

## Mustang Sally and Jimmy Stewart



This is one of the best, if not the best aviatiotories I have ever read. If you have just one drop of aviation fuel in your blood you will probably read this twice and keep in your file. What a pleasure to read.

Sally Connors had been working at the Carlsbad Airport for three years and even though she was only fourteen years old, she knew more about flying than pilots much older than herself. She had been taking flight training lessons since she was thirteen and planned on flying solo when she turned sixteen and getting her pilot's license when she became eligible on her seventeenth birthday. Sally first saw a airplane up close on her fifth birthday at the San Diego Airport and has been consumed by anything aeronautical ever since. She read everything she could find about female pilots which included Amelia Earhart, Harriet Quimbey, Pancho Barnes, Bessie Coleman, Amy Johnson, Jacqueline Cochran and Willa Brown among others.

Her job chores at the small North County airport included walking the runway every morning at sunrise to make sure that it was completely clear of debris, running errands for pilots, washing down aircraft and various janitorial services. Sally would do any task without complaint or hesitation as long as she was able to be around airplanes. If she was lucky, one of the local pilots would take her up for a ride and if Sally was really lucky, the pilot would give her temporary control of the aircraft.

It was May 16, 1980 and the airport was preparing for the Memorial Day air show. The main attraction was going to be James Stewart, actor, pilot and World War II hero. He was going to fly his vintage P-51 Mustang fighter down from Los Angeles and perform at the show. Sally could hardly contain her excitement as she familiarized herself with the P-51 and James Stewart's flying history. She even

compiled a list of questions to ask the iconic actor and familiarized herself with the development of the legendary airplane.

To most people it was just boring details, but not to Sally who found it captivating; The North American Aviation P-51 Mustang was an American long-range, single-seat fighter and fighter-bomber used during World War II and the Korean War, among other conflicts. The Mustang was designed in 1940 by North American Aviation. The Mustang was originally designed to use the Allison V-1710 engine, which, in its earlier variants, had limited high-altitude performance. It was first flown operationally by the RAF as a tactical-reconnaissance aircraft and fighter-bomber. The replacement of the Allison with a Rolls-Royce Merlin resulted in the P-51B/C model and transformed the Mustang's performance at altitudes above 15,000 feet, allowing the aircraft to compete with the Luftwaffe's fighters. The definitive version, the P-51D, was powered by the Packard V-1650-7, a license-built version of the Rolls-Royce Merlin 66 two-stage two-speed supercharged engine and was armed with six .50 caliber M2/AN Browning machine guns.

James Stewart's war time P-51 Mustang was modified to civilian use by adding a taller tail fin, wingtip tanks and a tight second seat that was placed in the space formerly occupied by the military radio and fuselage fuel tank. The real coincidence of the situation was that he named his plane, 'Mustang Sally' not after Sally Connors, but after his granddaughter, Sally, the second child of his daughter Kelly.

Memorial Day could not come fast enough for the precocious teenager and in the week prior to the holiday, Sally was at the small airport by the crack of dawn to do her assigned chores before heading off to school. When class was out, she rushed back to the airport, worked for two more hours then biked home before nightfall.

Her father, Bill was a former Army Ranger and World War II veteran and encouraged his only child to pursue her dreams, and even though he was concerned for her safety, he knew that trying to restraint her would be a serious error in parenting. His wife Margaret wanted a more traditional life for her free-spirited daughter, "She is so focused on flying that I'm worried she is missing out on other activities," Margaret said. "She gets good grades, is involved in sports, doesn't do drugs or cause trouble," Bill said, "Most parents would be thanking their lucky stars for a daughter like ours Maybe we should support what she is, instead of wishing that she was somebody else." "When you put it that way," Margaret smiled.

It was May 24th when one of Sally's friends, Shannon approached her as she was leaving school, "What are you doing for Memorial Day weekend...a bunch of us are going to the beach." "I'll be working at the air show," Sally responded. "You're always at the airport!" Shannon snapped back. "James Stewart is coming in," Sally responded. "Who's that?" "Seriously, Shannon, you don't know who James Stewart is?" Sally responded in amazement, "He's coming with his Mustang." "Big deal, my brother has a Camaro" "P-51 Mustang...never mind," Sally shook her head and walked off.

Sally asked Andy Howard, the airport manager everyday if James Stewart was still coming to the air show, "How many times are you going to ask me that question?" "I just want to be sure," Sally flashed an impish grin. "You'll be the first one I tell if anything changes," Andy promised.

