



HELL BENT FOR LEATHER

THE FOUNDERS OF AVIREX AND COCKPIT USA HAVE CREATED A USER-FRIENDLY "LIVING HISTORY" MUSEUM ENCOMPASSING THE WORLD OF MILITARY AIRCRAFTS

BY STEVEN LUNDIN

"Hell bent for leather" doesn't carry much meaning to today's cattle-herded air travelers. But there was a time when the phrase summed up all the sights, sounds, smells and accessories of heroes piloting war birds in action against our enemies. Fighter pilots are one of the most highly accessorized and glamorized of our fighting forces. Their kits include a sophisticated watch, stylish jacket, clothing, boots, helmet and, the ultimate boy toy, a warbird.

Jeff and Jacky Clyman, who virtually created the category of wearable collectable military jackets when they founded Avirex and Cockpit USA in 1975, have brought the actual environment of several generations of the warbird experiences to those willing to brave the wilds of Long Island.

Forty-five minutes outside New York City in Farmingdale, New York, on the grounds of the old Republic Aircraft Factory, lies the American Airpower Mu-

seum, a 501C3 non-profit educational foundation (www.americanairpowermuseum.com) where warbirds still fly. The museum was created by the Clymans as an educational and charitable institution catering to enthusiasts, schools, tourists and any other visitor who seeks a deeper understanding of historic and contemporary world conflict and the role of air warfare.

"The museum is literally a living time machine, where history flies," offers Jeff Clyman.



At top: Top Gun, the last F-14 flown in the U.S. **Above:** The model wears Navy & Marine nylon flight jacket, 27 PUS flight coveralls and a Navy H6U 33P helmet with a Tutima watch.

Enter the hangar

The total immersion experience begins when you enter the Museum, a 40,000-square-foot hanger on a working airfield that is rated for fighter jets. You begin your trek into the past in the museum's shop, where everything from vintage flight helmets to antique furniture and military spec jackets are either available for show or for sale. The museum takes a good afternoon to drink in all the details. The walkway through an incredible collection of planes is lined with battle

dioramas, uniform collections, interactive exhibits, an actual C-45 cockpit that comes to life, period newspapers and enough artifacts to make you feel as if the planes next to you are about to thunder to life.

And they do! Keep walking and you'll discover a WW II USAAF dining room, adjacent to a ready room, where participants can actually suit up in period clothing and go through a briefing before taking off on an actual flight.

As part of a museum membership, a visitor can participate in a 1944 D-Day flight in a Douglas C-47 transport, which is an actual D-Day veteran on view at the museum.

"The experience consists of the participant dressing in 1944 combat jump clothing, parachute and combat gear and hooking up in the aircraft, before embarking on a flight," says Jeff Clyman. Clyman, himself a military trained pilot, routinely takes his light ground attack jet, a 1988 L39C Albatross,

designed for the Soviet Air Force and built in Czech Republic, to air shows around the country.

The Clymans are consummate collectors of militaria, with a forty-year-old habit. Jeff's historical passion simply outgrew every nook and cranny of his properties and warehouses. "We had planes in our hangar elsewhere, jackets, military items, accessories, memorabilia and vintage military watches in storage. It would take years to see everything. That's when we decided to open the vault and let everyone in," says Jacky Clyman.

With a considerable amount of work, love and dogged determination, the Clymans have made sure that history is not forgotten.

"There is a feeling of a time warp when one enters the hangar; the bulk of our collection on view

consists of WW II fighter bombers, trainers, many historical artifacts, dioramas and interactive exhibits," adds Jacky. Some of the treasures that emerged from storage included several aircraft cockpit sections and original bomber turrets, which are now available for visitors to climb into.

Military history

After searching for a home throughout the 1990s for their collection, the Clymans found and settled on Republic Field in Farmingdale. "We were fortunate to be just in time to occupy the last vintage 1941 aircraft hangar, at least in New York State, where the Republic Aircraft Corporation produced thousands of our nation's most significant military aircraft. Our hangar was used as the final assembly hangar where

the government furnished equipment (GFE) guns and radio equipment, were installed in the planes before the aircraft were rolled out for acceptance by the US Air Force," says Jeff Clyman.

