

# Re-Imagining the WARBIRD IMAGE

The Warbird Art of Chris Wawro  
Story by **Ann Lawrence**



▲ (top & inset photos) Close-up of Hangar Sortie #1 "a look under the skin" features the Republic P-47D Thunderbolt, featuring *Hairless Joe*, flown by Col. David C. Schilling (inset).

▲ (middle) Aero-Fotografik HQ, the portal to the warbird imagery, where pixels dogfight.

**G**ROWING UP on a farm in southwest Poland in the 1960s, Chris Wawro was too young to understand why he spoke Polish and not German. This was due in large part to the sacrifices of scores of American patriots during World War Two. Forty years later, though, Wawro, now a professional photographer, is very well aware of the forces responsible for saving his family's culture and heritage. He is passionate about finding ways to honor the men and women who gave Poland back to the Poles. One of the most striking and emotional of Wawro's efforts is a series of photographic portraits that show the warbirds of that era in a unique and dramatic way.

The Hangar Sortie series, as it stands today, was many years in the making. The Poles never forgot the Americans who helped save them from the Nazis. But by the late '60s, the promises made by Stalin at Yalta had been broken. Life in Poland had become economically, politically, and emotionally difficult. For Wawro's young parents, escape to America offered hope for their son's future, even though it would mean dividing the family. Poland





▲ Wawro's childhood home just outside the center of town.



▲ Francis 'Gabby' Gabreski at his home on Long Island, NY, July of 1999. When asked what his advice regarding dogfighting was, Gabby replied "always check your six, never let them get on your six".

▼ (top-inset) Photo of Chris, his first month in the USA.

was under Soviet rule at the time, and in an effort to discourage entire Polish families from leaving the country, the Soviets allowed only one parent to travel outside the country at a time. Because Wawro's maternal grandmother was already a United States citizen, the U.S. allowed Wawro and his mother, Maria, to enter the country to visit her. His father, Janusz, stayed back in Poland, hoping eventually to be allowed to join them.

### First Flight

The flight from Poland to America had an enormous impact on Wawro. Being a five year old boy and already fascinated by airplanes, Wawro was forever changed after a tour of the Boeing 707's cockpit. "Even as a small boy I knew I had found my life's passion—airplanes and flying." It would be many years before he would make his dream a reality, but Wawro eventually went on to earn his private pilot license as well as instrument and commercial ratings. Today he, like those long-ago Boeing pilots, makes his living in a plane, his own Cessna 172, which he flies as an aerial photographer. While commercial photography feeds his family, his tribute photography feeds his soul.

### Gabby

Wawro's first contact with a World War Two ace was with fellow Pole Francis "Gabby" Gabreski. According to Gabreski's autobiography, as a student at Notre Dame in the late 30's, his flight instructor told him he "didn't have the touch" to be a pilot, so Gabreski almost walked away from flying. Hitler's invasion of Poland in 1939 angered him, though, and spurred him to reapply himself. He enlisted in the U.S. Army Air Corps and trained in the Stearman PT-17, Vultee BT-13 and finally the AT-6 Texan. As a member of the 45th Pursuit Squadron, 15th Pursuit Group, at Wheeler Field, Hawaii, Gabreski was one of several members of his squadron to try to intercept the attack on Pearl Harbor. He would go on to score 28 aerial victories in the European theater, and a further 6.5 in Korea flying the F-86 Sabre. Wawro became good friends with Gabreski, and began thinking about ways to recognize Gabreski for his service to America. When Gabreski died in 2002, Wawro realized that as the World War Two pilots and their crews aged and passed, their heroic stories would die with them. Suddenly his quest to honor these Americans took on a new sense of urgency.



## Hangar Sortie

Some things are just meant to be. After moving from Poland to America, Wawro and his mother settled in southeastern Wisconsin. Wawro eventually bought a home a couple of miles from a small airport in East Troy, Wisconsin. The airport also happened to be home to Tab-Air, a World War Two warbird maintenance business owned by Sam Taber. One spring morning in 1994, Wawro was awakened by the distinctive sound of a Merlin V-12 engine flying over his house. He threw on some clothes, grabbed his camera, and drove his Ford Bronco the short distance to the local airport to find a P-51 Mustang had just landed and taxied up to the Tab-Air hangar. From that day on, Wawro became friends with Taber and a fixture at Tab-Air. Fascinated by both the grandeur and the grace of the warbirds that came there for annual inspections and repairs, Wawro began shooting them from every possible angle. His photos document the aircraft from the inside out and top to bottom; but the photos weren't portraying what was in his heart.

Trained and employed as a tool and die/mold maker, Wawro began making one-of-a-kind tools and small replacement parts for the warbirds. This happened in a small basement machine shop on an as-needed basis.

