



Steve Hinton arrives in N505MH over Lake Matthews on 24 May.

LIGHTNING STRIKES CHINO

THE COLLINGS FOUNDATION'S LOCKHEED P-38 IS AIRBORNE AFTER TWO-DECADES ON THE GROUND

BY MICHAEL O'LEARY

Photo One, where are you?" asked Steve Hinton over the radio. "Photo One is at 3500-ft in a left orbit over the northwest end of the lake," replied George Hulett.

"Roger that. I'm just crossing Mount Baldy and will be there in a few minutes," came back Steve. The aircraft we were waiting for was particularly significant — a rare Lockheed

Lightning that had been acquired by the Collings Foundation following the collapse of the Evergreen Museum in McMinnville, Oregon (we should note that the museum is alive and well under new management — see *Air Classics* May 2017). Rob Collings commented, "The Collings Foundation has long hoped to acquire a P-38 for its collection as the story of the P-38 in many ways reflects and is defined by America's narrative at that time. Flown by the two highest-scoring American aces of the Second World War, and the principal aircraft during the 'Race of Aces,' the P-38 was a deadly and superlative opponent for any aircraft in the hands of a skilled pilot. This P-38L-5-LO is the definitive type of P-38 and is equipped with the hydraulically boosted ailerons and represents the ultimate version of the Lightning used in combat."

While we were orbiting, I had time to reflect on the P-38 heading south. Registered N505MH, this aircraft started life as one of 2520 P-38L-5-LOs constructed at Lockheed, but 44-53186 was destined for conversion to a photo recon F-5G. Once this was done, there apparently was no use for the aircraft — along

with thousands of other aircraft pouring from American production lines in an almost unstoppable flow — and it went into storage at Kelly Field before being flown to Kingman, Arizona, where it became just one of the 498 P-38/F-5 Lightnings baking under the desert sun.

Of course, all the machines were for sale and

the WAA/RFC established \$1250 as the asking price for a P-38. The fact that many of these machines just had the conclusion that they were being snapped up as fast as possible. Unfortunately, that was far from the fact. Besides a few machines selected for survey/air racing, the majority went to smelters.

USAAF s/n 44-53186 was lucky — it was purchased by a survey company. Based in Midland, Texas, Kargl Aerial Surveys Inc. simply could not go wrong with their purchase. Along with nearly

full tanks, the F-5G was equipped with the latest avionics. Flown to Midland on a ferry per-

mit, the aircraft was assigned the civil registration N62350 but it would have a short stay in Texas since it was sold next year to Mark Hurd Mapping Company, who eventually changed the registration to N505MH to fit in with rest of their mapping/survey

fleet. When I was in high school, a friend knew I was interested in vintage aircraft said, "There's a bunch of old P-38s parked at Santa Barbara Airport." Well,

that got my interest and since I had just gotten my driver's license I was soon off to the scenic airfield. Upon arrival, they were easy to spot but, even to my untrained eye, they were not in the best condition. However, a group of mechanics was busily at work on one of the machines so I began asking questions. I was told that they were trying to beat the plane into flying shape for a ferry flight to Reno, Nevada, where it was going to become part of Bill Harrah's growing collection of vintage cars and aircraft.

One of the pilots pointed out a

rather distinguished fellow standing nearby and said, "That's the pilot. Why don't you go talk to him?" I did, and that is how I met Mira Slovak. Mira had gotten the ferry job and, of course, I asked if he had ever flown a Lightning. He sort of smiled and said, "No." We talked a lot more and Mira would become part of my aviation life for decades to come.

The plane was N505MH and Mira made it safely to Reno where the wings were removed and little was done to restore the aircraft. To make things short, it was acquired a dozen years later by David Tallichet and David's crew beat it back into a "sorta" flying condition. It was then sold to the eccentric Doug Arnold, owner of Warbirds of Great Britain. Well-known Warbird pilot Mike Wright got the job of flying

the Lightning across the Pond. He completed the mission successfully and then, a couple of years later, repeated it going the other way when the Lightning was purchased by the Evergreen Aviation Museum.

At Evergreen (at the time located in Marana, Arizona), the decision was made to rip the fighter apart and restore it from the ground up. Evergreen had acquired land at McMinnville, Oregon, for the creation of a splendid new museum to house the organization's growing fleet. The restoration started in Arizona and was completed in Oregon. It was indeed a fabulous air-