The Clymans have embraced every aspect of the world of warbirds, from the leather mil spec leather jackets they manufacture under the Cockpit label (under contract for the US Air Force), to the vast collection of period-correct planes, watches, and virtually every type of military collectable associated with the period between 1940 and 1999.

The collection, backed by corporate donations and other parties, features a combination of aircraft owned by the Clymans, the Museum or on loan from other individuals as well as the US Air Force. The aircraft include:

Below: Interior of the Cockpit USA Lifestyle Store in New York.
Right: Jeff & Jacky Clyman in front of their P-47 Thunderbolt.
Below right: Curtiss P-40 Flying Tiger with IWC Big Pilot's watch.



1) A North American Aviation B25 Mitchell bomber donated to the museum by the Clymans. Often called the Tokyo Raider because bombers of this type were the first to bomb the Japanese home islands, this model was launched from an aircraft carrier on April 18, 1942, in retaliation for the attack on Pearl Harbor. This particular model was the fastest production B-25 designed. The actual plane was chosen by General Henry "Hap" Arnold

Commander of the US Army Air Forces as his personal transport in the continental U.S. during WW II. Other owners included Howard Hughes, who purchased the plane when the Army sold it for surplus after WW II. The Clymans rescued this plane from derelict status at a Texas airfield and had it restored to its former glory.

2) A Douglas C47 Dakota, which was acquired by the museum from the Israeli Air Force by way of a Canadian aircraft salvage company through grants and donations. This plane was ferried from Israel to Canada in 2000 using a system of linked fifty-gallon drums of aviation gas to supply fuel for a nonstop flight from Ireland to Alberta, Canada. It

Museum's recreation of a WWII 9th Airforce battlefield tactical control tower for close combat support fighters. **Right:** Jeff Clyman and General Chuck Yeager at Edwards AFB



was selected for its authenticity and pristine condition: nothing had been changed in it since it dropped paratroopers over Normandy in June 1944. It is fitted with all its original equipment, including the parachute static line. It's used for the museum's living history program called "D-Day Living History Experience."

3) The Consolidated Vultee PBY6A (the last of the Dumbos) was also acquired through grants and donations. Dumbo was a nickname given to these 110-foot wingspan Navy patrol bombers because when their wingtip floats are dropped into position for a water landing they look like the droopy ears of the Disney character Dumbo the elephant. They were used for search and rescue by the Navy as well as the Air force into the 1950s and then extensively as water-bombers in Canada fighting forest fires until 2007. This particular model flew into Republic from upstate New York and is being restored to its original condition.

4) An FG1D (F4U1D) Corsair, built as a fighter for the

Navy and Marines. This plane was dubbed "whistling death" by enemy pilots; its distinctive gull-shaped wing profile gives it an unmistakable look. The controls harmonize as smoothly as a modern jet, yet it has all of those unmistakable characteristics of a true World War II thoroughbred: the oil, gas and paint smells. Built in January 1945, it was never used during the war, but had been raced at the Reno air races.

5) The P47D-30 in the museum was originally used by the US AAF 9th Air Force, and then acquired by the Yugoslav Air Force. It ended up in a park in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, as a kid's play object. This plane was made to be flown fast; performing best at high altitudes at speeds of over 250 mph, with some pilot's insisting that they hit over 600 mph in a dive. Jeff Clyman's uncle flew one in the 362nd Fighter Group, 377th Fighter Squadron as it moved with Patton's army across France and into Germany until the very end of WW II.

6) The Curtiss P40M, aka the "Flying Tiger," was immortalized by the American Volunteer Group, an all-volunteer group of American military aviators, who were released from active duty by the U.S. Government in mid-1941, before the U.S. entered WW II. The Tigers began to engage in one of the first covert operations of the war. The Chinese called them Flying Tigers (or Fei Hu) because of their distinctive shark mouth paint jobs. The operation turned out to be far less than covert after Time magazine published an article on these flyers who went to China to fly against the superior Japanese forces. The planes were originally designed in the late 1930s and are known for their diving speed and rugged ability to absorb battle damage.

