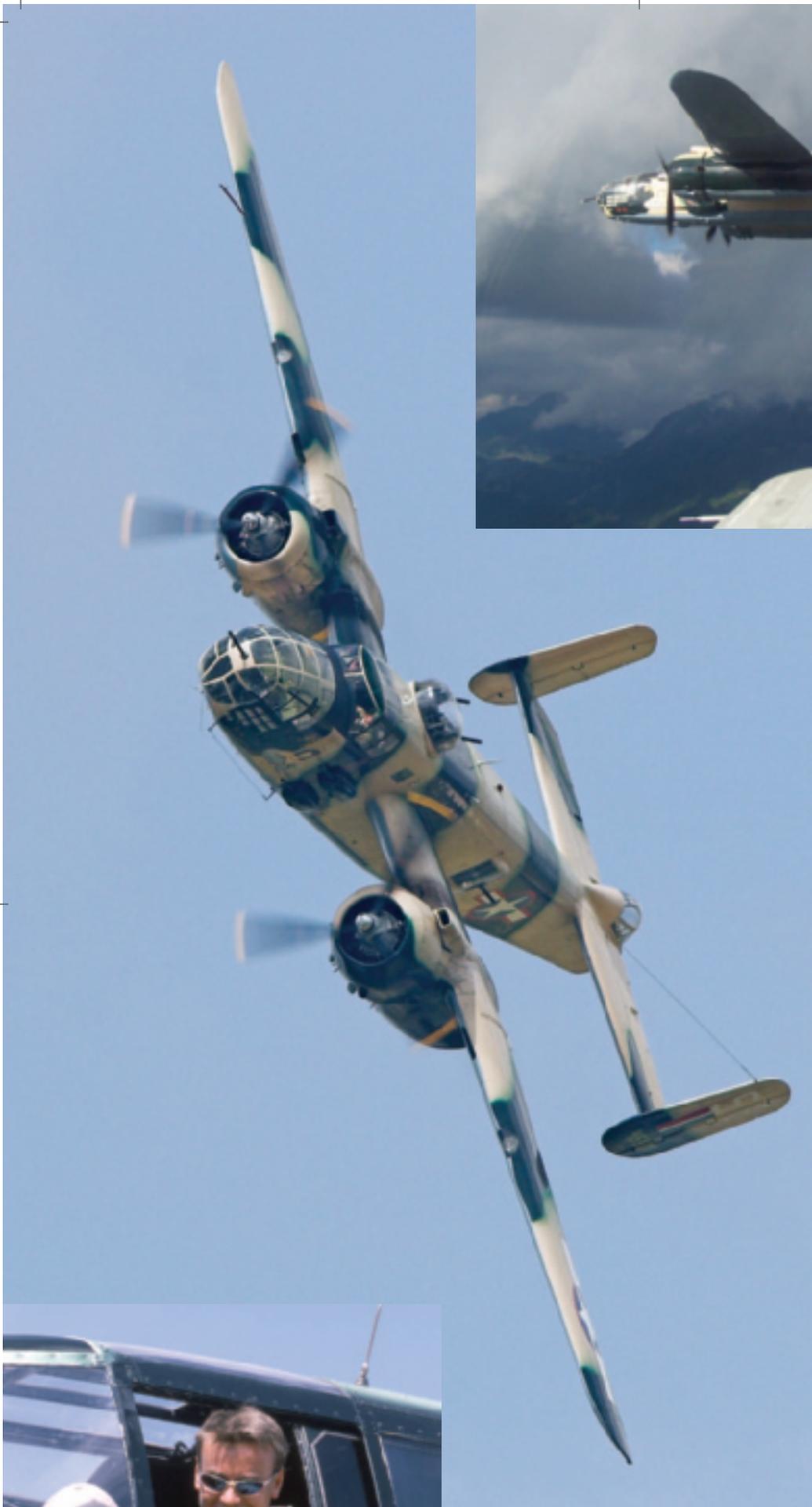
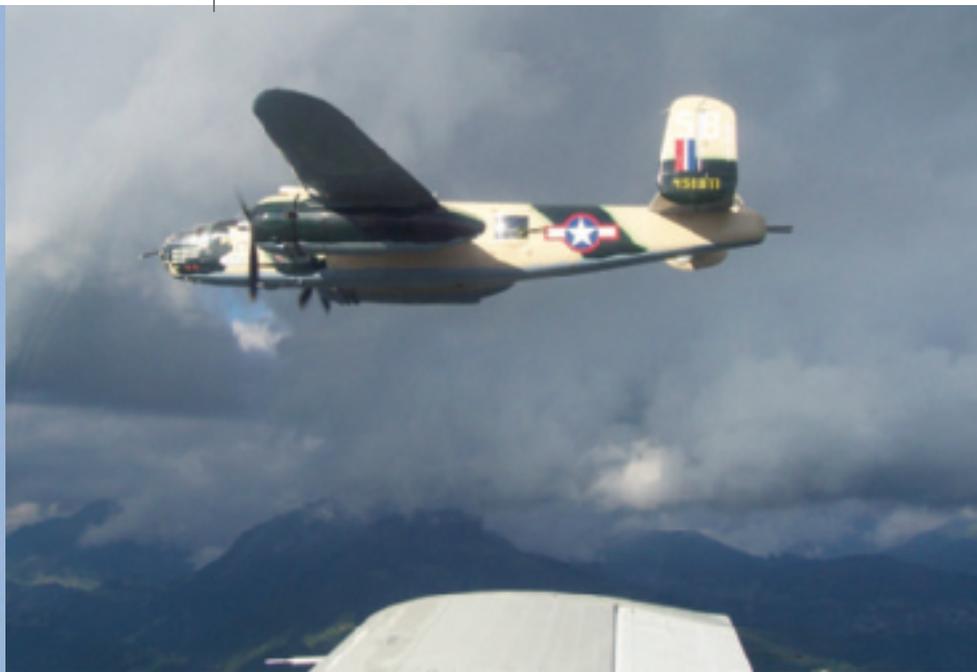
Michael has all these things, and as well as having understanding parents he had an uncle who not only encouraged his fascination with aviation but had a very successful company based in Switzerland and South Africa, and could help him out on occasion when funds were short. Nonetheless, virtually every penny Michael has ever earned has been ploughed into warbird flying.