It was Sunday, twenty-four hours and counting to the Memorial Day show and Sally was up before dawn. Her father was already in the kitchen when she walked down the stairs. "Do I need to ask where you are going today?" Andy asked. "You don't need to, but I'm happy to tell you anyway," Sally smiled. "I hope you're not expecting too much from James Stewart," Andy cautioned his daughter. "What do you mean?" "He's a famous actor and a lot of people are going to want to talk to him. His time is limited, and he'll be in his plane, then he'll probably be gone," Andy explained, "What I'm trying to say is that he might not have as much time to spend with you as you would like." "I considered that possibility already, so I plan to be at the airport when Mr. Stewart arrives and I'm staying there until he leaves. If I see my opportunity then I'll take it, and if I don't then I also realize that life is full of disappointments, this will just be one of them. That doesn't mean I shouldn't try, does it?" "How old did you say you were?" Andy smiled and was obviously impressed by his daughter's grasp of the situation. "Remember one thing, I'll never be old enough to stop having breakfast with the best dad in the world," Sally leaned over and kissed her father on the cheek.

It was almost 1400 hours on the Sunday before Memorial Day when one of the airport workers turned to Sally, "Everything is done, why don't you go home." Before Sally could answer, she heard something in the distance and listened more closely, "Hear that?" "Hear what?" The airport worker responded. Sally took off in a full sprint for the airport tower and ran up the stairs, found a pair of binoculars and looked to the west. Suddenly there was a radio transmission, "Carlsbad, this is Mustang HO624J requesting permission to land."

The tower operator was not there, since no incoming aircraft was scheduled for take-off or landing. It only took Sally a second to realize what needed to be done, so she picked up the radio, "Mustang, this is Carlsbad, you are clear for landing, approach from the east, crosswinds six to seven knots, visibility clear." "Affirmative," came the distinctive voice of the pilot.

As Sally rushed out to meet the aircraft, she bumped into Ben Littlefield, the tower operator and almost knocked him over, "What's going on?" "We have a plane landing," Sally replied as she kept running. "Nobody told me. It is James Stewart!" Sally knew the sound of every aircraft that flew regularly into Carlsbad Airport, but nothing sounded like the high pitched whine that grew ever louder until the afternoon sun reflected off the silver fuselage of the P-51 Mustang that quickly came into view. It was like a sliver of light as it sliced through the skies and then landed so softly that it barely seemed to touch the pavement before it taxied to the hangar area.

Sally guided the Mustang to an area that had been reserved especially for it. It dwarfed the Pipers and Cessnas that were parked nearby. James Stewart opened the cockpit and stepped out, he was an older man, his hair was gray and tousled and had the style of several generations earlier. His flight jacket was faded brown, creased

and worn and the American flag was prominently sewn to the right shoulder. There were also several other squadron emblems on it as well. As soon as James Stewart's feet touched the tarmac, Sally said with utmost enthusiasm, "Welcome to Carlsbad, Mr. Stewart, my name is Sally Connors and I'm here to help you in any way that you need." "Did you say that your name is Sally?" James Stewart asked, "I like that name," and gestured to writing on the plane, Mustang Sally, "my granddaughter is named Sally."

"We weren't expecting you until tomorrow, sir," Sally said. "Call me Jimmy, I was planning on leaving in the morning, but it was supposed to be overcast with light drizzle until early afternoon, so I thought to myself, what would I'd rather do; take a nice ride along the coast in the sun today or fly in the 'May Gray' tomorrow." "I'm glad you chose today," Sally smiled.

"I've booked a room at the Carlsbad Inn so I'll need a cab to take me there," James Stewart said. All of a sudden, a thought flashed through Sally's mind, "Why don't you stay at my home?" "Thank you, Sally, but I've already made my reservation," James Stewart replied. My dad was in the 82nd Airborne, the 'All American Division' and served in World War II, the same time as you. My mom and dad are big fans of yours, me too of course. Please Mr. Stewart, we've got a great guest room and it's a lot better than a hotel. My mom is a really good cook and she'll make you anything you want." James Stewart hated to tell the young girl no, "Do your parents allow you to invite strange men to your home?" "You're not a strange man, you are James Stewart!"

Sally was exuberant. "Call your parents and see what they say." Bill Connors was in his car and on his way to the Carlsbad airport in less than two minutes, once he got his daughter's phone call. Bill Connors and James Stewart shared stories about their military service and like most men of the 'Greatest Generation' they only spoke in generalities, while choosing to ignore the horrors of war that they experienced.

Sally was riveted by their conversation and when her father was done speaking; she began asking James Stewart technical questions about the many aircrafts that he had flown in his life. Three hours later, Margaret Connors intervened, "Mr. Stewart has a busy day ahead of him tomorrow, why don't you let him get some sleep." "I'm sorry Mr. Stewart, I didn't mean to ramble on," Sally apologized. "It has been my pleasure to talk to a young person that is so passionate about flying."