7) A Grumman TBM Avenger Torpedo bomber, which is a combat veteran of the Okinawa campaign. This was an aircraft carrier mainstay attack bomber capable of carrying up to 3,000 lbs. of ordinance, or one aerial torpedo, in



its enclosed bomb bay. This is the same plane flown by ex-President George Bush and one in which he was shot down twice while executing bombing missions against heavily defended Japanese island outposts. This is probably one of the most complete examples of this aircraft in existence.

Historic jets

On loan from the United States Air Force Museum are several unique historic jets:

1) The Republic F 84G, which was outfitted in the very hangar occupied by the museum today. This is an interesting and rare historical Cold War era aircraft. It's a Korean War Veteran and one of the first Air Force jet fighters to enter service along with the Lockheed P-80. The F84 was built to carry the first tactical free-fall atom bombs.

2) The F 111 A. This particular aircraft was assigned to what was known as SAC or Strategic Air Command during the Cold War. It carried a variety of armaments, including atomic weapons. It was essentially mothballed at the end of the Cold War, though some saw action at the end of the Vietnam conflict.

3) The Republic F105 Thunderchief, nicknamed the "Thud," was one of the most advanced single-engine low-altitude strike fighters in the late 1950s. It featured a thermonuclear bomb in an internal bomb bay and advanced electronics and radar. Later, in the mid 1960s, it became the workhorse fighter-bomber of the Vietnam War. This one saw four years in that conflict.

Remarkably, they all fly.

Company origins

The Clyman's were exposed the aviation bug literally piece by piece. In 1975 they began a small mail-order business out of their living room in Manhattan, selling premium military surplus jackets. Their business got a jump-start when Jeff purchased a store-sized collection of vintage WWII militaria from a collector in London. The collection included a treasure trove of aviation jackets, boots and thousands of miscellaneous



Below: Model standing in front of P 40 Flying Tiger wearing a Cockpit USA Sheepskin B-6 jacket. **Right:** Clyman's P-47D Thunderbolt and a Tutima watch.





Top: Jeff Clyman's AT6 Texan. **Above:** A-10 Warthog cockpit section with the museum's pilot's personal equipment room parachute rack (right), set up as it would be in 1944.

airplane parts. The pair sold these items through small ads in aviation enthusiast publications. Eventually the supply dried up—but the demand didn't. That's when the Clymans became manufacturers.

"We decided to try to replicate the originals. Mind you we knew nothing about making garments or the leather business. We used Jeff as a model because we couldn't afford anything else," says Jacky Clyman. Their company became

multinational, producing a wide variety military specification jackets for the public, the military and other government contractors.

By 1979, the business had grown to the point where Jeff Clyman decided to quit his day job as an antitrust lawyer in a New York law firm. He went looking for original suppliers and found empty factories in upstate Beacon and Newburgh, New York. Amongst the dust he found pat-

terns for making jackets. They then sourced garment manufacturers in New York City and got an expensive education in leather buying. They began by replicating some of the most desirable designs: the famed A2 (USAAF) and G1 (Navy) flying jackets.

"Military leather jackets are iconic pieces of clothing. We've found that our customers buy them because of the intrepid image they represent, much like sports enthusiasts wear their favorite player's jerseys," says Jeff Clyman.

And who could resist? Leather jackets have defined generations of heroes and anti-heroes. The roots of leather clothing are actually in combat, with Roman sol-



Model is wearing a Cockpit USA G1 jacket and is standing in front of an F-105 Thunderchief. **Above:** The instrument panel for the museum's working helicopter simulator and an Ernst Benz watch.

diers wearing leather armor; add sleeves and you've got a jacket!

In addition to the A-2 and G-1, the company also manufactured the famous sheepskin B-3. The jackets were worn by Tom Cruise and General Chuck Yeager. "When *Top Gun* came out the G-1 and all military leather jacket sales went through the roof. We saw a huge swell of interest that carried the company to some good highs through the late 1980s and into the 1990s," says Jacky Clyman.