Michael, who lived close to Basel airport in Switzerland, began making model aircraft at the age of four – first simple gliders, then complex warbirds. At the age of 14 he was allowed to take the controls of a Piper Cub owned by a friend, and such was his expertise gained from flying radio controlled models and Microsoft flight simulators that he was able to fly the aircraft well enough at the first attempt. The Swiss military paid for his PPL – he was one of 28 chosen out of 4,500 applicants for the course – and he got his ticket on a Piper Archer at the age of 16. He flew the Slingsby and the Pilatus PC7 while working towards his CPL and frozen ATPL, and got a job with

Crossair flying the Saab 2000. But what he really wanted to do was fly a Mustang.

So he saved up all his money and with help from his uncle – because even in 2001 it cost \$45,000 to get a Mustang rating – he went off to Warbird Adventures in Florida. First he was required to do a rating on the T6 Harvard, just as his wartime predecessors would have done. Then he could move on to Stallion 51 at Kissimmee to fly the Mustang. It was, he says, enormously hard work, as labour-intensive as it was costly, but his long-held dream drove him on.

He loved flying the Mustang every bit as much as he thought he would. "It's big and powerful, but I think it's easier to fly than the T6," he says. "The P51 is very forgiving as long as you know what the limitations are – both the aircraft's and your own. You have to be careful with the power on take-off. My technique is to set power to 30 ins MAP, release the brakes, get the tail up at 40 knots then go to 40 ins, wait two or three seconds, gently advance to 45 inches, then after another couple of seconds take it out to 50, then 55 inches – max boost is 60 inches. You can't apply so much horsepower all at once



Scott Robinson



Above: B25 Russell's Raiders, which Michael has flown at Flying Legends at Duxford
Left: Michael at the controls of the B25, which is owned by Red Bull
Top right: the Mitchell seen from the T28 on transit across Switzerland
Above right: Michael flew the B25 in formation over Buckingham Palace in 2005

because the aerodynamic surfaces are too weak to overcome the mechanical forces. The Harvard is more twitchy and can roll extremely fast at the stall. The Mustang gives a lot of warning before the stall, the air intake and oil cooler start to whistle loudly before it breaks away."

It's fast, too, after the 140 knots of the T6. "The P51 is about 400 knots and it flies almost like a jet," Michael says. "It's in no hurry to slow down when you reduce power, so you have to plan well ahead."