"I love being able to contribute, in even a very small way, to keeping those birds in the air," he says. This connection put him in touch with a group of warbird owners, one of them being Butch Schroeder. Schroeder owns an F-6D Mustang restored as Clyde East's *Lil' Margaret* and a P-47 Thunderbolt painted as David Schilling's *Hairless Joe*. Wawro traveled to Danville in January of 2006 for a photo shoot. "Butch was great," Wawro said, and initially planned to use the shoot to get detail shots of his favorite warbird. "The plane was in the process of its annual inspection, so I was able to take shots of everything under the panels." Unknown to Wawro at the time, this piece of good fortune would form the basis of the fine art series he would eventually create and call Hangar Sortie: A Look Under the Skin.

But back in 2006, all the pieces had not yet come together. Since the panels were off *Hairless Joe* for the inspection, Wawro wasn't able to get photos with the panels back on. But he traveled back to Wisconsin and loaded the contents of his memory card into his computer, excited about the photos he'd taken. And he realized something. Seeing the warbird fly was breathtaking. But seeing what made a warbird fly was equally so.

"I was impressed with both the simplicity and the complexity of the plane at the same time," he said.



▲ (top) Hangar Sortie #2 "a look under the skin" features the P-51 Mustang *Excalibur*.

▲ (middle-right) Hangar Sortie #1 (close-up showing detail) flown by Col. David C. Schilling.

▲ (middle-left) P-38F Lightning, featuring *Glacier Girl*, (bottom-right) Close-up of cockpit showing detail.

▲ (top-op) An aerial view of Olszyna, Poland; Wawro's birthplace and hometown for the first 5 yrs. of life.

"I realized that there was so much more to the story—more than what already seemed so huge and awe-inspiring. That these young men would have the courage to leave their home for foreign lands, to take these machines into the air and face danger and death for people they'd never even met... It was more than that. It was also the entire effort that went into building and maintaining the plane, designing it, manufacturing it, and repairing the battle damage. So now I not only wanted to honor the pilot who flew the plane, but all the others who were part of the story."

He did it one step at a time. Hangar Sortie #1 shows the Thunderbolt's engine detail against a moody, cloud-filled sky. "I realized to tell a story, I'd need to find a way to create drama and emotion," he said of the background. In August of 2005, Wawro was taking ground shots in Lake Geneva when a tornado rolled through Stoughton, Wisconsin, 50 miles to the northwest. When the remnants of that storm arrived a while later in Lake Geneva, he captured a sky that was angry yet full of gorgeous colors and energy. The kind of sky he imagined the pilots over Europe may have experienced from time to time. Replacing the actual hangar walls that were in the background, he used the photo of the moody sky. It was just the element he had been looking for to bring the story to life, and this technique has become an important part of every Hangar Sortie.

A lot of thought went into lighting the plane, as well. "I played with the lighting to get exactly the effect I had been envisioning in my head for so long," said Wawro. He hauls along a number of custom rheostat-controlled halogen lights to the location of each aircraft he shoots. "My goal is to recreate the way the plane would have looked in early morning or sunset conditions."

Wawro added other elements over time. The first Hangar Sortie contained one simple side view of the subject plane's mechanical details, the name and nickname of the plane, and some simple, historical design elements to help the viewer identify the plane. Over time, Wawro changed the camera's perspective from a direct side shot to a front-quarter view shot, which gave the image much more dimension. "You see multiple angles at the same time," he said. "More of the propeller, the hub, more of the mechanicals." These details were important to illustrate the design and workmanship that went into each plane.

For Hangar Sortie #2, Wawro shot the *Excalibur* P-51 Mustang. He realized that a plane's nose art says as much about it as the craftsmanship of its internal parts. Using computer software, he crafted a layering technique which allowed him to fade the

► P-51D Mustang—*Big Beautiful Doll* (below) Close-up showing detail.

▼ (bottom) Hangar Sortie #5 "a look under the skin" features the P-51 Mustang *Hurry Home Honey*, (below) Close-up showing the detail.







outer skin of the warbird's panels enough to see through them. He was now able to show both the bird's nose art as well as the mechanical masterpiece beneath. After that, he again layers and masks one of the many dramatic background shots he's captured.

By the time he created the third Hangar Sortie, he knew exactly what background he wanted to see behind *Glacier Girl*, the well-known P-38F Lightning rescued from the Greenland icecap. Artistic considerations weren't the most difficult part of that shoot. Convincing expedition and then-*Glacier Girl* Museum director Bob Cardin to grant him access took many phone calls and emails. Cardin eventually acquiesced and gave Wawro full access, even providing a forklift fitted with a basket to lift him high enough above *Glacier Girl* to get the detail shots he needed. Wawro later went on to create a detailed cockpit poster of *Glacier Girl* as well.

