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On Saturday 9 April 2011, P-51D Mustang 'Big Beautiful Doll' left the United Kingdom for Bremgarten, Germany, where it joins the expanding collection of vintage warbirds at the Air Fighter Academy. Elliott Marsh visited former owner Rob Davies' private airfield at Woodchurch to witness the departure of this British airshow legend.



Arriving at Rob Davies' lovely private grass strip at Woodchurch, near Ashford in Kent, early on a gorgeous Saturday morning at the end of April - I'd had strict instructions to arrive before 10am if I wanted to catch the Mustang's departure from its home of more than a decade - I was surprised to find that I was the only "outsider" on the airfield, with only two of the Woodchurch Warbird engineers present and looking over the P-51D.

The Mustang looked the mirror of perfection, sat under a wide expanse of clean blue sky with not a cloud in sight. It's just a tremendous machine; lethal beauty, if you will. I could wax lyrical all day about the oxymoronic qualities of the aircraft, but I'd only be doing this classic fighter a disservice. To be honest, the Mustang speaks for itself. Few descriptive words are necessary.



As Rob emerged from his house (adjacent to the runway, and sat next to the Woodchurch Warbirds hangars) kitted up in his flight suit, he was joined by other members of the Davies family who had come to bid 'Big Beautiful Doll' farewell.

It became clear to me that this wasn't an occasion for interviews and media participation; it was simply a family saying a quiet goodbye to a flying machine that had obviously played a major part in their lives for some 14 or so years. Memories of low level sorties and engagements with French Mirages over the English Channel were recalled, with Rob's affection for 'Big Beautiful Doll' being abundantly clear as he reflected on some of the almost surreal moments he enjoyed in the aircraft's company.



With a few family photographs taken on the wing of the Mustang, Rob and his daughter strapped in and fired up just a few feet from where I was stood, close enough to feel the reverberations deep in my chest as the resounding

snarl of the Mustang's Merlin tore through the still Kent air.

Taxiing out with a final salute to the small group assembled beside the taxiway, Rob completed his pre-flight checks for the last time before gunning the Mustang into the air, leaving a swirling mess of grass and leaves in its wake.



There had been talk of a beat-up at Headcorn before the Mustang returned for a final pass over its former home base, but Rob seemingly scrubbed these plans and returned shortly after with a low pass down the Woodchurch runway, breaking overhead into a wide circuit before rolling back in for a terrifically low final pass before bucking into the air and banking south towards the continent. It was all over within a matter of minutes, but what a farewell it was.

'Big Beautiful Doll' is one of the Australian built Mustangs, manufactured by the Commonwealth Aircraft Corporation and designated the CA-18 Mk.22 in Royal Australian Air Force service. Rolling off the production line in 1951, the 'Doll' entered military service in March of that year, though its Air Force career saw the airframe accumulate only four hours before being placed into storage for a little over seven years.



The aircraft changed hands a number of times whilst under private ownership in Australia, before leaving for the Philippines in 1969 where it suffered a forced landing following a major engine failure on its first test flight under George Schley's ownership in Manila.

This necessitated a three year rebuild, after which the aircraft returned to the skies for a matter of months before crash landing again at Manila airport. This time however, the aircraft was a write-off.



The aircraft, now a battered husk, was placed into storage in Manila until it was shipped to Hong Kong where it fell into the hands of Ray Hanna who, at that time, was yet to form the Old Flying Machine Company.

Ray and his associates of the day decided to use 'Big Beautiful Doll's' airframe, and that of a second P-51D (an ex-170th Fighter Squadron machine that saw service in the Korean War and latterly, with the Philippines Air Force), to rebuild a 'new' Mustang airframe using parts from both aircraft.



The aircraft was restored for Ray and Mark Hanna by the Hong Kong Aeronautical Engineering Company - which, incidentally, is why the aircraft was registered as G-HAEC in the UK, using the Company's initials in honour of the work they did in bringing the Mustang back to life.

The Mustang took to the skies again following the rebuild in February 1985 and it was shipped in short order to Duxford, where it joined the OFMC, an organisation with whom it enjoyed a fruitful, lengthy relationship.



It was during this time that the Mustang became a regular performer on the British airshow scene, appearing up and down the country in the hands of some of the country's finest warbird pilots, while also enjoying the occasional soirée with the silver screen.

Indeed, G-HAEC was used for aerial work in *Empire of the Sun* in 1987 (where it appeared as 'Missy Wong from Hong Kong' in the famous "Cadillac of the skies" airfield attack, watched by a young Christian Bale), *Memphis Belle* in 1989 (as 'Ding Hao') and *Saving Private Ryan* in 1998, where it played a starring role in the climactic battle sequence.



The Mustang wore several different schemes throughout its OFMC career, including fetching camouflage in the late-1980s and, unusually, a RAAF silver scheme in the mid-1990s. The markings that G-HAEC will surely be remembered for are undoubtedly those in which she graced these shores for more than a decade - the distinctive 78th Fighter Group chequered nose and silver paintwork of Colonel John D. Landers' 'Big Beautiful Doll'.

It was in this scheme that Rob Davies operated his Mustang, appearing at some of the UK's largest events including the Royal International Air Tattoo, Waddington, Biggin Hill, Duxford and Jersey. 'Big Beautiful Doll' also graced many smaller venues, providing a welcome dose of historic warbird action at the likes of Little Gransden, Headcorn's Flying Proms and Abingdon, to name but a few.



The warbird industry is forever evolving and aircraft come and go each year as new owners are found or the ever increasing cost of operating a vintage aircraft takes its toll. While it would seem a little histrionic to lament the departure of 'Big Beautiful Doll', particularly given that it has only gone to Germany, it is hard to deny that Rob and his Mustang were British airshow stalwarts and the P-51D will be sorely missed. I suppose the important thing is that it is still flying and you never know, we may see it back on these shores as a visitor sooner rather than later.

To be honest, I'm just thankful that I was able to be there and witness the end of an era for Woodchurch Warbirds and this corner of Kent. 'Big Beautiful Doll' will be missed, but she'll be back. Maybe under a different guise, but I'm certain she'll come home one day.