Michael added the T28 Trojan rating at Courtesy Aircraft in Chicago – the Trojan was the aircraft that helped the USAF transition to the F86 Sabre – and was later rated on the *Russell's Raiders*, the B25 Mitchell based at Sion in Switzerland and operated by Salzburg-based Red Bull, who provided the instructor. "The B25 is easier to fly than you might think," he says. "You can loop it, and you can roll it, just on the ailerons – not that I ever



Above left: the high-performance T28 helped American pilots to transition onto jets
Above: Michael prepares for a display flight in the Trojan

Below: the reluctance of the P51 to slow down calls for forward planning on landing

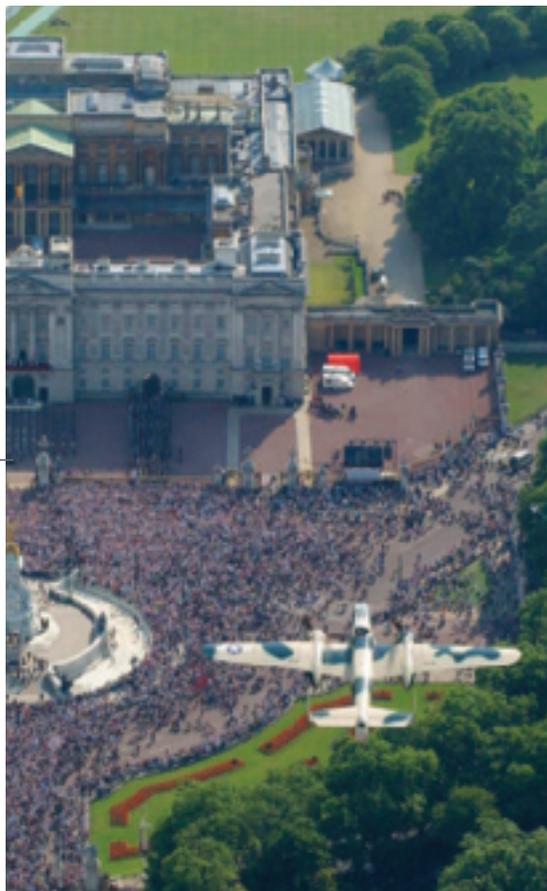
a check ride in a warbird," he says, "but just as important is the mental discipline that makes you a truly trustworthy pilot. If someone is going to allow you to fly his valuable aircraft, he wants to know that you have the cold self-control to do the job properly. People who cannot resist the temptation to spice up a display when faced with a 50,000 crowd will soon come to grief. You are not the star of the show, the aircraft is the star – and it is also old, temperamental, and very precious. In normal flying you must give 100 percent, but when you're flying an old warbird, use 80 percent of the aircraft's capability and keep 20 percent in reserve for anything that might crop up.

"I sometimes throw away landings, even when many people are watching, if I haven't got everything absolutely right. The T6 is prone to bounce on landing, and the only thing to do is smoothly open the power and go around. Who cares if it's embarrassing. If you try to mask your mistake and get down anyway, you risk a greater embarrassment, and you could risk losing the plane."

Michael was taught aerobatics by the world-renowned Sean Tucker in California, and also flies the Pilatus P2 and the L39 Albatross while piloting a UPS ATR based at Cologne for a day job. He is also chief executive of a company marketing advanced procedures trainers based

on Microsoft flight simulator software – simulators that allow airlines to cut costs by reducing the number of hours that are required on full-motion simulators. He has recently sold his own T6 Harvard and is looking around for something to take its place. "Ideally I'd like to get a Spitfire rating," he says, "and the only place to do that now is in the UK."

So how does one set about becoming a warbird display pilot? "First, talk to the owners," Michael says. "It may take years to be taken seriously, but if you're lucky they'll give you a job cleaning the hangar floor. After a few years of that, maybe if you're lucky you'll get to help clean the actual aircraft. The next step is getting a ride in the plane, perhaps on a positioning flight, then if you're a pilot you might get to handle the controls in the cruise. And it goes on from there. Remember, somebody has to fly it. There may only be half a dozen B25 pilots in Europe but there's no reason why you shouldn't try to be one of them." ■



have, of course – but it flies just like a fighter. You can use short fields. I've landed on 750 metres. The most difficult thing is managing the engines. Getting the fuel-air ratio correct is difficult. If it's too lean it will backfire, and if it's too rich you have to handle the throttles very carefully or you can lose an engine. Carb icing is a big problem. With each engine sucking 400 litres an hour through the carbs, the problem can be extreme in the autumn and winter." Michael has flown the Mitchell at Flying Legends at Duxford, and his most memorable flight in the UK came in 2005 when he flew the aircraft over Buckingham Palace as part of the huge formation of World War Two aircraft assembled to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the end of the war in Europe. The UK doesn't accept Swiss display authorisations so before he was allowed to fly the B25 in Britain he had to do a short check ride with the CAA's Robb Metcalfe.

"Flying skill is important if you're going to do



Damien Burke