In addition to spending countless hours shooting and editing the photos, Wawro researches much more than the history of the airplane. If the plane is painted to represent an ace's mount, he digs into the story of the ace as well. This has led to one of the most gratifying aspects of the work for Wawro; he's built relationships with some of the aces he's met in the process of honoring their work.

### Clyde B. East & Kelly Gross

Through Butch Schroeder, Wawro was introduced to Clyde B. East, a World War Two photo recon ace.



▲ (top) Hangar Sortie #8 "a look under the skin" features Jack Roush's P-51B Mustang *Old Crow*.

◀ Close-up showing the detail of Hangar Sortie #8 poster.

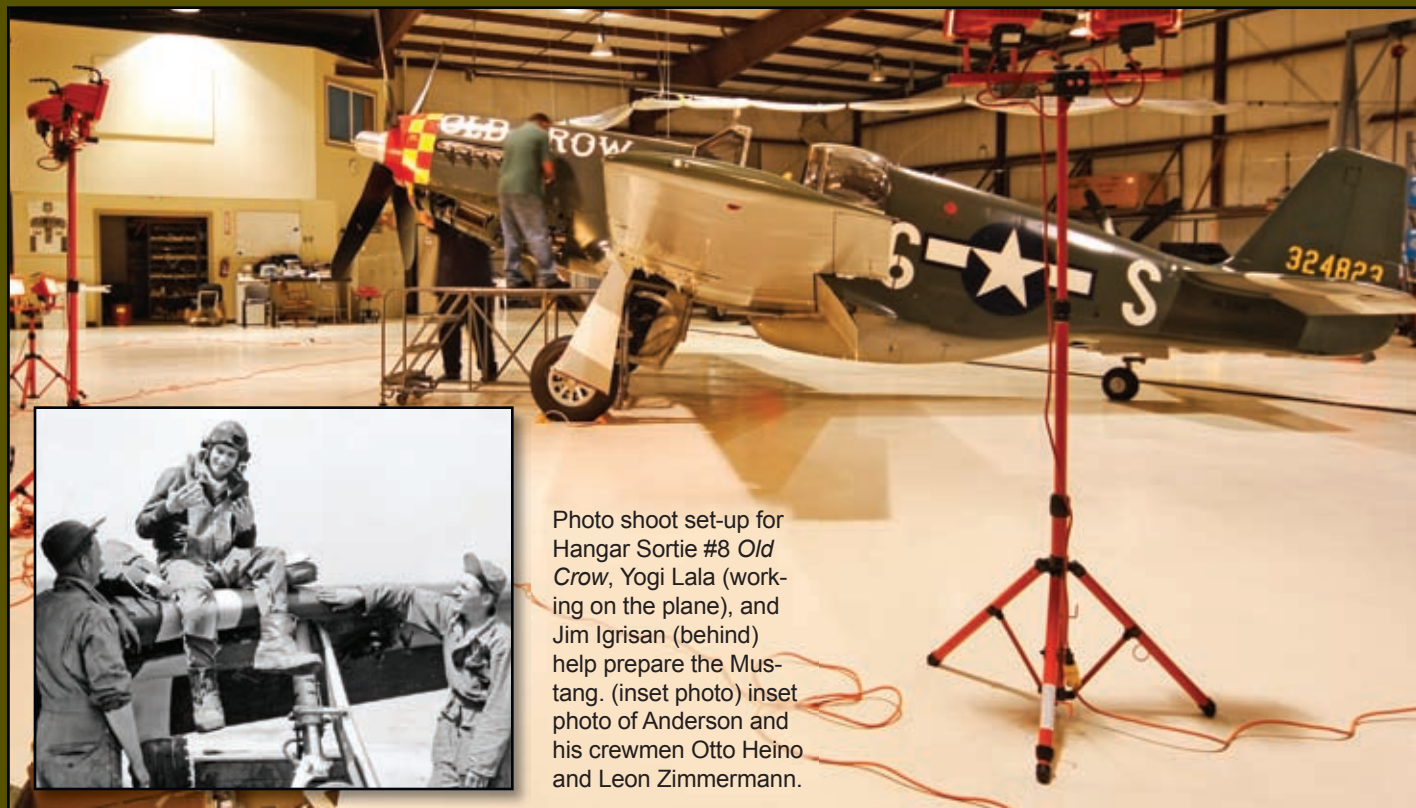


Photo shoot set-up for Hangar Sortie #8 *Old Crow*, Yogi Lala (working on the plane), and Jim Igrisan (behind) help prepare the Mustang. (inset photo) inset photo of Anderson and his crewmen Otto Heino and Leon Zimmermann.

