On My Father's Wing

By Jim Busha

The incredible journey of the Tobul family’s Corsair

The SHINY DARK BLUE wings held upright like a pair of praying hands begin to unfold and drop into place. While the wings lock into their inverted gull position, the Pratt & Whitney R-2800-52W, 18-cylinder, 2700-hp radial engine awakens like rolling thunder during a summer storm. Puffs of gray, oily smoke blast out underneath the aircraft’s barrel-chested nose. The enormous 13-foot, four-bladed Hamilton Standard propeller sends an exhaust cloud swirling around the cockpit before disappearing over the tail of the F4U-4 Corsair.

Through the haze I notice the pilot, Jim Tobul, EAA 182013, of Bamberg, South Carolina, run his flying glove just underneath the canopy rail, his fingertips gently stroking the nameplate that reads Jim Tobul/Joe Tobul.

I lock onto the warm smile beaming across Jim’s face. Having previously interviewed Jim at length I’ve come to the realization that if ever there was an aviation journey with great peaks and valleys, it couldn’t come close to the journey of the Tobul family Corsair.

Jim (left) and Joe Tobul.
Honestly I was at a crossroads in my life back in November 2002,” Jim said. “Our family had owned this F4U-4 Corsair since 1981, and my father, Joe, and I restored it over a 10-year period. My father taught me so many things, and through him I developed a passion for these old warbirds. Although he was my mentor, he was more than a dad; he was my best friend. Unfortunately I lost my dad and the Corsair on November 10, 2002, and I had no idea where the next journey with this airplane would lead to.”

**LINEAGE OF A LEGEND**

In February 1938 the U.S. Navy was looking for a new high altitude, high speed fighter/interceptor as it began phasing out its 1920s’ technology biplane fleet. Chance Vought answered the call with a single-seat fighter design called the Corsair. From the onset the Corsair looked like no other fighter of its time. Most unique was its inverted gull-wing design, used in part because of the length of the massive 13-foot propeller that was spun around by an even more massive R-2800 Wasp radial engine with double-rowed cylinders. Chance Vought knew that if it stayed with a standard straight-wing design, the aircraft’s landing gear legs would be like those of an ostrich—long and lean—for the propeller to clear the ground. But with the inside portion of the wing inverted, the landing gear remained a standard size and rotated 90 degrees on takeoff before being inserted flush inside the wing.

Chance Vought understood from the onset that the Corsair would be housed primarily aboard the narrow confines of aircraft carrier decks. To counter space needs, the Corsair’s outer wings folded upright, allowing for multiple fighters to be stacked next to each other like cordwood.

The 10,000-pound F4U carried an assortment of weapons including six .50-caliber machine guns, eight 5-inch HVARs (high velocity aircraft rockets), two 150-gallon drop tanks, or an assortment of bombs. The Corsair went on to perform valiantly during World War II and the Korean War, obtaining a respectable 11-to-1 kill ratio during WWII.

Because of the high demand during WWII for this fighter, Chance Vought turned to fellow aircraft manufacturers Goodyear and Brewster for assistance as they churned out more than 12,500 Corsairs of various models from 1940 until 1952, making it the longest U.S. produced piston fighter in history. One particular Corsair, built as an F4U-4 model in August 1945 and given bureau number 97143, just missed going into combat during WWII.
But it more than made up for missing WWII during the Korean War, along with seeing some action in a “little skirmish” in Central America before being rescued by a father and son in 1981.

**KOREAN WAR HERO**

From the very onset of the Korean War this Corsair was engaged in combat. From June through October 1951 the Tobul F4U-4 was aboard the USS Boxer with squadron VF-884, known as the Bitter Birds. Eventually reassigned in December 1951 until July 1952, this Corsair was flying with VF-653 aboard the USS Valley Forge. Its squadron emblem consisted of a dragon holding a shield with a golden triangle and a checkerboard stripe. The checkerboard stripe signified the winning of the Cleveland Air Races (twice) by the squadron commander, Lt. Cmdr. Cook Cleland, who flew this particular Corsair during its more than 200 combat missions. Although this F4U-4 Corsair was retired from U.S. naval service in July 1956, its combat days were far from over.

“...I think one of the more unique historical aspects of this Corsair was that it was involved in the ‘Soccer War’ between Honduras and El Salvador in July 1969,” Jim said. “Although that air war only lasted less than a week, it was the last aerial battle fought between WWII-era fighters. El Salvadoran air force P-51 Mustangs and F4U Corsairs slugged it out with Honduran F4U Corsairs for aerial supremacy. Our Corsair was sold to the Hondurans in the early 1960s and became FAH-613. I am convinced that the only reason it survived was because it ended up becoming a parts airplane for the other Honduran Corsairs.”

