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The P-51 2006 Mustang

Story Benjamin Hunting, Photos John Parli, Gearhead Girl Laryah

When Phil Bartnicki drove his 2006 Ford Mustang home and parked it in his driveway for the first time, he could not have known that he was about to embark on a journey that would see his new muscle car evolve from a two-door coupe to a living, breathing tribute to one of history's most celebrated fighter planes.

Phil had long been an aviation nut, and is in fact a private pilot checked out on both Cessna and Piper aircraft, but at first he didn't make the connection between his Ford Mustang and its World War II namesake. Initially, he was content to simply enjoy the power provided by its 4.6-liter V8 engine, and three days after he bought the car it gained a set of JBA mufflers so that he could better hear the intoxicating note of its mill under full throttle.

It might have been due to some kind of subliminal message encoded in the JBA



Phil receiving the Gearhead News Publisher's Choice Award at the Knights of Columbus Car Show



exhaust frequencies, but suddenly Bartnicki had abandoned his plans of keeping the Mustang stock and instead began to assemble a very potent street machine. Within the first year of ownership, the bright yellow pony had gained a Roush supercharger, along with a full exhaust – including headers – to replace the original aftermarket mufflers he had first installed. The car also benefited from a custom suspension system during that same period, giving it a lower look and a more connected feel behind the wheel. Most of this work



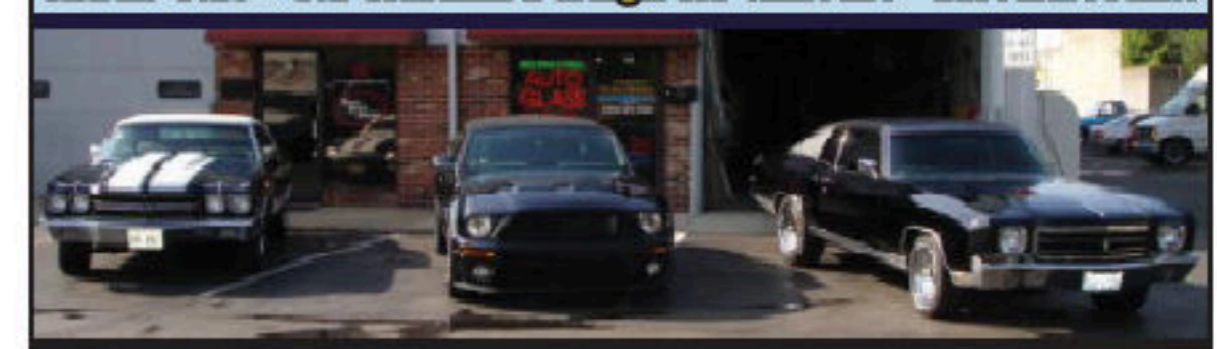
was done at Rod Baker Ford in Plainfield, IL, and it was there that Phil first heard about the team of builders who would end up taking his Mustang to the next level.

"I had asked the service manager where I could get high quality striping done on the car," Bartnicki recalled. "He gave me two options, but said that if I really wanted the best possible work then I should make sure to choose Midwest Hot Rods."

Midwest Hot Rods (815-254-RODS) operates a 23,000 square foot facility (also located in Plainfield) that has been servicing the Chicagoland custom car scene since 1987. The company offers service ranging from engine building to body work to paint and everything in between. When Bartnicki rolled into the Midwest Hot Rods shop, he certainly had no inkling that first striping job would lead to a design partnership that would radically transform his '06 Mustang into what it is today. After seeing how well the stripes turned out, Phil began to get into deeper discussions with Dan Ulreich regarding how the Midwest Hot Rods team could keep on tweaking the muscle car to match the plans that were formulating in Bartnicki's head. It was at this point that the P-51 concept really began to take shape.

"At first, we added a few small touches to the car, such as removing the rear quarter windows to add the scoops, moving the battery to the trunk and working on some plastic

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filler panels for the front end," Ulreich said. Once past these initial modifications to the car, it was like someone had flipped a switch, and the creative dynamic between the two of them really kicked into high gear.

Phil realized that the natural connection between the original Mustang that he had always admired – the P-51 fighter plane that ruled the skies during the Second World War – and his own Mustang could finally be expressed through the talents of the team at Midwest. "Things started to move much faster after that initial cosmetic work we did on the car," said Ulreich. "Starting with replacing the plastic tanks under the hood with aluminum units, and added a wet nitrous system to the car."

Phil's enthusiasm fueled the transformation of his Ford Mustang into a high performance tribute to one of the most effective aerial combat planes ever constructed. Bartnicki's attention to detail meant that almost no aspect of the car's appearance went untouched in terms of bringing the aviation theme to life. Further changes to the outside of the coupe included tongue-in-cheek "kill stickers" in the form of Japanese and European automotive badges, along with painstakingly airbrushed rivets along the length of the Mustang's rear wing that required so much concentration and time on the part of the Midwest Hot Rods crew that



Ulreich recalled having to walk away from the task several times in order to clear his mind and stay focused on what his hands were doing. The vehicle's interior was similarly transformed to resemble a P-51 cockpit, with aircraft-style switches and gauge pods used wherever possible. Each headrest features a representation of the airplane, while under the hood the fuse box has been painted to resemble an open container of ammunition.

The hood and trunk lids both have an additional surprise for those taking a closer look at Phil's P-51 Ford Mustang. Out back, a beautiful airbrushed scene from the Pacific theatre of WW2 has been airbrushed on a flat aluminum panel by Big Nick's Garage in Kenosha, Wisconsin (262-654-1425). Also capturing the original P-51 Mustang in flight, along with a flock of B-17 and ME-109 airplanes is a scene from the European theatre that was just completed by Big Nick, and which will be installed under the hood on a similar panel. The detail in each of the scenes is incredible, and breathtakingly captures the spirit of America's most revered fighter.