Now, Cockpit

The Clymans recently sold the Avirex trademark but continue reissuing high-end military

jackets and a complete upscale and contemporary line of fashion clothing under the Cockpit brand. Their products are available online, through their store in Manhattan (at 652 Broadway) and through specialty stores internationally. In true collector's spirit, the line's attention to detail and authenticity is important, and the Clymans have a vast personal collection of items to reference. They have begun

producing rarer and rarer period pieces, including a new horsehide motorcycle jacket based on a 1950s English café racing jacket. They are also the official contract supplier of the current-issue leather A2 flight jackets to the USAF.

Watches

Jackets are just part of their interest in period militaria. The Clymans love military watches. →

Starting left top, just below the 30 caliber ammo box, is a British RAF **Hamilton** from the 1960s. Next is a **Hamilton** US army Air Force Navigator's stop watch from 1942. The large watch is an **IWC** German Luftwaffe pilot's watch. Next is a WWI US Army Artillery officer's watch. Below the WW I watch is a Vietnam-era **Hamilton** issued to Navy Seals and special operators (on edge of black flight computer). At the center of the flight computer is a **Hamilton** Army Air Force WW II Navigator's 24-hour hack watch. Above this watch is a 1940 Luftwaffe **Hanhart** pilot's wrist chronometer. At the bottom of the page is a typical WW II **Bulova** pilot's hack watch. Lying on the embroidered patch below the two .45 caliber bullets, and just below the WW II aviator watch, is a USAF navigator/ pilot's watch by **Sinn**. The three watches at the top, above the belted .50 caliber rounds, are a WW II **Hamilton** pilot's watch with original strap, unworn. Next is a USN pilot's **Benrus** with gray band, and finally a 1965 **Hamilton** AN-5740-1 Vietnam era watch. Below the .50 caliber belt, next to a few .45 caliber bullets, are two watches: The one touching the .50 caliber shell is a **Benrus** pilot's watch USAAF 1944 with separate hack second hand on its own position at bottom of watch dial with original canvas band. Below and next to that watch is a standard US government-issue army watch, circa 1943. Below these, to the lower right of the **Hanhart**, is an AAF WW II Pilot's watch with black dial and original strap from 1942. There's a similar **Bulova** sitting on the knit of the US Navy leather G1 flight jacket.



Companies like Tutima, Jungmans, Hanhart and IWC have kept international fascination with pilot's watches very much alive. Any of these brands are instant companion pieces to the Cockpit products. Like anyone approaching collecting holistically, the Clyman's are as intrigued and passionate about military flavored watches as they are about their planes and jackets; Jeff has amassed one of the most complete collections in the country.

"I must have at least 100 or more vintage watches, most of them from 20th century wars," says Jeff Clyman.

Highlights of his collection include a 1940 WWII Hanhart Luftwaffe watch with a moving bezel; a 1939 Laco Luftwaffe pilot, a World

War I US Army Artillery officers watch and many Bulova and Hamilton military watches ranging from WW II through Vietnam.

In a quest to bring more of this world to their customers, the Clyman's have started looking at handling various watches through their online and Manhattan store.

"We are very open to handling interesting brands that reflect our taste through our distribution network," says Jacky Clyman. "If any manufacturers or importers reading this have an interesting piece that fits with our brand, please contact us through our www.cockpitusa.com website. To get a sense of what we are looking for take a look at our catalog," she adds.

Responding to their customer's tastes, the Clyman's are bring-

ing out a new line of 1950s and 1960s cold war era flight jackets for their 2008 collection. These will be cotton and nylon flight jackets as well as various treatments of the G1, from Korea through Vietnam.

"Many of these jackets have never been seen by the general public, because they were taken home from the service and never hit the surplus market. They were so well made that the soldiers to whom they were issued used them around the house," says Jeff Clyman. "We're going to bring this history back to life, just like we have done with the museum," he adds. ☺

The museum is located at 1230 New Highway Farmingdale, New York; (631) 293-6398.

Vietnam era G1 with a blood chit next to a Cockpit USA WWII G1 replica, surrounded by helmet, goggles and other flying items.

Right: Planes pictured are the P-40 in the foreground and C-47 transport used during D-Day. Below is an IWC pilot chronograph.