After languishing in the Honduran jungles until 1977, it was rescued by an airline pilot and traded hands one more time before the project was put up for sale and purchased by Joe Tobul in 1981. Joe was no stranger to Korean War vintage aircraft. He had flown U.S. Marine Corps F3D Skyknight attack squadron during the early 1950s.

“My dad had a passion for warbirds,” Jim recalled. “He loved to fly warbirds as much as turning wrenches on them. He is the reason I am so passionate about them as well.”

In the early 1980s when Jim wasn’t boring holes in the sky at the controls of the family SNJ with his dad, Joe, instructing, he was at his father’s side working on the F4U-4. After 10 years the Corsair project, appropriately named **Korean War Hero**, reached the light at the end of the tunnel in December 1991. Both Joe and Jim flew the single-seat F4U-4 to air shows and aerial outings all across the United States, sharing it with as many people as possible.
“That’s exactly what my father was doing on his last flight,” Jim said. “He was sharing the Corsair with some disabled veterans at the Dorn VA Medical Center as he made his annual Veterans Day flyover. I was flying on his wing in the SNJ when he radioed that he was having engine problems. Unfortunately he didn’t have many options available as the terrain below him was covered with residential housing. At the last minute Dad turned the Corsair away from the houses and put it into some trees as gently as he could. Sadly, he did not survive.”

RESURRECTION OF A LEGEND

It is often said that time heals all wounds. While that may be true in most instances, the healing process for Jim took him on a six-year roller coaster ride before he finally made the decision to rebuild the Corsair in 2008. Jim’s goal was to use as many of the parts and pieces from the original airplane as he could and then supplement those damaged pieces with other Corsair parts he had accumulated over the years. Beginning with the massive center section, Jim began a very detailed, step-by-step restoration process, one that he estimated would take eight to 10 years of diligent work—eight to 10 years.

“I really didn’t give much thought to that restoration time figure until a family friend, Bill Klaers, called me up one day after I had invested almost a year and a half into the project,” Jim said. “Bill has restored his own share of warbirds in the past at his Colorado Springs facility called WestPac when he reminded me that it would take 10 years or more to complete the Corsair. Before I could acknowledge his observation, he then stuck me with a hot poker by saying, ‘And you will be 60-plus years old.’ That hit me like a brick. Needless to say in early 2009 I boxed everything up and placed the Corsair project in Bill’s hands.”

Although the F4U-4 project was now located west of the Mississippi River, that didn’t stop Jim from traveling out to Colorado at least once a month to dirty his hands and bloody his knuckles. Jim admitted he encountered the same issue most homebuilders and restorers face while working on a project during the early stages—trying to deal with the unpleasant feeling of time standing still.

“With all the man-hours you put into the project you expect to see more progress early on,” Jim explained. “But having been through this before, I realized that it takes methodical baby steps moving forward before you start to see any real results. It doesn’t matter if you’re working on a Cub, RV, or Corsair; you have to work on all the individual components before you actually join them together. They are all small milestones when you complete each one, but it is not until you mate the tail onto the fuselage or the wings and gear to the center section; that’s when you realize it was all worth the time and effort.”

While Jim started the restoration on his own, he eventually placed the responsibility in the hands of WestPac, and flew out to Colorado at least once a month to work on the plane.
As the restoration progressed at an accelerated pace, due in part to Jim’s monthly assistance along with the half-dozen craftsmen that worked on the Corsair full time, there was one item on the project that Jim refers as the hen’s teeth of all Corsairs. “Probably one of the most critical parts on the airplane is the ailerons,” he said. “The first Corsairs were built with aluminum-covered ailerons, and they quickly found that these would flutter at high speeds and tear off the airplane. Chance Vought then tried a combination of aluminum and fabric, but the gremlins tore these off as well.”

A solution was finally discovered with the use of an all-wood aileron. The outside covering is made of an ultra-thin laminated wood that when moistened becomes very pliable. Once in place it is glued and nailed before fabric is attached and sealed over the laminate. But the most vital part on the whole aileron is the trim tab.

“I probably spent the most time on this one part,” Jim said. “There is a certain criterion that must be followed to balance these ailerons perfectly. There is a lot of forward lead weight that was required to keep them balanced, but the true test would occur during the test flight. And I am here to tell you they were flawless.”

With the clock fast approaching the two-year mark, Bill Klaers, Alan Wojciak, and the rest of the WestPac craftsmen had done what they had promised—finished the Corsair on time. Jim selected an original paint scheme that his father had applied 20 years earlier, honoring both the VF-653 and VF-884 U.S. Navy squadrons that the Corsair had served with during its days of combat. Jim, however, added one variation to the original scheme with the addition of his father’s name next to his.