Midwest's Dan Ulreich has enjoyed the time spent working with Phil on the P-51 project, and in particular highlighted the trust that has built between the shop's crew and the Mustang's owner. For his part, Phil has stated that he prefers to let the creativity of individuals like Ulreich and Big Nick flow through into their work, and that while he will suggest and guide the design process he values the input and skill of the individuals at Midwest Hot Rods who have put so much time into his pride and joy.

Although not an attention-seeker at heart, Phil does admit that driving a bright yellow Mustang – in particular, one that has been given such a unique hot rod treatment

– does attract a fair amount of interest from other drivers and passers-by. Most of the time, he is happy to watch from a distance as others admire his ride, but he did mention one incident from two years ago that he has been unable to forget.

"I was at a cruise night, as usual, and I noticed an older man staring intently at my car," related Bartnicki. "As I walked over to talk to him, he turned towards me and I could see his eyes brimming with tears."

"I used to fly these during the war, he told me." Phil was speechless. "I couldn't believe that my Mustang had been able to make that kind of connection with someone who had actually put their life on the line in the cockpit of the actual fighter plane.

It was all I could do to keep from tearing up myself as I listened to his story."

What lies ahead for the 2006 P-51 Ford Mustang? Phil is still brimming with ideas for fine-tuning the muscle car's aeronautical look, including painting the nitrous tanks to resemble Air Force ordnance as well as somehow incorporating a yoke from an actual P-51 airplane into the automobile's interior. He also would like to airbrush the kill badges to help smooth out the look of the current decals. In between stops at Midwest Hot Rods for the next steps in his Mustang's transformation, Bartnicki will continue to fly low all over Illinois at the cruise nights and car shows that give him the chance to introduce people to his custom creation.



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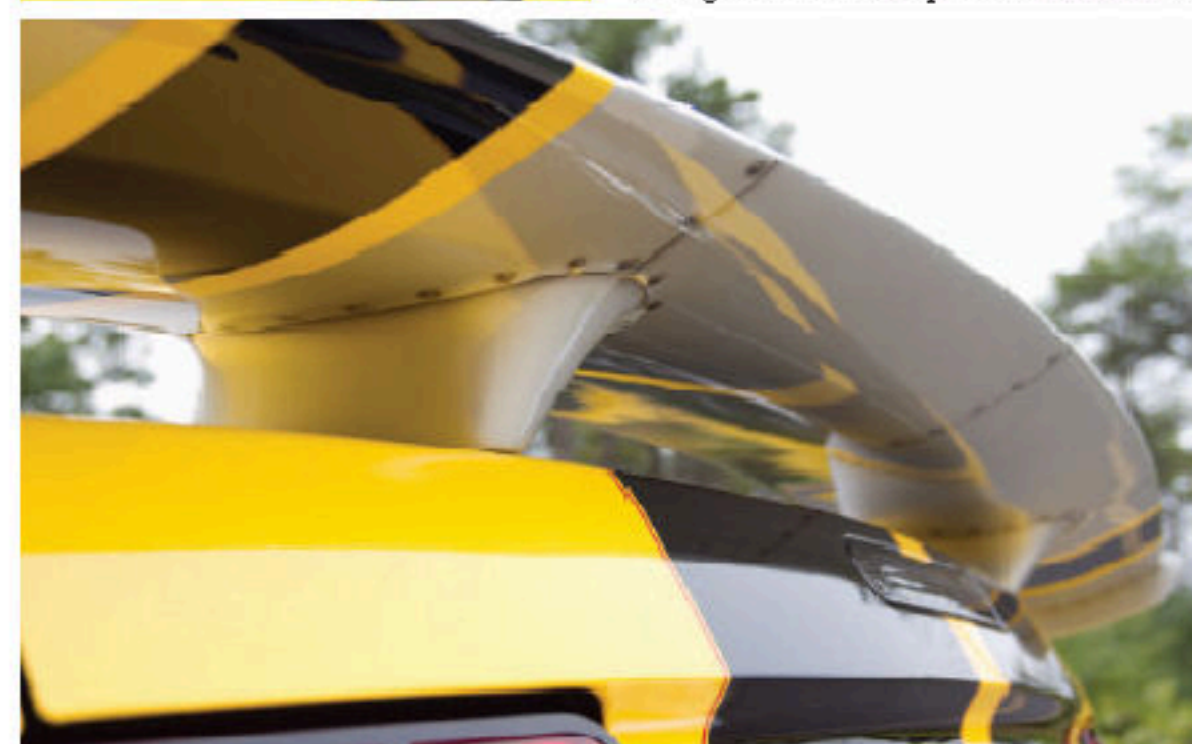
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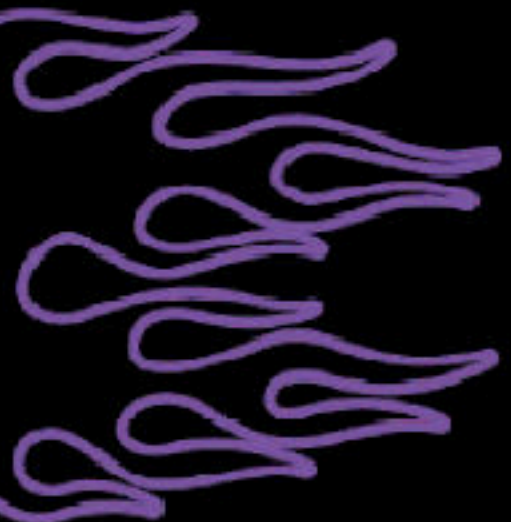


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