East flew an F-6D, the photo recon version of the P-51 Mustang. He often met with resistance while gathering tactical information via his camera-loaded Mustang while deep over enemy territory, but he never missed a mission and finished the war with 13 aerial victories. East's signature graces Hangar Sortie #7, a tribute to him and his plane *Lil' Margaret*. Wawro recently arranged for East, as a former aerial photographer, to speak and show a slide presentation at the annual conference of the Professional Aerial Photographers Association this February. Wawro said, "Clyde and I are both aerial photographers, but there's one huge difference between us: I'll never have to worry about being shot down!"

Wawro is always on the lookout for planes and aces to honor. Clyde East put him in touch with his good friend and fellow World War Two ace, Kelly Gross. *Live Bait*, the P-51D Gross flew in the war, has yet to be replicated in tribute, but Wawro is hard at work trying to change that. After many phone calls and emails, Wawro learned of a potential candidate being restored in Danville, Illinois. The plane's owner has not made a final decision, but Gross and Wawro are hopeful that he'll choose to paint the Mustang with Gross' *Live Bait* scheme. "If I could, I'd like to make sure every veteran flier were honored that way," said Wawro. "I know how much it means to these heroes to see 'their' planes flying again."

## C.E. "Bud" Anderson & Jack Roush

NASCAR fans know him as the owner of Roush Racing, but Jack Roush's passions extend beyond Mustangs of the wheeled variety. Roush owns two P-51s, both restored in tribute to aces. *Old Crow* honors C.E. 'Bud' Anderson, and is actually the second plane Roush had painted to honor the ace. The first was sold to his friend Jim Hagedorn and is now based in Columbus, Ohio. Wawro recently shot the current *Old Crow* shortly after it rolled out of Art Teeter's Cal Pacific Airmotive in Salinas, California. It had been restored to factory-new, and became Hangar Sortie #8. This edition includes an inset photo of Anderson and his crewmen Otto Heino and Leon Zimmermann. The photo, shot just after his 9th aerial victory, shows Anderson sporting a huge grin and nine raised fingers to signify his ninth victory. Of the completed Hangar Sortie, Anderson says, "I think the prints are great."

## Influences

All artists have their influences, and Wawro does as well. Famed aviation photographer Paul Bowen's work continues to inspire him to ever higher standards. Bowen has become a valued mentor as well, always willing to take time to give advice and express encouragement. Bowen said, "Chris has managed to



▲ (top) Hangar Sortie #7 "a look under the skin" features the P-51 Mustang *Lil' Margaret* and Ace Clyde East.

◀ Clyde East—"Eyes of the Hunter", with *Lil' Margaret*.  
Photo: Bob Archibald

▼ (bottom) Hangar Sortie #4 "a look under the skin" features the F4U-5 Corsair.





marry computer technology with art, while honoring the heroes who flew these flying sculptures. It's rare that I display someone else's work in my studio, but the Hangar Sortie series makes the cut." Wawro has also looked to Bowen for advice on establishing a rapport with the owners and aces. "There is so much to learn from an accomplished photographer like Paul," Wawro said. "I'm really lucky; no matter how busy he is at times, he always makes time to spend a few minutes on the phone with me."

"It's been such an honor to work with these men," Wawro said of Schroeder, Bowen, Roush and the aces. "Even if I never earned a penny from the prints, I would do it all over again just for the chance to know them."



▲ (L-R) Paul Bowen, Chris Wawro, and Tim Savage at Airventure 2006 event.

## Legacy

In the modern America that celebrates youth over age and wisdom, Wawro hopes his Hangar Sortie series will bring the story of the wise and aged to America's youth in a format that will spark their imaginations and ignite their own patriotism. He's also created a number of cockpit posters whose vivid colors and sharp detail have led many observers to note they almost feel as though they could climb into the photo and take off. "I'll keep going," he said of his warbird work. "I feel the need to help keep these stories alive, to fire even more interest in the warbird movement." Because, he said, "One day the World War Two generation will be gone."

Find Wawro's work at [www.aero-fotografik.com](http://www.aero-fotografik.com), Sporty's, and various museum and aviation gift shops throughout the United States. To contact Wawro regarding a subject idea or request, e-mail: [aero-fotografik@wi.rr.com](mailto:aero-fotografik@wi.rr.com) or call: (262) 441-9001. 🇺🇸

► During a recent poster signing Clyde East said, "The *Lil' Margaret* prints appear to be about the fanciest way of representing a beautiful airplane that I have ever seen. The amount of work involved must be exhausting, but the results are really great! The use of canvas makes the image really eye-catching. All of the folks I have shown these copies to are really impressed with them, as am I!"

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