“I realized that my dad will always be with me, so his name is right next to mine. During the painting process I knew I had to list my name and my father’s name just below the cockpit,” recalled Jim. “I was having a very difficult time deciding if his name should go above mine or vice versa. I slept on it, and when I awoke I realized that my dad will always be with me, so his name is right next to mine, that way he will be with me on every flight; including the maiden one.”

### GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

- **Crew:** 1 pilot
- **Length:** 33 feet, 8 inches (10.2 m)
- **Wingspan:** 41 feet (12.5 m)
- **Height:** 14 feet, 9 inches (4.50 m)
- **Empty weight:** 9,205 pounds (4,174 kg)
- **Loaded weight:** 14,670 pounds (6,653 kg)
- **Powerplant:** Pratt & Whitney R-2800-18W radial engine, 2,100 hp (1,565 kW)

### PERFORMANCE

- **Maximum speed:** 446 mph (366 kts, 718 km/h)
- **Range:** 897 mi (602 nm, 1,115 km)
- **Service ceiling:** 41,500 feet (12,649 m)
- **Rate of climb:** 3,870 feet/min (19.7 m/s)

### ARMAMENT

- **Guns:** 6 × 0.50 inch (12.7 mm) AN/M2 Browning machine guns, 400 rpg or 4 × 20 millimeter (0.79 in) M2 cannon
- **Rockets:** 8 × 5 inch (12.7 cm) high velocity aircraft rockets
- **Bombs:** 4,000 pounds (1,800 kg)
Sharing the Sky

In early March 2011, Korean War Hero was rolled out of the WestPac hangar and readied for its first flight. Jim felt very comfortable acting as the test pilot, but he also knew that even though he had accumulated more than 400 hours of Corsair time, it was time to get his game face on. After spending three and a half days completing a comprehensive and thorough examination of every nut, bolt, washer, cotter key, and safety wire attachment from nose to tail and wingtip to wingtip, Jim was ready to fly.

“You cannot take off at full throttle in this aircraft,” he warned. “There is way too much power in this engine, and you would torque roll right over on your back. I typically use between 45 and 50 inches of manifold pressure, and even that will push me back in my seat. The Corsair accelerates very quickly, and once the tail comes up your wheels are leaving the ground soon after. You have to act quickly and suck up your gear because you can exceed your gear speeds if you’re not careful. When my flaps are retracted, I pull my rpm back to 2400 and climb out at 120 knots.”

With his feet moving the rudder pedals back and forth, Jim began to reminisce about all of those who had flown this airplane before him. “Every time I fly this airplane, I cannot help but think about all the pilots who had placed their feet on these same pedals,” he said. “Whether in combat, training, or pleasure flying, I feel very humbled that I have the ability to place my feet on the same pedals. There comes a point that when everything is so well harmonized like it is while flying the Corsair, that you actually feel as if you become an extension of the airplane. That’s what makes flying this treasure such a joy. Although the journey to reach this point was full of sadness and unknowns, the one guiding light was the memory of my father. My dad taught me how to fly the Corsair, and I think of him every time I go up. Although I miss him dearly, I know he is with me on every flight, flying just off my wing.”

**FAMOUS CORSAIRS**

**Flying Leathernecks** (1951), starring John Wayne, was about a Marine Corps squadron flying Corsairs while developing close-support tactics.

**Baa Baa Black Sheep** The exploits of Marine Corps squadron VMF-214, which flew the Corsair in the Pacific during the war, were depicted in the popular 1976 made-for-television movie (also released as *Flying Misfits*) and the follow-up television series *Baa Baa Block Sheep*, also called *Block Sheep Squadron*, which aired from 1976 to 1978. The television series featured six genuine flying Corsairs, but the storylines were fictional.


**Ted Williams** served as a flight instructor training young Marines to fly Corsairs while away from major league baseball during his years of military service in World War II.

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“Colorado Springs has a 12,000-foot runway, so I knew I had plenty of time to take off, fly, and then land if I had an issue or problem.”

From his initial start-up of tickling the primer just enough to get the rpm up before bringing the mixture in, Jim listened as the big radial began to speak to him through a series of “bicks and bangs.” Satisfied that he had heard these same noises before, Jim brought the rpm up to 2000, making sure that the oil pressure and temperatures all looked good. With everything in the green and the flaps set at 20 degrees, Jim was ready for takeoff.

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Jim Busha, EAA 119684, is an avid pilot and longtime contributor to EAA publications. He is the editor of *Warbirds* magazine and the owner of a 1943 Aeronca L-3. For more information on EAA Warbirds of America and an in-depth pilot report on flying the Corsair visit www.SportAviation.org.