

# PRESERVING PLANES

— By Angel Morris





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*As a boy, Gerald Oliver was constantly watching airplanes. “They fascinated me, especially the history. At 12, I asked my dad if I could start taking flying lessons,” Gerald recalled.*

The agreement was that as soon as Gerald could drive himself to the airport, he could learn to fly. “I earned my private pilot’s license at age 18, right after high school graduation,” he noted.

Almost five decades later, Gerald would come to live in an aviation-oriented Midlothian neighborhood, but not before making a name for himself in real estate. With an accounting degree in hand, he initially began working in the real estate division of an insurance company. From there, he worked for several large real estate firms. “I moved from Chicago to Dallas in 2008 when I was recruited by a company that owned 50-plus office buildings in 35 cities around the U.S., including the tallest building in Fort Worth,” Gerald outlined.

That same year, Gerald joined the Commemorative Air Force, an organization dedicated to preserving World War II aircraft. He sits on the board of its foundation, and is the volunteer captain for *Ike’s Bird*, the Aero Commander L-26 used by the Eisenhower White House, and the smallest plane ever to be used as Air Force One.

“The best part of aviation is meeting all the great people on the ramp at fly-ins and airshows. I’ve participated in nearly 100 events,” Gerald said. “There are always people who come up and relate stories of their family, the sacrifices of a veteran or express with wide eyes their appreciation of the aircraft. It’s satisfying to bring that kind of joy to others.”

Gerald was involved in the move of the Commemorative Air Force from Midland, Texas. “Using my real estate background, I helped survey the nation



for the right airport and location. We looked at 26 cities and chose Dallas. It's very satisfying to see the new location and especially the new 50,000-square-foot National Aviation Education Center on the campus of Dallas Executive Airport," Gerald shared.

In 2016, Gerald founded the Historic Aircraft Preservation Society (HAPS) with four friends, gaining IRS approval as a tax exempt 501(c)(3) the next year. "We have received donations from over 600 people in the last few years," Gerald credited. Gerald retired from real estate in 2017 and wrote a beginner's guide to careers in commercial real estate management titled, *How to Land the Best \$100,000 Job in America*, available on Amazon.

In 2018, he was finally able to make a home where his passion for airplanes could soar. "We had been looking at the Eagle's Nest subdivision for at least three years. Houses there don't come up for sale very often," Gerald noted.

Writing letters to homeowners there and a chance stop at a garage sale led Gerald and his wife, Kathryn, to a couple thinking of selling their home. "A few weeks later, we had the house under contract before it ever hit the market," he said.

Now, Gerald spends much time promoting HAPS. "The organization is focused on vintage aircraft from the 1930s to the 1950s. We've been able to acquire two historic aircraft: The 1942 Piper J-3 Cub, used during the war to serve as a trainer for artillery spotters, and the 1931 Fleet Model 8 biplane.

"This is the last flying Model 8 in the world, once owned by a famous World War II bomber pilot, Fred J. McConnell. McConnell Air Force Base is named in honor of Fred and his two brothers."

HAPS acquired the plane in 2022, along with its storied past. "Just after the war, Fred was flying to his new duty station in this airplane. He hit a high-tension wire, was thrown out and killed instantly," Gerald relayed. "His wife survived, but never wanted anything to do with flying again. She allowed the parts to lay in the farmers field for 37 years.

"The center section became a chicken coop, the tail a windmill stand. An aircraft mechanic teacher at Central Missouri State University heard about the parts. He drove to Kansas, made



a deal with the farmer and took the pieces home. Over the next 12 years, he worked to rebuild the plane. It flew again in 1995, 50 years after the accident.”

Stories such as this validate HAPS’ mission. “We feel the Society is important because it is dedicated to helping preserve the aircraft and stories of the men and women behind these aircraft,” Gerald said. “They are worth remembering and retelling. What make the planes interesting are the stories they tell.”

HAPS’ biggest challenge is finding funding to restore and preserve planes that no longer have utilitarian value. “We decided to put together a sweepstakes giveaway to raise money for the restoration of the Fleet biplane. The grand prize is a 1965 Ford Mustang GT350 Tribute convertible valued at \$40,000,” Gerald stated. “In addition, the grand prize winner will win a ride in a WWII P-51 Mustang fighter.”

Proceeds from HAPS’ Great Mustang — Mustang Giveaway will help further the organization’s goals. In addition to saving more vintage aircraft, HAPS hopes to add a small training aircraft to its stable to begin flight training for youth. “As aircraft become available, we would like to offer rides and take the planes to fly-ins and airshows to tell the stories of the men and women who pushed the boundaries of aviation,” Gerald said.

Gerald invites other enthusiasts to join HAPS, which has no membership fees. “You can write to us at our website, and we’ll add you to our email list. We publish a newsletter on an irregular basis,” Gerald stated. “We also have a schedule online that keeps track of historic aircraft events in North Texas.”

Gerald is proud of having made HAPS a reality, and gives special thanks to Kathryn, and son, David, for their support; to his brother, Jon, Chief Pilot of Airborne Imaging at the Midlothian Airport; and brother-in-law, Bruce Granger. He reminds folks that donations of cash, cars, planes or RVs are tax deductible, and reiterates such donations help preserve memories for people who, “Have never stopped watching the sky.” **NOW**

*Editor’s Note: Great Mustang – Mustang Giveaway tickets are available at [www.HistoricAir.org/Mustang](http://www.HistoricAir.org/Mustang).*