On Memorial Day, the gray clouds were heavy and dark and there was a collective sense of disappointment from the people at the airport that they would not burn off in time for the air show. James Stewart methodically went through his pre-flight check as Sally watched every one of his movements and committed them to memory. He handed Sally a fire extinguisher with specific and simple instructions, "If you see a fire, put it out." "Affirmative," Sally responded, "You can count on me."

James Stewart climbed into the cockpit and gave the thumbs up. The air around the exhaust manifolds shimmered like a mirror from fuel fumes as the huge prop started to rotate. One manifold, then another barked, several people backed up, but Sally stood her ground mesmerized by the sound. The Packard-built Merlin engine came to life with a thunderous roar and blue flames knifed from the manifolds with an arrogant impatient snarl. It was as if the heavens were listening, for as soon as the P-

51 Mustang began to taxi, the skies began to clear. By the time James Stewart reached the end of the runway, the skies directly above the airport were bright blue and the sun focused its attention on the Mustang. Like a banshee freed from a hellish prison, the plane shot upward, swallowing altitude like a voracious predator.

James Stewart made several passes over the field, the last one in the inverted position and only fifty feet above the ground tearing the air to shreds at 500 mph, the wingtips of the P-51 spilling contrails of condensed air. It glistened, screamed and the buildings shook. The anticipation of waiting for James Stewart to arrive paled in comparison to the reality of these glorious moments. Sally's emotions were coursing through every fibre of her being and she didn't know whether to laugh, cry or scream in jubilation.

Over the next three years, James Stewart kept in touch with Sally. His P-51 Mustang was hangered at the Santa Monica airport and whenever he was taking it up, he called to see if Sally wanted to take a ride. Andy would drive his daughter up Interstate Five and wait until they were finished then returned to Carlsbad. At the age of sixteen, the actor allowed Sally to fly solo.

After graduation from high school, Retired Air Force General James Stewart and Congressman Ron Packard recommended Sally Connors for admittance to the Air Force Academy. In her first military deployment with the 76th Tactical Fighter Squadron Sally flew 611 sorties in her A-10 Thunderbolt during the Desert Storm campaign which lasted August 1990 to February 1991. She was later assigned to an F-16 fighter jet squadron in 1994 and was stationed at Aviano Air base in Italy.

While there, she received the bad news that James Stewart passed away on July 2, 1997. She was given emergency leave to attend the funeral and when she returned to California, she was informed that his P-51 Mustang had been left to her. As the first actor in Hollywood to serve in World War II was being laid to rest, Sally flew 10,000 feet above the Forest Lawn Cemetery in Glendale, California, and wrote Jimmy across the clear blue sky.

Later in her career, Sally flew with the Air Force Thunderbirds air demonstration squadron and later was accepted into the program to fly the SR-71 Blackbird stealth fighter. This plane can attain speeds over Mach 3 (2300 mph) and reach altitudes of 80,000 feet. There were times when Sally was flying on the outer reaches of the wild blue yonder that she could swear that she saw the face and heard the voice of James Stewart echoing down from the heavens, voicing his approval. Sally remained on active duty for twenty-five years and reached the rank of Colonel before transferring from active duty to a reserve unit at Edwards Air Force base. She was promoted to Brigadier General, the same rank that her mentor and role model, James Stewart held at the time of his retirement from the Air Force. Sally became a test pilot for several aircraft manufacturers, and as a hobby began entering Red Bull air races. She won enough times to become the number one pilot on the tour. Throughout her entire career, Sally used 'Mustang' as her call sign. Most people thought she came up with it because of her name, she just let them go on thinking that was the answer.

It was May 28, 2018 and Sally was asked to perform at the Memorial Day air show at the Carlsbad airport, something she had done on numerous occasions whenever her

military commitment did not prevent her attendance. Her P-51 Mustang was already hangered there and she was living in Bressi Ranch, a nearby neighborhood because she loved living close to the airport where everything started for her.

She made a few modifications to the P-51 Mustang for racing, but the most noticeable one was the writing on both sides of the tail fin, Jimmy. When asked about it, Sally responded simply, "Whenever I fly, I know that Jimmy is right there with me." Memorial Day weekend was her favorite holiday and it held special significance to General Sally Connors for several reasons; it gave her the privilege to honor the men and women and their dedication, sacrifice and devotion to duty in service of our country. These patriotic Americans are always willing to go into harm's way on hostile lands or into dangerous skies, and make the ultimate sacrifice if need be so that others can enjoy the precious gifts of liberty and freedom. It was also when she met James Stewart for the first time, but there was also something unexplainable, spiritual and surreal that happened to her on this weekend. Sally taxied to the end of the runway and saw the vague image of James Stewart in the glass canopy and heard his distinctive voice; "Mustang Sally, you better speed your Mustang up." "Roger that," Sally pushed the throttle lever down and raced to the heavens to play among the angels.

The End